

**AFTER THE FACT: CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST
FICTION AND HISTORICAL TRAUMA**

by

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**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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During the 1980s and 1990s, novels dealing with past traumatic experiences in both the public and private spheres appeared with some regularity. These works depict historical atrocities, including slavery and genocide, as well as varying forms of interpersonal violence, and notably childhood sexual abuse. They draw on the growing body of interdisciplinary research and theory which has come to be known as trauma studies, an area of concern heavily inflected by psychoanalytic approaches to memory and narration. Many trauma novels take the form of historical fiction, narrated in the first-person by fictional or fictionalized survivors whose accounts bear witness to the need for violent actions to be admitted into public consciousness. This dissertation proposes that concerns about the construction of identities, chiefly in terms of gender, race, and sexuality, have been grafted onto past events, creating a testimonial and explicitly feminist form of fiction authored by women writers from a range of cultural backgrounds. These novels frequently deal with women survivors, highlighting the relationships between narration, gender, and trauma. The works I examine—Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace, Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman, Joy Kogawa's Obasan, Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones and Julia Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies—stress that both trauma and recovery have collective as well as individual dimensions. These novels are explicitly pedagogical, teaching lessons about historical events and emphasizing the need for an ethical engagement with the past. They make

claims on readers to function as the receivers of painful and complicated stories, in order to assist in the creation of historical memory.

These five Canadian and American novels respond to recent questions raised in a variety of disciplines and contexts about the nature of historical storytelling. With the exception of Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace, they counter the dominance of postmodern approaches to historical recreation, focussing instead on the significance of telling apparently transparent, if not always verifiable, truths about the past. These works are acutely interested in the telling of trauma as a socially constructed and meaningful act, one requiring the active participation of both a witness and an engaged listener. Reciting accounts of trauma, and listening to these horrifying narratives, are the primary activities depicted by the novels I study.

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“In a fearful nation, public sorrow was stamped down by the climate of uncertainty. If a father protested a son’s death, it was feared another family member would be killed. If people you knew disappeared, there was a chance they might stay alive if you did not cause trouble. This was the scarring psychosis in the country. Death, loss, was ‘unfinished,’ so you could not walk through it.

-Michael Ondaatje, Anil’s Ghost

“‘Well, in a very few years,’ she began nervously. ‘the people who lived through the Third Reich will all be dead. And when the people who experienced an event are no longer walking the planet, it’s as if that event never existed at all. There’ll be books and museums and monuments, but things move so fast now, the only difference between fantasy and history is living people.’”

-Emily Prager, Eve’s Tattoo

“Any explanation of war neurosis must account for the fact that this apparently intensely masculine life of war and danger and hardship produced in men the same disorders that women suffered from in peace.”

-Pat Barker, Regeneration

“We live in a period in which memory of all kinds, including the sort of larger memory we call history, is being called into question. For history as for the individual, forgetting can be just as convenient as remembering, and remembering what was once forgotten can be distinctly unforgettable. As a rule, we tend to remember the awful things done to us, and to forget the awful things we did.”

-Margaret Atwood, In Search of *Alias Grace*

Introduction

This dissertation studies the efforts of five American and Canadian women novelists to use historical fiction as a means of testifying to traumatic events of the past. Through my readings of these works, I examine connections between therapeutic discourses of psychic trauma, contemporary historical fiction, and feminist fiction and theory. These novels depict the narration of the past as a subjective, constructed act, one affiliated with Shoshana Felman's suggestion that literature can function as testimony, as a performative utterance of trauma.¹ Women's contemporary historical fiction carefully scrutinizes events that have received less attention in official historical narratives. These novels present a kind of counter-memory, broadening readers' awareness of the textured complexity of the past, and of the gaps and omissions in the historical record.

In the novels I examine, female characters struggle to know and tell painful stories, even while they acknowledge that historical amnesia and silence are powerfully appealing alternatives. I have selected works that illustrate what I perceive to be the most significant elements of contemporary testimonial fictions. This dissertation focusses on the processes of recalling and "telling" trauma to a skeptical, reluctant, or overly eager listener, and on the complicated roles assigned to trauma survivors, who are alternately invested with ethical and political authority, or marginalized. The novels I study highlight the intersection of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality in the

¹ Felman's influential theory of literary testimony is discussed in Chapter 1. Along with her co-writer, Dori Laub, Felman holds that the testimonial act takes place between two people, speaker/writer and listener/reader, who engage in an ethically motivated exchange in order to work through a past traumatic experience.

construction of survivor identities. They depict bodily pain, and particularly the pain of sexual violence and torture. Finally, they bring to light the crucial relationship between the form of address created by traumatic texts and their reception by readers. These concerns are described in greater detail in the first chapter of this dissertation, and elaborated in relation to five novels in the following three chapters. In each of these chapters, I focus on the construction of traumatic survivorship and testimony in light of the narrative representation of particular individual and collective tragedies.

These novels highlight the importance of survivor testimony, while recognizing that the effort to reconstruct the past has significant political consequences for the present. Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace, Joy Kogawa's Obasan, Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman, Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones, and Julia Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies were published between 1980 and 1998, coinciding with a renewed attention to cultural memory, and what Ian Hacking has termed "memoropolitics," the analysis of identities in light of ideologically-driven and contentious claims of past traumatic experiences (Rewriting the Soul). Contemporary literatures of trauma attempt to make visible forms of insidious or historical trauma, which have been obscured, or even deliberately suppressed. Leigh Gilmore's recent study points out that "the age of memoir and the age of trauma have coincided": individual subjects have emerged in writing to tell their stories of past oppression in both non-fictional and, as I will discuss, fictional forms (16). The works I consider in this dissertation are not autobiographical, although Joy Kogawa's Obasan does include significant semi-autobiographical elements, and all the novels that I examine mimic forms of confessional life-writing. Instead of representing their personal experiences, these authors use

historical and biographical fiction to put forward testimony. In considering these texts as testimonial works, I differ from the approach taken by several recent important studies, including Kalí Tal's Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma, Suzette Henke's study of twentieth-century women's traumatic autobiographies, Shattered Subjects, and Carolyn Forché's anthology of trauma poetry, Against Forgetting. For Tal, for example, "the writings of trauma survivors comprise a distinct 'literature of trauma'" which is "defined by the identity of its author" and "holds at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience" of Holocaust survivors, Vietnam War veterans, and childhood sexual abuse victims (17). Tal puts forward her critical project as one which counters a "postmodern" concern with "the problematics of *reading*" by emphasizing instead "the act of *writing*" (17, 18). In contrast, I take up Shoshana Felman's suggestion that traumatic literary texts attempt to function as testimonial projects, even when they are not clearly autobiographical, by appealing to the reader to function as the receiver and, potentially, the transmitter of painful stories. Felman argues that the effects of traumatic texts on their readers are crucial, even that "The specific task of the literary testimony is [...] to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history—what is happening to others—in *one's own body*, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate physical involvement" (108). For Felman, and her co-author Dori Laub, the reader or listener's empathic engagement and identification with the trauma story of the other is central to the nature of the testimonial act.

The historical novels I study undertake second-order witnessing: they are testimonial projects at some remove from the events and historical periods they depict.

The nature of second-order witnessing has been analyzed by trauma therapist Stevan M. Weiner, who writes,

To witness is to see, to know, and to be engaged with an other's experience of traumatization, in all of its complexity and enormity [...]. Witnessing encompasses more than the traumatic experiences themselves; it also includes the life that was shattered and the life of the survivor. Witnessing is concerned both with the individual and the collective. It is private, a confession embodying the survivor's spiritual, aesthetic and moral essences. And it is public, a documentation of historical events and cultural traditions. The witness receives, processes and transmits survivors' knowledge. (168)²

Acts of imagination, as well as the transmission of the witnessing accounts of others, characterize second-order witnesses. These are testifiers who, like most readers or listeners, were *not there* at the moment of trauma, yet have taken up the responsibility of conveying the past to the present. According to Sara Horowitz, the tasks of first- and second-order witnessing are very different:

Survivors write out of a compulsion to bear witness—for oneself, for one's losses and one's survival, and for others. The second generation, to borrow from the poet Paul Celan, bears witness for the witness. Second generation writers anchor their aesthetic representations in research rather than in memory,

² Kalí Tal worries that "Until recently, the title of *witness* to a genocide (or to any other event) was accorded to those who had firsthand experience of an atrocity. Lately, however, the title has expanded to fit (or been appropriated by) those who have only a mediated experience with the traumatic event" ("The Physician as Witness" 218).

as they trace a trauma both remembered and not remembered, transmitted and not transmitted. ("Memory and Testimony" 278)

Second-order witnesses may feel called on by virtue of their proximity to tragic events, as family members, friends, descendants, or community members—with community defined in national, racial, or other terms. Of the authors I study in this dissertation, for example, it is notable that a Korean American writer depicts Korean American characters; a Japanese Canadian author writes, semi-autobiographically, about her dispersed community; a Haitian American writer describes a tragedy in the country where she was born; and a Dominican American depicts the female activists she read about in Life magazine after her own family had escaped political terror by seeking asylum in the United States. These authors elect to depict trauma survivors, eyewitnesses to violent events.

The literatures of trauma are heavily influenced by representations of the Holocaust. Witnessing narratives by Holocaust survivors have a privileged status: Anne Frank's diary, the post-Holocaust writings of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, and other first-person accounts promise a documentary authenticity which is often treated as the preferred form of testimonial writing.³ As Ernst Van Alphen writes,

[. . .] representations of the Holocaust are especially valued if they make people think of literature as little as possible [...]. Fictionalizing is taboo, while ego-documents, personal testimonies modeled on journalistic or documentary

³ This is discussed further in Chapter 1, in light of claims that Benjamin Wilkomirski's Fragments only purports to be an autobiographical work.

accounts, are considered to be the most appropriate genre in representing the Holocaust. (18)

James Young's study, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust, concurs, arguing that because these works are asked to perform the strenuous task of not just representing but actually documenting trauma, writers have sought a transparent style, while critics have praised works that seem less mediated:

Holocaust writers and critics have assumed that the more realistic a representation, the more adequate it becomes as testimonial evidence of outrageous events. And as witness becomes the aim of this writing, "documentary realism" has become the style by which to persuade readers of a work's testamentary character. For the survivor's witness to be credible, it must seem natural and unconstructed. (17)

The survivor's first-person witnessing gesture is similarly valorized in other literatures of trauma, and there is frequently a peculiar tension between a desire to have the survivor stand in for others (usually the dead or silenced) and the particular merits of the survivor's unique perspective. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who transcribed and edited the oral account of Rigoberta Menchú, conveys this dual attraction to eyewitness testimonies in her introduction to Menchú's autobiography. On the one hand, Burgos-Debray believes that Menchú is "exemplary: she speaks for all the Indians of the American continent"; on the other hand, she is "a privileged witness: she has survived the genocide that destroyed the family and community and is stubbornly determined to break the silence and to confront the systematic extermination of her people" (xi). Menchú's life, with its specific details and circumstances, can stand in for the stories of

all of her people, Burgos-Debray suggests, because it is “simple and true” (xiii).

Truth telling is a crucial element of traumatic narratives. At the risk of oversimplification, in an autobiographical account, the trauma survivor, narrator, and author are unified. In contrast, in historical fiction the trauma survivor is a fictional or fictionalized character, who may also narrate, but who is crucially distinct in identity and experience from the author. This common-sense division—autobiographies are “true” accounts of the lives of the authors, while historical novels are, by definition, fictional reconstructions of historical circumstances and characters—in fact involves several complex issues. Both the traumatic memoir and the historical novel may strive to “tell what really happened” but they will be received and evaluated differently by readers and critics. Skepticism may be more likely to greet the memoir: its claim to authentic truth telling, to transparent representation of reality, can be challenged by questions which undermine the authority of the writer to self-represent accurately, questions that focus, for instance, on the writer’s motives in shaping a particular narrative, or of offering the narrative to the public at a specific point in time. The historical novel is not exempt from critical challenges to its authenticity and veracity, but the expectation that the work is, in some sense, fictional, relieves it from the burden of being purely “history”.⁴

⁴ Some historical novels have been questioned by critics unhappy with particular portrayals, as with the complaints about William Styron’s depiction of Nat Turner, who led a slave uprising, in The Confessions of Nat Turner. Similarly, Alex Haley’s Roots, one of the most important literary representations of slavery in the U.S., which claims to reveal the lives of some of Haley’s own ancestors, has been challenged by various historians. Naomi Jacobs’s analysis of “fictional biographies” argues that these works are “pseudohistorical and antihistorical fictions” that have been “directly and indirectly influenced by theories of history, character, and language that question the existence and

As I discuss in the first chapter of this dissertation, historical fiction is generally understood to deal largely or entirely with events set in the past, that is, separated temporally from the date of the work's composition: further, the novels I have selected deal with the significance of key events or figures for the construction of historical memory. In contrast with the popular historical romance, literary fictions do not use historical settings as mere backdrops, and they are far less likely to take up the lives of celebrated historical personages, such as Mary, Queen of Scots, who tend to figure prominently in the historical romance. It is notable, in fact, that most recent historical fiction, like Emma Donoghue's novel Slammerkin, displays more interest in the lives of obscure and forgotten people.

The historical novels examined in this dissertation seek both to uncover a problematic history and to reveal the complicated, painful truths about this past to a broader audience. These fictions dramatize the survivor-witness's attempt to access their own traumatic memories, and demonstrate the multiple blocks to memory that prevent the accurate and comprehensive recovery of personal and collective histories. They put forward the past compulsively, seeking listeners and readers who will attend to the details of forgotten lives and deaths. Access to public attention is crucial: fiction

even the desirability of factual truth [...].” (xiv). These works, she suggests, “are not intended to be good history or even to look like good history” because they eschew careful historical research and the use of factual evidence (71).

The authors of historical fiction are less likely to be questioned about the factual basis for their fictionalization when they take pains to distance their representations from the “true” story that inspired them, as with Toni Morrison's decision, for instance, to give the central character of Beloved an identity distinct from Margaret Garner, whose story intrigued Morrison (Matus 15).

becomes one possible conduit for stories about the past that have not been accorded sufficient attention in public consciousness. Often, these traumas have been actively repressed, either by survivors themselves, seeking to forget in order to move on, or by institutional authorities that regulate and authorize the telling of national histories. The attempt to “re-story” the past is important for both individual characters, in these novels, and for the ethnic and cultural groups they belong to, which have been deprived of full histories. In the fictional worlds, ethnic communities are strengthened by their ability to incorporate an awareness of their own historical traumas; these works may, by extension, assist readers in coming to terms with their own racial and cultural histories, as well as those of others.

While these novels were all written during an era when writers were increasingly conscious of the overlap between historical and fictional discourses, a tendency associated with contemporary postmodern fiction, most of the authors I examine insist on treating history as a set of discernible facts, recalled but not constructed or manipulated through narrative. Postmodern historical novels deploy irony and parody, and focus, self-consciously, on the human agency involved in rewriting history; in contrast, four of the novels I study focus largely on the political difficulties of recounting past historical traumas. The exception is Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace, which is more self-reflexive than the other novels I analyze. Like A.S. Byatt’s Possession, Atwood’s novel includes disparate generic elements of the romance, biography, epistolary fiction, ghost story, and detective novel; Alias Grace, crucially, also incorporates the late nineteenth-century psychoanalytic case study as a close parallel to the detective story. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I argue that it is important that most novels dealing with historical

trauma eschew postmodern features in favour of what might seem like the less artistically challenging or provocative mode of psychological and social realism.

While the novels I examine are not all formally innovative, they share a provocative reliance on first-person narrators, placing them in a tradition of women's quasi-confessional writing, of fictional autobiography which stresses the recitation of elements of an individual life, recollected not during upheaval, but from a later point of relative tranquillity. The significance of the confessional act is its close approximation to the circumstances of testimony: both are performative actions, carried out within the parameters established by institutionalized authorities, and seeking to tell the truth about an individual life. As Peter Brooks notes, confession, in both religious and secular (therapeutic) forms, "is a powerful tradition, in its conjoined claim to console and to discipline: to offer absolution for faults and omissions while simultaneously policing the contents of consciousness" (111). These novels, then, employ a largely psychological approach to the task of testimony, exploring the individual processes of memory and narration as they are related to a narrator's unique sense of social responsibility, guilt, or inadequacy to perform the act of witness.

This dissertation argues that historical materials are marshalled as part of a larger claim for recognition of social inequality. While the past is not treated as the determinative source of the present, contemporary novelists are acutely aware of the continuity between prior events and today. Slavery, to take the example of a number of recent historical novels, is important not only in its historical dimension as a grievous injustice deliberately perpetrated against a racial group, but as one important origin for the contemporary socio-economic status of African Americans, thirty years after the

Civil Rights movement. Trauma novels implicitly argue that the past has not been laid to rest, but instead haunts the present in a variety of forms, including the florid manifestation of Toni Morrison's ghost (Beloved), Octavia Butler's contemporary heroine who is pulled mysteriously back into the past to confront a slave history (Kindred), or Phyllis Alesia Perry's protagonist, Lizzie, who has visions of life as a slave after receiving her grandmother's quilt and great-grandmother's diary as heirlooms. Lizzie tells her skeptical psychiatrists that she is suffering from traumatic memories, rather than dreams or hallucinations. Her body is covered with scars that her doctors believe to be self-inflicted, in suicide attempts, but that Lizzie knows to be the "permanent remembrance of the power of time folded back upon itself. Proof of lives intersecting from past to present" and the physical manifestation of "the gift of memory" (Stigmata 204).⁵

The works I analyze are all authored by women, and have significant claims to be treated as feminist fiction, that is, as novels that are preoccupied with a socio-political analysis of women's status, and that espouse social transformation. These literary texts extend what Rita Felski describes as "the contemporary self-discovery narrative," a form of writing which she argues has tended "to focus upon the process of psychological

⁵ Perry's recent novel bears an interesting resemblance to Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time, which also features a central female character, a member of a racial minority, who is held against her will in psychiatric facilities, and whose contact with a different historical era is diagnosed as madness. Piercy's novel is often studied as part of the early proliferation of feminist science fiction and utopian fiction, as are the novels of Octavia Butler. In contrast, attending to history involves a different orientation toward time, a distinction which may suggest that contemporary feminist fiction, like much recent postmodern fiction, has entered a "historicizing" period.

transformation rather than upon a detailed exploration of its social implications [...]" (133). In contrast, the novels I examine in this dissertation point to the inadequacy of individual revelation and insist that psychological healing and social change must occur together. They advocate political pedagogy, and enact lessons within their own texts that are intended to educate their readers. These novels stress the particular challenges that women face in attempting to create testimony since, as Sue Campbell points out, the credibility of witnesses depends on their being "granted that status by others" and women speakers are particularly vulnerable to having their accounts dismissed or contradicted (241). In the first chapter of this dissertation I suggest that a tendency of feminist critics to overlook the strongly feminist attributes of recent fiction can lead to a dismissal of the political import of novels featuring psychotherapeutic and collective recovery.

The contemporary study of trauma has focussed on a range of events, from childhood sexual abuse to war and political violence, and the novels I study similarly take up a variety of representations of a traumatic past. The first chapter of this dissertation outlines the dominant contemporary theories of trauma and survivorship that I draw on, as well as the recent critical discourse on historical fiction and feminist fiction and criticism. In turn, each of the three following chapters studies historical traumas in a particular national, racial and/or historical context. These chapters are interested in both autobiographical memories and collective histories, beginning with an analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel Alias Grace. My chapter on Alias Grace argues that Atwood's first historical novel takes up a range of concerns surrounding psychic trauma and

dissociation or “splitting,” a phenomenon that recent clinical and theoretical studies of trauma most closely associate with childhood sexual abuse.⁶ Atwood focusses on the continuity between diagnoses of hysteria in the nineteenth century and post-traumatic stress in the late twentieth century to indicate that trauma has been consistently identified with women, and with forms of violent experience that are markedly sexual. Atwood’s central character is constructed as a trauma survivor, but she is also a convicted murderess: the novel sets up a tension between Grace as a victim and Grace as a perpetrator of violence. Grace’s memories of the past, subsequently, are suspect since her fragments of traumatic recollection may be “false memories” just as her claims of amnesia may be feigned.

While Grace’s status as a trauma survivor is complicated by her strong motivation to claim victimization as a legal and therapeutic excuse for criminal culpability, the novels I explore in Chapters 3 and 4 present more conventional, and less equivocal victims of trauma. Joy Kogawa’s Obasan and Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman, studied in my third chapter, examine the lives of Japanese Canadian and Korean American women who inherit their mothers’ war traumas. Each novel is preoccupied with the relationship between history and psychological damage. Additionally, however, these novels raise issues surrounding material and legislative reparations for past racialized and sexualized oppression. Political redress is treated in this chapter as an

⁶ Ruth Leys suggests that contemporary feminist therapy is too quick to assume that traumatic images in flashbacks and nightmares are literally true, representations of a past experience that has been lost from the survivor’s normal consciousness of her life. Atwood’s novel takes up similar issues surrounding traumatic or false memories.

alternate form of testimonial and witnessing project, one which offers tangible benefits to survivors, both in terms of compensation, and, in Judith Herman's terms, as a "survivor mission" which may provide retrospective meaning to experiences of traumatic loss.

These two novels support the proposition that traumatic testimony is personally and culturally redemptive, while silencing exacts a heavy price, and alienates even close family members from one another. In Obasan, the narrator's Aunt Emily is a vociferous proponent of reparations and an advocate of public truth telling exercises about past trauma, believing that it is emotionally damaging to suppress pain. In both novels, adult daughters do not learn about the most violent events of their own mothers' lives until their mothers have died, due to the attempts of their mothers to shield them from agonizing awareness. These works present the complexities of inheriting traumatic stories and the responsibility placed on second-generation survivors to continue to convey accounts of historical atrocities.

Finally, in the fourth chapter of my dissertation I examine the efforts of two recent American novelists to expand the geographic boundaries of American fiction, and to incorporate non-fiction testimony into the novel. Julia Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies and Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones are set outside the United States but examine U.S. complicity in foreign traumatic events. The novels use important features of the *testimonio*, a significant genre for writing non-fiction about political atrocities in a personal voice. The *testimonio* draws much of its impact from its claims of authenticity and truth telling, purporting to bear witness to acts of torture and murder which have taken place in great secrecy under totalitarian regimes; literary style is less significant than an attempt to persuade the reader to engage actively with the

political cause of the narrator.

Danticat and Alvarez provide fact-based accounts of victims silenced by political oppression in Haiti and in the Dominican Republic. Both writers have explicitly defined their novels as political and pedagogical projects. As Alvarez notes, American history has not yet admitted into public consciousness the collaboration of the American government with dictatorships like that of long-time Dominican leader Trujillo, who was responsible for the traumatic events depicted in both novels (“Chasing the Butterflies”). Alvarez’s novel portrays the four Mirabal sisters, three of whom were murdered in 1960. Dedé, “the one who survived to tell the story,” becomes the keeper of her sisters’ memory by maintaining a small house filled with their belongings for tourists to visit, and by granting interviews to journalists (321). Dedé functions as the mediator between the living and the dead, an accidental survivor whose life-long responsibility is to bear witness for her lost sisters. The Farming of Bones also portrays the responsibility of survivors to witness on behalf of murder victims whose deaths have been concealed. In Danticat’s novel, the 1937 massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic is described from the point of view of a fictional survivor. Amabelle communicates her personal losses of her lover, his sister, and other friends and acquaintances, but she also functions as a symbolic mourner, representative of the tens of thousands of victims and their multitude of survivors.

Dedé and Amabelle occupy a liminal space between the dead and the living, owing loyalty to both, but experiencing a particularly acute form of ethical obligation to remember those who did not survive with them. The novels illustrate that traumatic survivorship is necessarily situated within particular national, racial, cultural, and

economic parameters, a context which determines whether a survivor is likely to be valorized—fêted by the state, and called upon to make speeches on national holidays, as Dedé is—or forgotten and abandoned, like Amabelle, whose only audience for her account of trauma is the non-human yet comforting presence of the river that marks the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In each novel, finding a listener is crucial: readers are invited by the direct addresses of each narrative voice to share the task of witnessing, if only by permitting themselves to be educated about atrocities. Like the novels I examine in Chapter 3, In the Time of the Butterflies and The Farming of Bones advocate public truth telling, and suggest that the reception of testimony is a political act.

My study concludes that historical fiction has provided a dominant and effective mode of conveying past traumas to a contemporary readership. These novels have pedagogical aims, seeking to inform and transform readers by telling them truths that have been suppressed. All five authors are conscious of the ideological stakes of memory retrieval, in various forms, from the recollection of “repressed” memories of past violence to the reconstruction of massive violations of human rights which have been elided from official historical records. By linking traumatic memory to the performance of testimonial acts, these historical fictions advocate the telling of painful truths as both personally and socially redemptive. Paula Gunn Allen has argued that amnesia is more central to the formation of American national identity than memory, and attributes historical forgetfulness to a longstanding desire to envision a blank and unpopulated continent, pre-European invasion, and to overlook the genocidal aspects of colonial settlement (26). Similar claims could be put forward about Canada, which shares

the United States's violent early history. In countering a desire to forget with narratives that detail recollection, the historical novels I examine make important claims for the role of historical experience in the construction of personal and collective identities, and assist in the crucial rewriting of national histories.

Chapter 1: Contemporary Theories of Literary Testimony and Witnessing

Introduction

Women's historical fiction of the 1980s and 1990s has demonstrated a deep interest in the simultaneous recovery of individual memories and cultural histories of past trauma. Writers have depicted violence in both the public and private spheres, as part of what I will argue is an active engagement with history, one that features feminist goals of social consciousness-raising and transformation. While contemporary literary texts have frequently incorporated historical events and figures, the historical novels that I analyze in this dissertation use history in a purposeful and deliberate manner. These novels point out the relevance of the past for the present, seeking a usable history in the context of experiences of extreme suffering. Women's fictional accounts of trauma function as a critique of the silencing of sexual and gendered violence. These works support the proposition that female characters in contemporary fiction both experience and record trauma in ways that are affiliated with their subordinated status in different historical and cultural settings.¹

In the novels that I examine, the past must be unearthed, a process that is both complex and painful. The telling of trauma can, itself, involve the re-traumatization of the survivor and, through vicarious traumatization, her listening and reading

¹ I rely on a variety of sources that stress women's particular vulnerabilities to traumatic events in a range of contexts, including Laura Brown's suggestion that in patriarchal cultures women are the victims of "insidious trauma," and Roy L. Brooks's insight that "women seem to occupy an especially precarious position during times of war," suffering from the range of injustices to which men are subjected, as well as being "singled out for additional sexual and reproductive brutalities" (4).

communities.² Toni Morrison writes in the final paragraph of her historical novel, Beloved, “this is not a story to pass on.”³ Morrison renders the contradictory urges to tell and to withhold the story of trauma in a manner broadly representative of the efforts of a range of contemporary women novelists who use historical fiction to explore overwhelming experiences by constructing “a paradigm for history that privileges the vision of its victims” (Holloway 169).⁴ British novelist and literary critic A.S. Byatt notes that the current proliferation of historical novels is at least partially due to “the political desire to write the histories of the marginalised, the forgotten, the unrecorded” (On Histories and Stories 11). These historical novels demonstrate the strength and resilience, as well as the vulnerability, of victims who are remaking their lives in the face of overwhelming catastrophe, and with limited assistance. As survivors seek to recollect their lives, they may receive the support of a community of listeners, who encourage their efforts to remember and record the past; alternately, their stories may be ignored, or criticized. Historical fiction creates new possibilities for understanding how traumatic events enter into social consciousness, sometimes after decades of amnesia.

This dissertation assumes that trauma can be understood in light of a range of

² McCann and Pearlman discuss the therapist’s exposure to vicarious traumatization, or secondary traumatization. In Testimony, Shoshana Felman describes how a graduate course came to feel traumatized by the accounts of the Holocaust that students were reading and viewing.

³ Jill Matus writes in her chapter on Beloved, “the present tense in ‘this is not a story to pass on’ suggests that this story must not disappear or die, that this is not a story that will die or fade away” (120).

⁴ Elizabeth Beaulieu’s study of the contemporary African American neo-slave narrative takes up some of the issues surrounding the proffering and withholding of aspects of these accounts.

therapeutic approaches to past suffering, and in the context of research into autobiographical and social memory. The characterization of an event as traumatic is due in part to the overwhelming nature of the event but also, importantly, to the post-event characteristics of survivors, who suffer from memory disturbances and other indicators of psychic damage.⁵ Therapists and theorists have postulated that a range of terrifying and painful experiences can result in similar symptoms for their survivors: flashbacks or amnesia, psychic numbing or hyperarousal, a tendency to avoid reminders of the trauma, or a compulsive desire to seek out and re-enact it.⁶ Contemporary culture—and notably the fields of law, medicine, and literature—is paying a great deal of attention to trauma’s survivors, particularly since the insertion of a psychiatric diagnostic category of “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (PTSD) in the Diagnostic and Statistical

⁵ Cathy Caruth emphasizes the importance of belatedness in contemporary theories of trauma which stress the disjuncture between the past event and the current memory disturbances of the trauma survivor:

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. This simple definition belies a very peculiar fact: the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself—which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally—nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: 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)

⁶ See Agger and Jensen, Bar-On, Bass and Davis, Freyd, Herman.

Manual during the 1980s.⁷ Efforts to study cumulative and complex post-traumatic stress have recently expanded to include the analysis of traumatized collectives, generally the members of racial and cultural minorities, whose lives have been subjected to extreme pressures over periods of several generations.⁸ Certain events, like the Holocaust, have been deemed to have a transgenerational effect on survivors, whose offspring may continue to suffer from the experiences of their parents or other relatives.⁹

⁷ Laura S. Brown discusses the diagnostic criteria for PTSD in the 1987 edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III-R) and its revision for the DSM IV. Edward Shorter's less than reverent assessment of the medical authorities responsible for revising the DSM to first include PTSD argues that the identification of the disorder is more politically than clinically motivated, because Vietnam veterans had become a "powerful interest group" whose "struggle for recognition" required the incorporation of a medical diagnosis (304). Allan Young's excellent study, The Harmony of Illusions, makes a similar, albeit more complex argument, that PTSD serves the interests of veterans and those who treat them, and destigmatizes alcoholic, drug-addicted or violent veterans.

⁸ In the International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma, editor Yael Danieli argues that the interfamilial transmission of traumatic materials is a complex and multifaceted process, including the possibility of a "conspiracy of silence" in which trauma survivors, such as Holocaust survivors, refuse to directly communicate their experiences to their descendants, but inadvertently pass down their own symptoms of disconnection and traumatic grief; alternately, children may become "a captive audience" for traumatic stories that they are too young to assimilate, leading the children to experience "the constant psychological presence of the Holocaust at home, verbally and nonverbally [. . .]" (5). Danieli's analysis suggests the complexity of the ways in which trauma can be passed down through generations. Similarly, Marsella et al note that trauma is understood and transmitted in particular ways which are dependent on ethno-cultural context. See also Cross.

⁹ It should be noted, however, that some analysts of Holocaust survivors and their offspring reject the notion that their adjustment disorders are pathological:

their memories are not symptoms, nor in telling their tales do they seek some form of reintegration into their community—a goal they have long since achieved [. . .] painful memories are not always disabling, and narratives about them [. . .] rarely 'liberate' witnesses from a past they cannot and do not wish to escape. For them, forgetting would be the ultimate desecration, a 'cure' the ultimate illusion. As for renewal or rebirth, such monuments to hope cannot be

This dissertation is part of a recent cross-disciplinary effort in literary studies, history, film studies, performance studies, psychoanalytic theory, and feminist theory, to identify and analyze the prominence of themes of both private and public forms of trauma, and to theorize transgenerational manifestations of historical trauma.¹⁰ One question posed by this dissertation is whether a fascination with trauma, generally, is a contemporary preoccupation, albeit one that tends to project itself back into the past, as when Judith Herman claims that awareness of trauma falls in and out of fashion, and medical consciousness. Ruth Leys's recent study proposes a "genealogy" of trauma, arguing that there is "a series of crucial episodes in the ongoing if interrupted attempt by various physicians and others to define the nature of trauma," episodes that manifest "historical specificity" and disrupt the idea of a continuous narrative of trauma theory (10). Leys suggests that there has been a double movement in most fully elaborated psychiatric theories of trauma to incorporate both mimesis and anti-mimesis. In contemporary trauma theory, including the feminist therapy of Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth's literary deconstruction, and the neurobiological theories of Bessel Van der

built from the ruins of a memory crammed with images of flame and ash.
(Langer 68-69)

¹⁰ Approaches to the study of trauma in literature have been particularly influenced by deconstruction, as the important work of Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth demonstrates. The journal *History & Memory* has included some of the most prominent discussions of traumatic suffering from the perspective of historians and historiographers, including recent work by Daphne Berdahl and Nancy Wood. Psychotherapeutic approaches are indebted to the work of Judith Lewis Herman, Elizabeth Loftus, Jennifer Freyd, Lenore Terr and Laura Brown. Robert Jay Lifton has been a pioneer of the study of trauma, looking at events ranging from environmental disasters to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Transgenerational trauma has been theorized by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok.

