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"They Will Invent What They Need to Survive": Narrating Trauma in Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

“THEY WILL INVENT WHAT THEY NEED TO SURVIVE”: NARRATING
TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY ETHNIC AMERICAN WOMEN’S FICTION

By

Kara E. Jacobi

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2009

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TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY ETHNIC AMERICAN WOMEN’S FICTION

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“They Will Invent What They Need to Survive”:
Narrating Trauma in Contemporary Ethnic
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“‘They Will Invent What They Need to Survive’: Narrating Trauma in Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Fiction” analyzes novels by Octavia Butler, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Alice Walker, and Julia Alvarez through the lens of contemporary theories of trauma, tracing the ways in which survivors struggle to construct narratives that contain and make sense of their experiences. Many of the major theorists of trauma studies emphasize the impossibility of re-capturing traumatic events through creating narratives even while recognizing that the survivor’s need to tell her story persists. In my project, however, I explore the ways in which the *Kindred*, *Stigmata*, *Paradise*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Sula*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, and *In the Time of the Butterflies* extend theories that insist too readily on the survivor’s inability to accurately or completely re-member by depicting characters who, despite difficulty, present narrative accounts of their painful memories. In my own readings of the texts, I emphasize that the complexities highlighted by these texts ultimately foster our deeper understanding of the traumatized subject and her attempts to empower herself through testimony.

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Introduction

“‘They Will Invent What They Need to Survive’: Narrating Trauma in Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Fiction” analyzes novels by Octavia Butler, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Alice Walker, and Julia Alvarez through the lens of contemporary theories of trauma, tracing the struggles of survivors to construct narratives that contain and make sense of their experiences. Many of the major theorists of trauma studies emphasize the impossibility of re-capturing traumatic events through creating narratives even while recognizing that the survivor’s need to tell her story persists. In my project, in contrast, I explore the ways in which the literary works extend theories that insist too readily on the survivor’s inability to accurately or completely re-member¹ by depicting characters who, despite difficulty, present narrative accounts of their painful memories.

According to Cathy Caruth’s oft-cited definition of trauma, “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (*Trauma* 4-5). Several theorists, including Caruth, argue that a trauma that has not been understood and cannot be consciously recalled must, nonetheless, be transformed into narrative, which “allows the story to be verbalized, communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past” (Caruth, *Trauma* 153). Ironically, Caruth also suggests that transformation is an impossible task. Caruth herself seems to privilege the power of the traumatic memory over the survivor’s capacity to

¹ Here, I use the term “re-member” instead of “remember” to indicate that as survivors try to recall their memories, they undertake the task of re-assembling a past that they could not process at the time of its occurrence.

work through that memory; the event can never be understood and instead presents an “*affront to understanding*” (Caruth’s emphasis, *Trauma* 154). While most offer testimony as a possible means of working through, theorists tend to emphasize “the impossibility of recreating the event” (Tal 121) and the feeling that “[t]here are never enough words or the right words,” that one cannot “articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*” (Laub 78). So even though the testimonial model is maintained in trauma theory as a viable means of recovery, theorists appear to have little faith in the testimony as a therapeutic experience for the survivor. In *Kindred, Stigmata, Paradise, The Joy Luck Club, The Temple of My Familiar, Sula*, and *In the Time of the Butterflies*, however, the authors seem to place more value on testimony, and more confidently depict the ability of narrative to translate traumatic memory, than do the theorists themselves. This divergence between the theorists and the fictional texts demonstrates a stronger desire in the fictional texts to resolve crises of representation and witnessing, crises that theorists pose as irresolvable dilemmas.

Trauma Theory and Literary Studies

Before elaborating on the details of my theoretical framework and my analyses of the literary texts, it will be useful to provide an overview of the origins of trauma theory and its relationship with literary studies. Recently, a number of scholars working in the field of trauma studies have attempted a similar task, tracing the origins of contemporary theories of trauma and explicating literary studies’ growing fascination with theories of trauma. Among the most comprehensive are Ruth Leys’ *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) and a chapter entitled “‘Why Trauma Now?’: Freud and Trauma Studies” from E. Ann

Kaplan's recent study *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (2005). As any theorist tracing the development of a field inflected by psychoanalysis would, Leys and Kaplan begin with Sigmund Freud, rehearsing Freud's studies of the symptoms of female hysterics and male war veterans experiencing what was termed shell shock. One of the most significant of Freud's hypotheses for late twentieth- and early twenty-first- century theorists of trauma is his distinction between repression, which implies an action on the part of the survivor, and trauma, which instead, the survivor appeared to have no ability to control or recall consciously. Clearly, Caruth's definition of the "possession" experienced by a survivor is influenced by Freud, whose ideas she engages with frequently throughout her work.

According to Kaplan, after Freud's study of shell-shocked World War I veterans, the next major development in trauma studies is the establishment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a recorded medical condition, a development that grew out of the study of post-war symptoms of Vietnam War veterans (32-33). Post-traumatic stress disorder was first included in the American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic Manual* in the early 1980s and has undergone a series of revisions since its first appearance. For my project, the most important development occurred when feminist theorist Laura S. Brown challenged the definition of trauma found in the *DSM-III-R*, or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. There, traumatic experience was defined as "a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience." Brown argues that because a number of abuses associated with female victims such as rape, incest, and domestic violence are statistically common, and because the *DSM-III-R* indicates that trauma is engendered by events that are "outside of

the range of usual human experience,” the definition of PTSD reflected a gender bias (by validating male experiences of shell shock as traumatic) and should be expanded to account for a wider spectrum of traumatic events. Brown’s insistence that an evaluation of whether a patient has experienced trauma should be based “on the person’s subjective perceptions of fear, threat, and risk to well-being,” rather than strictly tied to particular kinds of events, is especially useful to my reading of the texts in this study (111). My assessment of whether a character has experienced trauma hinges on the reactions of that character to a given event. Furthermore, Dominick LaCapra suggests that “[s]ome losses may be traumatic while others are not, and there are variations in the intensity or devastating impact of trauma” (64). Following the lead of Brown and LaCapra, then, I base my evaluation of traumatic effects on a survivor on the survivor’s reaction to an event, on the ways in which characters manifest the effects of traumatic memory, rather than on the nature of the event itself.

In addition to expanding the definition of what constitutes a traumatic experience, my project also extends the definition of which contexts might produce traumatic memories, beyond the Holocaust context. Much of contemporary trauma theory has been written in response to the delayed testimonies of Holocaust survivors, including one of the primary discussions of testimony and witnessing by Dr. Dori Laub. Laub’s work in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* will be a guiding theoretical voice in my analysis of testimony. Laub recognizes that survivors of the Holocaust have undergone a trauma that results in a loss of control over experiences and memories that have traumatized them. Because trauma involves an inability to assimilate the experience, and because the survivor experiences trauma as a loss of control, according to Laub, creating a narrative about the traumatic event provides an essential site of power and control for the survivor:

To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process – a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event* – has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. (69)

Although Laub's work emerges directly from the Holocaust context, his discussion of testimony certainly resonates with the novels analyzed in this study. For example, in a chapter comparing *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Sula*, Laub's idea that the trauma story must be "transfer[red] ... to another" before it can be integrated into the survivor's memory provides a particularly appropriate lens through which to examine the abundance of testimonial scenes in Walker's novel, scenes in which African American and Latin American characters remember their traumatic experiences through the act of narrating those memories to each other. Laub's overarching theory that the creation of a narrative is an essential component of a survivor's healing process guides my analysis of all of the novels in this study, as each novel highlights its characters' need to externalize traumatic memories through narration.

Laub and Felman's *Testimony*, as well as a number of important works linking traumatic experience to the Holocaust,² have sparked a growing interest in trauma theory applied to literary study; as Kaplan notes, "trauma theory quickly extended beyond Holocaust studies in the humanities" (33). Recently, literary critics have employed trauma theory in their analysis of a variety of texts; for example, Deborah Horvitz's *Literary Trauma* discusses fictional depictions of sexual abuse and survivors' attempts to work through their memories. ** Significant work has been done in African American

² For example, Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* (2000), Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: The Aftermath of the Holocaust* (1996), Saul Friedlander's *Probing the Limits of Representation* (1992), Susan Gubar's *Poetry After Auschwitz* (2003), as well as a number of the essays included in Caruth's collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995).

literary studies linking theories of trauma to slavery, such as Naomi Morgenstern's "Mother's Milk, Sister's Blood: Trauma and the Neoslave Narrative" and J. Brooks Bouson's study "*Quiet as its Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*". Morgenstern herself conjectures that "it would be difficult to teach a course on contemporary American fiction without also teaching a course about the relationship between trauma and narrative" ("The Primal Scene" 70). Although literary studies has clearly taken an interest in trauma theory, literary trauma studies is a growing area of interest to which I seek to contribute in this project by analyzing a number of novels that have not yet been extensively linked with theories of trauma.

Traumatic Memory and Narrative Memory

The most obvious explanation for literary studies' growing interest in trauma theory is the supposition that traumatic memory can possibly be worked through if transformed into a narrative. In "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart distinguish between traumatic memory, which emerges without, and sometimes against, the survivor's will, and narrative memory, which becomes a means through which survivors can contain and take control of their experiences. Normally, van der Kolk and van der Hart assert, experiences can be recalled and narrated, and consequently, can "be integrated into existing meaning schemes" (175). However, because, according to van der Kolk and van der Hart, traumatic events cannot be experienced at the time of their occurrence, they are instead "contained in an alternate stream of consciousness" (168), where, as Caruth and others argue, the memories "are largely inaccessible to conscious

recall and control” (*Trauma* 151). Subsequently, memories of traumatic events emerge unconsciously, often in the form of “somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks” (Van Der Kolk 172). At a distance from the event itself, the survivor eventually is forced to remember, to confront, indeed, to truly experience for the first time, events that have psychologically scarred her.

Having experienced a loss of control during the original event, and continuing to feel this loss as the memories involuntarily surface and demand the survivor’s attention, the survivor attempts to empower herself. In order to regain control over the events in her past, and in order to organize experiences and integrate them into ordinary functioning memory, the survivor must transform her traumatic memories, the involuntary “somatosensory” (172) fragments of the overwhelming event, into narrative memories. According to Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart, “[n]arrative memory consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience” (160). Articulating her experiences allows a survivor the opportunity to exercise control over her memories by organizing an event that defies logic into a logical format, in order to understand what has happened to her and to integrate that experience into her life and memory.

Put another way, traumatic experience results in the survivor’s loss of voice, while narration is a means by which the survivor reclaims her voice. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), Elaine Scarry argues that victims of torture experience first the destruction, or “unmaking” of their worlds through the physical pain and interrogation inflicted by the torturers. After surviving these traumatic scenes, the victims emerge with a desire, even a need, to rebuild that destroyed world, to “make,” or to participate in some form of creation. For Scarry, the torture scene

illustrates the connection of power and voice; the victim loses her voice because the torturer appropriates that voice to enhance his own power. In Scarry's formulation, the torturer becomes "all voice" (all power) and the victim becomes "all body" (all pain, no power). Therefore, it becomes crucial for the victim to exercise her voice in order to regain power (45). Although Scarry's argument focuses on physical pain, her formulation of destruction, creation, and power in the torture scenario is applicable to psychological pain, as well. In the novels investigated in my study, I illustrate how the tragedies and oppressions (both physical and psychological) experienced by characters result in a destruction of their worlds, and in their sense of themselves, and how constructing a narrative allows characters to rebuild that world, albeit in a form that has been forever changed by the traumatic experience.

There is no doubt that the characters featured in the novels analyzed here experience traumatic events in their pasts. We see characters who are overwhelmed, psychologically damaged, and, at times, seemingly incapable of overcoming the tragic events of their histories. The authors describe traumatic events and depict the difficulty, sometimes even the impossibility, of transforming traumatic memory into narrative memory, of the survivor making her experiences as real to a listener as they are to the survivor. Ultimately, however, the novels are just as interested, and in many cases, are more interested, in the processes by which survivors attempt to work through their painful memories by articulating those memories and by constructing accounts that contain their experiences. Even though survivors find themselves frustrated by others' inability to understand or believe, or by the survivors' own inability to find "the right words," survivors continue to narrate, to write, to paint, to create. Even the works that

seem dominated by the tragically scarring events in the characters' lives can be read as emphasizing the means by which recovery might be possible.

Trauma and the Ethnic American Experience

My interest in trauma and recovery in contemporary ethnic American literatures has led me to a variety of texts, written by authors from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Experiences of immigration, diaspora, racism, sexism, and political oppression are described in a range of texts by ethnic American writers, despite the historical and social particularities that color those experiences. Often, as in the works examined here, these experiences are traumatic for the subjects who suffer as a result of them, and these subjects feel compelled to remember and narrate their painful memories. Because of the prevalence of this paradigm across cultural and racial lines in ethnic American novels, I have not limited my analysis to the experiences of only one ethnic group but, rather, consider together works by African American, Chinese American, and Dominican American authors. According to Kathleen Brogan, for the critic of Ethnic American literatures, there is value in examining “cultural cross-pollinations, convergences, and inventions” (12) in an effort to analyze works by ethnic American writers both within their cultural contexts and across such divisions. Brogan explains, “If the historical and cultural differences that emerge ... are ignored, the parallels I would draw devolve into meaninglessness” (16). Nonetheless, Brogan believes that “despite these dangers, the parallels are worth identifying” (16). Like Brogan, I intend to analyze these novels both within their specific historical and cultural contexts and across those historical and cultural boundaries. The experiences of Dana in *Kindred*, for example, are

inextricably tied to the particular history of slavery in the American South. However, it is also valuable to consider what the reemergence of traumatic memories of slavery shares with other traumatic experiences, particularly those associated with racism, assimilation, and oppression based on culture, ethnicity, and gender. A comparative methodology also illustrates that the urgency and importance of narrating trauma manifests itself across cultural divisions. While it is important to maintain specificity when reading Ethnic American texts, considering works by women writers of different ethnic backgrounds side by side also opens up new possibilities for understanding the transnational and transethnic implications of trauma and recovery.

In discussing novels centrally concerned with trauma and recovery, some of which have never been discussed in terms of trauma, I also identify these texts as part of the “transethnic genre” (Brogan 16) of trauma narratives. A plethora of contemporary texts could be categorized as part of this genre, but traumatic experience and the transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory seems to be of particular concern in ethnic American literatures by women. For African American authors, the legacy of slavery continues to haunt subjects over a century after Emancipation, and remnants of racism and discrimination continue to plague contemporary subjects. Dominican Americans remain affected by the terror regime of Trujillo and by the subsequent political turmoil that has continued on the Island, while also dealing with the difficulty of integrating themselves into a new culture with a new language and facing discrimination and disadvantage. In pointing specifically to trauma narratives by and about ethnic American women my work offers the particularly risky suggestion that women and members of racial or ethnic minorities are especially susceptible to trauma;

however, I focus on the recovery process in order to highlight how the characters and their authors counteract their potential victim status; in the texts, narrative becomes a form of agency through which survivors challenge oppression.

Narrating Trauma in Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Novels

This study takes its title, “They Will Invent What They Need to Survive,” from Julia Alvarez’s novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). As the family departs for the United States, narrowly escaping the persecution of Rafael Trujillo’s dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, their housekeeper Chucha reflects on the future lives of the García daughters:

In the girls’ rooms I remember each one as a certain heaviness, now in my heart, now in my shoulders, now in my head or feet; I feel their losses pile up like dirt thrown on a box after it has been lowered into the earth. I see their future, the troublesome life ahead. They will be haunted by what they do and don’t remember. But they have spirit in them. They will invent what they need to survive. (223)

The “heaviness” that marks the lives of the Garcías certainly has its roots in the traumatic experience of living under the dictatorship, which Alvarez describes in detail in so many of her works. The García family lives in fear, subjected to a regime of terror in their homeland, and then, due to Carlos García’s involvement in the underground revolution to violently remove Trujillo from power, they experience an abrupt escape and subsequent transition to life in a new country, a new culture, and a new language. In their new home, the fate of those they left behind still haunts the Garcías, and they continue to feel the overwhelming impact of traumatic events suffered while on the Island.

Although Chucha’s prediction for the girls is somber, marred by “losses,” “troublesome [lives],” and “haunt[ings],” she ends on a note of hope: she concludes that

the Garcías “will invent what they need to survive.” Despite the fact that the girls have suffered and will continue to suffer due both to the traumatic memories from the Dominican Republic, which they likely “don’t remember” yet, but which will resurface throughout their lives, and due to the struggles they will encounter as they immigrate to a new country, Chucha, and ultimately Alvarez’s novel, emphasizes survival. While fully aware of and sensitive to the overwhelming and destructive impact of the dictatorship and the Garcías’ escape and immigration to New York, Alvarez highlights, in this novel and in later works, the possibility, even the inevitability, of her characters’ survival, of their ability to overcome and work through traumatic memories.

Chucha’s assessment of the García girls’ future in the United States as defined both by struggle and by survival resonates throughout the novels analyzed in this study. *Kindred*, *Stigmata*, *Paradise*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Sula*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, and *In the Time of the Butterflies* likewise emphasize the need to survive, the need to work through trauma. Characters in these novels live through extraordinary, overwhelming experiences including slavery, racism, war, rape, torture, discrimination, and the terror of a dictatorship. The characters experience these events as traumatic, as indicated by the intrusion of memories associated with the horrific events they witness and live through; their memories surface, insisting that the survivor confront their painful pasts. Each of the chapters in this study focuses on a particular facet of the recovery process and explores the nuances of the texts’ depictions of the translation of traumatic memory into narrative.

The first chapter, “‘An Impossible History’: Paradoxes of Traumatic Memory and Representation in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*,” examines two postmodern slave narratives by Octavia Butler and Phyllis Alesia Perry. I argue that both novels incorporate supernatural

elements – in *Kindred*, Dana travels back in time and space to antebellum Maryland, while in *Stigmata*, Lizzie periodically becomes two of her foremothers and exhibits physical signs of their traumatic memories on her own body – in order to emphasize the extreme paradoxes of representation that the experience of trauma presents to the survivor. This chapter establishes a problem that my project continues to interrogate in each of its later chapters: in the face of the impossible and the unbelievable, survivors are haunted both by memories of a psychically scarring event and by a need to contain the event in narrative form. In *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, in the face of even the most unimaginable circumstances, both protagonists succeed in transmitting narratives of their experiences, Dana in a novel and Lizzie in a story quilt.

Building on the suggested impossibility of narrating trauma presented by Butler's and Perry's works, and continuing an investigation of the ways in which painful memories can be passed on to future generations, chapter two, "'But why were there no stories to tell of themselves?': Postmemory in *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club*" deploys Marianne Hirsch's work on the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory. I engage Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which describes the inherently complex position of the descendant of survivors of extreme trauma, in reading Morrison's *Paradise* and Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, which feature characters who must grapple with the overwhelming stories of their parents' and grandparents' painful memories of discrimination and diaspora. By reading these works together, we can see both, on the one hand, the dangers of recording and narrating painful stories when the community of Ruby in *Paradise* compulsively re-enacts their founding trauma (their rejection from an all-black town due to their too-black skin), and, on the other hand, the possibilities for

healing through stories in *The Joy Luck Club*; here, mothers and daughters begin to mend distressed bonds when the mothers impart their narratives through a ritual of storytelling. Ultimately, both Morrison and Tan are exceedingly aware of the power of stories, and although postmemory is characterized by impossibility and exile from the site of memory, both novels offer opportunities for recovery because both authors recognize the therapeutic potential of narrative.

In examining the role of the listener in the narrative testimony as an essential component of the recovery process, in chapter three, “Testimonial Scenes in *Sula* and *The Temple of My Familiar*,” I also pair two texts that, on the surface, seem to present contradictory depictions of the possibility of recovery after destructive trauma. In *Sula*, Morrison creates a community and a protagonist that appear to be utterly devoid of artistic or narrative potential; on the other hand, in *The Temple of My Familiar*, Walker’s characters embrace storytelling and communal purging of traumatic memories more enthusiastically than in any other novel included in this study. While *Sula* dies tragically as a young woman, never having found a creative outlet through which to express her struggles, the major characters of *Temple* (Suwelo, Fanny, Arveyda, and Carlotta) exult in myriad forms of art and narrative when sharing their stories with one another, until they appear to be almost magically healed at the novel’s end. I argue, however, that despite these antithetical conclusions, the novels actually propose a similar formula for a successful scene of testimony: the survivor must have both a viable form of expression and a supportive listener or community of listeners, in order to truly transform traumatic memory into narrative memory. This chapter’s analysis of Morrison’s and Walker’s novels is primarily influenced by Dori Laub’s work on the position of the listener in

Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History; Laub emphasizes that survivors must involve a listener, one to whom the survivor “can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside” (“Bearing Witness” 69). While *Temple* is marked by its abundance of testimonial scenes and *Sula* is characterized by the absence of those very scenes, both novels ultimately highlight that the listener is necessary in order for testimony to be therapeutic.

The final chapter, “We needed a story to understand what had happened to us’: Narrating Trauma on the National Stage in Julia Alvarez’s Novels,” combines the concerns of the previous three chapters and reaches beyond them, focusing on the interaction between individual and collective trauma and the interdependence of individual and national healing in Alvarez’s fiction, especially *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Alvarez’s novels depict the psychic scars inflicted upon the Dominican people under the Trujillo dictatorship in the mid-twentieth-century; in describing the lasting effects of life under a regime of terror on individual survivors, even after Trujillo’s assassination and even after some survivors have relocated to the United States, Alvarez portrays the Dominican and Dominican American communities as traumatized entities. As they were scarred together, the communities must also heal together, and Alvarez demonstrates how the circulation of the story of the murdered Mirabal sisters, revolutionary opponents of Trujillo, inspired social and political change in the Dominican Republic and provided an opportunity for healing for the nation as well as for the surviving Mirabal family members. This chapter incorporates Kai Erikson’s “Notes on Trauma and Community” to investigate the phenomenon of collective trauma detailed in

Alvarez's works about the Dominican Republic, while I also build on previous chapters' examination of the transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory in an analysis of Dedé Mirabal's testimony. The protagonist of *Butterflies*, Dedé is the sister who was uninvolved in the political underground and thus did not suffer the same fate as the "Butterflies." Alvarez suggests that by revisiting the story of her sisters' lives, their deaths, and her relationship to both their lives and deaths, Dedé is able to work through, at least to some extent, the traumatic memory and guilt associated with her lack of involvement. Dedé also shares her story with the community and voices her belief that the Dominican people "needed" the story of the Butterflies to remind them to continue to fight oppression and overcome the pains of history.

Alvarez's work does not ask readers to passively consume this story of the trauma and tentative recovery of the Dominican people; rather, *Butterflies* hopes to inspire readers to become more active participants in the world around them and to use the knowledge gained from these stories to continue the work of the fallen Butterflies, to promote responsibility toward ourselves and others, and to heal injustices in our own communities and around the world. In a brief conclusion, my project begins to investigate the relationship between trauma narratives and social change and political activism. Some authors – like Alvarez and Walker – are more vocal about their belief that literature can and does promote awareness and change, and while there is no simple answer, I argue that all of the texts in this study invite the question: Why do we read trauma narratives?

In a recent article in *The New York Time Book Review*, Louisa Thomas provides an intriguing answer to this inquiry:

Fiction can indeed deepen our understanding of trauma; it can expand our capacity for empathy and provide consolation. But its highest achievement is to

complicate, not simplify – to leave us better students of our messy lives, not to graduate us with honors and send us blithely on our way.

Although Thomas makes this comment in response to Wally Lamb's 2008 novel *The Hour I First Believed*, which chronicles, primarily, the violent murders of teachers and students at Columbine High School in 1999, I find her discussion of the purposes of reading trauma narratives particularly useful to my thinking. It is precisely the complexity presented within the pages of *Kindred*, *Stigmata*, *Paradise*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Sula*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, and *In the Time of the Butterflies* that makes these texts such powerful analyses of the traumatized psyche and of the means through which the survivor struggles to overcome her painful memories. I hope, in my own readings of the novels, to emphasize that the complexities highlighted by these texts ultimately foster our deeper understanding of the traumatized subject and her attempts to empower herself through testimony.

Chapter One

“An Impossible History”: Paradoxes of Traumatic Memory and Representation in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*

According to Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “The traumatized ... carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Dana Franklin, the protagonist of Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and Lizzie DuBose, of Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998) literally embody Caruth’s idea of “an impossible history.” Both narrators are African-American women of the twentieth-century who are forced to interact physically with the traumatic history of slavery; each woman’s scarred body becomes “the symptom of a history that [she] cannot entirely possess.”³ In many works of trauma literature, survivors struggle, with varying degrees of success, to accomplish the necessary therapeutic steps of creating narratives containing their experiences and presenting their testimonies to witnesses. In *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, Butler and Perry complicate even the possibility of transmitting the trauma story to an other who has not experienced the same traumatic events. Because these authors use unrealistic, fantastic elements to illustrate the urgency of survivors’ face-to-face confrontation with their traumatic histories, the narrators struggle to transmit their stories to other characters. While the supernatural quality of Butler’s and Perry’s novels does inevitably problematize the fictional survivors’ ability to narrate their stories, interestingly, employing supernatural elements to imagine the narrators’ interactions with traumatic

³ Lisa Long, in the only article that examines both of these novels together, stresses the violation experienced by Dana and Lizzie as they physically encounter the past. As her title, “A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*” indicates, these “female protagonists are penetrated by the past” (464).

history actually allows Butler and Perry to craft a strikingly realistic picture of the paradoxes inherent in a survivor's struggle to work through trauma.

In *Kindred*, Dana Franklin undergoes a series of travels across time and space, transporting her from her 1976 California home to an antebellum Maryland plantation where she will meet her ancestors, Rufus Weylin and Alice Greenwood. Dana is repeatedly pulled into the past when Rufus' life is in danger and must continue to ensure his livelihood until the birth of his and Alice's child Hagar, the descendant who begins Dana's family line. Dana makes six different trips to the antebellum Weylin plantation, and she can only return to California when she senses that her own life is in danger. Eventually Dana kills Rufus, symbolically and literally severing her physical ties to the past. However, on her final trip back to California, Dana loses part of her arm as the dying Rufus takes hold of her; the part of her arm that is above Rufus' hand returns with her, while the portion below Rufus' hand is mysteriously left behind on the plantation.

In *Stigmata*, Lizzie also inexplicably interacts physically with a family history of slavery when she inherits a trunk containing the dictated journal of her great-great-grandmother, Ayo, and a story quilt about Ayo's life, crafted by Lizzie's grandmother Grace. Soon, Lizzie begins having elaborate dreams and visions, imagining herself in the lives of both Ayo and Grace. She later learns that Grace experienced these same visions and was so traumatized by Ayo's life that she abandoned her family when her daughter Sarah was only a small child. While Dana physically returns to the scene of her ancestors' past traumas, Lizzie believes she is the reincarnation of two of her foremothers, the first of whom directly suffered profound trauma as a result of slavery. Lizzie physically encounters her grandmother Grace's and her great-great-grandmother

Ayo's memories as she "becomes" her ancestors, somewhere between their world and her own, or rather, in both places at once. Becoming Grace and Ayo means owning their pain, and Lizzie's initially vague inklings of pain eventually rupture her skin, resulting in bleeding and scars on her back and wrists.⁴ After being institutionalized due to what is misconstrued as a suicide attempt, Lizzie tries to "heal" in a series of mental health facilities until she is finally released at the age of thirty-five, thanks to "some well-acted moments of sanity" (6).

As a brief overview of the plots indicates, Butler and Perry strategically employ supernatural, anti-realistic elements in order to imagine their narrators' encounters with an impossible history – impossible both because slavery has ended over a century before these protagonists' stories begin and because there is no way for any of us to imagine, regardless of the time that has passed, the traumatic impact of slavery on subjects unless we ourselves have experienced that life firsthand. The critics who consider both *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, Lisa Long and Stephanie Sievers, emphasize this latter impossibility, indicating that the novels insist that history must be experienced physically and witnessed firsthand in order to be truly known.⁵ Other scholarship, particularly on *Kindred*, comments extensively on how we should define these texts generically – as science fiction? As neo-slave narratives or postmodern slave narratives?⁶ Butler herself, a well-

⁴ Readers familiar with Morrison's *Beloved* will notice a similarity in Lizzie's scarred back to the chokecherry tree scar on Sethe's back. Further, when Anthony Paul touches the scar and finds it beautiful (*Stigmata* 147), we are reminded of Paul D. lovingly tracing Sethe's scar. For more detailed commentary on these connections, see also Sievers' "Embodied Memories."

⁵ Long and Sievers both point out a central problem with Butler's and Perry's decision to have a protagonist suffer extreme physical trauma as the novels' major plot device. Both critics point out that the novels are built on a contradiction: the narrators tell their stories even while insisting that narrative cannot capture experience in the way that a physical encounter can. Sievers, though, worries that *Stigmata* "ultimately obstructs the process of turning individual memory work into a sharable story" (138).

⁶ Although for some critics, these terms appear to be interchangeable, here, I take "neo-slave narratives" to mean contemporary works portraying characters who are slaves and a protagonist who is a slave, a life

known science fiction writer, identifies *Kindred* as “fantasy,” insisting, “there’s no science in *Kindred*” (Kenan 495). Despite the recognition of this oft-cited statement, scholarship on Butler’s novel almost always attempts to assign the work a genre, or, often, to analyze how and why *Kindred* combines two or more genres.⁷ While *Kindred* and *Stigmata* certainly feature elements of science fiction and characteristics of neo-slave or postmodern slave narratives, I argue that these texts are primarily trauma narratives.

According to Naomi Morgenstern, “trauma narrative is a major contemporary genre” that combines the concerns of psychoanalysis, history, and narrative (70). These works foreground “the relationship between history and fictiveness, between events and their resistance to adequate representation” to the extent that “[in] postmodern fiction, ‘trauma’ (by definition the unnarratable) and narrative have become codependent terms” (70-71). It is through a central paradox – the use of supernatural, fantastic, anti-realist elements to describe the very real and brutal fact of American slavery – that *Kindred* and

imagined by the writer rather than experienced directly. “Postmodern slave narratives” engage the same subject matter as neo-slave narratives but employ postmodern techniques, a definition endorsed by A. Timothy Spaulding, who writes that postmodern slave narratives “deploy elements of the fantastic not as a way of undermining their narrative authority but as a means of establishing it. through the narrative freedom of imaginative or speculative fiction, postmodern slave narratives blur the lines between historical subject and contemporary author, between the past history of slavery and its current legacy in contemporary culture, between historical and fictional reconstructions of the past” (18). While both neo-slave narratives and postmodern slave narratives rewrite/revise the original genre of the slave narrative of the 18th and 19th centuries, postmodern slave narratives, like *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, do so by incorporating fantastic elements and blurring generic divisions.

⁷ Robert Crossley examines the ways in which *Kindred* differs from the typical science fiction novel, noting that “Octavia Butler’s hybrid of memoir and fantasy is a distinctive contribution to the genre of neo-slave narrative” (265). Sandra Y. Govan analyzes the work as “a neatly packaged historical novel” (88). Elizabeth Beaulieu considers *Kindred* a neo-slave narrative but also reads elements of “historical fiction, slave narrative, and science fiction” in the work (119). A. Timothy Spaulding terms the novel a “postmodern slave narrative,” investigating the “revisions of the slave narrative [in which Butler] create[s] an alternative and fictional historiography based on a subjective, fantastic, and anti-realistic representation of slavery” (2). Likewise, Marc Steinberg refers to *Kindred* as a postmodern slave narrative and as “a sort of inverse slave narrative” because it stages the movement from free to enslaved (467). Differing slightly from Steinberg in terminology, Angelyn Mitchell sees *Kindred* as a “liberatory narratives,” a text that reworks the slave narrative by focusing on freedom and the protagonist’s search for self (4). Ashraf Rushdy calls *Kindred* a “palimpsest narrative” because the novel is informed by an earlier narrative (or genre of narrative - the slave narrative). Missy Dehn Kubitschek reads the novel as a female quest (24-25), while Christine Levecq speaks for many critics when she recognizes both the fantastic elements and the qualities of realism present in the novel (525).

Stigmata are able to explore the intricate complexities of the traumatic experience. The physical experiences of Dana and Lizzie indicate that confrontations with the past are both painful and unavoidable. The narrators feel both compelled to learn about the history of slavery and repelled by the physical and psychological pain that that history engenders. Another paradox explored in these texts involves the narrators' struggles to convey their experiences to others. As Caruth notes, trauma "simultaneously defies and demands our witness" (*Unclaimed Experience* 5). Dana and Lizzie discover both that traumatic memories need to be transformed into narratives and that, regardless of this urge, the story can never be transmitted in a way that will be understood by those who have not physically experienced the trauma. The simultaneous struggle to testify and the need to testify is, according to Kali Tal, "one of the defining characteristics of trauma literature" (121). While *Kindred* and *Stigmata* clearly exemplify the paradoxes inherent in experiencing and narrating traumatic memories, both novels ultimately emphasize the persistent need to testify by depicting protagonists who tell their stories.

"The past ... is a circle": Traumatic Structure in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*

The experiences associated with slavery – enduring the Middle Passage, being sold as a slave, being abused on the plantation, suffering the separation of family members, and losing connections to a homeland and a culture – are profoundly traumatic, and these novels' presentations of the effects of slavery clearly mark Butler's and Perry's texts as thematically concerned with traumatic memory. Further, though, the emphasis on trauma is mirrored in the very structure of *Kindred* and *Stigmata*. The episodic nature of both texts – in *Kindred*, the fact that each chapter describes one of Dana's adventures into

the past, and in *Stigmata*, the fact that each chapter tells of a particular moment in Lizzie's life, as indicated by the time and place introducing each chapter – highlights the ubiquity of traumatic memory in the characters' lives. Their "stories" do not simply illustrate the ways in which they have been scarred by the intrusion of slave history into their contemporary lives; the organization of all other memories around the traumatic experiences suggests that traumatic memory, when present, defines and determines the survivor's perspective on her life.

In *Kindred*, for example, all of Dana's memories are evoked in the context of her time travels. Each chapter, with the exception of the Prologue and Epilogue, are defined by the event in the past which requires Dana's transportation (for example, "The River," is so named because in that chapter, Dana saves a drowning Rufus from a river). As the novel progresses, each of Dana's travels marks a repetition. With each return to the plantation, Dana fits back into the scene fairly easily and takes up her duties, after a time, without difficulty. The repeated interactions with the people on the plantation, although over a span of years and characterized by chronological gaps, allow the people, places, and events to become predictable for Dana. Also, the conditions that precipitate her journeys back and forth from past and present are contained by a formula – she goes to the past when Rufus' life is in danger and returns to the present when her own is at risk – that repeats in each of the six chapters. Even Dana's narrative style in the novel indicates on the structural level that she is telling her trauma narrative: in order to make sense of her memories and contain them in this novel, then, Dana goes back to the past and relives her experiences in detail for the reader, speaking in the present tense as though the events are occurring as she tells them. Christine Levecq reads this retrospective narration as

“foreground[ing] the protagonist’s storytelling qualities and the constructedness of her narrative” (549). To take Levecq’s observation a step further, by reading *Kindred* as a trauma narrative, we understand that Butler has Dana narrate the story after her interactions with the past have “ended” both to reinforce the notion that a necessary delay occurs between the event and its telling, and to depict the ways in which Dana has tried to organize her experience through this narrative account.

As in *Kindred*, the structure of *Stigmata* reinforces the text’s thematic concerns with trauma. When we first meet Lizzie, she has, like Dana, already survived her interactions with the past, and this novel also begins after the original intensity of Lizzie’s confrontation with history has subsided. Following the introductory chapter, which is set in June, 1994, the novel proceeds along two narrative timelines: in the first, Lizzie moves us through her story in the past, from the time she inherited Grace’s trunk in April 1974, through her physical manifestations of her ancestors’ experiences and her introduction to two different mental hospitals, until the final chapter of the novel, which ends with Lizzie in an art class at one of the hospitals in 1988; the second line begins with Lizzie’s release from the hospital in 1994 and relates her attempts to assimilate into “mainstream” society again and, most importantly, her attempts to create her own story quilt to explain Grace’s story to a skeptical and deeply hurt Sarah, finally ending with Sarah’s apparent comprehension of the quilt in July 1996. The novel alternates between the two timelines, abruptly shifting from one year to the next; these repeated, jarring transitions mimic Lizzie’s own disorientation while moving between the past and present when she periodically “becomes” her foremothers.

Although *Stigmata* consists of interspersed episodes from the “past” (1974-1988) and the “present” (1994-1996), and each time frame has its own continuing narrative trajectory, the lines between past and present are constantly blurred. Even within the “present,” Perry inserts Ayo’s journal entries⁸ at the end of each 1994-1996 chapter to remind us that, for Lizzie (as for any trauma survivor struggling to work through her experiences), the past *is* the present; the two coexist.⁹ The journal entries also correlate thematically to Lizzie’s commentary within the earlier part of each chapter. For example, in the first chapter, Lizzie is released from the mental hospital, but she also confides to the reader that “there is no cure for what [she’s] got” (6). Lizzie understands that her struggle to work through the traumas of her family history will continue even once she is deemed “sane” by society. The journal entry that closes this particular chapter includes Ayo telling Joy, “I come from a long line of forever people. We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again” (7). Ayo’s statement reinforces Lizzie’s own sense, earlier in the chapter, that her relationship to the past is an ongoing struggle. Ayo’s statement also importantly introduces the novel’s perspective on time and history. Like *Kindred*, *Stigmata* views time as circular, repetitive, and cyclical, a perspective endorsed by Lizzie and Eva within the novel and reinforced by both novels’ structures.¹⁰

⁸ Ayo’s journals were written from 1898 to 1900, but cover Ayo’s life from the time of her abduction and transportation to America to her death in February, 1900.

⁹ Further, as Sievers points out, juxtaposing the narratives of Lizzie’s “sanity” in the present and her “insanity” in the past, *Stigmata* also “blurs the distinctions between normalcy and insanity by placing Lizzie’s thoughts before, during, and after her hospitalization next to each other” (“Embodied Memories” 134).

¹⁰ Eva explains to a troubled Lizzie, still struggling to understand how her ancestors could be “reincarnated” in her body, “The past – that’s what you call it – is a circle. If you walk long enough, you catch up with yourself” (117). Lizzie’s experiences lead her to agree with Eva, to doubt that the “past” is ever really past.

Although *Stigmata*'s chapters are divided according to the time and place of the events to be described in that chapter, the chronological ordering cannot contain the variety of experience found within each chapter. In addition, despite the neat arrangement and precise labeling of the time at the start of each chapter, the novel leaves out even more time than it describes. *Stigmata* is characterized by narrative gaps, some quite significant in length. For example, the final chapter in the narrative timeline about the past (1974-1988) occurs in 1988, while the first chapter of the present-day timeline (1994-1996) picks up six full years later. In the present-day timeline, Lizzie tells the reader rather generally about her time in mental institutions, but the reader is left to wonder exactly what occurred between 1988 and 1994 to facilitate Lizzie's eventual "sanity." Similarly, in *Kindred*, there is no indication about the length of the gap between the Prologue (Dana in the hospital) and the Epilogue (when her arm is "well enough" 262), nor is there a definitive description of what occurred during that span. Even as both Butler and Perry indicate that the narrators are attempting to organize their experiences into deliberate, logical components, the structure cannot account for the breadth of their experiences. The gaps in both narratives symbolize the inability of the protagonists to communicate parts of their memories, or their inability to exert control over the sudden and repeated intrusion of the distant past into their lives.

"The past. Wherever I go": The Inescapable Past of Slavery

Despite the narrative gaps in the texts, both Butler and Perry have their narrators attempt to construct narratives of their experiences in order to assert control over traumatic memories. This response is necessary for Dana and Lizzie, as for other

survivors, because the event itself marks a loss of control for the survivor. Dana and Lizzie are forced to confront history, and their painful interactions with the history of slavery stand as the ultimate example of their loss of power; they cannot even control when and through what means they will remember. Caruth's description of the "repetitions" characteristic of traumatic memory, through which the survivor is made to involuntarily confront past events through nightmares, "unwitting reenactments," or flashbacks, seems particularly appropriate to these novels. Caruth claims that repetitions "seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control" (*Unclaimed Experience* 2). Butler and Perry dramatize the survivor's unwilling confrontation with the horrors of the past by deploying supernatural elements. This strategy literalizes the ways in which the traumatic memory possesses and controls the survivor by physically transporting the protagonists directly into the traumatic event or into the body of a survivor who experienced that event firsthand. Both novels indicate that it is necessary for Dana and Lizzie to witness the traumatic events themselves. As Sievers argues, the texts are characterized by "a sense of unavailability – a sense that the past is still haunting and that this engagement is not a choice but a necessity" (133). The eruption of past events into the present-day action of the novels constructs traumatic memory as aggressive and unavoidable.

In transporting her protagonist back to an antebellum plantation, Butler stages a very literal confrontation between Dana and the traumatic memories of her family's history. In *Kindred*, Dana carries the "impossible history" of slavery without, at first,

even being aware of the extent to which that history impacts her contemporary life and her identity. During Dana's second encounter with the past in "The Fire," she learns that she is on the Weylin plantation in the year 1815. Hearing the strangely familiar names of Weylin and Rufus' childhood friend Alice "triggered a memory," which "was coming back ... in fragments" (27). Dana gradually realizes that Rufus is her ancestor, "vaguely alive in the memory of [her] family" thanks to a written record the family has kept in their Bible (28). Dana struggles to remember the full names of her distant ancestors, indicating how separated she has become from her own family's history, and thus from the reality that slavery was indeed a part of her family's past. Dana's amnesia toward her family origins implies that her time travels are instigated by her inability to remember her history. Spaulding observes that Dana's "knowledge of the past is abstract and distant," so "Dana's alienation from this crucial component of her own history may function as some kind of contemporary crisis that triggers her physical encounter with slavery" (47). Butler's solution, then, is to have Dana learn this history in the most direct, intimate way imaginable. The novel stages Dana's discovery of the painful truth of her family's origins while also supplying her with the direct experience of slavery, an experience she later learns that she shares with her foremother Alice.

Dana's delayed understanding of her familial connection to Rufus, along with her apparently newfound knowledge that her family line was begun by a white male ancestor who was also a slaveholder,¹¹ is only one example in the text that provides evidence of

¹¹ According to Ashraf Rushdy, Dana "finds herself untangling a family secret about the racial makeup of her own family line" (21). Although the mixing of races during slavery is oft-recognized, Dana is apparently unaware, before her trips to the plantation, that her forefather Rufus was a white slaveholder who started her family line by raping her black foremother, Alice.

Dana's initial lack of connection to the history of slavery.¹² In a flashback in which Dana recounts how she and her husband Kevin met, she nonchalantly remarks, "I was working out of a casual labor agency – we regulars called it a slave market" (52). Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu reads this detail as evidence that "Dana at the beginning of *Kindred* has virtually no historical awareness" (18). After she encounters slavery firsthand during her trips to the nineteenth-century Weylin plantation, she is able to view this analogy more critically, admitting that the labor agency "was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn't have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered" (52). However, Dana's earlier equation of her low-income job with slavery, a comment that indicates her attitude toward the job when she was working at the labor agency before her trips to the past, suggests a lack of true comprehension of the horrors of slavery.¹³

The "slave market" example is only one of many instances that depict Dana as a twentieth-century character who has become disconnected from the reality of American slavery. As Long observes, we as a culture have lost our physical connection to the memory of slavery; no former slaves are still alive and there are few living who have ever had firsthand contact with a former slave (459). Even a broad knowledge of slavery is not enough, the novel insists, to understand the complexity of the slave experience, a complexity Dana becomes increasingly aware of as she spends more time in the past.

¹² This notion that Dana must "insure [her] family's survival" is also interesting when compared with Ayo's insistence on the continuity of her own legacy in *Stigmata*. Within the world of *Kindred*, Dana must assist in physically bringing her family line into existence; additionally, though, she is also equipped to "insure" the "survival" of that family history as a result of revisiting and thus learning about her family's history, namely its connection to slavery.

¹³ Spaulding reads Dana's comment as Dana "draw[ing] an explicit connection between the commodification of Africans as slaves and the exploitation of the underclass in contemporary America" (*Re-forming the Past* 52). However, I believe Dana is only able to consciously connect these two oppressed groups after her experiences in the past.