Kolk, Leys perceives a strong inclination to “interpret flashbacks, dissociative states, intrusions, and other symptoms as exact reiterations of childhood traumas” (242).

This thesis argues that trauma is a useful concept for contemporary culture, including recent historical fiction, in part because it offers a strong belief in causality: the occurrence of dreadful events produces a range of aftershocks which mimic and repeat the original trauma. As Leys has analyzed, there is a strong “mimetic” strain in many recent theories of trauma, which advocate reading traumatic symptoms as literalized manifestations of historical experience. The symptoms, then, become proof of an event that is otherwise inaccessible in the present. Clinician Janice Haaken concurs, arguing that particularly in “the feminist-influenced field of sexual abuse” there has been “a tendency to grant an exalted status to subjective, experiential knowledge and to adopt a literalist approach to memory [. . .]. This literalist model of mind implies that unconscious memories are stored in the recesses of the mind, frozen in time, and waiting to be revealed at opportune moments” (“Heretical Texts” 14-15).

A wide range of contemporary novels, memoirs, poetic works and cross-genre texts explore experiences of historical and personal trauma. Important examples of trauma fiction include Timothy Findley’s The Wars and Pat Barker’s Regeneration trilogy (both dealing with the First World War), Russell Banks’s The Sweet Hereafter and Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres (father-daughter incest), Anne Michaels’s Fugitive Pieces and Cheryl Sucher’s The Rescue of Memory (the Holocaust), and Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Octavia Butler’s Kindred, Charles Johnson’s The Middle Passage and Sherley Anne Williams’s Dessa-Rose (African American slavery). As this brief list begins to suggest, women writers are overrepresented as the authors of trauma fiction,

and the characters they portray are often female as well. As the novels I study demonstrate, the construction of female testimony is particularly fraught because women are perceived as less credible witnesses, even to their own bodily experiences. When women are granted opportunities to testify, their attempts may be too tentative, partial, or contradictory for impatient interlocutors. More frequently, they are prevented from testifying by medical, legal or political forces outside their control, or by dominant male listeners, who seek to condition their speech. The novels I examine point out that women's realities have historically been trivialized and dismissed: they take up the challenge of restoring a voice to submerged realities, and name the experiences of countless women as traumatic.¹¹ Laura Brown argues that traumas have been characterized as the experiences outside "the range of human experience" of "white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men": "Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other. War and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumas; so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean" (101). Brown urges a feminist appraisal of trauma, one which "draws our attention to the lives of girls and women, to the secret, private, hidden experiences of everyday pain, reminds us that traumatic events do lie within the range of normal human experience" (110). While some critics worry about blurring the distinction between "real" and trivial forms of

¹¹ "Feminists have been attentive to the role of gender in evaluating what counts as trauma, as they advocate incorporating sexual abuse into definitions of post-traumatic stress disorder and its treatment" (Cvetkovich 385).

oppression,¹² the novels I study suggest a complicated continuum of experiences and identities: traumatic triggers may seem out of proportion to the emotional response they inspire in characters, but the broader context of each novel illuminates the conflation of the past and the present, of smaller and larger harms which are inextricably connected.

My dissertation draws on the efforts of recent theorists to conceive of literary texts as quasi-judicial acts of testimony. Shoshana Felman argues that the reconstruction of trauma produces a particular kind of speech act, one that is performative as well as constative: "Testimony is [. . .] a discursive *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*. To testify—to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one's own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement" (*Testimony* 5).¹³ The project of traumatic testimony involves the production of a story which is invested with great symbolic weight, and accorded the status of literal truth, of evidence, as in Gayl Jones's powerful novel, *Corregidora*, about

¹² Ruth Leys remarks that "it is hard not to feel that the concept of trauma has become debased currency when it is applied both to truly horrible events *and* to something as dubious as the long-term harm to Paula Jones" (2). Therapist Jeffrey Prager concurs, arguing that "current preoccupation with trauma has resulted in its overuse as a diagnostic tool" (131). In literary studies, the concept of trauma has been complicated by the differing approaches of various critics, some of whom, Dominick LaCapra suggests, are more interested in what he terms "structural trauma," which he largely equates with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic notion of the traumatic real. In contrast with the universality of structural trauma, LaCapra argues, "Historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it" (*Writing History* 78).

¹³ Carolyn Forché argues that we require a more complicated understanding of how literature can function as testimony: "A poem that calls on us from the side of a situation of extremity cannot be judged by simplistic notions of 'accuracy' or 'truth to life.' It will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confessions, by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth" (31).

the legacy of Brazilian slavery and its impact on three generations of victimized women. Telling the story of trauma produces testimony that illuminates the past while highlighting the ongoing legacy of sexual and physical violence that the Corregidora women are unwittingly furthering. Traumatic experience is treated as a static but nonetheless precious legacy that must be preserved. Ursa Corregidora recalls, "My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose [sic] to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget" (9).¹⁴

The injunction to "never forget" is crucial to testimonial historical novels, which seek to lay out the past in painful detail. Fiction attempts to make traumatic memory and amnesia apparent to readers, who are called upon to facilitate projects of witnessing and empathic solidarity. As Norma Field writes,

To listen and to watch—acts of witnessing—are emblems of our willingness to care. We need to be prepared to extend our imagination to fragmentary testimonies, to barely distinguishable testimonies, to testimonies that never

¹⁴ While testimony in historical fiction represents past experiences of traumatic suffering, part of the contemporary literature of witness has included the efforts of a significant number of writers to represent HIV/AIDS in their memoirs, drama, poetry, and fiction, in order to increase the public profile of the disease, remove stigma, and encourage responsiveness to victims. Timothy Murphy's article on AIDS literature notes that "Elegy, or testimony as I prefer to call it, belongs to the continuum of moral and political conscience that fuels activism in the epidemic and has as an important function the protection of the individual" (307). These testimonial efforts, Ross Chambers has suggested, make particularly demanding claims on the responsiveness of their readers because the suffering they represent is ongoing and not historical.

reach us because their utterers perished first and because their locus, in terms of political geography, didn't matter enough. Testimony mediated by art is effective in developing our affective readiness to mourn the loss of and the pain inflicted upon lives that never impressed their uniqueness upon us [. . .]. We need to develop that faculty without which there can be no justice: to care about principle, and therefore, about lives of which we know virtually nothing. (36)

This study posits that fiction about trauma seek to construct a particularly urgent and demanding address to the reader, who is asked to pay attention to the project of the text, extending beyond the depiction of particular events and characters to make a claim for the reconstruction of historical knowledge. This claim is a peculiarly contemporary one, recurring with some urgency in a variety of forms of literature. Fiction undertakes to educate readers, and to achieve social transformation through consciousness-raising: change is posited as necessary for personal, cultural, or even global survival.¹⁵

In the next section of this chapter I locate the contemporary historical novels I am studying within a broader cultural context of a preoccupation with memory, and especially painful memory. The examples of monuments and other forms of memorial projects suggest the ideological and political stakes of the construction of traumatic memory. Through these instances, I explore the fraught terrain of contemporary memory

¹⁵ Ross Chambers's subtle and complex study of AIDS witnessing literature notes that "our century might be the first period—or the first in a long time—to have seriously doubted the plausibility of humanity's having a future and to have turned to witnessing as a response to that doubt." For Chambers, "what witnessing most profoundly bears witness to, then—over and above the horrors that it represents—is the desire for this to be the case: for me to survive or for my tale to find a reader" (134).

retrieval and representation to suggest that the works of feminist historical novelists intervene in the creation of historical and counter-historical discourses.

I then study the relationship between contemporary feminist fiction, historical fiction, and postmodernism, in order to argue that a critical focus on history as the preserve of postmodern novels by male authors—Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, William Styron, E.L. Doctorow, John Fowles, Timothy Findley and others—has partially obscured a significant investment in the representation of the past by contemporary women authors, only a few of whom, like Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Susan Sontag, and Susan Daitch, have been associated with postmodernism's tendency to "use and abuse" historical artefacts, while most others have represented women's historical experiences in a mode closer to social realism. I suggest that some of the qualities associated with postmodern depictions of the past, including a blurring of the distinction between historical fact and the novelist's invention, may be too dangerous for feminist writers dealing with history, and with traumatic events in particular. Since women survivors of trauma, and particularly sexualized forms of trauma, already face a skeptical reception, there may be less room to challenge the binary dichotomies of truth and fiction. Postmodern historical novels, like Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace, demonstrate that their authors are dubious about the possibility of disentangling contradictory narrative accounts of the past, and even celebrate the confusion of multiple and conflicting versions of reality that can be sifted through by characters and readers alike. One consequence, however, is that a unitary "truth" about the past is perceived as impossible, with the accounts of survivors granted only tentative and partial credence.

In the final part of this chapter, I turn to the nature of traumatic testimony as it has

been constructed in recent literary, psychoanalytic, and legal theories. While these discourses insist on the centrality of testimony to contemporary culture, they differ in their evaluation of how—and even whether—testimonial efforts succeed. From these theories, I draw most heavily on the suggestions of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, and Ross Chambers, that testimony requires an interlocutor, a listener/reader who assists in the construction of the work of testimony, an effort that includes the incorporation of a significant component of mourning.¹⁶ In the subsequent chapters of my dissertation I examine divergent representations of the central figures of the trauma survivor, who testifies to her experiences of loss and violence, and the listener/reader of the testimonial address. These chapters suggest that theories of testimony are most respectful when they take into consideration the particular circumstances of the survivor, attempting neither to confer an exalted status on her, nor to expel her disturbing story from collective consciousness.

1. Historical Consciousness, Trauma, Postmodernism and Fiction

Contemporary culture is preoccupied with history, a fascination which manifests itself in a variety of forms: the accelerated effort to build memorials, commemorative

¹⁶ The relationship between post-traumatic stress and mourning is the focus of several new studies. Theresa Rando suggests that traumatic responses may follow deaths that are particularly difficult to assimilate, including those which involve the mutilation of the victim, or multiple, simultaneous deaths. Selby Jacobs distinguishes between trauma reactions and mourning by noting that “the bereaved person with separation distress is preoccupied with the deceased person, seeks for reminders of the dead person, and is aroused and focused on the lost person.” Conversely, “the traumatized person is preoccupied with the scene of the trauma and the violent encounter with death, wishes to avoid reminders of the event, and is hypervigilantly aroused and oriented to threat, danger, or the return of a similar threat” (16).

sites and museums to honour those killed by a variety of overwhelming events in the twentieth century; the “memoro-politics” of traumatic events, memories and amnesia, as debated by scholars and in the media; attempts to think through collective identities in light of historical experiences; the proliferation of historical-fictional amalgams in literature, the visual arts, and film; and a focus on the technologies of memory, including recording and reproduction tools that promise to preserve memories for the future.

Philosopher Andreas Huyssen notes, however, that the various memory discourses which have proliferated contain a core contradiction: “The undisputed waning of history and historical consciousness, the lament about political, social, and cultural amnesia, and the various discourses, celebratory or apocalyptic, about *posthistoire*, have been accompanied in the past decade and a half by a memory boom of unprecedented proportions” (5). Huyssen suggests that the most visible markers of a fear of amnesia are the multitude of new memorial projects, which indicate to him that the nation-states he describes are “haunted by the fear of some imminent traumatic loss” (5).¹⁷ Further, he ties the development of memory discourses to “minority rights” and specifically the “raging identity debates of the 1980s and early 1990s over gender, sexuality, and race” (6). Huyssen’s complex observations suggest that the years since the Second World

¹⁷ The fear of an “imminent traumatic loss” sounds apocalyptic, a suggestion that is developed in James Berger’s *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Berger writes, “Modernity is often said to be preoccupied by a sense of crisis, viewing as imminent, perhaps even longing for, some conclusive catastrophe” (xiii). Berger proceeds to argue that postmodern culture, however, has incorporated a perhaps even more chilling sentiment, that “the conclusive catastrophe has already occurred, the crisis is over [. . .] and the ceaseless activity of our time—the news with its procession of almost indistinguishable disasters—is only a complex form of stasis” (xiii).

War, and particularly the last two decades of the twentieth century, have created new forms of post-national collective identities, ones which required the construction of new group “memories” and historical narratives. In the United States and Canada, then, a traditional focus on cultural, linguistic and geographic specificity in the construction of identities has been tied to more recent, and overtly politicized, claims for equality on the part of women, ethnic minorities (particularly African Americans, and Aboriginal peoples in both countries), and gays and lesbians. All of these groups have undertaken “historicizing” projects that reveal years of oppression and violence at the hands of the dominant culture.¹⁸ Margaret Atwood has suggested that, “As a rule, we tend to remember the awful things done to us, and to forget the awful things we did” (*In Search* 7-8). Over the course of the last decades, members of groups that have experienced persecution have insisted on putting forward their memories of trauma, and have troubled national histories which tend to “forget” their own transgressions.

Memory and amnesia, importantly, have both individual and collective dimensions. Current debates about the reliability of individual memories have arisen in the context of many traumatic events, including the fraught theories of the repression and recollection of memories of childhood violence, which will be discussed in the next chapter of this dissertation. The analysis of group “memories,” in turn, frequently focusses on the construction of contentious and complicated massive traumas in the

¹⁸ Some claims for recognition of historical trauma have been perceived as overtly competitive. Emily Miller Budick, for instance, worries that Morrison’s epigraph to *Beloved* deliberately compares “two holocausts” and wonders whether this relates to “a conflict between two peoples for a privileging of their history [. . .]” (332).

public sphere, events with multiple victims and perpetrators. Here, too, there have been crises of authenticity, as survivors are asked to “prove” their allegations of atrocity. For years after the publication of Anne Frank’s diary, Holocaust deniers charged that it was a fabrication, and numerous tests were conducted to establish its provenance. More recently, Benjamin Wilkomirski’s Fragments, which claims to be the memoir of a childhood in concentration camps, has been withdrawn by its publisher as an autobiography, and is now instead marketed and sold as a novel, in light of conflicting evidence about the identity of the author.¹⁹ Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio*, I, Rigoberta Menchú, a non-fiction account of her experience as a Quiché Indian in Guatemala, persecuted by the government and military, has inspired a comprehensive investigation by anthropologist David Stoll. Stoll grants that the main events depicted in Menchú’s account are accurate—the murders of several of her family members, most crucially—but nonetheless casts doubt on many aspects of her work, including her representation of her own educational and political background, and of the circumstances surrounding her

¹⁹ Philip Gourevitch provides an important analysis of the status of Wilkomirski’s purported memories of childhood. Mary Jacobus’s insightful literary reading of the text, as autobiography, includes a postscript concerning the questions raised about its authenticity. Jacobus writes,

The temptation exists to say that in so far as the text of *Fragments* is a work of imagination, its value as testimony remains unchanged. But the stakes are not simply extra-literary. Whatever has gone on in the reading encounter, and however alert the reader may be to the inevitably constructed nature of any autobiographical memoir, reading involves an element of witnessing. Whether one witnesses to fact or fiction may amount to the same in the end. But in practice, the reader is likely to recoil from the idea that memories have been fabricated, emotions manipulated, sensibilities violated. If Benjamin is a fictional character, his trauma imagined or appropriated, what does that say about the reader’s response? (160)

collaboration with Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Stoll argues that Menchú's stature as a Nobel Prize winner, as well as her prominence among left-wing western intellectuals, necessitates a verification of her recollections.²⁰

Testimony is dependent on an ability to recollect and represent the past in a narrative form to one or more listeners or readers, who must be persuaded of the veracity of the account. In order to function as a political intervention, autobiographical recollections shift from the privacy of individual remembering to the public sphere of voicing the past. As Sue Campbell points out, even individual memory processes, then, have a significant social component: "I do not only recognize, remember, forget, recall, [...] *for myself*, but also recount, commemorate, reminisce, remind and testify *to others*" (241). While autobiographical memory is most often conceived of as a person's faculty that enables the recall of past experiences, including both events and emotional states, attempts to theorize collective memories go on to analyze the meaning that groups make of particular recollections. Elizabeth Lira draws these two forms together when she writes that

²⁰ Non-autobiographical forms of testimonial writing are also subjected to close scrutiny, although in historical fiction it may be the author's appropriations, as well as his or her misrepresentations, which are critiqued. D.M. Thomas's 1981 novel The White Hotel borrowed liberally, albeit with acknowledgement, from the eyewitness account of a survivor of the Babi Yar massacre, an event that features prominently in his work. As A.S. Byatt describes, the novel was recounted "in words so derivative that—despite our sophistication, even then, about faction, postmodern quotation, 'framing' truth with fiction, or interweaving the two [...] it was accused of plagiarism, and felt to gain its chief shock from someone else's purloined text" (On Histories and Stories 30). Susan Sontag's most recent novel, In America, which fictionalizes the life of Helena Modjeska, a Polish immigrant actress, has also been accused of illicit borrowings from other authors (Carvajal).

Memory is understood as the ability to remember events and experiences from the past. Memory is also the ability to conserve and remember past states of consciousness and everything associated with them. Memory is also described as the psychic functions that permit individuals to represent the past as past. Social memory can be understood, in this context, as the memory of subjective processes associated with historical events that have traumatically affected everyday life. Social memory implies giving meaning to those events. In this sense, social memory entails not only objective remembering, but subjective meaning conferred on the past. (225)

Maurice Halbwachs's groundbreaking efforts during the 1930s attempted to theorize a "collective memory" by arguing that the physical and social contexts in which recollections are formed are crucial to how events are recalled by individuals. Paul Connerton expands on Halbwachs's work, and proposes that "control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power" within the culture. He writes that it is "an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory. To the extent that their memories of a society's past diverge, to that extent its members can share neither experiences nor assumptions" (3).

In the wake of traumatic events, collective memory is fragmented and disjointed by the competing interests of communities: the Holocaust recollections of German Jews and non-Jews, for example, or the greater emphasis placed on the Middle Passage by African Americans. Traumatic events prove divisive when a range of remembering communities, invested with varying degrees of social power, recall the past differently; more vulnerable communities, then, are likely to have their memories suppressed.

Laurence J. Kirmayer suggests that “Trauma shared by a whole community creates a potential public space for retelling. If a community agrees traumatic events occurred and weaves this fact into its identity, then collective memory survives and individual memory can find a place (albeit transformed) within that landscape” (188-189). If, however, there is not a community consensus, collective memory will not crystallize, and the potential for individual memories to be expressed will also subsequently diminish.²¹

The nature of a collective memory of trauma is difficult to theorize. Some critics have suggested analogies between autobiographical and group memories, while others take pains to distinguish between the mechanisms that allow them to function. Nancy Wood, for example, stresses that an important distinction between how autobiographical and collective memories work is that “while the emanation of individual memory is primarily subject to the laws of the unconscious, public memory—whatever its unconscious vicissitudes—testifies to a will or desire on the part of some social group or disposition of power to select and organize representations of the past [. . .]” (2). Hayden White, in contrast, argues that past historical traumas

function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals. This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously

²¹ Kirmayer claims that “the social world fails to bear witness for many reasons” and notably because “the terrible things that happen to people” can “constitute a threat to current social and political arrangements” (192).

identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group's capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects. ("The Modernist Event" 20)

Either approach to collective memory, however, concedes that the social significance of the formation of shared memories is how they are deployed: some memories are endlessly recycled, because they are "useful," while others are rapidly lost.²²

Deliberate strategies of collective memorialization can be studied in the design and construction of memorial sites, ranging from statues and monuments to museums and public education projects. German commemoration of Holocaust concentration camps, the Smithsonian's efforts to represent the Enola Gay's role in the nuclear bombs dropped over Japan, and the construction of a Toronto memorial to Chinese railway builders are all examples of efforts to come to terms with traumatic and still controversial events. Each of these instances has produced debates about how to remember. In the case of the Smithsonian exhibit, for example, American veterans protested attempts to include an indication of the devastation suffered by Japanese civilians, insisting that this

²² Peter Novick's study of the Holocaust's role in American culture argues that The most significant collective memories—memories that suffuse group consciousness—derive their power from their claim to express some permanent, enduring truth. Such memories are as much about the present as about the past, and are believed to tell us (and others) something fundamental about *who we are now*; they express, or even define, our identity. For a memory to take hold in this way, it has to resonate with how we understand ourselves: how we see our present circumstances, how we think about our future. (170)

would tarnish historical memory of their heroic war efforts.²³ The Enola Gay exhibit was largely given up, having proven too difficult a “*lieu de mémoire*” for American culture, at least while there are surviving World War II veterans. Other memorial projects have been successfully undertaken, but demonstrate their own ethical, aesthetic and political complexities.

It is difficult to analyze collective memories because there is almost no end to the manifestations of historical experience that might be constituted as memorial practices. Chris Healy, for example, puts forward a theory of social memory which argues that it consists of “relatively discrete instances in a network of performances: enunciations in historical writings, speaking, (re)enactment, (re)presentation and so on; the surfaces of historical discourses; the renderings of memory practices” (5). French historian Pierre Nora has pioneered the important idea of “*lieux de mémoire*,” memory sites which are not necessarily physical locations but where national memory is embodied: his examples include the French flag and anthem, Joan of Arc, and a range of other instances of French memorial practices. Marita Sturken, similarly, analyzes “cultural memory” as a form of collective remembrance embodied in projects as diverse as the AIDS Names Quilt and the Zapruder recording of the Kennedy assassination; cultural memory is distinct from

²³ In *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*, Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell describe the construction of an “official narrative” of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an account which claims that the nuclear bombs ended the war and saved countless American lives. The “Smithsonian debacle,” according to the authors, succeeded only in postponing “an inevitable coming to terms with Hiroshima. With its broadening of interest in the atomic bombings, the controversy, along with the entire commemorative year, served as a stimulus for a radical expansion of Hiroshima consciousness [. . .]” (297).

history because it “is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning” (Tangled Memories 3).²⁴

The power to confer cultural meaning is most often held by institutional authorities. Memorials are designed to spark memory, but as Kyo Maclear suggests, they can also become “crypts of memory” for the nation-states that construct them to ensure a particular perspective of the past, and prefer a form of recollection that upholds contemporary political aims (125-26). In order to avoid the rigid crystallization of traumatic memory, designers have sought to produce more ambiguous projects that allow viewers to take up the tasks of witnessing, interpreting, and mediating. In Vienna, for example, British sculptor and installation artist Rachel Whiteread has envisioned a “Nameless Library,” a casting she made by moulding cement to rows of books and then removing the objects themselves, leaving only their distinct traces in the casting material. This project has occasioned its own controversies, ranging from the Holocaust memorial’s site, in the former Jewish quarter of Vienna, directly over the remains of a medieval synagogue burned during a pogrom, to fears that the library design was unnecessarily elitist and exclusionary. The Berlin Holocaust memorial, similarly, was beset with aesthetic and ideological difficulties that delayed its construction for more

²⁴ Some critics oppose attempts to discuss cultural or social memory in relation to historical traumas. In The Texture of Memory, James Young notes that he has “tried to avoid applying individual psychoneurotic jargon to the memory of national groups” and in fact “to break down the notion of any memorial’s ‘collective memory’ altogether” in favour of a sense of a “‘collected memory.’ the many discrete memories that are gathered into common memorial spaces and assigned common meaning” (xi).

than a decade. In both of these instances, the specific designs of the memorials have been contested, but an underlying current of the controversies has been the question of whether more Holocaust memorials should be constructed at all. Right-wing politicians and journalists alike have suggested that memorialization of the Holocaust has already been more than adequately undertaken in Western Europe; they have claimed that the genocidal past of Germany, in particular, has been unnecessarily fetishized and removed from historical context.²⁵

In the United States, commemoration of the Holocaust, which took place abroad and without significant American losses of life or national honour, has seemed less fraught than recollecting the Vietnam War, in which the country was more directly and humiliatingly embroiled.²⁶ Vietnam veterans have repeatedly complained that their sacrifices were ignored and belittled upon their return to a country that could not find a way to celebrate them as heroes. Maya Lin's astonishing Vietnam Wall is a noteworthy example of a commemorative effort which seeks to testify to the loss of individual lives,

²⁵ German national memory, clearly, is particularly fraught, and the 1980s' "Historians' debate" revealed the deep schisms between divergent approaches to memorialization of the Holocaust, including the remembrance of collective responsibility. Similar debates have taken place in Austria, and in Switzerland, in light of more recent claims that Swiss banks held onto the assets of Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

²⁶ A new collection of essays, The Americanization of the Holocaust, is one of several recent books to take up the question of contemporary American commemoration of the European genocide. A number of the contributors are critical of what has been termed the kitsch art and trivialization of the Holocaust in the United States. Editor Hilene Flanzbaum's nuanced introduction suggests that American Jewish culture has come to hold the Holocaust as a central tenet of identity, and that works like Steven Spielberg's film Schindler's List represent an attempt to come to terms with a legacy of loss which was largely suppressed in the immediate post-war period.

and to provide a place where those intimately connected to them can grieve, even while offering a more public forum for commemoration for those less deeply or personally implicated in the war. In Carried to the Wall, Kristin Hass describes the active participation of visitors to the memorial who bring with them offerings to leave at the wall: flowers, dog-tags, photographs, and, more incongruously, children's stuffed animals and other gifts. Daphne Berdahl refers to the memorial as "a public place where private communions with and mourning for the dead occur" (88) as well as a space which invites the collaboration of spectators in the acts of remembering and commemorating:

The hand prints that smudge the Wall's polished surface are evidence of visitors' active participation, testament to the need to interact with and touch this memorial. A striking contrast to the traditional national war memorial, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where uniformed military guards keep visitors at a distance, this monument invites the observer to make contact with the names of the known casualties. (89)

At the same time, the mourning practices associated with the Wall are carefully defined within national, and implicitly racial parameters: the names inscribed in the Wall commemorate only lost American lives, not Vietnamese casualties of the conflict.²⁷

All of these instances of collective memorialization both reflect and shape how

²⁷ Daphne Berdahl writes, "the voices of the war's other victims, the Vietnamese, are conspicuously absent here. By stressing the sacrifice, personal loss and heroism of American veterans, their families and friends, the memorial's discourse neglects the unvoiced stories of destruction committed by Americans during the war" (110).

events of the past will be recalled, although the construction of a memorial project cannot ensure that permanent recollection of an event or historical figure will be achieved.

Memorial projects create their own official memories, and invest particular narratives of the past with significance and authority. In the process, some accounts are necessarily overlooked, or muted, and discontinuities in traumatic accounts are stifled, since few memorials are able to convey ambivalence about the task of historical remembrance that they themselves are performing.

2. Historical Fiction: Postmodern Tendencies and Feminist Politics

Like national monuments, historical fictions about trauma provide a means of staging dramatic confrontations with the past. Some critics have perceived trauma novels as analogous with memorials, as when Kathleen Brogan suggests that Morrison's Beloved stands as a "memorial site" that is also a "counter-monument" to the legacy of slavery (133).²⁸ While memorials are clearly "public" efforts of commemoration, and particularly traumatic commemoration, novels allow for a more interiorized, subjective and psychological approach to trauma. In recent historical novels, the voices of individual survivors are privileged because their status as eyewitnesses implies that they have a detailed and direct experience of the past; the survivor's encounter with trauma provides her with additional authority, as one who has suffered, nearly died, yet lived to tell the tale to others. These novels illustrate that survivors of trauma are granted an ambivalent status, sometimes privileged and sometimes abjectified, situated uneasily

²⁸ Morrison herself has suggested that her project is "a kind of literary archeology" ("The Site of Memory" 112).

between the dead, who share their knowledge of the traumatic event, and the living, who were not present at the moment of catastrophe. Survivors strive to make the past seem real to their listeners, and to find a place in their former communities. In Charlotte Delbo's memoir of returning from Auschwitz, she wonders "with whom do I belong?" She feels isolated and cut off from assistance among the untraumatized living, her friends and family members who cannot understand her experiences: "It was useless to shout, call for help [. . .] the only human beings who might have helped me were out of reach. No one could take their place" (236). The extreme desolation of survivors may, as in Delbo's case, find some limited relief in the recitation of experiences of trauma to others.

The historical novels that I examine in this dissertation resuscitate traumatic past events and present them for a contemporary readership, eschewing historical fiction's affiliation with the popular romance in favour of a more literary approach. The evolution of the historical novel is complex, involving varying conceptions of the genre's defining features and purposes, but undertheorized.²⁹ Martin Kuester remarks that "while the existence of such a genre as the historical novel is too obvious to be denied, it is not always easy to give a clear-cut definition of this literary phenomenon" (26). In recent critical studies, the prominence of historical themes and characters in postmodern fiction has received attention, while more conventional historical novels are less frequently

²⁹ Martin Kuester adds that

Scott's Waverley novels have always been generally accepted as *the* models of the genre [. . .]. While the historical romance is still one of the most successful genres on the literary scene as far as its popularity is concerned, it is nowadays overshadowed by other types of historical fiction. (26)

discussed. One important exception is the growing body of research on historical fiction written for children, a genre that is particularly prominent in educational settings.³⁰

The defining feature of the historical novel is a time lag between the events depicted in the work and the historical moment at which the author composes the fictional treatment. The critics who have studied the genre disagree on the length of time that must have passed for a novel's setting to have become "historical." David Cowart's History and the Contemporary Novel considers a range of novels invested in the exploration of historical consciousness, including a number set in the present, while Martin Kuester's study of contemporary Canadian historical fiction treats Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Bodily Harm, neither of which is set in the past, as historical novels because they are interested in the ideological construction of history. Conversely, Lars Sauerberg's Fact into Fiction: Documentary Realism in the Contemporary Novel adheres to a more conventional understanding of the historical novel as one with "a setting more than two generations in the past (that is 40-60 years)," a qualification which accords with Sir Walter Scott's popular nineteenth-century historical fictions (62).

The tradition of North American English-language historical fiction originates in historical romances, and notably James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking" tales, admired by Russian critic Georg Lukács in his foundational study The Historical

³⁰ Children's historical fiction lies outside of the scope of this study, but it is interesting to note that this genre is more carefully scrutinized for the ethical lessons it teaches, and for its historical accuracy, than most historical fiction written for an adult readership.

Novel.³¹ Dennis Duffy's essay on Canadian historical fiction charts an evolution from the form of popular historical romances like William Kirby's The Golden Dog and Frances Brooke's The History of Emily Montague to an almost complete neglect throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ronald Hatch argues that "not until after World War I does a tradition of genuine historical fiction begin to emerge in Canada" and links this development to historical trauma and a burgeoning postcolonial sentiment: "with the Great War, the ensuing Depression and the terrifying powers unleashed during World War II, Canadian authors not only felt the changes at work in the making of their history and culture, but saw the need to free the country of its colonial identity" (80). Hatch perceives Hugh MacLennan, Frederick Philip Grove, Rudy Wiebe, and Mavis Gallant as important modernist practitioners of historical fiction. According to Duffy, however, the contemporary proliferation of Canadian historical fictions began only with Anne Hébert's Kamouraska, in 1970,³² and developed more prominently in English-Canadian literature throughout the late 1970s to the present, thus linking the pronounced development of the historical novel in Canada directly to postmodernism and metafiction. Representative authors include Rudy Wiebe (The Temptations of Big Bear), Timothy Findley (The Wars and Famous Last Words), and Graeme Gibson (Perpetual

³¹ Lukács argues that, while novels with historical themes certainly appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "The historical novel arose at the beginning of the nineteenth century at about the time of Napoleon's collapse (Scott's *Waverley* appeared in 1814)" (19). His study deals largely with European examples of historical fiction, and undertakes a historical materialist approach.

³² Kamouraska and Margaret Atwood's first historical novel, Alias Grace, which is examined in the next chapter, both deal with "true crime" events in nineteenth-century Canada, and deconstruct femininity and memory.

Motion), all discussed by Duffy, and more recently Guy Vanderhaeghe (The Englishman's Boy), Anne Michaels (Fugitive Pieces), Michael Ondaatje (The English Patient), Margaret Atwood (Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin) and Jane Urquhart (Changing Heaven and The Underpainter).³³ A tendency to write historical trauma in fiction appears to have accelerated in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and according to some critics this has a great deal to do with a particular political moment: Marie Vautier's recent study, New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction, argues that "the didactic urge in English Canadian and Québécois fiction to retell major historical events in a new light suggests the presence of a postcolonial thrust [. . .]" (202).³⁴

Postmodernism and postcolonialism have also been linked to a recent interest in exploring history that is evident in American literature. In E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime and The Book of Daniel, Tony Kushner's Angels in America, Susan Sontag's In America and several of Thomas Pynchon's novels, history is explored as a highly mediated, self-conscious form of narration. Only a few decades ago, however, American fiction was seen to ignore the past in favour of the present and future. Harry Henderson opens his

³³ Herb Wyile observes that "In a time of what Fredric Jameson calls 'the enfeeblement of historicity' (303), it seems notable that a substantial proportion of celebrated recent fiction in English Canada is concerned with the past [. . .]" (20).

³⁴ The designation of contemporary North American English-language fiction as postcolonial is controversial, but may shed some light on the recent representation of historical traumas. Leela Gandhi suggests that postcolonial literature has been intensely interested in the conditions of the "colonial aftermath," and has been characterized by conflicting desires to "forget the colonial past" in order to create a new and independent nation and to return to "the colonial encounter" to narrate "multiple stories of contestation and its discomfiting other, complicity" (5).

1974 study by noting a comparative neglect of historical fiction, first by novelists, most recently by critics:

The development of a significant tradition of historical fiction in America has gone almost unnoticed by scholars and critics, and yet the reasons for this neglect are not difficult to discover. Initially, American writers felt that the nation had no history, no sense of the past comparable to that of European nations. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American writers saw the Past as something that existed only abroad, and if anything, America seemed to represent a decisive break with the Past. This idea has persisted down to the present day, for in addition to sharing the conventional disdain for the historical novel as a low, mixed form, students of American culture have seen a special implausibility in the notion that the American historical imagination could produce and sustain a native literature of vigorous artistic growth. (3)

Henderson's contention that "the American historical imagination" is deserving of study is supported by the prominence of historical figures and materials in recent literature. In contemporary American novels that deal with history, the past is a source of fascination, and discerning its dimensions requires either careful study or—less reverently—an urge toward appropriation, as in Doctorow's Ragtime and The Book of Daniel, or Tony Kushner's Angels in America. Postmodern fiction tends to eschew a progressive notion of history, and sometimes teleology altogether, in favour of an awareness of historical experience as a series of fragments, historical narrative as filled with gaps, omissions and interruptions. In contrast to a reliance on "documentary authenticity," postmodern historical novels draw the reader's attention to the construction

of historical narrative.³⁵ Magali Cornier Michael explains that “the postmodern challenge to the notion of history as truth leans toward a confrontation of both history and historicity”:

Through such strategies as inserting historical figures and events into fictional texts (and thus overtly fictionalizing them) and emphasizing the lack of access to past figures and events, postmodern fiction problematizes the classic oppositions between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, and further undermines any rigid distinction between historical and fictional facts, events, or narratives. (41)

Hayden White argues, using similar terms, that a postmodern historical approach involves the “placing in abeyance of the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary [. . .]” (“The Modernist Event” 19).³⁶

Canadian fiction has also been influenced by postmodern approaches to historiography, perhaps best witnessed in the works of Timothy Findley, George

³⁵ Frederick M. Holmes’s study, The Historical Imagination: Postmodernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction, provides a particularly clear explanation of distinguishing features of postmodern historical novels. Linda Hutcheon’s The Canadian Postmodern offers an invaluable discussion of what Hutcheon terms “historiographic metafiction,” novels which are “not quite historical novels in the traditional sense, for they are also very metafictional in their attention to the processes of writing, reading, and interpreting” (13).

³⁶ Not all critics are comfortable with contemporary historical fiction’s tendency to combine fact and fiction, particularly where traumatic events are concerned. As Mary Jacobus’s reading of Benjamin Wilkomirski’s Fragments points out, “A world of difference exists between events that really happened, whether to oneself or to others, and which should be addressed, redressed, or prevented, and events that did not” (160).

Bowering, or Leonard Cohen. Findley's novels The Wars, Famous Last Words, and Pilgrim all take up historical events and often specific figures in an attempt to understand the narration of history as a process of interpretation that leads to efforts of transmission. As Hatch describes, The Wars "forces the reader to realize that history does not exist as something given" since "the past itself takes form through invention and intervention, arranged in narrative form" (93).

British fiction, like A.S. Byatt's Possession, Peter Ackroyd's Chatterton and Hawksmoor, or John Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman, has manifested a similar fascination with the narrative reconstruction of past events. In Graham Swift's Waterland, history is a traumatic story told by a teacher to adolescents who disavow the value of narrating the past, who want only to hear about their own present. The narrator stubbornly insists on the value of historical story-telling as a mode of understanding the twentieth century, linking the First World War to fin de siècle presentiments: "Who will not know of the mud of Flanders? Who will not feel in this twentieth century of ours, when even a teenage schoolboy will propose as a topic for a history lesson the End of History, the mud of Flanders sucking at his feet?" (17) This sense of a contagious traumatic history revisited upon subsequent generations is a frequent image in many contemporary historical novels, and notably in those, like Waterland, or The Wars, which focus intense scrutiny on the possibilities and limitations of telling the story of the past to the present.

The prominence of postmodern historical fiction highlights an important distinction between male and female writers. It is a striking aspect of contemporary critical approaches that, with a few significant exceptions, the work of male novelists,

playwrights and poets is far more likely to be identified as postmodern. Molly Hite's study of feminist literature argues that the exclusion of women authors from most prominent lists and analyses of postmodern fiction creates the assumption that "in the contemporary period, and especially for the body of fiction written after 1960, 'women's writing' is a category almost completely outside the dominant experimental movement of postmodernism." Instead, she suggests, critics assume that "female writers are interested in 'other things' than formal experimentation: in psychological subtleties, personal relationships, social accommodation, or revolution" (14). Certainly there are notable exceptions: Angela Carter's various novels and stories, Susan Daitch's L.C., and the work of Kathy Acker are often characterized as postmodern, yet many discussions of contemporary postmodern fiction, and particularly of "historiographic metafiction" (as Linda Hutcheon has named those works acutely conscious of their intervention in historical and fictional discourses) ignore women's writing entirely.³⁷ Postmodern experimentation may not represent a potential form of critique or subversion for feminist writers. Patricia Waugh argues that it is not surprising that "the relationship of women writers to postmodernism" is generally ambivalent "despite the fact that postmodernism is usually presented as an art of the marginal and the oppositional and as such would

³⁷ Fredric Jameson's depiction of postmodern historical fiction in his seminal essay, "Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," is typical of the critical tendency to list only male authors as postmodernists. An important exception to what Molly Abel Travis terms "academic theory's predominantly masculinist model of postmodernism and the postmodern reader" (47) is provided by Magali Cornier Michael's Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse, which argues that a number of contemporary women writers do successfully inject feminist politics into a postmodern style.

seem at last to offer women the possibility of identity and inclusion" (3, 6). While the two, she suggests, share significant points of contact, they are tending in opposite directions: feminism toward a stabilizing cultural identity, postmodernism toward a critique of essentialized identities (6). Linda Hutcheon, examining the juxtaposition of postmodern and feminist tendencies in contemporary culture, suggests that a central tension is that postmodernism is a theory with an ambivalent political status, while feminism is necessarily both a theory and a politics, with a commitment to improving the real conditions of women's lives ("Incredulity Toward Metanarrative" 79). In turning away from postmodern historiography in their historical fiction feminist writers may also be attempting to insist on the importance of distinguishing facts from fictions, particularly in the recounting of women's experiences which have not yet been accorded the status of truth. Traumatic events represent a particularly troubling case for historical fiction, which has generally steered clear of a postmodern representation of massive tragedies like the Shoah or the Middle Passage.³⁸

If feminist novelists have largely ignored the particular revisionist possibilities opened up by postmodern historical fiction, they have certainly not ignored history: notably, a range of women writers has focussed on the kinds of silences in the historical record identified by Toni Morrison in her analysis of slave narratives. These authors have sought to recuperate the less visible histories of women from different periods and regions. Their efforts can be identified with the aims of feminist historians who look beyond the lives of "great men" to more shadowy female figures, in an attempt to amend

³⁸ There are some exceptions, such as D.M. Thomas's The White Hotel.

historical records and more accurately reflect those whose contributions to political and social life have been ignored. Linda Anderson suggests that feminist historians turned their attention from public to private realms in order to achieve a more holistic view of social relations and historical events:

[. . .] the quest of many recent feminist historians has been to recover women's submerged or unrealized past. What has also happened as a consequence of this recuperative work has been a 'restructuring of the canon', a re-visioning of history, for women cannot simply be added on to history [. . .] without putting under pressure the conceptual limits that excluded them in the first place. The story of wars, nations and dynasties, the tangible public events—so long assumed simply to be history—take on a different meaning, a different configuration when we begin to see through them [. . .] to women's concealed existence in the private sphere of family and home. (130)

Like feminist historians, feminist historical novelists seek to illuminate women's hidden lives, scrutinizing the impact of political events and cultural changes on female historical figures, real or imagined. Many recent historical novels by female authors espouse a strongly feminist consciousness, examining the cultural construction of gender and sexuality in different periods, and critiquing the patriarchal suppression of women's rights in both the public and private spheres; yet, surprisingly, few analyses of recent fiction take up the question of feminism. Studies of feminist literature are more apt to focus on pre-1980 fiction, ignoring the significance of gender in the critical and commercial prominence of women writers over the last two decades in North America, or even arguing that by the mid-1980s feminist fiction had largely disappeared, a victim

of more conservative times. Are most contemporary women writers *not* writing feminist fiction? Have academic critics lost interest in the relationship between the concerns of recent women's writing and their own studies of gender?

In Susan Gubar's new collection of essays, Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century, she suggests that both popular and academic forms of feminism are in decline. Gubar argues cogently that in each manifestation feminism is perceived as irrelevant, either outmoded—now that significant feminist demands for improvement in women's educational, health and employment needs have been met—or abstruse—since the complexity of recent feminist literary theory has alienated non-academics. Compared to the excitement of the earlier feminist projects of critique (of canonical literary works) and recovery (of forgotten but outstanding works by women authors), Gubar perceives the contemporary stage of post-identity politics, poststructural academic feminism as depressing and fragmented. Gubar argues that “a number of prominent advocates of racialized identity politics and of poststructuralist theories have framed their arguments in such a way as to divide feminists, casting suspicion upon a common undertaking that remains damaged at the turn of the twentieth century” (114). The result is a feminist literary critical practice that alternately critiques in a highly repetitive, derivative manner that is not constructive, or that retreats to theory, usually couched in terms inaccessible to most non-specialist readers (122, 126).

Gubar appears nostalgic for a moment in feminist activism when it seemed more likely that institutional practices, including those of the academy, could be transformed, and where the role of feminist literary criticism was defined in explicitly ideological and political terms. Elaine Showalter identifies the creation of feminist literary criticism as

the joint effort of “literary and academic women—editors, writers, graduate students, university instructors and professors—who had participated in the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and who shared its polemical force, activist commitment, social concern, and sense of communal endeavor” (The New Feminist Criticism 5).

Gayle Greene argues that feminist literary studies became prominent because they bolstered feminism as, simultaneously, a “teaching movement,” a “reading movement” and a “writing movement” (50). The use of literary study as a tool of feminist consciousness-raising is perceived by Greene, along with other historians of 1970s feminist criticism, as central to its value. Greene argues, even, that “it was feminist writing—fiction, poetry, and nonfiction—that transformed confusion to consciousness, enabling women to understand the changes they were living through [. . .]” (50).

The novels of the late 1960s and the 1970s have been taken to represent a high point in the publication and generally positive reception of what Rita Felski terms the women’s “contemporary self-discovery narrative,” a form she largely equates with feminist fiction (125). Similarly, Greene cites Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing, Erica Jong’s Fear of Flying, Marge Piercy’s Small Changes, Margaret Laurence’s The Diviners, Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and Alice Walker’s Meridian as exemplary feminist novels from this period; Alix Kates Shulman’s Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen, Marilyn French’s The Women’s Room, Rita Mae Brown’s Rubyfruit Jungle and Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and Sula are also repeatedly mentioned by critics as part of the flowering of the “feminist renaissance” in literary fiction. These novels share a common preoccupation with the expression of female sexuality, the status of women in contemporary society, including women’s concentration in the private

sphere and the discrimination they face in paid employment and higher education. Some novels, like Anne Roiphe's Up the Sandbox!, scrutinize the limitations imposed on women by the exhausting and relentless work of mothering, employment that is camouflaged as both pleasure and duty, while others, like Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time, attend to race and class divisions that make some women particularly vulnerable to patriarchal authority. Women's entitlement to the ownership of their own sexuality is frequently depicted, and in novels like The Color Purple, which Lisa Hogeland cites as one of the last of the feminist "consciousness-raising" novels, female characters explore sexuality outside of compulsory heterosexuality. Taken together, these novels suggested new choices and possibilities for living a woman's life and provided important role-models for readers. Anger and hope both feature prominently in most of these texts: Felski argues that these novels belong to "an essentially *optimistic* genre, bearing witness to women's self-identification as an oppressed group, and hence as a potential challenge to existing social values" (125).

By the mid-1980s, however, the disappearance of feminist fiction was noted with alarm by a range of critics, who feared that new women's literature was symptomatic of a renewed conservatism in both British and American cultural life. Recent histories of contemporary feminism note that, particularly in academic circles, "a 'crisis' in feminism is documented during the mid-'80s, and this crisis seems initially to be triggered by the recognition that political feminism had gone into such a rapid decline" (Whelehan 126). Gayle Greene argues that by 1985 women's fiction had largely ceased to be feminist, having "shrunk in its concerns" to the realm of personal and particularly heterosexual romantic relationships (200). Greene cites a set of novels by women writers, and notably

some of the authors listed above as important 1970s feminist novelists, as exemplary of a trend toward the “privatization and depoliticization” of literature by women, including “the sentimentalization of the family, the resignation to things as they are.” She notes, regretfully, that “even the feisty feminist writers of the seventies” like Piercy and Atwood “participate in this retreat” in their more recent fiction (200). Greene claims that “women’s fiction of the eighties denies or forgets the syntheses of the seventies and, losing sight of the connections between individual and collective, participates in the dismembering and disremembering of the decade” (201).

Not all contemporary accounts are this pessimistic about the possibilities for feminist consciousness in the novel. According to Maria Lauret, fears for the demise of feminist literature are misplaced, and fail to take into account the increasing diversity of contemporary women’s fiction, in particular:

[. . .] the continuing popular and academic demand for new feminist fiction is met by new generations of African-American, Chicano, Latino and Chinese-American writers who in their turn reenvision and reconceptualise the personal and political, the popular and the literary, the various configurations of race, class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation in an imaginative engagement with feminism. It is the rise of this new feminist fiction that forces the question of the 1990s: post-feminism? whose post-feminism? (10)

To Lauret’s suggestion that feminist fiction is currently being produced by an array of authors of diverse heritages, I would add that their “imaginative engagement with feminism” is frequently joined to the study of history and, in particular, traumatic histories. Among the American and Canadian authors that I do *not* study in this

dissertation, Dionne Brand, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Amy Tan, Sherley Anne Williams, Octavia Butler, Lorene Cary, Cristina Garcia, Anne Michaels, Maxine Hong Kingston, Sky Lee, and Lydia Kwa have all composed powerful contemporary novels about traumatic family histories in the context of racial oppression or political upheaval. This incorporation of a range of national and racial histories into contemporary women's fiction serves as a corrective to what a number of critics have perceived as the race-blindness of 1970s feminism, while at the same time lesbian intimate relationships and politics are finding their way into prominent historical novels—Kwa's This Place Called Absence, Irish novelist Emma Donoghue's Slammerkin and English writer Sarah Waters's Touching the Velvet and Affinity. The feminist politics of the 1990s, although perhaps more fractured, in Gubar's terms, have allowed for the inclusion of more women's voices.³⁹

This broader inclusiveness has incorporated the feminist insight that "the personal is the political" in a variety of ways that are relevant to the study of trauma. While

³⁹ bell hooks has been among the most outspoken critics of the marginalization of African American women in 1970s feminism; Karla Jay's recent memoir, Tales of the Lavendar Menace, highlights the homophobia of some feminist leaders, like Betty Friedan, who feared that the prominent inclusion of lesbians would damage feminism's claims to be a mainstream movement; Wendy Ho argues that

Asian American women shared and were influenced by [the] issues and concerns circulating in the mainstream Women's Liberation Movement. But they were comfortable neither with a feminist notion of "sisterhood" based on superficial sentimentality, nor with a gender unity based solely on the experiences and concerns of predominantly middle-class white women. Their interest lay in a politically earned notion of sisterhood that would acknowledge similarities and differences and radically retheorize and critique oppressive institutions, attitudes, and power relations among diverse communities in the United States and abroad. (32)

public histories are frequently recovered in the works of multicultural feminist writers, some authors have focussed on the recovery of personally traumatic pasts. Bonnie Zimmerman's study of lesbian fiction argues that "post-1985 novels are virtually obsessed with the ways in which we heal the wounds inflicted by damaging pasts, inadequate relationships, and a violent society" (212). In fact, Zimmerman perceives "the story of a recovery from a traumatic experience" as "the most notably original form of the lesbian novel to emerge in the late 1980s." Her suggestion that the recovery-from-trauma narrative became crucial to lesbian fiction in the late 1980s applies broadly to much recent feminist fiction, and particularly to the works of writers whose characters' racial background or social class compounds their marginalization by the dominant culture. Dorothy Allison's award-winning 1992 novel, Bastard Out of Carolina, is a significant example, the "cross-over" work of a long-time lesbian activist, poet, and short-story writer, who achieved critical and popular success with her semi-autobiographical account of illegitimacy, sexual abuse, and poverty. Allison reveals the complex relationship between systems of class and gender oppression, and highlights the vulnerability of children subject to the rage of adults who feel disempowered. Her representation of the central character's plight challenges readers to understand how sexual abuse victims can feel complicit with their abusers, and her complex rendering of the relationship between the child and her mother, who cannot fight for her child's safety, is an indictment of the social forces which propel women to make impossible choices between financial and emotional survival. Allison's novel illuminates one of the central tasks of contemporary feminist writers, who use fiction to counter popular myths about victimization, and to challenge explanations which pathologize trauma survivors, or

demonize their assailants, without understanding the specific circumstances in which women and children live.

Renewed attention to family and sexual violence has sometimes—and usually disparagingly—been linked to analyses of contemporary “self-help” culture, a complex amalgam of individual and group “recovery” programmes, with typical ailments ranging from alcoholism and drug addiction to the more amorphous “relationship addiction.”

Although some critics, like Anita Shreve, have found contemporary therapeutic culture significantly less feminist in orientation than 1970s consciousness-raising, there are often similar approaches: group therapy for incest survivors or battered women, for example, asks participants to contribute personal stories in the hope of both individual and social transformation.⁴⁰ Women’s self-help culture can encourage individual trauma survivors to seek therapeutic intervention—it may also, however, make it difficult for them to discuss histories of violence outside of dominant paradigms of illness and healing.⁴¹

While the recovery movement is most closely associated with autobiographical and inspirational self-help guides, contemporary fiction incorporates significant models of trauma and healing in the context of sexual and childhood violence. These works have been controversial: Katie Roiphe, among others, has charged that there is a contemporary

⁴⁰ Elayne Rapping argues that feminist critics have been too dismissive of “recovery culture” and have failed to note the ways in which it has incorporated some feminist values. Comparing earlier feminist speak-outs on violence to group therapy programmes, she does concede that “therapy, even feminist therapy, has a limited, if crucial, place in our lives [. . .]. It needs to take place in a broader context of struggle for social change” (165).

⁴¹ Louise Armstrong, who believes that a focus on the survivor’s recovery pathologizes the individual, and loses sight of feminist politics, makes this point.

preoccupation with victimization in recent women's novels, even that "incest has become our latest literary vogue" (69).⁴² While Roiphe blames feminist novelists for the purported repetitiveness of their concern, Margaret Atwood more generously credits the broader women's movement with opening up new subjects for literature: "Whole areas of human life that were once considered non-literary or sub-literary" including "the once-forbidden realms of incest and child abuse—have been brought inside the circle that demarcates the writeable from the non-writeable" ("Spotty-Handed Villainesses"). Atwood's point is important: when incest and child abuse were not "writeable" the responsibility for victimization was more likely to be placed on the injured child, a travesty that contemporary feminist discourse has worked hard to address and correct. The inclusion of childhood violence in contemporary feminist fiction serves a goal of holding abusers responsible for their actions by illuminating the stark power differentials between children and adults.

Recent feminist fiction about childhood abuse makes it clear that significant after-effects of physical, emotional and sexual violence mark survivors. Camilla Gibb's Mouthing the Words, for example, features a narrator whose fantasy world is her only safe place in the context of a chaotic family life, including molestation by her father. As she grows to adolescence, she is repeatedly hospitalized for psychiatric symptoms, and it

⁴² Roiphe's essay in Harper's Magazine is very similar to a more prominent article by Carol Tavris that appeared in the New York Review of Books. Tavris took the "incest-survivor machine" to task for encouraging women to identify as childhood sexual abuse survivors even if they had no memories of being molested; further, Tavris objected to the idea that incest survivorship had a political value, suggesting instead that it is a profitable scheme aimed at defrauding survivors.

is only when she locates both an empathic therapist *and* meaningful work (as a legal advocate for lesbian mothers) that she experiences a sense of integration and is able to risk intimate relationships. In the concluding paragraph of the novel, Norma reflects that her fantasy friends from childhood are “shrinking” while she herself is gaining in confidence:

My God! This is me speaking. Not mouthing. Not typing and twitching. Not writing a suicide note, the length of a novel that will never be finished. I hear voices now but I know they are not the voices of fathers or lovers, or mothers or angels or demons, but the sounds of my own private wars echoing the battles of women before and near me. No wonder I do not make people comfortable. I am a mirror. I have far too many things to say. (186)

3. Trauma and Testimony

For more than a century, the “talking cure” that assists Gibb’s protagonist in coming to terms with childhood violence has been available for some trauma survivors. Noted therapist Judith Herman advocates talk-therapy as a means of assisting survivors in reconstructing the “story” of the trauma, and of transforming traumatic memories, which she posits as non-verbal, fragmented, and static, into narrative memories. Herman postulates that it is necessary to narrate the past in the presence of an attentive and attuned other in order to begin to recover from the complex debilitating effects of traumatic shocks and losses. Since “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others” then recovery must be based “upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133).

Herman urges the listener to take on the role of therapeutic ally and supporter.

Narrativization also furthers an important political goal by revealing past traumatic suffering to the community in which it occurred, whether the event was political persecution, torture, or childhood abuse, traumatic stresses that Herman suggests are linked by similar post-event symptoms. As Ruth Leys notes, the construction of traumatic narratives is not perceived by Herman as merely therapeutic for the survivor, but as a means of integrating a past which has been inaccessible, frozen in static and silenced images of pain, into collective consciousness. Leys writes that this approach to the treatment of trauma is powerfully committed “to the redemptive authority of history”: “for Herman and for the modern recovery movement generally, even if the victim of trauma *could* be cured without obtaining historical insight into the origins of her distress, such a cure would not be morally acceptable.” In fact, it is precisely because “personal testimony concerning the past is inherently political and collective that the narration of the remembered trauma is so important” (Leys 109).

As I noted earlier, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have put forward a highly influential theory of how non-survivors, including therapists and readers alike, can function as a supportive community of second-order witnesses for trauma survivors. In Testimony: Crises of Witnessing In Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, Felman and Laub explore the construction of the trauma story, focussing on verbal and written accounts of the Holocaust. According to Felman, testimony is provided by those literary and filmic texts which are “composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events

in excess of our frames of reference" (5). Laub, in turn, argues that witnessing acts cannot be performed by survivors in isolation, but must take place within a "testimonial process" of a survivor speaking to a listener. Tal worries that this characterization of testimony, and the significant emphasis placed by Laub on the listener's own difficulties of attending to the trauma story, draw attention away from the survivor and may even function to appropriate the experience of the trauma survivor by stressing the analytic dialogue (Worlds of Hurt 53-57).⁴³ However, Laub persuasively argues that the Holocaust, at least, as an event which sought to eliminate the possibility of witnesses, in fact necessitates the return of witnessing to share in the task of constructing the survivor's trauma story (80-81). Laub insists that a traumatic event that has not been transformed into speech addressed to another is, in essence, an event that has not yet been witnessed:

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to 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.

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-

⁴³ Sara Horowitz's review essay of Felman and Laub's book also expresses concern about the extent to which they rely on the listener as a conduit for the trauma story. Horowitz points out that Felman and Laub privilege an originary moment of traumatic testimony, the first time the trauma story is recounted, as the act of witness.

owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself. [. . .] The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silence, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony. (57-58)

Other literary critics who draw parallels between listening and reading also stress the listener's role. According to Mieke Bal, "witnessing can become a model for critical reading" since "the recipients of the account perform an act of memory that is potentially healing, as it calls for political and cultural solidarity in recognizing the traumatized party's predicament" (Acts of Memory x).

The reader's empathy is challenged by the difficulty that authors have in putting pain into words that approximate physical suffering. Physical pain, which figures in all the novels that I examine, is said to resist both written representation and the listener or reader's clear identification: "To have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*" (Scarry 13). For readers to even begin to imagine the physical pain of the other, a difficult address must be constructed to "place the injured body several inches in front of our eyes, hold the light up to the injured flesh, and keep steady the reader's head so that he cannot turn away" (Scarry 65). In Margaret Atwood's "Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written," similarly, "Witness is what you must bear":

To see clearly and without flinching,
without turning away,
this is agony, the eyes taped open
two inches from the sun.

The witness's need to tell a comprehensive story of the past to a supportive

listener is supported by the historical novels I examine in the next three chapters. All the works I study highlight testimony in order to stress the weight placed on survivors of trauma to present a full and accurate rendition of their own past experiences. Steven Connor argues that historical novels often portray events that have not yet been accorded the status of “official and institutional history” but are instead in a period of transition: “Novels [. . .] witness or inspect or assist the coming into being of events, the passage of history into History” (130). In the historical novels I analyze, this process is fraught, in large part because of debates surrounding memory and traumatic survivorship. In the next chapter of this dissertation I turn to the study of a novel which is acutely aware that histories are retrospectively and subjectively constructed, put together out of “whole cloth” as Atwood’s *Grace Marks* thinks to herself at one point, wondering, as the trauma survivors do in all the novels that I analyze, how to tell the story of the past to contemporary listeners.

Chapter 2: Hysteria and Traumatic Testimony in the Therapeutic Encounter:

Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace, her first historical novel, recreates the life of a nineteenth-century Irish immigrant to Upper Canada. Grace Marks entered domestic service at the age of thirteen, only to be tried, just a few years later, for the grisly murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear; his housekeeper and lover, Nancy Montgomery, was also killed. The trial created a sensation: Grace's youth and beauty seem to have been largely responsible for the reprieve she won from execution, while her less appealing male co-accused was hanged. In this chapter I argue that Atwood's depiction of Grace distills important contemporary debates about the relationship between gender, traumatic memory, and story-telling. Atwood's novel expresses an ambivalent desire to redeem Grace, not by putting forward evidence for the innocence she claimed, but by providing her with a legitimate psychiatric complaint in the form of post-traumatic stress, recast as nineteenth-century hysteria. Atwood has conceded that her historical novel has very "contemporary" concerns, and in this chapter I examine her representation of Grace as a hysteric with repressed traumatic memories, in light of contemporary *and* historical debates about repressed memories.¹ These questions have most recently been pursued

¹ The concept of repression, as Frederick Crews's diatribe against Freud points out, is a complicated and contradictory concept, and as such it has been used by post-Freudian therapists, and especially recovered memory therapists, to mean either deliberately *suppressed* memories of violence or the process of unconscious *repression*. Elizabeth Loftus argues that there is no clear clinical or experimental proof that traumatic memories can be pushed out of an individual's recall and then return years later. As

almost exclusively in terms of the recovery of memories of childhood sexual abuse.

Hilde Staels has suggested that Grace is in fact the victim of incest: "Her fits of hysteria and her traumatic amnesia result from the early loss of her mother and presumably from childhood sexual abuse by her father." Staels does acknowledge that "Grace never explicitly mentions the latter trauma" which is merely suggested in certain recurring, and threatening, images in the novel (Staels 437). While I do not find the textual support that Staels's article puts forward for this argument very convincing,² she is correct that the slippage between Grace as murder suspect and Grace as abuse survivor is very important in this novel, as Atwood complicates notions of female victimization and culpability.

James Kincaid notes, repression is "a loose baggy monster of an idea" (245) deployed for multiple purposes.

² One passage that Staels does not cite that *may* indicate some evidence that Grace recalls or fantasizes sexual abuse occurs late in the novel, during the course of a disturbing dream described by Grace:

I'm in the back passage, feeling my way along the wall. I can scarcely see the wallpaper; it used to be green. Here are the stairs going up, here is the bannister. The bedroom door is half open, and I can listen. Bare feet on the red-flower carpet. I know you're hiding from me, come out at once or I'll have to find you and catch you, and when I've got hold of you, then who knows what I will do.

I'm keeping very still behind the door. I can hear my own heart. Oh no. oh no, oh no.

Here I come, I am coming now. You never obey me, you never do what I say, you dirty girl. Now you will have to be punished.

It is not my fault. What can I do now, where can I turn?

You must unlock the door, you must open the window, you must let me in.

Oh look, oh look at all the spilt petals, what have you done? (353-354)

This passage is important in a number of ways. highlighting Grace's preoccupation with flower petal/blood drop images throughout the novel, and the clear relationship between these images and sexuality. What is not clear is whether her dream condenses elements of different experiences, possibly childhood incest perpetrated by her father, and her later surreptitious witnessing of her employer's surreptitious relationship.

While theories of trauma typically rely on a careful distinction between victims and assailants, Atwood's novel suggests a more complex and morally troubling picture of a historical figure who she portrays as articulate, self-protective, and canny. Atwood's depiction of Grace, while clearly ambiguously "postmodern," offers an explanation for Grace's conduct that is rooted in causality: Grace suffered traumatic losses, dissociated, and then acted out her rage and pain in violence. As Juliet Mitchell's recent psychoanalytic study of trauma suggests, "Today, a fascination with trauma has ousted hysteria in such programmes as the movement to recover memories of childhood abuse. In fact, memory (or its absence in hysterical amnesia), trauma and death all come together in hysteria" (33), and this is precisely the case in Alias Grace.

One other recent analysis of Grace that focusses on the significance of models of trauma and recovery is Deborah M. Horvitz's chapter on Alias Grace in her study Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction. Like Staels, Horvitz perceives a possible sexual dimension to Grace's past suffering, but she proposes a more diffuse explanation. Horvitz suggests, for instance, that "the axis around which Grace's traumas spin and intersect is the 'Irish Question,' which involved severe anti-Irish prejudices" (100). Horvitz also cites the death of Grace's mother, during the family's passage to Canada, her friend Mary Whitney's death, and the possibility that Grace was raped during her incarceration, as traumas contributing to Grace's dissociation and amnesia. While Horvitz's analysis argues that the novel articulates "an intriguing, credible, psychologically consistent, and sympathetic interpretation of Grace as a victim of trauma and multiple personalities," she does not acknowledge that Atwood's retrospective defence of Grace is more clearly invested in late twentieth-century

psychological ideas about traumatic memories—true or false, repressed or recovered—than in the standard explanations of Grace’s own day. Horvitz grants Atwood’s recreation more credibility than the historical record indicates—no account of Grace Marks from her own era proposed a traumatic amnesia/dual personality explanation, yet Horvitz insists that the novel’s focus, and its gesture toward the “contentious contemporary debate” of recovered memories is rooted “within nineteenth-century discourse, where it rightfully belongs”(119). In contrast, my chapter on Alias Grace argues that it is significant that Atwood has attached such an unlikely diagnosis to Grace, and, crucially, that it is precisely the controversy surrounding “false” memories that Atwood’s novel takes up, albeit in a form which allows the novelist to avoid the appearance of “taking sides” in a vociferous and highly polarized debate which has significant consequences for the consideration of female accounts of trauma.