Like most twentieth-century Americans, what Dana does know about slavery comes from books and films; obviously, she is much more accustomed to contemporary images of slavery than she is to any immediate, realistic knowledge of the institution. Robert Crossley demonstrates that Dana “learns the inadequacy of even the best books as preparation for the firsthand experience of slavery” and finds that films “are even less reliable guides to the past” (276-277). At first, following her initial trip to the past, Dana compares her experience to “something I saw on television or read about – like something I got second hand” (17); as it quickly begins to recede, Dana describes how unreal her visits to the 1800s first seem to her. However, as Dana’s encounters with the past increase and become more direct and substantial, she can no longer deny their reality. When Dana directly witnesses a slave being beaten, she compares that scene with typical twentieth-century depictions of violence against slaves:

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping. (36)

Upon even her first confrontation with the painful reality of slavery, Dana already begins to distance herself from the television and movie versions of violence. Highlighting their constructedness, she notices “the too-red blood substitute” and “well-rehearsed screams.” Dana recognizes that fictional depictions are completely inadequate in capturing the visceral quality of this scene, with its very real “sweat” and authentic “pleading and praying.” Dana also quickly and unconsciously assumes the proper reaction to witnessing such a scene: she is physically and mentally affected when she cries and wishes to escape

from the reality of the incident, mirroring the reaction of her foremother Alice, her authentic nineteenth-century counterpart,¹⁴ rather than that of an unaffected twentieth-century moviegoer, who presumably would watch this scene from a comfortable distance.¹⁵

Even as she begins to interact more extensively with the past, Dana still attempts to maintain a distance between herself and the past that so persistently demands her attention and participation, claiming that she and Kevin

were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were acting. (78)

It does not take long, however, for Dana's experience in the past to become more real to her than her 1970s California existence. Upon a later return trip to the plantation, she admits "feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that I had come home" (190). Dana struggles to maintain the distance between past and present and even begins to believe that the past is more "real" than her life in the twentieth century. Returning only to feel out of place in her own California home, she observes,

I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus's time was a sharper, stronger reality. The work was harder, the smells and tastes were stronger, the danger was greater, the pain was worse ... Rufus's time demanded things of me that had never been demanded before, and it could easily kill me if I did not meet its demands. That was a stark, powerful reality that the gentle conveniences and luxuries of this house, of *now*, could not touch. (191, Butler's ellipsis and emphasis)

¹⁴ Dana's foremother Alice is often described as Dana's double; they are "One woman. Two halves of a whole," according to Rufus (257).

¹⁵ The inadequacy of the text to capture and recreate experience has many implications for my argument regarding Dana's attempt to give her testimony to the reader. These implications will be discussed later in this chapter. Clearly, it is problematic that Butler establishes fictional accounts and/or accounts given at a distant from an event, as unreliable, while indicating that Dana's account is more "real," even though Dana's account is also, ultimately, fictional.

Her trips to the past have taught Dana that whatever is experienced directly by the body is what is “real,” even if what is “real” occurs due to her movement across time and space, which seems impossibly unreal. As Long notes, the novel endorses the idea that “[w]ithout the bodily transubstantiation of distant suffering, there is no apprehension of the past” (461). *Kindred*, then, allows Butler to imagine a means through which the contemporary subject can actually feel the “distant suffering” of her ancestors.

Dana’s trips to the past quickly work to remedy her inadequate knowledge of American slavery, but Dana’s disconnection with the past is evident even in her lack of relationships with her immediate family in the present: both Dana and her husband Kevin are orphans. After they have decided to get married, Dana realizes, “we had never talked much about our families, about how his would react to me and mine to him” (109). Ostensibly, Dana, a black woman, and Kevin, a white man, have not discussed their families because they are afraid their interracial union will not be accepted. More importantly, however, Dana’s admission that she and Kevin know nothing substantial about each others’ families reveals that neither of these twentieth-century characters seems to view the history of even his or her immediate families, let alone the more distant histories of their ancestors, as significant. Kevin admits that his “only close relative” is a sister who would disapprove of their marriage due to the influence of her husband who, according to Kevin, “would have made a good Nazi” (109-110), and Dana reveals that the aunt and uncle who are apparently her only living relations would not support the marriage because Dana’s failure to marry a black man stands as a rejection of her own black father (111). From these details, the reader can infer that neither Dana nor Kevin has a continued, close connection with any of their blood relatives. Rather, Dana refers to

Kevin as her “kindred spirit” (57). As Ashraf Rushdy observes, Butler’s novel refigures traditional concepts of kinship in that “‘kindred’ can become a substantially more important political category, a relationship presupposing a common set of values, not genes” (124). However, the plot of the novel suggests that this modern conception of kinship must be supplemented by knowledge of and confrontation with one’s genetic “kindred,” as well.¹⁶

Once Dana begins to experience history firsthand, her present life becomes consumed by the past. Afraid that she could be pulled back in time at any moment, Dana does not leave her home and keeps a bag packed with survival tools (a knife, aspirin, a map of Maryland) at her side in case she should be transported. When she is not in the past, with the exception of a few flashback scenes to her earlier relationship with Kevin, Dana thinks almost exclusively about life on the plantation. On the other hand, while in the past, Dana often uses her twentieth-century knowledge and education to her advantage and other times must downplay the reality of her present life to conform to standards of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ The constant interaction of Dana’s past and present and her inability to ever fully occupy either space without thinking of and being affected by the other, keeps Dana in a disconcerting state of limbo for much of the novel. In fact, the opening line of the novel, “I lost an arm on my last trip home,” spoken before we know the details of Dana’s contemporary life or experiences on the antebellum

¹⁶ Similarly, Long claims, “Dana is hungry for the extended family she discovers in the past” (“A Relative Pain” 469). This reading indicates that Dana wants to meet and understand her ancestors, to feel a connection to them, because she has become so disconnected from the relatives of her own time (whether by death or estrangement).

¹⁷ Perhaps the most striking example of this is that she must pretend that Kevin is her master and she is his slave, when they occupy the past together. Another example is the fact that Dana, a very well-educated black woman in the twentieth-century, must be careful how and when she uses her skills of reading and writing, which are much superior even to the white characters on the plantation.

plantation, indicates Dana's existence in both worlds because we are not sure which "home" Dana actually means here.¹⁸

Elaborating on the idea that Dana's travels exist in a kind of "in-between" space, Crossley compares Dana's journeys to the past to the Middle Passage, claiming that "*Kindred* evokes the terrifying and nauseating voyage that looms behind every American slave narrative: the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World" (268). As one of the defining traumas, if not *the* defining trauma, of the slave experience, the Middle Passage recurs in both *Kindred* and *Stigmata* and can be seen to function as a metaphor for the traumatic experience itself. Indeed, Tal observes, "[t]rauma is enacted in a liminal state" (15), just as Dana's travels to the past and the Middle Passage occur in a liminal state. As Levecq notes of *Kindred*, "the novel stages a hovering between event and memory, raw encounter and retelling, reality and textuality" (527). Dana's physical time travels metaphorically illustrate the psychological state of the traumatized individual who must, inevitably, exist for a time "between ... raw encounter and retelling."

Further, Dana's understandable disorientation upon returning from the past correlates with the disarray experienced by the trauma survivor to whom the traumatic memory attempts to make itself known. As Bessel A. Van Der Kolk explains, "dissociation of a traumatic experience occurs as a trauma is occurring" (168). Therefore, according to Caruth, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). In *Kindred*, the traumatic events of her distant past, the past

¹⁸ Beaulieu also notes this, claiming that Dana's statement "resonates with the ambiguity of the term 'home,' which now stands for both California and Maryland" ("So Many Relatives" 130).

of her “kindred,” rather than her own direct memories, return to haunt Dana. This is exactly the problem that instigates Dana’s journeys, though: she has never had to confront the trauma of slavery that is an integral part of her personal history. Like a survivor whose painful experience resurfaces, or, rather, surfaces completely for the first time, Dana must confront the truth of her past, the past she has “precisely *not known* in the first instance.” Dana’s repeated trips to the past suggest that the traumatic memory of slavery continually makes itself known to her and insists that she recognize it, and with each trip, Dana’s knowledge of the past and her ability to navigate its complexities increase. By transporting Dana to the past several times before allowing her to sever her physical ties to it, the novel’s structure again reinforces its thematic interest in the psychology of traumatic memory.

Whereas Dana’s interaction with the past in *Kindred* seems to be brought on by her historical ignorance (both of the history of her country’s relationship with slavery, and of her family), Lizzie’s dreams, visions, and physical encounters with the past are the result of a curse, brought on by Ayo in an effort to share the unimaginable traumas of her abduction/capture, being forced to America on the Middle Passage, then being sold and abused by white men and women as a slave in the American South.¹⁹ Interestingly, in the logic of the novel, the experience of what Lizzie often calls “reincarnation” only occurs in alternating generations. Thus, Ayo does not transmit her experiences to her own daughter, Joy, but rather to Joy’s daughter, Grace. Similarly, Grace spares her daughter, Sarah, and instead wills the trunk that contains all of the remnants of the traumatic past,

¹⁹ *Corregidora* fits this same description. In Gayl Jones’s novel, though, Ursa’s ancestors explicitly say that they want to continue the story so that no one will forget their history; their decision is a political one because as oppressed women, their part of the historical record has been strategically erased by the dominant culture, who records their selected version of history, but disseminates it as “truth.”

to Lizzie. As Long points out, with each visitation, “the weight of history becomes heavier, not lighter, as we get further away from its reality . . . the further from slavery one moves, the more pain those granddaughters must bear” (473). When Lizzie begins to experience the traumatic memories of her ancestors, she must tolerate both Ayo’s original traumas, as well as those suffered by Grace as a result of bearing Ayo’s pain herself.

Lizzie’s understanding of family history, and the collective history of slavery, are awakened by the objects that apparently hold and grant access to the past. In *Kindred*, Dana, a contemporary character disconnected from the past, initially seems to have little interest in her family’s history. Lizzie, on the other hand, is anxious to delve into the secrets of her aunt’s trunk. Lizzie is impatient to view its contents, confessing that “the trunk is all I think about” (14). Her reaction indicates that Lizzie is genuinely curious about her family history, especially because this trunk may hold the key to understanding the enigmatic Grace. The trunk is clearly associated with memory and exists as a place to hold memories. Interestingly, though, the memories that are held in the trunk cannot quite be contained by it; seemingly, once they are released, these memories take on a life of their own, entering Lizzie’s body and intruding into her life.

Although Lizzie mentions at the beginning of this chapter in 1974, before she inherits the trunk, that she feels “older than old. Ancient and restless and wandering” (8), she does not develop physical manifestations of her foremothers’ pains until after she begins to interact with the letters and quilt in Grace’s trunk; we can assume, then, that it is the connection with those materials that leads to her bleeding wounds. Beginning as vague aches and pains, Lizzie’s encounters with the past become increasingly more physical until one evening, when she is twenty-one, her intense experience of Grace’s

and Ayo's struggles manifest themselves on her body in the form of bleeding wrists and a bleeding back. Sarah believes that Lizzie's interest in the quilt and letters, and her subsequent "insanity" as a result of that interest, causes the wounds on her daughter's body. While the novel partially supports this theory by having Lizzie's pain and bleeding begin only after she learns about her ancestors through the trunk of relics, the novel also asserts that the relationship between Lizzie and Grace and Ayo is destined and unavoidable, as indicated by Grace's explicit wish to pass the trunk on to Lizzie. Although her interaction with the trunk and its contents (i.e. with memories) is painful, and Sarah thinks that simple avoidance of the trunk will allow Lizzie to heal and become "sane," the novel insists that there is no way for Lizzie to evade the traumatic past.

There is, then, an insistence on remembering throughout the novel, but also an insistence that remembering can be, if necessary, imposed upon contemporary subjects by their ancestors. Lizzie knows that when she feels the pains of the past that her ancestors purposely transmit their pains to her, "[s]o [she] won't forget again" (195). Lizzie becomes increasingly aware that certain things *have* to happen, and she even begins to feel comfortable with it. As she becomes accustomed to the coexistence of herself and her foremothers, all in her own body, Lizzie experiences "that feeling of looking back into time at some distant point and feeling more familiar with that place than with where I am now" (65). Like Dana, Lizzie becomes more invested in her past lives than in her present-day life. In a moment reminiscent of Dana's realization in *Kindred* that Rufus's time is "a sharper, stronger reality," Lizzie confesses, "I've grown comfortable when I'm inside them. But in the world I am supposed to know, I feel as if a trap is slowly being sprung" (140). Once they begin to experience the past, both narrators

eventually connect with the traumatic memories of their ancestors – to the more immediate impact of slavery – more than they connect with the contemporary world.²⁰

Initially, though, Lizzie’s relationship to the past is anything but “comfortable.” When Lizzie first begins experiencing the pain of Ayo and Grace, she is overwhelmed, both physically and emotionally. Her body begins to hurt when she feels the presence of her foremothers and “[e]verything is heavy” (56). At times, Lizzie does tire of her ancestors’ demands, but she also realizes the inevitability of what is happening to her. Most of Lizzie’s negativity toward the past surfaces when she “becomes” Grace. Grace, the first to be infected with Ayo’s traumas, had no precedent, and so did not understand what was happening to her. As a result, she tried to escape instead of confronting the past. At a moment in which Lizzie’s voice merges with Grace’s, Lizzie complains, “I feel forever pressing down, even from where I stand” (131). Momentarily adopting Grace’s attitude, Lizzie here perceives the past as Grace did: as a burden.

It is from Grace’s example, though, that Lizzie learns that she cannot avoid the past as Grace attempted to do. After “becoming” Grace several times, Lizzie grasps the nature of her dreams, visions, and the merging of her identity with Grace and Ayo; she knows that Grace experienced the same phenomena before her and this knowledge, along with some strong physical evidence, convinces her that her “reincarnation” is legitimate and real. Lizzie comes to accept her task asserting, “I’m not going to run from ‘it’ any more – as if I ever could” (141). Lizzie understands that a confrontation with the past will be necessary in order to work through the pains heaped upon her by Ayo and Grace.

After she is released from the hospital, Lizzie is strangely grateful to have had the

²⁰ As critics discussing postmodern slave narratives suggest, in a postmodern world, individuals may feel disconnected from history and may look to the past for meaning, grounding themselves in a history that they perceive as an established “reality.”

opportunity to learn her family's history, even though for her to really understand it, she had to experience its pain physically. She claims that her treatment "[c]ured [her] of fear. Made [her] live with every part of [herself] every day" (47). Accepting the brunt of the excruciatingly literal confrontation with the past, she chooses to endure Ayo's and Grace's traumatic memories. Once she understands her ancestors' pains, she is able to gain more control over her experiences. Lizzie pays attention when the past calls to her, undergoes her education in the traumas of her family history, and is then able to see what she considers the "truth" of her identity: she comes to believe the voice she hears in her dream telling her, "*Your life is many lives*" (176, Perry's emphasis).

Unlike Grace, Lizzie evolves to a point where she can see the positive side of her "haunting." She begins to see her foremothers as supportive; during one of her initial episodes, Lizzie feels Ayo beside her: "I am aware that the woman sits on the floor with me, and my head is in her lap, but I can't see her anymore. I only feel her bones beneath my bones, holding me up" (39). This image is one of connection, comfort, and support; although Lizzie's ancestors impose their traumas onto her, they also realize that she will need help to get through the hardships to come. Similarly, Lizzie finds comfort in the quilt Grace created based on Ayo's life. When she first inherits the quilt, Lizzie begins to sleep with it, and she feels "safe underneath the story of [her] life" (24). The quilt, which she even refers to as a "cloth womb" (39), soon becomes associated with Lizzie's episodes of remembering/ reliving the past. Consequently, Sarah packs up the contents of the trunk and gives them back to Eva while Lizzie is institutionalized. As soon as she is released, however, Lizzie seeks the comfort of the quilt again. Sarah cannot understand this because she blames the quilt for Lizzie's "delusions" and fears her daughter will

become “sick” again if exposed to the quilt. However, because Lizzie has confronted the past and has ceased to be its victim, she can appreciate and coexist with that past, even though it was once the source of intense pain.

Further, Lizzie’s conversation with Father Tom, a priest working in one of the mental hospitals where she is committed helps Perry’s protagonist change her perception toward her experiences. After asking Lizzie to explain where her physical scars have come from, the priest tells Lizzie about “stigmata,” referring to the bleeding marks experienced by devoutly religious individuals empathizing with the pains of Christ’s crucifixion. Although she is not particularly religious, Lizzie’s situation and stigmata both qualify as “mysterious physical trauma” (214). The priest’s suggestion strikes Lizzie as a powerful revelation. For one, Lizzie is able to name and identify a phenomenon that has, until then, remained vague and confusing. She tells her father, “There’s a word for what happened to me” (217). This seemingly small development is crucially important for Lizzie because not having an acceptable “name” or “explanation” for her injuries, her marks have previously been used against her, to identify her as “insane,” “self-destructive,” even “suicidal.” Having an alternative name, one that is not accompanied by the social stigma attached to “insanity,” gives Lizzie more control over how her trauma is perceived. Lizzie’s introduction to the idea of stigmata, then, helps her reverse, at least in her own mind, the label of “insanity” into something far more positive. Father Tom explains that when a particular monk suffered the marks of the stigmata, “no one considered the monk insane. He was practically considered a saint, a healer” (213). Within Catholic theology, experiencing the stigmata is seen as a privilege, a sign of one’s devotion to and connection with Christ. Instead of seeing her “condition” as a burden or a

curse, Lizzie is now equipped to read her experience as a blessing, or, as Long claims, a sign of her “redemptive work” (468).²¹ Long, in fact, views the protagonists of both

Kindred and *Stigmata* as having been specially chosen to confront history:

While we all bear history in our bodies, Butler and Perry imply that some African American women’s bodies are particularly suited to endure a potent, reinvigorated history for all of us. If such a history were reanimated and alive in everyone, we would simply be living history again. (468)

Stigmata implies that Lizzie is “particularly suited” to confront the traumas of the past.

Even before her birth, Lizzie is chosen by Grace to receive the trunk, and Eva refers to

Lizzie as “one of the lucky ones,” interpreting Lizzie’s access to the past as a special gift.

Instead of understanding her episodes of reincarnation as punishment, Lizzie sees them as

an opportunity; Ayo’s and Grace’s memories made themselves known without Lizzie’s

consent, but Lizzie’s ability to relive the most traumatic of her ancestors’ experiences has

also given her knowledge of that history, a knowledge that will, in turn, allow her, to

some extent, to work through the pain and find a place for those memories, so that they

no longer dominate her life.

Despite Lizzie’s decision to view her forced interaction with the past as an

opportunity rather than a punishment, the reader cannot ignore the fact that Lizzie’s

ancestors have caused her intense physical (not to mention emotional and psychological)

pain.²² While critics admit that the premise of the novel is effective and provocative,

Long worries that

²¹ The comparison between her marks, made by Ayo’s bondage and abuse, and the stigmata of religious figures also suggests a larger association between slavery and martyrdom. In this way, the priest’s mention of stigmata changes both Lizzie’s perception toward her own “condition,” as well as recasting the slave as a suffering, wrongly persecuted Christ figure.

²² This point establishes another interesting contrast between *Kindred* and *Stigmata*. As I’ve said, in Perry’s text, ancestors, particular Ayo, inflict violence upon the body of a contemporary relative. In Butler’s novel, on the other hand, Dana inflicts a sort of violence on her foremother Alice when she allows Rufus to repeatedly rape Alice in the interest of ensuring her own family line through Alice’s impregnation. This is

Ayo and Grace's insistence that Lizzie relive the most painful scenes of their lives – scenes of kidnapping, abuse, and emotional trauma – makes them complicit in the practice of keeping postcolonial peoples always subject to the pain of their initial subjugation. (467)²³

If Ayo is always “there, reminding us who we are,” there is a danger that contemporary subjects like Lizzie, whose ancestors were directly affected by slavery, will never move beyond their identification as oppressed people. It seems blatantly unethical that Lizzie be forced to suffer physical injury and fourteen years in mental hospitals because her great-great-grandmother was deeply traumatized by slavery. The family connection makes Lizzie's pain even more alarming; how could someone's great-great-grandmother and grandmother wish pain on their kin? Although *Stigmata* raises these ethical dilemmas, Perry ultimately attempts to resolve this problem by also asserting that it is possible for an individual to work through trauma and achieve a healthy relationship with the past, which Lizzie attempts to accomplish through narrative and quilt-making. By depicting the traumatized subjects' attempts to regain control over their lives, both *Stigmata* and *Kindred* seek to reverse the tendency to read these characters as victims.

“I probably wouldn't believe it either”: Paradoxes of Narrating Trauma

In an effort to exert control over their lives, both Dana and Lizzie struggle, with varying degrees of success, to externalize their traumatic memories by transforming them into narratives that can contain and make sense of their pain. The traumatic event cannot

troublesome to many readers of *Kindred*, and Novella Brooks – De Vita explores this in detail in her article “Beloved and Betrayed: Survival and Authority in *Kindred*,” accusing Dana of “betrayal” and “insensitivity” (19).

²³ For a thorough examination of the ways in which identity politics risk rendering oppressed groups as permanent victims, see Wendy Brown's *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. This construction is reminiscent of *Corregidora*, as well, in that the passing on of traumatic knowledge is painful for the recipient (Ursa), but seen as necessary by the ancestor continuing the story. For the *Corregidora* women, carrying on the story of their abuse and enslavement is a rebellious act for the oppressed subject, as hooks describes in *Talking Back*.

be experienced at the moment of its occurrence, nor can it be fully experienced through the intrusive flashbacks and nightmares that plague the survivor as traumatic memories surface. In order to assimilate the “unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences” from the past, Dana and Lizzie must transform trauma into narrative. According to Van Der Kolk, “narrative memory consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience” (168). Because trauma “cannot be organized on a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory ... level” (Van Der Kolk 172), the survivor can only begin to recover, to integrate the experience appropriately into the psyche, by constructing a narrative that contains the traumatic memory. In their illustrations of protagonists who struggle to gain the support of other characters in the novels through relating the details of their “unbelievable” experiences, Butler and Perry each explore another major paradox of trauma and recovery: the need to represent an experience that is, by nature, unrepresentable.

I noted earlier that Caruth defines trauma as that which “simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). In a similar vein, Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* posits that while the victim (for Scarry, specifically the torture victim) must reclaim her voice in order to reclaim control over her experience, physical pain is simply not translatable.²⁴ If, as Scarry claims, “the translation of pain into power is ultimately a transformation of body into voice” (45), Lizzie and Dana must attempt an

²⁴Tal is one of the most outspoken proponents of the idea that trauma literature cannot convey the “truth” of the original trauma. She argues, “Textual representations – literary, visual, oral – are mediated by language and do not have the impact of the traumatic experience ... There is, in this case, no substitute for experience – only being is believing” (*Worlds of Hurt* 15).

impossible task, and in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, we witness detailed illustrations of the inherent conflict faced by trauma survivors trying to construct narratives.

Through the juxtaposition of extreme physical symptoms of trauma – eruptions of traumatic memory onto the body – with implausible, supernatural “explanations,” *Kindred* and *Stigmata* effectively dramatize the survivor’s paradoxical drive to testify. Other characters radically doubt the narrative’s explanation of Lizzie’s severe physical reaction, which is read as a suicide attempt, just as Dana suspects the “truth” behind the loss of her arm would be doubted by her doctors. As Sievers observes, “for them [Lizzie’s parents and doctors], ‘insanity’ is the only available explanation for what happened” (131). Because the novel is told from Lizzie’s perspective and in her own words, however, the reader is encouraged to scoff at the doctors who attempt to rationalize (and who eventually pathologize) events that are, to Lizzie, supernatural, but also very real phenomena.

Working to combat the reader’s instinct to doubt, the novel is littered with details to corroborate Lizzie’s narrative account. Lizzie’s body is repeatedly marked with physical signs of her ventures into other lifetimes. When Sarah and Lizzie first look at Grace’s story quilt, Lizzie begins to experience a physical reaction, albeit a subtle one. Later that night, under the quilt, she sees, in a “dream,” one of the stories from the quilt come to life. She relives Ayo’s only joyful childhood memory, when she walks with her mother to the market. Later, we will learn that this is only moments before Ayo is kidnapped, separated from her family and homeland, and taken to America on a slave ship. When Lizzie awakens, “there is dust about [her] feet” (25). Inexplicably, Lizzie has brought “the dirt gathered around [Ayo’s] bare toes” into her present-day bedroom. This

detail signifies that Lizzie was not simply dreaming about her great-great-grandmother's childhood memory; she *became* her great-great-grandmother, reliving Ayo's memory over a hundred years after its first occurrence. She was, inexplicably, transported physically into that moment, and the dirt serves as evidence of that trip.

The appearance of the "dust" on Lizzie's feet is only the first of many physical markers that support her account. Lizzie sometimes unconsciously speaks as Ayo. Further, Lizzie tries to prove to Sarah that she has become Ayo and Grace by revealing details about Grace's life that Lizzie could not have possibly known. Sarah, however, dismisses Lizzie's attempts to reach out to her and refuses to revisit her childhood memories. It becomes apparent that verbal communication is insufficient for Lizzie to transmit the reality of her experiences. Beginning to show physical signs of the suffering she describes, Lizzie expects to be believed, but ironically, even physical markers cannot convince her doubtful family and doctors. Lizzie finds that her physical pain cannot be understood by others, especially at first, when her body aches but shows no outward sign of injury. She finally describes her pain to Ruth, who thinks that "physical manifestations" could serve as "proof that [Lizzie] really went [back in time]" (83). At this point, though, Lizzie has not been physically injured by the past; for now, the pain is vague but ever-present.

Interestingly, though, Ruth is only able to "feel" Lizzie's pain by touching the affected areas of her body. Although she sees no scars on Lizzie's aching wrists at this point, when she touches them, Ruth experiences "Just for a second. Pain" (83) under Lizzie's skin.²⁵ After nearly drowning while reenacting Ayo's attempt to jump from the

²⁵ In a later chapter on *Sula* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, I discuss listeners. Here, Ruth serves as a listener for Lizzie. She is the only character who comes close to "feeling" what Lizzie feels. This portrayal

slave ship, the pain in Lizzie's wrists has escalated to the point where she exhibits physical scars. As a result of the chains tugging at Ayo's wrists during the Middle Passage, Lizzie develops "red, round marks on my wrists" (88). The physical manifestations of Ayo's and Grace's pain on Lizzie's body culminate in what her parents interpret as a suicide attempt. Again, Lizzie witnesses a violent scene of Ayo's experience on the Middle Passage, characterized by "[b]lood and water and brown bodies falling down and never landing" (145). The blood from the memory inexplicably invades Lizzie's body, as "red drops seep through [her] skin, onto the quilt, onto the carpet" (145). As Lizzie mentally returns to her bedroom, she realizes that "All the aches and mysterious stabs of pain now have their corresponding wounds. Raggedy, ugly, familiar skin openings and welted patterns" (146); the pain and suffering that have built up for years have now reached a breaking point. It is significant that the memory associated with this breaking point is, again, the Middle Passage, located by Crossley and others as *the* defining trauma of the slave experience. Ironically, though, the moment of the novel in which Lizzie's physical pain is most vivid and real to the other characters is also the moment at which they most doubt her story. Seeking a "rational" explanation for what has occurred in Lizzie's bedroom, her parents commit her to a mental hospital.

Even within the mental hospital, physical manifestations of Ayo's and Grace's pain persist, but they also continue to raise doubts in the minds of the mental health

can be contrasted to that of Kevin in *Kindred*, which I will discuss later; although Kevin physically does go to the past with Dana, he cannot comprehend the totality of her experience. On the other hand, Lizzie's lover, Anthony Paul appears to be a potential listener. Lizzie becomes convinced that Anthony Paul is also reincarnated, a man from one of her past lives (possibly George, Grace's husband), and sees her relationship with him as a sort of reunion reminiscent of the lovemaking scene between Arveyda and Fanny at the end of *Temple*. Anthony Paul created a painting that depicts a scene of Ayo on the slave ship, a work of art that was produced before he even met Lizzie. *Stigmata* raises interesting questions about the necessity of the listener to testimony, but these questions are not pursued to the extent that they are in *Sula* and *Temple*.

professionals there. Spontaneous bleeding plagues Lizzie throughout her first year of institutionalization: every night she experiences dreams and memories of Ayo and Grace, and every morning she wakes with their pain. Overhearing a conversation between her doctor and a nurse, Lizzie learns that they cannot understand how she could physically harm herself without any weapons. The logical minds of her doctors and her father, also a doctor, insist on a concrete explanation for the bleeding. The doctor wonders if “she’s just been reopening the stitches with her fingernails,” but is dumbfounded, admitting, “Frankly, I haven’t even figured out how she does it” (159). Even when faced with the lack of physical proof that Lizzie has harmed herself (in the form of a weapon; physical proof does exist in the form of her injuries), the doctors in *Stigmata* refuse to see Lizzie’s explanation as legitimate or believable. Like Dana’s severed arm in *Kindred*, the physical mark of trauma exists on Lizzie’s body, but the supernatural events responsible for her scars do not seem to correlate with the very real injuries that all of the characters in the novel witness.

Lizzie illustrates the trauma survivor’s paradoxical relationship to “truth”; her scars allow others to see the truth with their own eyes, but Lizzie struggles to translate her experiences in a way that others can comprehend. When talking to Dr. Daniels, Lizzie feels frustrated that “it’s so hard to make him understand the enormity of what I have felt, and of what I feel approaching” (137). *Stigmata*, then, largely reinforces the idea that trauma, particularly physical trauma, is not translatable by any means other than direct physiological experience. Lizzie can understand Grace’s pain and Ayo’s pain because she feels those injuries in her own body; Sarah cannot understand Lizzie’s pain, much less Grace’s, because she has been spared from the physical experience of the past that is

transmitted to Lizzie. Although Lizzie views her scars as “proof of lives intersecting from past to present” (204), the reactions of the other characters to her physical markers of trauma reinforce the idea that “the experience of bodily pain remains radically particular” (Long 475).

Despite Lizzie’s inability, for most of the novel, to convey what she considers the truth of her experiences to her parents and her doctors, she does have the support of her cousin Ruth, who claims to feel the pain in Lizzie’s body by touching her, and of Aunt Eva, who had witnessed Grace’s suffering. In *Kindred*, Dana is more isolated; Kevin is the only character with whom she discusses her journeys to the past. As she returns to 1976, Dana inadequately attempts, to articulate what has happened to her. Her first trip to the nineteenth century introduces, among other issues, the problem of communication between Dana and Kevin when it comes to “what happens” when Dana disappears. When Kevin demands an explanation, in “The River,” Dana tells him that she saved a young boy from drowning. She instinctively relates these details, but then “hesitated, trying to think, to make sense. Not that what had happened to me made sense, but at least I could tell it coherently” (15). In order to try to convince a “carefully neutral” Kevin, Dana “remembered it all for him – relived it all in detail” (15). Kevin clearly struggles to believe Dana, but she senses that he does not. Her inability to express these events in a way that Kevin understands does not make the experience any less real to Dana, though. Again, her experience is “radically particular.”

Any faith Kevin does have in Dana’s story comes not from her verbal replay of the events, but rather from the physical evidence on her body as she returns: she is wet and covered in mud. Not only that, but Kevin witnesses Dana’s disappearance and

reappearance. He admits, “It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts,” and as he wipes the mud off her leg, notes, “This stuff had to come from somewhere” (16). Like the dust around Lizzie’s feet when she wakes from her first “dream” as Ayo, the Maryland mud corroborates Dana’s story. Afraid to consider the meaning of this strange event, Kevin encourages Dana to “pull away from it,” but she knows that she cannot ignore or repress what she has experienced. However, when Dana tells Kevin, “I don’t have a name for the thing that happened to me” (17), we see that she struggles to find a way to verbally describe this paranormal occurrence. The experience defies their comprehension and exists outside of any of their previously stable ideas of time and space. Trying to distance herself from this bizarre occurrence, whose purpose she does not yet understand, becomes impossible for Dana.

Because of the nature of traumatic memory, Dana cannot simply forget this experience. Even though she tries to “let go,” as Kevin advises her to do, what happened to Dana “had still not quite settled back and become the ‘dream’ Kevin wanted [it] to be” (18). After her next trip to the past, Kevin again asks her questions about where she was and what occurred; this time, however, Dana struggles with her physical pain so much that she cannot answer his questions. The physical pain that Dana undergoes repeatedly throughout the novel is one reason she can never “let go” of her traumatic experiences; she can never forget them because she is always reminded by her marked, suffering body, whose scars always return with her to the present. Physical agony also robs Dana of her voice in the novel; the pain of the body becomes her primary focus.

Even if Dana were able to describe the pain she feels, she cannot express this in a way that others could comprehend. According to Scarry, “physical pain does not simply

resist language but actively destroys it” (4). When Dana returns to 1976 after beatings in the 1800s, she is brought back to consciousness by her body’s pain. In the face of agonizing physical pain, Dana seeks escape from her thoughts and her memories.

Immediately following the events, she does not want to relive them or narrate them; Dana simply wants to forget them. But the pain will not let her forget; it serves as a constant reminder of the traumas – both physical and psychological – that she has undergone and to which she will continue to be subjected.

Dana’s inability to convey her experiences to Kevin, the only other twentieth-century character who knows about her travels, could potentially be resolved by Kevin’s trip to the past with Dana. On the third journey, “The Fall,” Kevin holds onto Dana as she disappears and thus accompanies her to the plantation for the first time. Kevin’s identity as a white man and Dana’s as a black woman immediately delineate their roles in the past. Now accustomed to playing the part of the nineteenth-century slave woman, Dana must act as Kevin’s property. Although the married couple travels together in hopes that Kevin can appreciate Dana’s predicament, their racial and gender differences determine their experiences and mark a definite separation in those experiences, which does not allow Kevin ever to understand the depth of Dana’s trauma. This is evident from their contrary reactions to the slave children participating in a “game” imitating a slave auction. Kevin’s attitude toward this game is casual; he tries to calm Dana by telling her she is “reading too much into a kids’ game” (100). Positioned as a slave herself and newly-equipped with the knowledge of her slave ancestry, Dana is reasonably more upset by the game, insisting that Kevin is “reading too little into it” (100). This instance is symbolic for Dana because what bothers her is “the ease ... I never realized how easily

people could be trained to accept slavery” (101). This particular conversation also demonstrates how different Dana’s and Kevin’s experiences of the past are when Kevin downplays the brutality of slavery on the Weylin plantation, surprised that there is “[n]o overseer. No more work than the people can manage” (100). Dana counters that there’s also “no decent housing ... no rights and the possibility of being mistreated or sold away from their families for any reason – or no reason” (100). Kevin and Dana both realize that Kevin can never know what it is like to be a slave. In Dana’s case, physical interaction with history helps her to understand the past; despite Kevin’s simultaneous interactions with the past, Kevin’s transportation fails to bridge the gap in their experiences and in some ways, perhaps even widens that gap. The disparity in their experiences based on their respective race and gender prohibit any potential for Kevin to understand Dana’s plight. Ironically, the shared physical experience does not make it any easier for Dana to articulate her struggles to Kevin.

Even at the climax of the novel, when Dana is permanently scarred by the loss of her arm and has had to murder Rufus, Dana cannot and does not narrate her traumatic memories to Kevin; Dana knows Kevin will not and cannot understand her perspective. Dana stabs Rufus because he attempts to rape her. Dana will simply not tolerate this violation and strikes back, killing her ancestor and losing her arm from the point where Rufus is holding it, as she resurfaces in her California home. In the Epilogue, as Kevin and Dana travel to 1970s Maryland to visit the sites of their past time travels, Dana realizes, “Kevin would never know what those last moments had been like. I had outlined them for him, and he’d asked few questions” (263-64). Dana leaves her explanation at “Self-defense” (264), unable to relate the most important details to her husband. Dana

chooses not to tell Kevin those details because, in the previous chapter, Kevin asked Dana if Rufus ever tried to rape her, and she attempted to explain to Kevin that Rufus would not succeed, even if he did try to rape her. Dana “tried to find the right words” because she thinks, “If I could make him understand, then surely he would believe me ... [He was] the only person who had any idea what I was going through” (246). Despite Dana’s desperate attempts to explain her experiences, she fails to fully communicate with Kevin. After several attempts, she realizes, “He didn’t understand,” and when he tells her that he knows “the truth” of Dana’s relation to and feelings about the sexual violation of black women under slavery, Dana resigns herself to being “only half understood” (246). As a result of this failed communication, Dana learns that she cannot discuss this topic with Kevin and expect him to be a completely understanding listener; therefore, Dana purposely withholds details of her final encounter with Rufus, never telling Kevin that her ancestor tried to rape her and never admitting to her husband how difficult it was, even then, to thrust the knife into Rufus’s side and back. For Dana, words cannot convey her extraordinarily pain, nor can language express the contradictory emotions Dana experienced at the moment of Rufus’s death.

“I’m at the end of the pain”: Narrative and Recovery

Even though Dana cannot and does not communicate the whole truth of her experiences to Kevin, she still must find ways to narrate her story in order to transform the traumatic memories that are the result of her interaction with the past. Within the novel, Dana participates in both hired writing and personally cathartic writing while on the plantation. Dana agrees to help Rufus write letters to his creditors after Tom Weylin’s

death because Rufus is woefully uneducated and he knows that Dana is a writer. After some hesitation,²⁶ Dana agrees to “write some very persuasive letters,” but even more rewarding for Dana is that, as a result of agreeing to write for Rufus, she is able to keep some paper on which to record her own thoughts. In the time she does not spend working for Rufus and Margaret Weylin, Dana “kept a journal in shorthand” because the other characters cannot translate it; only Dana knows what her marks symbolize.²⁷ She admits, “It was such a relief to be able to say what I felt, even in writing, without worrying that I might get myself or someone else into trouble” (229). Dana’s move to narrate and record her experiences is a step she must take to deal with the horrors she has faced and continues to face. Later, after Alice’s funeral, Dana similarly finds a useful outlet in her writing. She confesses, “Sometimes I wrote things because I couldn’t say them, couldn’t sort out my feelings about them, couldn’t keep them bottled up inside me. It was a kind

²⁶ As many critics recognize, the scene in which Rufus asks Dana to write his letters for him echoes the earlier scene in which Kevin wants Dana to type his manuscripts for him. When Rufus asks for the favor, claiming that he thought Dana might miss “writing [her] own things” (227), Dana tells him, “You’ll never know how hard I worked in my own time to avoid doing jobs like this” (226). Earlier, Dana reveals in a flashback that even though she hated typing even her own works, she “grudgingly” typed Kevin’s manuscript. She refused on the next occasions, however, and “He was annoyed” and then “said if I couldn’t do him a little favor when he asked, I could leave” (109). This flashback is one of many instances in the text where Kevin is connected to a white male character in the past who attempts to dominate Dana. As Dana experiences slavery on the Weylin plantation, she begins to connect her modern oppression with that of her ancestors, and this involves identifying Kevin, in subtle ways, as the oppressor.

²⁷ Dana’s act of writing as a black woman in the antebellum south can be read as an act of resistance. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks praises those who are oppressed but refuse to be silenced:

For us [the writer from any oppressed, colonized group who endeavors to speak], true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act – as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced. (8)

In addition to functioning as a means of her own healing and coping, Dana’s writing could also be seen as the construction of a counter-narrative, just as slave narratives were seen in the nineteenth-century. These narratives represented the speaking black subject writing a history of the oppressed, although History is usually controlled by the oppressors.

Similarly, in one of the few articles that mentions Dana’s writing in the novel, Steinberg refers to Dana’s journal as “one act of subterfuge” and recognizes that her “secret writing” provides Dana with “peace of mind” and “an outlet” (472).

of writing I always destroyed afterward. It was for no one else. Not even Kevin” (252). As a survivor, Dana comes to know her story as she tells it; she discovers and assimilates her experiences through writing about them. At the same time, though, she recognizes that this writing is “for no one else.” Although she notes this writing is, “Not even [for] Kevin,” we might guess she means “especially [not for] Kevin” after Dana has realized the distance between their experiences. Even as Dana recognizes that this narrative of trauma cannot be fully shared with others, it does serve as a means of personal healing as she struggles to survive.

Despite her increasing realization that she is the only person who can completely understand her experiences, Dana does eventually try to communicate her story to others. Butler’s protagonist attempts to exercise her professional writing skills to transform her memories into a narrative. Dana first tries to write her story in a form that is intended to be distributed to others (while in the past, she also writes personal notes, which she does not intend for others to read) when she returns alone from the past, while Kevin remains in the nineteenth century. Dana tells us that

The time passed and I did more unpacking, stopping often, taking too many aspirins. I began to bring some order to my own office. Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it. (116)

Here, Dana attempts to order her life and make sense of what she has seen and experienced during her travels. She starts by trying to “unpack,” a project she and Kevin had just begun as her trips to the past commenced. She then tries to “bring some order” to her office. And perhaps even more significantly, she tries to order her experience by writing about what has happened to her. Dana’s attempts fail at this juncture, but she still

holds on to the hope that “someday” she will be able to successfully put her experiences to paper. Dana feels the need to write both as an attempt to purge herself of the traumatic events she has witnessed and experienced on the plantation and as an attempt to convey her experience to others. Dana’s failure to write at this point indicates the difficulty, even impossibility, of ever being able truly and accurately to communicate trauma.

Similarly, Kevin feels frustrated and angry with his own thwarted attempts to write about his experiences, especially the five years he has spent alone in the antebellum South. Remembering her “own attempts to write when [she’d] been home last” in which Dana “had tried and tried and only managed to fill [her] wastebasket” (194), she tries to console Kevin by sharing her own hope that she will “someday . . . be able to write about it.” Significantly, Dana tells Kevin, “you can’t come back all at once any more than you can leave all at once” (194). Dana astutely recognizes, in relation to her own desires to write, that she may have to wait until “this was over, if it was ever over” to narrate her story. Her comment emphasizes that trauma defies its own representation; specifically, Dana understands that a distance must exist between the survivor and her attempts to tell her story because the trauma cannot be experienced at the time it actually occurs, but only later, when the survivor is able to re-member those traumas. When Dana and Kevin try to record their stories in the middle of Butler’s novel, they are not able to; this fact suggests that traumatic stories can only be told after the traumatic event has reached its completion, even while it signifies the extent to which that desire to narrate and externalize those events haunt a survivor.

The unbelievable nature of her story further complicates any attempt Dana will make to narrate it, of course, since she recognizes that it is likely to never be believed. As

Dana and Kevin reflect on their interactions with the past in the novel's epilogue, Dana remarks, "If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane" (264). Placing this comment at the very end of the novel, after narrating a series of detailed experiences, Dana wonders if she can ever tell anyone her story. The novel, however, exists and represents that story. Knowing that Dana is a writer, and that she has attempted in the past to transform her traumatic memories into a narrative, we can assume that this novel is the culmination of her attempts. Upon one return to the past, we find Dana sifting through her journal entries, which she previously claimed were private, "wondering whether [she] could weave into a story" (244). Hearing the story that is presumably based on those secret journal entries, we understand that we are a more privileged audience than Kevin; further, Dana specifically confides to the reader that she can never tell Kevin certain details, details which she does, however, reveal to the reader. Because she still writes this account of her experiences, we can assume that her imagined reader stands as Dana's last hope for a sympathetic witness.

While Dana seems ultimately to rely on the reader of her narrative to hear her story, Lizzie appears to be most concerned with transmitting the details of her trauma to another character – her mother, Sarah. As in *Kindred*, Lizzie's narrative in *Stigmata* illustrates in detail the process of recovery, both its potential successes, which Perry's novel dwells on more completely than Butler's, and the difficulties inherent in the survivor's attempts to confront the painful past and externalize the events through telling her story. When Father Tom first approaches Lizzie, she is impressed because "he doesn't ask what's wrong with me. He asks, what's my story? My story" (211). The

novel stands as Lizzie's attempt to answer that question; taking ownership of her experience by telling her story is Lizzie's primary means to healing.

Lizzie's journey to healing is not simple, though. The inability of others to understand Lizzie's experience, even after witnessing her physical pain, teaches Lizzie that she should not to tell people what "really" happens to her, and this inability to communicate her experiences jeopardizes the possibility of her recovery. Despite her drastically misunderstood attempts to share her "truth" with others, the urge to talk about her experiences persists. In one of her first attempts to verbalize her trauma, she tells Dr. Daniels, "There are no voices ... these are memories, that's what they feel like. And when the ... conditions, I guess ... are right, they're more than memory, they're events. They're replays of things that have already happened" (139). Lizzie's description of memories as "replays" recalls Van Der Kolk's definition of traumatic memory, which surfaces in the form of "somatic sensations, reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks" (172). The "memories" inherited from Grace and Ayo do surface as "somatic sensations, reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks" when Lizzie is forced to physically relive events from her ancestors' past. The traumatic memories of slavery continue to rematerialize through the generations, surfacing in Lizzie's psyche and on her body, insisting that they be noticed. As Aunt Eva observes, addressing Lizzie as Grace, "'That's why you're here now. Because you left something unfinished'" (49). Grace's inability to come to terms with Ayo's past during her lifetime necessitates Lizzie's reenactment of traumatic memories from Grace's life, in addition to the traumatic memories of Ayo's life that Grace could not resolve. The unfinished business of

traumatic memory travels through the generations of Lizzie's family, resurfacing again and again until it can be confronted and worked through.²⁸

Again, since the aggression of traumatic memory does not leave a traumatized individual a choice, the survivor experiences a fundamental loss of control. Lizzie can, however, exercise some control over her life by determining how she will make sense of her experiences. After several thwarted attempts to communicate verbally what is, to her, the truth of her "condition," Lizzie rebels by embracing silence instead of narrative. When institutionalized, Lizzie does not speak for two years. Understanding the importance of externalizing the traumatic experience and containing it in one's own terms, Lizzie's doctor encourages her to talk about her memories. However, Lizzie cannot rely on her doctor to support her testimony, insisting, "no one here understands the necessity of silence" (158). Sensing that she has "no control" over either her aggressive memories or the reaction of those around her to her account of these disturbing events, Lizzie feels that words simply cannot capture the reality of her experiences; for her, "speech ... has become inadequate" (157). Lizzie embraces the ancestors whose "actions" led to her hospitalization rather than casting them off, taking refuge in a world where she can contemplate "all that chatter for all the lifetimes I didn't know I had, the ones I couldn't tell [the doctors]" (157). Lizzie thus embarks on an inner journey, during which she patiently listens to the "voices" of her foremothers and seems to come to a deeper understanding of their plights, an understanding that ultimately allows Lizzie to work through her own relationship to the painful past. As Sievers argues, *Stigmata* "suggests that a necessary development is happening within Lizzie during that

²⁸ In the next chapter, the transmission of traumatic memory within the family will be discussed in more detail through an analysis of postmemory in *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club*.

time. She needs to go through a phase of mental confrontation” (135). Recalling Dana’s advice to Kevin that he “can’t come back all at once,” *Stigmata* indicates that this stage is necessary for Lizzie before she can attempt to share her story with others again.

Eventually, Lizzie is able to find outlets through which to externalize her experiences during her hospitalization. Although hesitant at first, Lizzie decides to try Dr. Brun’s suggestion that she record her thoughts and memories in a journal. Because Lizzie’s historical reenactments are instigated by her ancestors’ insistence that she (and the rest of her family) remember the painful history of slavery, she knows that recording that history is one way to preserve it. The past is so real to her, however, that she sees no need to record it in words, which she has so often found inadequate. The doctor does not want Lizzie to write down her memories in an effort to preserve them, however. Dr. Brun instead understands the significance of externalizing the trauma narrative, of describing trauma in words and containing it in a narrative of the survivor’s own construction, as a means of regaining control of that experience. Eventually, Lizzie admits, “this journal has helped me ... I’ve developed a need for the journal that wasn’t there before” (218). Describing the therapeutic effect of the journal in more detail, Lizzie remarks, “The journal eases my mental pain and illuminates it, makes everything swimming through my head touchable” (219). Although telling her story to other characters does not seem to alleviate any of Lizzie’s pain, putting her thoughts down in writing allows her to begin to make sense of the overwhelming confusion she feels as a result of her experiences. Lizzie’s most significant narrative within the novel, however, is the story quilt she creates to tell the story of Grace’s life.

Through the metaphor of the quilt, we see that it is not only the traumatic memories that are passed on like family traditions in *Stigmata*; the urge to tell the story and to continue this legacy of trauma also recurs throughout the generations of Lizzie's family. Grace, once she has begun to experience Ayo's pains herself, feels she must continue the legacy; in order to record Ayo's story, she composes the story quilt that Lizzie will later inherit. Lizzie is inspired to create a story quilt by her grandmother's Grace's quilt. Throughout the novel, Grace's construction of the quilt about Ayo's life is juxtaposed to Lizzie's quilt. Haunted by Ayo's memories, Grace tries to transfer them to the quilt. She also makes the quilt to remind herself of the life she left behind. Although she tries to escape Ayo's memories by leaving Alabama, she regrets that she has chosen to leave her own family behind. To correct this decision, she puts Sarah and her husband George and their twin boys in the quilt, "So she can remember them. So Grandmother Ayo doesn't drown them with the past" (56). Grace seems to believe that if she is able to work through Ayo's memories by placing them on the quilt, the memories will cease to affect her family.

Just as Ayo visits the pain of her life on Grace in an effort to continue a legacy of remembrance in her family, so too does Grace artistically render pictures of her family in an effort to establish memories of her family even though she cannot be with them. In a letter to her sister Mary Nell, Grace reveals that the quilt is "finished and Ayo's whole story is set on it. I feel better now it's through" (15). Like many other survivors, however, Grace does not simply proceed through an uncomplicated recovery. She confesses, "I thought getting all that out on the quilt in front of me would get rid of it somehow. I don't know about that. But I know I can't pass it on to her this craziness" (15). Grace discovers

that recovery is not as simple as transcribing the trauma narrative artistically. She cannot avoid or escape the past; instead, she needs to achieve a relationship with it that allows her to both recognize her family's history and find a way to integrate it into her life without letting it consume her.²⁹ Lizzie's memories of Grace include Grace's life in Detroit, after she leaves her family in Alabama. Lizzie's description indicates that the story quilt serves as a source of comfort for Grace, just as it becomes a comfort for Lizzie. For Grace, "[the quilt] became large enough to warm her sorrow, though not to excise it" (71). Grace's act of creation does ease her pain somewhat, but she can never completely overcome Ayo's traumatic memories and the subsequent painful decisions she has made in her own life. Grace's decision to abandon her family and, in the process, to try to escape Ayo's pain, can ultimately never provide her with absolute solace because she cannot confront the past as honestly and as completely as is necessary.

Because Grace does not resolve her relationship with the past during her lifetime, Lizzie is infected with the traumatic history and must attempt to succeed where Grace could not. Part of Lizzie's corrective project is to repeat Grace's story quilt project, this time recording Grace's life. One major issue left unresolved by Grace is her relationship with her daughter Sarah, and transmitting Grace's story to Sarah becomes Lizzie's primary goal in producing this new quilt. Lizzie notes, "I'm telling Grace's story with this quilt – just as she had told Ayo's story with hers – and the fabric has to hold up at

²⁹ Confronting the past includes finding a way to live with it and not be controlled by it. As Dori Laub argues, "re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside" (*Testimony* 69). After telling the story, then, the survivor must also be able to take that story and integrate into her psyche and into her life. The trauma story can then become part of the story of her life but not *the only* story of her life.

least until the next storyteller comes along” (63).³⁰ Here Lizzie establishes the line of afflicted women in her family as artist figures, as storytellers. As one of these women, she bears a responsibility to tell the story of the past. Lizzie does see her venture into quilt-making, which she once refers to as “dabbling,” as a responsibility. She worries that Sarah won’t understand, but thinks, “I have to continue the story, and maybe, please God, Mother will understand in the process” (60). Her desire to create the quilt persists, even if Sarah’s comprehension of the quilt as the story of Grace’s life is not accomplished. When Ruth doubts whether Lizzie’s strategy will be an effective way to “talk” to Sarah about Grace’s life, Lizzie retorts, “I’m going to make the quilt whether she catches on or not” (75). Although sharing her creation with Sarah is always part of Lizzie’s plan, translating Grace’s story through the quilt serves its own purpose in Lizzie’s healing.

Over time, though, Lizzie comes to see her greatest responsibility as transmitting the story of Grace’s life to Sarah, who was never given the opportunity to understand Grace’s struggles. After her attempts to converse with Sarah as Grace and about Grace have repeatedly failed, Lizzie explains that the quilt is “the gentlest way, to reopen the subject of my [Grace’s] past” (222). Having seemingly completed her confrontation with the past, Lizzie must now facilitate Sarah’s confrontation with the past, as well. Ruth tells Lizzie that Sarah “doesn’t want to believe” and has repressed the traumatic memory of Grace’s absence. Ruth explains, “Sometimes you have to cut off the part of your memory that hurts. Maybe that’s what she’s doing, you know?” (75). Lizzie realizes that

³⁰ Because of Lizzie’s comment and because of the progression of “reincarnations” so far, the reader can presume that another woman will be born, a granddaughter to Lizzie, who will experience the pains of Lizzie, Grace, and Ayo. Long assumes that the legacy will continue after Lizzie, commenting that “This cycle does not bode well for Lizzie’s future granddaughter, who, we presume, will endure the weight of Lizzie’s fourteen-year institutionalization” (473). On the other hand, because Lizzie seems to achieve a healthy relationship with the past and because she and Sarah seem to be on the way to resolving the issues left behind by Grace, it is possible that the cycle will end with Lizzie, or rather, that it will continue in a way that will no longer involve pain and suffering.

her mother is “choosing not to” (74) connect with her over the shared pain of Grace’s life, while Lizzie has been forced to confront and live with the past. The novel makes it clear, though, that Lizzie is a stronger woman than her mother because of her knowledge of the traumatic past and her ability to integrate her family’s history into her contemporary life.

Gradually, however, Sarah seems to be won over by Lizzie’s attempts to communicate through the quilt. Sievers observes that *Stigmata* forces us to think about the ways in which “alternative venues – painting or quilting, for example – [might] be potentially more convincing than words” (134). Indeed, Perry’s text suggests that these visual translations of Lizzie’s/Grace’s/Ayo’s story are more effective than any verbal transmission has been to this point. Late in the novel, when Lizzie decides to move to Atlanta, she finally realizes that Sarah is beginning to believe in Lizzie’s reincarnation because Sarah laments, ““We just ... we just got started with ... everything ...”” (Perry’s ellipses) as “[h]er child’s eyes bore a hole right through” Lizzie (196). Relating to Lizzie as though she is Grace, poised to abandon the young Sarah again, Sarah worries, ““I can’t think of you going away again. Not now”” (196). Sarah has begun to open her mind and heart to the possibility of the truth of Lizzie’s account and now displays her fragility at being hurt again by her mother. Sarah’s reaction indicates that she is beginning to believe Lizzie’s story.

Lizzie’s project to communicate with Sarah as Grace comes full circle when Sarah finally understands the message embedded in Lizzie’s story quilt. The final “present-day” chapter (July 1996) allows Lizzie to witness the success of her therapeutic mission. The quilt serves as an impetus for Lizzie to finally relate the story, from her

intimate knowledge of Grace's life and memories, of the day Grace left her family, to the still-grieving Sarah. Allowing herself finally to express her pain, Sarah weeps, Lizzie completes the final stitch on the quilt,³¹ and realizes, "The circle is complete and my daughter sits across from me with the gap finally closed" (230). When Lizzie explains, "That's what the quilt is about. The past. And putting the past aside when we're through" (228), Perry's suggests that this quilt will be more successful than Grace's previous quilt and that, this time, the afflicted woman has been able to effectively externalize her traumatic memories through an artistic medium.

History, Memory, and the Possibility of Healing

Despite the optimistic reconciliation of Lizzie, Sarah, and Grace at the end of *Stigmata* and Kevin's closing statement that he and Dana "have some chance of staying [sane]" now that Rufus is dead, we leave both novels with the feeling that something is still unresolved.³² In *Kindred*, Dana's tone is somber; she must adjust to life without one of her arms (the absence of which will serve as a constant reminder of her trauma), while her arm lingers in a liminal state somewhere between past and present. In *Stigmata*, Perry does not end the novel with the reconciliation of Lizzie and Sarah; rather, she inserts a final chapter from the "past" timeline, an episode from 1988 in which Lizzie participates in a therapeutic art class. Creating a painting expressing the experiences of Ayo in the

³¹ Significantly, this last piece that is stitched is the small blue cloth that belonged to Ayo's mother that Ayo, Joy, and Grace, before Lizzie, have cherished and which Lizzie calls, "A link to the past" (228).

³² Thus, I must qualify Beaulieu's statement that "Dana sinks the knife into Rufus and succeeds in separating herself from the threat of slavery forever" (127). This reading indicates that Dana is able to sever herself completely from the impact of slavery, but she is only able to do so, presumably, physically when she kills Rufus. The psychological implications of slavery will continue to haunt her. On the other hand, I would agree with Crossley's argument that "[l]eaving the book's ending rough-edged and raw like Dana's wound, Butler leaves the reader uneasy and disturbed by the intersection of story and history rather than reassured by a tale that solves all the mysteries" (268).

Middle Passage, the art teacher Mr. Hart remarks, “That’s not your original idea, Miss DuBose, but very . . . compelling” before adding, “I see a story there, but it’s all alone. Embellish!” (234-235). Mr. Hart’s enthusiastic advice to “[e]mbellish!” has many implications. For one, the word connotes “exaggeration,” and we could read Lizzie as having taken this art teacher’s advice in constructing her narrative; we leave the novel wondering, how much of her story did she “embellish”? Additionally, Mr. Hart’s recognition that the painting is not based on an “original idea” speaks to the multiplicity of Lizzie’s identity; if we believe her account, we know that she is repeating the lives of her foremothers to some extent. Further, in the context of trauma and recovery, placing this chapter, which is chronologically located somewhere in the center of the story told by the novel, and certainly in the middle of Lizzie’s hospitalization, at the very end of the novel indicates that history is never over, and that attempting to recover from serious traumas, like those inflicted on slaves, is an ongoing, perhaps even irresolvable, battle.

Both *Kindred* and *Stigmata* suggest, as scholarship on the two novels has widely recognized, that the past impacts on the present in profound and unavoidable ways. And, as is also well-established, Butler’s and Perry’s accounts of the return of traumatic memories of slavery assert the importance of remembering history, especially for oppressed groups whose experiences have for so long been excluded from the official record. In *Stigmata*, Ayo cannot remember the names of her parents and her homeland is only a distant memory. To correct her own forgetting and to prevent similar trauma from happening again, Ayo imposes her own historical legacy onto future generations of women in her family. While continuing the relationship with a past that is so unimaginably painful may serve, as Sievers worries, to exacerbate the oppression of

African Americans, Perry makes it clear that Ayo's vow to visit the traumas of the past upon her future relatives is a political decision.³³ While institutionalized and silent, Lizzie reflects on Ayo's motivation for silence during her life and incessant "speaking" after her death, through the transmission of memories to Grace and Lizzie. When she refuses to answer a question asked by her mistress and is beaten for her strategic silence, Ayo recognizes that, for a slave

...there wasn't nothing to own but your private loves and hates and white people wanted those too. They wanted to own the unknowable. So Ayo stayed silent and thought of ways to get through and live to tell. (165)

Ayo thus takes ownership of her life and her memories by withholding them from the white slaveowners who have already taken so much from her. It is certainly valid to read Ayo's curse as potentially relegating her descendants to victim status, much like the status of the slave which her legacy hopes to resist. Both *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, however, present their contemporary characters not strictly as victims, but as survivors, actively attempting to overcome traumatic memories. The extent of their physical relationship to the past is not, within the worlds of these novels, in Lizzie's or Dana's control. It *is* in their control, however, to manage their pain and to work through their trauma, which we witness throughout both novels.

While the importance of historical awareness, especially an awareness of oppression, is a prominent concern of both novels, Butler's and Perry's texts do more than insist on the necessity of historical transmission. To Shosana Felman's inquiry, "Is

³³ Scholars of the postmodern slave narrative note the political implications of recording the slave narrative in the contemporary world. Beaulieu observes that novels like *Kindred* "rearticulate...that enslaved persons were not wretched but instead deliberate, determined, and dignified" (xv). Thus, postmodern slave narratives can work to remedy stereotypes and unrealistic portraits of African-Americans. For Spaulding, "What results in these novels is a persistent faith in the power and ability of narrative (if used oppositionally) to achieve liberation for both the enslaved and the postmodern black subject" (4). Postmodern slave narratives, then, do not reinscribe trauma, but rather, seek to overcome it.

the testimony, therefore, a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing?" (20), I believe *Kindred* and *Stigmata* would offer an emphatic "yes!" However, the question remains: why do Butler and Perry choose to use supernatural elements in order to illustrate the very real traumas inflicted by slavery and the subsequent recovery process?

In his study *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra suggests that literature is the privileged means of expressing the inconsistencies and complexities of traumatic experience.³⁴ Because "literature in its very excess can somehow get at trauma in a matter unavailable to theory – that it writes (speaks or even cries) trauma in excess of theory," literature may be one of the modes best suited to communicating the traumatic experience (183). Because "art departs from ordinary reality to produce surrealistic situations or radically playful openings that seem to be sublimely irrelevant to ordinary reality but may provide indirect commentary or insight into that reality," fiction is able to explore the paradoxes of trauma in interesting ways (185). Readers of *Kindred* and *Stigmata* must agree that these novels present "surrealistic situations," but it is also true that the "surreal" qualities of these narratives illustrate the challenges faced by a survivor who attempts to transform her experience into narrative as a mode of healing. Theorists of trauma and literary critics may argue that these two novels bleakly imply that relying on physical experience eliminates the possibility of empathizing with characters and, by

³⁴ LaCapra also notes that Caruth is a proponent of this idea: "Many commentators would agree with Caruth in thinking that the literary (or even art in general) is a prime, if not the privileged, place for giving voice to trauma as well as symbolically exploring the role of excess" (190). Similarly, in a discussion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Spaulding mentions that "Morrison suggests that the fictional text, with its dialogic quality and its emphasis on imagination, can succeed where traditional historiography and historical fiction fail" (7). LaCapra, Caruth, and Morrison, then, see literary fiction as able to capture the complexities of both the traumatic experience and of the past more accurately than other, more ostensibly realistic modes, like "history." Historical modes traditionally are identified as proponents of certain "truths," while novels like *Beloved*, *Kindred*, and *Stigmata* undermine the assumption that we can come to know the complete truth about the traumatic experiences of history.

extension, with others in the real world. However, in their depictions of survivors' struggles to relate their experiences, Butler and Perry do illustrate the survivor's paradoxical drive to remember and to forget, and her impossible mission to tell a story that cannot be understood; the novels provide an honest portrait of this struggle for readers, and the ironically realistic portraits of the psychology of the trauma survivors in these novels may, in fact, be the ideal method of earning the understanding of readers

Chapter 2

“But why were there no stories to tell of themselves?”: Postmemory in *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club*

As my analyses of *Kindred* and *Stigmata* have demonstrated, the creation and transmission of a narrative that contains and makes sense of traumatic memory are crucial steps in a survivor’s potential recovery. Octavia Butler’s and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s novels also pose a related question: what happens when the traumatic memories that must be confronted are not the memories of the contemporary subject but are, rather, the painful remnants of traumas suffered by the subject’s ancestors? In Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Morrison’s community of Ruby and Tan’s Chinese American daughters also feel the powerful, and usually negative, effects of events that psychically scarred their parents and grandparents. What distinguishes *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club* from *Kindred* and *Stigmata* is that Morrison’s and Tan’s novels portray characters who, because of the intense and apparently unresolved impact of traumatic events on their ancestors, must work through the powerful, sometimes overwhelming memories of their parents and grandparents without having any physical or psychological access (through their own memories) to those events.

In her study *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1996), Marianne Hirsch theorizes the consequences of the kind of intergenerational transmission of trauma seen in *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club* through the concept of “postmemory,” which she describes as more “indirect and fragmentary” (23) than the memory would have been for its original survivor. Hirsch explains that when looking at a photograph,

specifically one that was taken of events or people during times preceding the viewer's birth, the viewer necessarily "fills in what the picture leaves out," so she must create an "imaginative" relationship with the memory represented by the photograph (21). Thus, when interacting with the memory of one's ancestors, a second-generation subject, always at a distance from the remembered event, will have to "fill in" or "imagine" the memory, since she has no direct access to the event itself. Hirsch, then, defines "postmemory" as a "powerful and very particular kind of memory" that

characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (22)³⁵

While postmemory may allow descendants to establish an imaginative connection with the memories of their ancestors and thus foster empathy, it is inherently more difficult for second- and third-generation subjects to work through postmemory than it would be for them to work through events witnessed firsthand. Their distance from the scene of trauma results in their utter inability to ever experience or understand the horrors faced by the previous generation. In *Paradise*, the citizens of Ruby remain marked by the founding trauma experienced by the town founders, as indicated by their repetition of the traumatic memory within their community, while in *The Joy Luck Club*, the Chinese American daughters unwittingly repeat elements of their mothers' traumatic memories, apparently due both to their lack of knowledge of their mothers' stories and to the still unresolved impact of those stories on the mothers themselves. Through their depictions of the effects of postmemory on descendants, the novels suggest that it is the traumatic memory of the

³⁵ Hirsch points out that although she "[has] developed this notion [of postmemory] in relation to children of Holocaust survivors ... it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences" (22). Here, of course, I am connecting this concept to the experiences of African American and Chinese American subjects.

ancestors that must be worked through in order for the contemporary characters to resolve conflicts in their own lives.

Paradise tells the story of the fictional all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma in the 1970s.³⁶ As the novel opens, a group of men from the town murder five women in the women's home, known as "the Convent," positioned on the outskirts of Ruby. The men imagine the "Convent women," who are marked by their sexual freedom and willful independence from men, as a threat to the town's purity, which citizens conceive as based both on their religious and moral superiority, and on their deliberately uncontaminated black bloodlines. The act of murder is meant to ensure that the women's influence does not poison utopian Ruby. After the jarring first chapter, *Paradise* goes on to detail the histories of the townspeople and of the Convent women before revisiting the murder scene and describing its aftermath.

Throughout Morrison's novel, we discover that the impetus for the violence that begins the novel is rooted in a traumatic memory from the town's past. This memory is of an event known as "The Disallowing," which Ruby preserves and ritualistically repeats, even though it was experienced decades earlier by the original founders, known in local lore as the "Old Fathers," as they sought to join an all-black town in Oklahoma near the end of the nineteenth century. Responding to an ad to "Come Prepared or Not at All,"³⁷ the group of freedmen and their families migrated west to Fairly, Oklahoma, but upon their arrival, they were rejected for being "too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter"

³⁶ While the town in *Paradise* is Morrison's creation, it is based on the historical reality of African-American westward migration in the late 19th century. According to Justine Tally, Morrison was inspired by "the fact that black people were seldom, if ever, portrayed in the westward movement of the country" and this absence sparked "her interest in writing an alternative history of her people" (15).

³⁷ Morrison notes that it was this line in advertisements from the period that first sparked her interest in recreating this history in her novel (Gray, "Paradise Found").

(14); it is later revealed, however, that this rejection is based primarily on the Old Fathers' dark skin color, which is too black for the residents of the aptly-named Fairly.

In the "present-day" Ruby of the novel, it is the 1970s, the townspeople who witnessed the original Disallowing are no longer alive, and the "New Fathers" have no firsthand memory of the founding trauma; they were born almost twenty-five years after the event. Nonetheless, the townspeople continue to be affected by the Disallowing, revering its memory and allowing it to overshadow the events of their own lives. Despite their distance from the memory itself, in *Paradise*, the Ruby families forge a connection with the past that becomes a "cold-blooded obsession" (14). The New Fathers attempt to repeat the actions of their ancestors in order to understand and connect to those experiences; the imaginative connection they forge is so extreme, though, that they want to preserve those memories completely, so they establish a static account of the town's history that they intend to carry into the future exact and unchanged. Although theorists of trauma insist that traumatic memory needs to be transformed into narrative memory, or that the survivor's testimony must work to contain the traumatic experience within the story, Morrison complicates the theory that remembering a traumatic past and transforming that history into narrative will necessarily be therapeutic; in *Paradise*, stories of trauma lead to repetition rather than recovery. Morrison extends Hirsch's concept of postmemory by depicting descendants who are removed from the event and its survivors by two generations. The additional distance from the memory may contribute to the compulsive repetitions practiced by the "New Fathers" generation, repetitions which are symptomatic of the unresolved nature of memories that have not been, and maybe cannot be worked through.

While *Paradise*, like Morrison's other novels, has provoked an array of interesting and useful critical arguments, work by J. Brooks Bouson, Andrew Read, and Elizabeth Yukins is most closely related to my own reading of the novel.³⁸ Much of *Paradise* criticism engages explicitly with theories of memory, history (particularly oral history and the idea of "counter-history"³⁹), and narrative; however, most scholars do not explicitly incorporate tenets of trauma theory. Yukins' article, "Bastard Daughters and the Possession of History in *Corregidora* and *Paradise*," contains the only mention "postmemory," arguing, primarily through an analysis of Pat Best, that second-generation characters in Morrison's novel experience "often a more pervasive and paradoxical sense of dispossession ... than is recognized by Hirsch's term *adoption*" (226). Although Yukins' work is compelling and valuable to my argument, especially in its insistence on the complexity of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory, the focus of Yukins' article cannot accommodate the extent of postmemory's resonance in *Paradise*.

Criticism on *The Joy Luck Club* engages even less with trauma theory than does scholarship on *Paradise*, and there is no mention of postmemory in the discussion of Tan's novel, nor have these two novels been analyzed together. It is widely accepted that

³⁸ Bouson, in her study of trauma and shame in Morrison's novels, explicates the "formative trauma of slavery and also the pain of intraracial shaming ... [resulting in] the intergenerational transmission of racial wounds" in *Paradise* (193). Although this mention of "intergenerational transmission" resonates with Hirsch's definition of postmemory, Bouson does not use the term postmemory and instead focuses most specifically on how shameful secrets from the past function in the present-day lives of the characters and how shame-defense mechanisms, such as the "contempt-disappear scenario," are employed by the leaders of Ruby. In an article examining masculinity in *Paradise*, Read observes that the men of Ruby "inherit the same traumatized psychological state" as the Old Fathers as a result of their immersion in town history since their births (531); notes the importance of the Deek's confessional testimony to Reverend Misner (in which Deek "[utters] the traumatic and shameful memories that he and his community have repressed" (539); and ultimately reads *Paradise* as interested in "the traumatic psychical consequences of race oppression" (528). While providing a detailed analysis of the effects of traumatic memory on the men of Ruby, he, like Bouson, does not incorporate postmemory into his discussion.

³⁹ Chiji Akoma's "The 'Trick' of Narratives: History, Memory, and Performance in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" analyzes the novel in terms of oral history and tradition and the role oral transmission of history plays in African American culture, especially the way in which oral history fosters "counter-history."

The Joy Luck Club is a novel centrally concerned with storytelling and the power of narratives in women's lives.⁴⁰ Although the mothers in the novel pass on particularly traumatic memories of their lives in China and the struggles of their migration and life in the U.S., these memories, once they are brought to the surface, allow for increased understanding and potential healing in the conflicted mother-daughter relationships. While repeating the story of the founding trauma in *Paradise* only leads to more pain and violence, *The Joy Luck Club* more enthusiastically endorses the power of storytelling to heal ruptures in relationships and to allow subjects to work through painful memories that have, as yet, remained unresolved and may be surfacing for the first time.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), is marked by a much different kind of persistent conflict than *Paradise*: these conflicts are nonviolent and take place in the domestic sphere between Chinese mothers and their Chinese American daughters. While the citizens of Ruby must grapple with the overwhelming memories of their fathers' shame, the second-generation Chinese American women of 1980s San Francisco struggle to understand the experiences of their mothers in war-torn 1940s China, especially those that took place before their mothers' immigration to the United States and certainly before their American daughters' births. The second-generation women in Tan's novel, unlike the men in *Paradise*, want to distance themselves from their mothers, from Chinese history, and from those memories of events before their own births: while

⁴⁰ See, for example, Gloria Shen's "Storytelling Reconciles Mothers and Daughters" in *Women's Issues in The Joy Luck Club* (Ed. Gary Wiener), and Shen's longer article, "'Born of a Stranger: Mother-Daughter Relationships and Storytelling in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," as well as Rocio Davis' "Identity in Community in Ethnic Short Story Cycles: Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*." A number of articles about mother-daughter relationships also discuss storytelling as the medium of communication between the women. See Marina Heung, "Daughter-Text/Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*," Helena Grices's "The Maternal Line of Descent Dominates *The Joy Luck Club*," Bonnie Braendlin's "Mother/Daughter Dialog(ic)s in, around, and about Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," as well as the more extensive studies of Tan's fiction by Adams and Huntley.

Morrison depicts the New Fathers as clinging loyally to the legends of their forefathers, the Chinese mothers witness the daughters “swimming away” from their mothers’ stories (274).

Despite their efforts to differentiate themselves, the daughters remain dominated by their mothers; though they are unfamiliar with the details of their mothers’ histories at first, the daughters come to understand that knowing their mothers’ memories, often traumatic and formative, is essential to the healing of rifts in the daughters’ own lives. As E.D. Huntley argues, “each mother’s past affects her daughter’s present” (47), and the daughters are “deeply marked by their mothers’ stories” (54). In fact, we can assume that even if the daughters had been receptive to hearing their mothers’ stories, most of the memories related by the mothers in the novel have presumably not been told to the daughters before; as the mothers come to understand the importance of these stories and the impact they have on their own lives, they also begin to see how their own histories impact the lives of their daughters. Ultimately, *The Joy Luck Club* stresses that the lives of these women are physically, emotionally, and psychologically inextricable.

In this chapter, I will analyze *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club* in order to explore the complexity of postmemory and the multiplicity of second- and third-generation reactions to the dominance of their ancestors’ traumatic memories, while trying to understand the intriguing, if embattled, relationship between postmemory and working through. By reading these two novels side by side, we reach an understanding of the necessary conditions for working through postmemory; *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club* indicate that, ultimately, descendants of survivors must grapple with the stories of their ancestors and understand the relationship of those stories to their own lives in order to

integrate the remnants of those traumatic events into their memories. Further, by exploring how postmemory affects both African American and Chinese American characters, we can hypothesize that while each experience of postmemory is bound to culturally specific circumstances, such as American slavery, the Holocaust, or World War II, postmemory is a condition with cross-cultural resonances.

“Deafened by the roar of its own history”: Obsessive Storytelling in *Paradise*

In imagining a relationship with their ancestors and creating and transmitting narratives about their forefathers’ painful experiences, second-generation survivors can attempt to understand the ways in which the struggles of their parents continue to affect their lives. In *Ruby*, though, grandchildren of the Old Fathers take their imagined connection to town history to an extreme. At one point in the novel, Reverend Misner, a relative newcomer to Ruby, ponders the town’s singular obsession with the memories of the community’s founders:

Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers ... But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. (161)⁴¹

Clearly, the townspeople have had no trouble recording their memories into narrative form, as seen in the “stock of stories” that is virtually worshipped by the New Fathers.

However, these stories preserve the particularly painful memory of the Disallowing, an

⁴¹ This reference to the townspeople’s having nothing “to pass on” is reminiscent of the ending of Morrison’s *Beloved*, when the narrator warns us, “This is not a story to pass on” (*Beloved* 275). As many critics have noted (including Bouson, p. 161), the repeated declaration that closes *Beloved* could be read in two ways: “This is not a story to pass *on*,” meaning the story is too painful to transmit to others; or, “This is not a story to *pass* on,” meaning we should not pass over or ignore this important story. In the example from *Paradise*, we could read this “pass on” as a continuation of the phrase “Had nothing to say,” meaning the New Fathers’ generation has no stories about themselves; or, it could be that “pass on” is a command meaning they want to quickly gloss over their own stories (which do exist) in order to valorize the past.

event that Dominick LaCapra might term a “founding trauma.” According to LaCapra, a founding trauma “paradoxically become[s the] valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group” (23). Identifying closely with the experience of their forefathers, characters like Steward, Deek, and other New Fathers practice extreme loyalty to the memories associated with The Disallowing, and on the surface, it seems the whole town has lifted the Old Fathers to mythological status.⁴² The Morgan twins become quasi-ambassadors of the town’s history; in fact, their dedication to keeping the memories of their forefathers alive has always been their top priority. Even at an early age, the twins prefer the stories of their ancestors to new knowledge gained at school:

none of it was as good as what they learned at home, sitting on the floor in a firelit room, listening to war stories; to stories of great migrations – those who made it and those who did not; to the failures and triumphs of intelligent men – their fear, their bravery, their confusion; to tales of love deep and permanent. (110)

All of these legendary tales are collected in one book where “[the twins] owned them” (110-111). Their obsession with their ancestors’ stories shows in the condition of the book itself, its “spine frayed into webbing at the top, the corners fingered down to the skin” (111). These well-known stories are so central that they form the basis of Ruby’s identity.

The book of stories is not the only way that the town preserves its traumatic memories. Perhaps the most disturbing controlling narrative found in Ruby is the pseudo-nativity play that is performed ritualistically each year before Christmas. This “school program,” which conflates the Christian Nativity story with the Ruby community’s

⁴² It is gradually revealed that many in the town actually deeply resent the New Fathers’ pride in the town’s history. These dissenters include many of the younger generation, who want to move beyond the town’s history and embrace Civil Rights; the women, who represent a sort of counter-narrative but who are ignored by the paternalistic ideology of the town leaders; and particularly Pat Best, whose chapter, “Patricia” reveals many of the complications of the town’s “official” record, as she tries to put together a genealogy and history of Haven/Ruby as a gift to the citizens.

dramatic myth of origins, depicts seven couples (played by schoolchildren), multiple stand-ins for the parents of Jesus, and for the “holy families” of Ruby. A dramatic scene shows the families begging for shelter, though they are ultimately turned away, just as both the holy family of Christian tradition and the “8-rock” families, who would later found Ruby, were turned away.⁴³ The only change that has occurred in the play over the years is that two of the “holy families” have been eliminated from the ritual, erased from the town’s history as a result of some transgression. The townspeople’s participation in the finale of the play, singing “Amazing Grace,” their “voices...peal[ing] as one” (212) reveals their endorsement of this allegorical representation of their embattled but triumphant history. Although the community has tried to contain the pain and humiliation experienced in the Disallowing by creating this narrative, and although they have attempted to translate their pain into a story of hope and accomplishment, the ritualistic repetition of the Disallowing every Christmas maintains the town’s melancholic attachment to their painful founding trauma.

While many contemporary African-American novels insist that twentieth-century subjects must be aware of the history of slavery and must negotiate its legacy in their own lives, in terms of psychological health, it has traditionally been seen as highly problematic for a victim to cling to an event that has deeply scarred her. As Eva Tettenborn notes in “Melancholia as Resistance in Contemporary African American Literature,” foundational theories of mourning and melancholia, such as Sigmund Freud’s, define melancholia as a disabling condition in which a subject maintains “a continued mental attachment to and yearning for a lost object” (103). According to

⁴³ Pat Best calls the founders “8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful” (193). Originally a source of shame when the Old Fathers are excluded from Fairly, skin color becomes a source of pride for the Old and New Fathers.

Tettenborn, on the other hand, contemporary African American literature depicts melancholia as “appropriate and, in fact, necessary” (107), in that it functions as an act of political resistance through which the African American subject subverts dominant (white) historiography and “mak[es] an active aesthetic effort to remember, rewrite, or imagine the stories of those lost who demand a proper place in historiography and memory” (115). In *Paradise*, then, the memorialization of The Disallowing could be seen as a political move, whereby the communities of Haven and later Ruby deliberately choose to preserve their painful memory, assert its importance in the historical record, and assure it is not forgotten.

It should be noted that although the stories surrounding the Disallowing revolve around a founding trauma, the New Fathers are equally, if not more interested in the heroic deeds that the Disallowing engendered in their forefathers as they are in the shame their ancestor suffered. The Old Fathers’ heroism becomes a source of inspiration, as when Steward “remember[ed] their lives and works” and “was steadied, his resolve cemented” (99). The twins see themselves as the “rightful heirs,” according to the theory that the citizens who can act most like the “Old Fathers” are most fit to lead the town. The narrator suggests that Ruby itself is a marker of the Morgans’ “heir status,” asking “Who, other than the rightful heirs, would have repeated exactly what Zechariah and Rector had done?” (113). The same insistence on consistently repeating events and heroism of the past can be seen in the pressures the 8-rocks put on their children to conform to the standard of their ancestors. As a result of the generational conflicts that erupt in Ruby, the 8-rocks assume “past heroism was enough of a future to live by” and Misner believes that, as a result, “rather than children, they wanted duplicates” (161).

Although it is possible to gain strength and inspiration from stories of “past heroism,” and while stories can potentially motivate positive change, in *Paradise*, preserving Ruby’s history in narrative form leads only to repeated trauma.

Despite being traumatized by violent events in their own lives, particularly their experiences fighting in some of the major wars of the twentieth century, Ruby residents like the Morgans prefer the stories of their ancestors to their own. The heroism of their ancestors in the face of “abject humiliation”⁴⁴ is rewarded with mythological status, and the men of Ruby feel their own accomplishments simply fall short. The New Fathers personally experience a second founding trauma, known as “the Disallowing, Part Two,” as a result of the racism still persistent in the United States following World War II. As the men returned to the U.S. after serving their country in battle, they

heard about the missing testicles of other colored soldiers; about the medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy – and recognized the Disallowing, Part Two. It would have been like watching a parade banner that said WAR-WEARY SOLDIERS! NOT WELCOME HOME! (194).

Not welcome in a country they risked their lives to protect, just as their forefathers were not welcome in Fairly, they also react like their forefathers by isolating themselves from the social forces that have caused them so much pain. In repeating the Old Fathers’ project of “moving west,” the men of Ruby pride themselves on being able to protect their women from what lurks “Out There.” Sensitive to external forces that could humiliate, traumatize, or even kill them, the people of Ruby are unaware that, due to their preservation of the founding trauma, the ways in which they continue to be dominated by the original Disallowing will lead to further repetitions of trauma in the town. Assuming that time may have healed the humiliation the Old Fathers suffered at the gates of Fairly,

⁴⁴ This is a term used to describe a memory of Seneca, one of the Convent women, in *Paradise*, but could just as well apply to the original shame of the Disallowing (137).

the narrator skeptically asks, “The rejection, which they called the Disallowing, was a burn whose scar tissue was numb by 1949, wasn’t it?” (194). Holding onto the memory of the Disallowing only prevents the characters from working through the event that scarred so many of their ancestors and continues to scar them decades later. We could ask again, then, if the pain of the original Disallowing should be “numb” by 1976, when the Ruby men massacre the Convent women; however, their actions indicate that the trauma still lives with them, as they repeat the Disallowing by eliminating those “throwaway people,” who do not belong in or, apparently, anywhere near, their safe haven.

“The residue of that loss seemed to be accumulating in a way he could not control”:

Traumatic Repetitions in *Paradise*

The removal from Haven to Ruby, the repetition of the Old Fathers’ original act, is only one of many instances of traumatic repetition in the novel. Instead of leading to the empowerment of the people of Ruby, maintaining a melancholic attachment to the Disallowing, and establishing that founding trauma as the basis for their identities, contributes to conflict and destruction within the town. As Pat Best astutely observes, “Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many. But the ramifications of those ramifications were another story” (189). The second round of ramifications entails the repetitions of earlier traumatic events, this time perpetrated by the people of Ruby rather than against them. In attempting to reverse their original trauma, the town leaders subject others to the victim status they formerly suffered.

In order to protect themselves from additional pain, the town leaders repeat their ancestors' exclusion from Fairly through a series of subsequent exclusions of others from Ruby. These exclusions do not strictly involve town "outsiders," however. In perpetuating the stories of Haven/Ruby's original founders ritualistically and forcibly, the New Fathers cannot tolerate the younger generation's refusal to subject themselves to past pains, an attitude influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. Thus, the Old Fathers attempt to exclude new ideas and even their own children, whom they associate with those ideas. The children of the New Fathers' generation are considered rebellious mostly because they have moved beyond the town's static history and have embraced ideas from the outside world. It is clear that the younger generation will cause trouble for Ruby when, ridiculing Miss Esther's "finger memory," "they howled at the notion of remembering invisible words you couldn't even read by tracing letters you couldn't pronounce" (83). Valuing education and literacy above memory, the younger generation demonstrates what the New Fathers see as disrespect for the community's tradition: the younger generation does not revere the town's traumatic history and refuses to repeat the events stored in the New Fathers' postmemory.

This generational conflict is played out in the pseudo-allegorical debate over the Oven, when the symbolic centerpiece of the town is altered by members of the younger generation. The original founders adorned the community oven with the phrase "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," marking Ruby as a God-fearing, obedient town. When the younger generation changes the phrase to "Be the Furrow of His Brow," the elders are appalled; the young people embrace agency, empowerment, and change. In a town that wants nothing more than to maintain, remember, and relive history, this kind of evolution

is simply not welcome. Rather than continue to submit to past abuses, to be controlled by them as the New Fathers are, the young people reject victim status, supporting their revised Oven slogan by asserting, “No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To ‘beware’ God ... in case He’s getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down” (84). The younger generation, invoking the more distant postmemory of slavery, critically evaluates their relationship to that past and, ironically, become empowered, while the New Fathers, who zealously worship the heroics of the past, ignore the trauma that necessitated those very heroics and remain trapped in history. Their refusal, or, more accurately, their inability to face the reality of slavery in their families’ past, precludes their ability to work through that trauma, hence the obsessive repetition that ensues in the New Fathers’ generation.⁴⁵ Deek’s assertion, “That Oven already had a history. It doesn’t need you to fix it” (86), encompasses the town’s attitude toward its history and toward change: history does not evolve or interact with the world but simply remains frozen in time. When Steward wonders whether “that [younger] generation ... would have to be sacrificed to get to the next one” (94), it becomes obvious that the New Fathers are willing to violently exclude anyone who could change the dominant narrative of town history.

Because their loyalty to the trauma story forecloses the possibility of any alternate perspectives, the “official story” of Haven/Ruby’s founding, and the Ruby citizens’ obsession with the tragedies of their own history, allows them to virtually obliterate their

⁴⁵ The men and women of the town also refuse to hide their disgust toward the young people’s connection to Africa. The younger citizens are “giving themselves ugly names. Like not American. Like African” (104). This explicit disgust for African culture further indicates the Ruby elders’ inability to grapple with the deep, unresolved pains of their history. In denying their relationship to Africa, older community members repress the pain of their ancestors’ separation from their homeland and the violence and trauma that followed in their capture, transportation in the Middle Passage, and enslavement.

consciousness and/or memory of the ways in which they have traumatized others. The uncanny return of the Native American in Nathan DuPres' dream begins to reveal these submerged details.⁴⁶ In an apparent community tradition, DuPres, a town elder, is "persuaded" to give a speech to the town. The town dismisses "Old Nathan" and his "incoherent dreams" (205), what the community members ignore as meaningless babbling actually reveals hidden communal guilt and traumatic memory. DuPres relates that in his dream, he speaks with an Indian, who "shook his head, sorrowful-like" when lamenting that the water needed to nurture his crops is polluted. The conversation sets up a difference of opinion between the Indian, who sees what is wrong with the crops, which are red when they are supposed to be white, and DuPres, who, on the other hand, originally thought the crop was productive until he turns to see the flowers "turning pink, then red. Like blood drops" (205). The bloody image recalls the forceful removal of Indians from territories like Oklahoma, where Haven and Ruby are located. DuPres' interpretation of his own dream points to the importance of understanding the land and its potential fertility; a lack of understanding (of the land, ostensibly), on the other hand, "can break us" (205). DuPres' reading of his own dream points less to the "strength of our crop" (i.e., Ruby itself) than to the willful erasure of the pain of others. While celebrating their ancestors' reactions to the Disallowing, the town's collective postmemory appears to be somewhat selective when they do not acknowledge the violence against Native Americans that is also part of their community's past. What these examples have in common, though, is that the New Fathers' generation avoids, or is

⁴⁶ Another place in which the memory of Native Americans surfaces is the Convent building itself, in brief references throughout the novel to its history. Originally an embezzler's mansion, the house was then turned into a Christian school for Arapaho girls.

unable to confront both traumatic memories, and this characteristic inability to work through the past is what leads to the repetition of trauma.