Atwood’s interest in Grace Marks is longstanding; she was introduced to Grace’s story by Susanna Moodie’s Life in the Clearings, which takes a melodramatic approach, presenting Grace as a “lunatic,” haunted, like a character from a Dickens novel, by the burning eyes of her victims. In the early 1970s, Atwood wrote the television play The Servant Girl, her first attempt to portray the Kinnear murders.³ Later, Atwood drafted,

³ The Servant Girl is a one-hour drama, directed by George Jonas, which aired on CBC in 1974. Grace is introduced into the Kinnear household, and becomes increasingly jealous of the housekeeper, who is called Hannah in this version. Grace encourages a fellow servant to kill Hannah, promising him sexual favours if he complies, and then Grace actually assists in the murder by tying her own handkerchief around Hannah’s neck. The concluding scenes are most interesting, depicting Grace languishing in prison. She is visited by Susannah Moodie, and confesses to the writer that she cannot sleep because she is haunted by Hannah’s dead, staring eyes.

but did not complete, a stage adaptation of the story which is still largely indebted to Moodie's presentation of Grace Marks.⁴ Atwood is acutely aware of the kinds of appropriations enacted on historical figures, and discusses the textual mediations through which she came to know Grace's story in a brief Afterword to Alias Grace as well as in a speech delivered in Ottawa entitled In Search of Alias Grace. When she undertook to write Alias Grace, Atwood conducted exhaustive research (Author's Afterword and Acknowledgements to Alias Grace 555-563). Atwood explains the parameters that she set for herself in fictionalizing Grace Marks and the murders at the Kinnear homestead: "when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it [. . .]. Also, every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times" while the parts of her story which were "left unexplained" by existing documentation allowed for free invention (In Search of Alias Grace 35). What is most striking in Atwood's explanation of her historical revisionism is her fascination with a story which cannot be known in its entirety because the truth was never fully revealed by the participants: the victims died, Grace's co-accused was hanged, and Grace herself escaped execution only narrowly, but never provided an entirely satisfying account of the day of the murder. In Atwood's novel, this provides the central elision around which the narrative unfolds.

André Brink offers an important analysis of the contrasting accounts that animate the novel, emphasizing the multiple and contradictory historical narratives that Atwood worked with:

⁴ A typescript and a final draft of Grace, the stage version, are included in the Atwood collection at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book library at the University of Toronto.

As her point of departure Atwood takes the three different versions of the murder Grace Marks herself offered at the time, and the two of her accomplice: these multiple locations of memory within individuals converge to constitute public memory. And this is amplified and further complicated by incorporating into the text various other contemporary accounts, testimonies and commentaries—even a poem that circulated at the time, and drawings of the accused in court. All of these, representing various degrees of fictification, constitute, and constantly modify, shift, or even remake, the public memory (to which Alias Grace itself makes yet another contribution) [. . .]. (34)

Atwood displays a subtle awareness of the mutability of purported facts in tellings and retellings of the same event. As Brink analyzes, Alias Grace highlights the disjuncture between Grace's various self-depictions, and other representations of her as a murderess, or a poignant victim of seduction and betrayal. By the time the novel begins, a number of years have elapsed between Grace's crimes and her current effort to be released: the passage of time adds an additional difficulty, since Grace's memory cannot be expected to conjure up all the events of her past life in perfect detail.

To elicit Grace's narrative, Atwood provides a fictional analyst to the convict, an "alienist" with progressive ideas about hysteria's relationship to traumatic memory and amnesia which he wishes to explore by using Grace as a test case. Brink notes that "Grace explicitly manipulates her narrative to suit the requirements of her interlocutors" (34) of whom the novel's chief listener is Dr. Simon Jordan. Through a complex process of transference and counter-transference, Dr. Jordan is increasingly unable to achieve sufficient critical distance on Grace to evaluate even whether her traumatic amnesia and

periodic hysteric fits are feigned or genuine. He ultimately flees Kingston, where he has been interviewing Grace over the course of some months, to return to the United States. His own sense of scientific objectivity is severely compromised, but his desire for narrative closure is unfulfilled. At the conclusion of the novel, Dr. Jordan has himself been transformed into a patient, after his participation in the American Civil War. His domineering mother has effected his marriage to a local girl, and he is firmly under the joint control of his mother and wife, his medical ambitions largely abandoned. Grace's plaintive letters to her former doctor remain unanswered, and she has only the readers of Atwood's novel to function as substitute listeners. Through the combination of Grace's account, spoken to Dr. Jordan, and the inclusion of her internal monologue, readers function as a closer approximation to the perfect audience that Grace has been seeking for her story.

While Atwood's novel demonstrates a wealth of historical research and reconstruction, some critics have been skeptical about the work's deployment of psychological theories. Judith Knelman charges, most crucially, that the novel's central, imagined event of a therapeutic encounter between Grace and a fictive doctor simply could not have taken place: "The novel, set mostly in the 1850s, suggests an explanation that would have been largely unknown at the time and so would not have been readily accepted [. . .]" (682). In particular, Knelman cites the use of hypnosis as a means to recover memories, and the diagnosis of double consciousness put forward by Atwood's invented character, Dr. Jerome DuPont, and recognized, if not validated by Dr. Jordan, as anachronistic. Writes Knelman, "In inventing an interior monologue and a course of psychotherapy for Grace, Atwood sets her free by turning her into somebody else"

(683).⁵ Without adopting Knelman's criticism entirely, it is fair to ask why Atwood's depiction is so highly dependent on explanations which were not brought forward at Grace's trial. This chapter argues that Grace's immersion in nineteenth-century ideas about memory and personal identity draws in significant ways on later theories of psychic trauma, allowing Atwood to explore contemporary concerns of feminism—and most importantly the debate about women's status as believable victims of violence—within a broader historical context. As Margaret Atwood repeatedly pointed out to interviewers at the time of the publication of Alias Grace, our own culture shares many of the dichotomous notions about women, sexuality, and criminality that were deployed when Grace Marks was first accused of murdering her employer and his lover.

1. Hysteria, Psychoanalysis and Feminism

Atwood's representation of Grace Marks draws on the complex history of hysteria, an entity that has been perceived by feminist scholars, in particular, as an illness of femininity. Grace is identified by the Matron of her prison as a "hysteric" prone to fits of violence and madness (32). Dr. Jordan considers her behaviour within the context of important nineteenth-century studies of hysteria, particularly during his first glimpse of her, when her appearance in a "penitential dress falling straight down" along with "the timorous hunch of the shoulders; the arms hugged close to the thin body" and the long wisps of her hair "were all as it should be. He'd seen many hysterics at the Salpêtrière in

⁵ The significance of double consciousness for nineteenth-century approaches to the study of the mind is stressed by Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth, who note that theories of "dédoublément" "formed part of a much wider discussion of hidden traces within the mind [. . .]" (71).

Paris who'd looked very much like this" (66). Grace's account, then, can be read as one more version of the hysteric's story, a narration that, since Freud, links together memory, sexuality, power, and violence. While the hysteric may seem a forlorn, disenfranchised figure, for the male doctors who treated her, and marvelled at the cunning transformations of her intractable symptoms, she was a source of mysterious, seductive wiles, an exaggeration of "normal" female traits. Martha Noel Evans notes that French doctor Jean-Martin's Charcot's paradigmatic hysterics were seen "as deceitful. They liked to fool people, especially doctors" and were perceived as "unworthy of credibility" (31). Atwood's Grace, similarly, is perceived by her detractors as an unreliable narrator of the circumstances of the Kinnear murders, a vengeful, jealous woman who blamed the murders she masterminded on the male companion whom she had seduced in order to gain his co-operation. This depiction of Grace is at odds with the equally gendered view of her held by her supporters, who assume that her youth and beauty, as well as her ladylike manner, belie the possibility of violent intent. From either perspective, Grace is so closely associated with femininity in either a monstrous or repressive form that she is a highly convenient symbol, a transparent representation of pure femininity as well as its pathological form, hysteria, which Elaine Showalter terms "the female malady."

There are complex relationships between childhood sexual abuse, hysteria, and contemporary diagnostic categories of dissociative identity disorder and post-traumatic stress. According to Juliet Mitchell's recent study, "Hysteria 'disappeared' into its psychoanalytic 'cure' and re-emerged as the trauma theories (Recovered Memory syndrome and False Memory syndrome) of contemporary therapies" (110). Recovered memory theories hold that sexualized violence, particularly in childhood, causes victims

to dissociate from their bodies and minds, so that autobiographical experiences are essentially lost to the trauma survivor, who cannot recall these important aspects of her own past. In contrast, proponents of False Memory Syndrome (a coinage not recognized by the psychiatric establishment) claim that amnesia is a rare consequence of trauma: instead, they argue, memories of childhood abuse “recovered” in adulthood, particularly in the context of therapeutic intervention, represent a complex amalgam of fantasy and therapeutic suggestion. Debates surrounding recovered memories have broadened to include a range of charges of childhood abuse, both by children and by adult survivors, and, despite the efforts of the many clinicians and researchers who stress that memory processes are complicated, polarized and divisive claims have been made about the nature of true and false recollections of the past.

Margaret Atwood has argued that while the nineteenth-century novel is intensely preoccupied with memory, in the twentieth century “[fiction] has been on the whole more interested in forgetting—forgetting as an organic process, and sometimes as a willed act” (In Search of Alias Grace 11). In contemporary culture, “forgetting” has been closely associated with the disputed theory of traumatic repression, whereby experiences that are too painful to recall are pushed entirely out of an individual’s consciousness, perhaps to surface years later after a particular trigger prompts recall. Atwood’s Grace Marks, who may be suffering from traumatic amnesia, asserts that “there are some things that should be forgotten by everyone, and never spoken of again” (27). In Atwood’s novel, deliberate and unconscious repression of past events blur: Grace’s doctor is left to wonder whether her account is accurate and comprehensive, or whether it contains significant ellipses.

Atwood acknowledges that her historical novel, which aims to be as true to the known facts of the Kinnear murders as possible, takes up recent concerns around traumatic memory, and applies them to past events. Grace's story, Atwood notes, "is dependent on what she remembers; or is it what she says she remembers, which can be quite a different thing? And how can her audience know the difference?" The uncertain reliability of Grace as a narrator draws attention to the significance of women as narrators of trauma some one hundred and fifty years after Grace's crimes, as Atwood makes explicit:

Here we are, right back at the end of the twentieth century, with our own uneasiness about the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story, and the continuity of time. [. . .] we cannot help but be contemporary, and Alias Grace, although set in the mid-nineteenth century, is, of course, a very contemporary book. (In Search of Alias Grace 36)

An examination of Grace Marks as a fictionalized but historical figure to whom Atwood attributes elements of traumatic recovered memories provides insight into the centrality of childhood sexual abuse to the contemporary feminist construction of trauma. As Ian Hacking points out, a close relationship has typically been presumed between hysteria and multiple personality disorder (69). Grace experiences flashbacks and nightmares which contain significant traumatic material; when she is diagnosed as a dual personality, it is apparent that Atwood is drawing a link between trauma and Grace's disorder which, in contemporary terms, usually depends on a sexually violent history.

An exploration of Atwood's novel that views Grace as a trauma survivor whose claims may be false also offers a means of exploring the impact of gender on testimony,

which is more vulnerable to being discredited if it is voiced by a woman, and particularly one who claims that she cannot remember everything. Sue Campbell writes that women's testimony is examined particularly closely, and gaps or omissions are taken to imply not simply forgetfulness but deceit:

We often see in legal settings the attempt to undermine memory authority by shifting significance to what has been forgotten, even though no one remembers all the details of an incident in the past. In certain contexts, I can maintain a memory claim only if there is a certain amount I have not forgotten in the surroundings of the past event, and what I am responsible for is often determined by challenge. The framing of women's abuse narratives as quasi-legal testimony encourages the public, as interpreters, to take the stance of cross-examiners who categorize forgetting as memory failure and insist on completeness and consistency of memory detail through all repeated tellings. (246)

This is precisely the difficulty that Grace Marks faces, since her claim of victimization has been dismissed and she is viewed as an accomplice to two murders. Her story has changed in different tellings, arousing suspicion, and thus her claims of memory loss are suspect.

Hysteria as a diagnosis has come in and out of vogue a number of times since the first identification of a syndrome involving a "wandering womb" by Galen. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, there was a positive epidemic of hysteria, and one not entirely confined to women, although closely associated with the condition of femininity. Michael Roth notes that "hysteria was surely the most prominent and

memorable *maladie de la mémoire* of the nineteenth century.” raising questions such as “what does it mean to suffer from the past, to be pained by memory? [. . .] How does attention to the past develop from being a choice, a matter of taste, to being a duty, a matter of obligation, to being an obsession, a matter of mental illness?” (1, 2)

In turn, hypnosis, which is closely affiliated to the study of hysteria, became a privileged vehicle for investigating memory disturbances, beginning with Eugène Azam’s study of patient Félida X’s case of “*dédoublement*” or split personality, in 1859 (Roth 2).⁶ Earlier developments in mental science were also important, and turn up in Atwood’s *Alias Grace*. Henri Ellenberger’s classic history of psychiatry discusses the move from Mesmer’s late eighteenth-century claim of a mysterious physical fluid which purportedly constituted “animal magnetism” to de Puységure’s experiments with metallic rods to attempt to control the optimal flow of this magnetic fluid, and a new “artificial somnambulism,” a “magnetic sleep” which incorporated rudimentary hypnotic suggestion (62-74). The relationship between hysteria and hypnosis is complex but important: hysterics were perceived to be particularly suggestible, and their manifestations of “*grande hystérie*” included trance-like states that were apparently self-induced, but could also be provoked by skilled doctors.⁷ The somnambulistic tendencies

⁶ Ellenberger explains that Azam coined the term *dédoublement* to explain Félida’s apparent contrasting personalities: “In her normal state she knew nothing of the secondary condition except that which others told her about” (137).

⁷ During the hypnosis scene toward the end of *Alias Grace*, the hypnotist, “Dr DuPont,” makes scientific claims for his methods, disavowing the less rigorous techniques of some earlier experimenters:

“This is a fully scientific procedure,” says Dr. DuPont. He is talking to the rest of them, rather than to Grace. “Please banish all thoughts of Mesmerism, and other

of hypnotized patients accentuated their relative passivity, and their doctors' control over their actions; their apparent compliance was interpreted as transparent truth telling, since in their semi-conscious state hysterics were allegedly less able to dissemble.

Ruth Leys points out that the hysteric's hypnotizability is analogous to her previous experiences of traumatic dissociation; she argues that the striking similarities of self-induced dissociative states and hypnotic trances have encouraged therapists to jointly conceptualize hypnosis and trauma, in relation to what Leys terms *mimesis*:

It is well known that the rise of trauma theory was associated from the start with hypnosis. Hypnosis, or hypnotic suggestion, was the means by which Charcot legitimated the concept of trauma by proposing that the hysterical crises that he suggestively induced in his patients were reproductions of traumatic scenes.

What is less well understood is that hypnosis was not just an instrument of research and treatment but played a major theoretical role in the conceptualization of trauma. This is because the tendency of hypnotized persons to imitate or repeat whatever they were told to say or do provided a basic model for the traumatic experience. Trauma was defined as a situation of dissociation or "absence" from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was likened to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance. (8)

such fraudulent procedures. The Braidian system is completely logical and sound, and has been proven by European experts beyond a shadow of a doubt. It involves the deliberate relaxation and re-alignment of the nerves, so that a neuro-hypnotic sleep is induced." (474-475)

What concerns Leys is that an emphasis on a mimetic model of traumatic dissociation argues for the transparent truth of such symptoms as flashbacks and compulsive re-enactments, discouraging analysis of the therapist's role (in provoking iatrogenic responses) or the dissociative or hypnotized patient's ability to convey symbolic as well as literal truths.

Charcot's work at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris is instructive. His studies of hysteria produced popular "mad shows," public demonstrations of "grande" and "petite hystérie" on the part of female patients. These women became celebrated for their peculiar embodiment of femininity as a mixture of overt sexuality, mental instability, and deference to masculine authority. Charcot used hypnosis to practice inducing temporary paralyses in his patients (Ellenberger 89-90). Ellenberger suggests that "a peculiar atmosphere of mutual suggestion developed between Charcot, his collaborators, and his patients." many of them "young, pretty, and cunning" (98).

Pierre Janet's work, which has been more important for contemporary trauma studies, differed sharply from Charcot's approach. Janet felt it important "first, always to examine his patients by himself, without witnesses; second, to take the exact record of everything the patients said or did [. . .] and third, to scrutinize the entire life history of the patients and their past treatments" (Ellenberger 339). This clinical encounter produced a record of the variety of traumatic events that Janet's patients had suffered. He evolved a theory which laid the groundwork for Freud's approach to the traumatic neuroses, by arguing that "certain hysterical symptoms can be related to the existence of split parts of personality (subconscious fixed ideas)" which have their origin in past traumas (Ellenberger 361). If these traumas could be recalled, perhaps through the use of

hypnosis, then there would be the possibility of “dissolving” the patient’s subconscious fixed ideas, and eliminating their physical and emotional manifestations. Judith Herman, who notes that Freud and Breuer in Vienna and Janet in Paris were pursuing similar theories in the 1890s, favours a Janetian approach to traumatic memory and dissociation. Herman writes:

A century ago, Janet pinpointed the essential pathology in hysteria as “dissociation”: people with hysteria had lost the capacity to integrate the memory of overwhelming life events. With careful investigative techniques, including hypnosis, Janet demonstrated that the traumatic memories were preserved in an abnormal state, set apart from ordinary consciousness. He believed that the severing of the normal connections of memory, knowledge, and emotion resulted from intense emotional reactions to traumatic events. (34-35)⁸

While Pierre Janet’s work has been eagerly embraced in contemporary theories of trauma. Freud’s oscillations about the real or fantasized nature of sexual traumas have been more difficult to adopt. The precise historical trajectory of Freud’s theorizing is important. His first published case histories traced the symptoms of young female hysterics to recent precipitating traumas, events that mirrored their early childhood experiences of traumatic shock, usually sexual abuse. In the short case history of

⁸ Ruth Leys points out that Herman’s use of Janet discards his suggestion that hypnosis could assist patients in forgetting, rather than in recalling, past traumas; unlike Freud and Breuer, who were seeking a “cathartic abreaction” in their hysterical patients. Janet was ambivalent about the value of traumatic confession (105-115).

Katharina, for example, Freud encounters a servant girl while he is on holiday. She frequently experiences breathlessness and feelings of suffocation, along with other symptoms of what Freud identifies as an “hysterical attack” (Studies 191). His study of Katharina, who witnessed and experienced incestuous sexual overtures and perhaps abuse, concludes with Freud’s insistence that these early sexual experiences lay the groundwork for later hysteria. Freud insists that “in every analysis of a case of hysteria based on sexual traumas we find that impressions from the presexual period which produced no effect on the child attain traumatic power at a later date as memories, when the girl or married woman has acquired an understanding of sexual life” (Studies 200). In his 1896 “seduction theory” Freud postulated that the majority of the women patients he saw in analysis, most of whom were diagnosed as hysterics, had been sexually exploited by male relatives (usually their own fathers) during childhood. The memories of this abuse had then been repressed, but were manifested as symbolic symptoms of the earlier trauma, usually after a secondary, lesser trauma had triggered unconscious recall. In “The Aetiology of Hysteria” Freud argues for the first time that “at the bottom of every case of hysteria will be found one or more experiences of premature sexual experience, belonging to the first years of childhood” and suggests that this is “a momentous revelation” for the study of hysteria (187). Freud goes on to anticipate the kind of rebuttals which have indeed followed closely on many accusations of childhood abuse, including the possibilities “either that the physician forces such scenes upon the docile patient, alleging them to be recollections” or, alternately, that “the patient tells him things which he has purposely invented or spontaneous phantasies” which the doctor, in turn, misconstrues as factual statements (188). Freud dismissed both possibilities,

maintaining that hysterics are in fact reluctant to accept the validity of the memories they recount; the possibility of physician-induced fantasies of abuse strikes him as “untenable” given his own experiences with patients (188).

Famously, Freud revised his seduction theory, turning to the myth of Oedipus to put forward a new theory of infantile sexuality in which the scenes of early sexual encounters related by his patients were now seen as memories of childhood fantasies. These fantasies elaborated on a universal infantile desire to supplant the same-sex parent and join in sexual union with the opposite-sex parent. In replacing the seduction theory with the oedipal theory, Freud effectively supplants an explanation grounded in trauma with a broader claim about the foundational nature of sex differences.

A series of important feminist and psychoanalytic critiques of Freud’s shift in emphasis for sexual trauma have been put forward. Florence Rush posits “a Freudian cover-up” of childhood sexual abuse: “Unable to accept the father as seducer, he exchanged female veracity for female fantasy” (83). Rush notes that Freud’s published case histories of hysterics frequently misrepresent the “seducer” of the young girls he analyzes, displacing sexual abuse from their own father to an uncle and thus significantly altering the nature of the betrayal trauma experienced by the victim (85). Drawing on many of the same documents as Rush, including letters exchanged between Freud and his fellow analyst, Wilhelm Fliess, Jeffrey Masson claims that Freud deliberately suppressed the validity of the seduction theory in order to assuage his guilty complicity in the disastrous and near fatal treatment of one patient, Emma Eckstein, and to placate his

Viennese medical community.⁹ Masson suggests that Freud's repudiation of the seduction theory, and its replacement with the theories of infantile sexuality, served to protect powerful patriarchal interests at the expense of Freud's women analysands. For Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, the authors of The Courage to Heal, an important self-help book for sexual abuse survivors, Freud's refutation of the seduction theory is crucial to understanding how women's experiences of childhood assault have been (mis)construed by medical authorities. The Courage to Heal insists that "No one fantasizes abuse" and alleges that "the Oedipal theory as used in this way is false and damaging to women" (347). Bass and Davis cite Masson and Florence Rush's roles in documenting a Freud who had "no evidence to support his switch" from the seduction theory to the Oedipal theory: "Freud was simply unwilling to believe that so many fathers—possibly including his own—could abuse their children" (347).¹⁰

While Freud eventually rejected his seduction theory, traumatic forgetting and therapist-assisted recollection are both central to how experiences of trauma are currently constructed. As Ruth Leys points out, contemporary trauma theories, and particularly their application in feminist trauma therapy, have held onto an early Freudian approach

⁹ See also Malcolm, Rush.

¹⁰ The Courage to Heal has assumed a particular importance in contemporary trauma studies. Critics like Crews and, most recently, Joan Acocella, argue that the "check list" of symptoms provided by the guide to help readers determine whether they may be survivors of childhood sexual abuse is too suggestive. Elaine Showalter argues that, in contrast with some of the 1970s feminist literature on which the work draws, "The Courage to Heal is about victimization and accusation" rather than "self-determination, action, and responsibility" (*Hystories* 150). A strong contrast is provided by Rosaria Champagne, who argues that "The Courage to Heal has turned a whole generation of women into feminists" (19).

to sexual trauma and repression, while rejecting his later work. In particular, the idea that traumatic events fall out of consciousness and can be recalled accurately and in detail years later as “flashbulb memories”¹¹ of important events is crucial to how childhood sexual abuse has been understood by the feminist recovery movement.¹² In Betrayal Trauma, psychologist Jennifer Freyd advances a theory of the “social utility of forgetting” to argue that amnesia is particularly likely to be provoked by childhood sexual abuse if the perpetrator is a close family member on whom the victim is dependent. She suggests “the degree of amnesia will be a function of the degree of betrayal (with betrayal defined as a conflict between reality and the need to trust the caregiver)” (136). Since child sexual abuse is most likely to be inflicted by someone close to the victim, amnesia, according to Freyd, then appears to be a likely response, and memories of violence may be suppressed from conscious recall for many years. A variety of recent novels, most of them overtly feminist, take up the theme of recovered memories of childhood sexual violence. Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres, which was

¹¹ Martin A. Conway’s study, Flashbulb Memories, explains the theory behind the strong imprinting of particularly dramatic memories, such as individual recollections of what people were doing when they first learned of the Kennedy assassination. The image of a flashbulb suggests that, in the wake of a cataclysmic event, the whole set of emotional and cognitive experiences affiliated with the event are recollected in tandem with the event itself. Elizabeth Loftus has been a particularly trenchant critic of the theory of flashbulb traumatic memories, arguing that these recollections cannot be taken as accurate representations simply because they are strongly felt.

¹² Margo Rivera has edited a recent collection of essays, Fragment by Fragment: Feminist Perspectives on Memory and Child Sexual Abuse, which provides a particularly helpful introduction to the ways in which traumatic amnesia and sexual violence have been theorized together by feminists.

awarded a Pulitzer, is perhaps the best known example.¹³

Feminist activists and critics have supported the authenticity of women's narratives of sexual trauma, and have warned that dominant cultural modes tend to discredit female trauma survivors, by characterizing their discourse as "mad" and "as evidence of women's or children's hysterical or mendacious tendencies" (Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale 205). The cultural silencing of survivor discourse can, in turn, create an ethical imperative for advocates of women to believe their accounts of sexualized trauma. Throughout her writing career, Atwood has been acutely aware of the reputation that women have as confabulators, and of the disdain which has greeted their accounts of sexual violence. In the early prose poem "Marrying the Hangman," for example, Atwood focusses on the critical and political distinctions between "fantasy" and "history" which are involved in recounting experiences of violence; she writes

My friends, who are both women, tell me their stories, which cannot be believed
and which are true. They are horror stories and they have not happened to me,
they have not yet happened to me, they have happened to me but we are

¹³ Because childhood sexual abuse, along with other forms of domestic violence, has so often been concealed, the effort to "break the silence" surrounding abuse has included the publication of countless narratives by victims, as memoir, poetry, and autobiographical fiction. Many of these focus on the recovery of memories. Some recent Canadian examples include Camilla Gibb's Mouthing the Words, Sylvia Fraser's My Father's House, Charlotte Vale Allen's Daddy's Girl, Betsy Warland's The Bat Had Blue Eyes, Elly Danica's Don't: A Woman's Word and Libby Scheier's SKY; American examples include Betsy Peterson's Dancing with Daddy, Martha Ramsay's Where I Stopped, Roseann Lloyd's War Baby Express and Elly Bulkin's Enter Password: Recovery. Numerous novels, including Loranne Brown's The Handless Maiden, Julie Brickman's What Birds Can Only Whisper, Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres and Alice Walker's The Color Purple also deal with childhood sexual abuse.

detached, we watch our unbelief with horror [. . .] these things happen and we sit at a table and tell stories about them so we can finally believe. This is not fantasy, it is history [. . .].

As a number of Atwood's own works have pointed out, masculinized "history" has been more closely allied with telling the truth than female story-telling has been, and so it is necessary to keep insisting on the factual (if not always verifiable) basis of women's accounts of violence.

The feminist critique of Freud holds him accountable for refusing to believe his female patients' accounts of childhood sexual abuse, and for fostering a climate in which women's stories could be dismissed as fantasies. While more nuanced appraisals of Freud's evolution of the seduction theory have been advanced, Bass and Davis' perspective captures the popular feminist critique of Freud, which also surfaces in a variety of literary and artistic works. Canadian writer and video artist Marusya Bociurkiw's recent short film, Nancy Drew and the Mystery of the Haunted Body, provides a particularly inventive example of postmodern parody in the service of feminism. The mystery novel heroine is depicted as suffering from nightmares, flashbacks, and periods of dissociation, symptoms that she learns over the course of the film to identify as post-incest somatic effects. The filmmaker's own summary is useful:

Written in the feverish, multi-plot style of a Nancy Drew mystery, the story is set in the bland town of Riverdale Heights, where Nancy works as researcher by day, detective by night. One day, she gets called in by her boss, Doctor D. Nial at The Psychology Institute (really a front for the False Memory Institute). A researcher was killed, his papers stolen.

Nancy must find them: they are Freud's original writings on the discovery of traumatic memory in his female clients. The plot thickens. The mysteries pile up. A Mannish Academic has had her research ripped off; Nancy suspects a link with Freud when Mannish Academic shows Nancy the Invest Survivors' Hall of Fame, where Nancy Sinatra and the Dionne Quintuplets whisper clues. A racy sexual encounter, a gig on a TV talkshow, and a showdown with Dr D. Nial follow.

Canadian psychologist and writer Keith Oatley's first historical novel, The Case of Emily V., also takes up the feminist critique of Freud. His fictional protagonist is a young hysteric, treated by Freud for symptoms of voicelessness and anxiety that surface after she has inadvertently participated in the death of her guardian. Emily attempts to conceal the fatal accident from Freud, fearing that he will report her to the police; she tells him only of the sexual abuse that her guardian had perpetrated for several years while she was living in his home. Freud, however, dismisses her account, confiding to his professional colleagues that he no longer believes his own earlier theory of trauma, and instead has come to the conclusion that such accounts are confabulations. Oatley stresses the importance of Freud's almost entire neglect of Emily's own agency as a narrator: the psychoanalyst will not admit her account into his theories because he assumes that the stories of hysterics are unreliable, inconsistent, and fragmented.

Unlike Freud's actual female patients, however, Emily has an unlikely ally in persuading the therapist of the veracity of her recollections of sexual abuse. While Freud has been interrogating Emily, Sherlock Holmes has been pursuing a parallel investigation

into the death of the high-ranking diplomat. Emily's guardian, whose mysterious disappearance in Austria hints at an international conspiracy. Holmes' detection turns up independent corroboration of Emily's abuse, precisely the kind of evidence least likely to be found in intimate sexual violence cases where the victim's dependence on her abuser ensures her silence, and the privacy of the family home conceals the crime.¹⁴

2. Alias Grace: Hysteria, Traumatic Memory and Historical Fiction

Narrative control and mastery are central to Alias Grace, which, like Keith Oatley's The Case of Emily V., rewrites psychoanalysis as detective fiction. In Margaret Atwood's novel, an aspiring psychiatrist is, implicitly, also conducting a criminal investigation, since the patient who intrigues him is a convicted murderess, now seeking a pardon. Atwood's work is situated in the rich context of mid-nineteenth-century psychological science. Her fictional doctor, Simon Jordan, hopes to establish a model asylum, one with careful attention to hygiene, setting, and modern physical facilities; he is considerably vaguer about his therapeutic aims. Like other so-called alienists of the mid-century, Jordan is aware of the need to establish a professional reputation with the upper classes whose family members cannot be relegated to public asylums. His

¹⁴ While the silencing and dismissal of sexual violence narratives has been critiqued for some time, more recently some feminists have been troubled by the proliferation of women's abuse narratives, and by the tendency of the media to package accounts of violence for public consumption. In "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" Linda Martín Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale note the tension between the use of survivor "speech as an important object of conflict and disclosures as increasing domination" in contemporary media-saturated culture (199). While women's accounts of sexual violence have been frequently characterized as "breaking the silence," these authors point out that the parameters for survivor discourse are inevitably set by the dominant culture.

treatment of Grace Marks, however, anticipates Freudian techniques such as dream analysis and free association. Like the famous Félicité X and other noted multiple personality sufferers, Grace demonstrates two distinct personalities after she has been hypnotized. Her apparent “*dédoublement*” offers a final mystery rather than a satisfying revelation of Grace’s indeterminable guilt or innocence, thwarting the conventions of the detective novel mode used and parodied in Alias Grace.

Atwood’s novel is heavily dependent on parody and intertextuality. Along with the case studies of hysterics discussed above, Atwood’s novel draws on Freud’s best known analysis, his account of Dora, which posits an Oedipal complex and bisexual desire but unwittingly illuminates powerful patriarchal attempts to use Dora as a sexual pawn.¹⁵ Dora was an adolescent girl brought for analytic treatment. Her father expressed concern about Dora’s ongoing physical ailments, which included a nervous cough and hoarseness, one brief loss of consciousness followed by amnesia, along with symptoms of depression and irritability. Predictably, the onset of Dora’s symptoms followed on what Freud and Breuer had postulated as the most common cause of hysteria: an experience of “psychical trauma” rooted in a sexual cause. At this point in his account, however, Freud wonders if he should venture beyond his theory of a sexual aetiology for hysteria to wonder if earlier childhood experiences may play a role. In Dora’s case, “if [. . .] the trauma theory is not to be abandoned, we must go back to her

¹⁵ Two important collections of essays are the issue of Diacritics devoted to Dora, and In Dora’s Case, edited by Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane. Hélène Cixous and Canadian playwright Kim Morrissey have both written dramatic adaptations of the case history.

childhood and look about there for any influences or impressions which have had an effect analogous to that of a trauma" (58). Freud locates these earlier "influences or impressions" in his recently formulated Oedipal theory: he argues that Dora's cough and loss of voice, in particular, are attributable to an early childhood desire, now revived in adolescence, to perform oral sex on her father.