Hearing DuPres' speech, Misner condemns the utopian project of Ruby, insisting that the founders should have attempted to create "[a] real home. Not some place you went and invaded and slaughtered people to get" (213). Misner's mention of murder and forced removal is a thinly-veiled reference to the obliteration of the Native American population as Americans moved west.⁴⁷ Instead of empathizing with another group that was refused community and forced to move from its desired homeland, the Haven/Ruby contingent perpetuates violence and exclusion. Subsequently forcing the memory of the removal of the Native Americans out of their minds illustrates yet another way that "paradise necessitates exclusion."⁴⁸ The self-centered glorification of their own pain and consequent ignorance of, even obliviousness to that of others characterizes the Ruby community. The town founders who took land from Native Americans to build their own community, an act of violence that symbolically repeated the Old Fathers' own exclusion from Fairly, began the cycle of repetition that continues to plague their descendants. This example is revelatory not just of the community's past but also of its future. DuPres' dream is not just an isolated, obscure statement by a crazy old man; instead, the dream foreshadows the ritualistic purge and elimination of the Convent women.

The men of Ruby's compulsive exclusionary practices begin long before the Convent raid, though. Pat Best's mother Delia, "a wife of racial tampering" (197), was ostracized by the Ruby community even though her husband Roger had previously been a

⁴⁷ Undercutting the mythologized version of the founder's story, it is earlier revealed that the land formerly "belonged to a family of State Indians, and it took a year and four months of negotiation, of labor for land, to finally have it free and clear" (99).

⁴⁸ Morrison noted this as a governing interest of *Paradise*, as quoted in a 1998 review by Anna Mulrine.

respected member of the town. Delia's "sunlight skin" inspires hatred in the town because it "[r]eminded them of why Haven existed, of why a new town had to take its place" (200). During the move from Haven to Ruby, Steward remarks that "'[Roger's] bringing along the dung we leaving behind'"; Delia ("the dung") symbolizes the fact that the town will carry with it a reminder of the shame they faced as a result of both Disallowings. Because Steward associates Delia with the Disallowing, Delia herself, through an act of displacement by the 8-rock leaders, serves as a visible reminder of trauma; ironically, Steward and the other New Fathers do not recognize that the ways in which the 8-rocks continue to reenact past events and their insistence on preserving the stories of their troubled history could better be identified as "the dung" they bring along to their next community.

Delia's death, which Pat believes the New Fathers enabled, recalls the earlier death of Ruby Morgan, the younger sister of the Morgan twins for whom the town is named.⁴⁹ Delia's death actually serves as a reversal (and a consequence) of Ruby's death. Ruby became sick on the trip from Haven to Ruby and was in desperate need of medical attention when they reached the new town's site. Because the town was so isolated from other communities, the twins had to bring Ruby to a hospital in a nearby town, but "[n]o colored people were allowed in the wards" (113). The Morgans' inability to procure proper medical assistance due to their race constituted just one part of this traumatic event; the detail that most deeply scars the twins is that while Ruby waited for help, and died in the waiting room, having been refused a doctor's care, "the nurse had been trying to reach a veterinarian" (113). Steward and Deek are obviously traumatized by the

⁴⁹ Note also that naming the town Ruby preserves the traumatic memory of her death as the basis of the town's identity.

dehumanization of their sister. Later, however, this scene is reversed when the light-skinned Delia is refused help by the 8-rock men of Ruby. As the specter of the dying woman returns in the form of Delia, the community leaders perpetuate the cycle of trauma rather than attempting to correct it, due to the unresolved nature of earlier traumatic memories, both their own (the death of Ruby) and those of their ancestors. Although the deaths of Delia and Ruby are experienced firsthand, the exclusion and ostracism that characterizes both of those women's fates is a residual effect of the Disallowing, and can even be linked back to perhaps the ultimate founding trauma and exclusion of African American existence: slavery.

Though repetition is pervasive in *Paradise*, the act of violence against the Convent women is the most blatant moment of traumatic reenactment in the novel as well as the most dramatic result of the town leaders' obsession with the stories of the Disallowing; excluding the marginal female figures from the community symbolically repeats the original exclusion of the Old Fathers from Fairly. Ruby's leaders see the attack on the Convent women as a necessary defense, to ensure "[t]at nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain" (5). As Linda Krumholz argues, Morrison "considers what the danger of repetition *without* difference might be" (21). While "repetition with a difference" presents an opportunity to work through the past, the most significant difference between the exclusion of the Convent women and the exclusion of the Old Fathers from Fairly is that the former is decidedly more violent.

As the twins raid the Convent, the narrator attempts to explain why they feel the need to defend Ruby from the women. We learn

[t]he twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened – things they witnessed and things they have not ...

And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told by their grandfather – the man who put the words on the Oven’s black mouth. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves... (13-14)

The “powerful memories” of the twins, which the narrator claims can even accomplish the impossible task of remembering details of events in which they did not participate, become automatically suspect when viewing *Paradise* in terms of postmemory, which Hirsch aligns with Henri Raczymow’s “‘memoire trouée,’ his ‘memory shot through with holes’” (*Family Frames* 23). Descendants of survivors cannot claim to have the “total memory” bestowed upon Deek in the novel (*Paradise* 107).⁵⁰ What lives on, then, cannot be actual memory, but is instead an interpretation of those memories, preserved in narrative form.

The controlling story of the Disallowing provides motivation for the Convent raid because that story reveals why the Old Fathers began to isolate themselves and exclude all others who were not part of that original community or who are too different from it. However, the New Fathers’ interpretation of the Disallowing results in their desire not only to continue the legacy of their forefathers, but also to avenge them, to purge them and their descendants of the shame engendered by the Disallowing. Ironically, the New Fathers act in a way that would shame the Old Fathers rather than make them proud. Misner reflects on this dilemma posed by the men’s actions on the Convent:

They think they have outfoxed the white man when in fact they imitate him ... Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had

⁵⁰ Complete memory of traumatic events is not even afforded to the survivors who directly experienced those events; trauma distorts memory, and the further from the event, the more distorted the memory becomes (as Laub indicates, “the longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes,” 79). Therefore, any “memory” the New Fathers’ generation has of the Disallowing has been imagined, or remembered, but is not a flawlessly accurate account of the event.

trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and callousness it froze the mind. Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby ... was an unnecessary failure. (306)

Having still not resolved the pain associated with the Disallowing generations after the original event, the New Fathers fail to recognize before the Convent raid that they are acting not like their ancestors, but like the persecutors of their ancestors.

“An absence too heavy to carry”: Loss, Absence, and the Trauma of “Paradise”

What makes negotiating the effects of postmemory so difficult? Most theorists who describe the process of working through argue that a survivor must narrate her memories in order to contain, make sense, and integrate those memories. However, an analysis of works invoking postmemory must first recognize the inherent distance from the memories that second- and third-generation characters face; the memories that affect descendants of survivors cannot be possessed by these descendants, yet Morrison’s and Tan’s novels suggest that these memories must, nonetheless, be confronted in order for descendants to manage the effects of these haunting events. Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between loss and absence is particularly useful when reading *Paradise* because LaCapra’s definition of absence seems to be connected to postmemory. LaCapra emphasizes that recognizing the difference between absence and loss can valuably inform a discussion of recovery, even identifying “the very ability to make the distinction between absence and loss (as well as to recognize its problematic nature) ... [as] one aspect of a complex process of working through” (47). Conflating absence and loss, though, can lead to the inability to work through the past.

Essentially, loss can be associated with specific events, while absence is more abstract and “inherently ambivalent” (58).⁵¹ In *Paradise*, for example, deaths like those of Ruby (the character) and Delia are losses; the pain felt as a result of them can be traced back to definite events. Because of their cause-and-effect relationship, losses seem to offer more potential for working through, though the process is not simple or straightforward by any means. Because absences have no definite object and cannot be traced back to a particular event – according to LaCapra, absences signify that the projected lost object actually never existed – they are more difficult to work through than losses. Due to their abstract nature, absences may be converted into losses by the survivor in order to make them more tangible, but LaCapra warns that this is a dangerous move that could result in further traumatization, relativization of trauma, or even violence. It appears that the idea of absence is especially applicable in instances of traumatic postmemory. Like absence, postmemory is associated with a sort of impossibility. According to Hirsch, because descendants can never truly “know” their parents’ experiences, “[her] generation’s practice of mourning is as determinative as it is interminable and ultimately impossible” (242, 244). Similarly, absence can never be felt, visited, experienced, or properly mourned. Hirsch indicates that this mourning process is necessary and should be undertaken by descendants of survivors, but that it is inherently complex, even irresolvable. In addition to the Ruby citizens’ seeming inability to negotiate the effects of postmemory due to their own absence within that memory, the descendants of the Old Fathers continue to grapple with another absence: that of the paradise they hoped to establish in Haven and later Ruby.

⁵¹ It is important to point out, though, that according to LaCapra, “Some losses may be traumatic while others are not, and there are variations in the intensity or devastating impact of trauma” (64). In other words, a loss is not always or necessarily experienced as traumatic.

Clearly, Ruby is a troubled community, and although based on an idea of paradise (an all-black “dreamtown” [6]), the present-day Ruby of the novel does not fit our traditional expectations of paradise.⁵² The characters who populate Ruby struggle to overcome the memories of their community’s traumatic past, remaining melancholic underneath a veneer of intense pride; their attachment to the past prevents them from moving beyond it. Although many of the events in *Paradise* could be described as concrete losses, the trauma that dominates the narrative, and the life of the community of Ruby, is more accurately associated with *absence* than with loss. While the Disallowing does serve as a specific loss – the loss of pride – what is also at stake in the Old Fathers’ aspiration to belong to Fairly and their subsequent attempts to found their own towns is the idea of paradise. What the people of Haven and later Ruby ultimately desire is a community free of racism, conflict, violence, and trauma. Their utopia is literally a “no-place”; paradise does not exist.⁵³ Not only that, but as LaCapra insists,

Paradise *absent* is different from paradise lost ... It is *not there*, and one must therefore turn to other, nonredemptive options in personal, social, and political life – options other than an evacuated past and a vacuous or blank, yet somehow redemptive, future. (57, emphasis added)

Rather than admitting that the paradise that they imagine has never existed, the people of Haven/Ruby figure this trauma as a loss, and according to LaCapra, when subjects convert absence into loss, they imagine

that there was (or at least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made ‘us’ lose. Therefore, to regain it one must somehow get rid of or eliminate those others – or perhaps that sinful other in oneself. (58)

⁵² Morrison has famously discussed the change of title for this novel, which was originally titled *War*. Publishers urged Morrison to change the title to appeal to her readers, and while the author herself still second guesses the change, I believe *Paradise* is a much more enigmatic, complex, and provocative title.

⁵³ This notion is echoed within the novel by Billie Delia, when she calls Ruby “a backward noplac” (308).

In associating the Disallowing and the subsequent problems it causes with “loss,” the community avoids what is actually the absence of the paradise they have sought. The idea of a perfect society, protected from all that exists “Out There,” free of internal conflict, is a fabrication. Attempting to mourn this absence as a loss leads to a seemingly never-ending process of repetition, of “acting out” rather than working through. Further, treating the Disallowing as a loss allows the townspeople to assign blame and to punish the parties “responsible” for that loss.

The portrait of Ruby indicates, of course, that the title *Paradise* is an ironic gesture, but Morrison’s novel engages extensively with and challenges stereotypical notions of paradise. Several examples near the end of the novel, including the dreamlike afterlives of the Convent women, suggest an earth-bound idea of paradise. If we believe in an afterlife that is in another time and place, we can look forward to a future without pain, “a better place,” as heavenly realms are often called. However, if we situate paradise on earth, we are forced to deal with our struggles during our mortal lives. In this sense, working through is linked to Morrison’s earthly vision of paradise. Susan Neal Mayberry suggests that Morrison’s paradise “embraces the inextricability of the heavenly and the not-so-divine” (223). Mayberry’s observation is supported repeatedly in the text, not least of all by the final line of the novel, which alludes to “the endless work [Piedade and “the younger woman”] were created to do *down here* in paradise” (318, emphasis added). This formulation subverts our traditional expectations of a heaven that is “up there,” and instead forces us to see the implications of paradise in the here-and-now. Further, the lower-case “paradise” contributes to the idea that paradise should not be thought of as a transcendent place because, as Morrison notes “an earthly Paradise is the

only one we know” (Marcus 1). Thus, an idealized version of paradise always results in a problem of absence, although, as in *Ruby*, this absence is often figured as a loss.

The interaction between death and life, between “heaven” and earth is established when Misner and Anna Flood visit the Convent after the raid, and sense the presence of a strange liminal space that Misner identifies as a window, Anna as a door. Understanding that this window/door is “the sign rather than the event,” they avoid discussing this occurrence and instead, wonder to themselves, “What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?” (305). This complex moment near the end of the novel establishes the frightening but exciting idea that the relationship between heaven and earth, between the afterlife and mortal life, is more fluid than they have previously imagined. Later, at Save-Marie’s funeral, Misner reflects on these possibilities, and “when he bowed his head and gazed at the coffin lid he saw the window in the garden, felt it beckon toward another place – neither life nor death – but there, just yonder, shaping thoughts he did not know he had” (307). Misner’s thoughts here again corroborate Morrison’s avowed interest in an earthly paradise, when he interprets paradise as inherently connected to our physical world.

The mysterious window/door debate is not the only image of an in-between space in *Paradise*. There is also the recurring mention of an earthly spot, a natural wonder that promises the viewer a feeling of unmatched ecstasy. We first hear of this place in Gigi’s chapter, when Mike alerts her to the existence of “two trees [that] grew into each other’s arms. And if you squeezed in between them in just the right way, well, you would feel an ecstasy no human could invent or duplicate” (66). This little piece of heaven on earth is said to be in *Ruby*, so Gigi travels there to see if “there was anything at all the world had

to say for itself ... that wasn't body bags or little boys spitting blood into their hands..." (68). This space of hope, possibility, and redemption is described as a liminal space, somewhere between paradise and earth.⁵⁴ This notion of a liminal space is most significantly embodied by the Convent itself, and like the site of the embracing fig trees, the Convent becomes a privileged place of possibility and healing.

“Could grace slip through at all?”: The Struggle to Heal in *Paradise*

Like the people of Ruby, the residents of the Convent are plagued by traumatic memories that continue to affect their lives; however, the Convent women are dealing explicitly with personal memories rather than postmemory. After detailing the histories of each of the women and their arrivals at the Convent, Morrison describes a scene of healing. Connie, the owner of the home and the “leader” of the women, instructs the women to lie on the floor; Connie then creates a “template” for each one by “painting the body’s silhouette” on the floor (263). A scene of collective testimony follows, referred to as “loud dreaming” (264). In addition to the women’s apparent sharing of their stories when “[h]alf-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles,” it is also crucial that they hear the stories of the others and interact with all of the testimonies given. This collective sharing of stories is marked by empathy, in which “they step easily into the dreamer’s tale” (264). Engaging so intensely with their traumatic memories is both “alluring and corrosive”; the women “rise and go to their beds vowing never to submit to that again but knowing full well they will. And they do” (264). Traumatic memory insists on recognition and compels the women to confront the past.

⁵⁴ Bouson also refers to this spot as a liminal space “where the sacred-ecstatic and physical-sexual are conjoined” (206).

Once the women have completed this testimony stage, they are able to begin to externalize their pain onto their templates, which “drew them like magnets” (264). Eager to purge themselves of their traumatic memories, the women decorate their templates with traces of their memories. These artistic acts prompt further narrative engagement, as well; for example, when Gigi draws a locket on her template, Mavis wants to know more about the significance of this piece of jewelry, which Gigi reveals was given to her by her jailed father. The most poignant instance of externalization of trauma occurs when Seneca, whose usual reaction to pain is to cut herself, feels “the hunger to slice her inner thigh,” but she instead “chose...to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor” (265). The narrator significantly reveals that “unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted” (266). Connie’s healing ritual is depicted as highly successful, though it is not able to save the women from the violence of the men of Ruby. The women ignore Lone’s warnings in a scene of cleansing in which “the irresistible rain washed ... away” both the hints of danger to come and the pains experienced in the past (283). The overwhelmingly positive response to Connie’s rituals of working through stands in stark contrast to the traumatic repetitions employed by the men of Ruby.

Though the people of Ruby could be faulted, particularly the New Fathers and other men who participate in the raid on the Convent, for continuing to compulsively “act out” the founding trauma of exclusion, the ending of the novel also leaves room for redemption and healing for the people of Ruby. They are seemingly still in a stage of melancholia, which LaCapra associates with “acting out,” rather than mourning (“working through”)⁵⁵; however, LaCapra indicates that “acting out in general may be a

⁵⁵ LaCapra connects these concepts, as Freud also did in “Mourning and Melancholia,” by associating mourning with working through and melancholia with acting out (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 65).

prerequisite of working through, at least with respect to traumatic events” (67, fn 32). In *Paradise*, it appears that the attack on the Convent, the compulsive reenactment (though in its repetition, decidedly more violent) of the founding trauma, functions as a necessary event, a sort of purging of the ills of the community, after which the community is altered, even left with the possibility of redemption.

The change in the community manifests itself most symbolically through the death of Save-Marie, a child of Sweetie and Jeff Fleetwood, who becomes the first person ever to die within Ruby’s town parameters, and through the growing distance between Deek and Steward Morgan as a result of the raid. Formerly, the town felt “blessed” because any citizens who passed away did so outside of the town, resulting Ruby’s “claim of immortality” (199). Save-Marie’s death significantly introduces the concept of mortality to Ruby; ironically, this death is a symbol of hope for the community because it finally introduces difference into the community and breaks the previously repetitive cycle. Further change is marked in Ruby when the Morgan twins become differentiated. After the attack, although the twins began to look “more alike than they probably had at birth,” it is “the inside difference [that] was too deep for anyone to miss” (299). While Steward and many of the other New Fathers remain steadfast in the stubborn belief in their superiority, Deek is the one male character in Ruby who seems to be ready to work through his personal traumas and those of his forefathers. Deek’s testimony to Misner symbolizes the beginning of his healing journey. Deek’s inchoate testimony is described as “raw matter,” but he shares these fragmented traces of his own war memories, and eventually, the story of “his grandfather who walked barefoot for two hundred miles rather than dance” (301). This story seems to be particularly important to Deek; though it

is a postmemory, it has clearly scarred him, and since we know Deek has “never taken into his confidence any man,” it is likely that he has never attempted to articulate this deep-seated memory before.

The story, marked in the town’s memory by its absence, involves another instance of racial shame: Big Papa (Coffee) had a twin named Tea, who has been effectively erased from the family lineage, though not from the collective postmemory of the community insiders.⁵⁶ Tea agreed to dance for white people when threatened and thus became a symbol of racial shame for his twin brother; as a result, Big Papa decides to disown Tea and erase him from the family records. Deek explains that for Coffee, “the shame was in himself. It scared him” (303). This analysis also sheds light on the Convent raid because when Deek says he thinks “Coffee was right” in disowning Tea, because of the humiliation and fear that surface as a result of Tea’s actions; Deek indicates that a similar thought process may have governed the Ruby men’s murder of the Convent women. Humiliated by being turned away by the residents of Fairly, the men of Ruby react by violently excluding the women of the Convent. Ashamed of his own involvement with Connie and with the additional rumors of some of the townspeople’s association with the Convent women, Deek and his companions must purge their own guilt by erasing all reminders of its existence. It appears that through confronting painful personal memory and postmemory, Deek can begin to understand his actions, which perhaps will allow him to break the cycle of repetition.

The cleansing of the Convent women, and their apparent mystical capacity to live beyond mortal life after their murders, point to the potential for working through;

⁵⁶ The only remnant of the story (as shown in Pat Best’s research of the town) is the fact that Zechariah (Big Papa Morgan) was shot in the foot but persisted in the journey to Haven and that his name was changed from Coffee to Zechariah/Big Papa for an unknown (or unrevealed) reason (189, 192).

however, comparing that healing ritual with actions of the New Fathers against the Convent women, as well as the aftermath of the mass murder scene in the community, reiterates the fundamental difficulty second-and-third generation subjects face when attempting to cope with postmemory. The women of the Convent had endured some painful, psychically scarring instances of abuse, violence, and loss – but their memories recall events they experienced firsthand. The people of Ruby, on the other hand, struggle to come to terms with an event that has left them scarred but that they cannot access through memory. It seems impossible for a second- or third-generation individual to work through the traumatic memory of an ancestor without experiencing the event firsthand. In fact, Morrison presents the community through a critical eye, concentrating on the destruction that results from seemingly endless cycles of repeated trauma, a repetition that in itself hints at the unresolved nature of the brutal past of these characters. However, if fixity and exclusivity characterized the Ruby that seemed doomed to compulsively repeat the violent memories of the past, the introduction of change, however slight, suggested in the novel's conclusion, serves as a sign of hope that the community can heal and break the cycle of repetition. Although *Paradise* ostensibly portrays the impossibility of working through that painful past, it ultimately depicts both the hardships faced by those suffering from the effects of postmemory and the desire to work through, which persists despite the difficulties inherent in the process of working through any traumatic memory, let alone one not experienced firsthand.

“Casting long shadows into her life and eventually into mine”: Jing-mei, Suyuan, and Postmemory in *The Joy Luck Club*

Although *The Joy Luck Club* is ultimately more hopeful about the potential for descendants to work through their ancestor's traumatic memories than *Paradise*, Tan's novel opens with a decidedly tragic event: as Jing-mei Woo begins to narrate, she reveals that her mother, Suyuan, has recently, suddenly, and unexpectedly died. The loss of her mother and her subsequent responsibility to reconnect with the twins Suyuan had to abandon in China (before immigrating, marrying Jing-mei's father, and giving birth to Jing-mei), and to impart to the twins the knowledge of their mother, results in a crisis for Jing-mei, who worries to her mother's friends, "I don't know anything. She was my mother" (31). Jing-mei's assertion that the mother-daughter relationship is one of inherent disconnection is quickly countered by the shock of the mothers when An-mei exclaims, "Not know your own mother? ... Your mother is in your bones!" (31). This exchange establishes the major conflict that will recur throughout *The Joy Luck Club*: the daughters' attempts to distance themselves from their mothers, and thus from the memories of their lost Chinese lives, are juxtaposed to the mothers' insistence that their daughters understand the lives of the mothers in order to live their own. Working to demonstrate and then to overcome this division, the novel consists of a series of stories and testimonies that begin to reconnect the mother-daughter pairs.

Jing-mei and the other daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* would likely share Marianne Hirsch's sentiment that, in relation to her parents' Holocaust memories, that she has "sometimes felt there were too many stories, too much affect, even as at other times [she's] been unable to fill in the gaps and absences" (*Family Frames* 244). Jing-mei recalls repeatedly hearing the story of how Suyuan founded the original Joy Luck Club in China, but it is not until the end of the novel that the fullest version of the story is

revealed, and even then, Suyuan is no longer alive “to fill in the gaps and absences” that will continue to frustrate Jing-mei as she learns about her mother’s life. Jing-mei, the narrator from whom we hear the most stories (four chapters are spoken in her voice), could be considered the protagonist of the novel. It is her project to “remember everything about her [Suyuan] and tell [the twins]” (32) that instigates all of the testimony given in the text, and it is her trip to China to meet the twins, that brings the novel full circle and begins to resolve the major conflicts of both Suyuan’s and Jing-mei’s lives. Jing-mei, unlike the other *Joy Luck* daughters who only tell their personal stories, is responsible for telling both her own stories and those of her mother, whose death has foreclosed the possibility of her direct narration. By combining Jing-mei and Suyuan’s stories in each of Jing-mei’s chapters, Tan suggests the inherent connection between the lives of this mother-daughter pair, despite the conflict found within those stories. The novel’s structure thus highlights Suyuan’s continued presence in the novel and symbolically reveals the extent to which the memories of the mother haunt the daughter, insisting that they be confronted and resolved. Jing-mei’s trip to China at the end of the novel signifies that she, as a surrogate, can potentially resolve the prevailing imbalance that marred Suyuan’s life.

Within her own lifetime, Suyuan attempted to deal with wartime struggles by forming a supportive community in China. As a reaction against the squalid, miserable conditions in Kweilin, a city marred by overpopulation, poverty, disease, and constant bombings by the Japanese, Suyuan began the original Joy Luck Club, a meeting of four women who congregated to talk, play games, and try to forget their everyday tragedies. The meetings became a ritual, allowing the women to purge themselves of their pain and

look forward to a better future: “we could forget past wrongs done to us. We weren’t allowed to think a bad thought. We feasted, we laughed, we played games, lost and won, we told the best stories. And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy” (12). Faced both with the traumatic memories of wartime China and the new challenges of immigration to the United States, Suyuan reinstates the Joy Luck Club with three women she meets in church. What unites the new Joy Luck Club in San Francisco is that “the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn’t begin to express in their fragile English” (6). Their “unspeakable” memories have apparently remained unspoken, particularly to their daughters. Due to Suyuan’s attempts to present the positive side of her experiences and the difficulty of relating traumatic memories, Jing-mei did not know for years that her mother’s Chinese life was marked by another “unspeakable tragedy.”

Although Jing-mei had heard her mother’s story many times and assumed it was “a Chinese fairy tale” (12), on one occasion, her daughter’s selfish, childish behavior motivates Suyuan’s much darker version of this testimony. Suyuan reveals that, when fleeing from Kweilin to Chungking, she had to leave everything she had been carrying on the side of a road, including her infant twin daughters. It is interesting to note that Suyuan’s testimony is characterized by its repetition; as Catherine Romagnolo observes, “Suyuan attempts to recover her whole self by repetitively beginning her originary story” (101). Jing-mei has heard this story countless times, though “the endings always changes,” and she notes, with a subtle measure of annoyance, that “[t]he story always grew and grew” (12). The unfixed ending of the story reflects, for Romagnolo, the sense that

[t]he completion of Suyuan's story is continually deferred in an attempt to recover an irretrievable past which represents her unknowable beginning. The deferral of this narrative, however, may also be seen to signify an anxiety over representation ...the impossibility of depicting an authentic subject through language. (102)

The "impossibility" Romagnolo refers to is associated with the particularly traumatic nature of Suyuan's memory. Her "anxiety over representation" suggests her inability to accurately recreate, "through language," an experience from the past, but it additionally marks Suyuan's repetitive storytelling as the testimony of a trauma survivor.⁵⁷ Further, the continuous growth of the story represents the way in which Suyuan's memory becomes more detailed each time she tells the story. Her testimony cannot be given all at once; rather, like the memory itself, her narrative is fragmented and continually in process. The fact that she had not, in the innumerable versions of the story given to that point, told Jing-mei the true ending of the story shows that it has taken time for Suyuan to reach a point at which she can narrate the most painful part of that memory. Her sudden death, before hearing from or meeting her long-lost daughters, inhibits Suyuan from gaining any sense of closure; thus, Tan has Jing-mei take on the responsibility of resolving, to the extent that it is even possible, her mother's unfinished story.

In order for Jing-mei to fill Suyuan's place, she must come to know more intimately her mother's formative memory. A later testimony by Canning Woo, Jing-mei's father, fills in more of the details, such as the fact that Suyuan was "delirious with pain and fever," physically exhausted and bleeding from carrying clothes, food, and the

⁵⁷ What Suyuan may perceive to be a language barrier keeping her from expressing her story and telling it to Jing-mei is also characteristic of the testimony of trauma. Laub argues, "There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought*, *memory*, and *speech*" (63). Articulation of memory, then, is both a reflection of difficulties with language for a Chinese immigrant, and a sign of the inherent difficulty of narrating traumatic memory.

babies. Completely out of strength, Suyuan left the babies on the side of the road with a note begging anyone to take care of them, and with some valuable jewelry and pictures of the twins' parents with their names written on the back. Expecting to die, Suyuan was surprised to find herself saved, "in the back of a bouncing truck with several other sick people, all moaning" (325). Canning also relates that Suyuan's entire family had been killed when their house was bombed and obliterated, which the couple witnessed firsthand when they returned to Suyuan's family home to look for the twins and found only "four stories of burnt bricks and wood, all the life of [their] house" (313). Among a myriad of painful memories, it is her decision to leave the twins that haunts Suyuan most; she makes it a lifelong mission to try to find them, though this goal is not revealed until after Suyuan's death. Exposure to her mother's traumatic memories causes Jing-mei to grieve the loss of her mother all over again, this time especially regretting "how much [she has] never known about her [Suyuan]" and having to say "goodbye before [she has] a chance to know her better" (330). Learning more about her mother's memories, then, leads not only to enhanced understanding, but also to mourning; Jing-mei knows that there are memories that will forever remain hidden now that Suyuan is gone.

Trying to assemble her own memories about her mother, Jing-mei recalls that Suyuan "was always displeased ... Something with always missing. Something always needed improving. Something was not in balance" (19). Jing-mei has always seen herself as a disappointment to her mother. It is not until she is an adult and learns that the twins are still alive that Jing-mei begins to understand that her mother's constant displeasure, the feeling that "[s]omething was always missing," and the subsequent criticism of Jing-mei, grew out of Suyuan's unspeakable loss in China. Constantly trying to fill the void

left by the lost twins, Suyuan saw Jing-mei, literally, as “[her] long-cherished wish ... the younger sister who was supposed to be the essence of the others” (323). In this sense, the mother’s loss has trickled down into Jing-mei’s life and has influenced Jing-mei’s image of herself and her relationship to Suyuan. By listening to the story of her mother’s memory, though, Jing-mei begins to heal from what became a personally painful aspect of their relationship. After she hears the more detailed version of her mother’s final days in China, Jing-mei finally understands that she is not to blame for her mother’s dissatisfaction and her sense of imbalance, and thus a major rift that separated mother and daughter during Suyuan’s lifetime can begin to heal, at least in Jing-mei’s mind, as she reconciles herself with the loss of her mother and with their former relationship. It is part of Jing-mei’s “life’s importance,” symbolized by the jade pendant her mother gives her in “Best Quality” (235), to fulfill her mother’s dream of returning to China and meeting her daughters. Because Suyuan tells her, “I wore this on my skin, so when you put it on your skin, then you know my meaning” (235), Jing-mei knows that her connection with her mother will continue to deepen after her death, just as the jewel will become greener each time it is worn. By revisiting her own childhood memories, Jing-mei is ultimately able to open up a space within which she can empathize with her mother.

Jing-mei’s connection with her mother continues to develop when she finally travels to China to meet the twins. Although Jing-mei feels conflicted about her Chinese heritage – sometimes she feels she is “becoming Chinese” while at other times, she “realize[s] [she’s] never really known what it means to be Chinese” (306-307), on the plane to China, Jing-mei feels her “blood rushing through a new course, [her] bones aching with a familiar old pain” (306). This description seems to combine mother and

daughter again, as the “new course” of Jing-mei’s blood adjusts for the first time to her identity as a Chinese American woman; she also is able to feel her mother’s “familiar old pain,” the pain that China symbolizes even though it was Suyuan’s home. With Jing-mei’s trip to China, Tan attempts to bridge the gap between the traumatic past and a more hopeful future. Suyuan always insisted that “once you are born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese ... it is in your blood” (306). Although Jing-mei, and the other Chinese-American daughters, resist their Chinese identities for much of their American lives, it appears that returning to China allows Jing-mei to connect more directly to her cultural roots.⁵⁸

Jing-mei’s growing connection to China, and thus, to her mother, is also significantly represented in her request to hear, in Chinese, her father’s account of Suyuan’s story. After a lifetime of trying to distance herself from her mother, Jing-mei feels compelled to learn her mother’s history, in her mother’s language, thinking, “I need to know [why she abandoned the babies], because now I feel abandoned too” (323). Significantly, Jing-mei comes to realize that her story and her mother’s story interact; she must hear her mother’s narrative in order to understand her own reaction to Suyuan’s sudden death. Tan has Jing-mei meet the twins only after hearing Canning’s version of Suyuan’s traumatic memory, which suggests that only then is Jing-mei properly prepared to meet her sisters and transmit her mother’s story. Instead of claiming she knows nothing about her mother, Jing-mei worries that she cannot explain “in [her] broken

⁵⁸ Adams seeks to complicate readings of the novel that conclude that Tan’s depiction of Jing-mei’s “becoming Chinese” on her trip to China points to essentialism. Instead, Adams reads Jing-mei’s comments regarding her cultural transformation as “suggesting that ethnic essence is a cultural process” (66). Adams also deconstructs criticism of the novel that argues that Tan reifies the Oriental/Occidental binary or that Tan’s work is “neo-conservative, if not neo-Orientalist and neo-racist” (50). Ultimately, Adams sees Tan as dealing much more critically with these issues than other scholars have given her credit for.

Chinese about [their] mother's life" (330). Although anxiety-ridden about the meeting for months, Jing-mei feels an immediate connection to her twin half-sisters; Jing-mei feels "as if [Suyuan] is among [them]," and while she does not immediately recognize in the twins any physical resemblance to their mother, "they still look familiar" (331). Jing-mei's thought is confirmed when they view the Polaroid picture taken by her father: "I know we all see it: Together we look like her mother," and this closing image of the novel succeeds, in part, in fulfilling Suyuan's "long-cherished wish" (332).⁵⁹

Much critical debate has ensued in relation to the ending of *The Joy Luck Club*. Due to its phenomenal popular success, the novel has been criticized by some as resorting to an ending that is too neat and simple,⁶⁰ and many read the ending as an unqualified "reconciliation." More recent scholarship, however, seeks to complicate those readings. For example, Bella Adams argues that readings that privilege reconciliation "marginalize the not so sweet side of the text, all the ideologically suspect remarks," and particularly the complex relationship between Jing-mei and Suyuan (38). While the ending of the novel, to some extent, heals the pains revealed in the text, it ultimately raises many complex issues that cannot be wrapped up so neatly. For Adams, while Jing-mei's apparently effortless bond with the twins and, presumably, her ability to tell them about their mother, "function[s] positively" and "marks the beginning of a reciprocal and dialogical relationship between Jing-mei and others," the novel's seven narrators demonstrate that "'subaltern representation' is empowering but not to the extent that it

⁵⁹ Adams argues that the photograph is what initiates Jing-mei's recognition of the twins: "Significantly, oneness develops in terms of a representation . . . the textual surface effects the communal subtext" (68). This reading is attentive to Jing-mei's initial lack of physical recognition of the twins' relation to her and to their mother, but it also ignores Jing-mei's comment that "they still look familiar" despite seeing "no trace of my mother in them" (331).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Leslie Bow's reference to the "overly neat, feminist ending" (117).

resolves disenfranchisement” (70). While the ending of the novel provides a measure of closure for Suyuan and Jing-mei, we can read this conclusion as just the beginning of a long and complex healing process. It is also worth noting that, while the novel hints that the other three mother-daughter pairs are moving in the direction of reconciliation, we also leave them just as they are beginning to communicate.

“I must tell her everything about my past”: Mother-Daughter Testimony in *The Joy Luck Club*

The testimonies of the surviving mothers – Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu, and Yingying St. Clair, – begin as a result of Jing-mei’s project to remember and represent her mother. In the opening chapter, as Jing-mei’s *Joy Luck* “aunties” encourage her to tell her half-sisters all about Suyuan’s life, and Jing-mei worries that she will have nothing to say, she can tell that these women fear that their own daughters would react like Jing-mei, if any of the daughters were given the task of telling the mother’s story:

They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America ... They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation. (31)

Sensing this fear, Jing-mei is motivated to learn about her mother, and although Jing-mei only appreciates her mother and their relationship after Suyuan’s death, her example allows the living mothers and daughters to reconnect while still alive, to begin to mend the relationships that have caused so much turmoil in their lives.

Huntley describes the three mothers’ stories in “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away,” the first section of the novel, as revealing “the trauma of a long-ago pivotal event that transformed a naïve young girl into a self-directed woman” (50). These initial stories

by Lindo, An-mei, and Ying-ying give priority to a particular moment or event from their childhood/adolescence in China, which Tan ultimately connects to similar events in the daughters' lives, demonstrating the impact of postmemory on the *Joy Luck* daughters. The most valuable lesson from Lindo's testimony – the ability to empower herself through narrative – has resonances not only for her daughter Waverly, but also for the other mother-daughter pairs in the novel. Lindo's formative memory begins when she is forced into an arranged marriage as a child, and, as a result of destructive floods that ruined her family's lands, she must live with her future husband's family, where she is treated like a servant. For Lindo, her perceived lack of agency is particularly traumatic; thus, when telling her story, Lindo empowers herself, emphasizing the control she exercised over her dismal fate. After marrying Tyan-yu, Lindo extinguishes the red candle that is supposed to burn for the entire wedding night to represent the everlasting bond of husband and wife. After watching the flame waver in the wind, Lindo is not content to have her fate decided for her, and her "hope ... burst and blew out my husband's end of the candle" (56). Later, when her mother-in-law confines her to bed in hopes that she will bear Tyan-yu's child, a state Lindo calls "worse than a prison," she concocts a plan to escape her marriage. Eventually freed from her obligations, Lindo feels secure in her independence and her ability to control her own fate; she transforms a story of trauma into a story of survival.

Throughout Lindo's and Waverly's narratives, we see their relationship transformed from one of opposition to one of tentative understanding. Lindo's stories about her life and China and the series of displacements that followed ("my first marriage to a family that did not want me, a war on all sides, and later, an ocean that took me to a

new country,” [293]) eventually allow Waverly to demystify her mother, seeing her more realistically as “what was really there: an old woman, a wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword . . . wait[ing] patiently for her daughter to invite her in” (204). Through Lindo’s narrative of her memories in China, and Waverly’s childhood memories of herself and her mother, Tan shows how storytelling fosters a new understanding between the women, as they, like the other mother-daughter pairs, have begun to mend their once conflicted relationship by the end of the novel. Although the example of Lindo and Waverly certainly demonstrates how characters take control over their memories by constructing a narrative, and while their pairing also locates mother-daughter storytelling as the privileged means of healing, their stories do not engage as intimately with the concept of postmemory as those of An-mei and Rose and Ying-ying and Lena.

An-mei’s stories “Scar” and “Magpies” poignantly relate the traumatic history of her relationship with her own mother, who was cast out of the family and separated from her children after unwittingly becoming a concubine of the powerful Wu Tsing, rather than properly playing the role of a grieving widow. As a child, An-mei’s maternal grandmother, Popo, and other relatives, have told her that her mother is a “ghost,” meaning it is “forbidden to talk about” her (33). The young An-mei is robbed of not only her mother’s physical presence, but also of stories about her mother. Nevertheless, when an unfamiliar woman enters her grandmother’s house, An-mei “knew it was [her] mother even though [she] had not seen her in all of [her, An-mei’s] memory” (36). Instead of casting off her mother, as her relatives encourage, An-mei “saw [her] own face looking back at [her]” (37). This physical connection between mother and daughter is reiterated by An-mei later as she thinks the impact of her own life on her daughter, Rose:

...even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way. (241)

An-mei and her own mother bond over their pain, and presumably, by sharing her childhood stories with Rose, An-mei hopes she and her daughter can also bond through the sharing of pain. In fact, understanding her mother's pain is the precondition of An-mei's connection to her own mother (242). In addition to her instinctual connection to her mother, An-mei later learns from her mother's servant that her mother has been abused both by Wu Tsing, who has repeatedly forced her into sex due to her role as his concubine, and by Second Wife, who connived in An-mei's mother's original disgrace. When An-mei's mother gave birth to a boy, Second Wife claimed him as her own; upon hearing the story, An-mei empathizes with her mother and "saw [her] terrible pain" (268). Regardless, An-mei remembers her time with her mother as the most "comfortable" (255) of her life, due to their bond.

Depicted mostly as an empathetic supporter of her mother, An-mei also suffers due to the circumstances that surround her mother. One distant memory from her childhood surfaces when her mother touches a scar on her chin, releasing a submerged memory. The memory reaches back to a time in An-mei's early childhood when she was burned by hot soup during a clash between her own mother and Popo, who had just learned of An-mei's mother's concubinage. An-mei remembers the emotional pain that resulted when she was torn from her mother at that early age, as Popo banished An-mei's mother for bringing shame on their home. When her mother returns though, and "[rubs] the memory back into [her] skin," An-mei recalls that as her scar healed, she lost her memory of her mother, explaining, "The wound begins to close in on itself, to protect

what is hurting so much. And once it is closed, you no longer see what is underneath, what started the pain” (40). The physical pain, and its subsequent healing, displaces the deeper emotional trauma of losing her mother.⁶¹ The physical connection between mother and daughter becomes spiritual when An-mei and her mother believe that with her mother’s suicide, An-mei will receive the spirit of her mother in order to make An-mei “stronger” (271). Although realizing her mother’s despair is what leads to her eventual suicide, An-mei chooses to look at her mother’s act as a strategic choice, meant to punish those who wronged her during her life (270), and as a sacrifice, intended to give An-mei a better life and a stronger spirit.

An-mei’s privileging of the mother-daughter relationship as the primary site of understanding complicates her relationship with her Americanized daughter Rose. Due to her marital troubles, Rose sees a psychiatrist, but An-mei objects, telling her daughter, “A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you” (210). In the context of An-mei’s earlier remarks about the physical connection between mothers and daughters and about the inherent connection between generations of women (her “stairs” analogy), we can assume that An-mei “knows what is inside” Rose because much of what is there is also inside An-mei and/or is a result of An-mei’s own experiences and those of her mother and grandmother before her. Given An-mei’s admiration of her mother’s power, it is no

⁶¹ An-mei’s feeling of physical connection to her mother, “beneath [her] skin. Inside [her] bones” is reinforced when An-mei witnesses her mother’s sacrifice for the dying Popo. Despite the harsh treatment she has received from her own mother, An-mei’s mother cuts herself and adds some of her flesh to a special soup that she hopes will heal Popo. An-mei reflects that, in order to “remember what is in your bones,” one “must peel off your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her” (41). Tan here highlights that mother-daughter connection is passed on by the women in An-mei’s family.

surprise that An-mei is frustrated by her daughter's indecisiveness and seeming impotence in her ongoing divorce from Ted.⁶²

Revisiting her childhood, Rose remembers “the power of [An-mei's] words” (106). An-mei once told Rose, “You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next to you ... if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak” (213). An-mei speaks these words out of her own experience; following her mother's voice and her mother's actions rather than the multitude of voices advising her to cast her mother off resulted, in An-mei's opinion, in her strength and the quality of her relationship with her mother. Similarly, listening to her mother's voice empowers Rose; An-mei's simple suggestion that Rose “speak up” in her conflict with Ted results in Rose's strong demand to keep the house in their divorce settlement. As her confrontation with Ted ends, Rose, like An-mei before her, realizes that “[t]he power of my words was that strong” (219). Rose's sudden agency is a result of her relationship with her mother; her powerful voice is a trait she received from her mother, and, as we hear An-mei's stories (which, presumably, she also shares with Rose), we understand that the source of this strength originates in the experiences recounted in those painful but ultimately empowering memories. Rose gains strength from her mother's pain, just as An-mei previously gained strength from her own mother's tragic life. The lessons learned by An-mei through her childhood memories can become stories of strength for Rose.

⁶² Rose's story “Half and Half” reveals that her inability to make decisions stems from a childhood tragedy in which she takes responsibility for the drowning death of her youngest brother Bing. Having been given the responsibility of watching Bing on a family vacation to the beach, Rose blames herself when an accident occurs and Bing is lost forever; thus, she avoids taking on even small responsibilities in her later life, as reflected in her paralysis in moments of decision. Rose sees another correlation between her childhood memory and her current marriage failures; she understands both events as situations in which she knows a tragedy is occurring but feels powerless and “just let[s] it happen” (140).

It is Ying-ying St. Clair and her daughter Lena, though, who provide perhaps the clearest example of how the traumatic memory of the mother haunts both her own life and that of her daughter. As a child, Lena remembers witnessing the gradual psychological disintegration of her mother, whom she describes as being governed by “unspoken terrors ... [that] devoured her, piece by piece, until she disappeared and became a ghost” (105). Lena’s sensitivity toward her mother’s fragmented existence does not enable her, however, to understand the details of Ying-ying’s traumatic memory until Ying-ying tells the story of “The Moon Lady.” This narrative dramatizes the surfacing of a buried memory, the knowledge of which is attained through its very narration.⁶³ By the time she has completed her narrative, Ying-ying is able to connect it to subsequent life experiences and identify it as the founding trauma in her young life.

As a young girl, Ying-ying lives a relatively peaceful, privileged life as the daughter of an upper-class Chinese family. Her family’s social status, however, means that she has little connection with her biological mother and is instead cared for mainly by her Amah, whom she now realizes she treated poorly and “thought of ... as only someone for [her] comfort” (72). The only guidance her mother seems to offer is the notion that “a girl should stand still,” and presumably, this early emphasis on the rewards of passivity for girls contributes to Ying-ying’s adult behavior, when she “moved so secretly [Lena] does not see [her]”; she describes herself and her daughter both as

⁶³ Laub describes the scene of testimony and witnessing, when a survivor transmits her story to a listener as, “the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57). For Ying-ying, articulating the memory of the Moon Festival means re-membering it, returning to the event for the first time and attempting to recreate it for the listener/witness.

“unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others” (64).⁶⁴ Though it is apparent that Ying-ying’s femininity is part of her traumatic identity-formation in this early childhood memory, the details about proper behavior for girls remain subtle and marginal, while Ying-ying focuses on a more generalized form of identity, one that could be described simply as either “lost” or “found.”

The event that Huntley terms the “single traumatic childhood experience” (47) in Ying-ying’s life begins when the child falls off of a boat during the Moon Festival.⁶⁵ Picked up in a fisherman’s net, she finds herself in an alternate world where the Ying-ying she knows has ceased to exist because she is not recognizable to the strangers who rescue her. The young girl is “filled with terror” at the thought that she “had turned into a beggar girl, lost without [her] family” (79). Forced to watch the remainder of the Moon Lady ceremony with this new community of strangers, she “was crying, shaking with despair”; her connection to the Moon Lady’s story, which she admits she “did not understand,” is so strong that she “understood her grief. In one small moment, we had both lost the world, and there was no way to get it back” (82). Even though Ying-ying is eventually found and recovered by her family, she marks this moment as the moment when “I lost myself” (83). Her wish to the Moon Lady, given while she was still separated from her family, was “to be found,” and as she narrates her story in the present-day of the novel, Ying-ying believes that in finally remembering that as her wish, she can put her desire into effect. Because the memory of that event was so traumatic for Ying-

⁶⁴ Adams provides a particularly useful reading of the “The Moon Lady” (42-45) that emphasizes the ways in which “Chinese patriarchy effectively displaces femininity,” a reading that also offers an interesting explanation for the Moon Lady’s true male identity, which is revealed to Ying-ying as she offers her wish (“the Moon Lady looked at me and became a man,” *JLC* 83).

⁶⁵ Walter Shear further asserts that “the childhood nickname here [Ying-ying] may be intended to suggest the regressive nature of her trauma” (47).

ying, she “forgot what [she] wished for, that memory remained hidden from [her] all these many years,” and it is only through telling the story that “now [she] can remember the wish, and [she] can recall the details of that entire day” (65). Because she feels that this event is the origin of her identity as a “ghost,” Ying-ying knows that this story in particular is important for Lena to know.

In her second story, “Waiting Between the Trees,” Ying-ying reveals that, as a young woman, she also suffered as a result of a failed marriage and of her decision to abort her pregnancy due to her hatred for her philandering husband (281). She marks that marriage as another erosion of her identity, as Ying-ying “became a stranger to [her]self” (280). She vows to “tell Lena of [her] shame,” feeling that the painful stories from her past will help Lena not only understand her mother but also herself. As Walter Shear argues, “[Ying-ying] fears that [her] abandonment of self has in some way been passed on to her daughter” (48). Ying-ying interprets Lena’s struggles with her husband Harold as the result of a similar loss of self. Lena admits to feeling disconnected from the self she projects to the world, worrying “that [she] would be caught someday, exposed as a sham of a woman” (169), while her husband seems oblivious to Lena’s influence on him (as when Lena suggests a crucial business idea, which Harold benefits from, [172]). Lena sacrifices herself in order to make her husband happy with a “feeling of surrendering everything to him, with abandon, without caring what I got in return” (174). Ying-ying recognizes in Lena’s predicament traces of her own gradual disconnection from her self, and she knows she must tell Lena her stories in order to help her understand, and perhaps overcome, the challenges she faces in her marriage.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Adams recognizes the similarity between mother and daughter here, also, as reflected in their marriages: “As figures of patriarchal authority, both husbands subalternize their wives by speaking on their behalf”

Lena already knows about the erasure of her mother's identity that occurred when she came to the U.S. as the wife of Clifford St. Clair. Ying-ying was declared "a Displaced person," given a new name ("Betty"), a new birth year ("1916 instead of 1914"), and a new astrological symbol ("Dragon instead of Tiger"), as Clifford claims "he saved her from a terrible life [in China], some tragedy she could not speak about" (107). Lena knows, even as a child, that her mother "looks displaced" (107) and is haunted by "the unspeakable" (105), but since her "mother never talked about her life in China" (105), Lena had no insight into the details of her mother's displacement. The story told in "The Moon Lady"; the further information about Ying-ying's first marriage, abortion, marriage to Clifford; and the revelation of all the ways in which her identity eroded over the years, supply much-needed insight into Ying-ying's psychological state. From these stories, Lena gains privileged access to her mother's memories. While for most of the novel, the mothers aspire to save their daughters by revealing their own pasts, Lena, after watching her mother gradually "fall apart," also hopes to put her mother back together. She describes how as a child "the pain of not being seen was unbearable" (120), a result of her mother's inability to nurture her due to the crippling trauma she had experienced. Lena wants to explain to her mother that she has "already experienced the worst" and "now...must come back, to the other side" (121). Through Ying-ying and Lena's "implicit conversation"⁶⁷ throughout the novel, both begin to heal due to their

(45). While Clifford St. Clair determines Ying-ying's American identity, presumably without even knowing the details of her past, Harold Livotny assumes the leadership role and work and at home, while pretending, through assigning his wife a lower salary and keeping track of everything each person buys on a tally sheet on their refrigerator, to value fairness and equality above all else. Lena confesses that "Since Harold pays more [of the mortgage], he had the deciding vote on how the house should look" (175-76). Lena is effectively erased from her own home (which features "none of [her] cluttered look" [176]).

⁶⁷ Zenobia Mistri, in "June's Symbolic Journey to Discover Her Ethnic Identity," (*Women's Issues in The Joy Luck Club*. 51-59), describes the novel as "an implicit conversation among the four mothers and their daughters as they tell their stories" (52). The notion that the mothers and daughters tell the stories to each

increased knowledge about one another's histories and memories. Faced with Lena's marital struggles, Ying-ying sees a reflection of her own marriage because Lena has disappeared to Harold just as Ying-ying has gradually become a "ghost" in America; Ying-ying now knows she "must tell [Lena] everything about [her, Ying-ying's] past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved" (274). She knows also that she must remember her own past in order to transmit it to Lena, so Ying-ying grapples with her painful memories and through her own process of testimony, she is able to reclaim her identity as a "Tiger." She understands she must confront her traumatic memories, explaining,

I will gather together my past and look. I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose. I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear. And then my fierceness can come back. (286)

Returning to what she sees as a truer version of her self, Ying-ying becomes powerful and also extends her power to Lena, whom she hopes to inspire to embrace her inner "Tiger," as well. Ying-ying is determined to "use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose ... I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter" (286). Like An-mei's mother, who transfers her spirit to her daughter through her own suicide, Ying-ying reclaims her

other and listen to each other's tales has become quite controversial in *JLC* scholarship. Rocio Davis alludes to the "fragmentation" of the novel, suggesting that "the arduous task of self-identification confronting them must be taken on alone ... only after personal identity has been determined can bonds of unity be forged" (165). A more outspoken critic of the "implicit conversation" argument is Marc Singer, who insists that the narrative structure "increases the dislocation between mothers and daughters" (336) and the testimonies become "radically isolated from one another" (339); instead of seeing the stories as in conversation with one another, Singer reads them as "internal monologues, rehearsed but never spoken" (339). I view the stories as in conversation with one another, although perhaps not literally, but I do not believe this reading completely conflicts with those of critics like Davis and Singer. If the stories are "internal monologues," it is highly possible that, since the mothers seem to recognize the importance of transmitting these narratives to their daughters, the stories will be passed on to the daughters at some point in the near future.

strength in order to pass it on to her daughter. She asserts that she has undergone this painful process of remembering the struggles of her past in order to leave her spirit to Lena (286). Ying-ying, like An-mei, understands that she must give her daughter the narrative of her own life, that it is essential to her daughter's survival. Inspired by the example of Suyuan's inability to share her story with her daughter(s) and frightened by Jing-mei's initial ignorance about her own mother's history, the other *Joy Luck* mothers take advantage of the time they still have with their daughters and begin to heal the strained relationships with their daughters through confronting traumatic memories.

Keeping their private pains secret for years, the *Joy Luck* mothers have tried to protect their daughters from the trauma they experienced, particularly while in China. As the opening vignette of the novel⁶⁸ establishes, the Chinese mothers want to pass on to their American daughters "all [their] good intentions" (4) so that the daughters "will always be too full to swallow any sorrow" (3). Wendy Ho observes, "They want their Chinese American daughters to have the best life – not to duplicate the sad, tragic, or restricted lives they and their mothers have known" (60). However, the mothers come to understand, partially through revisiting the memories of their own relationships with their mothers and by understanding how those memories have affected them throughout their lives, that the daughter must know the mother's stories, even though many of their memories are painful. It is important to realize that while the novel "invests narrative with tremendous representational power" and depicts storytelling "as a means of

⁶⁸ Preceding the first section of the novel is a short vignette about a Chinese woman emigrating to the U.S. who wants to bring a swan with her, symbolic of the possibilities that this new country will represent for her daughter; the swan is "a creature that became more than what was hoped for" (3). Unfortunately, immigration officials take the swan away and the mother is left with only a feather. She now realizes that she can only tell her daughter about this experience, but she wants to wait until she can "tell her daughter this in perfect American English" (4).

recovering the past and fostering communication between mothers and daughters” (Singer 334), Jing-mei still possesses a very limited knowledge of her mother, and her quest to “know” Suyuan and her memories after her death is an impossible one. Despite this recognition, Tan’s novel encourages us to see Jing-mei’s connection to the twins as the closest reconciliation that can be expected. Meanwhile, the other mother-daughter pairs have the opportunity to share more of themselves and their memories. Although the feeling of impossibility persists under the novel’s surface, *Joy Luck*’s bittersweet ending is tempered with hope and the possibility of healing.

The condition of impossibility associated with traumatic memory and, more appropriately for *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club*, with postmemory, is one element that unites these two texts; both novels are centrally concerned with the effects of parents’ memories on their children and grandchildren. While *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club* depict, arguably, much different accounts of the workings of postmemory, one value of reading these texts beside one another is that we are able to see the variety of experiences of second and third generation survivors of trauma and the difficulties associated with this particular type of traumatic memory. Although *Paradise* ostensibly portrays the impossibility of working through the painful past, and *The Joy Luck Club* seems to end with a tentative resolution, each novel actually depicts both the hardships faced by those suffering from the effects of postmemory and the hope and desire for working through that persists despite the difficulties inherent in the process of working through any trauma, let alone a trauma not experienced firsthand. *The Joy Luck Club* suggests that the narration of memory by parent to child is a necessary step in the process of working through. Stories prove to be therapeutic in Tan’s novel, while they result in repetition of

traumatic events in Morrison's text. Analyzing the novels together, though, can help us understand why narrative produces almost opposite results in these two works.

The Joy Luck Club and *Paradise* together provide a picture not only of what postmemory looks like in the lives of the characters, but also how postmemory can be worked through. Always sensitive to the inherent difficulty in coping with postmemory, Hirsch describes second-generation survivors as in exile, existing in a diasporic state:

The children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and forceful separation from home and the destruction of that home, remain marked by their parents' experiences: always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora ... This condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is a characteristic aspect of postmemory. (243)

This condition of exile is one that is deeply felt by both the Chinese and Chinese American characters in *The Joy Luck Club* and by the African American community of Ruby in *Paradise*, who are removed from the physical landscape of their parents' memories as well as from the memories themselves, but who "remain marked" by trauma and thus must also work through and mourn the original loss and the necessary absence that occurs with postmemory. Despite the seeming impossibility of the position of postmemory, Hirsch emphasizes that an "aesthetics of postmemory ... needs simultaneously to (re)build and to mourn" (245). Both Morrison's and Tan's novels ultimately indicate that working through will always be a continuous, difficult process for survivors and their children, but both also provide, even if subtly, the opportunity for change, reconciliation, and healing. By reading works depicting the struggles of Chinese American and African American characters side by side, we also see that the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the difficulties involved in working through the painful histories of ancestors are not isolated phenomena that apply only to the

descendants of slaves, or only to second-generation immigrants, or only to Holocaust survivors. Through the pairing of Morrison's and Tan's novels, we gain both a sense of the multiple effects that postmemory can engender in the lives of second- and third-generation survivors, as well as an understanding that the remnants of traumatic memories can and do continue to haunt descendants of survivors across cultural divisions.

Chapter Three

Testimonial Scenes in *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Sula*

While all of the novels analyzed in this study demonstrate an interest in the transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory through testimony, Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1977) also raise interesting questions about the role of the listener in the testimony. *Kindred* and *Stigmata* most frequently depict the absence of a listener; the supernatural elements of the protagonists' stories make testimony nearly impossible. *Paradise* also reflects on this impossibility by portraying characters who never testify, primarily because the memories that haunt them are not their own and thus cannot be called upon by the second generation characters. One exception may be Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, which implies that mothers must testify to their own daughters in order to ease the pain of traumatic memory and give their daughters a chance to heal from the transgenerational effects of the mothers' tragedies. In the previous chapter, I discussed narrative as a means through which second- and third-generation survivors can begin to understand overwhelming experiences in which they did not directly participate, but which have nonetheless impacted their lives because of the familial connection the listeners have to the stories. In *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Sula*, on the other hand, characters must find supportive listeners for their testimonies who are, incidentally, never their own family members. Consequently, Walker's and Morrison's novels focus on the act of transmitting the story, and the presence or absence of a listener receiving that story, more than on the story's content.

In “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” psychoanalyst and writer Dori Laub explicitly maps out the listener’s role in a survivor’s recovery process:

To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process – a process of constructing a narrative, or reconstructing a history and essentially of *re-externalizing the event* – has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. (69)

Laub indicates that that survivor must construct “a narrative,” or tell her story. Further, though, she must “transfer it to another,” or address her story to a listener. Because of his extensive experience as a listener himself, in his roles as psychoanalyst and founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Laub offers particular insight into the essential role of the listener and the social nature of testimony. Laub emphasizes that the testimony always “includes the hearer,” whom he identifies as the survivor’s necessary “*addressable other* ... who can hear the anguish of [the survivor’s] memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (68). Judith Herman elaborates on this point, arguing that “[r]ecovering can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133). Laub and Herman emphasize, then, that while it is important for the survivor to create a narrative about her experiences, it is equally important that the survivor have the support of a listener or a community of listeners.

In Laub’s formulation, however, it is not the listener’s mere presence that allows the survivor to testify; rather, the listener must possess and exercise particular skills that enable the survivor’s narrative to emerge and take shape. Laub describes the listener as, primarily, “a companion in a journey onto an uncharted land” (59). The role of companion involves the listener paying careful attention to the survivor’s words, as well as to the silences that may still mark the inchoate account of the traumatic memory (61).

Equally importantly, the listener must not judge, evaluate, or question the “truth” of the narrative. Ultimately, the listener must understand that the narrative is the desired outcome, and the testimony cannot be enacted unless the survivor empowers herself through telling. Because, as Herman argues, the survivor “must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery,” the listener must take a secondary role. Laub himself recognizes, though, that the testimonial scene described on the previous page represents an ideal. The listener also has the ability to contribute to further damage “if the price of speaking is *re-living*; not relief but further re-traumatization” (67). Doubting the survivor’s account, disempowering the survivor by seeking to “rescue” her (Herman 133), or emphasizing one’s own reaction to hearing the story of trauma are just a few of the means by which a listener can become “an obstacle or a foreclosure to new, diverging, unexpected information” (Laub 62) that surfaces through the act of testimony.

Superficially, *Sula* and *The Temple of My Familiar* represent stark contrasts in their portrayals of testimony, especially in their depictions of survivors finding supportive listeners to receive their testimonies. Morrison’s title character dies alone as an outcast, and the novel ends without ever depicting a testimonial scene, while Walker’s novel closes with several of her central characters apparently finding “soulmates,” joining in symbiotic pairings with appropriate doubles in explicitly orgasmic bliss. The polar extremes of the two conclusions, however, obscure the extent to which both Morrison’s and Walker’s texts stress the importance of the listener in the testimonial scene. Although *Temple* produces one testimonial scene after another and *Sula* is marked by the absence of those very scenes, both novels reach the surprisingly similar conclusion that healing

from trauma can occur only when an individual has both a creative outlet through which to tell her story and a supportive listener or community of listener to receive that story.

“They have a purpose in each other’s lives”: Idealized Testimony in *Temple*

Most of the critical response to Alice Walker’s fiction has addressed *The Color Purple* (1982), her most popular, as well as her most critically acclaimed novel. Conversely, reviews of *Temple* were mixed, at best, and many reviewers harshly criticized the novel. Even academics writing on *Temple* address what Adam Sol sees as the stylistic flaws of Walker’s writing, including frequent “clichés and sentimentality”; although Walker “strives for lyricism and achieves it” at times, Sol finds that “she more frequently achieves schlock” that is “easy to make fun of” (400). Others, like Lillie P. Howard argue that the extremely wide scope of the novel and its multiplicity of themes and characters lead to the reader’s “mental and physical disorientation” (141). While these criticisms may be valid, it is also useful to consider the ways in which Walker’s strategies contribute to our understanding of what is at stake in her novel. If we consider *Temple* as a trauma narrative, some of the most frequently cited challenges of the text – the scope, the constant movement between stories and the ways in which they overlap, the sheer number of characters and stories – can be read as part of Walker’s conceptualization of the nature of trauma. In her novel, trauma is a constant – people of both genders and all races and cultures have been victims of painful, overwhelming experiences, especially experiences of racism and sexism, since the earliest (chronologically) stories related by the novel.

While scholarship on *Temple* has addressed the major elements that I will examine in my argument – the exploration of painful memory, the abundance of art, artists, and stories, and the prioritizing of community and relationships – critics have not yet united these concerns under a paradigm of trauma and recovery, nor has any research thus far introduced the work of Laub to analyze the dynamics of the testimony and its implications for recovery of/from traumatic memory in Walker’s novel.⁶⁹ A significant number of writers connect the abundance of art in the novel to the forging of community, as when Madelyn Jablon notes that creating art “makes one’s experience of the past accessible to others” (139). Jablon sees art as Laub sees testimony: an inherently social act. However, the ubiquitous storytelling in the text is more often linked to African oral tradition⁷⁰ than identified as testimony. Although Walker clearly intends to incorporate African traditions, testimonial scenes in the novel also interestingly recall Laub’s description of testimony, the act through which a survivor transforms her memory into narrative. And while *Temple* features numerous scenes wherein a character transmits her story verbally, Walker expands Laub’s concept of testimony, as “storytelling” can include any number of aesthetic possibilities for Walker’s characters. Arveyda, for example, transmits Zedé’s story to Carlotta through song, which proves to be a more effective medium than conversation.

⁶⁹ Nearly every critic recognizes the characters of the novel as fragmented or psychologically scarred. Le Guin notes, “all the people are passionate actors and sufferers” (22). In order to resolve the problem of fragmentation, brought about by oppression of all kinds, but especially by racism and sexism, characters seek to rediscover their histories (Dieke 508), reconnect with the stories of their parents (Sol 396), and recover their own memories (Bochman 304). While Lauret does compare Walker’s novel to the Jungian “valuation of creativity as therapy or self-fulfillment” (145), most of the critical commentary on the function of art in the novel focuses elsewhere.

⁷⁰ For example, Howard describes the storytelling scenes as reminiscent of the African oral tradition, [in which] we must gather round to receive, from those who have gone before, the wisdom of the ages” (142).

Regardless of the forms that the stories take, the need to tell them to another person persists. In a review of *Temple*, Ursula K. Le Guin remarks, “everything [Walker’s characters] talk about is urgent, a matter truly of life and death” (22). It is clear that the characters in the novel not only need to recover their own memories and tell their own stories, but they also need to hear the stories of others. The characters together weave a quilt of their past experiences, and their sharing and listening spark a sort of therapeutic domino effect, as each character connects to another and encourages her healing. It is in Walker’s focus on not just telling, but also on listening, that *Temple* most closely resembles Laub’s description of testimony, which emphasizes the mutual work of the survivor and her listener in moving toward the survivor’s recovery. Walker’s novel portrays what might be called a successful series of testimonies; as Jablon points out, “[a]t the novel’s close, [the four main characters] live together, having realized that they are a collective by which each will grow” (139). In the fictional world of *Temple*, an individual’s recovery cannot occur apart from the community. Creative engagement and sharing stories within the context of the community is, therefore, the therapeutic prescription for traumatized individuals and cultures put forth by Walker’s text.

While Walker’s novel addresses a wide scope of issues worthy of discussion, I will concentrate most closely on what might be termed the “testimonial scenes” in *Temple*. These scenes typically feature two characters, one who is a speaker actively giving testimony, and another who serves as a supportive listener. The speaker has survived or witnessed violence and/or oppression and has experienced these events as trauma. Therefore, the speakers describe events from memory, but, because the events are traumatic in nature, the speakers often narrate their memories as they themselves are

experiencing and learning of the events that scarred them in the past. Laub's description of testimony works well with Walker's novel because both Laub and Walker are deeply invested in listening, in hearing, in receiving testimony. Laub explains, "The listener ... by definition partakes of the struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past" (58). Walker, too, carefully considers the role of the listener in testimony as demonstrated, primarily, by her choice to dramatize instances of her characters testifying to each other, rather than in isolation, relating their stories to the reader only, as Dana appears to do in *Kindred*; it is not the story itself, but the exchange that occurs when an individual shares her story with another that is privileged in *Temple*. As Howard recognizes, "the novel often plunges its characters and its readers into darkness, thereby sharpening their hearing, so that they can listen all the better to the stories they need to hear" (142). *Temple* seems, then, to be primarily interested in the process by which memories are retrieved and transmitted, a process that requires not only the testimony of the survivor, but also the sharp hearing of the listener.

Temple progresses as a series of stories told by one character to one or more other characters. The cycle of storytelling originates with a loss – Suwelo's Uncle Rafe has recently passed away, and Suwelo has returned to his uncle's home in order to settle the estate. As a result, Suwelo meets Lissie and Hal, and the exchange of stories among these three characters instigates the action of the novel. We quickly learn that Suwelo is suffering as a result of a failed marriage to Fanny, the details of which he shares with Lissie and Hal. Further, as Suwelo enters Rafe's home and sees a picture of his own parents, his reaction that "[h]e could not, would not think of them" because "he wanted to be happy" suggests that Suwelo harbors painful memories about his family (30). He will

not confront these memories until the end of the novel, after he has listened intently to the stories of Lissie and Hal. Walker here privileges listening as the means of healing: Lissie and Hal do not appear to tell their stories out of their own need to narrate painful memories; rather, there is a sense that Lissie, especially, tells her stories in order to prepare Suwelo for his own recovery. Lissie's actions serve as a model for Suwelo, who will later be able to share his most painful memories with Carlotta.

Walker creates the character of Lissie to explore the history of oppression and to reveal the (invented) origins of the racism and sexism that plague so many of *Temple's* contemporary characters. Lissie claims to have lived many lives since the beginning of time and to have been a witness to oppression throughout the ages:

Could it be possible after hundreds of lifetimes that I have not known peace? That seems to be the fact. In lifetime after lifetime, I have known oppression: from parents, siblings, relatives, governments, countries, continents. As well as from my own body and mind. Some part of every life has been spent binding up my wounds from these forces. (82)

Early in the novel Lissie remarks that she remembers being “exactly one hundred and thirteen” different people, including a white man and even a lion. Part of Walker's strategy in *Temple* is to explore the ubiquity of oppression; therefore, readers learn just as much about Suwelo's pain as we do about that of Fanny, and we listen to the narrated memories of characters from a variety of cultural backgrounds. In a novel that seems more concerned with the universal than with the specific or the local, Walker has Lissie's struggles with oppression throughout the ages serve as a backdrop against which to read the more individualized tragedies of the contemporary characters' lives. For Suwelo, part of his apprenticeship in the listening to and telling of stories involves being educated in this legacy of oppression, a lesson that prepares him to confront two major losses in his

life. The first is the loss of his marriage, the loss of Fanny as his wife; the examination of this loss requires Suwelo to recognize and correct the ways in which he has participated in the perpetuation of oppression himself. As a professor of history, Suwelo has accepted and upheld the power structure that has silenced the stories of women and minorities, though he is a black man himself. Ironically, it is his own personal history that Suwelo has not been able to negotiate, and Walker suggests that Suwelo's inability to confront his past contributes to his present struggles.

The Suwelo of the past is often depicted as a male chauvinist, a man who, for example, refuses to read books by women. After learning of the offense Fanny takes at his sexism, Suwelo understands that oppressing women also has painful consequences for men, a sentiment that recurs throughout Walker's novel. Suwelo knows that he has attempted to dominate both Fanny and Carlotta, a woman with whom he had a sexual affair, by trying to make each "his woman" (29). Suwelo repeatedly faces his guilt toward his treatment of both Fanny and Carlotta, lamenting "the mess he'd made of his life with Fanny. And the cowardice he'd shown in his relationship with Carlotta" (36). The stories he tells to Lissie and Hal allow him to relive and evaluate his treatment of the women.

The second major loss Suwelo must face is the loss of his parents. Although he has spent hours listening to Lissie and Hal's stories, Suwelo had been unable to testify to his most painful memories about his parents' troubled lives and horrific deaths. After a long period of listening, Suwelo thinks,

From time to time he had told them [Lissie and Hal] small stories from his life; though they never asked. He felt he knew them more intimately than he knew his own parents – who had been killed in a car wreck, the result of one of his father's drunken rages, when Suwelo was in college – and that to not attempt to share his life with them made him feel like a thief. (240)

From the first time we meet Suwelo, we know that there is a painful history related to his parents, but he has not yet been able to confront it completely. Importantly, Walker depicts Suwelo as experiencing a stronger bond with Lissie and Hal than he ever shared with his own parents, an intimacy that has been achieved through the amount and depth of the stories they have imparted about their own lives. Despite his conversations with Hal and Lissie about Fanny, Suwelo never explores the memory of his parents' deaths with Hal and Lissie; however, the incredibly perceptive Lissie leaves Suwelo a message, recorded at the end of her life and heard by Suwelo after her death, telling him that "part of [his] work with Fanny is the work [he] must do with [his] parents. They must be consciously called up, called *upon*, re-called. How they lived; but how and why they died, as well" (354). Like the Holocaust survivors described by Laub, Suwelo must return to the scene of this trauma; re-membering means he must completely recreate the experience of seeing his parents' bodies, even the small details.⁷¹

In addition to encouraging him to share this important history with Fanny, Lissie urges Suwelo to mend his relationship with Carlotta, a woman with whom he had a sexual affair and whom he abused because he did "behave as if a person whose body [he used] is a being without substance" (355). Walker indicates that the exchange of stories and of memories is what binds people, again privileging the testimonial scene as a site of healing and transformation. To engineer Suwelo's recovery of his traumatic memories, Walker has Suwelo pair off with Carlotta near the end of the novel, and the two work together to achieve Suwelo's transformation. Sharing his testimony with Carlotta will

⁷¹ Laub describes the testimony of a woman who survived Auschwitz: "a sudden intensity, passion and color were infused into the narrative. She was fully there" (59). Since the traumatic event could not be registered at the moment of its original occurrence, the survivor must return to the scene when narrating her memory. Laub is also careful to point out, though, that without a supportive listener, this trip into the past could result in retraumatization, in "a *re-experiencing of the event itself*" (67, Laub's emphasis).

allow him to create a bond with her and possibly repair their relationship. It is significant that Walker has Carlotta serve as Suwelo's ideal listener because through his testimony to Carlotta, Suwelo is able to move toward recovery in several areas of his life; he is not only able to finally begin to work through his parents' deaths, but he is also able to see Carlotta not as merely a sexual object, but as an equal who is crucial to his psychological healing. He must rely on her, and this requires him to let go of the previous position of power he saw himself as holding over her during their affair. Lissie advises him to "express to her something of your own trauma, which may have its origin in your mother's abandoned and suffering face, and the fear this caused you about knowing too much of women's pain, and tell her something of what you have learned" (355). Lissie's suggestion, then, allows Suwelo to repair his relationship with Carlotta by demonstrating to her his growing understanding of "women's pain," the kind of pain to which he once subjected Carlotta. The sharing of pain is described again as therapeutic, with the potential to heal lives and rebuild connections between people. Lissie's wisdom applies to all the characters in the novel, who all need to open the blockages in their hearts and minds that prevent them from knowing themselves and each other. In *Temple*, there is no hope of recovery if a survivor cannot reach out to another person, tell her story, and heal relationships with those who share her past and her present.

It is significant that, before Suwelo tells his story, Walker has him listen as Carlotta talks about her mother. At the mention of her mother, "his stomach tightens" because "his own mother, Marcia, flashes across his mind. It is as if she appears at a door in his memory" (398). The memory of his mother is surfacing, asking to be confronted and made a part of Suwelo's life story. Although he is not yet ready to confront her, "he

doesn't slam [the door shut]; that's what he's always done before. Now he peeks at her face from behind his hands and *gently* eases the door shut" (398).⁷² Suwelo still cannot face the painful memories of his mother's life and death, but the change in his demeanor here indicates that he is progressing toward that confrontation. Suwelo's gradual move toward testimony reaffirms the difficulty surrounding traumatic memory, the hesitancy with which survivors approach memories that are both painful and necessary to understand. Further, Walker suggests that Suwelo's ability to tell his story is borne from Carlotta's story: in *Temple*, stories beget more stories, and testimony occurs as a chain reaction, as each character supports another's confrontation with the past. For Suwelo, his role as listener has finally prepared him to tell his own story.

Therefore, hearing Carlotta's story gives Suwelo the courage to tell his own story. Immediately after Carlotta reveals that her mother is still alive, Suwelo says, "'My mother *is* dead'" and this statement "sounds as if he's finally admitting it to himself" (401). Suwelo's understanding of his mother's death has been obscured because the circumstances surrounding it (as he will soon tell Carlotta) were so traumatic that the memories of his parents and their deaths were buried along with their bodies. As he tells Carlotta of the sights that scarred the young Suwelo, he transforms the traumatic, unassimilated memories into narrative form, gaining a measure of control over them. As he begins to assemble the events of the night of his parents' deaths, "Marcia easily pushes her way in," and Suwelo finally invites his mother's memory into his life again. Although Suwelo explains that his parents' marriage was painful and abusive even before the car crash, it is the moment when Suwelo is alone, viewing his parents' bodies, that most scars

⁷² The figures of Marcia and Suwelo's father, Louis Sr., at the "door" serve as an example of personified memory, as the ghost of the baby does in Morrison's *Beloved*. As Suwelo tells his story to Carlotta, Walker repeatedly refers to the figures at the door, who gradually make their way in.

him. His father appears “peaceful,” but observing his mother’s body, Suwelo notices her face, “frozen in a kind of grimace, an exaggerated version of her usual look of desperation” (402). Even more disturbing were her hands, with all of the nails broken off, “her fingertips bloody” (402). It is at this moment that Suwelo realizes that his “mother was trying to get out of the car” (403). Suwelo’s complete breakdown following this admission also indicates that he is just now beginning to feel the loss and the pain that he has carried with him all of these years.

As Suwelo delves further into his emotional history, a more distant memory of a terrifying car ride in which Marcia begged Suwelo’s father to let her and the young Suwelo out of the car surfaces and allows Suwelo to understand the terror his mother endured during the last moments of her life. Finally facing the past in a more honest and complete way, Suwelo is astonished at how he could have “repressed so much terror” (403). Ultimately, facing his memories allows Suwelo to forgive his parents, even his father. Suwelo tries to imagine his father as a young man, before he was damaged, both physically and psychologically, by his military service. Walker emphasizes here that narrative can create empathy, even in the most impossibly difficult of situations. As the chapter closes, “Suwelo is suddenly too tired to keep watch over the door of his heart. It swings open on its own, and this father, whom Suwelo has never seen and whom he realizes he resembles very much, walks in” (404). Suwelo realizes that he must narrate his parents’ history and incorporate the memory of them into his life, no matter how traumatic it is, to fully understand his own history. As Suwelo relives his painful past, Carlotta listens supportively and comforts him affectionately; Walker suggests that Suwelo’s testimony could only occur in the company of this listener.

Perhaps one of the reasons Carlotta is able to serve as a supportive listener for Suwelo's story is because she herself has suffered as a result of the actions of family members. Walker describes Carlotta's life as defined by pain from an early age. As the only daughter of a single mother, Carlotta moves to San Francisco, disadvantaged due to her race, her initial inability to speak English, her gender, and her poverty. As a result, Carlotta "was a dark, serious child," spending her childhood "in a shabby, poorly lighted flat over a Thai grocery in an area of the city populated by the debris of society" with more responsibilities than many young girls are given (6). As the young girl begins to assimilate into American culture, she suffers further separation from her mother, who obviously feels out of place in their new surroundings. Zede is described as "stooped, a twitch of anxiety in her face at thirty-five" and as "a grim little woman, afraid of noise, other people, even of parades" (6). Carlotta thrives, then, when she finally is able to bond with another person -- Arveyda. Carlotta feels a connection to this man who "looked, she thought, something like her self" because of "his Indianness that she saw, not his blackness" (7). Carlotta finally senses a kinship with another person, and it is significant that this person is a man because Carlotta has never known her father (this story will be revealed by Zedé later in the novel).

Despite the strong bond Carlotta feels to Arveyda, resulting in their marriage and the birth of their children, Arveyda also connects deeply with her mother, Zedé. He recognizes "[in] both their faces ... the stress of oppression, dispossession, flight" (18). All three characters have suffered similar painful experiences, but Zedé feels a bond to Arveyda that Carlotta cannot yet share. Arveyda's resemblance to Carlotta's father recalls a particularly traumatic loss for Zedé, who reacts to meeting Arveyda with "a gesture of

pain Carlotta had never seen before” (19). Carlotta, of course, cannot sympathize with her mother’s pain when she discovers the relationship between Arveyda and Zedé because she suffers as a result of their affair. When it is revealed that Zedé and Arveyda have fallen in love, Carlotta feels “emptied ... of knowledge. Once again, as when she was a small child, she felt she knew nothing” (27). Carlotta truly knows nothing about her mother’s life and the pain Zedé has suffered, but the relationship between Arveyda and Zedé eventually allows Carlotta to overcome one of the tragedies of her life: her strained relationship with her mother and the lack of knowledge about her family history.

Ironically, Walker describes the relationship between Zedé and Arveyda as redemptive and therapeutic. Once Zedé bonds with Arveyda, she changes: “her face...had become younger since he’d known her. The birdlike eyes didn’t dart about so, the twitch was gone. Only the sadness of the dispossessed of love remained” (23). Having been unable to narrate her “too painful” memories, Zedé has never shared with anyone the loss of Carlotta’s father. Through telling her story to Arveyda, she remembers and confronts the past, which she must do in order to attempt to work through it.

Thus, early in the text, the transformative power of testimony is demonstrated through the relationship of Arveyda and Zedé. As they travel to Zedé’s (and Carlotta’s) homeland in South America, Zedé tells Arveyda about the tragedy that led to her move to California, Zedé is obviously a troubled soul, but there is hope that she will be able to heal: “Though her voice often cracked with the effort not to weep from the pain of relived experiences, she spoke with an eloquence that startled Arveyda, who held on to her as she talked, not as a lover, but as the ear that might at last reconnect her to her world” (45). It is this supportive “ear” that listens as Zedé relates her time as a slave in a nearby village

and her relationship with her lover, Jesús, a fellow slave. A slave's sexuality was the property of whatever soldier had chosen her as his "favorite slave 'wife'" (72), and of course, she was forced to mate with him on his orders. When Zedé falls in love with Jesús, they together defy their slave status by owning their sexuality. She proudly recounts, "During an hour they could not witness and will never own, I made love to him. He made love to me. We made love together," despite Jesús's physical bondage (73). The love affair is short-lived, however. The second time Zedé goes to meet Jesús in his hut (when she claims to have conceived Carlotta), they are discovered together. As a punishment, the soldiers first cut Jesús's hair while Zedé is forced to watch. She is taken away and brutally raped by one after another soldier while the others kill her lover. Finally, in a harrowing culmination, "...as [Zedé] lay bleeding, they brought his body and threw it in with me ...Jesús' throat had been cut. They had also removed his genitals. He had been violated in every conceivable way" (74). After being locked in a tiny hut, naked and dying, next to the mutilated body of her murdered lover, Zedé is rescued by Jesús's fellow tribesmen who "understood, as no one else ever would, the form of [her] brokenness" (74). Much later, Zedé is finally able to narrate this traumatic memory to Arveyda, which indicates that she feels he is an appropriate, supportive listener.

Arveyda does more than just listen to Zedé's stories compassionately, though. He also tries to use his knowledge of the stories to close the gap between Zedé and Carlotta. Realizing he has permanently damaged his marriage, Arveyda tells Carlotta, "I want to give you the gift of knowing your mother – which I don't think you would have without me, because she couldn't tell you herself" (121). His first attempts to communicate with Carlotta about her mother fail, though, because "[s]he could not make sense of what he

said” (122). Although in Zedé’s case, storytelling allows her to confront traumatic memory, Carlotta does not begin to hear the story until it Arveyda translates it into music; Carlotta’s careful listening allows her to finally understand the pain of her mother’s past:

[Arveyda] sang of the confusion and the terror of the mother: the scars she could never reveal to the daughter because they still hurt her so. The love for the child’s wild father, a bitter truncheon stuck in her throat ... He sang until Zedé, small and tentative, was visible, a wisp, before her daughter. (124)

The song makes Zedé’s pain real to Carlotta, and although she suffers herself as a result of the brutal murder of her father and her mother’s subsequent trauma, Carlotta also learns that, somehow, “breaking the heart opens it” (124). Through the musical narration of Zedé’s trauma, the stage has been set for Carlotta’s reconnection with her mother. She later tells Suwelo that she asked Arveyda to relate her mother’s stories again and again and that she “began to see Zedé as a woman, a person, a being. Sacred. And to love her more than ever” (399). After being reunited with her own mother, Zedé the Elder, Zedé is living in Mexico as the novel closes, and the relationship between Carlotta and Zedé has healed and even progressed. Having learned the importance of sharing their stories, the two Zedés and Carlotta are described as “always talking and listening to each other intensely, as if whole worlds hang on their words” (406).⁷³ As a result of this testimonial scene, Walker neatly ties up Carlotta’s relationships with Zedé and with Arveyda, although the two are no longer married. When Carlotta gives her own testimony, however, it is narrated to Suwelo rather than to a member of her immediate family;

⁷³ It is important to note here that Carlotta’s reception of Zedé’s testimony via Arveyda does provide an example of the listener’s intimate, familial connection to the testimony that is being imparted to her. Like the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, Carlotta is able to discover the painful truths of the past and is able to use her new knowledge to forge a stronger relationship with her mother, one that begins to heal because Carlotta now understands and sympathizes with Zedé’s struggles.

Walker more often depicts her characters as seeking out listeners who have no direct involvement in the testimony that is being given; the listener's role is simply to listen.

Temple implies that Carlotta is able to gain a better understanding of herself after hearing the crucial story of her parents' relationship and her father's death. She is able to critically evaluate her earlier actions, particularly those related to her affair with Suwelo. She tells Fanny, "I was really going through a period of such trauma as a woman that the only way I could deal with it was to become someone other than myself. I became a female impersonator" (383). Carlotta is able to understand that her reaction to Arveyda's infidelity was to market herself as a sexual object, a role that she later realizes is inauthentic. Her newly discovered sense of identity also manifests itself through Carlotta's interest in art. As the daughter of at least two generations of skilled seamstresses (Zedé the Elder and Carlotta's mother Zedé) and the wife of a shamanistic musician (Arveyda), Carlotta had always been surrounded by art but was rarely seen participating. After hearing the story of her mother and father, Carlotta paints, and, at the end of the novel, when the four main characters are reunited, Carlotta has become a bell chimist. She recognizes that her happiness no longer depends on male attention, but is organic and comes from her self and from her art: "I do not stop smiling or being happy just because he's noticed it. I run through some more chimes with another little stick I have, and the sound makes me happier still. *Oh, I think to myself, when he leaves!*" (377). Carlotta's life has been transformed, and it is no coincidence that this can occur only after she hears Zedé's story and becomes an artist herself, since art is identified as therapeutic throughout Walker's novel.

Carlotta's transformation is marked not only by a stronger relationship with her mother, but also healthier connections with Arveyda, Suwelo, and even Fanny. Her relationship with Fanny is interesting because, during her time as "a female impersonator," Carlotta valued attention from men and neglected relationships with other women. Significantly, it is Fanny who most deeply understands Carlotta's pain. It even seems that when she discovers that Suwelo is having an affair with Carlotta, most of Fanny's anger is directed at the fact that Suwelo is not able to sense the depth of Carlotta's trauma. Fanny explains, "I knew the body of the woman you said had no substance. Carlotta's very substance was pain. And that you did not know this, or, if you knew it, did not care, that is what made me despise you" (320). Even though Fanny knew none of the particulars of what had caused Carlotta's pain, she felt, "... the pain of a body recently and repeatedly struck. A body cringing" (320-321). Carlotta's emotional and psychological pain has manifested in her physical body, and Fanny's ability to read people through their bodies, allows her to understand Carlotta as a scarred, traumatized woman. Fanny's empathy here sets the stage for the later conversations between Fanny and Carlotta that also serve as sites for therapeutic sharing between women.

Despite Fanny's deep sensitivity to the pain of others, early in the novel and during her marriage to Suwelo Fanny struggles with her intense anger toward white people. Fanny even sees a therapist because she wants to avoid hurting white people the way she believes white people have hurt others. She remembers having one white friend as a child – Tanya – but cannot yet remember how or why their relationship ended. Now an adult, though, Fanny obviously still struggles as a result of racism. At the same time, Fanny understands that racism is what needs to be erased, rather than white people.

Despite her logical comprehension of this, Fanny continuously fights her impulses to kill white people, at one point even living in seclusion (303). Fanny's visits to her therapist, Robin, to address the legacy of racism, provide the first of Fanny's testimonial scenes.

Through the testimony given in one of her therapy sessions, Fanny is able to come to terms with the roots of her anger by recovering a submerged traumatic memory. Through conversations with her childhood friend Tanya, Fanny realizes that her hatred of white people is a defense mechanism against the physical and emotional pain inflicted upon her by a white hand. When trying to reconstruct their shared childhood, Fanny and Tanya discover that Fanny appears to have no memory of the incident that estranged the two young girls. Tanya reveals that her grandmother did not approve of her friendship with a black girl. The therapist tells Fanny that she cannot remember what happened because the trauma caused Fanny to "become alienated from [her] own body, [her] own self" (329). As she feels herself "falling deep inside [herself], Fanny is told by Tanya that Tanya's grandmother slapped Fanny for kissing Tanya. The grandmother "slapped [Fanny] so hard she knocked [her] down," and told Fanny, "If I ever catch you putting your black mouth on Tanya again, I'll knock your little black head off" (330). After reliving this painful memory, or rather, living it for the first time in earnest, Fanny replies, "I still don't feel it," but she soon senses "the tears of horror on her face" (331). Walker depicts Fanny as just beginning to feel the pain of this traumatic memory. Once Fanny recovers this memory, the novel moves into its final part, the section of the novel in which the characters truly begin to heal. The quotation that begins Part 6, "Remembrance is the key to redemption"⁷⁴ indicates that, after returning to the event that

⁷⁴ Walker takes this quote from a World War II memorial in San Francisco, a monument which commemorates concentration camp victims.

most deeply scarred her, Fanny will now be able to move toward healing. Her healing reaches a climax once she connects with Arveyda in the final chapters of the novel.

Fanny's mastery of massage is another way in which she is able to heal herself even while ostensibly in the business of healing others. In a position to strongly perceive the deep pains of her customers, Fanny turns her job as a masseuse into an art form. She is able to learn through her practice that all people suffer from private pains. Her healing power seems to reach its height when she massages Arveyda at the end of the novel.