The wealth of feminist re-interpretations of Freud's partial analysis of Dora suggests a preoccupation with the unequal relationship it depicts between a male analyst and a female analysand. Through Freud's work with Dora, questions of power and authority are linked inextricably to narrative. Freud claims the right to name Dora's desire, and to redefine her experience of sexual exploitation as a neurotic overreaction rooted in guilt. Steven Marcus argues that throughout the case history, Freud is guilty of manipulation and exploitation, mirroring the treatment Dora received from her father. "Instead of letting Dora appropriate her own story," he suggests, "Freud became the appropriator of it" (85). Claire Kahane, Elaine Showalter, and numerous others have reviewed Freud's treatment of Dora, and his theories of hysteria, and found him guilty of misogyny and even willful blindness to his own overt intervention in the narratives of his female patients. His hysterics, they have suggested, rebelled against his misappropriation of their life stories, and, like Dora, left therapy. As Juliet Mitchell points out, such historical revisions have their roots in Second Wave feminism, which "protested against the prevalent stigmatization of women as hysterical by accepting and then overturning its implications: the hysteric in her many guises—as a witch or as Dora—was a protofeminist heroine protesting against patriarchal oppression" (120). Mitchell suggests, however, that we have more recently seen yet another re-evaluation:

“Now the late second wave or ‘third wave’ of feminism sees that initial reascription as futile: hysteria has not shed its denigrating connotations” and may not provide a productive or healthy model of femininity (110). In Atwood’s novel, Dora’s namesake is the intractable house servant who waits on Dr. Jordan, covertly observing his transgressive sexual relationship with his married landlady, Rachel.

Atwood’s novel is set several decades before Freud’s work with hysterics, but she elects to transpose his therapeutic methods onto her own fictional doctor, and establishes a relationship between analyst and patient which takes up important aspects of the feminist critique of psychoanalysis. Like Freud with his hysterics, Dr. Jordan has definite ideas about how to elicit Grace’s sexual and traumatic stories. His patient has experienced multiple traumatic events, ranging from her mother’s death and her father’s neglect and abandonment, to the loss of her closest friend, Mary Whitney, who dies from a botched abortion. Yet, Grace’s traumatic amnesia, while closely affiliated with her friend Mary’s death, surfaces most concretely in relation to an event for which Grace was a perpetrator rather than a victim. Grace claims amnesia for many of the events surrounding the two murders at the Kinnear household, and her subsequent flight, with her co-accused, to the United States. One of the most difficult of Grace’s narrative tasks is to attempt to persuade her auditor, Simon Jordan, that she should in fact be taken as an additional victim of the “real” murderer, James McDermott, along with the two murder victims themselves. Grace alleges that the “breaking day” of the murders was a traumatic shock that induced her dissociation and subsequent fugue state; she positions herself as an unwitting accomplice to McDermott’s violence and flight from the country. Since McDermott himself was hanged, after Grace’s sentence was commuted, Grace is

the only living witness of the events at the Kinnear household, and her status as the privileged eyewitness makes her a source of speculation.

Simon Jordan attempts to be Grace's ideal listener, but comes to feel like a voyeur. He has read and heard other accounts, and dismissed the previous interpreters of Grace's story as incompetent observers and unreliable storytellers, reserving particular criticism for Susanna Moodie who, as noted above, mediated Atwood's own textual and sensationalized introduction to *Grace Marks*. Unlike Moodie, Jordan is initially kindly disposed towards Grace. Jordan believes that he can provide a different kind of audience for the notorious murderess, a non-judgemental and non-intrusive presence that can guide Grace towards complete self-disclosure. He is not sufficiently mindful of the differences in power—chiefly founded in gender and class—which divide them sharply, and cause Grace to distrust him.

Dr. Jordan is intrigued by the possibility that his famous patient has repressed painful memories of violence. Because Grace claims that she cannot fully recall the events surrounding the murders, he must seek to restore Grace's "vanished memory" to illuminate either her guilt or innocence (96). He writes to a friend that he hopes "to wake the part of her mind that lies dormant—to probe down below the threshold of her consciousness, and to discover the memories that must perforce lie buried there" (152). Some time later, he considers the scholarly readings he has been pursuing, pausing to reflect that

Maine de Biran held that conscious life was only a sort of island, floating upon a much vaster subconscious, and drawing thoughts up from it like fish. What is perceived as being known is only a small part of what may be stored in this dark

repository. Lost memories lie down there like sunken treasure, to be retrieved piecemeal, if at all; and amnesia itself may be in effect a sort of dreaming in reverse; a drowning of recollection, a plunging under [. . .]. (161)

Dr. Jordan's pre-Freudian musings on the unconscious, and on the potential repression of memories, are central to the manner in which Atwood's novel approaches the story of Grace Marks.

Grace is not, initially, prepared to tell Dr. Jordan anything at all. She has grown tired of answering the endless questions of legal and medical authority figures, and finally

I stopped telling them anything. Not Dr. Bannerling, who would come into the room when I was tied up in the dark with mufflers on my hands. Keep still I am here to examine you, it is no use lying to me. Nor the other doctors who would visit there, Oh indeed, what a fascinating case, as if I were a two-headed calf. At last I stopped talking altogether, except very civilly when spoken to, Yes Ma'am No Ma'am, Yes and No Sir. (35)

Grace's attempt to substitute politeness for disclosure is soon apparent to Dr. Jordan, who devises a variety of strategies to entice Grace to talk. Some of these are clearly founded in Freudian exercises, such as Dr. Jordan's own version of free association, which, as Grace notes, is a kind of "guessing game [. . .] there is always a right answer, which is right because it is the one they want, and you can tell by their faces where you have guessed what it is" (44).

From Dr. Jordan's point of view, only Grace's full and free co-operation are of any value, since "enquiries such as mine are ineffective, unless the trust of the subject

may be gained”: his difficulty is that “she has had scant reason to trust anyone at all for a very long period of time” (60). Even as Dr. Jordan’s enquiries proceed, Grace is still subject to the conditions of the penitentiary, such as the “fondling” of the two men who escort her to the Governor’s house each day to work. Within the setting of the mansion, however, Grace is more at ease, and it proves to be a milieu conducive to therapeutic analysis, one which does not overtly remind Grace of the previous places where she has been interrogated about the murders:

He asks a question, and I say an answer, and he writes it down. In the courtroom, every word that came out of my mouth was as if burnt into the paper they were writing it on, and once I said a thing I knew I could never get the words back; only they were the wrong words, because whatever I said would be twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place. And it was the same with Dr. Bannerling at the Asylum. But now I feel as if everything I say is right. As long as I say something, anything at all, Dr. Jordan smiles and writes it down, and tells me I am doing well. (77)

Despite Grace’s sense that any response at all is acceptable to Dr. Jordan, she learns to distinguish between the effects of her various accounts, aiming in particular to tell the stories that Dr. Jordan will wish to record and analyze. In return for a treat that Dr. Jordan has proffered, for example, Grace decides to offer up a particularly interesting incident from the past: “Because he was so thoughtful as to bring me this radish, I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him; for I have always believed that one good turn deserves

another” (291). When Grace provides an elaborate account of an interlude involving an eventful dream and sleepwalking, she notes proudly that “Dr. Jordan is writing eagerly [. . .]. I have never seen him so animated before. It does my heart good to feel I can bring a little pleasure into a fellow-being’s life; and I think to myself, I wonder what he will make of all that” (335).

Grace’s disclosures to her doctor are partial. There are significant aspects of her experiences that Grace decides to conceal even as she grows more trusting. When Dr. Jordan inquires about her dreams, for example, Grace replies—“a little tartly because it is none of his gentleman’s business”—that she does not intend to relinquish these details. Grace does not tell Dr. Jordan, however, that she is deliberately withholding information, instead offering the excuse that she does not remember her dreams. In this same passage, however, the reader is privy to Grace’s internal monologue, as she reflects on the content of a recent and analytically provocative dream. In this nightmare, she was shaking hands with a strange man, only to discover that she possessed a “third hand” which must belong to another woman, and which was “dangling [. . .] like a glove” with blood dripping down from it (113). Stephanie Lovelady observes that these kinds of shifts, between disclosure and withdrawal, are characteristic of Grace’s story-telling methods: “Private and public narration intersect in Grace’s tale, which cannot be said to be truly private or public, but which moves along a continuum between these two poles” (36). Grace’s life, of course, manifests this extreme dualism, since she oscillates between her insignificance as a house servant, both before the murders, and in the privacy of the Governor’s home, and her very public profile as a notorious murderess. In this context, Grace’s stubborn attempt to have a private life of the mind—albeit one that is presented to the reader—is

an act of self-assertion that threatens Dr. Jordan's control.

Because the alliance between Dr. Jordan and Grace includes the characteristics of both a psychological and a criminal investigation, there is a tension between the divergent kinds of confessions that arise, and the uses to which they may be put. Grace repeatedly invokes the significance of a compact of truthfulness: of her own attempts to tell a complete truth, and of the importance of Dr. Jordan believing her. Simon Jordan, in turn, struggles with the complexities of his own role as a listener. As Dori Laub suggests about the traumatic listener's role, he finds his position complicated by the need for him to be simultaneously "both unobtrusive, nondirective, and yet imminently present, active, in the lead" throughout the investigation (Felman and Laub 71). Laub's concern is that the overwhelming emotional stress of recounting trauma "can end up in silence, in complete withholding" of the trauma story from the listener (71). This is also Dr. Jordan's greatest fear: that Grace will fail to reveal the truth. Dr. Jordan doubts the reliability of Grace's narrative, even as he longs to accept it; he has even compromised his neutrality by promising Grace that he will believe her account. Some of Dr. Jordan's suspicions are founded on the artful narrative construction of Grace's story, and her facility in recounting it. He wonders if "the very plenitude of her recollections," which she seems to offer so generously, "may be a sort of distraction, a way of drawing the mind away from some hidden but essential fact, like the dainty flowers planted over a grave" (215). His formulation is apt: one of Grace's most powerful withholdings is her unwillingness to share with Dr. Jordan her recurring dreams of blood-like peonies, "huge dark-red flowers with glossy petals" that are terrifyingly linked to her memories of one of the murder victims (375).

This dream *is* repeatedly shared, though, with the reader. While Dr. Jordan and the reader are joint “listeners” for the larger part of Grace’s story, important aspects are not divulged to Dr. Jordan, and the reader is made aware of these omissions in a narrative which can seem oddly direct and even confrontational. The significant intimacy that evolves between Grace and the reader can be understood in terms of Nathalie Cooke’s provocative analysis of “fictive confessions” in Atwood’s fiction, which suggests that readers become “acutely aware of our own role in the confessional dynamic of the fictive confession as a whole. We look to the speaker not so much for the disclosure of events as for their production. And we look within the text for models of reading” (211). While Dr. Jordan studies Grace’s body and language for symptoms of traumatic amnesia, the reader’s gaze is cast on Jordan as well, evaluating his therapeutic methods and his personal life. Cooke argues that the deployment of “fictive” confessions serves to “implicate the reader in the power politics under discussion” while bestowing “upon him/her both the authority and the responsibility of witness” (225). In this regard, it is striking that one of Atwood’s major revisions of Alias Grace involved rewriting the first 100 pages of the novel to make Grace a first-person narrator.¹⁶ The reader comes to occupy the role of Grace’s confidante, the role formerly accorded to Mary Whitney (from whom Grace borrowed a temporary identity) and never entirely bestowed on Dr.

¹⁶ Atwood discussed her revisions in several interviews that she gave at the time of the publication of Alias Grace, including one with David Wiley where she notes that she “had to discard about the first hundred pages after I’d written them—or that approach that was in the first hundred pages, because I had a third-person Grace, and that third-person Grace wasn’t working for me at all. So I went back to first-person Grace.” (n.p.)

Jordan.¹⁷ Grace's need for a listener to attend to her traumatic stories is acute, as is apparent when she describes the rapid intimacy that she developed with Mary, her fellow maid:

She asked all about me, and I told her about the journey in the ship, and about my mother dying, and sinking down into the sea among the icebergs. And Mary said that was very sad. And then I told her about my father, although keeping back the worst parts, because it is not right to speak ill of a parent [. . .]. (172)

After Mary's premature and tragic death, Grace's sense of loss is redoubled, and it is only when she encounters Dr. Jordan that she is again offered the presence of a sympathetic listener, albeit one with an agenda which may not entirely match Grace's own. The readers of Grace's outpourings, in contrast, more closely resemble Mary, in our mixture of curiosity, interest, and sympathy. Grace's justification for concealing information from Dr. Jordan then has the appearance of reasonableness, even while it calls specific attention to her sense of her own dreams and memories as objects which she is bartering with him: "I have little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself; and in any case, what use would he have for my dreams, after all?" (114)

Grace's desire to shield her dreams from Dr. Jordan as an assertion of privacy may be disingenuous, but it is logically consistent with Grace's complaints about how her "story" has been told by others, and her fear that Dr. Jordan, too, is selective in his

¹⁷ Atwood borrows the name Mary Whitney from the records of Grace Marks's confession, but invents the character.

interpretation of her account. Grace attempts to impress on the alienist that printed words, in particular, cannot be trusted. When he alludes to the “confession” attributed to Grace in a local newspaper at the time of the trial, she undermines his secure belief that the newspapers tell “the truth”:

That is not really my Confession, I say, it was only what the lawyers told me to say, and things made up by the men from the newspapers, you might as well believe the rubbishy broadsheet they were peddling about, as that. The first time I set eyes on a newspaper man I thought, Well then, does your mother know you’re out [. . .]. They were all like that, wet behind the ears, and would not know the truth if they fell over it [. . .]. They will make up any old thing to suit themselves. (114-115)

Grace’s spirited attack on the reliability of the journalism of her day allows Atwood to question the nature of the historical record that has produced an entirely textual Grace Marks. In the special issue broadsheet put out by The Star and Transcript on the occasion of the 1843 trials of Grace Marks and James McDermott, Grace’s “voluntary confession” is presented, apparently verbatim. According to this account, which conflicts directly with McDermott’s own published “voluntary confession,” the housekeeper’s disputes with McDermott led to the murders, in a charged household atmosphere of sexual jealousy and mutual contempt. The confession alleges that McDermott had told her that he was planning to kill Nancy, and he compelled her to participate. In contrast with Grace’s claims of minimal participation, James McDermott maintained, in his confession dated the day before he was executed, that “I will not say how Mr. Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery were killed, *but I should not have done it* if I

had not been urged to do so by Grace Marks [. . .]. Grace Marks is wrong in stating she had no hand in the murder: she was the means from beginning to end” (Walton n.p.).

Despite his awareness of McDermott’s claims, Dr. Jordan is intent on proving that Grace cannot be held responsible. He becomes implicated in Grace’s narrative, not only as her crucial witness, but as the victim of traumatic contagion: Grace’s stories of seduction and violence are so compelling that he begins to enact the scenarios she describes. All the time, Dr. Jordan wonders,

Was Grace unconscious at the time she claimed, or was she fully awake, as Jamie Walsh testified? How much of her story can he allow himself to believe? Does he need a grain of salt, or two, or three? Is it a real case of amnesia, of the somnambulistic type, or is he the victim of a cunning imposture? [. . .] In her favour, much of what she’s told him accords with her printed Confession; but is that really in her favour? Possibly it accords too well. He wonders if she’s been studying from the same text he himself has been using, the better to convince him.

The difficulty is that he wants to be convinced. [. . .] He wants her to be vindicated. (385-386)

All of Grace’s listeners, Atwood suggests, desire particular kinds of stories from Grace, and attempt to fit her accounts into particular generic models: legal testimony, confession, or trauma narrative. Grace depicts her trial lawyer as a particularly manipulative listener, who wished her to shape her “story” so that it will make sense:

He wanted me to tell my story in what he called a coherent way, but would often accuse me of wandering, and became annoyed with me; and at last he said that

the right thing was, not to tell the story as I truly remembered it, which nobody could be expected to make any sense of; but to tell a story that would hang together, and that had some chance of being believed. I was to leave out the parts I could not remember, and especially to leave out the fact that I could not remember them. And I should say what must have happened, according to plausibility, rather than what I myself could actually recall. So that is what I attempted to do. (42)

While Dr. Jordan assists in Grace's reconstruction of her past, the reader becomes increasingly complicit with Grace's selective arrangement of her history, as well as her efforts to evade Dr. Jordan's most pointed and dangerous questions. Here, too, Atwood relies on the complicated history of hysteria and feminism as an intertext. There is a peculiar pleasure in knowing more than Dr. Jordan, the expert, and for post-Freudians perhaps an additional satisfaction in retracing the common narrative trajectory of the ambitious male analyst's misunderstanding of, and overinvolvement in, his female patient's story of seduction, violence, and betrayal—as in Dora's case. Dr. Jordan's conduct is increasingly erratic, guided by his ambivalent sexual relationship with his landlady and his efforts to suppress his strong counter-transferential feelings toward Grace. While Grace has been publicly chastised for her alleged sexual improprieties, the reader judges Dr. Jordan's actions. His sexual life comes to parallel Grace's, as his illicit sexual relationship with his landlady threatens to end in bloodshed. Even Dr. Jordan's dream of aggressive sex with Grace seems to re-enact earlier scenarios recounted by Grace, including Mary Whitney's pregnancy and fatal abortion, as well as Grace's own experiences of sexual insults and attempted seduction. The fact that this scenario is

actually carried out on a woman's body—albeit Dr. Jordan's landlady, rather than Grace—reinforces Dr. Jordan's association with other exploitative men Grace has known, further diminishing his credibility as an appropriate witness for Grace.

Grace and her analyst arrive at an impasse, and he feels compelled to accept the suggestion of one of his patrons, that hypnosis may reveal the “whole truth” about Grace's complicity in the murders. Dr. Jordan is not aware that the hypnotist, the illustrious “Dr. Jerome DuPont,” is also Grace's Jeremy the peddler, an old friend and ally from her time as a maid before she began work for Kinnear. The complicated confidence tricks and frauds of which he is capable provide for the possibility that Grace is colluding in her own dramatic performance, but if this is the case, it is not revealed to the reader.

Under hypnosis, Grace is brought back to the events leading up to the murder. When Dr. Jordan poses his first question, however, it does not touch on Grace's innocence or culpability but, instead, on the issue that Grace knows preoccupies most of her observers: “‘Ask her,’ he says, ‘whether she ever had relations with James McDermott’” (478). Grace's response surprises him: she accuses him of hypocrisy, and points out that he is holding the hand of a young woman at the table. Unlike Grace's usual outward show of demure co-operation, she now speaks in an embittered, mocking voice:

Grace laughs again. “You'd like to know that, so I'll tell you. Yes. I would meet him outside, in the yard, in my nightdress, in the moonlight. I'd press up against him. I'd let him kiss me, and touch me as well, all over. Doctor, the same places you'd like to touch me, because I can always tell, I know what you're

thinking when you sit in that stuffy little sewing room with me.” (479)

When Dr. Jerome DuPont insists that Grace recall the violent scenes in the cellar at the Kinnear home, again she surprises her listeners. She speaks of her victim Nancy slightly, regretting the ruin of the handkerchief she used to strangle Nancy. Grace’s supporters feel betrayed, but she insists that the deception of innocence has not been her own: “‘Stop talking rubbish,’ she says. ‘You’ve deceived yourselves! I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it!’” (481). When Jordan recognizes, some minutes later, that Grace seems possessed by the spirit of Mary Whitney, he accuses her of “playing tricks” but Grace, in her trance-like state, returns to the central demand she has made on Jordan throughout the novel, her desire to be heard and believed: “‘You see?’ wails the voice. ‘You’re the same, you won’t listen to me, you don’t believe me, you want it your own way, you won’t hear...’ It trails off, and there is silence” (483).

DuPont offers a diagnosis, that Grace has been suffering from “double consciousness,” what Simon’s French source terms “*dédoublement*,” when “the subject [. . .] in a somnambulistic trance, displayed a completely different personality than when awake, the two halves having no knowledge of each other” (486).¹⁸ Dr. Bannerling, in contrast, rejects this approach to Grace’s condition, and steadfastly refuses to admit the possibility that she was not responsible for the actions carried out at the Kinnear

¹⁸ Atwood’s interest in fragmented personalities clearly predates *Alias Grace*. Atwood’s novels have repeatedly focussed on female characters who experience complex internal disintegration or fragmentation, ranging from the romance novelist with multiple identities in *Lady Oracle* to the artist in *Cat’s Eye* who literally divides her autobiographical works into triptychs. In one of Atwood’s best-known formulations, she recreated nineteenth-century writer Susanna Moodie as “divided down the middle.”

household. The reader may be torn between Dr. Bannerling's rational disbelief and Simon Jordan's grudging willingness to admit the possibility of double consciousness as a means of absolving Grace.

Before analyzing a final, crucial passage, in which Grace reflects on how to narrate the "breaking day," the day of the murders itself, it is worth considering what kind of therapeutic stance is presented in these passages, as Jordan struggles to believe Grace despite his own doubts about hypnosis. Contemporary trauma theory has repeatedly advocated the importance of a "therapeutic alliance" between the therapist and the patient. Judith Herman has articulated the need for the traumatized client and her therapist to collaborate in constructing the story of the trauma, which Herman and other trauma therapists have deemed a central aspect of individual recovery from traumatic events. According to Herman, the therapist acts as a witness to the trauma survivor, encouraging her "to reconstruct the traumatic event as a recitation of fact. Out of the fragmented components [. . .] patient and therapist slowly reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context" (177). The therapist must remember, warns Herman, that her "ethical stance" of bearing witness to the survivor's truth-telling cannot become "a criminal investigation" (180) since it is not the therapist's role to establish legal culpability.

In contrast, critics of trauma therapy's methods have suggested that therapists may pursue too active a role in assisting patients to reconstruct or even imagine past traumas, while not attempting with sufficient diligence to test the reliability of their patients' accounts. In Alias Grace it is clear that Dr. Jordan is unwittingly conditioning Grace's narrative, despite his overwhelming desire to provide a blank screen on which

she can project her own, unmediated truth. The novel presents an image of Grace as Scheherazade, offering up seductive stories to forestall his departure and his loss of interest in her “case.” Grace suggests, too, that her account is chiefly a way of structuring her own past, rather than an effort to manipulate Dr. Jordan’s responses to her: “When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood [. . .]. It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else” (355). Narrating traumatic experiences becomes a way of comprehending what actually occurred, and of evaluating what can safely be revealed to others.

The most self-conscious enactment of the tension between knowing and telling takes place when Grace is putting together her account of “the breaking day” for Dr. Jordan:

What should I tell Dr. Jordan about this day? [. . .] I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well. And what McDermott said I said, and what the others said I must have said [. . .].

I said that I remembered some of the things I did. But there are other things they said I did, which I said I could not remember at all. (351)

Although this seems like a bewildering mixture of words and deeds, Grace resists Dr. Jordan’s implicit encouragement to enact his theory of traumatic memory and amnesia, to inscribe on her body the writing of his own medical text. Grace’s plight is that of the

hysteric, whose narrative resists logical ordering and closure. As Charles Bernheimer notes,

When his patients came into possession of their own stories, Freud believed, they would not have to speak across the body. Yet, Freud neglected to ask how a woman comes into possession of her own story, becomes a subject, when even narrative convention assigns her the place of an object of desire. How does an object tell a story? (21)

Alias Grace withholds from readers a complete revelation of Grace's culpability or innocence, leaving us to speculate, even, as to whether Grace's state of double consciousness, revealed only under hypnosis, is real or a complicated confidence trick. Atwood allows for a variety of possibilities—that Grace is deliberately lying, that her traumatic memories are not accessible to her, that Dr. Jordan's intrusive efforts to shape Grace's account by posing sexually suggestive questions defeat his possibilities to learn "the truth." In Atwood's first effort to write Grace's story, The Servant Girl, these ambiguities were not highlighted: Grace, while young and confused, was clearly the instigator of the murders at the Kinnear household, and, equally unambivalently, retreated into madness after her incarceration, haunted by images of her victims. The television play clearly lacks much of what makes Alias Grace so interesting, including the multiple and contradictory perspectives of Grace Marks that are central to the novel. Most importantly, however, when Atwood composed The Servant Girl during the 1970s, the discourses of trauma that are crucial to Alias Grace were only just beginning to emerge. While Atwood has located and incorporated early and mid-nineteenth century psychological theories dealing with memory, she has transplanted these into a context

which, Judith Knelman suggests, is a peculiar and possibly even anachronistic one for *Grace Marks*: an analytic inquiry into her state of mind that reveals repressed memories, confused and fragmented flashbacks, and multiple personality disorder, all more “contemporary” than historical.

According to Susan Rowland, “It is the achievement of the novel to reveal the binary systems oppressing the feminine,” notably in the interplay of “history” and “fiction”:

History is problematised because it is revealed as fatally contaminated by sexuality and culture: its textuality is saturated with fiction. Fiction is problematised because *Alias Grace* fractures the realist text’s claims to portray a coherent *knowable* world and solve issues of representation. More precisely, the metafiction lies not only in the text’s refusing to tell us ‘the truth’ about Grace but in its revelation of its inability to do so. (249-250)

Atwood’s decision to avoid putting forward a unitary “truth” that resolves whether or not Grace is, in fact, guilty of the Kinnear murders is seen by Rowland as a hallmark of the work’s nature as both “postmodern” and “feminist” (25).¹⁹ In the context of trauma, however, the combination of postmodern and feminist impulses in the novel may lead to some ideological incoherence, particularly in light of the ferocity of contemporary debates surrounding the recall and narration of past acts of violence.

Atwood has shaped Grace into a story-teller, the most crucial of her identities in

¹⁹ Hilde Staels identifies *Alias Grace* as “historiographic metafiction” and as a parody of the detective novel genre (430, 433).

the novel, but in light of the novel's immersion in contemporary trauma theory and twentieth-century analytic methods, an additional identity for Grace Marks is clearly "trauma survivor". In this context, it is worth recalling that although Atwood inserts Grace into the complicated late nineteenth-century discourse of hysteria, she also establishes the possibility, if not probability, that Grace is consciously manipulating her presentation of self to achieve complicated effects on her listeners: to establish her innocence or, if that is beyond her reach, to provide a means by which she cannot possibly be held responsible for her own conduct. This representation of trauma and its aftermath as a legal defense, however, is troubling, suggesting a participation in the discourse of feminine hysteria that condemned hysterics for their "mendacious" or manipulative tendencies. Since, Mitchell and Showalter both suggest, the newer pathological entities identified with hysteria remain closely affiliated with "normal" femininity, both the historical and the contemporary theories deployed by Atwood in her historical novel deserve careful scrutiny and evaluation.

At the time of the publication of Alias Grace, a series of murders in Ontario had again captured public attention, resulting in the sensationalized media coverage that Grace Marks's own trial occasioned. The female companion of a notorious sex-killer agreed to testify against him. The public was outraged to learn, however, that the young woman had received a much more lenient sentence, in part, it appeared, because the Crown Attorneys who interviewed her did not grasp how instrumental she had been in the commission of her husband's crimes. They accepted her account that she was a battered woman, terrorized into submission by her mate, a claim which seemed belied by videotape evidence concealed from the police. In many of the newspaper interviews with

Atwood, she was asked if Karla Homolka was part of her inspiration for Grace Marks's story. Her responses varied only slightly: Atwood insisted that she was largely unaware of the story, but pointed out that it demonstrated the continuity of concerns about female criminality and sexuality from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Margaret Atwood's fiction has reflected a range of feminist concerns over the last thirty years, but she has frequently spoken of her unwillingness to follow a "party line"²⁰: in *Alias Grace*, as in *Cat's Eye*, Atwood draws on theories of traumatic memory and therapeutic recovery which reflect contentious cultural narratives. Atwood is less interested in the victimization that Grace Marks suffered as a recent immigrant, a young Irish woman, or a servant, than in the complex ways in which Grace may have been able to exercise her own forms of power and control. "In my fiction," Atwood writes, "Grace too—whatever else she is—is a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives" (*In Search of Alias Grace* 36). The historical Grace Marks may not have been a storyteller, but in granting her a voice—albeit one heavily overladen with late-twentieth century concerns about traumatic memories—Atwood offers a provocative revision.

²⁰ The two recent biographies of Atwood by Nathalie Cooke and Rosemary Sullivan stress this point.

Chapter 3: Transgenerational Trauma and Impossible Mourning in Joy Kogawa's Obasan and Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman

Introduction

The construction of traumatic testimony, as I described in the first chapter of this dissertation, has been theorized to include both a survivor-speaker—the dominant testifier—and a listener, who assists in the process of recovering the past and translating it into narrative by providing attention and sustained interest. As my discussion of Alias Grace demonstrates, the paradigmatic instance of a listener is the therapeutic witness who, like Atwood's fictional Dr. Jordan, brings a wealth of specialized knowledge to the analysis of trauma. Many listeners, however, possess less professional and more intimate credentials, acquiring the responsibility to witness from their status as a trauma survivor's family member. In this chapter, I analyze theories of testimony and transgenerational trauma in the context of novels, Joy Kogawa's Obasan and Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman, which situate young daughters as the partial and inadequate witnesses to their mothers' suffering. In each novel, the daughter only gradually becomes aware of the dimensions of the trauma experienced by her own mother, and of the political and ethical responsibilities that she herself bears to know, understand, and possibly publicize her mother's story. I read these novels in light of evolving theories of transgenerational trauma put forward by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their reworking of Freud, and in the field of trauma studies, more broadly, and particularly in Holocaust studies. Both of these novels highlight the significance of rituals of mourning and commemoration in the wake of traumatic loss. They suggest alternate modes of witnessing, notably an attentiveness to religious forms of witness, in the Christian and

Buddhist traditions in Obasan, and through Korean shamanism, in the case of Comfort Woman. In these novels, and in the two works I examine in the final chapter of this dissertation, traumatic memory and narrative are not tied solely to the recovery of individual survivors, but form part of a larger project to assist minority group members and even nation-states in healing from painful histories. Both novels were motivated by similar impulses, what Roy Miki calls (in reference to Obasan) an ardent desire “to reclaim a repressed history” in order “to speak back to the barrier of a denied personal and communal past” (142). These historical novels incorporate political goals, most explicitly in the case of Kogawa’s work, which was actively deployed during efforts to seek redress for formerly interned Japanese Canadians during the early 1980s.

Cathy Caruth argues that “the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (Trauma 11). In this chapter, the two novels I examine depict clear triggers for the telling of a story of past trauma, and portray adult daughters, who are themselves traumatized by their histories, as the privileged recipients of their own mothers’ accounts of suffering. Joy Kogawa’s Obasan, as Erika Gottlieb has observed, takes place as “a mourner’s meditation” during the days leading up to a funeral (36), while Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman has, as its point of departure, a narrator’s recollection of her mother’s startling confession of murder, and concludes with the scattering of ashes. The mourning process is complicated for the central characters of the novels, Naomi and Beccah, because their own identities derive or are formed in reaction to the absences of their mothers: the loss of attentive love consequent on Naomi’s mother’s trip to Japan, and Beccah’s mother’s periodic bouts of emotional withdrawal and dissociation. At the end of each novel, these characters come

to terms with what Freud calls “the work of mourning” when they must find ways to reconcile themselves to the deaths of mothers who have been prevented from nurturing them adequately.

A range of important feminist appraisals of the “lost mother” motif have been put forward. Lynne Huffer argues that feminist literary criticism of the 1970s and 1980s was particularly interested in reclaiming the figure of the mother, for example by emphasizing a matrilineal tradition of women writers as a contrast to the dominant critical model of a “paternal body of ‘great’ works” (12). Huffer argues, even, that “the gesture that replaced the paternal authority of the male tradition with an equally powerful female model of literary authorship was, and to some extent still is, one of the grounding concepts of American feminist literary theory” (12-13). Di Brandt’s analysis is even more pointed, as well as sweeping. Her study argues that “we might read the Western literary tradition as an ongoing lament for the missing, silenced, absent mother and her mediating, nurturing presence, in social institutions and discourse, and in story” (14). Like Huffer, Brandt cites Gilbert and Gubar’s groundbreaking The Madwoman in the Attic as well as Marianne Hirsch’s The Mother/Daughter Plot as central texts in the elaboration of the figure of the mother as oppressed and repressed by a patriarchal literary heritage.

Obasan and Comfort Woman are acutely conscious of the figure of the lost mother, and of the daughter’s desire to recuperate her mother’s life through traumatic stories. Each work begins and ends in the space of several days following a death and leading up to a funeral. This period of immediate bereavement, in each novel, functions as a traumatic trigger, as well as a retraumatization of adult daughters who have suffered,

but insufficiently mourned, multiple losses. The death of a close family member—Naomi’s uncle, in Obasan, and Beccah’s mother, in Comfort Woman—initiates an inquiry into the family’s past life, a quest for knowledge which reveals painfully haunting truths. Importantly, in each work it is clear that the daughters are already partly conscious of the magnitude of the traumatic past, recalling fragments of conversation, and significant moments from childhood when they overheard discussions that they could not quite grasp. Now, as adults, they must integrate the shards of memory that they possess with the narratives offered by others; they create autobiographical memories within a broader historical, cultural, and familial context, which allows them to make sense of their own life-long sense of abandonment and loss.

The two fictional works highlight the public, political dimensions of historical traumas by focussing on events that affected large numbers of victims and their families. Kogawa’s novel describes the circumstances surrounding Canada’s decision to intern Japanese Canadians, including Canadian citizens, during the latter part of the Second World War. Keller writes about an aging Korean American “comfort woman” who is haunted by memories of sexual slavery during her imprisonment by the Japanese Imperial Army. Both novels stress the relationship between ethnic identity and trauma: victims are singled out on the basis of racial heritage, and their suffering is deemed unworthy of attention or redress after the war. These two works also emphasize the particular vulnerability of women and girls to sexual violence. The novels include graphic scenes of sexual abuse, and portray the bodily violation experienced by their central characters. By drawing links between race, gender, and trauma, Kogawa and Keller illuminate the manner in which victims are rendered powerless and voiceless; their

recovery, subsequently, depends on naming the violence they suffered, and holding their perpetrators responsible. This act may take place in a legal setting or, as has been the case with both Japanese Canadian redress and the “comfort woman” movement, through aggressive lobbying of the governments responsible for financial compensation and an official apology for victims. As Judith Herman writes, for a minority of trauma survivors, individual healing will be an insufficient goal, and social healing will be equally necessary:

These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action. While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission.

(207)

These literary texts can also be conceived of as survivor missions: each of these first novels has been deemed by critics to be an important contribution to the developing body of Asian American and Asian Canadian literatures respectively.¹ They are both novels which “break the silence” by putting forward traumatic experiences that have not been adequately acknowledged by the dominant culture. These works rewrite Canadian and

¹ Christopher John Farley’s article on Keller links Comfort Woman to the recent emergence of other Asian American women writers, while a review by Jessica Hagedorn places Keller more specifically within the context of Hawaiian Asian American fiction. Kogawa’s prominence is repeatedly cited, as in the full-length studies of the contemporary development of Asian American women’s fiction by King-Kok Cheung and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong.

American history, by insisting on the significance of women's World War II experiences as non-combatant victims, and on the relevance of the cultural memories of both immigrants and second- or third-generation minorities.

1. Theories of Transgenerational Trauma

Naomi and Beccah experience vicarious suffering from their mothers' unspeakable experiences during the war, and represent a second generation affected by war trauma. While theories of individual trauma stress autobiographical memory, emerging theories of transgenerational trauma suggest a more complex possibility, that memories can be "inherited" by the descendants of trauma survivors. The earliest psychoanalytic research on transgenerational trauma was concerned with the emotional states of the children of Holocaust survivors, offspring who were born after the end of the Second World War but who demonstrated similar symptoms to survivors themselves.² The suggestion that the children of Holocaust survivors came to suffer from symptoms that resemble those of their parents has been highly controversial. Popular texts like Helen Epstein's Children of the Holocaust and academic studies of the psychological states of "second-generation" survivors have offered sometimes-contradictory evidence about the transmission of trauma. One feature which is recurring in this literature is the uncanny way in which the children of Holocaust survivors have absorbed imagery and

² Christian Pross notes that concentration camp survivors were seen to have "severe, often quite sudden agitation and anxiety attacks"; "an unarticulated feeling of 'being different'" from non-survivors; "deep survivors' guilt"; "a sense of being psychologically overwhelmed and diminished" and of feeling like a "living corpse"; "painful reliving of the horrors of the camps [. . .] and nightmares"; memory problems, sexual disorders, and psychosomatic disorders of various kinds (90).

memories that their parents have not deliberately passed on to them. According to James Young, testimony can involve “traces of a story the survivor is not telling,” and memory that is “being transmitted not merely through narrative but by body movements and behavior as well.” and which is acutely registered by the children of survivors (Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust 162). Discussing one documentary about relationships between survivors and their offspring, Young notes:

[. . .] the children have inherited a particular understanding of events, an entire memory of them, which has little to do with what their parents have told them; in fact, part of the problem for many children was just this want of actual telling by the parents, an overload of behavioral and nonverbal signs that are so difficult to interpret. Part of their parents’ testimony has come in feelings of permanent dislocation, overprotectiveness, an implicit diminishing of adolescent problems (in light of Auschwitz), or just plain guilt at having survived. None of these responses may have been articulated or narrated as such but have been conveyed in a thousand daily ways to the children as memory. (162)

Abraham and Torok’s conception of the “phantom” as the instrument of transgenerational trauma suggests that traumatic experiences, such as unmourned deaths, may be passed down in the form of untold secrets which haunt descendants precisely because they have never been verbalized. In “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology,” Abraham writes poignantly of those who “are destined to haunt: the dead who were shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave” (171). The psychological result is traumatic haunting that passes “from the parent’s unconscious into the child” in an unknown manner, and whose

“periodic and compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom-formation in the sense of a return of the repressed: it works like a ventriloquist [. . .]” (173). According to Abraham, the process always points to “a gap” or “the unspeakable” and “indicates the effects, on the descendants, of something that had inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents” of the sufferer (174). Abraham’s patients manifest the presence of a phantom trauma by engaging in unconscious compulsive repetitions of actions that mirror the traumatic experiences of their parents or even their grandparents.

While theories of transgenerational trauma stress the inherited nature of haunting memories, it is important to note that experiences of traumatic loss can also be multiple and cumulative, as in the novels I study in this chapter. The members of racial minorities, or other groups who have experienced multigenerational oppression, may find themselves coping with the burden of ancestral *and* personal histories. Naomi and Beccah, for example, are not only the inheritors of their mothers’ traumas, but must also struggle to work through their own experiences of parental loss and cultural alienation. They experience the trauma of losing their mothers prematurely, of being deprived of a form of maternal nurturing and comfort that would allow them to develop into secure adults. Years before either mother actually dies, their daughters feel bereft and abandoned. In Naomi’s case, this loss is the result of her mother’s physical disappearance, when her mother travels to Japan and is unable to return. Beccah’s loss is slightly less tangible: while her mother is physically present during Beccah’s childhood, her periods of immersion in the spirit world leave Beccah to fend for herself. At a very early age Beccah is conscious that a role reversal has occurred, and she has become her mother’s caretaker. Maternal deprivation is particularly important in both of these novels

because fathers are more shadowy figures, who die prematurely; it is the central bond with their mothers that Naomi and Beccah experience as their most intimate relationship of knowing and being known.³ Both Beccah and Naomi are uncomfortably aware that their abilities to have sexual relationships are impaired; Beccah becomes involved with a married man who offers her limited comfort and support, while Naomi thinks of herself alternately as a “spinster” like her Aunt Emily, and an orphan.⁴ As adult women, they must repair childhood and adolescent wounds, while confronting their mothers’ difficult histories, or risk remaining entangled in the past. Dominick LaCapra elaborates on Freud’s theory of mourning and melancholia, suggesting that losses must be “worked through” in order to move into the future:

Through memory work, especially the socially engaged memory work involved in working through, one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one’s people) back then which is related to, but not identical with, here and now. Moreover, through mourning and the at last symbolic provision of a proper burial, one attempts to assist in restoring to victims the dignity denied them by their victimizers.

³ John Bowlby’s work on attachment disorders postulates that the loss of maternal figures before the age of six frequently precipitates pathological mourning (“Childhood Mourning and Its Implications” 50). Naomi’s loss of her mother takes place, then, when she is at a particularly vulnerable stage of development: her sense of symbiosis with her mother is completely shattered, and cannot be repaired, because she does not even know why her mother disappears permanently from her life.

⁴ *Itsuka* examines Naomi’s continuing difficulties with close relationships, particularly those with a sexual dimension. While Naomi is largely located within familial relationships in *Obasan*, in the later novel her social context expands to include political allies.

(Writing History 66)

Confronting their family histories offers Naomi and Beccah the possibility of either symbolically (for Naomi) or literally (in Beccah's case) burying their mothers: the gesture is profoundly cathartic.

2. Nora Okja Keller's Comfort Woman: Haunting Histories

American Nora Okja Keller's first novel is a fictional evocation of a Korean "comfort woman," Akiko, who survives sexual slavery during the Second World War, and comes to live in the United States with an American missionary who assists and then marries her.⁵ He insists that she conceal her wartime experiences, claiming that it is for the sake of the daughter they have together. When Beccah eventually learns of her mother's past life, this is the one memory she recalls, of her father's attempts to suppress her mother as she cried out her pain:

"Quiet! What if someone hears you speaking like this? [. . .] What if Beccah hears you? Think of how she would feel, knowing her mother was a prostitute."

My father held my mother in his arms, cradling her as she moaned and pounded against him. "Shush," he murmured. "It is not for me to judge. But know that 'The sins of the parent shall fall upon their children and their grandchildren.' I ask you to protect our daughter, with your silence, from that shame." (196)

⁵ Watanabe notes that "the term 'military comfort women,' a literal translation of the Japanese *jugun ianfu*, is a euphemism for the forced military sex slavery during World War II": one preferred term is the Japanese *teishintai*, or "voluntary labor corps." the original name for these women (20). I use "comfort women," following Keller.

Akiko's American husband holds her accountable for her own sexual victimization, equating her forced removal to a "comfort station" where she was repeatedly raped with prostitution. Akiko's own experience defies her husband's explanation, but he uses his personal and religious power to define her as damaged, and to portray her sexuality as excessive and engulfing. In response, Akiko has pushed down as much of her history as she can possibly manage, and attempts to give her daughter, after the death of her husband, a normal "American" life.

Akiko's efforts to suppress her own painful past accord with the general silencing of comfort women's experiences during the post-war period. The accounts of comfort women have only recently been admitted into public consciousness, with the publication of several memoirs and novels, and, most notably, in the context of efforts to seek official recognition and redress from Japan for war crimes. Kazuko Watanabe observes that "because the Japanese government is sensitive to international pressure, women's collective voices can be a great force for change in the Japanese government's attitude toward comfort women" (29). The exploitation of Korean comfort women represents "the legalised military rape of subject women on a scale—and over a period of time—previously unknown in history" (Hicks xv).⁶ A report by the International Commission of Jurists from the United Nations estimates that between 100,000 and 200,000 girls and

⁶ The system of sexual slavery was actually designed to prevent political embarrassment. In 1937, the infamous "Rape of Nanking," which resulted in the sexual assaults of tens of thousands of Chinese women, and an unprecedented massacre of non-resisting civilians, created an international outcry. Japanese military leaders ordered the creation of the "comfort station" system for troops in part to control wartime sexual aggression (Dolgopol and Paranjape 7-20).

women from China, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan were held captive in “comfort stations” for Japanese Imperial soldiers shortly before and throughout the war in the Pacific (Dolgopoi and Paranjape 7). Korea, which was annexed by Japan in 1910, had by far the largest number of comfort women—more than 80 percent of the total—who were transported to comfort stations across Asia (Watanabe 20). Korean comfort women have been the most vocal in attempts to seek restitution from the Japanese government, which has only recently admitted any official involvement in establishing the system of military comfort stations. As of 1995, “the central evidence that coercion and deception were used by the Japanese military to recruit women for the comfort system comes [. . .] from the women themselves” with “no official documents to back up such evidence” forthcoming from Japan (Hicks 229). In light of the refusal of the Japanese government to acknowledge the issue fully, the individual testimonies of former comfort women have been essential in attracting international attention to the situation, even while the effects of testifying have been extraordinarily difficult for participants. Only in 1993 did Japanese investigators of the comfort stations even begin to interview former victims.

The 1994 United Nations report on comfort women calls for greater openness on the part of the Japanese government, and cooperation in investigating individual and collective responsibility for the massive abuses. It is critical of Japanese efforts to date, suggesting that “the investigation conducted by the Japanese Government is inadequate and appears calculated to placate sentiments rather than being focused on a solution to

the issue" (Dolgopol and Paranjape 202).⁷ At the same time, the International Commission of Jurists also finds fault with the actions of the Allies, who "had full knowledge in 1945 of the fact that these atrocities had been committed" but "did nothing to bring these offenders to trial or to obtain reparations for the victims." They call on the Allied nations "to explain this, and to make public all records in their possession" relating to the comfort women's ordeal (Dolgopol and Paranjape n.p.).⁸

The accounts of individual comfort women who survived the war have provided crucial testimony. Several have been published in Korean and Japanese; only one, by Maria Rose Henson, has been translated into English. Henson describes her family's life in the Japanese-occupied Philippines, and her nine months of captivity by the army. She explains that she has decided to publish her own story despite the taunting she has received from neighbours, who doubt her account, and accuse her of having been a willing participant in prostitution. The public testimony of other former comfort women from the Philippines "firmed up my decision to go public. I realized that my role was to serve as an example to other survivors of wartime sex slavery who may still be ashamed to come out with their experience" (87). Huyn Sook Kim's essay argues that the more than one hundred women in South Korean who have come forward to register with their

⁷ Hicks suggests that a "national amnesia" about Japanese war atrocities can be seen in "the scarcity of public memorials or museums recalling the war" (231). Chin Sung Chung argues that "the Japanese perception of themselves as war victims" hindered the nation's ability to come to terms with its own culpability (233).

⁸ Hicks notes that the Allies, who pursued post-war prosecutions of other Japanese war crimes, ignored the comfort women issue: only the Dutch prosecuted these sexual crimes, focussing exclusively on kidnapped Dutch women in Indonesia. Hicks argues that the Americans were well aware of the comfort women's plight (228).

government as former comfort women speaks to the individual bravery of the victims and to their insistence on social recognition and restitution in the broader context of Korea's exploitation by Japan:

In their narratives, we find that the women [. . .] consider their stories to be collective and political, not just personal. The women testify about their experiences of exploitation and violence in terms of the larger socioeconomic, cultural, and political issues—the difficult circumstances that they and their families faced under colonialism.

The most remarkable and historically unprecedented aspect of the comfort women “movement” is that the women survivors speak out by asserting their multivocal identities: they state that they are elders, women, poor, and subjects who were subordinated by both imperial/colonial and national governments because of their gender and ethnicity. The women's self-identification as former comfort women is by itself a political act that is symbolic (and may be cathartic) on both personal and national/collective levels. (74)

Nora Okja Keller's novel was inspired by the oral testimony of a former Korean comfort woman whom she heard speak in Hawaii. Journalist Christopher Farley writes that Keller's sense of herself as a writer was radically transformed in 1993. “when she went to a symposium on human rights at the University of Hawaii at Manoa; there she heard an elderly Korean woman tell her true story of being a ‘comfort woman’ during World War II.” Apparently, the story haunted Keller: “Who would pass it on? Who would write it down? The old woman came to her in nightmares” that Keller began to record, and which formed the first draft of Comfort Woman (Farley 101).

Keller's novel presents the dual perspectives of a Korean comfort woman, Akiko, and her American-born daughter, Beccah, in alternating first-person narratives. Akiko was sold by her older sister in their small Korean village, during the Second World War, in order to provide the sister's dowry; she was transported by Japanese soldiers to a comfort station, in defiance of their promise that she will be taken to work in a factory. Akiko is first used as a servant to the comfort women, as she is only a child, but by the time she is twelve she is taken to replace a young comfort woman murdered by angry Japanese soldiers. This episode forms the central dramatic action of the novel, which links Induk's murder and Akiko's exploitation:

One night [Induk] talked loud and nonstop. In Korean and in Japanese, she denounced the soldiers, yelling at them to stop their invasion of her country and her body. Even as they mounted her, she shouted: I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do. I am a daughter, I am a sister. (20)

Keller links together Korean nationalism and the sexual vulnerability of Korean women under Japanese colonial rule: the bodies of women represent a territory encroached upon by the Japanese soldiers in the name of imperialism. Induk's declarations enrage and frighten the soldiers, who continue to sexually assault her. The next day, some of the soldiers take Induk to the woods and murder her, bringing her corpse back, "skewered from her vagina to her mouth, like a pig ready for roasting" to function as an "example" of silent subservience to the other comfort women (20-21). The narration of this murder is crucial to the novel, since Induk, who wore uniforms identifying her by the Japanese name Akiko, is perceived by her successor as a spirit aide. According to the "new"

Akiko, whose Korean name Kim Soon Hyo is not known even to her daughter, the traumatic multiple rapes she experienced during her first night as a comfort woman have killed her: “[. . .] Induk didn’t go crazy. She was going sane. She was planning her escape. The corpse the soldiers brought back from the woods wasn’t Induk. It was Akiko 41; it was me” (21).

Judith Herman and Margo Rivera have both described the extremes of dissociation which trauma survivors may experience: a sense of splitting from one’s own body and even, more rarely, the construction of alternate, multiple selves to shield the core self from knowledge of violence. In Keller’s novel, this splitting is cultural and linguistic, as well as a division of mind and body. The Korean Kim Soon Hyo is not only renamed but also, grimly, numbered. Her identification with her predecessor is reinforced by the gender and race they share, and which create a dual vulnerability in the eyes of the Japanese military. A doctor who performs an abortion on Akiko is particularly blunt in his assessment:

As the doctor bound my legs and arms, gagged me, then reached for the stick he would use to hook and pull the baby, not quite a baby, into the world, he talked. He spoke of evolutionary differences between the races, biological quirks that made the women of one race so pure and the women of another so promiscuous. (22)

According to the doctor, “the differences in geography” may “make the women of our two countries so morally incompatible” (22). The Japanese military conquest and annexation of Korea are here invoked as a parallel to Akiko’s suffering: she is vulnerable to sexual abuse because her gender and nationality make her radically “other” and the

Japanese doctor who attends her justifies her pain by denying her humanity.

Akiko spends the rest of her life attempting to suppress as much of the trauma she was subjected to as she possibly can, but her rage and pain erupt in periods of wild fits and trances when she feels possessed by spirits. As Kathleen Brogan points out, these “frequent fits of possession, though easily viewed as only expressions of trauma-induced madness, identify her as a traditional Korean shaman” (156). According to anthropologist Laurel Kendall, who studies Korean spirit possession, the dead are considered “a common source of affliction” in a household, particularly for women, and can threaten injury or even death (99-100). Daniel Kister notes that Korean shamans are nearly always women, who become “mudangs” through “an initiatory experience of social alienation and the so-called ‘spirit-illness’, or *shinbyong* [. . .]” (4-5). In Akiko’s case, her near-murder leaves her susceptible to the approach of the dead, and particularly to the spirit of Induk; the dead communicate through her, because she briefly existed in a liminal space between life and death. Akiko’s haunting follows a “*shinbyong*” during which she escapes from the comfort station after the traumatic abortion described above, and collapses next to the river. While she lies next to the water she imagines herself dying, but a spirit guide comes to her and leads her to a protector. The spirit guide, Induk, condemns the Japanese soldiers who murdered her and nearly killed Akiko; most of all, however, Induk faults the soldiers for not having allowed the appropriate Korean funerary and mourning rituals to be carried out over their bodies:

She spoke for me: No one performed the proper rites of the dead. For me. For you. Who was there to cry for us in *kok*, announcing our death? Or to fulfill the duties of *yom*: bathing and dressing our bodies, combing our hair, trimming our

naïfs, laying us out? Who was there to write our names, to even know our names and to remember us? (38)

Akiko's sense of identification with the dead is a tangible symptom of psychic trauma that also attests to the responsibility she feels to foster social memory. Like Toni Morrison's Beloved, Comfort Woman uses gothic conventions of haunting and spirit possession to highlight the radically alien effects of post-traumatic symptoms. In her recent study of haunting and ethnic memory, Brogan suggests that

Stories of cultural haunting record the struggle to establish some form of historical continuity that allows for a necessary distance from the past—breathing room, as it were. They can be read as cautionary tales about the proper function of memory. Possession—the dangerous incorporation of the dead—signals a failure of memory to organize history, to render it usable. Flight from history can just as easily lead to possession as a nostalgic return to the past: denied history reasserts itself, much like the return of the repressed. (9)

Induk returns to Akiko in other visions, angrily blaming Akiko for having failed to mourn her properly. Akiko is uneasily aware that she is partly responsible, since when the comfort women found Induk's corpse they "wanted to take her to the river with us to prepare her body for the separation of its spirit" but they were too afraid and appalled by the spectacle presented by her violated corpse. Instead, "in the end we left her, just as the soldier had" with "her nakedness only half concealed by the forest's undergrowth, her eyes dry and open and staring toward the river" (54). Induk asks. "Why did you leave me to putrefy in the open air [. . .]?" and Akiko can only respond that she was afraid of sharing Induk's fate (96).

Akiko is unable, like many comfort women, to articulate her wartime experiences to family members, and her silence functions to isolate her even from her daughter. Like many recent feminist novels, Comfort Woman is most interested in the relationship between mothers and daughters, and in the variety of circumstances that make it difficult for women to mother appropriately, or for their daughters to forgive their transgressions. Akiko's daughter, Rebeccah, learns to fear the periods of possession when her mother is unable to tend to her:

When the spirits called to her, my mother would leave me and slip inside herself, to somewhere I could not and did not want to follow. It was as if the mother I knew turned off, checked out, and someone else came to rent the space. During these times, the body of my mother would float through our one-bedroom apartment, slamming into walls and bookshelves and bumping into the corners of the coffee table and the television. (4)

Akiko's physical vulnerability to harm, during these periods, demonstrates the extent to which she is unconscious of her own body, numbed to new sensations of pain by the multiple attacks she suffered as a young girl. As Judith Herman and others have described, ongoing physical numbing and dissociation are recurring symptoms of traumatic experiences. Survivors shut down physically, to distance themselves from overwhelming physical suffering, but this protective mechanism is less useful when the trauma has passed. When Akiko has sexual intercourse with her husband, or gives birth to her child, her body recalls the sexual trauma of the comfort station, including the violent abortion performed on her by the camp doctor. Akiko's feelings of past sexual subjugation are also transposed onto her marriage, so that her husband's body merges

with her attackers. Akiko experiences the past and the present simultaneously: "When he pushed me into the bed, positioned himself above me, fitting himself between my thighs, I let my mind fly away. [. . .] my body was, and always would be, locked in a cubicle at the camps, trapped under the bodies of innumerable men" (106). This same blurring of the past and present, however, facilitates Akiko's attachment to her daughter, who reminds Akiko of her own dead mother. Akiko perceives Beccah as the only person who is directly connected to her in the wake of traumatic events that have caused Akiko to feel that she is no longer among the living. For Akiko, "my husband, the missionaries who took me in after the camp, my sister, if they are still alive, are all incidental" since "what are living people to ghosts, except ghosts themselves?" (20-21).

As Beccah grows up, her sense of racial and cultural difference is pronounced, particularly at school, and she struggles to keep her mother's periods of possession a secret. Beccah becomes the parent, attempting to ensure that her mother remembers to eat, and trying to break through to her mother during her periods of trance. Beccah's emotional isolation is pronounced and traumatic, and she bitterly resents her mother, wishing even that her mother were dead. At the opening of the novel, Beccah is confronted with the fulfillment of her wish, and struggles throughout the course of the novel with the guilt of not ever having known Akiko intimately. Beccah is a newspaper writer who composes obituaries, and she is aware of the irony that the formula she has learned does not assist her in composing a written narrative of her own mother's life:

I have recorded so many deaths that the formula is a template in my brain:

Name, age, date of death, survivors, services. And yet, when it came time for me to write my own mother's obituary, as I held a copy of her death certificate

in my hand, I found that I did not have the facts for even the most basic skeletal obituary. And I found I did not know how to start imagining her life. (26)

Akiko, anticipating her daughter's regret, has deliberately left a record of her own life; Comfort Woman allows for a posthumous reconciliation which is only possible when Beccah is made aware of her mother's experiences in Asia. As Muller notes, "it is Beccah's task to 'claw' through memory and story" to uncover her mother's heritage (186). Akiko, who was frequently paid to tape-record mourning ceremonies for Korean expatriates, has made her own personal recording, in which she commemorates the comfort women she knew, and attests to her own experiences of suffering and loss. In one of the chapters narrated by Akiko, she explains that she has created "a thick black cassette tape that will, eventually, preserve a few of the pieces, the secrets, of our lives" (183). Akiko hopes that it will provide some consolation and comfort to her daughter after she herself has died, indicating to Beccah that "when she cries, she will never be alone" (183). The recording that she inherits is initially difficult for Beccah to decipher: she hears "only senseless wails, a high-pitched keening relieved by the occasional gunshot of drums" (191). Beccah is not able to approach her mother's story intellectually, but discovers that when she "stopped concentrating" she can understand her mother's words. Beccah struggles to receive and record her mother's testimony: "I turned the volume knob on the stereo until my mother's voice shivered up the walls, as if the louder the words, the easier I would be able to understand the story" (191):

After filling several notebook pages with black scrawl, I stopped the recorder.

The scraps of paper seemed inadequate, small and disjointed. Needing a bigger canvas, I stripped the sheet from my bed, laid it on the living room floor in front

of the speakers, pressed Play on the recorder and caught my mother's words.

(192)

Beccah's task is to act as a witness to her mother's narration of trauma, and her role has multiple challenges, including correctly interpreting the Korean language, which is largely unfamiliar to her. She must also find a way to accept and endure the pain that accompanies knowledge of her mother's suffering, and of her mother's attempts to conceal the assaults inflicted on her years before. The story that her mother is reciting is an intimate one, and Beccah recognizes its nature when she abandons writing on paper and transcribes her mother's words directly onto the bed sheets. Most importantly, Beccah is challenged to function as the addressee and the transmitter of a message of historical trauma, by providing attentive listening, and carefully preserving her mother's words. In her recording, Akiko calls on Beccah to "lead the parade of the dead" (197). The ghosts who had visited Akiko are recalled, and their names and lives are noted: "Amugi. Omoni. Kun Aniya. Mul Ajumoni. I sing the names by which I have known you, so that you will remember. So that I will remember. So that those who come after me will know. Induk. Miyoko. Kimiko. [. . .]" (192). Beccah does not recognize any of these names, even her mother's invocation of her own Korean name. Her mother's halting attempt to convey the horrors of the comfort stations is almost unbearable. Beccah uses a Korean-English dictionary to piece together the past, but wonders how her mother could possibly have survived the horrors she endured and yet gone on to bear Beccah. Beccah becomes aware that she is now entrusted with the responsibility of not

only surviving her mother, but of ensuring the appropriate remembrance of her mother's life.⁹

3. Witnessing and Attentive Listening in Obasan

Silent mother, you do not speak or write. You do not reach through the night to enter morning, but remain in the voicelessness. From the extremity of much dying, the only sound that reaches me now is the sigh of your remembered breath, a wordless word. How shall I attend that speech, Mother, how shall I trace that wave? (241)

Joy Kogawa's Obasan is explicitly concerned with the forms of witnessing and testimony available to Japanese Canadians in the wake of their internment during the Second World War. The experience of internment stripped Japanese Canadians, many of whom were Canadian citizens, of basic human rights by positing that their continued presence on Canada's west coast created a danger for the country as a whole. Japanese Canadians were the only group singled out for incarceration: German Canadian and Italian Canadians, for example, were not as vilified by the press as a threat to national security, or removed from their homes without provocation. The legacy of the experience of internment has been brought to light evocatively in Obasan and defined as an historical trauma in Canadian life. As Roy Miki writes,

For those who underwent the horrendous trauma of denial, estrangement, and

⁹ Chambers explores a similar process of transmitting trauma testimony in his discussion of the short Canadian film RSVP by Laurie Lind. Chambers suggests that the reader or listener of traumatic messages is inevitably figured as a mourner who must take on the responsibility of the "afterlife" of witnessing texts (126-128).

ostracization during the internment period, the monolithic and unwieldy power of the outside—the white Canadian public, the government, the media, and all the ethnocentric forces that together constituted the body politic of this country—decreed that Japanese Canadians were ‘enemies’ in their midst who were incapable of speaking as subjects. The abrogation of citizenship and the subsequent degradation of subjectivity would have devastating effects on a community that had already suffered some fifty years of racism and exclusionist policies on the West Coast. (140)

Kogawa portrays this ordeal from the individual perspective of a first-person narrator, Naomi Nakane, who recounts the events of her childhood and, more elliptically, her adulthood.¹⁰ Naomi’s central task, as elaborated in the quotation above, is to find a way to attend the silence of her mother’s trauma, to hear a story which her mother did not wish to convey to her, but which Naomi must know in order to forgive her mother for abandoning her.

Kogawa’s novel offers several different forms of direct witnessing, including an overtly Christian mode, notably in her deployment of the Old Testament Book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk features a startling speech by God, who agrees with a grieving

¹⁰ King-kok Cheung suggests that “Kogawa bases Obasan on her own experiences during World War II and on letters, journals, and documents of the time” (Articulate Silences 129). In a footnote, Cheung draws the following points of similarity: like Naomi, Joy Kogawa was born to Issei parents in Vancouver, and was evacuated to Slocan, although with her whole family; Kogawa differs in age by only a year from Naomi; Kogawa worked as a teacher before beginning a writing career. Kogawa’s decision to rewrite part of her own childhood history, but omit the figure of her mother, bears directly on the novel’s representations of maternal absences and losses.

suppliant that the feared Chaldeans are seizing “dwelling places which are not theirs” and collecting “captives like sand.” God promises that the aggressors will eventually be judged for their violence, but the suppliant is impatient, and puzzled about why God would “raise up” such a people in the first place. Habakkuk’s second chapter presents a vision of the future punishment to be meted out to the Chaldeans, and Joy Kogawa quotes from the second verse of this chapter near the beginning of Obasan. Naomi’s aunt, whom she calls by the Japanese title of Obasan, has located a package of Aunt Emily’s writings, with a note affixed on top stating “Write the vision and make it plain.” Naomi responds, characteristically, with ambivalence:

Write the vision and make it plain? For [Aunt Emily], the vision is the truth as she lives it. When she is called like Habakkuk to the witness stand, her testimony is to the light that shines in the lives of the Nisei, in their desperation to prove themselves Canadian, in their tough and gentle spirit. The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey. But on my lap, her papers are wind and fuel nudging my early morning thoughts to flame. (32)

The material losses and physical dispersal of the Japanese Canadians are reflected in the Biblical prophecy, with Aunt Emily portrayed by her niece as the prophet who will bring the truth to her people. It is notable that in rewriting the Biblical tale, Kogawa casts a woman in the role of prophet, suggesting that ancient representations can be re-envisioned, and made to serve contemporary needs. This focus on Biblical prophecy forms part of the novel’s complex amalgam of Christian religious teachings and political action, a dynamic which is sometimes ambiguous given the association of Christianity with the western political values which work explicitly against Naomi’s family, and other

Japanese Canadians.

Critics have perceived the figure of Aunt Emily as the emissary of traumatic stories, although she undertakes this task only partially, and with significant ambivalence—she does, after all, participate in concealing the circumstances of their mother’s horrific death from Naomi and her brother for many years after she herself has learned of them. Emily’s truth-telling mission is repeatedly highlighted throughout the novel, and frequently inflected with a degree of irony by her niece who sees her as “Aunt Emily, BA, MA [. . .] word warrior. She’s a crusader, a little old grey-haired Mighty Mouse, a Bachelor of Advanced Activists and General Practitioner of Just Causes” (32). Naomi’s response to her aunt combines some anxiety and condescension with respect. Repeatedly, Naomi fears her aunt’s attempts to snare her in the work of the redress movement. At the same time, deeper antipathy seems to underlie her attitude towards Emily, the aunt who, unlike Obasan, has only ever known her from a distance. Naomi doubts the usefulness of her aunt’s political work, perhaps even the efficacy of traumatic truth-telling. Speech, for Naomi, is linked to expressions of power and control that are uncomfortable to recall, and in light of this Naomi contrasts her two aunts, the one who lives in language and the one who chooses silence. Naomi affiliates herself more closely with Obasan’s approach:

Dear Aunt Em is crusading still. In seven canonical words, she exhorts, cajoles, commands someone—herself? me?—to carry on the fight, to be a credit to the family to strive onwards the goal. She’s the one with the vision. She believes in the Nisei, seeing them as networks and streamers of light dotting the country. For my part, I can only see a dark field with Aunt Emily beaming her flashlight

to where the rest of us crouch and hide, our eyes downcast as we seek the safety of invisibility. (31-32)

Emily frames her insistence on knowing and telling the past as therapeutic.

“‘You have to remember,’ Aunt Emily said. ‘You are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene’” (49-50).¹¹ Emily’s own statements,

though, tend to be more analytic than personal; she denounces the treatment of Japanese Canadians by the government, but she does not, except in her wartime journal, articulate her own losses in a concrete manner. The journal is itself a failed form of address, a series of letters written but never sent to her sister, Naomi’s mother, in Japan.