Although the focus is on Arveyda's healing, through telling Fanny about his mother, their connection is therapeutic for Fanny, as well. Just as both Arveyda and Fanny use their perceptive and creative talents to heal others, both also need healing, and they find this in each other. When they pair off, we learn that "Fanny finds talking to Arveyda very easy" (389). The joining of Arveyda and Fanny is described as one of true connection with therapeutic potential for both characters.

Arveyda is seen for most of the text as a healer whose music is therapeutic for his fans, but we later also realize that he suffers, too, and needs a listener to receive his own tragic stories. Arveyda is a popular, influential musician, a superstar even, whose "music [was] medicine, and, seeing or hearing him, people knew it. They flocked to see him as once they might have to priests" (24). Described specifically as a healer, and proven as such, specifically in the case of the song he writes for Carlotta and his ability to listen to Zedé's incredible story, what is often hidden from the people whom Arveyda heals is the private pain that drives much of his art. The power of his music is drawn from his experiences because "[h]e played for his dead mother and for the father he'd hardly known; the longing for both came out of the guitar as wails and sobs" (24). Arveyda's

music is so packed with emotion and pain that “he often wept while he played” (25). His sensitivity, in turn, allows him to understand pain in others. When he looks at Zedé, “He knew” that she needed him because “longing was like a note of music to him, easily read” (22). Although he has told Carlotta “odd bits and pieces of his life,” Arveyda seems to not know much about his mother. Katherine Degos founded the Church of Perpetual Involvement and, ironically, although she is “intrusive” and always involved in the affairs of others, her son seems to have little idea about her life. Disillusioned by the lack of appreciation for her acts, Katherine became increasingly detached from the world around her and exhibited little to no interest in Arveyda’s life. Understanding Katherine is crucial to Arveyda’s own history, just as knowing Zedé’s story is key to Carlotta’s identity.

Walker’s emphasis on the connection between family history and self-knowledge is reinforced when Arveyda remarks that “ignorance [about his mother] caused him to stumble blindly in the world” (390). Even though “there is residual pain around the old wound caused by her indifference to him as a child,” now, “he is healing” (390). Arveyda finally decides to return to his hometown of Terre Haute to investigate his roots and ironically, becomes closer to her mother through his aunt’s harsh words of hatred against Katherine. The always sympathetic Arveyda thinks, “It gave me chills to think of my mother growing up the object of such contempt” (392). Proving once again that relationships and community are essential in order for healing to become possible, Arveyda recognizes that “[t]he trip back to Terre Haute had been possible for me, largely because of Carlotta’s support ... I was glad she was there to prop me up” (392). Just as Arveyda supported Carlotta through her understanding of Zedé’s painful history, Carlotta returns the favor by encouraging and accompanying Arveyda on his quest to know

Katherine. Arveyda also relates the story he was recently told of the death of his father who was apparently killed when he fell off a bridge during a construction job, leaving “no body, nothing” (393). Although Arveyda knows his father is dead, the details of both his life and death remain obscured.

As witness to the remembrance of this tragic mystery, it is Fanny’s turn to show her support for Arveyda, which she does affectionately when she “leans over, there in the open, on the trail ... and kisses him. To her, it offers the comforting, automatic reassurance of a hug ... Her soul flies right out of her mouth, and into Arveyda’s own” (393). This moment, characterized by the sharing of tragic personal experiences, is also described as one of deep connection between two people. As they contemplate the lives of Arveyda’s parents, “They do not touch, except in spirit” (394). This is the beginning of a strong relationship, one that allows each of the participants to freely tell painful stories in a supportive, safe environment. Fanny continues to help Arveyda heal as she practices her masterful massage techniques on him. As with Carlotta, “All the pain in [Arveyda’s] body seems to be eager to show itself to Fanny, who presses points here and there that make him cry out from the pain ... then, after she releases the pressure ... he feels the energy once again flowing freely in his body” (405-406). Vulnerable and open, Arveyda “has given himself over to Fanny, as if all of himself is resting in her arms. He feels there is something about her, something in her essence, that automatically heals and reconnects him with himself” (407). As they make love, he realizes “if he were to join himself with her ... he would feel literally re-membered” (407). The connection Arveyda feels to Fanny offers the potential for healing and the understanding of his true self that he sought, though unsuccessfully, as he investigated the lives of his parents. Reconnected to

his history, “Arveyda feels as if he has rushed to meet all the ancestors and they have welcomed him with joy” (408). As they “lie cuddled together in sheer astonishment,” Fanny and Arveyda experience a sense of unity for which each has longed all their lives: “‘My ... *spirit*,’” says Fanny, at last, her face against his chest. ‘My ... *flesh*,’ says Arveyda, his lips against her hair” (409). Walker describes finding the proper listener as, quite literally, transformative.

Temple progresses as a chain reaction of creation, sharing, and healing. Through their experiences of testimony and listening, characters constantly learn to support each other and come to understand the importance of community. As Suwelo, Fanny, Arveyda, and Carlotta congregate at the end of the novel, “they all vaguely realize they have a purpose in each other’s lives. They are a collective means by which each of them will grow” (395). Walker stresses her characters’ discovery of the importance of both narrating and listening, as well as the artistic nature of those acts. In relation to Arveyda and the healing power of his music, Walker writes,

Artists, he now understood, were simply messengers. On them fell the responsibility for uniting the world. An awesome task, but he felt up to it, in his own life. His faith must be that the pain he brought to others and to himself – so poorly concealed in the information delivered – would lead not to destruction, but to transformation. (123)

Walker specifically aligns healing with community and with art; artistic engagement and storytelling are almost universally therapeutic in *Temple*.

When reading Walker’s novel in conjunction with Laub’s description of testimony, the similarity between the two is striking. Early in my discussion of *Temple*, I indicated that the text has been panned by many critics; one complaint is that Walker’s message is overly didactic and idealistic. Indeed, *Temple* ends with what Roland Walter

calls an “utopian solution” to the difficult issues introduced by Walker’s novel (57). Others have criticized Walker’s novel for being too political,⁷⁵ as when Carol Ianonne identifies Walker as one of a group of artists who see their work as “often a chance to accomplish in their art what their favorite political movements have failed thus far to achieve in life” (57). Indeed, the conclusion of *Temple* does suggest that finding a supportive listener can be relatively easy, and Walker’s ideal pairings of characters at the end of the novel allows them to achieve what we might call a “successful” testimony; in reality, however, a descriptor such as “successful” does not carry much weight when we consider the extremely complex process of giving testimony. Even if a survivor is able to narrate her story to a listener, this does not mean that the survivor is “healed” or that the tragedies that necessitated her testimony have been “resolved.” Walker’s optimism is, on the one hand, admirable; on the other hand, does she dangerously oversimplify the nearly impossible challenge presented by trauma? Morrison’s *Sula* does not appear to share this optimism, and thus complicates Walker’s “utopian solution.”

“The distance between them increased”: Absence of Testimony in *Sula*

If the portrayal of testimony and its therapeutic power can be described as idealized and overly didactic in *Temple*, Morrison’s depiction of testimonial scenes might comparatively be described as subtle. In fact, Morrison does not have her characters testify to each other at all; *Sula* instead meditates on the tragedy of what is left unspoken,

⁷⁵Indeed, Walker has received this critique in relation to several of her novels, having repeatedly been accused of being too extreme in her indictments of racism and sexism. For example, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a highly politicized examination of the practice of female circumcision in Africa. Also, many critics chide Walker for her negative portrayals of black men in favor of black heroines and stressing the importance of female community over heterosexual relationships. In other words, within the black community, Walker has been criticized for seeming to focus on the problems of black women rather than on black people, or, prioritizing gender oppression over racism.

and thus unknown, and the impact of the unspoken on her characters' lives. *Sula*, therefore, complicates *Temple*'s perfect testimonial scenes by emphasizing the difficulties that stand in the way of testimony. To a large extent, testimony is foreclosed in Morrison's novel by the state of the community, which itself exists as a traumatized entity. Unlike Julia Alvarez's novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, which I will discuss in the next chapter, *Sula* establishes the traumatized community as one that prevents, sometimes actively, testimony and thus, potential recovery.

One of the crucial points of comparison between Walker's and Morrison's novels is the presence of a supportive community in *Temple* and the absence of that community in *Sula*. Ironically, although *Sula* concentrates on an idiosyncratic community where everyone knows each other, it is *Temple*, with its enormous scope and cast of characters that exemplifies the therapeutic possibility of community. While both novels feature characters, communities, and landscapes that might be described as traumatized, the Bottom and its inhabitants are portrayed as scarred to the point that they cannot help each other heal from their (often shared) wounds.

Criticism on *Sula*, a novel that has received copious attention from scholars, widely recognizes the text's portrayal of pain and tragedy, and many observe the widespread impact of trauma on the community.⁷⁶ Notably, Jill Matus recognizes that "the preface and first chapter introduce a novel that will continue to explore a wide spectrum of trauma and loss, for *Sula* is undeniably a novel filled with traumatic events" (60). Further, J. Brooks Bouson argues that *Sula*, "with its repeated scenes of violence, replicates the disrupted, fragmented trauma narrative" (49). Most often, critics, even

⁷⁶ Several scholars have compared *Beloved* to *Temple*, including Bochman, Jablon, and Gina Wisker, while Walter reads *Temple* alongside Morrison's *Jazz*. However, critics have yet to consider *Sula* together with *Temple*.

those not explicitly addressing issues of trauma in the text, identify Shadrack as “the utterly traumatized individual” (Bouson 52) as a result of his identity as a combat veteran psychologically scarred by his experience in World War I.⁷⁷ Readings of Shadrack often recognize his insistence on order, both through his establishment of the ritualistic National Suicide Day and through his “obsessively well-ordered cabin” (Page 192), and repeatedly identify Shadrack’s actions as attempts to cope with trauma.⁷⁸

In a sense, it is not surprising that Sula would distance herself from such a damaged community and strive to live outside of its conventions. Several critics explore the ways in which Sula defines herself against the residents of the Bottom and the ways in which the community also feeds on Sula as a means of defining themselves. Others, like Bouson, read Sula’s status as outsider as a product of Sula’s “emotional disconnection from the suffering of others” and cite her flawed interaction with others and seeming devotion to the development of only herself as the sources of her ultimate downfall (65). Morrison’s portrayal of Sula’s “process of inner disengagement” (Guth 316) and simultaneous failure as an artist establish *Sula* as a critique of the solitary artist figure who must exist apart from the community in order to achieve aesthetic clarity and power. Reading *Sula* as a novel of trauma, however, indicates that Sula is not simply selfish, but traumatized, and struggling to work through her painful experiences with

⁷⁷ For example, Barbara Christian comments, “Death is the haunt, personified by Shadrack, that moves the story” (27). Trudier Harris compares Shadrack to an artist figure: “Shadrack is comparable to an overly sensitive poet/philosopher who has seen so much of the horror of life that he has been blasted beyond the reaches of mundane influences” (113). Due to his war experience, primarily the experience of witnessing the violent death of a fellow soldier whose head is blown off but whose body continues to run, Philip Page argues that “Shadrack loses confidence in the stability of the other and in the order and permanence of the material world” (195). Lisa Williams describes Shadrack as existing “in a mad and fragmented state” (112).

⁷⁸ Page reads National Suicide day and Shadrack’s cabin as “measures that parallel the Bottom’s collective ability to control its traumas by incorporating whatever evils confront it” (192). Matus argues, “The war experiences of Shadrack introduce the notion of trauma and the madness of trying to keep order in a world of incalculable loss and death” (56).

neither a creative outlet through which to tell her story nor a supportive community of listeners. Unlike Walker's characters, Sula never connects with an ideal listener. As Philip Page observes, "In a fictional world that emphasizes paired characters, Sula cannot survive because she finds no enduring relationship with any other character" (200). Sula perishes because she not only has no artistic outlet, but also because her extreme attempts to connect with others fail.⁷⁹

While most of the scholarship on *Sula* does not emphasize the relationship between art and community – the two key elements of my own reading – Barbara Johnson's brief 1992 article, "'Aesthetic and Rapport' in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" presents an important exception. Johnson's argument centers on Nel's description of her discovery of Sula and Jude's affair, when Nel reveals that she waited for "some explanation, something important that I did not know about that would have made it all right," expecting "Sula to look up at me any minute and say one of those lovely college words like *aesthetic* or *rapport*..." (105). According to Johnson, the seemingly random pairing of two "lovely college words" actually holds a key to interpreting the concerns of Morrison's novel.⁸⁰ Extending Johnson's argument on the connection between the "aesthetic" (which in *Sula* is represented as a struggle to find creative outlets), and "rapport" (which signifies relationships between people) in the specific context of Laub's definition of testimony, I argue that Morrison's novel is able to stress the necessity of

⁷⁹ These attempts include Sula's emotional detachment/rebellion in her relationships with Eva Peace and the Bottom in general, and her experiment to unite completely with another in her misguided attempt at connection with Nel through her affair with Jude. Maureen T. Reddy argues, "The wish to be Nel is what drives Sula into her sexual experimentation with Jude" (9).

⁸⁰ Johnson claims that "in many ways the novel is precisely about the relations between aesthetic and rapport. If aesthetics is taken as the contemplation of forms, imaginary detachment and distance, and rapport is taken as the dynamics of connectedness, the two words name an opposition, or at least a set of issues, that are central in *Sula*" (9).

both a creative outlet and a supportive listener or community of listeners as crucial to a survivor's recovery precisely by depicting the absence of both of these key components.

Characters in *Sula* need to testify because they occupy a world that is marked by pain, as the reader immediately learns in the preface to the novel. As Matus observes, "The novel's concern with loss and pain are written into its first paragraphs" (59-60). Indeed, *Sula* begins by stating that in the place where the Bottom used to be, "there was once a neighborhood" (3). The narrative foregrounds the disappearance and loss of the community in which the action of the novel once took place; for the reader, the Bottom can be little more than a memory. In beginning the novel by gesturing toward the loss of the Bottom, Morrison establishes this larger communal tragedy as the background against which all of the characters' individual struggles take place, in much the same way as Walker uses Lissie's stories in *Temple*. The narrative retrospectively reconstructs the past through memory, assembling, with difficulty, a structure to support the events of the former world of the Bottom. The fragmented narrative, with gaps and repetitions, will itself reflect the psychological scarring of the characters who live in its pages.

Before elaborating on the form the narrative takes and the ways in which trauma narrative is shown to resist structure and order in *Sula*, it is important to note how the preface to the novel also introduces the crucial themes of the forthcoming story. The loss of the community – the erasure of the neighborhood and the culture that once existed there – is set up as the first trauma under which all the others will fall. Once the reader knows that "there will be nothing left of the Bottom" (4) by the time she reads the novel, the narrative launches into an important anecdote, which tells of a white "valley man [who] happened to have business up in those hills" witnessing a scene of local culture: "a

woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk ... to the lively notes of a mouth organ” accompanied by the laughter of the “black people” who are her onlookers, followed by soulful gospel singing at a local church (4). What the valley man cannot understand, asserts our narrator, is “the adult pain,” despite the laughter he witnesses, because “the pain would escape him even though the laughter was part of the pain” (4). Here, Morrison sets up the conflict between the valley and the Bottom, or the middle-class white community and the lower-class black community who reside in those respective locales. Although the white community is merely a marginal presence in Morrison’s novel, the preface establishes the contrast between the two races and classes and, more significantly, establishes the black community as one characterized by pain and loss. Trauma caused by racism and oppression becomes the context within which the residents of the Bottom experience their own personal traumas, which are necessarily informed by that context. Further, we know from the beginning of the text that, in the Bottom, art (dance, song, music) is inextricably linked both to pain and to community. The participants and observers of the aesthetic scene (with the exception of the white businessman) are all characterized by pain, and this aesthetic scene also takes place in the presence of a community of onlookers and listeners.

As soon as we are presented with the depiction of this community as traumatized, as characterized by “the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids, somewhere under their head rags and soft felt hats” (4), we are immediately introduced, in “1919,” to “National Suicide Day,” the symbol for order amidst the chaos, fear, and death that plague human life. National Suicide Day, a one-man parade celebrated by the “crazy” Shadrack is instituted on January 3, 1920; the ritual represents Shadrack’s “struggle to

order and focus experience,” his way of “making a place for fear as a way of controlling it” (14). Just as the prefatory chapter establishes the connections between trauma, art, and community, so too does the first narrative chapter establish *Sula* as not merely a novel that will tell of tragedy and pain, but also as an examination of the struggles survivors undertake to work through, or live with, trauma.

The combination of these thematic concerns with the carefully crafted form of the novel contributes to *Sula*'s identity as a trauma narrative. The structure that follows the opening chapters consists of two roughly equal halves, each composed of a series of chapters titled by years related to the narrative action. In addition to the preface, Part I contains a chapter for each year from 1919-1923, then notably jumps to 1927 before the close of Part I. Part II begins in 1937, ten years after the 1927 chapter in which Nel marries Jude and Sula leaves the Bottom. Part II marks her return and consists of a chapter for each year from 1939-1941, before making a substantial jump to 1965, where the novel finally ends. Morrison's narrative seems to be systematically organized, but the precise chronological arrangement of the chapter titles belies the disorder found within each chapter. Reflecting the complex workings of memory, *Sula*'s narrator tells of events in the present of the narrative (for example, what is happening in 1919 in that particular chapter) but also relives the past through related flashbacks and also makes mention of the future, because the story is being told in retrospect with knowledge of the entire narrative as well as what has followed it, as indicated by the preface. In the “1919” chapter, for example, we are told of events of the past throughout the chapter when the story of Shadrack's service in World War I is recounted (Shadrack was “blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917” [7]); reference is also made to his time in

a Veteran's hospital, and we learn that 1919 is apparently the year Shadrack comes to the Bottom and begins living in his cabin on the outskirts of the community. References to the gradual acceptance and integration of Shadrack's "madness" and his National Suicide Day celebration (which, again, begins in 1920, not 1919) litter the chapter, moving the narrative from the present moment to the already-known future.

The narrator's ability to move fluidly between past, present, and future in each chapter, despite the linear structure established by the chronological order of the chapters, characterizes the entire novel. Likewise, the sometimes significant jumps between years signified by chapter titles, as well as the gaps in the narrative itself, defy the narrative's ostensible ability to order experience.⁸¹ We learn few details of the occurrences between, for instance, 1927 when Sula leaves the Bottom and 1937 when she returns; however, the ten years between those events exist as a sort of gaping hole in the narrative that we cannot piece together. Although we know Sula has attended college and has apparently lived in a variety of cities, and that Nel has married Jude and has had children, the details of both women's lives during their estrangement remain shadowy.

The other significant gap in the narrative occurs between 1941 and 1965, a fourteen-year fissure this time that follows Sula's death in 1940 and the tragic deaths of several of the Bottom's residents as part of National Suicide Day.⁸² In 1965, when "things were so much better" (163), Nel is one of the few remnants of the Bottom

⁸¹ Deborah E. McDowell mentions the "fragmentary, elliptical quality" of the novel, as well, but McDowell connects the "gaps in the text" to an attempt "to thwart textual unity, to prevent a totalized interpretation," and to "allow for the reader's participation in the creation of meaning" (87).

⁸² The townspeople had never participated in National Suicide Day until 1941. That year, many joined in because they were frustrated with not being allowed to work on the tunnel project, as they had been repeatedly promised. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos explains the relation of this scene to Sula: "it is not just her personal problem when a culture keeps a women from growing into all she could be" (87). The occurrence of this tragedy so soon after Sula's own death creates a relationship between the two events; Demetrakopoulos reads the fatal 1941 National Suicide Day march as a sign that the community must be made responsible for the ways in which it contributed to Sula's stunted ambition and eventual death.

existing in the text because the community has since “collapsed” (165). Nel’s visit to Eva Peace’s nursing home lends a circularity to the narrative, returning us to a character who figured prominently early in the novel but was pushed out of her home, and out of the narrative, when Sula commits her to a nursing home in 1937. The final image of the novel further underlines the circularity of the text, as Nel’s cry “had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174). Nel’s grief cannot be contained, just as her story and that of her community cannot be contained within the schematic organization of the text. This final image denotes the repetition of Nel’s pain: the pain of the loss of her friendship with Sula, and the betrayals of her best friend and her husband, which she has tried to stifle for years, but finally must begin to genuinely feel.

Sula’s neat, linear chapter divisions attempt to order and make sense of these traumatic memories that exist within and beyond its parameters; in other words, the narrative form attempts to contain and control the tragedies that it reveals. As Laub explains, “The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after” (69). Further, the memory of trauma “finds its way into their [survivors’] lives, unwittingly, through an uncanny repetition of events that duplicate – in structure and in impact – the traumatic past” (Laub 65). The “uncanny repetition” described by Laub characterizes the storylines of *Sula*. For example, Eva’s decision to burn Plum recurs later when Hannah burns to death, with the significant difference that Eva cannot stop Hannah’s tragic fate, and the image of the burning Hannah returns when Sula explains her reaction to Nel, as well as in Sula’s nightmares. The mention of Chicken Little’s death repeats throughout the text, most notably when Eva, in the final chapter, forces Nel to reconsider her own role in the incident which has always been

blamed on Sula.⁸³ Images recur and re-emerge as survivors struggle to come to terms with the horrific events of the past.

As a result of a series of narrative gaps, *Sula* is a concise novel that gives us the “highlights” of its characters’ lives. Notably, almost all of the incidents we are told of in the characters’ lives are painful, but these are also the most crucial moments of character formation and development. For example, we know little else of Shadrack’s life apart from his war experience.⁸⁴ After leaving the hospital, “he didn’t even know who or what he was ... with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock ... and nothing, nothing to do” (12). The traumatic experience of participating in and witnessing war, expressed in the vivid imagery of the decapitated soldier whose body “ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back” (8), has left Shadrack without any of the components of an ordered existence. Dismemberment, beginning with this image of the decapitated soldier, continues with Eva Peace’s missing leg and the mystery surrounding its disappearance, and is recalled in images related to Sula and Nel, which I will discuss later, making dismemberment a sort of trope for traumatization. Although he is only a witness to the physical dismemberment of the soldier, it is Shadrack who feels psychologically alienated from himself, from his history, from any sense of community, and from “ordinary” human life with its combs, pencils, and clocks. All we know of Shadrack, and all we seem to need to know of him, is that he has seen great violence and pain, that he

⁸³ The ritual of National Suicide Day repeats every year, although in this case, repetition is purposely employed as a mechanism of control.

⁸⁴ The presentation of Shadrack’s character is more detailed, though, than that of Eva’s son Plum, who also went to war and arrived home in 1917 “with just the shadow of his old dip-down walk” (45). His depression and drug use eventually lead Eva to burn him alive in his bed, sensing that he wants to “git back in,” into her womb to escape the harsh realities of adult life (71).

has been scarred by what he has seen, and that he spends the rest of his life to trying to deal with those events. Shadrack's defining moments are his traumatic experience – his time in war – and his attempts to recover from that experience – the establishment of his famous National Suicide Day.

It is reasonable enough that a marginal character like Shadrack could serve as a symbol for traumatic memory and the struggle to recover from trauma, and thus what we learn of him is almost always directly related to those limited characteristics. Of course, part of the point is that traumatic experiences are overwhelming and have a way of taking control over the survivor's life. However, Shadrack is not the only character whose life seems dominated by trauma. Most of what we learn about Sula and Nel, Morrison's two protagonists, evokes their experiences of pain and loss. For Sula, whose life was already characterized by the disorder and instability of her home, two major incidents in the text permanently scar her. First, Sula overhears her mother tell friends that, although she loves Sula, she "just don't like her," lamenting that children are "different people" from their parents (57). Sula experiences this moment as rejection and subsequently learns to distrust the dependability of human relationships. The next significant traumatic event in Sula's young life occurs only slightly later on the same day when, while playing, she accidentally throws Chicken Little, a neighborhood child, into the river, where he drowns. The shock of the boy's disappearance is registered in the reaction of Nel and Sula: "The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the water" (61). The girls react with disbelief, and although the event

seems to have impacted the sensitive Sula more than Nel,⁸⁵ Nel represses this trauma and returns to it over forty years later in the final chapter of the novel, when Eva forces her to consider her role, asking “You was there. You watched, didn’t you?” (168). Nel’s buried guilt about her reaction to Chicken Little’s death also connects her to Sula, who reacts with similar distance when observing her own mother, Hannah’s, death.

In the year following the death of Chicken Little, Sula witnesses a scene in which Hannah burns to death while Eva tries to save her life. Eva recalls seeing “that Sula watched Hannah burn, not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (78), a sentiment later supported by Sula’s own confession that she “was thrilled” and “wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (147). In the text, though, we do not get Sula’s perspective until seventeen years later. And immediately after Hannah’s death and Eva’s disturbing insight into Sula’s reaction, the narrative moves four years forward to the year in which Nel marries Jude and Sula leaves the Bottom. Sula’s response to the burning death of her mother is left unspoken,⁸⁶ and the very absence of information about what happens to Sula following her mother’s death symbolically indicates that this event has deeply traumatized the young girl.

The second half of the novel portrays Sula more often as a character bringing pain to others than a character who experiences pain herself. Notably, her decision to have sex with Nel’s husband Jude is the betrayal that provides the central conflict of the narrative.

⁸⁵ It is Sula who panics and wonders “Had [Shadrack] seen?” while “Terror widened her nostrils” (61). It is Sula who “simply cries” throughout the entire funeral” (65). Nel’s behavior is comparatively calm.

⁸⁶ Further, in “1927,” we learn that the community does not argue with Sula’s insistence on being in charge of Nel’s wedding-planning because “most people were anxious to please her since she had lost her mamma only a few years back and they still remembered the agony in Hannah’s face and the blood on Eva’s” (84). It is significant that the community is said to still remember the incident, but there is no mention of what Sula remembers or how it affected her. Presumably more deeply traumatized by the death of her mother than other onlookers would have been, Sula cannot as readily remember and incorporate this traumatic memory.

However, Sula suffers just as Nel does, and Sula continues to suffer due to her lack of a creative outlet, which I will discuss later. Additionally, once Sula decides to try to have a relationship with Ajax and allows herself to become vulnerable, Ajax abandons her; this event clearly has a critical impact on Sula. Her psychological pain physically manifests itself in a mysterious illness that leads to Sula's early death. Further, she compares the pain she experiences as a result of Ajax's desertion with decapitation, an image reminiscent of the paper dolls of her youth:

When I was a little girl the heads of my paper dolls would come off, and it was a long time before I discovered that my own head would not fall off if I bent my neck ... I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him and so I lost it just like the dolls. (136)

Significantly, this image of decapitation recalls the war scene witnessed by Shadrack (8).

In *Sula*, then, characters are joined by their experience of trauma, but they are never joined as a means of testifying or working through trauma, as characters are in *Temple*.

Through these related images, Morrison suggests that there is potential for a relationship between Shadrack and Sula, based on their shared experience of trauma. Significantly, it is Shadrack who gives Sula some measure of comfort immediately after the drowning of Chicken Little. When she runs to Shadrack's nearby cabin in an attempt to discover whether he witnessed Sula's "crime," she seems somewhat calmed by the "restfulness" and "order" of the town madman's home. Later in the novel, Shadrack "tips his hat" to Sula even though "Shadrack ain't civil to nobody!" (116). Even though the two characters only exchange one word during their acquaintance (the elusive "Always" uttered by Shadrack after the drowning of Chicken Little, 63), they clearly have an understanding and, although their shattered, traumatized subjectivities may not allow them to communicate in traditional ways, Morrison implies a connection between the two

characters. Their connection, however, never allows either to testify; they do not narrate their memories, nor do they receive one another's stories.

However, according to theorists like Laub, because Sula has witnessed and suffered a number of events that she has experienced as traumatic, she needs to testify to a listener. Although Sula is described as endowed with great creative energy, unlike Walker's characters in *Temple*, Sula is able to find neither a means through which to tell her story nor a listener to receive that story. The impossibility of creative expression thus inhibits her from coping with trauma and even causes further pain for herself and for others. The noteworthy passage in the novel reads,

In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (121)

Clearly, Morrison's narrator diagnoses Sula's problem as a lack of resources, an unfortunate and tragic set of conditions working against her potential, as Trudier Harris's interpretation of the aforementioned passage articulately states:

In careful, exquisite terms, Sula has been endowed with dimensions of other possibility ... Indeed, the possibility of art, of intellectual vocation for a black female character, has been offered as a style of defense against the naked brutality of conditions ... (53-54).

The lack of paints, clay, dance, or strings is not merely tragic; the impossibility of aesthetic fulfillment also has devastating effects not only for the artist manqué but also for those around her when she becomes "destructive."

Even before the passage occurs, the novel presents Sula as a character with potential to easily blur the line between creation and destruction. This is most obvious in

Sula's delayed description of her mother's death: "I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing" (147). Sula experiences an aesthetic reaction to this gruesome image of death and destruction, with "[Hannah's] face a mask of agony" and "the familiar odor of cooked flesh" marking the scene (76-77). Sula's inability, even refusal, to distinguish creation from destruction then causes her to destroy her bonds with others. While Walker's novel depicts the chain of testimony that occurs when one character receives the story of another, Morrison portrays Sula's inability to tell her story as contributing to the subsequent destruction of the bonds she has with her two closest friends and potential listeners: Nel and Ajax.

Sula destroys her relationships because her failure to express herself inspires her to misdirect her creative potential onto herself and onto other people. She tells Eva that she doesn't want to follow the social norms and have children, retorting, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). While her creative impulse is the quality that has the potential to heal the traumas of her childhood, Sula reacts to those experiences by alienating herself from others rather than connecting with them: "The first experience [Hannah's statement that she doesn't like Sula] taught her that there was no other that you could count on; the second [Chicken Little's death] that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow" (118). Sula's fear of the instability of relationships after overhearing Hannah's remark and her fear of the instability of the self after witnessing the sudden death of Chicken Little launch Sula into "an experimental life" characterized by no "major feeling of responsibility" (118). Sula attempts to channel her creative energy into sex, but "[s]exual aesthetics bored her"

(122). Ultimately, she only enjoys the way sex allows her to connect to herself rather than to other people. Sula anticipates “the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (123) but also seems to regret her inability to connect with others. Although “the solitude she found in that desperate terrain had never admitted the possibility of other people,” after experiencing the loss of her feeling of power after orgasm, “she wept” thinking of a series of sentimental images like “prom photographs of dead women she never knew; wedding rings in pawnshop windows” (123). Sula can deal neither with the possibility nor the reality of loss. Her sexual exploits ultimately fail to help her defend herself against loss and disconnection and only remind her more of their inevitability, a painful fact from which she has been running since the two events of 1922 that scarred the young Sula.

Other than Nel, the only character in the novel with whom Sula seems to have a substantial relationship is Ajax. With him, Sula experiences “real pleasure” because “he talked to her. They had genuine conversations,” and “he listened more than he spoke” (127-128). Ajax is also described as a dreamer and possible artist figure. He brings Sula “a reed whistle he had carved that morning” (131-132), and listens “enchanted” to stories of airplanes while he is not otherwise occupied looking at airports (126). Like Sula, Ajax is positioned as a curious observer, and this quality, along with his ability to listen to Sula, suggests a potentially positive, therapeutic relationship. However, once Sula takes Ajax as an aesthetic object, she again conflates creation and destruction, and Ajax flees. During one scene of love-making, the description of the action alternates with a long, italicized prose poem in which Sula apparently fantasizes about breaking through the

layers of Ajax's skin in order to understand him.⁸⁷ After Ajax leaves, Sula realizes, "[i]t's just as well he left. Soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity" (136). Here, referring to the poem created in her mind as she and Ajax made love, Sula moves from appreciation of the "glint of gold leaf," "the cold alabaster," and "the black of the warm loam" that she suspects resides under Ajax's surface; next, to deep curiosity; and finally, to destruction as a means to satiate her intense curiosity about the deeper levels of her lover. Further, it seems that Sula's hopes of ever successfully expressing herself are extinguished following Ajax's departure, as she laments, "*I have sung all the songs I have sung all the songs there are,*" and she senses the presence of the now "acridness of gold," "the chill of alabaster," signifying the images' transformation from objects of beauty to reminders of pain and loss. After alienating this potential listener, and being emptied of her creative impulses, Sula weakens and dies of an unspecified illness.

Sula dies alone because she also becomes destructive in her relationship with her primary potential listener – her best friend Nel – by having an affair with Jude. Sula attempts to clarify her actions by explaining, "Well, there was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That's all. He just filled up the space" (144). Sula tries to fill the "space" left empty by her inability to successfully express herself through relationships with other people. In doing so, she destroys the bond she has with Nel, which the novel establishes as her best chance at healing. The novel repeatedly offers Sula's relationship with Nel as Sula's means of recovery. Their connection is sparked by the affinity the girls share from even before they formally meet,

⁸⁷ The description of this scene as a prose poem comes from McDowell, who observes that Sula is "associated throughout the narrative with creativity as seen in the long prose poem she creates while making love to Ajax" (83).

despite the differences in their backgrounds. While Sula is described as a potential artist, Nel has also suffered due to stifled creativity. As a girl, “[a]ny enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” (18). Nel finds creative fulfillment only in her relationship with Sula. Although “her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or sputter she had,” Nel finds that with Sula, “that quality [had] free reign” (83). The relationship between Sula and Nel occupies most of Morrison’s novel. It is important to note, however, that these two characters are connected through images and experiences of both creative potential (which is thwarted in both instances) and through images associated with trauma. Just as Sula is connected to Shadrack through an image of decapitation (the paper dolls), so is Nel associated with decapitation at one point. After discovering Sula’s betrayal, Nel blames “Sula who had taken the life from the [her thighs] and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away” (111). Again, we recall the image of the decapitated soldier “ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back” (8). This image is a response to the most obviously painful incident in Nel’s life, but the betrayal of Sula and Jude is just one of a series of events that scar Nel.

Like Sula, Nel is greatly affected by painful memories from her childhood. In her only trip out of the Bottom, Nel accompanies her mother Helene to New Orleans for Helene’s grandmother’s funeral. On the segregated train, Nel is humiliated not only by being treated as less than human (for example, African American passengers have to relieve themselves in grass on the side of the road rather than in restrooms), but also by witnessing her own mother’s shame. After mistakenly boarding a car for white

passengers and being publicly scolded and demeaned when the conductor calls her “gal,” Helene smiles at the conductor. Noticing their refusal to help Helene with her bags, Nel also observes in the eyes of the black soldiers on the train “a hatred that had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile” (22). Significantly, Nel responds to her mother’s humiliation by seeking to separate herself from Helene and claim an identity of her own. She thinks of herself as “not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me” and “[e]ach time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (28). It is also important that “her new found me-ness” allows Nel to befriend Sula; had Nel taken Helene as a model, she would have avoided the free-spirited Sula in favor of social conformity, which she has already learned to associate with public humiliation and debasement.

Sula’s and Nel’s childhood pain draws them to each other, each girl seeking community somewhere other than in her respective home because each has learned not to depend on the mothers to whom they are biologically bound. Unlike *Temple* and *The Joy Luck Club*, *Sula* does not suggest that a relationship with one’s parents and family history can be redemptive; rather, Morrison’s novel seems to indicate that relationships with these particular mothers should be avoided in exchange for the relationship Nel and Sula build with each other. Their shared experiences and Morrison’s privileging of their relationship allow us to see Nel and Sula as possible listeners for each other, in the way that Arvedya and Fanny and Suwelo and Carlotta become reciprocal listeners in *Temple*.

Morrison lays the groundwork for Nel and Sula’s connection by comparing their childhoods, which, while opposite in the sense that Nel’s mother stresses conformity and her home is characterized by order and cleanliness and Sula’s mother leads a free, openly

sexual life in a home best described as chaotic, nonetheless are similar in that “[t]hey were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream” (51). As the young Nel and Sula dreamed separately in their very different homes, they “had already made each other’s acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams” (51). When Nel dreamed, “always, watching the dream along with her, were some smiling sympathetic eyes. Someone as interested as herself” (51). In the (pre) friendship of the girls, the narrator describes a sympathetic bystander who accompanies the dreamer, watches alongside her, and wordlessly supports her visions. A reading of the novel informed by Laub’s description of the testimonial scene would indicate, then, that this bystander potentially fills a role similar to the listener, who becomes the “companion” guiding the survivor through her testimony. In *Sula*, though, that potential is never fulfilled.

When the girls finally meet in person, “they felt the ease and comfort of old friends . . . they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for” (52). Sula and Nel enjoy an intensely close relationship, finding “in the safe harbor of each other’s company [that] they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (55), until the death of Chicken Little, after which “there was a space, a separateness, between them” (64). Although the girls witness a scene that scars them both, ironically, the incident creates a distance between them rather than forging their bond. Joined at the funeral by their fear of the mystery and the suddenness of death and their guilt (as we learn later, of having watched curiously), the two girls hold hands tightly, later relaxing, “until during the walk back home their fingers were laced in

as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends trotting up the road on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter” (66). Seemingly surviving a temporary break in their closeness, the girls carelessly continue on with their lives; their loosening grasp on each other, however, signifies the imminent fracturing of their connection as they reach adulthood.

The distance between the girls that seemed to be bridged after Chicken’s funeral widens forever when Nel marries Jude. When Sula returns, it seems that her relationship with Nel will be revived. Nel feels Sula’s presence “was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed ... Sula ... whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was the constant sharing of perceptions. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself” (95). Marriage, though, has altered the women’s relationship, as Sula and Nel discover when Sula has sex with Jude. Feeling an apparent closeness to Nel that nothing could break, Sula “had no thought of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude” because “they had always shared the affection of other people” (116). Nel’s reaction teaches Sula that, though “[s]he had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self ... she and Nel were not one and the same thing” (119). The unity and solidarity that characterized their relationship before Nel’s marriage have apparently disappeared.

Even though Sula’s affair with Jude causes the women to hardly see or speak to each other and when doing so, only with anger, both Nel and Sula preserve, in their individual lives, the sanctity of their former friendship. When Nel feels pained by the infidelity of her husband, she instinctively thinks of looking to Sula for support before remembering that Sula instigated a painful betrayal. For example, when Nel wonders if

there was a “gray ball in death” she wants to consult “somebody she could confide in and who knew a lot of things, like Sula, for Sula would know or would say something funny that would make it all right” (110). Nel realizes, though, that their estrangement and Nel’s pain will not allow her confide in her best friend. Nel concludes, “[t]hat was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it” (110). At this point, Nel is just beginning to understand that the loss of her friendship with Sula is much more painful than the dissolution of her marriage.

Sula also continues to instinctively involve Nel in her life even after their estrangement. As she dies, following a visit by Nel during which Sula’s “pain had increased” (140), Sula thinks only of Nel. The narrator describes Sula as “completely alone,” after which, “she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn’t have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. ‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel’” (149). Even though her last encounter with Nel is characterized by hostility and misunderstanding, Sula thinks of sharing her experience of death with only Nel. The girls’ earlier relationship with death (Chicken Little) and the questions that arose from it are answered for Sula by her own death. She wants nothing more than to share everything with Nel, even to protect her from the fear of pain and death. Throughout the novel, Morrison repeatedly suggests that there is potential for Sula and Nel to regain the closeness of their friendship, but they can never quite do so. In part, Nel has not been able to resolve her anger toward Sula while Sula is alive because Nel has not been able to confront the past. When her memories finally resurface, Nel realizes that Sula was the only person who could have received her testimony, just as Nel was the

best person to supportively listen to Sula. Morrison's novel ends with Nel's cry, "loud and long – but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (174), as she finally realizes the extent of the loss she has experienced. Even though the potential to find supportive relationships did exist, it is the absence of testimony between Nel and Sula, and thus, what has remained unspoken, that marks Morrison's novel.

Nel begins to realize the extent of her loss only after she is able to revisit the traumatic memory of Chicken Little's death. Nel finally faces her own guilt after her conversation with Eva in the final chapter of the novel. Eva's confusion of Nel and Sula ("You. Sula. What's the difference? 168) actually reads as sage insight. She insists, "You was there. You watched, didn't you?" (168), forcing Nel to re-evaluate her memory, challenging her own idea that she was simply an innocent bystander while Sula deserved blame as the active agent. As she storms out, frustrated with Eva's refusal to see Nel and Sula as separate individuals, "[a] bright space opened up in her head and memory seeped in" (169). Nel is finally able to think about "the old feeling and the old questions," which arose from the death of Chicken Little but have remained buried ever since. She remembers that she experienced "a good feeling ... when Chicken's hands slipped" and asks herself, "Why didn't I feel bad when it happened?" (170). Nel's memory has apparently been obscured by her inability to admit her reaction to the death of Chicken. Like Sula watching her mother burn to death, Nel's role in Chicken's death is one of an interested, curious, even pleased, observer. Nel realizes that "what she had thought was maturity, serenity, and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation" (170). Aligning Nel with Sula means that Nel can no longer maintain the distinction between herself and Sula as good versus evil or right versus wrong, but must

confront the similarities that she and Sula share, the experiences that should have bonded them rather than driven them apart.

After Nel remembers Chicken's death and visits the graves of the Peace family, "[a] soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze" (174). This "ball of fur," which descends upon Nel after she catches Sula and Jude having sex, is first described as "a gray ball hovering just there ... always floating in the light near her but which she did not see because she never looked" (109). The "gray ball" that never leaves Nel symbolizes her traumatic experiences; she carries them around with her constantly, but she cannot grasp them. She identifies the ball as torturous, even preferring to die rather than live with the ball's presence (110). Confronting her trauma, which in this case seems to arise from Sula's affair with Jude, but which also could include the painful experiences of childhood, becomes Nel's greatest fear because confronting trauma means she must relive it. Finally, at the end of the novel, Nel must face the reality of the past. Eva's challenge leads to Nel's memories, and by the time she has replayed the death of Chicken in her head (notice this is what she replays, not the scene where she finds Sula and Jude together), she is able to confront and bury the past. Significantly, then, she reaches the cemetery, where she reads the tombstones of the Peace family (Sula, Plum, Hannah, and Pearl). To Nel, "Together they read like a chant: PEACE 1895-1921, PEACE, 1890-1923, PEACE 1910-1940, PEACE 1892-1959" (171). The repetition of the word "PEACE" signifies more than the last name of Sula and her family members; the chant, which to Nel is "not even words," but "[w]ishes, longings," is a plea by Nel, who is ready to face the past in an effort to find peace. As the "soft ball of fur broke and scattered," Nel realizes the truth: "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing

Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something” (174). Ultimately, the loss of her friendship with Sula is the traumatic blow that has caused Nel to live in pain for nearly thirty years. All of her re-memories tell her that Sula was not to blame, or rather, that there is no way to simply decide who was “right” or “wrong”; all of the memories that flood her mind when the gray ball bursts finally allow her to realize that she and Sula needed each other, that they were each other’s community, each other’s hope for survival

Thus in the end, Sula and Nel’s friendship is not only confirmed as the central relationship of the novel, but it can also be read as the potential vehicle for both women’s healing. Nel and Sula could have served as what Laub calls “addressable other[s],” allowing each other to transform traumatic memory into narrative. In *Sula*, however, “[t]he absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (Laub 68). Ultimately, the tragedy of *Sula* is that Nel and Sula could have listened to each other’s stories and could have guided each other through the traumatic past, but this potential will remain unfulfilled.

In *Sula*, the emphasis on pain and the absence of testimonial scenes indicate how difficult it is for a survivor to work through trauma, especially in circumstances where her narrative is foreclosed by both the absence of creative outlets and the absence of a listener. The struggles faced by Morrison’s characters certainly complicate the image of recovery depicted in *Temple*’s series of relatively painless, and even joyful, testimonial scenes. Despite their drastically different conclusions, there is no doubt that both novels extensively critique the oppression suffered by their characters. Where the texts differ is

in their respective presentations of what characters do in the aftermath of traumatic experiences. E. Ann Kaplan, perhaps even more than Laub and a number of other theorists, believes in the potential for art to mediate the pain associated with traumatic events, like those suffered by Walker's and Morrison's characters. Kaplan recognizes the

importance of "translating" trauma – that is, finding ways to make meaning out of, and to communicate, catastrophes that happen to others as well as to oneself. Art, perhaps paradoxically, is one such way ... Trauma can never be "healed" in the sense of a return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnessed a catastrophe; but if the wound of trauma remains open, its pain may be worked through in the process of its being "translated" via art. (19)

That Walker endows artistic engagement with healing power and Morrison endows Sula with artistic potential that remains tragically unfulfilled ultimately reveals the extent to which both authors seem to understand, as Kaplan does, the capacity of art to translate and mitigate pain. It is the lack of the art form, and the subsequent inability of Sula to transmit her story to a listener that foreclose the possibility of testimony. Walker's novel is much more confident than *Sula* that scarred subjects can overcome oppression and loss through engagement with art and with community. On the other hand, *Sula* highlights not the testimonial scenes, but the missed opportunities for those very scenes; the tragedy that closes Morrison's novel is that the possibility to testify (at least for Sula) has been forever foreclosed. Analyzing this pair of novels alongside Laub's description of testimony reveals that in both fictional communities, testimony hinges on the presence of a listener, and not just any listener, but the correct listener. Reading these works together, one can only imagine how different Sula's life could have been if she were placed in Walker's fictional world.