Additionally, Emily’s journal incorporates elements from Japanese Canadian journalist and activist Muriel Kitigawa’s writings, notably her letters to her brother during the war, and the articles she published in the Japanese Canadian newspaper The New Canadian. When Kogawa was composing Obasan, she relied extensively on Kitigawa’s published and unpublished writings, grounding the fictional characters of her novel in a specific

¹¹ Joy Kogawa’s third novel, The Rain Ascends, continues the author’s interest in speech and silence. Millicent Shelby discovers that her minister father has been accused of serious crimes against young boys, but refuses to ask him if he is guilty, feeling that it is her responsibility to protect the elderly man from his persecutors. It is only when Millicent learns that her own son and her sister-in-law’s nephew were also molested by her father that she becomes enraged, and accepts the need to reveal the truth:

The way of truth is the way of the light. I am seeking the light after my life-long night. I am telling the untellable to myself, or others, in whispers, in intimate conversation. And with every breath of my body I am striving to be free, that the child of my child may be strong and truthful and unashamed. (201)

biographical, as well as historical context.¹²

In sharp contrast to her Aunt Emily, Naomi wishes to move on from the past: “Crimes of history, I thought to myself, can stay in history. What we need is to concern ourselves with the injustices of today” (41). Naomi’s perspective raises the question of whether past injustices are relevant: Aunt Emily disputes Naomi’s division between past and current oppression, and retorts that “the past is the future” (42). Part of the work of Obasan involves demonstrating to readers why a traumatic history cannot simply be forgotten or elided. While Naomi undertakes a pedagogical project, one which includes reading and critical reflection, readers are similarly invited, as Claudia Eppert analyzes, to confront and struggle to overcome the limitations of their own knowledge; the historical past is treated as a complex, and not entirely discernible, object of inquiry. Further, Eppert argues that while Obasan undertakes an explicitly pedagogical project, manifested in such signs as Naomi’s status as a teacher, and her direct, “teacherly” address to readers in parts of the text, readers are also encouraged to become aware of the distinction between their own, disinterested stance and Naomi’s direct implication in the history she recalls:

[. . .] our witnessing obligations [as readers] require a withdrawal from potentially imagining ourselves into the particularities of Naomi’s Japanese-Canadian experiences, her traumatic childhood abandonment and subsequent

¹² Kogawa stated in an interview that she “picked and chose and used a lot of Muriel’s letters to Wes Fujiwara, her brother, and some of her writings in other things. At first I used them verbatim, because I didn’t want to alter the words. Later, I had to cut them and change them to make them fit a story” (Koh 22).

loss of her mother, or her mother's suffering [. . .] nor, for that matter, can we project a presumptive equivalency between Naomi's learning and our own.

While Naomi and readers both learn what it might mean to witness, to hear/bear the testimony of another's suffering, the specific context, expression, and relevance of this learning remain markedly separate. (228)

Eppert's formulation resembles Dominick LaCapra's recent theory of empathy, which attempts to distinguish between useful forms of vicarious suffering and those which are presumptuous and appropriative. LaCapra argues that it is inappropriate "to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject position. The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity" but rather "a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (*Writing History* 78).

While readers, then, learn from Naomi, Naomi's own learning takes place largely through her exposure to the markedly different approaches to the construction of memory taken by her two aunts, Emily and the aunt identified only by the Japanese honorific "Obasan." The stark contrast between the perspectives of Naomi's two aunts, one of whom "lives in sound" and the "other in stone" (32) has been remarked frequently by critics, with Naomi positioned as a character who vacillates between these two stances. Importantly, Naomi also effectively stands in for the majority of readers, largely unaware of institutionalized racism and the displacement of Japanese Canadians during the war, and perhaps reluctant to know more. Naomi wonders if "some memories [. . .] might better be forgotten" since "if it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past

pain” (45).

Naomi’s desire to forget is a convenient one for the construction of Canadian historical memory. Aunt Emily’s textual reconstruction of the circumstances of the internment does not cast Canada in a flattering light: instead of a reputation as a tolerant and multicultural nation, Canada is compared unfavourably with the United States. Emily notes, “official racism was blatant in Canada. The Americans have a Bill of Rights, right? We don’t” (34). Emily’s vocal insistence on redress places a demand on Canadians to acknowledge their own history as one troubled by expressions of deliberate racial persecution; in the context of the Second World War, in particular, a war portrayed as a struggle of the Allies against genocidal racism, accounts of Canadian racism are unwelcome. Naomi notes that “People who talk a lot about their victimization make me uncomfortable. It’s as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind” (34). Naomi’s second statement is shown by the novel to be a defensive, but largely inaccurate, impression of the uses of traumatic history. None of the characters in Obasan attempt to use past suffering as “weapons or badges”; this is not to say that opportunistic deployment of trauma never occurs, but that claims of manipulation follow almost immediately upon any allegation of historical victimization, and particularly those which argue for a pattern of racist oppression.

Naomi’s ambivalence about resurrecting the past is seen most clearly in her responses to the movement seeking redress in the form of an apology and financial compensation from the Canadian government. While individual payments of \$21,000 were eventually paid, after an official acknowledgement in the House of Commons by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, it took many years for the National Association of

Japanese Canadians to achieve this result. Not coincidentally, the Canadian government's action followed closely on an American decision some weeks earlier to provide restitution to war-interned Japanese Americans. Ken Adachi's study of Japanese Canadian internment makes it clear that Canadian losses, however, were far more significant:

The Canadian policy on property, from beginning to end, fell far short of the American record in almost every respect. Not only did the United States not envisage, at any time, the compulsory sale of property, but the basic operating principle of the War Relocation Authority, which took over the protection of property, specified that it would act only as intermediary for those evacuees wishing to lease or sell their property. (321)

In contrast, in Canada homes and businesses were sold at vastly reduced prices, and despite the protests of their owners, many of whom were uncertain about whether or not the government seizure and control of their property was lawful under the War Measures Act. Personal liberty was also less severely curtailed in the American internment program: only Japanese Americans living in coastal regions, and especially California, were interned, and they were immediately allowed to return to the coast at the conclusion of the war. As Kogawa's novel and studies like Adachi's make clear, in Canada the British Columbia government sought to keep Japanese Canadians from ever returning to the West Coast.

Adachi perceives the post-war period as a lengthy era of "rehabilitation" for Japanese Canadians, with the redress movement as the most tangible and therapeutic means of achieving reconciliation with the Canadian authorities who had stripped

citizens of their rights and interned them as resident enemy aliens. Activist Maryka Omatsu has carefully articulated the significance of redress:

[. . .] redress was a form of recuperation and of exorcism. At a public community meeting in 1984 David Suzuki said. "As an adult, I ended up in psychoanalysis and was shocked to discover that virtually every psychological problem I had traced right back to the evacuation." Before redress the community similarly seemed to be in a state of psychosis. But by bringing a shameful past into the open and, more importantly, by demanding and fighting for its rights, the community became engaged in an important healing process. (171)

While media attention to the redress movement provided a potential public forum for Japanese Canadians to air the indignities and abuses to which they had been subjected, not all internment survivors welcomed the opportunity to participate. The humiliations and losses associated with internment, including financial deprivations, geographical dislocation, familial fracturing, and the gradual dissolution of political and legal rights, left many survivors with troubling memories which they wished to suppress. Maryka Omatsu's Bittersweet Passage: Redress and the Japanese Canadian Experience notes that her own father never told her of his internment during the war; she only learned of Japanese Canadian internment when she reached high school, and read about it in a textbook (36). Adachi writes that many Nisei are unwilling to discuss the internment period: "the memories of their incarceration in the British Columbia camps remain an indelible scar which is generally carefully concealed from the public eye, puzzling researchers and Sansei who find Nisei reluctant to talk of the past" (361).

Along with the understandable reticence of the older generation of internment survivors, Canadian discussion of the wartime acts against Japanese Canadians was also limited by the nature of the redress gesture in parliament. In the United States, there was a Presidential Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, which held public meetings in 1981. Tomoko Makabe points out that “nationwide hearings received ample media attention and captured the attention of Japanese Americans and the general public. In total, more than 750 witnesses—evacuees, former government officials, public figures, interested citizens, and historians and other professionals—testified before the commission throughout the nation” (157). In contrast, in Canada no public hearings were held, and stories about internment were circulated less formally in parliament, and in media accounts. Makabe suggests that comprehensive public education about internment was not undertaken in Canada, and the participation of survivor-witnesses was not elicited.

While survivor narratives were not solicited by the government, Obasan effectively spoke for the interned Japanese Canadians: Kogawa’s novel is particularly significant as the best-known effort to explore internment experiences.¹³ Scott McFarlane writes that “Obasan played a significant role in the redress movement as evidenced by its being quoted by both Ed Broadbent and Gerry Weiner during the announcement of the settlement with the government. Thus Obasan has played, and continues to play, a significant role in the way in which the internment is understood” (402).

¹³ In addition, Kogawa’s adaptation of her own novel into a picture book for young children, Naomi’s Road, has furthered the project of public education about internment.

Few novels in Canadian literature have been invoked this directly as political interventions. Obasan's importance owes much to the subtlety and complexity of Kogawa's nuanced portrayal, which reveals the ambivalences of a traumatic internment history (as well as the generational divides) which largely determine responses to this heritage. Naomi herself is uncertain about how to take on the burden of the past; her own traumatic losses include the absences and then deaths of both of her parents, the dispersal of her extended family, the loss of her family home and community, and her family's inability even after the war has ended to attempt to regain much of the security that has been taken from them. These losses are not often consciously acknowledged by Naomi, but have been submerged until the shock of her uncle's death initiates her memorial project. In contrast with Aunt Emily's energy, and willingness to acknowledge continuing collective losses (33), she is "curiously numb" and unresponsive (34). Naomi's delayed and largely suppressed response to her father's death, for example, is telling. She articulates the event only when a friend asks an innocent question about a family photograph, mistaking Naomi's uncle for her father:

The Barkers and everyone else have assumed that Uncle and Obasan are our parents and we've never bothered to correct them.

'My father's dead,' I reply as calmly as if I were offering the time of day.

But a few moments after I say it, I find myself collapsed on the sofa with a sharp pain in my abdomen and a cold perspiration forming on my forehead. (210-211)

Naomi's physical distress belies her surface acceptance. Relatives comment repeatedly on Naomi's silence and withdrawal as a child, personal traits which grow more prominent after her frightening experiences of sexual molestation by her family's

neighbour, Old Man Gower, and the loss of her mother. To Naomi, the two events are closely connected, not only temporally, but because they represent dual forms of alienation from the perfect closeness and understanding her mother has accorded her.¹⁴ In an important passage that many critics have pointed to, Naomi describes the wrenching separation from her mother that sexual molestation involves, and the complicated sensations of shame and complicity that she experienced as a child:

Old Man Gower lifts me onto his lap.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he whispers into my ear. This is what he always says. Where in the darkness has my mother gone?

I am clinging to my mother’s leg, a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot—a young branch attached by right of flesh and blood. Where she is rooted, I am rooted. If she walks, I will walk. Her blood is whispering through my veins. The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts.

But here in Mr. Gower’s hands I become other—a parasite on her body, no longer of her mind. My arms are vines that strangle the limb to which I cling. I hold so tightly now that arms and leg become one through force. I am a growth that attaches and digs a furrow under the bark of her skin. If I tell my mother about Mr Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I

¹⁴ Tharp explores the dual traumas of childhood sexual abuse and maternal loss in her essay on *Obasan* and *Itsuka*. She suggests that Naomi is suffering from post-traumatic stress, and cites Naomi’s fears of sexual relationships and of emotional closeness as symptoms of her childhood losses.

will be torn from her. But the secret has already separated us. The secret is this:

I go to seek Old Man Gower in his hideaway. I clamber unbidden onto his lap.

His hands are frightening and pleasurable. In the centre of my body is a rift.

In my childhood dreams, the mountain yawns apart as the chasm spreads.

My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each

other. My legs are being sawn in half. (64-65)

Julie Tharp notes that racial and cultural politics are invoked implicitly in this passage: issues of childhood sexual abuse “also function metaphorically since Naomi is seduced over to this Anglo man’s house and away from her Japanese mother’s protection” (217).

Smaro Kamboureli’s recent and nuanced appraisal of Obasan agrees that Naomi’s experience of abuse inscribes her racially and sexually at the same time (203). She points out that Old Man Gower is not only Naomi’s molestor but also the “friendly neighbour” who offers to care for the Nakanes’ property when they are interned, thus representing the power of the government to separate them from their rightful belongings as well as from each other (204).¹⁵ Sexual violence and family dispersal are forever linked in Naomi’s mind. When Naomi reflects on her childhood abuse, she notes, “[i]t is around this time that Mother disappears” (66). The loss is largely unexplained to five-year-old Naomi, who can “hardly dare to think, let alone ask, why she has to leave” (66). Her mother’s loss becomes a “stillness” which surrounds Naomi, encapsulating her in

¹⁵ Kamboureli’s essay puts forward a complex and sophisticated reading of Obasan as the textual representation and even embodiment of Naomi’s “hysteria,” the term that for Kamboureli most accurately portrays the disjuncture between Naomi’s representation of herself as speechless and the prolix text she produces.

darkness and silence, and shielding the secret of her abuse.

Naomi's silence comes out of an inability to undertake the work of mourning. The various funeral services and rites that take place when Naomi is a child are largely incomprehensible to her, as when she attends her grandmother Nakane's funeral but cannot understand the Japanese Buddhist prayers which are spoken. This funeral, although attended by a handful of friends from the internment settlement, is illustrative of the loss of community suffered by Naomi's family. Her grandfather is too ill to attend, and other relatives are scattered across the country and are unable to come to mourn. In the first chapter of the novel, set during Naomi's adulthood in 1972, she participates in her first mysterious mourning ritual when she and her uncle go out to the coulee, a muddy riverbed area: "The first time Uncle and I came here for a walk was in 1954, in August, two months after Aunt Emily's initial visit to Granton. For weeks after she left, Uncle seemed distressed, packing back and forth, his hand patting the back of his head. Then one evening, we came here" (2). On that first occasion, Naomi was already eighteen, but her uncle pronounced her "still too young" to learn the reason for the ritual. "Whatever he was intending to tell me 'some day' has not yet been told," notes Naomi, who attempts to ask again many years later, but receives no response (3). The date attached to the 1972 visit is precise, noting both a time, and the day and month, August 9th, the anniversary of the Nagasaki bombings.¹⁶ To Naomi the date is not

¹⁶ Arnold Davidson's study of *Obasan* notes that the memorial visit to the coulee may have additional religious significance: "O-Bon, the Japanese Buddhist festival of the dead and a major traditional ceremony, has been celebrated in Japan since the end of World War II from 13 August through 15 August" (31).

meaningful. The ritual commemoration cannot function as an anniversary for her, because she has not yet been told of her mother's injuries during the atomic blast over Nagasaki; her uncle's knowledge stems from letters brought in 1954 by Emily to Granton, and read by him and by Obasan, but not shared with Naomi and her brother.

Naomi's inability to mourn can be seen in her fixation on "the dead" as an abstract category at the beginning of Obasan. She asks Emily, after looking through her papers, "'why not leave the dead to bury the dead?'" Emily's response demonstrates a lack of understanding of Naomi's postponed grief: "'Dead?' she asked. 'I'm not dead. You're not dead. Who's dead?'" (42). Like Obasan, who bore two stillborn children, the second with "no explanation" since "Obasan refused to see or talk about the second child" (19), Naomi mourns abstractly, and symbolically. She is aware of her own shared state of frozen mourning with Obasan, their joint entrapment in unmourned losses featuring

our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves. Like threads of old spider webs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles (26).

While Naomi is surprised by the disruptive impact of these old memories into her present, Davidson argues that "Naomi's persistent attempt to consign the past safely to the past has the paradoxical effect of keeping that past ever present, a hovering history waiting to claim again her attention and her narration" (48).

When Naomi eventually learns of the circumstances of her mother's injuries and

death, she is still offered little in the way of tangible evidence of her loss. She hears from Aunt Emily that a missionary in Japan located her mother's name "on a plaque of the dead. A Canadian maple tree grows there where your name stands. The tree utters its scarlet voice in the air. Prayers bleeding. Its rustling leaves are fingers scratching an empty sky" (242). Only the first part of this image is factual and conveyed to Naomi by her aunt; Naomi's elaboration links the maple tree to a set of other tree and root images which appear throughout the narrative, notably in Naomi's image of a dead tree in the prairies where she sits "on its roots still as a stone" (243).

The inability to mourn is implicitly contrasted with the necessity of properly attending to other people, and of being attended to, which is the most significant form of intimate knowledge in the novel. Naomi notes that her aunt and uncle "were constant together [. . .] they attended one another" (245) and it is this form of attentiveness that she wishes to learn in order to reach her mother.¹⁷ Obasan's attentiveness is seen in her obsessive attempts to save and store household materials. Naomi notes that her aunt "has preserved in shelves, in cupboards, under beds—a box of marbles, half-filled colouring books, a red, white and blue rubber ball. The items are endless [. . .]. They rest in the corners like part of her body, hair cells, skin tissues, tiny specks of memory" stored up as

¹⁷ Fujita argues that Naomi is only able to reach this level of silent attentiveness after her dream of the Grand Inquisitor, which elliptically reveals to Naomi that her quest to reconstruct her mother's testimony verges on violent and appropriative. Fujita writes that "Naomi perceives that she has acted like the Inquisitor, obsessed with her own abandonment and forgetting to tend to the possibility of her mother's greater suffering. Recognizing her culpability as Mother's accuser is her supreme act, for only in the space created by self-denial, by a deliberate attendance, can Mother be restored" (39). A recent essay by Claudia Eppert includes a subtle analysis of the significance of Naomi's dream.

a kind of consolation and counterweight to overwhelming physical and emotional losses (15). Naomi's brother Stephen also articulates grief and longing in a concrete form, attaching labels to the records he plays over and over to indicate that they are the "property of Mrs. K. Nakane. Handle with Care...." (126).

Naomi first attempts to reach her mother through a reconsideration and analysis of family photographs which encapsulate collective memories, that is, family memories which Naomi does not know first-hand but has acquired as stories or fantasies. Marianne Hirsch has written about the formation of "post-memories," familial but non-autobiographical recollections that children absorb from their parents, and which are embodied in family photographs. For Hirsch, the term attempts to capture "the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the stories [. . .] with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (8). In *Obasan*, the most important photograph, a family group portrait taken on the occasion of Naomi's older brother's christening, indicates comfort and security. The figures in the portrait "all look rather humourless, but satisfied with the attention of the camera and its message for the day that all is well. That for ever and ever all is well" (20). In this portrait, Naomi's mother is "a fragile presence" whose blinking eyes had to be sketched in by the photographer, while her sister Emily has "an expression of concentration and determination" and appears "solid and intelligent-looking" (19). Obasan has offered this photograph to Naomi, along with other images of the family's "good times" before the war; she prefers Naomi to recall an idealized past than the traumatic rupture of internment. Nonetheless, for Naomi the family solidarity in the

portrait has literally unraveled in Naomi's image of a moth-eaten blanket, once tightly knit and now with "no more than a few tangled skeins" (21).

In contrast to Obasan's visual images of familial warmth, Emily repeatedly offers Naomi textual evidence of the family's unjust sufferings, documented in her own writings and in the government reports and decrees that she has amassed. While Obasan's archives are personal, Emily's are political and public. Naomi recognizes that Emily's written documents are an ambivalent gift, and she responds to her offering in a religious metaphor:

In Aunt Emily's package, the papers are piled as neatly as the thin white wafers in Sensei's silver box—symbols of communion, the materials of communication, white paper bread for the mind's meal.

We were the unwilling communicants receiving and consuming a less than holy nourishment, our eyes, cups filling with the bitter wine of a loveless communion. (182)

This notion of an unwilling communion/communication resounds powerfully at other moments of the novel. Naomi leafs through her aunt's papers seeing "thin wafers" (41).¹⁸ She collects Emily from the airport, and watches her remove "a bundle of conference notes and papers" (33); later, Emily defends the papers as a form of defense, which serves the purpose of "gluing our tongues back on," a painful process since "it

¹⁸ Chua notes that a variety of symbols connect to Christian communion rituals: "through Kogawa's book, through Naomi's speaking her story, Kogawa transubstantiates the stony silence of the Japanese Canadians' victimization into a speaking manna-bread of communion" (103).

takes a while for the nerves to grow back” (36). Naomi pictures her aunt in Toronto. “gradually getting more hunched as she sat over the typewriter, growing grey over the years, erasing, rewriting, underlining, trying to find the right mix that strikes home” in her account of the Japanese Canadians’ sufferings (40).

While there are clear psychological barriers which do not allow Naomi to accept her aunt’s offer of documentation, other written accounts are equally frustrating for Naomi, such as the letters from Japan, written by her grandmother, that she cannot read because she cannot decipher the Japanese characters. The Reverend Nakayama, who prays over them, as over communion wafers, before translating them for Naomi and Stephen, treats these letters as a Holy Communion. Even with a translator, the letters retain mysteries: the account of the Nagasaki atomic bombing “becomes increasingly chaotic, the details interspersed without chronological consistency”: the inadequacy of the written account to convey the experience of devastation mirrors the silences of Naomi’s grandmother and mother who were “unable to talk of all the things that happened” (236).

Lisa Yoneyama argues that survivor-witnesses of the atomic blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki faced particularly strenuous tasks in attempting to convey what they had seen and experienced in August of 1945 because, outside of a small group of scientists, they were the first to ever view the effects of nuclear explosions. The now familiar image of the mushroom cloud, for example, presented witnesses with an astonishing new sight, while the instant flash burns of victims resembled, but differed from, previous forms of burn injuries. Most cataclysmic of all were the chalky outlines of human beings who were instantly obliterated by the explosions. Survivors had to find

ways to convey the unimaginable to listeners who were not present for the blasts, who had only the post-atomic rubble to assist them in visualizing the two attacks.

Artists and writers felt the responsibility to document particularly acutely. Kyo Maclear suggests that “a strikingly persistent theme in the work of both hibakusha [atomic blast survivors] and non-hibakusha artists relates to the enormous barriers the atomic bombings pose” to efforts of representation. She writes that “so overwhelming are their memories, so unprecedented are their visions, that many artists and writers have tried to find new forms and a new language to convey their testimonies” (11). While Maclear studies these efforts in the visual arts, there is a parallel in literature: like Holocaust poetry, autobiography, or fiction, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki comprise a record of almost unimaginable, unrepresentable horror, which forces narrative to conform to a new reality. Other forms of discourse have influenced literary representations. Immediately after the surrender of Japan, survivor narratives were shaped by the requirements of medical and legal authorities: the doctors who treated them, and government officials who “certified” them as legitimate hibakusha, survivors of nuclear assaults eligible for compensation. According to Yoneyama,

This institutionalized medico-legal procedure determined to a great extent the style of narrativization that atom bomb memories later took. Because it measured damage by calculating spatial and temporal proximity to the location and the moment of explosion, classifying individual survivors accordingly, survivors’ accounts also tended to be saturated with exact figures and scientific terms. References to precise and detailed data on the number of casualties, the temperature of heat rays, the strength of the atomic blast, and the height of the

bomb's explosion helped fashion survivors' accounts, translating the catastrophe into measurable and calculable damages. (93-94)

In contrast, the account of the bombing in Obasan, while grounded in specific, imagined details, does not attempt detachment, or center around the representation of the single moment of the blast. Instead, the narration focusses on the impossible task of surviving the attacks. As Robert Lifton explains, the hibakusha can be seen as existing in a "death in life" state: "An extraordinarily persistent identification with the dead underlies the problems" of the hibakusha who "seem not only to have experienced the atomic disaster, but to have imbibed and incorporated it into their beings, including all of its elements of horror, evil, and particularly of death. They feel compelled to virtually merge with those who died [. . .]" (Death in Life 201).

While survivors, particularly those with visible burn scarring, were discriminated against in important ways as Japan struggled to overcome the experience of losing the war, Lifton suggests that the most pernicious constraints were those internalized by the hibakusha themselves. They were constantly reminded of their good fortune in surviving, yet their very survival could also be seen as a betrayal of those who died (Lifton 181-183). Survivors with keloid disfigurations were particularly vulnerable to ostracism and displacement, and Lifton recounts stories of hibakusha who abandoned their families and friends and went into hiding among the poorest segments of Japanese society. This provides an important context for the mysterious decision made by Naomi's mother and grandmother to live in as marginal and anonymous a fashion as they could manage even after the war ended. Naomi's mother, when her own mother first glimpsed her, was "utterly disfigured. Her nose and one cheek were almost gone. Great

wounds and pustules covered her entire face and body. She was completely bald. She sat in a cloud of flies and maggots wriggled among her wounds” (239).

The disappearance of Naomi’s mother, who is severely injured in the atomic blast, and then chooses not to return to Canada, is the novel’s central traumatic loss. As a child, Naomi experienced her mother as a reassuring presence of perfect understanding, who grasped and responded to her needs before they were even voiced. It is this kind of attentiveness that Naomi seeks to reciprocate:

Martyr Mother, you pilot your powerful voicelessness over the ocean and across the mountain, straight as a missile to our hut on the edge of a sugar-beet field. You wish to protect us with lies, but the camouflage does not hide your cries. Beneath the hiding I am there with you. Silent Mother, lost in the abandoning, you do not share the horror. At first, stumbling and unaware of pain, you open your eyes in the red mist and sheltering a dead child, you flee through the flames. Young Mother at Nagasaki, am I not also there?

In the dark Slokan night, the bright light flares in my dreaming. I hear the screams and feel the mountain breaking. Your long black hair falls and falls into the chasm. My legs are sawn in half. The skin on your face bubbles like lava and melts from your bones. Mother, I see your face. Do not turn aside.
(241-242)

Naomi’s expression of unity, her effort to implore her mother not to “turn aside” but to be seen and known, expresses a solidarity of spirit, a union of mother and daughter which promises retrospective comfort in the face of an overwhelming catastrophe where no solace was available. Kogawa’s novel, in turn, attempts to provide a voice for

experiences that have been largely muted in English-language fiction. As Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell point out, “television and cinema have slighted Hiroshima, but fiction has virtually ignored it. There is no major American novel about Hiroshima. Indeed, few American novels of any stature explore the consequences of using the atomic bomb” (373).¹⁹ The bombing of Nagasaki has, arguably, been even more neglected in North American fiction since the war, but Kogawa resurrects the event in order to link it to ongoing projects of historical memorialization, including efforts to think through American culpability, and Canadian complicity. Kogawa’s political speech acts function as testimony, highlighting the parallel although radically different experiences of racial oppression in Japan and in British Columbia. As Goellnicht suggests, *Obasan* carries out a didactic function, “not in the traditional way of teaching a product, but in teaching an epistemological process, a way of knowing through telling and reading [. . .]” (302). This effort of education is dramatized through Naomi’s archival recollection of the past, but at the conclusion of *Obasan*, with its revelation of the suffering endured by Naomi’s mother and grandmother, the pedagogical process is stalled. What “lesson” can the unprecedented events of nuclear holocaust teach to Naomi, or to readers whose only experience of Nagasaki’s bombing is at a distant remove?

4. Traumatic Resolutions and the After Life of Witnessing

As Roy Miki observes, readings of *Obasan* tend to incorporate a resolutionary

¹⁹ Michael Flynn agrees that American literature has also largely neglected the nuclear attacks. He notes that “given Hiroshima’s immensity, both as the most violent moment in human history and the actuation of existence with the threat of nuclear annihilation, its absence is deeply troubling” (33).

(not revolutionary) aesthetic in their overall critical framing of the novel: "The agreement seems to be that Naomi resolves her silenced past, so establishes peace with the human rights violations that caused such havoc and grief to her, to her family, and to her community" (143). Mason Harris, for examples, believes that the process of mourning in the novel, although "arrested" for a time, is "finally completed" when Naomi learns of her mother's death and revisits the coulee where her uncle had taken her on previous commemorative occasions (51). Miki, in contrast, argues that it is crucial that Kogawa's novel ends not with an image of Naomi, symbolically reconciled to her own heritage, but with the reproduction of a government document signed by three white men, requesting that the Canadian government not deport Japanese Canadians. He perceives this document as an indication that Obasan, "instead of resolving the dichotomy between silence and speech, between repression and exposure, ends within a gap where private and public are dichotomized as a stasis. Japanese Canadians are still *spoken for*" (144).

Kathleen Brogan expresses a similar, although not identical concern, about the conclusion of Comfort Woman. Keller's novel ends with Beccah engaged in a ritual mourning ceremony for her mother, which follows closely on Beccah's discovery of her mother's audiotapes detailing her life at the comfort station during the war. What troubles Brogan is that Beccah's rites are not undertaken in a community, but in solitude; in fact, Beccah's mother's "official" funeral is taking place simultaneously, and presumably includes other mourners, with whom Beccah is unable to join in commemorating her mother (Brogan 159-160). In contrast, Gilbert H. Muller perceives the conclusion of Comfort Woman as "resolutionary," in Miki's terms: "Spreading her

mother's ashes in the stream behind their house in Honolulu. Beccah accepts the myths and miseries of Akiko's tormented life, acknowledges the love that sustained their relationship, and accepts her own identity born of the diasporic forces of twentieth-century life" (186).

The significance of funeral rites in both novels highlights the theme of mourning that each work has developed. One central concern of each novelist is to disentangle the dead and the living, to leave, as Naomi suggests bitterly early in Obasan, "the dead to bury the dead" as much as possible. The radical discontinuity between the dead and the living is challenged by Kogawa's apocalyptic images of Nagasaki's nuclear bombing, and by Akiko's experience of a quasi-death and supernatural spirit possession. By the conclusion of each novel, however, the liminal space between death and life occupied by the two mothers, Naomi's mother and Akiko, may be at least partly resolved as their daughters achieve normal grief rather than pathological mourning. Both novels contain a critique of the mode of maternal behaviour which requires complete self-abnegation: Naomi, in one poem, refers to her "martyr mother," and each novel faults the mother figure for holding herself to a standard of silent endurance. These two works recognize that possibilities for empathy and mutual understanding are foreclosed when traumas are suppressed. Understanding, and some form of recovery from trauma, in Comfort Woman and in Obasan, are predicated on a painful but essential knowledge of the suffering of the other, and an attempt to voice their pain.

In Joy Kogawa's Itsuka (1992), the sequel to her acclaimed first novel Obasan

(1981), Naomi Nakane finally visits her mother's gravesite.²⁰ Naomi and her Aunt Emily, a tireless crusader for Japanese Canadian redress, have traveled to Japan on a commemorative pilgrimage. Naomi is left alone to explore the orphanage where her mother and grandmother sought shelter after the Nagasaki nuclear attack, and the hill where they were buried when they died of their injuries and radiation illness. For the first time since early childhood, Naomi experiences a sense of her mother's presence: "Perhaps it's the weight of centuries of belief that descends up on me in the late morning mist. I kneel by the maple tree and know. We're, all of us, dead and alive. We the dead and we the living are here among the trees, the coloured snails, the moss, the singing insects" (*Itsuka* 90-91). Naomi's religious faith offers her a redemptive vision of her mother, one that promises that her mother is still a living presence to her daughter. Naomi articulates this sense after a dream, some days later, from which she awakens with a new certainty that "There is no death. There is no disappearance, no finality in the drift downstream. Annihilation is not possible" (94). Naomi acquires a conviction that her accumulated losses, of mother, father, aunt and uncle are no longer as unbearable and unmournable as they have been throughout the course of her life. In a new image of herself, as "one, indivisibly, consciously and utterly myself" Naomi presents herself as

²⁰ Kogawa's *Itsuka* stands in a fascinating but undertheorized relationship to *Obasan*. In an interview with Karlyn Koh, Kogawa notes her own dissatisfaction with the novel, and also mentions that the *Globe and Mail*'s review of *Itsuka* was so devastating that it caused her to revise the book before its paperback appearance: "I tried to go back to rewrite the book and basically cut down as much as I could. This paperback edition is somewhat different from the hardcover. I've ended up hating the book as a result" (30). Kogawa abandoned plans for a third volume in the series (Koh 30).

healing from her traumatic grief and moving resolutely into the future with renewed political and social consciousness (Itsuka 94).

Chapter 4: Surviving to Tell the Story: Julia Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies and Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones

Introduction

Like Joy Kogawa, whose family was subjected to the Japanese Canadian internment that she describes in Obasan, the two novelists I examine in this chapter have close relationships to the historical traumas they portray. Julia Alvarez and Edwidge Danticat, both American writers, were born on the island of Hispaniola, Alvarez in the Spanish-speaking and wealthier country to the east, the Dominican Republic, and Danticat in the Kreyol-speaking Haiti. The United States occupied both parts of the island, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After American military control was removed, the U.S. continued to exercise strong influence, assisting in propping up the thirty-year-long virtual dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, the leader of the Dominican Republic, and intervening directly in the economic, political and military affairs of both countries for many decades. As children, both Alvarez and Danticat emigrated, under difficult circumstances, joining the large Dominican and Haitian communities in the New York City area. The earlier writings of both authors focus on the variety of experiences encountered by expatriates in the United States. In their most recent novels, however, Alvarez and Danticat have elected to turn from the immigrant experience to the histories of their homelands. Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies examines the final years of Trujillo's rule, focussing on the Dominican Republic during the 1950s and early 1960s, from the perspective of the Mirabal sisters—national heroines in the Dominican Republic—who worked to overthrow his regime. Danticat's novel, The Farming of Bones, examines an earlier point in Hispaniola history, the 1937

massacre of Haitian cane-cutters, whose deaths were ordered by Trujillo. In both novels, the focus is less on the social and political circumstances that shape the characters' lives than on the experiences of individual women caught in violent historical periods, struggling to survive with their loved ones and, ultimately, to testify to the atrocities that they have witnessed.