Chapter Four

“We needed a story to understand what had happened to us”: Narrating Trauma on the National Stage in Julia Alvarez’s novels

In many ways, the work of Julia Alvarez, particularly her novels set primarily in the Dominican Republic during the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1930-1961), explores the issues of trauma, memory, and narrative more completely than any of the works that I have analyzed thus far. Alvarez’s novels, most notably *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994)⁸⁸ but also her recent young adult novel *Before We Were Free* (2005), revisit a particularly tumultuous time in Dominican history, as her characters describe their experiences on the Island as well as the ongoing and delayed psychological effects of those experiences. As indicated in the narrative gaps and absences that are interspersed in her characters’ testimonies, Alvarez is sensitive to the complexities surrounding the (un)representability of trauma, just as Butler and Perry are in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*. While Alvarez does not employ supernatural elements to explore the paradoxes of representation, her emphasis on and attention to both written and oral testimony reveals both the possibilities of the trauma narrative as well as its inherent difficulties. Like Morrison and Walker, Alvarez highlights the importance of witnessing to the trauma survivor’s testimony despite the difficulties of representation. In *Butterflies*, Dedé Mirabal’s narrative is told to two witnesses – an anonymous Dominican American reporter and Dedé’s niece Minou – and the novel sets itself up as an account of the

⁸⁸ The novel will be referred to as *Butterflies* for the remainder of this chapter.

testimonial scene,⁸⁹ while Anita De la Torre of *Before We Were Free* explicitly addresses her story to the reader and to her journal. Finally, Alvarez's interest in this particular period of the Dominican past, most of which she did not directly experience and cannot remember, reveals the centrality of postmemory in her writing. In these novels, Alvarez does not depict characters who struggle with the traumatic memories of their ancestors, as Morrison and Tan do in *Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club*; instead, it is Alvarez herself who attempts to imagine and work through events from her familial and national history that continue to haunt her over time and space. Alvarez's work combines an engagement with the issues of witnessing, representation, and postmemory, but it also goes beyond each of these concerns, as Alvarez extends her examination of the relationship between traumatic memory and narrative to include both the scarring and the potential healing of a nation's collective trauma.

Although most of the criticism on Alvarez's novels addresses her portrayal of the extreme terror and oppression experienced in Trujillo-era Dominican life, and while several scholars even focus on issues of collective memory and history in *Butterflies*, critics have yet to explicitly connect Alvarez's novels to theoretical models of traumatic experience.⁹⁰ For example, Kelly Lyon Johnson argues, in her discussion of Alvarez's

⁸⁹ The idea that *Butterflies* reflects certain aspects of psychological therapy is supported by Maya Socolovsky, who argues, "Dedé's need to provide, in effect, a therapeutic situation for these storytellers [Dominicans who visited her to give her information on her sisters' deaths], and her own narrative shift from listener to storyteller, positions us as listeners and/or therapists" (9).

⁹⁰ One example is Jacqueline Stefanko's article "New Ways of Telling: Latinas' Narratives of Exile and Return," which reflects concerns of trauma theory; however, Stefanko uses the term "exile" to describe what I refer to as trauma or traumatic experience. The only exception to this rule is Socolovsky's article "Patriotism, Nationalism, and the Fiction of History," in which she actually refers to "the trauma of the Dominican past" (9), describes Dedé "as a guilty survivor" (10), and includes references to Cathy Caruth and Kai Erikson in a footnote (22). Socolovsky's article is extremely useful, but it differs from my argument in that she does not invoke the trauma theorists as the explicit framework for her analysis, but relegates them to one footnote. Further, Socolovsky focuses much of her argument on the function of narrative in exposing hidden historical "ghosts" and is particularly interested in the ways in which

depictions of collective memory in the Dominican Republic, “testimony serves as part of the collective memory and as part of the healing process of those who survived Trujillo’s regime” (“Silence” 105). Here, Johnson invokes many of the key words of trauma theory, such as “testimony,” “memory,” and “healing,” and while theories of memory and of trauma are clearly very closely connected, Johnson’s insightful study does not incorporate the conceptual framework of trauma and recovery, which I will emphasize here in discussing Dedé’s narration as a testimony with therapeutic potential for both herself and her nation. In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Kali Tal describes the literature of trauma as “affirm[ing] the process of storytelling as a personally reconstitutive act, and express[ing] the hope that it will also be a socially reconstitutive act” (121). Alvarez’s depiction of Dedé’s testimony reflects this twofold aim of the trauma survivor in telling her story: the fictional Dedé seeks to confront her personal relationship to her sisters’ deaths both for her own potential healing and for the healing of her nation, with the hope of encouraging the ongoing commitment to social justice in the Dominican Republic modeled by the Mirabal sisters.

Before discussing Alvarez’s depiction of communal traumatization and recovery, it is useful to elaborate on Alvarez’s personal relationship to her material, which will help to establish the connection between the author’s work and theories of trauma. *Butterflies*, Alvarez’s memorial to the legendary Mirabal sisters of the Dominican Republic, depicts the politically tumultuous time known as the “Trujillato,”⁹¹ and follows the lives, political awakenings, and eventual murders of Patria, Minerva, and Maria Teresa (Mate) Mirabal, as related by the only surviving Mirabal sister, Dedé. The Mirabals, known by

Dominican history’s relationship to American history is written into Alvarez’s novels, while my own argument spends more time exploring the way individuals and societies deal with those “ghosts.”

⁹¹ Johnson (“Both Sides” 9).

their revolutionary code names, *Las Mariposas*, or “the butterflies,” were killed, along with their driver, Rufino de la Cruz, by Trujillo’s secret police (SIM) on November 25, 1960. as the women were returning from a visit to their husbands, who were imprisoned for their own involvement in the resistance. It is rumored that the men were moved to a prison further away on a more dangerous route, in order for the SIM to carry out this premeditated attack on the Mirabals, who were some of Trujillo’s strongest political enemies. After the Mirabal sisters and de la Cruz were murdered, their jeep was cast over a mountain side in order to mask the crime as a car accident. In the Dominican Republic, outrage followed the deaths of the butterflies, and revolutionary fervor increased, leading to the assassination of Trujillo himself on May 30, 1961, only six months after the tragic murders of the Mirabals.

Alvarez’s curiosity about the Mirabal sisters stems from her own personal and familial history. Though born in New York, Alvarez spent most of her childhood in the homeland of her parents, the Dominican Republic. When she was a child, Alvarez’s immediate family fled the Dominican Republic for the United States only months before the murder of the Mirabal sisters, due to her father’s involvement in the same underground movement to depose Trujillo. In her essay “Chasing the Butterflies,” Alvarez candidly describes how the story of the Mirabal sisters haunted her, recalling the moment when, preparing to write *Butterflies*, she came across a 1960 *Time* magazine article that reported the murder of the Mirabals, through which Alvarez says she “recovered a memory of [herself]” (197): she associates this same dark period of Dominican history with the memory of her own family’s flight to New York. Juxtaposing her family’s history to that of their homeland, and to the history of the Mirabals, Alvarez

realizes that “[t]hese three brave sisters and their husbands stood in stark contrast to the self-saving actions of my own family and of other Dominican exiles. Because of this, the Mirabal sisters haunted me” (198).

Repeatedly, Alvarez identifies her family’s exile as an “escape,” and she admits to setting some of her novels in the Dominican Republic in order to connect to her former homeland and to the people who were not able to escape during Trujillo’s dictatorship. In a note following *Before We Were Free*, Alvarez understands this concern, writing that “Even though it has been many years since those sad times, I still have moments when I wonder what life must have been like for them. And so I decided to write a novel, imagining the life of those who stay behind, fighting for freedom” (166). Beginning with *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, in which Yolanda Garcia visits the Island and contemplates staying there permanently, each of Alvarez’s novels stages a return to her roots. However, *Butterflies* becomes the first work in which Alvarez completely immerses herself in the world of the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo dictatorship, partially as she attempts to “imagine the life” of Dominicans who, unlike her own family, suffered directly under Trujillo’s oppressive regime. As Marianne Hirsch observes in relation to descendants of trauma survivors, Alvarez must forge an imaginative relationship with a history she did not experience but which nonetheless continues to mark her life and her work.⁹²

⁹² As discussed in Chapter Two, Hirsch describes the moment of the trauma survivor’s descendant discovering a photograph of her parent and having to “fill in what the picture leaves out” (21), and since the descendant cannot have direct access to those memories, she can only imagine the events represented there and can only imagine a relationship between herself and those events. Similarly, Alvarez can only experience the events endured by her parents and her Dominican characters through an imaginative enterprise, which she undertakes in many of her novels.

Alvarez's primary means of imagining the reality of the terror of the trujillato is through the character of Dedé in *Butterflies*. In depicting Dedé as attempting to come to terms with and work through an unspeakable event that can never be fully understood or recaptured, Alvarez also tries to understand that unimaginable experience for herself. Although it is through writing Dedé's story that Alvarez attempts to envision and recreate the Dominican past, many critics see Alvarez as inserting herself into the novel in the character of the Dominican-American reporter, referred to as the *gringa dominicana* in the text. Arriving on the scene to meet with Dedé in the first chapter of the novel, the reporter apologizes that "[s]he is originally from here [the Dominican Republic] but has lived many years in the States, for which she is sorry since her Spanish is not so good"

(3). Most critics identify this character as a stand-in for Alvarez herself⁹³; Isabel Zakrzewski Brown, for example, describes the reporter as "a thinly-veiled, self-reflecting, and self-deprecating representation of the author" (100). Clear similarities exist between the reporter and Alvarez in that both women were born on the Island and later moved to the United States, where both the Dominican-American reporter and Alvarez have spent the majority of their lives. However, despite repeated critical identification of the reporter as Alvarez, this equation of author with character is refuted by Alvarez in her "A Note on the Loosely Autobiographical" (2000) and lampooned in her third novel *¡Yo!* (1997).⁹⁴

⁹³ Kelli Lyon Johnson calls this character "a double for Alvarez" (9), as does Shara McCallum (97, while Trenton Hickman instead sees the reporter's character as "a model for Alvarez's readers of how even someone as 'conditioned' as they are against a more hemispheric view of 'our America' can approach the story of the Mirabals..." (113). Lynn Chun Ink argues that the "interview woman" represents American misconceptions of Dominican history and that "The *gringa dominicana* serves as the conduit through which Alvarez delivers her critique of U.S. imperialist attitudes" (797). Jacqueline Stefanko points out that through the location of her self in the character of the interview woman, Alvarez "distances herself several layers from the telling" in order to avoid speaking for the "Other" and thus "blurs the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' in the performance of her own subject status" (62).

⁹⁴ It seems that countering the idea that novelists write only autobiographical works, even when they are "fictional," is one of the primary aims of Alvarez's third novel. The "Prologue" to *¡Yo!* tells us that

Ultimately the similarities between Alvarez and the reporter become secondary to the complex relationship between the author and the subjects of her novel. Originally intending to write a biography of the lives of the Mirabal sisters, Alvarez traveled to the Dominican Republic, where she discovered that a fourth sister, Dedé had survived.⁹⁵ Readers familiar with Alvarez's accounts of conversations with Dedé about the novel will sense the writer's particularly strong identification with Dedé, to whom the novel is even dedicated.⁹⁶ This dedication reveals that *Butterflies* becomes a novel about Dedé's therapeutic process, and by extension, Alvarez's own process of working through, perhaps even more so than it serves as an account of the heroism of the fallen butterflies.⁹⁷ Alvarez's decision to fictionalize the Mirabal sisters' lives (and martyrdom)

Yolanda Garcia has had a best-selling book published and that her family is upset about what they consider to be personal, biographical data included in Yolanda's novel. Alvarez's novel then goes on to undermine this assumption, primarily by including the perspectives of many of Yolanda's friends, lovers, family members, and acquaintances, who attest to her ability to "invent" and "create," as Yolanda is characterized as a skilled storyteller throughout. The chapter entitled "The Student – Variation" also strongly brings this point home when a former creative writing student of Yolanda's believes his teacher has plagiarized one of his submissions in a later collection of stories published by Yolanda. When the student, Lou, reads the story to his wife, hoping to expose Yolanda as a plagiarist, Penny explains that the story reminds her of something, and "her voice opened up into a story of a remembered childhood loss" (186). Lou then understands that people can share common stories and that stories can be interpreted differently by all readers; Alvarez is thus able to make her point that, even though the Garcia sisters may think Yolanda has used their stories, in her role as novelist, she has created and constructed, and it is not safe to assume that anything in fiction is strictly autobiographical.

⁹⁵ In her essay "Chasing the Butterflies," Alvarez describes her trip to the Dominican Republic to research the Mirabal sisters. Alvarez was able to visit the Mirabal museum, which is located in the family home where the three murdered sisters spent their last few months alive under house arrest and now contains various artifacts associated with the Mirabal sisters' lives and deaths, and to talk with Dedé. This fact obviously leads many readers to assume a relationship between Alvarez and the reporter in the novel. Photos of the monuments dedicated to the Mirabals and more information about the Museo can be found in *Caribbean Connections* and "Mirabal Museo," found at http://semdom.50megs.com/mirabal_museo.htm.

⁹⁶ Further, within the novel, Alvarez tries to make the connection between the reporter and Dedé clear. At one point, after going through a chapter of narration about each sister, "Again, Dedé feels as if the woman has been reading her thoughts" (65).

⁹⁷ The personal filter through which Alvarez inevitably depicts these women has opened her up to quite a bit of criticism, when scholars of *Butterflies* have attempted to evaluate the "success" of Alvarez's portrayal of the Mirabals. Although Alvarez claims to depict the women as real people rather than the legendary figures they have become, many critics believe that Alvarez's novel maintains the heroic status of the butterflies. For example, Isabel Zakrzewski Brown argues that Alvarez "fashions stereotypes rather than real people" (110), while Lynn Chun Ink sees the Mirabal characters as "more legend than flesh and blood, and Trenton Hickman reads *Butterflies* as a work of "hagiographic commemorafiction" (99).

rather than write a biography is motivated by Alvarez's own relationship to their story and to her own need to work through that relationship. In fact, some scholars have described Alvarez's personal "need" to tell the story of the Mirabal sisters, like Ibis Gomez-Vega, who suggests that Caribbean women writers like Alvarez write "to make sense of what has happened [by creating] their own mechanisms for coping with the events that transform their lives as it hurls them into exile" ("Metaphors of Entrapment" 232).⁹⁸ Readings like Gomez-Vega's emphasize the pain of exile from the homeland and identify that as the central struggle of Alvarez's life and work; my reading, however, highlights the guilt associated with surviving a traumatic event (an event that claimed the lives of others) as the primary occasion for working through.

Both Alvarez's reaction to her family's escape from the Dominican Republic and Dedé's struggle following the deaths of her sisters and her personal lack of political involvement, exhibit signs of what Robert Jay Lifton terms "survivor guilt." In his studies of survivors of extreme trauma such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima, Lifton observes that "the survivor has lived out the mythology of the hero, but not quite. And that 'not quite' is the tragic dimension of it" (*Trauma* 135). This "not quite" emphasized by Lifton can be compared to the feeling of escape experienced by both Alvarez and Dedé, both of whom were close to people involved in the revolutionary movement against Trujillo but both of whom also narrowly escaped tragic consequences because they were not directly

Alvarez has also been frequently criticized for factors she apparently ignores in her depiction of Dominican life. Shara McCallum strongly attacks Alvarez's portrayal of class and race in the novel, accusing the writer of irresponsibly recreating "the hegemonic structures entrenched in the Dominican Republic," and claiming that the text ignores the "Afro-Dominican experience," and "idealizes" the *campesinos* and Tainos in the text.

⁹⁸ Jacqueline Stefanko and Ibis Gomez-Vega explore the extent to which this novel functions as a way for Alvarez to work through her own family's history and exile and its connection to the lives of the butterflies.

involved. Thus it could partially be Alvarez's own survivor guilt that causes her to identify with Dedé and to write the novel with Dedé as its ultimate focus.

Through the discussion of postmemory in a previous chapter, we have seen that the impact of traumatic events and memories can exceed the bounds of the individual who directly experienced a painful event. In this chapter, analysis of *Butterflies*, and to a lesser extent, *Before We Were Free* and Alvarez's "novels of exile"⁹⁹ (*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and *¡Yo!*) indicates that a traumatic experience can scar not only individuals directly impacted and relatives of those individuals in later generations, but can also affect an entire nation. While Alvarez concentrates on the character of Dedé and the Mirabal family's personal tragedy, she is also able to convey the reach of the horrors witnessed and experienced by the Mirabals through her portrayal of the Dominican Republic as a community traumatized by the violence and terror of a political dictatorship. Alvarez's depiction of Dedé in *Butterflies* exemplifies how personal tragedy and political history become intertwined and inextricable. An analysis of this novel, as well as other works by Alvarez, allows us to explore the interactions of national trauma and individual memory and of individual narrative and social action.

"We're not free – we're trapped": Collective Trauma in the Dominican Republic

As is now well-known from historical accounts, Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic as a totalitarian. Over time, he gained power and asserted his will more and more. Trujillo even renamed the capital, Santo Domingo, "Ciudad Trujillo" in 1936

⁹⁹ This term is Lyon Johnson's ("Silence" 89) and describes Alvarez's novels that primarily describe the American lives of transplanted Dominicans. As I will describe later in this chapter, and as Lyon Johnson also recognizes, the "novels of exile" also deal with the residual effects of trauma incurred on the Island years prior to the present-day action of the novels.

(Moya Pons 362).¹⁰⁰ The regime is now famous for its blatant use of violence as a means of both silencing dissenters and as a means of “population control.” The most notorious example of Trujillo’s brutality is the 1937 genocide committed against Haitians living on the border of the Dominican Republic, in which Trujillo’s police force was ordered to kill any Haitians in the Dominican Republic, and even some Haitians in Haiti who were living too close to the border for Trujillo’s liking. In Trujillo’s mind, this plan was carried out in order to purify his own nation and to ensure the Hispanic, Catholic identity of the Dominican Republic.¹⁰¹ Although the public seems to have been aware of the dictator’s role in the murder of over 20,000 Haitians (despite an official story that sought to mask any governmental responsibility), Trujillo’s power grew. The people under his rule were intimidated into obedience and could not resist the dictator. Frank Moya Pons claims,

as the dictatorship aged, the message became more frequent, more elaborate, and more pervasive. Through that overwhelming propaganda apparatus, Trujillo managed to institutionalize a noncollectivist totalitarian political system without parallel in any other country in Latin America. (361)

It is no wonder Dominicans lived in fear, forced to at least feign loyalty to the government, as “[t]orturing and killing political prisoners and opponents became a daily practice” (372). Because of her proximity to these events, mostly through her parents’ involvement in the Island’s political underground, the volatile world of Dominican politics haunts the majority of Alvarez’s writing.

¹⁰⁰ Alvarez alludes to this historical fact in *Butterflies*. When Mate moves to the Capital to attend the University, Minerva informs her that all of the streets are named after the dictator and his family. This not only reveals Trujillo’s enormous ego but also enhances the feeling of constant surveillance experienced by the characters in *Butterflies*. As Mate tells her diary, which contains commentary on Trujillo’s governmental practices, “It’s not safe carrying you around in my pocketbook on the street of his mother or the avenue of his little boy” (131).

¹⁰¹ Trujillo’s relationship to Haiti is beyond the scope of this chapter, but Moya Pons offers an account in his history of the Island, and Edwidge Danticat’s novel *The Farming of Bones* provides a fictional take on the aforementioned events.

Alvarez, though, does not limit her examination of life in the Dominican Republic to the experiences of her own family; instead, she attempts to represent the ways in which the dictatorship scarred the entire nation. In “Notes on Trauma and Community,” Kai Erikson claims that “[t]rauma ... has a social dimension,” thus establishing communal trauma as possessing distinct characteristics and insisting that “traumatized communities [are] something distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons” (185). Erikson’s definition of “a group culture,” which “is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up” (185) could accurately describe Alvarez’s portrayal of post-Trujillo Dominican community. Alvarez’s novels – both those set in the Dominican Republic during Trujillo’s dictatorship (*In the Time of the Butterflies*, *Before We Were Free*) and those that follow transplanted Dominican American characters still dealing with the aftermath of their own and their parents’ traumatic memories of the Trujillo years (*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *¡Yo!*) – foreground the psychic impact of life under a regime of terror. Though these are recurrent concerns of Alvarez’s fiction and many of her essays, *Butterflies* is the novel that engages most extensively and explicitly with questions of memory, narratives of trauma, and the dynamics of collective traumas, demonstrating how these events both impact survivors individually and the community as a unit.

In discussing the experiences of the Dominican people living under Trujillo’s regime, we must expand the definition of “trauma” to include events that continue over time, which complicates theories of trauma that identify it as a singular event. For example, Cathy Caruth argues, “[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (*Trauma* 4-5), a definition that implies a survivor has been scarred by *an*

event, a singular experience.¹⁰² On the other hand, the trauma suffered by most of the Dominican people, including the Mirabal family, cannot be reduced to a “single and violent event,” but could be more accurately described as consisting of a series of repeated offenses against their security, freedom, and well-being. As E. Ann Kaplan explains, while “[s]uch daily experience of terror may not take the shape of classic trauma suffered by victims or survivors, to deny these experiences as traumatic would be a mistake” (1).¹⁰³ In Alvarez’s novels, Dominicans are living under a brutal dictator and are not free to protest against the government or to act against the state in any way. Although some characters do manage to escape to the United States, each incident must be accompanied by a legitimate excuse and must be approved by the government.¹⁰⁴ Alvarez’s work places great emphasis on Dominicans as captive in their own homes and in their own country, where threats of violence and actual violence were part of everyday life. Furthermore, the possibility of death was omnipresent during the Trujillato, especially for those who were suspected of opposing the government. Extending the definition of trauma to “be understood as resulting from a *constellation of life experiences*” (Erikson 185) allows us to better understand the widespread and long-term effects of the terror suffered by Dominicans during the Trujillato.

¹⁰² The theory of trauma as a specific and/or single event derives from a medical definition of trauma as an injuring blow or wound.

¹⁰³ Likewise, Judith Herman’s asserts that “Prolonged, repeated trauma ... occurs only in circumstances of captivity. When the victim is free to escape, she will not be abused a second time; repeated trauma occurs only when the victim is a prisoner, unable to flee, and under the control of the perpetrator” (74).

¹⁰⁴ Carlos Garcia goes to the United States to study and practice medicine. Anita’s sister Lucinda is sent to the States because the family fears Trujillo will expect her to become sexually involved with him, but she is allowed to leave the country after relatives concoct a plan called “Operation Maid”: “Friends in Washington who will be stationed in Colombia have been looking for someone who can teach their children some Spanish. Why not send Lucinda?” (69). The American ambassador therefore requests of the government that Lucinda be sent to help his friends.

The reach of these long-term effects of traumatic experiences is particularly evident in Alvarez's accounts of characters who are separated from the original event by time (in the years after Trujillo's assassination) and space (their relocation to the U.S.); although physically safe from threats, these individuals continue to be impacted by their traumatic memories. For instance, in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez litters the text with references to the terror experienced under Trujillo's regime and the persistence of this terror long after the Garcias leave the Dominican Republic. Carlos Garcia (Papi) was involved in the revolutionary underground plotting to overthrow the dictator, like Alvarez's own father. His life in New York, though, is haunted by fear, both for himself and his family, and for the fates of the co-conspirators he left behind in the Dominican Republic. His wife continues to hear the "terror in his voice, the same fear she'd hear in the Dominican Republic before they left" (139). Because of the terror that became part of their lives on the Island, the Garcias (especially Mami and Papi) have been conditioned to react with fear and anxiety. Dominicans like Papi nonetheless continue to experience what Judith Herman identifies as "hyperarousal." According to Herman, trauma victims experience an "elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on alert for danger. They also have an extreme startle response to unexpected stimuli" (36). In like manner, Papi Garcia remains sensitive to sudden noises and becomes nervous when he sees a black Volkswagon (the vehicle of Trujillo's secret police) or is followed by a cop in the U.S.¹⁰⁵ These reminders of the culture of fear on the Island return him psychologically to that experience; in his mind, "his secret fear [would

¹⁰⁵ Alvarez writes, "whenever a cop car was behind them in traffic, he kept looking at the rearview mirror and insisting on silence in the car so he could think ... Back home, he had been tailed by the secret police for months and the family had only narrowly escaped capture their last day on the Island" (*Garcia Girls* 158). The political circumstances mean that being followed by the SIM in the D.R. obviously had more serious implications than being followed by an American cop.

be confirmed]: they had not gotten away after all; the SIM had come for them at last” (GG 139). Even in New York, Papi remains “on alert for danger” (Herman 36). Alvarez’s depiction of the still pervasive nature of traumatic memories indicates that these experiences remain unresolved; the death of Trujillo himself and the move to a new country cannot repair the damage that has been done nor can it erase trauma’s continuing impact on survivors.

Similar after-effects of the chronic terror experienced under Trujillo are evident in *Butterflies*, when Dedé, over thirty years after her sisters’ deaths and Trujillo’s subsequent assassination, has retained elements of her Trujillo-era anxiety. Dedé awaits the arrival of the Dominican-American reporter when “[t]he slamming of the car door startles Dedé” (5). Alvarez explains that the loud, violent slam of the car door reminds Dedé of the fear she felt during Trujillo’s dictatorship; her reaction is a residual effect of her earlier trauma. Dedé thinks, “Any Dominican of a certain generation would have jumped at that gunshot sound” (5). Life under Trujillo trained Dominicans to fear loud noises that could be gunshots, a reminder of the danger and violence that characterized the period of dictatorship on the Island. Earlier in the novel, as the Mirabal girls’ awareness of the injustice perpetrated by Trujillo escalates, Minerva observes, “Every time it thunders we jump as if guards had opened fire on the house” (102). In this dangerous environment, even ordinary sounds become cause for extreme fright and concern. Unlike the mostly residual effects of trauma explored in her novels about the Garcia family, the family that escaped, in *Butterflies*, Alvarez paints a picture of what it was like to live in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo. This novel, more than her other works, depicts the circumstances by which Dominicans were scarred, allowing

readers to experience the fear instilled into the country's people along with the fictionalized Mirabal sisters.

Although in the present-day of the novel (1994), Dedé still exhibits residual symptoms of trauma, the novels set in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato, such as *Butterflies* and *Before We Were Free*, concentrate more on returning to the origins of the characters' traumatic memories, as Alvarez attempts to recreate the environment of terror that has scarred her characters as well as real Dominicans. Anita, the adolescent narrator of *Before We Were Free* allows Alvarez to imagine what it might have been like to live through the fall of Trujillo's regime and to be so close to the extremely risky underground movement.¹⁰⁶ As the novel opens, Anita is among the most devoted of Trujillo's followers, but gradually, she discovers that her country is “*not* free – we're trapped” (48). Her first clue is the SIM's investigation of her family's compound. Although she doesn't know it at the time, her father, uncle, and other Dominicans have masterminded a plot to assassinate Trujillo. Soon, her older sister Lucinda reveals that Trujillo is a dictator and that the citizens are coerced to worship the leader (20), and her friend Oscar tells Anita that the Dominican Republic's “democracy” and “freedom” are a farce (48).

Before We Were Free documents, through the perspective and narration of the precocious Anita, the gradual realization of the Dominican people that their government is corrupt and oppressive. Anita struggles with her father and the revolution's plan to kill Trujillo, but she also comes to understand the plan's apparent necessity:

¹⁰⁶ Because of the age of Anita at the time of Trujillo's assassination and the subsequent capture of her father and uncle and the rest of the family's relocation to New York, Alvarez presumably sees Anita as a potential stand-in for herself, had her family stayed on the Island a year longer than they did.

It's *so* unfair to live in a country where you have to do stuff you feel bad about in order to save your life. It's like Papi and Tio Toni planning to assassinate Mr. Smith [codename for Trujillo] when they know that murder is wrong. But what if your leader is evil and rapes young girls and kills loads of innocent people and makes your country a place where not even butterflies are safe? (75)

The “butterflies” Anita refers to here are the Mirabal sisters, and this is only one of many references to them in the novel. Anita also calls her mother her “Butterfly mami” (134) and believes the snow angels she makes with her cousins (the Garcias) in New York to be “four butterflies from Papi, reminding me to fly” (163). Here, Alvarez depicts the Mirabals as an influence on the plot to depose Trujillo, explicitly connecting the example of their deaths to the underground’s motivation for assassinating the dictator. Planting the Mirabals as heroines in this later novel also allows Alvarez to extend her argument that the butterflies’ story had crucial social import in the Dominican Republic.¹⁰⁷

Although they feel the assassination plan is just, Anita’s family suffers as a result of their involvement. First, the family’s situation grows more desperate, as Lucinda has to be sent away to the United States to avoid sexual advances by Trujillo, a situation that could not be resisted by the family without grave punishment.¹⁰⁸ After Trujillo’s assassination, however, the situation becomes even graver. Due to an error in the plan, it is discovered that Papi (Don Mundo) is involved; he and Tio Toni are arrested. Anita and her mother must live in constant fear, hiding in a crawl space at a friend’s home, until they are eventually rescued and taken to the United States. Once in New York, Anita and

¹⁰⁷ Later in this chapter, I will examine in greater detail the ways in which Dedé’s story of the Mirabal sisters in *Butterflies* works as a form of collective memory and collective healing.

¹⁰⁸ The same situation befalls Minerva in *Butterflies*. A schoolmate, Lina Lovaton, is taken away by El Jefe and becomes one of his “girlfriends,” while the school has to simply comply with his wishes. Minerva refuses to become Trujillo’s sexual pawn, but this rejection causes her family and herself to become political targets for Trujillo. After refusing El Jefe at a party, Minerva and her father (Don Enrique) are brought in for questioning and Enrique is imprisoned. The family believes his imprisonment leads to Don Enrique’s death soon after his release.

her mother learn that Don Mundo and Tio Toni have been killed on the Island. Like many other characters populating Alvarez's fictional landscape, Anita understandably continues to be affected by her father's death and the terrifying experiences she suffered while in hiding, even after her family is safe in another country. Near the close of the novel, Anita confesses, "...inside, I'm all numb, as if I had been buried in sadness and my body got free, but the rest of me is still in captivity" (159). The adults in the novel lament "that children can't be children anymore in this suffering country" (58). Alvarez's decision to tell this story through the eyes of a child highlights her alignment of political awareness with loss of innocence, a technique she also utilizes in the earlier novel *Butterflies*.

Like Anita, Maria-Teresa (Mate) Mirabal's political awakening (and later, her imprisonment) is recorded over time in her own journals, and like Anita, Mate becomes one of the primary informants of the terror under which Dominicans lived. After Minerva informs Mate of the atrocities committed by the Trujillo regime, Mate compares her new awareness to her previous conception of the dictator: "Before, I always thought our president was like God, watching over everything I did" (39). Her innocence and her trust in the government have been shattered, but ironically, Mate is still right about one thing: Trujillo is watching over her and her entire family, as they are put under SIM surveillance and must live their lives behind a guise of loyalty to their president.¹⁰⁹

Through each of the Mirabal sisters' narratives, we become increasingly aware of the oppression of the Dominican people under Trujillo. Alvarez notes that, for her own parents, the traumatic effects of living in fear, as "a nation of Dominicans had learned the habits of repression, censorship, terror" ("A Genetics of Justice" 108). In the world of the

¹⁰⁹ Early in the novel, Minerva, in reference to an Independence Day celebration, observes "It wasn't just my family putting on a big loyalty performance, but the whole country" (24). Here, again, Alvarez establishes the individual experience as representative of the larger national predicament.

novel, we are aware that Trujillo has set himself up as a god to be worshipped alongside Jesus and the Virgencita, as characters repeatedly pass the framed pictures of Trujillo positioned next to religious icons in the home (17). Minerva also notes that her schoolbooks compared the entry of Trujillo onto the political scene to a deity being sent to save the people (24).¹¹⁰ Minerva's awakening to the evil of the Trujillo regime occurs when a school friend, Sinita, tells a horrified Minerva that Trujillo has had members of Sinita's family killed and relates the story about how Trujillo manipulated and murdered to gain his place as dictator.¹¹¹ Gradually, Minerva spreads this new knowledge to her sisters, even describing Dominicans as "living in a police state" (75).

While Alvarez is clearly interested in presenting the far-reaching damaging effects of the dictatorship and establishing the resulting traumatization as a national problem, Alvarez also carefully illustrates the ways in which the personal and political constantly overlap in *Butterflies*¹¹² and also demonstrates how a large-scale event inevitably affects individuals in diverse ways. She combines mention of the growing political crisis with more personal tragedies in the women's lives, such as Patria's stillborn child, their parents' tense relationship as a result of their father's extramarital affair and the family of four girls that are the result of the affair, and the death of their

¹¹⁰ This is echoed in Moya Pon's Dominican history, when he writes, "From early on, thousands of political meetings and rallies, where thousands of speeches were given, were organized every year to teach Dominicans of the providential miracle of having a God-sent rule who would cure the Republic of all its historic maladies" (361).

¹¹¹ In *Butterflies*, Sinita's account is found on pages 17-20. As Alvarez's main characters also feel the urge to relate their traumatic memories, Sinita also must tell the story of the murders of the men in her family. Minerva says, "Sinita's story spilled out like blood from a cut" (18), indicating that Sinita is being purged of this traumatic story but also that its narration is painful for her.

¹¹² An interesting juxtaposition that continues throughout Alvarez's novel is the that of the everyday/domestic with the political/revolutionary. Although countless examples exist, the one that perhaps most directly expresses this theme is Patria's comment that "It was the shock of my life to see Maria Teresa, so handy with her needlepoint, using tweezers and little scissors to twist the fine wires [of a bomb] together" (167). Patria also notes that the parlor in which her daughter Noris "had begun receiving callers" was the same space in which the revolutionary group met and decided on its name (167).

father, Don Enrique. Eventually, the three Mirabal sisters' husbands, Manolo, Pedrito, and Leandro, are imprisoned, along with Patria's son Nelson and later, Minerva and Mate. Even after their release from prison, the women remain under constant surveillance in their own home and are allowed to leave only with permission from one of Trujillo's officials. One of the trips that is repeatedly approved is the visit to the imprisoned husbands. It is upon returning from one of these visits that the Mirabal sisters are hijacked and murdered.

“The words are coming back”: Reclaiming Voice in a Regime of Terror

The Mirabal sisters are punished, as were many other Dominicans under Trujillo's reign, for speaking and acting out against the government. Trujillo's order to have *Las Mariposas* murdered was an effort to silence their rebellion, and by silencing their dissenting voices, he hoped to secure his own power. Trujillo's strategy is reminiscent of Elaine Scarry's model of torture in *The Body in Pain*, and although her theories specifically address the physical pain imposed during a torture session, many of her arguments apply to *Butterflies*. According to Scarry, the torturer, through physical pain (which reduces the prisoner's voice to pre-linguistic utterances) and interrogation (which causes the prisoner's voice to be usurped by the torturer because the prisoner is made to “confess” details that are required by the torturer), the torturer strips the captive of her voice. Apparently, Trujillo himself often does not perpetrate violence or torture literally onto a victim; however, through his omnipresent SIM police force, Dominicans understand that they could be under surveillance at all times. Early in *Butterflies*, Dedé recalls a childhood scene in which the family converses outside their home and Papi's

mention of Trujillo's name sparks anxiety. Retrospectively examining this memory, Dedé understands the danger of "[w]ords repeated, distorted, words recreated by those who might bear them a grudge, words stitched to words until they are the winding sheet the family will be buried in when their bodies are found dumped in a ditch, their tongues cut off for speaking too much" (10). Here, Dedé specifically links the murder of her sisters with their refusal to silence or censor their political rebellion. Even during their lives, Alvarez's characters are aware of the risks of speaking out and claiming a voice in this environment of imposed silence. Any hint of resistance to the government or secrecy could result in persecution by the SIM.¹¹³ Thus, Trujillo's regime has results similar to Scarry's model torture session; silence is imposed upon the victim, and the torturer gains power through robbing the victim of her voice. Nevertheless, Trujillo's need to silence the voices of dissenters also speaks to the powerful potential of giving voice to injustice.

Scarry, then, sees claiming one's voice as essential to overcoming pain, of which silence is a crucial element: "As torture consists of acts that magnify the way in which pain destroys a person's world, self, and voice, so these other acts that restore the voice become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a diminution of the pain, a partial reversal of the process of torture itself" (50). Therefore, in Alvarez's world, those who choose to speak out against the dictatorship, to exercise their voices, attempt to react against the pain of living under such a stifling government. Speaking out, for Alvarez's

¹¹³ The patrolling of citizens' behavior seemingly has no limits in Alvarez's depiction. For example, in *Before We Were Free*, Anita's class Secret Santa game is cancelled because the adults agree that it may look suspicious and secretive to the SIM (30).

characters, consists of articulating traumatic experiences through storytelling or writing.¹¹⁴

Faced with the difficulties of living under an oppressive dictatorship, the residual effects of this traumatization, and, in many cases, the pain of living between two cultures and struggling to understand one's identity,¹¹⁵ the women in Alvarez's novels repeatedly attempt to give voice to their struggles, often through storytelling. Just as Alvarez and her family suffered as a result of the Trujillo dictatorship that she recreates in her fiction, the relationship between stories and survival emphasized in her novels is central in Alvarez's own life story. As she recalls her memories of living in the Dominican Republic during the last years of the Trujillo dictatorship, Alvarez admits that, although she now knows that her country was living under "a cruel dictatorship" and that her father was part of the plot to overthrow that government, "what I remember is not the cruel dictatorship, not the disappearances, not my parents' nervous voices behind closed doors, but the storybook that helped me get through the long, dull school days" (133). In the essay "First Muse," Alvarez emphasizes the importance of the book *The Arabian Nights* in her childhood, and her essay about this book's influence, as well as its strategic placement in the hands of her novels' characters¹¹⁶ suggest that Alvarez intimately understands the power of stories. Because of the heroine Scheherazade's talent for storytelling, which she must participate in for one thousand and one consecutive nights in order to engage the Sultan's interest

¹¹⁴ In *Butterflies*, oral narrative is the primary form of transmission for Dedé and, imaginatively, through the oral narratives of her sisters told to her within the novel. Minerva and Mate, however, do write within the novel; Mate's diaries are the primary example. For Yolanda Garcia and Camila Ureña, narration takes place through writing, as it also does for Alma and Isabel in Alvarez's most recent adult novel, *Saving the World* (2006). In Alvarez's fiction, storytelling and writing are the foremost modes of translating trauma into art; Alvarez does not often feature visual artists or musicians.

¹¹⁵ The issue of multicultural identity is more prominent in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *¡Yo!*, and *In the Name of Salome*.

¹¹⁶ In *Before We Were Free*, Anita is familiar with the book (146), and Yolanda also reads this book in *Garcia Girls*.

and thus keep him from having her killed the next morning, Alvarez “learned that stories could save you” (138). Joining her own culture’s oral tradition¹¹⁷ with the tale of the storytelling techniques used by Scheherazade to literally save her own life, Alvarez demonstrates in her fiction how crucial stories can be.

The link between storytelling and survival is reinforced by Alvarez’s interest in psychological therapy; her sister’s experience with trauma survivors has further influenced Alvarez’s depiction of storytelling in her novels. Alvarez explains,

I have a sister who works in Boston with Latin American refugees, many of whom have survived the burning of their villages, the torture and death of family members. My sister tells me that she knows her patients are going to get better if they can tell the story of what happened to them. So the silencing of those who have lived in terror is not just an external thing; it’s also a way in which the whole self shuts down. (176).¹¹⁸

As I have shown in the previous three chapters, characters’ ability to transform traumatic memories into narrative memories and to gain control over their painful pasts by containing them within a story is a crucial component of a survivor’s recovery process. While trauma generally results in the survivor’s loss of voice, the explicit risk involved in speaking out against the Trujillo regime further silences Alvarez’s characters; therefore, silencing is both a central element of the traumatic experience and a characteristic of that experience’s afterlife. Naturally, the Mirabal sisters attempt to regain their voices both during and after their traumatic experiences as they attempt to work through these painful events; the enforced silence and prohibition of free expression make the eventual testimonials of Alvarez’s characters even more empowering.

¹¹⁷ Alvarez writes, “The power of stories was all around me, for the tradition of storytelling is deeply rooted in my Dominican culture. With over eighty percent illiteracy when I was growing up, the culture was still an oral culture” (138).

¹¹⁸ This quote is from “In Her Own Words: A Conversation with Julia Alvarez, which is included at the end of the young adult novel *Before We Were Free* (2005).

In *Butterflies*, writing is presented as a viable form of speaking out, particularly when Minerva urges Mate to write in a journal in order to work through the pain of her political awakening and eventual imprisonment. The desire to write intensifies in this novel because of the risk involved in speaking; the characters are aware that they could be monitored and overheard at any time by a member of the regime's secret police. Writing, though, is certainly not without risk; documents often must be hidden, as they prove to be dangerously incriminating throughout the novel.¹¹⁹ The characters know that any one who speaks out against the government and its dictator, and anyone who acts against Trujillo, will be punished. The risk involved, however, also highlights the persistent need to articulate traumatic experiences (Mate seems to need her journal as an outlet, regardless of the danger), as well as the bravery of the Mirabal sisters who refused to obey the corrupt dictator in silence.

Anita of *Before We Were Free* is also sensitive to the risks involved in writing, and understands both the necessity of silence and the urge to write about her experiences. Anita, like Mate, writes in her diary in an effort to understand and deal with her pain. When her friend Oscar tells her about the horrors committed by Trujillo, Anita needs the space of the diary to negotiate her overwhelming confusion and fear:

All these things that Oscar tells us I write down in my diary. I don't know what I'd do without it. It's like my whole world is coming undone, but when I write, my pencil is a needle and thread, and I'm stitching the scraps back together. (48)

¹¹⁹ Minerva's trouble intensifies when the letters from Lio are discovered in her purse after she denied having a relationship with him to Trujillo. Mate must bury her first journal because it mentions names of people involved in the movement. Mate has to hide her prison diary and her writing is described in her own journal entries as a covert and risky action. In prison, a plot is concocted to pass information on to the inspectors through writing anonymous letters reporting injustices.

Because trauma is a type of destruction (in this case, Anita's innocence has been shattered, and the ideas she had of her country, her government, and her own personal safety, have been seriously undermined), dealing with these events requires an act of construction, or creation. Anita must stitch "the scraps" of her shattered world "back together," and she does so by writing.

While writing allows Anita to voice her disagreement with the government, if her diary were to be discovered by the SIM, serious consequences would befall her family. Indicating the power of both written and spoken language, Alvarez explicitly connects writing with the voice. Forbidden from writing in her diary, Anita becomes silent, losing her voice, "forgetting words" (82, 80). Once she and her mother are living in a friend's crawl space after some of the men of the family are arrested, Anita is allowed to write again. Her mother concludes, "We're in trouble already, maybe you can leave a record that will help others who are hiding, too" (108). Although Anita has no ambition to "save the world," she is relieved to have her diary again and even compares writing in her diary to her mother's use of sedatives (108). When Anita and her mother are rescued, they are extremely fearful that they are actually being discovered by the SIM. In this utterly terrifying moment, Anita can think of nothing but writing; she tells herself, "Just keep writing, don't stop" (115). Anita feels an urge to write because, "if I stop now, they've really won. They've taken away everything, even the story of what is happening to us" (124). Here, not only does Anita recognize how writing can help her deal with her personal fears, but she also understands that her account can leave a record of the abuses the Dominican people suffered under Trujillo.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ This impulse felt by Anita, and by other of Alvarez's characters who envision their own contributions to social justice and collective memory, will be further explored in the final section of this chapter.

Alvarez repeatedly depicts her characters' awareness of the social implications of their individual experiences. Like Anita, Mate Mirabal also intends to leave a record of the events she has witnessed. At first, also like Anita, Mate begins writing in a diary in order to cope with her own fears related to the newly discovered "truth" of the Dominican police state and she illustrates in her diaries both the need to communicate and the risk involved in exercising one's voice against political oppression, even through writing. When she is away at school and homesick, Mate writes in her first diary "to keep myself from crying" (37). As her political knowledge matures, Mate responds by writing about the horrors of the Trujillo dictatorship, but Mate's diary must be destroyed when Minerva tells her it contains "possibly inflammatory evidence" (43). She wonders, "What do I do now to fill up that hole? [in her soul]" (43). When Minerva gives Mate a new diary, Mate is "desperate enough to try anything" (118) to deal with the escalating political circumstances and her family's increasing involvement in the resistance.¹²¹

The riskiest document produced by Mate in *Butterflies* is her prison diary. After she and Minerva are charged as political traitors, Mate specially requests to have her diary sent in a package from her family; Mate admits that "It feels good to write things down. Like there will be a record" (227). Writing becomes a relief from the overwhelming experience of imprisonment; the appearance of order that she gets from writing down what happens each day and how she feels about it combats the competing

¹²¹ Although most well-known for her political outspokenness, Minerva is also attempts to work through her experiences through various artistic media. In addition to co-writing an inflammatory anti-Trujillo play as a student, Minerva reads and writes poetry (126) and takes up sculpture in prison (243). Serving house arrest after their imprisonment, Mate and Minerva transform their experiences into narrative form: "They [the prison memories] became stories. Everyone wanted to hear them. Mate and I could keep the house entertained for hours, telling and retelling the horrors until the sting was out of them" (259). While storytelling and other forms of artistic production may not serve as a "cure" for the Mirabal sisters, these acts of creation help to combat the destruction they faced during their imprisonment.

fear that she is not in control of her own life. In addition, the “record” that she creates can later serve as evidence of the injustices and mistreatment that accompany the imprisonment. The writing in which Alvarez has her characters participate serves the purpose of both individual healing and social witness, demonstrating Alvarez’s awareness of the perceived responsibility of the survivor to bring the story of trauma back to the community.

Though Alvarez presents writing as crucially important to both individuals and the Dominican nation as a whole, she is also sensitive to the inherent difficulties faced by the survivor in telling her story. Mate’s prison diary demonstrates the struggle that victims undertake when attempting to write about their experiences. Although some experiences seem to be too painful to express in words, and most theorists of trauma would agree that the traumatic event can never be accurately described in language, the need to tell the story persists. As Dori Laub argues, “The ‘not telling’ the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny” (79). Despite the pain that survivors must relive in order to tell of a traumatic experience, the story must be told. According to Laub, “it is essential for this narrative that *could not be articulated*, to be *told*, to be *transmitted*, to be *heard*” (85). For Mate, the story that cannot be articulated is an account of a particularly traumatic torture session in prison. Presumably Mate, who suspects she is pregnant, is tortured in front of her husband Leandro, in an attempt to elicit his confession.¹²² In her

¹²² Here I say “presumably” because the account is left somewhat unclear. Alvarez’s decision to not have Mate describe the torture session in explicit detail indicates that Alvarez emphasizes the “unspeakable” element of traumatic memory. Lynn Chun Ink criticizes Alvarez’s prison scenes, arguing that they “fail to convey the extent of the abuse the sisters endured under Trujillo” (796) and claiming that Mate’s “detached manner . . . renders her experience sentimentalized” (796). While Ink is willing to concede that Alvarez demonstrates “history [as] ultimately unknowable,” she ultimately sees Alvarez’s omission of certain details of the torture scene (and the murder scene later on) as a failure to “humanize [the Mirabals’] story” (796). On the other hand, I believe Alvarez’s depiction (or lack thereof) of the torture scene and the later murder scene is a more honest portrayal of the emotional and psychological reality of such traumatic

diary, Mate tells us that she “can’t bear to tell the story yet” and that her bleeding has stopped (240).¹²³ The full diary entry, within which the reader seeks the details of what exactly happened to Mate, is torn out; its absence, and along with it, the implication that Mate could not tell this story, is a powerful statement about the pain of reliving a traumatic experience in order to put it into words. The absence of the account of this torture session reminds us how even those survivors who are most willing to put their experiences into words can be overwhelmed. At the end of the chapter, we finally see a delayed, partial account of the torture session; its presence indicates both Mate’s need to write about her experiences and the characteristic delay in a survivor’s ability to express her trauma in narrative form. Mate cannot write about the torture incident immediately and even when she belatedly attempts to capture the experience in words, she is unable to fully give voice to the unspeakable horrors she witnessed and suffered.¹²⁴

While Mate’s prison diary is marked by the absence of what is likely the most horrific story recorded in all of her journals and while the actual murder of the Mirabals is never described in the novel, thus making it the ultimate symbol of the “unspeakable” in the novel, Alvarez portrays the Dominican community in the aftermath of the murder of the butterflies as one distinguished by a proliferation of stories. If, as Concepción Bados Ciria contends, the murders of the Mirabal sisters “was received as a national

experiences. And because her focus in *Butterflies* appears to be more in the representation and articulation of trauma than on the details of the original events themselves, Alvarez’s decision to depict Mate’s struggle to represent her torture experience matches Alvarez’s interest in the struggles inherent in narrating trauma as seen throughout the novel.

¹²³ Although this bleeding referred to by Mate could be a result of a beating, her earlier hints that she thinks she is pregnant indicate that the bleeding is likely the result of a miscarriage, brought on by the conditions of prison life and the torture session itself.

¹²⁴ In Anita’s diary, the scene in which she and her mother are rescued from their crawl space is similarly absent. Later, we get a delayed account of this scene; Anita tells of the rescue in September even though it occurred in July (137-138). Anita’s account of the incident as told two months later indicates that she experienced both fear (at thinking they were being discovered by the SIM) and pain as a result of being separated from homeland (they were taken directly to the U.S.) (139).

trauma” (414)¹²⁵ in the Dominican Republic, the society, like any individual trauma survivor, also needs to heal. Like Dedé, the community has not only been scarred by the deaths of *Las Mariposas* and have suffered in their own ways due to the dictatorship, but the Dominican community, like Dedé herself, has also been forced to face its own guilt and lack of involvement in the movement against Trujillo.

According to Dedé, immediately following the sisters’ deaths, these stories took the form of reports, especially those providing details of the sisters’ last hours alive on the night of their murder. Dedé remembers, “They would come with their stories of that afternoon . . . They all wanted to give me some of the girls’ last moments. Each visitor would break my heart all over again, but I would sit on this very rocker and listen for as long as they had something to say” (301). In the past, Dedé occupied for her fellow Dominicans the same place that the interview woman occupies for Dedé’s own testimony: she served as the witness, allowing the visitors not only to reveal small bits of information from that day of the murder, but also to purge themselves of the guilt suffered at not having been able to do something to prevent the tragedy. Although these visitors have in no way suffered the same pain that Dedé has, they still exhibit the need to tell the stories that are associated with this national tragedy. One man, whom Dedé imagines must have taken days to reach her home from the mountains, arrived and “gave me the exact hour and made the thundering noise of the tumbling Jeep he graphed with his arcing hand. Then he turned around and headed back to his mountain. He came all

¹²⁵ This sentiment is echoed by Dedé in the “Epilogue.” Dedé rejects Minou’s suggestion that, instead of constantly speaking to people individually about the Mirabal sisters, she record the story and sell it. Dedé responds, “Why, Minou, the idea!” To make our tragedy – because it is *our* tragedy, really, the whole country’s – to make it into a money-making enterprise” (312).

that way just to tell me that” (303).¹²⁶ As a witness to even a small part of their deaths, this man understands his responsibility to share the story. Thus, the need to testify remains strong even for those who did not directly experience the loss suffered by Dedé and the rest of the Mirabal family.

Of course, narrating trauma is never simple and painless, nor is every story therapeutic in *Butterflies*. Stories can also be overwhelming, as when Dedé, as part of her perceived punishment and martyrdom, listens, pained, to the stories of her fellow Dominicans. After a while, she “just couldn’t take one more story” (304). Hearing assorted details of her sisters’ last night alive ties Dedé to a cycle of repetition of the past, and as listener, not speaker, she does not exercise her own need to narrate. Dedé’s listener status is symptomatic of the unresolved nature of her traumatic memories. The only story that she has told about her sisters has become a static, mythologized account of their heroism and martyrdom. As we have seen in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, a mythologized, controlling narrative account of a traumatic event can cause more harm than good when a survivor seeks to work through painful memories.

“I came back from the dead”: Testimony and the Search for Self

For Dedé Mirabal, the legend of her sisters’ deaths, and what those deaths came to represent, has taken over her life; although stories of trauma can help a survivor gain control over the traumatic experience, at the beginning of *Butterflies*, Dedé is controlled by the story of the butterflies. Ironically, the power that story has over Dedé silences her

¹²⁶ Another example Dedé gives is from the proprietor of the store where the girls had stopped briefly before the SIM hijacked their jeep; he tells Dedé, “He will never forgive himself that he couldn’t find any cinnamon [Chiclets, which the girls wanted to buy]. His wife wept for the little things that could have made the girls’ last minutes happier” (302).

own story and hinders her ability to “know” buried elements of the story that have not yet resurfaced to demand her attention. Caruth argues that a trauma survivor is haunted by “not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (*UE* 6). Because she can rely on the mythologized account that satisfies curious visitors interested in the Mirabals’ lives, Dedé does not have to give an account of herself, and so she has not yet been able to confront the buried grief and guilt associated with both the tragedy and her absence relative to it. Maya Socolovsky argues that “memorial legends paradoxically create forgetting by doing and absorbing the work of remembering for us” and associates “forgetting” traumatic events directly with the “act[s] of memorialization” that paradoxically intend to commemorate those events and foreclose our forgetting (6). In *Butterflies*, Alvarez depicts Dedé’s own healing as inhibited by her reliance on the mythologized account of her sisters’ lives and deaths.

We ultimately discover that Dedé is most haunted by her decision not to join the butterflies on their revolutionary mission and that this decision is the reason she was indeed saved; however, Dedé’s crucial choice is only revealed through the novel’s enactment of her testimony. Although she has spent her life honoring the story of her heroic sisters, even suffering what her former husband Jaimito termed her “martyrdom” (308), through serving as the transmitter of the story of her sisters, what Dedé has not dealt with yet is the guilt she feels at not becoming involved, which has also blocked her ability to confront the reality of her sisters’ deaths. In her role as guardian of the story of the real Mirabal women, Dedé has developed a formulaic account of the butterflies. In the prologue to the novel, Dedé shows the reporter around the home, now a sort of museum in their honor. We learn that “[t]here are the three pictures of the girls, old favorites that

are now emblazoned on the posters every November, making these once intimate snapshots seem too famous to be the sisters she knew” (5). Here, Dedé feels distanced from the real people her sisters were.¹²⁷ For example, she tries to “[pin Minerva down] to a handful of adjectives” because she is “used to this fixed, monolithic language around interviewers and mythologizers of her sisters” (7). Although Dedé has previously told the story of her sisters as a sort of predetermined narrative, she seems to know early in the novel that this visit from the reporter will be different. In a sense, it has been easier for Dedé to cope with the tragedy that befell her family by resorting to the accepted myths about her sisters, making her loss “a manageable grief” (310). However, the narration offered in *Butterflies* attempts to go beyond “monolithic language” and the myths. As Yolanda asserts in *Garcia Girls*, “There’s more to the story. There always is to a true story” (102). The novel will not rehash the old story about the Mirabal sisters, but will trace Dedé’s attempt to get to her “true story.”

Dedé’s testimony is instigated by the reporter’s questions about simple facts first, such as the birth order of the Mirabal sisters; this indicates to Dedé that the reporter is unfamiliar with even the “myths” of the women that govern the Dominican image of them as heroines. Dedé feels “relieved” because “[t]his means that they can spend the time talking about the simple facts that give Dedé the illusion that hers was just an ordinary family, too” (6). Her “emotion in her voice in spite of herself” when she recalls the names and defining characteristics of her sisters shows Dedé’s continuing struggle

¹²⁷ Alvarez considers *Butterflies* as an attempt to avoid mythologizing the Mirabals and instead tries to understand these women, and Dedé actually enacts this process of understanding within the novel, as well. In the postscript to the novel, Alvarez observes, “deification was dangerous, the same god-making impulse that had created our tyrant” (324).

with the tragic fates of her sisters.¹²⁸ Dedé's anguish indicates an ongoing process of recovery. She may feel that she can "take up her own life again" and sink into relative "anonymity" during the times of each year not surrounding the anniversary of her sisters' deaths, but Dedé will not be able to deal with the tragedy fully until she faces the reality of her sisters' lives and her own relationship to their fates.

Dedé begins telling the reporter her story of her sisters by placing herself in a distant, happy memory. Taking the reporter and the reader back to this time of relative peace and innocence and then proceeding with the story from this point, seems for Dedé to be different than other accounts she's given of her family's history. At the close of the prologue, "A chill goes through her, for she feels it in her bones, the future is now beginning. By the time it is over, it will be the past, and she doesn't want to be the only one left to tell their story" (10). Dedé's uncanny reaction to telling the story this time indicates that she knows this narration will be different; in getting to the heart of the stories of her sisters and of herself, she will leave with a more thorough understanding of the traumatic events of the past that she has not yet been able to face, and she also seems to know that she will not be as haunted by those traumas after undertaking this journey. Caught in a cycle of repeating the predetermined account of the Mirabal story, Dedé has not confronted her own decision to remain uninvolved in the underground movement. By

¹²⁸ Dedé's character as a trauma survivor is even foregrounded early in the novel when she compares herself to a Holocaust survivor. When the reporter asks Dedé how she "keep[s] such a tragedy from taking [her] under?" (7), Dedé "thinks of an article she read at the beauty salon, by a Jewish lady who had survived a concentration camp" (7). Alvarez is clearly aware of connections between survivors of the Holocaust and survivors of political terror such as Dominicans. She also compares *Before We Were Free* to the *Diary of Anne Frank*: "In reviewing historical fiction for young readers, I found many powerful narratives on the Holocaust, on slavery in this country, but I could find very little for young people about our own hemisphere's recent history. That was what really pushed me to write *BWWF*. I wanted to tell the story of our Anne Frank on this side of the Atlantic" ("In Her Own Words" 175).

embarking on this narration, though, she seems to know that she must contend with the past in a new, more direct way.

Interestingly, Alvarez allows Patria, Minerva, and Mate to narrate their own sections in the first person, while Dedé's sections are told in third person. Again, the story Dedé is most used to telling is the story of her sisters' heroism and tragic deaths. However, because each part of the novel includes a chapter by Dedé, surrounded by the chapters spoken by her sisters, Dedé must both revisit the personal narratives of each sister and also insert her own story into the Mirabal family drama¹²⁹; in doing so, she must face her past decisions.¹³⁰ Although also painful, Dedé's former narration of the fallen butterflies allowed her to occupy a safe space in relation to her own guilt; at the time of the novel, however, it seems Dedé is ready to confront the Dedé of the past in order to better understand her role as survivor.

Dedé here embodies the idea that narrating the story of trauma through an act of testimony is both painful and therapeutic; the survivor experiences both a resistance to

¹²⁹ Although the sections about Minerva, Mate, and Patria are narrated by those characters in the first person, at the end of the novel, it is safe to assume that these characters have been speaking through Dedé all along. One piece of evidence supporting this theory is related to an early reference to Fela, a former housekeeper for the Mirabals who claims to communicate with the spirits of the sisters. Minerva's daughter Minou is known to visit Fela in an attempt to speak with her mother; at the end of the novel Minou comes to Dedé, upset by Fela's inability to summon Minerva's spirit. Minou says, "Fela says they must finally be at rest. It was strange, hearing that. I felt sad instead of glad" (174), but the notoriously skeptical Dedé assures Minou, "I swear they've been here. All afternoon" (174).

¹³⁰ Although it is much less important than her lack of involvement in the revolution, another memory that is painful for Dedé to face during her narration of the novel is one associated with Lío, also a revolutionary leader and former beau of Minerva. Dedé was also attracted to Lío (even though she is dating her future husband Jaimito) and was jealous of Minerva's relationship with him. She and Minerva have a fight over Lío, and Dedé, in her retrospective narration, feels a lot would have been different in the lives of the Mirabal sisters if she or Minerva had ended up with Lío. Remembering that time is painful for Dedé: "Something keeps her turning and turning these moments in her mind, something. She is no longer sure she wants to find out what" (73). Through re-living that time in the novel, however, Dedé remembers how she purposely did not relay a written message from Lío to Minerva, a note in which Lío asked Minerva to join him as he fled the country. Dedé also compares that memory to her lack of involvement in the movement (and her guilt at blaming Jaimito for that lack of involvement): "Jaimito was just an excuse. She was afraid, plain and simple, just as she had been afraid to face her powerful feelings for Lío" (184). Because of this juxtaposition, we are to understand that both of these revelations are uncovered by Dedé as she remembers the past by relating the story to the *gringa dominicana*.

tell the story and thus to revisit the traumas of the past and an urge to tell that same story in an attempt to move past the trauma. Laub writes of the delayed testimonies of Holocaust survivors that “[t]here is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (63). In *Butterflies*, Alvarez creates an opportunity for Dedé to attempt to learn her “buried truth,” in order to return to the so-called normalcy she seeks by understanding her own guilt and confronting the reality of the painful past, while also enabling herself to work through a personal relationship with the Mirabals and with the Trujillo-era and post-Trujillo Dominican Republic.

As I mentioned, Dedé’s sections in parts one, two, and three are narrated in the third person. In chapter nine, the last section of the novel that treats Dedé’s story within the timeline of events leading up to the murders of the butterflies, Dedé finally is able to take responsibility for her lack of involvement in the revolution, and thus her escape from the fates suffered by her sisters. She admits that it was her decision to remain uninvolved that resulted in her survival. Even as earlier accounts of Dedé’s character attempt to blame her domineering husband Jaimito, who is repeatedly depicted denying Dedé’s sisters any support and warning Dedé not to get involved in dangerous political activity, after narrating the stories and thus re-living them, Dedé is able to face her own choices and take a measure of control over her past. As she tells the story, recovering the traumatic memories of that time in her life, Dedé finally understands the truth and realizes, “She was hiding behind her husband’s fears, bringing down scorn on him instead of herself” (180). She finally confesses to the reporter that “*I followed my*

husband. *I didn't get involved*" (172, Alvarez's emphasis). Thus Dedé attempts to take responsibility for her actions through the process of giving her testimony. Lifton argues that the survivor configures witnessing, or bringing the narrative of trauma back to the community, as her "responsibility as a survivor. And it's involved in the transformation from guilt to responsibility" (*Trauma* 138). Having spent over thirty years feeling guilty for surviving, Dedé has dedicated her life to remembering the butterflies; even though it causes her pain, Dedé endures endless stories and questions, seeing this as her punishment and her martyrdom, feeling she justly suffers now because she escaped the physical suffering and death that her sisters experienced. However, narrating the story within this novel allows Dedé to transform her guilt at surviving into responsibility, both for herself and for the community.

In the epilogue, Dedé has finally begun to face her own past, which could have been easily put aside while she devoted her life to remembering "the girls." After decades of feeling suffocated by her inability to cope with her guilt, afraid to remember that she chose to not become as involved in the underground movement as her sisters, punished by having to live without them, Dedé finally can begin to live a life of her own. This is symbolized by her finally speaking in the first person in the epilogue. She closes her meditations by returning to the memory of innocence with which she began in the prologue. This time, however, she remembers it differently:

And I see them all there in my memory, as still as statues, Mama and Papa, and Minerva and Mate and Patria, and I'm thinking something is missing now. And I could count them all twice before I realize – it's me, Dedé, it's me, the one who survived to tell the story. (321)

Ironically, even though Dede is the only Mirabal sister to avoid torture and death, she has suffered the longest, imprisoned by the past; now, however, Dedé begins to see herself as

separate from that painful past. After reliving the stories through her narrative, she realizes that she can lead a life independent of her sisters while still honoring their memory. Dedé finally claims her own voice and begins to break free from the hold the past has had on her.

“A story bigger than your own story”: Individual Testimony and Collective Healing

Although Dedé seems ready to begin recovering from the traumatic past in the finale of *Butterflies*, it is clear that this process is painful and complex. As the novel opens, Dedé is exhausted by her role as the keeper of this traumatic history. Though Dedé seems less burdened by the past at the close of the novel, she has not simply “gotten over it.” The epilogue of *Butterflies* illustrates just how difficult it truly is for a survivor of trauma to recover. For Dedé, part of the struggle that continues is the search for the meaning of the girls’ death. Although she is now able to come to terms with her personal responsibility in the incident, Dedé continues to struggle with her responsibility to the community, which is to keep the memory of the butterflies alive in order to ensure the political change for which they ultimately sacrificed their lives. While it seems as though Dedé has been able to make some measure of peace with the past, her role as a survivor also entails the responsibility of sharing her story with the community. As Tal argues, “[w]hen a survivor testifies, she both purges herself of an internal ‘evil,’ and bears witness to a social or political injustice” (200). The overlap of the personal and the sociopolitical is certainly highlighted in Alvarez’s novel when she chooses to have the nationally-renowned story of the butterflies told by the surviving sister, and both Alvarez

and Dedé emphasize the importance of what is ultimately a very personal story to the Dominican nation.

While criticism of *Butterflies* has not thoroughly examined Dedé as a trauma survivor, most scholars have, at least in some way, recognized the relationship of the community to the trauma narrative (in this case, the importance of the Mirabal story to Dominican society). As the novel suggests, the story of the butterflies provided a much-needed impetus for change in Dominican politics. Immediately following the murders, change did occur in the Dominican Republic, including the assassination of Trujillo and the institution of a more democratic government; however, Dominican politics certainly did not follow a simple pattern of improvement. In the epilogue, Dedé attempts to negotiate her need to feel that “maybe it was for something that the girls had died” (310) with the reality of the unstable politics of her country, but she realizes that the social change for which her sisters fought is a steadily evolving process, much like her ongoing personal recovery. The story of the Mirabal sisters was, indeed, inspirational in the Dominican Republic, and their martyrdom is credited, at least in part, for the eventual overthrow of the dictator who ordered their deaths.

Alvarez insists on the influence of the Mirabals’ story by having another of her characters, Anita, attest to the inspirational impact of *Las Mariposas* in *Before We Were Free*, with an account of how she was told by her mother of the beginning of her parents’ involvement in the underground movement. Mami explains to Anita that “we heard about these sisters who were organizing a movement to bring freedom to the country. Everyone called them *Las Mariposas*, the Butterflies, because they had put wings on all our hearts” (133). Her uncle, who is involved in the plot to kill El Jefe as well, tells

Anita of “the thousands of people who ... will be brave because of the Butterflies” (102). In turn, Anita herself feels inspired and proud of her family’s commitment to justice. Although her mother is losing hope in the possibility of freedom in the Dominican Republic, Anita thinks, “No Mami, not the end. Long live the Butterflies!” (134), affirming that Anita, too, has been touched by the story of the Mirabal sisters and their devotion to and sacrifice for political change. Intent on solidifying the influence of the Mirabals on Dominican politics, Alvarez creates Anita as an example of how Dominicans were inspired to act against their oppressive government after the murder of the butterflies.

Over thirty years after her sisters’ deaths, though, Dedé continues to feel responsible for telling the story in order to remind the Dominican people of the magnitude of the sacrifices that were made to enable them to live in a better world; the story of the butterflies has the potential to inspire Dominicans to take initiative and continue on the road to recovery. Dedé sees it as her job, and in a sense, her reason for surviving, to pass on the story of her sisters’ heroism and martyrdom. Dedé felt it was her duty, at first, to listen to all of the stories that people in her community brought to her, mostly stories about the night the Mirabals were murdered. Even though listening to all of the details of the end of her sisters’ lives is extraordinarily painful for Dedé, she feels obliged to do so (301). Over time, however, Dedé recognizes that her role has transformed from that of the listener to that of the orator; she wonders to herself, “When, in other words, did I become the oracle?” (312).

In attempting to answer this question for herself, Dedé realizes that the example of the butterflies can again serve as an inspiration for the community. She testifies to her friend Olga,

'After the fighting was over and we were a broken people' – she shakes her head sadly at this portrait of our recent times – 'that's when I opened my doors, and instead of listening, I started talking. We had lost hope, and we needed a story to understand what had happened to us.' (313)

Dedé understands that, even beyond enabling her personal healing, telling the story of the butterflies has therapeutic potential for her community. Dedé's selfless dedication to promoting an awareness of this national trauma is important for the recovery of the community, but as *Butterflies* also indicates, Dedé's role as storyteller only came after she played the role of listener for many years. Significantly, Dedé cannot tell the story of her sisters' deaths because she did not witness them; however, not telling the story in such a way as to allow the narration of the Mirabals' deaths is also a strategic choice by Alvarez. The novel emphasizes that the story that has the potential to impact the Dominican people is one that honors the Mirabals' lives and their political commitments, and this is the story Alvarez tells in *Butterflies*.

Dedé's story, however, and the reality of the Mirabal sisters' deaths stands in contrast to the government's version of the events. In the novel, as in reality, the Trujillo regime circulates an "official story" of what happened to the Mirabal sisters in order to mask the cruelty and injustice of the dictatorship. According to Dedé, unlike previously in the Dominican Republic, when people may have heard the horrible rumors of Trujillo's brutality and were unable to either believe or contest the power of the regime, after the deaths of the Mirabals, "People came out of their houses. They had already heard the story we were to pretend to believe. The Jeep had gone off the cliff on a bad

turn. But their faces knew the truth” (308). As a counter-narrative, Dedé’s testimony challenges the “official story” transmitted to the public by the dictatorship. Her story offers an alternative to the regime’s “truth.” It is clear throughout Alvarez’s fiction that the Dominican people feel empowered by their ability to contest the “story” of the dictatorship and credit the version they see as the “true story.” In *Before We Were Free*, Anita writes in her diary, “if I stop now, they’ve really won. They’ve taken away everything, even the story of what is happening to us” (124).¹³¹ Again, the trauma narrative serves a purpose both in the personal healing of individual survivors, but also stands as social document and political action. There is a sense in Alvarez’s work that stories and writing are extremely powerful and hold enormous potential for healing and change.

Alvarez’s faith in the influence of the Mirabals’ story is reflected in her goal to present *Las Mariposas* to an American audience who had yet to truly appreciate the Mirabal sisters’ historical significance or the magnitude of the sacrifice they made.¹³² Alvarez envisions the butterflies “as models for women fighting against injustices of all kinds” (324), and her story seeks to spread their influence to the United States. Even

¹³¹ The story of the women in *Corregidora* functions as an alternate story to the “official” story created by the oppressors. The women see the importance of passing on that story, and so Ursa is told repeatedly the “truth” of what happened between her foremothers and the slave master Corregidora. She is told that she is “suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget” and that “you got to leave evidence too” (9, 14). In the second chapter, I showed how in *Paradise*, Morrison presents extreme allegiance to the trauma narrative as dangerous. When considering these works together, they suggest a precarious, complex relationship between the survivor and her story, particularly when her story holds a perceived political value.

¹³² The Mirabals’ lack of notoriety in the U.S. stands in contrast to their fame in the D.R. According to Johnson, “The paradox of the Mirabal sisters’ story is that Alvarez has to retrieve it not only from the silence of the trujillato but from the profusion of post-Trujillo narratives about las mariposas” (“Silence” 93). For a further discussion of the commemoration of the Mirabals on the Island generally and of the Mirabal Museo in particular, see Johnson, “Silence,” 97-106.

before her novel was published, Alvarez's vision was echoed by many others who seek to end political injustice. According to Dedé herself, in a recent interview,

In 1981 a group of women in Colombia decided to make November 25 the 'International Day Against Violence Towards Women,' in homage to Minerva, Patria, and María Teresa. And in 1997 the United Nations declared that date an international day of struggle against violence against women. (46)¹³³

This international recognition, along with Alvarez's novel itself, have helped to spread the story of the Mirabals, and ideally, for Dedé and for Alvarez, to spread the sisters' passion for ending injustice.

Although Alvarez's novel clearly praises the revolutionary actions of the Mirabals, persuading most readers that these women are indeed very important political figures, the reality is that the Mirabal story previously existed as a small mention in historical works on the Dominican Republic. For examples, Moya Pons' detailed *The Dominican Republic: A National History* only provides a brief paragraph on the Mirabals' contribution to Dominican politics (372), in which the author notes in a very straightforward manner that the Mirabals opposed Trujillo and were killed on November 25, 1960.¹³⁴ As indicated by critical emphasis and by the institution of the United Nations' International Day Against Violence Towards Women, the story of the Mirabals is one that provides an alternative history that is specifically gendered female. Alvarez's novel has received critical acclaim for its role in establishing the importance of women's

¹³³ This fact is also noted in Alvarez's "Postscript" to *Butterflies* (324).

¹³⁴ Therefore, in a work of 500 pages, only one paragraph mentions the Mirabals. Likewise, in *The Dominican People: A Documentary History*, Ernesto Sagas and Orlando Inoa relegate the Mirabal story to one brief paragraph, included in the section "Macho Politics" (183-184). Besides stating the facts of their opposition and their murders, Sagas and Inoa mention that, "The Dominican people, who did not believe the regime's official story, were horrified by the cold-blooded murder of these three defenseless women, as now no one felt safe from the dictator's wrath" (184).

participation in history.¹³⁵ Further, in providing an alternate account of the historical events surrounding the Trujillo dictatorship and the Mirabal's resistance and murders, Alvarez and Dedé's testimonies can further demystify the story of that regime and strip that story of its power. As Richard Patterson argues, *Butterflies* (and other recent fictional accounts of the Trujillo era told from viewpoints unsympathetic to the dictator¹³⁶) has the potential to "perform a subversive and ultimately liberating function" (224) by "convey[ing] a sense of the dictator himself being circumscribed and contained by the stories she has her characters tell" (229). In rewriting the dictator himself, therefore, Alvarez's novel offers the potential for healing for those who felt imprisoned by him for so long; they are empowered by the revelation of the horrors perpetrated under Trujillo, and confronting "the truth" about what they experienced enables survivors to begin to recover. Counter-histories, like the one presented in *Butterflies*, validate the experiences of so many who suffered as a result of the dictatorship.

While the importance of Alvarez's novel (and Dedé's fictionalized testimony within the novel) to the understanding of women's roles in history, and the rewriting of Dominican history more generally¹³⁷ should not be underestimated, there are several other significant effects that have been and can be produced through sharing the Mirabal story with the community. Just as narrating the story becomes therapeutic for Dedé as an individual, her storytelling can help to mend the Dominican community, which also

¹³⁵ Gallo, in "'The Good, the Brave, the Beautiful': Julia Alvarez's Homage to Female History," claims that, in *Butterflies*, "Alvarez provides a new, female-based unofficial version to stories that until now had been known only as popular legends or that had been written from a male viewpoint" (89). See also Johnson, "Silence" (94-95); she discusses the sexism of a particularly harsh review of *Butterflies* by Roberto Gonzales Escheverria, claiming that Escheverria's reading relies on an understanding of history as gendered male (he thought the novel was too sentimental and 'weepy').

¹³⁶ These works include Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Mario Vargas Llosa's *La Fiesta del Chivo*.

¹³⁷ Socolovsky argues that the novel also illuminates the intertwined histories of the United States and the Dominican Republic, as well as revealing the truth about the relationship between the U.S. and Trujillo.

suffered under Trujillo and felt deeply the loss of the revolutionary *Mariposas*. As Johnson argues, in *Butterflies*, “testimony serves as part of the collective memory and as part of the healing process of those who survived Trujillo’s regime” (“Both Sides” 14). So, even though it is painful for Dedé to remember and retell the story of her sisters’ murders, Alvarez’s novel suggests that the social import (not to mention the importance of her narration to Dedé’s own healing) supersedes this pain.¹³⁸ Ultimately Dedé cannot avoid telling the story of the butterflies; articulating trauma is presented in the novel as compulsory. As Laub claims, “repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation” (85). In Alvarez’s novel, Dedé’s testimony, while providing her with the opportunity to “complete the process of survival” for herself, also serves “a form of action, of change,” which for Dedé involves

¹³⁸ Although Gomez-Vega reads the character Dedé as in conflict with Alvarez over whether “there is any meaning other than the losses suffered by the family” (“Radicalizing Good Catholic Girls” 108), I feel that Alvarez and Dedé both understand the complexity of traumatization and recovery. Gomez-Vega argues, “The writer may want to romanticize history to invest it with meaning; she may want to argue that freedom is worth the sacrifice of human life, but the people who survive the wreckage of history know better than to think that there is anything more important than the loss of their loved ones.” (108)¹³⁸

Certainly, Dedé struggles to come to terms with the “meaning” of the unimaginable sacrifice made by her sisters; however, Dedé also understands the impact the butterflies have had on the country and on women’s lives.¹³⁸ Like the Dedé of Alvarez’s creation, the real Dedé Mirabal, in a recent interview, claims, “It’s been very difficult but I have healed: I don’t feel hatred although I always remember my sisters” (*Caribbean Connections* 46). Her statement echoes the fictional Dedé’s comment that raising her sisters’ children as “not haunted and full of hate” has been “a sign of my success” (319). Dedé’s character in the novel does understand both the pain and the significance of her sisters’ murders and seems to comprehend both her roles as sister and as historical witness.

Contra Gomez-Vega, who argues that Dedé “can see no meaning in their sacrifice because she never shares their revolutionary zeal” and so “sees only waste in the loss of her sisters’ lives” (106). Certainly, Dedé feels great pain in response to her sisters’ deaths and would not wish to exchange their lives for the unforeseen political ups-and-downs that followed their murders; however, it is also inaccurate to claim that Dedé was not inspired by her sisters’ “revolutionary zeal,” as the novel indicates the opposite sentiment. Dedé tells the reporter, regretfully, I think, that she did not survive because, as the reporter imagines, she was “luckily” not with them on the night of their deaths, but rather, because she “didn’t involved until later ... When it was already too late” (172). Although admittedly afraid to join her sisters while they were alive, Dedé did sympathize with their cause, and even “could feel herself being swayed by the passion of her sisters” (179).

an inherent responsibility to her community. Alvarez's hope is that exposure to the story of the Mirabals, both immediately following the death of the sisters in the Dominican Republic, and even now, as readers learn of the injustices perpetrated in the world, can inspire social action.¹³⁹

Not surprisingly, Alvarez clearly sees a connection between her personal interest in the political struggles of the Dominican Republic and the social project at stake. In her note following *Before We Were Free*, Alvarez explains, "There is a tradition in Latin American countries known as *testimonio*. It is the responsibility of those who survive the struggle for freedom to give testimony. To tell the story in order to keep alive the memory of those who died" (166). In her 2006 study, *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio*, Kimberly A. Nance defines *testimonio*

as a body of works in which speaking subjects who present themselves as somehow 'ordinary' represent a personal experience of injustice, whether directly to the reader or through the offices of a collaborating writer, with the goal of inducing readers to participate in the project of social justice. (7)

Butterflies could be said to offer both Alvarez's and Dedé's *testimonios*. Dedé's sisters, speaking through her, combined with Dedé's own personal testimony, depict the Mirabal sisters as "ordinary" women; Dedé delights in the fact that the *gringa dominicana's* basic biographical questions about the Mirabals will "give Dedé the illusion that hers was just an ordinary family, too – birthdays and weddings and new babies, the peaks in that graph of normalcy" (6). Although *Las Mariposas* are known as heroines in the Dominican

¹³⁹ This notion is reinforced by Alvarez's choice to present the every day lives of the Mirabals rather than focusing exclusively on their heroism. She explains, "by making them myth, we lost the Mirabals once more, dismissing the challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women" (324). In other words, seeing the Mirabal sisters as larger-than-life heroines discourages us from aspiring to their actions; attempting to describe their everyday lives, on the other hand, is a strategy Alvarez uses to allow readers to envision how they, too, could realistically become involved in political struggles.

Republic, attaining larger-than-life status in local legend, Alvarez attempts to see the Mirabals as their surviving sister Dedé would – as close personal friends, as family members, as real people. The Mirabal’s heroine status was reached, of course, by their dedication to ending the injustice of the Trujillo government in the Dominican Republic. Dedé hopes to keep the story of her sisters alive so that the Dominican people can be inspired and so that they can remember the sacrifice made by these women to ensure the freedom of the people. As Dedé stated in a 2006 interview, “Trujillo conquered her [Minerva], but he didn’t conquer the people. Because now the people have complete freedom of expression and action” (“Interview with Doña Dedé Mirabal” 46). Dedé, through Alvarez’s novel, now passes on the responsibility to pursue social justice to all who are aware of the butterflies’ story.

As a “subgenre of the literature of trauma” (Nance 100), *testimonio* also seeks to inspire social change and an awareness of justice in its readers. According to Tal, “Bearing witness is an aggressive act ... Its goal is change” (7), a joint goal, as Nance explains, of *testimonio*, “is not only to produce books; [the authors of *testimonio*] are after social change” (12). In keeping the Mirabals’ memory alive, Dedé not only holds onto her sisters and their memories and works through her personal relationship to the trauma, but she also makes the story public in the hopes that it will produce social change, end injustice in the Dominican Republic and, maybe even influence other nations suffering under political dictatorships. Trauma narratives characteristically blend the personal and the social, the private and the public; in the case of *testimonio*, the personal story is presented as representative or somehow relatable so that the reader can then feel more empowered and inspired to enact the social change for which *testimonio* is offered.

Alvarez, who explains in “First Muse” the influence of the story of Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights* on her life and her work, is acutely aware of the power of stories to affect the lives of both individuals and communities. According to Silvio Sirias, “Alvarez tells stories both to save herself and to make the world a kinder, gentler place” (9).¹⁴⁰ Even if Alvarez, like Scheherazade, writes her novels in order to “save herself,” to heal herself of the trauma experienced under the Trujillo regime and by moving to the United States, the guilt felt because she and her loved ones were able to escape the harsher fates of the Mirabal sisters, Alvarez’s own healing is not enough. Like Dedé, Alvarez sees a purpose for her stories beyond the role they play in her own recovery from trauma. In relating the story of the Mirabal sisters, heroines who were not able to escape persecution and death in the way Alvarez and Dedé were, the narrator of *Butterflies* and her author contribute to the therapeutic recovery of the society that was so scarred by the deaths of the beloved *Mariposas*. By reading the literature of trauma, in turn, we are asked to fulfill the responsibility that comes with hearing the story. Alvarez’s novel does not ask readers simply to passively consume the trauma and recovery of the Dominican people; rather, *Butterflies* hopes to inspire readers to become more active participants in the world around them and to use the knowledge gained from these stories to continue the work of the fallen Butterflies, to promote responsibility toward ourselves and others, and to heal injustices in our own communities and around the world.

¹⁴⁰ Further Trenton Hickman argues, “Alvarez’s readers are to understand that they must do the same: this is not a book to be read and blithely appreciated, but one that demands a new attitude and activism towards the ‘revolutionary’ issues of women’s voices and women’s ways of knowing the world” (111). Of all of the authors in this study, Alvarez is certainly the writer who is most explicit about her desire to inspire readers to become involved in sociopolitical activism.

Conclusion

As the novels analyzed in my project suggest, fiction is a space of possibility that may be able to inscribe some of the impossible elements of traumatic experience better than more “realistic” art forms. However, fictional accounts of traumatic experiences also are accompanied by a set of probing questions and issues. For example, if we think of novels and other fictional accounts as primarily forms of entertainment, as commodities, how do we reconcile the seemingly unethical enjoyment and consumption of products that describe pain, torture, and tragedy? Is it possible, as Alvarez has worried, that fictional accounts of trauma could distract readers from the more immediate needs of real survivors? And how do we reconcile the paradoxical struggle of the survivor, whether real or fictional, both to forget and to remember the traumatic experience? Ironically, trauma theorists almost unanimously emphasize the impossibility inherent in narrating traumatic experiences, despite the nearly universally-cited idea that traumatic memory must be transformed into narrative memory in order for survivors to begin to recover. How can a narrative marked by the impossible task of representing the unspeakable paradoxically become the means of healing scars left by the traumatic event? How can that narrative become powerful, meaningful, and influential not just on the personal level, but also on a communal, national, or international scale?

It is the question one inquisitive reader once asked Alvarez – “does writing matter?” (*Something to Declare* 298) – that seems to have inspired the character Alma, the protagonist of Alvarez’s recent novel *Saving the World* (2006), who increasingly doubts the relevance of her own writing in a world rapidly deteriorating due to an apparent epidemic of violence and oppression. Although Alvarez reveals in her fiction,

essays, and interviews her interest both in recovery from trauma and in the potential impact of trauma narratives on readers, even she questions the possibility that literary accounts of trauma can inspire real sociopolitical action. In *Saving the World*, Alma is surrounded by characters who are directly involved in the novel's eponymous project: her husband is an international aid consultant, her best friend is a social activist with an apparently endless list of causes, her neighbor's son and his wife head what they term an "ethical terrorist group trying to save the world" (59), and perhaps most importantly, the characters in Alma's latest novel (a work of historical fiction based on real figures) undertake the valiant mission of curing the Spanish New World of smallpox.

Throughout Alvarez's novel, Alma constantly compares her writing, which she had previously thought of as a form of social action (80), to these other examples and finds her own contributions wanting. After her husband's death, Alma is at her most skeptical, knowing there is no story that can bring her husband back, but she voices the paradoxical response of the trauma survivor when she thinks, "she has been infected with a sorrow that will leave her scarred and changed. But she is also carrying a living story inside her, an antibody to the destruction she has seen" (326). The "antibody" is Alma's novel, which reminds her that stories can live on and can influence future readers, just as Isabel, her fictional heroine, has inspired Alma. Alma comes to see herself, like Isabel, as "a carrier," bringing the story to the world, and therefore, engaging in a potential form of social action, though she also recognizes that her experiences have left her "scarred and changed" herself.

Alvarez (and, I argue, Morrison, Walker, Butler, Perry, and Tan, as well) does not minimize or simplify her characters' pain in order to offer a neat, uplifting conclusion to

their struggles. Their struggles, their doubts, their resistance, their desire to forget, their inability to articulate their experiences are all portrayed in these novels. Although narratives of trauma have the potential to educate and to inspire action and social change, these authors clearly demonstrate that the characters telling their stories do not do so without an enormous amount of struggle, and at the end of each of the novels, though many characters seem to have begun healing, there are no easy or straightforward resolutions for the problems posed within each text's pages. Nevertheless, Morrison, Walker, Butler, Perry, Tan, and Alvarez all end their texts on notes of at least muted hope. Each novel carefully renders the complexities and the nuances of traumatic experience and the struggle survivors confront when attempting to work through painful memories. And despite the texts' depictions of the widely different degrees of recovery achieved by their characters, each novel places the recovery process – either its presence or its absence – at the center of the experience of trauma.

In the literature of trauma, the potential of the trauma narrative to promote social change co-exists with the difficulty inherent in constructing that very story. As readers of trauma literature, we become witnesses to the pain of others. As E. Ann Kaplan suggests,

“Witnessing” involves not just empathy and motivation to help, but understanding the structure of injustice – that an injustice has taken place – rather than focusing on a specific case. Once this happens we may feel obligated to take responsibility for specific injustices. Art that invites us to bear witness to injustice goes beyond moving us to identify with and help a specific individual, and prepares us to take responsibility for preventing future occurrence. (23)

Kaplan's tentative belief that interaction with “[a]rt that invites us to bear witness to injustice” implies that the movement from reader/witness to activist is a multi-step process, but Kaplan also seems confident that recognizing injustice and oppression in art,

in literary texts, for example, ultimately can lead to the desire to act upon this recognition; witnessing engenders a responsibility to not just watch and listen, but to act. It would be overly simplistic to claim that reading about trauma guarantees that a reader will want to “save the world,” but it would also be a mistake to ignore the power of stories. After considering whether writing matters, and in what way, Alvarez herself admits that literature “matters in such a small, almost invisible way that it doesn’t seem very important” (298), but finally recognizes the value of “the tiny rearrangements and insights into our hearts that art accomplishes” (298). Perhaps the “tiny rearrangements and insights” gained by reading the literature of trauma can serve as a first step toward healing our traumatized world.

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