Testimony to trauma is stressed in both historical novels, which feature central characters who feel a strong ethical imperative to convey the truth about the past to the present. The novels differ substantially, however, in the relative abilities of their central characters to form testimonial relationships. While Alvarez's Dedé serves as the weary guardian of her sisters' memory in the decades following their murders, Danticat's Amabelle cannot locate an appropriate witness to her suffering. Their predicaments illustrate the complexity of the testimonial situation, and suggest contrasting possibilities for resolving trauma. These novels illustrate the significance of the speaking position of the testifiers, whose access to an audience for their powerful stories is partly determined by race, class, and literacy; inevitably, the disenfranchised acquire fewer opportunities for publicizing their painful experiences. Additionally, by calling on non-family members to function as witnesses, the two novels enact a project that is explicitly political: like Obasan and Comfort Woman they transgress historical silences, and demand that violent events be attended to, years after they took place. While readers could not approximate the intimate awareness of the central characters' of Kogawa and Keller's novels, Danticat and Alvarez suggest that even those who are remotely concerned and involved must be attentive to the circumstances of historical trauma.

In the Time of the Butterflies demonstrates that Dedé's testimonial efforts are not

only valorized but even demanded, after her country emerges from its decades of dictatorship.¹ Her late sisters are national heroines whose memory is useful as a source of inspiration to other Dominicans, and so their deaths have been readily incorporated into contemporary historical memory. Since her sisters' tragic and early deaths, Dedé has felt a sense of obligation toward them, a complex amalgam of guilt, for surviving, and responsibility, for ensuring their memorialization. The trauma story that Dedé repeats to each visitor has become formulaic and fixed; she seeks a means to move beyond her immersion in the past, in order to pursue her own future happiness.

Danticat's novel, in turn, presents the plight of an impoverished and poorly educated Haitian woman, Amabelle, who becomes a house servant to an important Dominican military family. Her status as a kind of adopted daughter has been compromised by Trujillo's inflammatory anti-Haitian rhetoric, and his policies of "Dominicanization" which seek to restore the "purity" of his country by expelling the darker skinned Haitian workers who cut the sugarcane. Amabelle learns that her safety is in jeopardy, and plans to flee to Haiti with her lover, Sebastien. Their efforts are thwarted when Sebastien is captured and almost certainly murdered, although Amabelle never learns his precise fate. She does escape to Haiti, but her testimonial efforts are in vain and she is left isolated and silenced. Amabelle's painful story, unlike Dedé's, challenges national historical memory in uncomfortable ways. After the 1937 atrocities

¹ Julia Alvarez, linking her family's history to Dominican history, notes that "On May 30, 1961, the group of plotters with whom my father had been associated assassinated the dictator. Actually, Dominicans do not refer to the death as an assassination but as an *ajusticiamiento*, a bringing to justice" ("Genetics of Justice" 107).

the Haitian government co-operated in Trujillo's efforts to label the massacre a border skirmish, accepting minimal financial compensation for the murders of tens of thousands of Haitians. Because this resolution was desired by the United States, as well as by other Dominican and Haitian trade partners, the stories of victims like Danticat's fictional Amabelle were largely suppressed for many years after the massacre. Danticat's novel is the first English-language approach to these events, and her work is clearly less optimistic than Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies about the possibilities for meaningful historical witnessing. Having failed to locate an appropriate human listener, Amabelle addresses her mourning dirge to the spirit of the grimly but aptly named Massacre River.

In my consideration of these novels, I begin with a discussion of the *testimonio*, a form of non-fictional testimonial writing that has proliferated in Latin and Central America and in some Caribbean nations since the 1960s. Like the two historical novels I study in this chapter, the *testimonio* has been directed at a readership who, their narrators anticipate, are largely unaware of the political upheavals of other nations. The rise in popularity of the *testimonio* has coincided with a significant increase in North American models of "new" non-fiction, such as the celebrated examples of Truman Capote's In Cold Blood and Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song, both true crime accounts. Sometimes known as documentary fiction or "faction," the new non-fiction blurs the generic lines between memoir, biography, journalism, personal essay, fiction, and even, sometimes, poetry. The *testimonio* is also a blend of genres: oral storytelling, anthropological research, political propaganda and autobiography are combined to produce texts which purport to tell more than the truth of the life of the individual

speaker. In sharp contrast with North American models of creative non-fiction, however, the *testimonio* cannot afford to pose questions about its own credibility; instead, the speaker strives to establish narrative authority in order to solicit the political solidarity and possibly even the financial support of readers. In the wake of events of the 1970s and 1980s, notably the “Dirty Wars” in Argentina and Chile, and the government-sponsored terror campaigns in Nicaragua and El Salvador, the *testimonio* has provided a more intimate narrative approach to acts of state violence.

1. The *testimonio*: Truth-Telling and Political Consciousness-Raising

While North American novels are not generally considered as *testimonios*, a number of American literary critics have been intrigued by the genre’s manifestations in the Spanish-speaking nations of Latin and South America. *Testimonios* attempt to create a potent documentary form of non-fiction, with an explicit political agenda of social transformation through consciousness-raising. John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman define the *testimonio* as

A novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or a significant life episode (e.g., the experience of being a prisoner). Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or social activist. (173)

Because most *testimonios* involve the presence of an active listener, they raise again the

question of the construction of testimony as a joint project, an issue brought up in Felman and Laub's approach to Holocaust testimonies. In contrast with the psychoanalytic listener, whose primary task is to assist in reconstructing the story, the *testimonio*'s listener is primarily a transmitter, responsible for conveying the story to a broader reading public than the narrator could secure on their own. The *testimonio* is a story "that needs to be told" and the reader is "meant to experience both the speaker and the situations and events recounted as real" (Beverley and Zimmerman 173, 174). The listener/editor of the *testimonio* may arrange the narrative in a particular manner, striving for verisimilitude as well as drama.

The central goal of the *testimonio* is to accomplish social change by revealing atrocities, seeking redress, and achieving transformation of governments and their policies. In this regard, Linda Craft argues that the *testimonio* has been successful:

Testimonial accounts have effectively drawn the world's attention to the crises in Central America. These documents fit into the same project as the work of human rights activists and sanctuary-solidarity groups in their appeal to moral conscience and indignation in the face of injustice. In short, they work. (21)

Alicia Partnoy's testimony, in the brief sketches of The Little School, provides an illustration of Craft's contention that these texts "work." Partnoy recounts not only her own experiences of imprisonment, isolation, and torture but also those of her fellow prisoners; where Partnoy lacked eyewitness access to events, she imagined or reconstructed them from other testimonies. Such narratives are gestures of solidarity with the plight of those who cannot or choose not to speak for themselves in a public forum. These accounts change the narration of history, countering efforts of

governments to control the “official story.”² *Testimonios* offer a potent form of counter-memory. Like the historical novels discussed in this dissertation, they provide a tangible means of addressing the past in a revisionist manner. While the demands of truth telling are most strenuously felt by narrators, John Beverley suggests that the *testimonio*’s form also invites a particularly intimate and complicated response from the reader, even that “the position of the reader of *testimonio* is akin to that of a jury member in a courtroom” (1996 26). By opening up a discursive space in which the reader is invited to weigh historical evidence and pronounce judgement, these narratives offer a means to ally literary and juridical concerns. It is important, as well, that the “jury member”/reader is most likely to be relatively enfranchised as well as literate, and thus situated in a very different subject position than the narrator of the *testimonio*. For this reason, “the complicity a *testimonio* establishes with its readers involves their identification—by engaging their sense of ethics and justice—with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience” (Beverley 1996 31). The challenge for the author of *testimonio*-like fictions, then, is to find a parallel way to engage their readers in an account that is fact-based yet is not an unmediated eyewitness report.

The *testimonio* that has received the most attention among the English-speaking

² The Official Story, an award-winning film from Argentina, is a powerful fictional account of a government official’s wife who struggles with her dawning awareness that her adopted daughter is in fact the kidnapped child of a political prisoner deliberately “disappeared” by the regime. In one highly charged scene, the official’s wife is visiting with an old friend from school, a former political detainee who attempts to recount her experiences of torture and sexual assault. The testimony cannot be admitted by the government official’s wife, who tries to stifle her friend’s story in order to prevent herself from feeling guilty and complicit.

readership of North America is the translation of Rigoberta Menchú's account of her life as a Quiché Indian and peasant activist in Guatemala. During the so-called culture wars in the United States, conservative commentators like Dinesh D'Souza and Education Secretary Lynne Cheney denounced the rise of "politically correct" multiculturalism studies in American colleges and universities.³ I, Rigoberta Menchú was repeatedly held up as an example of the kind of text that left-leaning professors of literature were using to indoctrinate their unsuspecting students. Certainly, the work has been taught broadly enough to spawn the publication of a volume of essays on its use as a pedagogical tool.⁴ Menchú's *testimonio* describes her family's abject poverty and their exploitation by their employers. Rampant disease, childhood deaths from malnutrition, arbitrary cruelty by local *ladino* landowners and other catastrophes gradually culminate in the development of a rebel peasants' movement.⁵ The growth of political awareness in the narrative is broadly Marxist, but much of the interest of the text is generated by Menchú's complicated descriptions—and withholdings—of native customs and rituals. While the *testimonio* is a "telling," Menchú reserves the right to hold many details back. Some ceremonies, such as birthing and naming practices, are granted many pages of description, yet Menchú repeatedly notes that she is keeping the secrets of her people. Even in the final paragraph of her extraordinarily detailed narrative, Menchú concludes

³ A discussion of the controversy surrounding Menchú's memoir is found in the introduction to Stoll's book; see also D'Souza, 59-63.

⁴ The essays in *Teaching and Testimony*, edited by Allen Carey-Webb and Stephen Benz, provide a wealth of readings of Menchú's work.

⁵ Menchú explains that the *ladinos* are usually of mixed European and Indian ancestry, but do not identify with the plight of the indigenous peoples of their country.

“I’m still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I’m still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets” (247). Doris Sommer’s perceptive reading of the work suggests that an emphasis on withholding information is crucial to the fascination Rigoberta Menchú’s account exerts. Sommer wonders if the narrator was in fact “an authentic witness to abuse, a vehicle for truth beyond her control and vulnerable to a compromised and infuriated government? Or was she being coy on the witness stand, exercising control over apparently irrelevant information, perhaps to produce her own strategic version of truth?” (115)⁶

Sommer is a sympathetic and engaged reader, who grants Menchú’s account credence as a testimonial effort. Other critics have evaluated the text’s omissions and representations more harshly. As I noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, anthropologist David Stoll undertook an investigation into the claims of Menchú’s testimony, eventually concluding that there are significant misrepresentations of the political situation in Guatemala, and particularly of the causes of Menchú’s family’s sufferings.⁷ These experiences are central to the work, as Menchú describes, in turn, the torture and murder of her brother, mother, and father, in retaliation for their efforts on behalf of indigenous people. As Stoll points out, Menchú tends to describe these events

⁶ Some critics avoid using legal comparisons, arguing that, as Arturo Arias suggests in a recent *PMLA* article, the *testimonio* was “never meant to be autobiography or a sworn testimony in the juridical sense; rather, it is a collective, communal account of a person’s life” (76).

⁷ Arias points out some of Stoll’s logical inconsistencies in holding Menchú to a legalistic standard of proof.

as if she had personally witnessed them, although she does occasionally note that she has, in fact, recreated the violent scenes from the accounts of others. Stoll's critique tends to overlook the collective dimension of the *testimonio* which distinguishes it from other forms of autobiographical writing: while Menchú adopts the stance of the eyewitness, her reasons for doing so are in part rhetorical, since the survivor-witness's account, as we have seen previously, is frequently granted a greater authority than other narratives. It is particularly crucial that Menchú claims the status of witness when she is describing horrific scenes of violence that left no survivors, and whose few observers were most likely to be the military personnel complicit in the deaths and mutilations of her family members. The *testimonio* does not tend to shy away from representations of violence but, as Elaine Scarry has analyzed, it is always difficult to convey the truth of bodily torment. By describing horrific events in a graphic and direct manner, Menchú effectively forces us to become engaged with the plight of her family members.

The representation of violence in testimonial narratives presents some complex issues, particularly for feminist critics, since sexual assaults are frequently part of the torture inflicted on female political prisoners. In works like *Hear My Cry*, authors generally elect to avoid detailing these attacks: like some celebrated nineteenth-century slave narratives, *testimonios* often adopt a religious framework that includes an ethos of female sexual modesty. In many testimonial accounts, threats of sexual assault are uttered by prison guards, creating part of the culture of intimidation and violence to which women seem particularly vulnerable.

Testimonial narratives resemble, in important ways, Amnesty International's attempts to document human rights abuses, and particularly state-sponsored torture,

illegal imprisonment, and murder. Amnesty's efforts are directed at restoring "to each person tortured his or her voice, to use language to let pain give an accurate account of itself, to present regimes that torture with a deluge of letters and telegrams, a deluge of voices speaking on behalf of, voices speaking in the voice of, the person silenced" in order to "return to the prisoner his most elemental political ground" (Scarry 50).

Scarry's analysis suggests that the work of making the pain of the other visible and visceral to detached observers who are not themselves in jeopardy is central to Amnesty's success in fostering broad awareness of violence. Similarly, the *testimonio's* reliance on recreating scenes of violence for readers is closely tied to its political mission, to effect consciousness-raising and, ultimately, change. In turn, in the historical novels I examine in the next part of this chapter, novelists depict extreme events, including torture and murder, and solicit attentive readers.

2. Julia Alvarez's In the Time of the Butterflies: Surviving to Tell the Story

Julia Alvarez is acutely aware of the significance of the *testimonio*, having composed the introduction to the English-language translation of Alicia Partnoy's The Little School. Alvarez writes, "Captured and blindfolded, 'disappeared,' Partnoy's revenge on her captors is to see, in minute detail, the ignored little particulars that mark her place in the Little School" (8); "these are not short stories in the genre of fiction—they are not fanciful and crafted, erudite and inventive—but in the genre of survival tales. Partnoy is a Latin American Scheherazade bearing witness, telling her stories to keep herself alive" (10). In the Time of the Butterflies, in turn, uses storytelling to capture the interest of North American readers in political events known to few of them. The novel draws on Alvarez's own ongoing involvement with human rights issues, and reveals a

broad knowledge of torture practices documented by Amnesty International in a range of Latin American countries over the last several decades. Official human rights observers, and an attempt at written testimony by an informant, are interpellated into Alvarez's fictionalized account of the lives of the four Mirabal sisters. Ellen McCracken notes that In the Time of the Butterflies "might be viewed as a kind of collective autobiography of the women, both fictionally and historically reconstructed by another because the subjects themselves are not able to do so" (84).

Of the authors I include in this study, Danticat and Alvarez have perhaps the most complicated relationships to the historical materials they unearth. As expatriate writers, who have described a sense of exile, they frequently write with ambivalence about the countries where they were born, expressing nostalgia and loss as well as criticism. Since their life histories place them as "hyphenated" Americans born outside of the United States, I will include brief biographical summaries for each author. Alvarez was born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States with her parents and sisters in 1960. Her father, a doctor, was involved with anti-government political activities, and feared arrest by Trujillo's SIM, the secret police. In New York, Alvarez's family established a comfortable middle-class life in exile: Alvarez's first novel, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, is fictionalized autobiography, exploring the lives of four Dominican-American women in interlocking short stories. Her second novel, ¡Yo!, explores a writer's responsibility to the friends and family members whose stories she distorts in her published fiction. Alvarez has also produced several volumes of poetry and a collection of essays. Her most recent novel, In the Name of Salome, is her second venture into historical fiction, and deals with a nineteenth-century woman poet in the

Dominican Republic, and her ties to her twentieth-century Dominican American daughter.

In the Time of the Butterflies is a fictional recreation of the lives of “las Mariposas” that takes into account available historical facts while attempting to avoid the hagiographic tone habitually taken when discussing the Dominican Republic’s best-known political activists. In 1960, shortly before the decades-long dictatorship of Trujillo ended, three of the four Mirabal sisters were murdered on their way home from visiting their husbands, all of whom were imprisoned for anti-government political activity. Their murders fixed the status of martyrs on them, and helped precipitate Trujillo’s own assassination. In order to re-examine them, Julia Alvarez elects to portray each of the four sisters intimately, in the form of diary entries and internal monologues. She traces the lives of the four sisters from childhood or adolescence through to 1960; a prologue and additional segments are recounted from the perspective, in 1994, of Dedé, the sister who “survived to tell the tale” and who has become the keeper of her sisters’ memory for researchers, activists, and curious tourists.

As Ellen McCracken’s analysis points out, Alvarez’s novel demonstrates the efforts of “a contemporary feminist U.S. Latina writer” to reread the history of the country of her birth, “insisting that the U.S. mainstream come to terms not only with recent Dominican history, but with non-official versions of that history” (84). This project can be linked to a broader literary culture in many developing and underdeveloped nations that has been termed “resistance literature” by Barbara Harlow. According to Harlow, there are a range of recent literary texts which have been largely ignored by academics and critics because they are perceived as overtly political and/or

unsophisticated: many of these works deal with the “struggle over the historical record” in order to put forward a counter-discursive or revisionist history, and begin the task of deconstructing both national and ethnic identities (Harlow 7).

In the Time of the Butterflies’s Dedé is aware of the significance of her function as the archivist for her family’s political activities, but she is also, after decades of attending to the needs of public memorialization, more than a little tired of the role she has been assigned during official functions:

Now, after thirty-four years, the commemorations and interviews and presentations of posthumous honors have almost stopped, so that for months at a time Dedé is able to take up her own life again. But she’s long since resigned herself to Novembers. Every year as the 25th rolls around, the television crews drive up. There’s the obligatory interview. Then, the big celebration over at the museum, the delegations from as far away as Peru and Paraguay, an ordeal really, making that many little party sandwiches and the nephews and nieces not always showing up in time to help. But this is March, Maria santísima! Doesn’t she have seven more months of anonymity? (3)

Alvarez juxtaposes the seriousness of the murders of the three sisters with the weariness of maintaining a memorial vigil which serves the needs of others—of Dominican society, broadly, as it recalls the deaths of the women in the context of the Trujillo regime—and which requires Dedé to function as a representative survivor. Dedé’s own sense of identity has been shaped by the loss of her sisters, and by her survival in the face of an attempt to wipe out her family. She experiences external pressures to shape her narratives of her sisters to explain, implicitly, why she herself was not a victim. This

effort means that “before she knows it, she is setting up her life as if it were an exhibit labeled neatly for those who can read: THE SISTER WHO SURVIVED” (5). Dedé has developed a format that seems to suit most of her curious and more politically engaged visitors: “usually, if she works it right—a lemonade with lemons from the tree Patria planted, a quick tour of the house the girls grew up in—usually they leave, satisfied [...]” (5). What Dedé fears most is the question to which she has no satisfactory answer: “why are you the one who survived?” (5)

The novel opens with Dedé’s encounter with yet another inquisitive visitor, whose questions propel Dedé back into her memories of the past. The visitor, who is not named, wishes to join in the project of memorializing the sisters: she lives in the United States, and regrets that “the Mirabal sisters are not known there [. . .] it is a crime that they should be forgotten, these unsung heroines of the underground, et cetera” (3). Dedé’s sense of irony contrasts with the earnestness of her visitor, who has not borne the weight of three decades of grief and mourning.

Alvarez’s novel carefully details the gradual involvement of the Mirabal sisters in anti-Trujillo politics. Minerva Mirabal, the eldest, is the first to form affiliations with political insurgents. When she is only a young girl she befriends an orphan at the boarding school they both attend. Sinita, who has lost family members to political terror, tells Minerva “the secret of Trujillo” which she is not supposed to reveal: the General’s political power is illegitimate. Having disposed of his political rivals, he worked his way to the head of the country’s armed forces, and then declared himself president without calling an election (16). Minerva and Sinita have a dangerous early encounter with Trujillo’s regime, when they travel to the capital city to perform a play before him.

Sinita carries a bow, and is to aim “imaginary arrows at imaginary foes”: instead, she walks directly toward the General and raises her bow as if to fire directly at him.

Minerva quickly leads the stunned audience in a series of cheers for Trujillo, to prevent her friend’s arrest (27-28).

The three sisters who become closely involved with the anti-Trujillo movement have differing motivations, and paths to political action. The youngest daughter, Maria Teresa, called Mate, becomes interested in politics only when she falls in love with a young activist. Mate joins the movement in order to assist him, and, in Alvarez’s representation of the young girl, she is naïvely excited about her decision:

A national underground is forming. Everyone and everything has a code name. Manolo is Enriquillo, after the great Taino chieftain, and Minerva, of course, is Mariposa. If I were to say *tennis shoes*, you’d know we were talking about ammunition. The *pineapples for the picnic* are the grenades. *The goat must die for us to eat at the picnic*. (Get it? It’s like a trick language.) (142)

While the other three sisters are represented by internal monologues, Mate’s narrations are purportedly diary entries composed in various books and on pieces of loose paper.

While she is still a schoolgirl, she is compelled to bury one diary because it contains incriminating information about her older sister’s friend, Hilda. Mate’s attempts to commemorate the events of her own life and of her culture are subsumed, repeatedly, to the need to maintain security.

Patria, the most devout of the sisters, joins only after she has witnessed a murder. While on a religious retreat she observes several guerrillas who are pursued by government troops, and shot:

They made it to the outdoor deck. I could see them clearly, their faces bloodied and frantic. One of them was badly wounded and hobbling, another had a kerchief tied around his forehead. A third was shouting to two others to stay down, and one of them obeyed and threw himself on the deck.

But the other must not have heard him for he kept on running towards us. I looked in his face. He was a boy no older than Noris. Maybe that's why I cried out, "Get down, son! Get down!" His eyes found mine just as they shot him square in the back. I saw the wonder on his young face as the life drained out of him, and I thought, Oh my God, he's one of mine. (162)

Patria returns from her retreat utterly changed, and determined to function as a witness to state-sponsored violence, despite the dangers to herself and her family: "Patria Mercedes had come back to tell them all, tell them all" (53). Patria senses a vocation that is religiously inspired, unlike the more secular preoccupations of her two sisters.

While Patria, Mate and Minerva all eagerly embrace roles in the resistance movement, only Dedé holds back, fearing her husband's disapproval. In response to her American interviewer's suggestion that she was "lucky" that her own husband was not arrested along with the husbands of her sisters, Dedé offers a quick retort: "'It wasn't luck [...] it was because he didn't get directly involved [...].'" She continues, "back in those days, we women followed our husbands" (171-172). While the explanation proves adequate for her listener, Dedé is not satisfied: "Now, when she thinks back, Dedé asks herself [...] Why? Why didn't she go along with her sisters. She was only thirty-four. She could have started a new life. But no, she reminds herself. She wouldn't have started over. She would have died with them on that lonely mountain road" (177). Her

awareness that her choice was between separation from her sisters and their cause, or certain death, presents Dedé with a nearly unbearable burden of guilt and posthumous responsibility.

Dedé's dread of what may befall her sisters is realized when Minerva and then Mate are detained by the police. Patria describes the events from January to March of 1960, including Minerva's arrest, while the following chapter, perhaps the most harrowing in the novel, is narrated by Maria Teresa, in the form of a secret diary that she maintains in prison. Mate recounts life as a political prisoner under Trujillo, and notes

The fear is the worst part. Every time I hear footsteps coming down the hall, or the clink of the key turning in the lock, I'm tempted to curl in the corner like a hurt animal, whimpering, wanting to be safe. But I know if I do that, I'll be giving in to a low part of myself, and I'll feel even less human. And that is what they want to do, yes, that is what they want to do. (227)

Mate's prison diary reports that the "women politicals" are confined to a small cell with sixteen other women, whose crimes include theft, prostitution and murder. As Mate wryly notes, "Three bolted steel walls, steel bars for a fourth wall, a steel ceiling, a cement floor. Twenty-four metal shelves ("bunks"), a set of twelve on each side, a bucket, a tiny washbasin under a small high window. Welcome home" (228).

Mate's fictional prison diary is one of the most interesting segments of Alvarez's novel, since it is where the author grapples most directly with the insufficiency of language to convey physical and emotional torment: it is also where the novel's status as a fictional recreation is deliberately distanced in order to effect an approximation of "truth." Most of the journal passages highlight the alternating tedium and anxiety of life

in captivity, including the serious illnesses that Mate suffers. Mate's body is repeatedly brought to the reader's attention in passages which note her inability to eat prison food, her nausea and vomiting, her sleeplessness and fits of weeping. There are also points when description breaks down in the text entirely, and silence is used to express horror as well as disorientation. Mate is tortured during one interrogation session, and when she returns to her cell, and to her journal, her first entry notes only "Not sure what day it is," in the place of the customary date which marks each new page (240). Soon after, she writes, "Still very weak, but the bleeding has stopped. I can't bear to tell the story yet" (240). When Mate does write a date for an entry, April 26, she continues, "Here is my story of what happened in La 40 on Monday, April 11th"—but this is followed by the notation "[pages torn out]" (242). A number of pages later we learn that Mate's written account of her torture has been removed from her journal and secretly conveyed to a visiting delegation, a committee from the Organization of American States which is investigating human rights abuses in the Dominican Republic (254).

Mate's initial inability to "tell" her trauma, either to her diary or to her fellow prisoners, including her older sister, reflects the deep shock of the torture to which she is subjected. The textual deferral of a description of the scene of torture becomes a source of readerly anxiety: a curiosity to know "what happened" is mixed with the knowledge that Mate's experience will be challenging to read about. As Laura Tanner's recent study describes, graphic depictions of violence, including sexualized violence and torture, tend to elicit uncomfortable responses from readers: she suggests that readers may be torn between horror and fascination. The construction of Mate's account as an official narrative may offer a means of creating a manageable story by affiliating readers with

human rights officials, as concerned but not overly involved observers of the prisoners' plight. The testimony that Mate offers to the OAS is both personal (she recounts her own story) and generic (she chooses anonymity, to protect herself and her family from government retaliation; she elides some specific details). As in the *testimonio*, Mate's story becomes both personal and collective, representing her own bodily experiences and her husband's suffering, but also standing in for countless other victims of the regime whose pain is not recorded and presented to an official delegation.

Mate's testimony explains that she was taken from her own cell to a different complex where, prisoners knew, interrogation and torture sessions were routinely performed. There she was stripped and forced to lie down on a metal table, and then her husband was brought in, emaciated and covered with blisters. The text cannot name Mate's husband; his identity is discernible from the context of the interrogation, and from his responses to her. When he refused to reveal the names of his fellow anti-Trujillo activists, Mate was tortured: a metal rod was applied and "my whole body jumped with exquisite pain. I felt my spirit snapping loose, soaring above my body and looking down at the scene" (255-256). Her husband betrayed his colleagues in order to spare Mate further suffering.

The earlier segments of Alvarez's novel carefully shift between the narrative voices of the different sisters, but this parity is, of necessity, reduced as the novel nears its climax: the deaths of three of the sisters, and Dedé's survival as their most important witness. In reconstructing the murders of the sisters, *In the Time of the Butterflies* uses first-person narration right up to the final minutes of the women's lives. In the first part of one of the novel's final chapters, Minerva describes a prison visit to their husbands

undertaken by herself, Mate, and Patria, and the sense of uneasiness that they had on their return trip. In Alvarez's retrospective creation of the final hours of the sisters' lives, Minerva is prescient: "I don't know quite how to say this, but it was as if we were girls again, walking through the dark part of the yard, a little afraid, a little excited by our fears, anticipating the lighted house just around the bend [...]. That's the way I felt as we started up the first mountain" (297). Dedé's epilogue, which immediately follows this passage, explains that the final hours of her sisters' lives have been recounted to her by multiple eyewitnesses, who visit her and offer fragments of specific but unhelpful information: the kind of candy the sisters purchased when they stopped at a store on their way home, the speed of their car as they drove. She notes that these witnesses, who did not observe the murders, "would come by the old house in Ojo de Agua and insist on seeing me [...] they would come with their stories of that afternoon [...] they all wanted to give me something of the girls' last moments" (301). Instead of gratitude, Dedé has a sense of obligation: she is the "one saved" (301) who must listen to stories that break her heart. Over the years, Dedé longs to be with her sisters, and is told repeatedly that her own "martyrdom" is "to be alive without them" (308).

While her individual suffering overwhelms her, Dedé is compelled to serve an important symbolic function when the Dominican Republic is reorganized under new political leadership, only a short time after her sisters' murders, and Trujillo's assassination. The country's new president visits, promising to bring healing and justice, to "make us a nation proud of ourselves, not run by the Yanqui imperialists" (310). Dedé is aware that her own family's tragic history has become inextricably entwined with the fate of her people: "Every time he made one of these promises, he'd look at me as if he

needed me to approve what he was doing. Or really, not me, but my sisters whose pictures hung on the wall behind me. Those photos had become icons, emblazoned on posters—already collectors’ pieces” (310). As the sister who survived, Dedé is invested with preserving the memory of her sisters as national heroines, telling and retelling the story of their lives for all visitors, ranging from “the Belgian movie maker” to “the Chilean woman writing a book about women and politics” (312). The effect on Dedé, who is also busy raising her sisters’ children, is to tie her own life entirely to the memory of her sisters. She is “the oracle” brought out for public festivities to serve a symbolic function, and she continues in this role because she knows that she is one of the few Dominicans who has brought the past into the present. She muses, “the problem is not enough of us have done that. What is that thing the gringos say, if you don’t study your history, you are going to repeat it?” (313) While a friend wryly contradicts her, noting that the “gringos say too many things,” Dedé has a sense of memorial responsibility that is familial but also political. Protecting the memory of her sisters becomes her consolation for holding back from joining in their activism. In surviving to testify, however, she must also find a way to extricate herself from the pull that her family’s dramatic history has on various listeners, and her final act of witnessing, before her Dominican American visitor, appears to be conclusive. The novel ends with Dedé’s most optimistic thoughts in the novel, as she contemplates her own future, and anticipates the pleasure of travel, work and, even, a new romantic relationship, all possibilities foreclosed by her sisters’ deaths and her own hard work of commemorating them and raising their children.

3. Edwidge Danticat’s The Farming of Bones: Testimony Without Witness

Near the end of Edwidge Danticat's novel, The Farming of Bones, published in 1998, a Haitian tour guide is conducting a visit to an important site commemorating a former political leader. "Famous men never truly die," he tells his tour group, "it is only those nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke in the early morning air" (280). Danticat's novel seeks to attach a history, albeit in fictionalized form, to the tens of thousands of "nameless and faceless" Haitian cane-cutters who were massacred in the Dominican Republic in 1937. The work opens by stressing the necessity of naming people whose lives and deaths have been forgotten: "His name is Sebastien Onius," declares the novel's narrator and central character, Amabelle, about her lost lover. The Farming of Bones insists on the significance of individual lives that have not been commemorated in historical records.

Danticat's The Farming of Bones adds a lyrical dimension to the narration of historical trauma, a juxtaposition that some readers may find jarring in its aestheticization of pain and loss. The novel's narrator is Amabelle, a young Haitian housemaid, who has lived in the Dominican Republic since her loss of her parents when she was a child. The novel forms her mournful lament addressed to the "Mother of the Rivers," in commemoration of her parents' deaths by drowning, and in tribute to the symbolic significance of the Massacre River which marks the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Danticat's novel vividly illuminates the climate of fear in which Haitians lived during the months leading up to the October 1937 massacre. Amabelle listens to rumours and uneasy gossip, and hopes for the protection of her employers. Her dilemma is whether to flee to the safety of Haiti, by crossing the river, or remain in the Dominican Republic with her lover. Over the course of the novel, Amabelle's sense of

temporary safety and refuge is entirely shattered; more than any of the other trauma survivors I consider in this study, she is left bereft and alone, deprived of a meaningful community of witnesses for her experiences. The absence of an appropriate witness for Amabelle places a greater responsibility on readers to be responsive and empathic. While the other fictional trauma survivors discussed in this dissertation do receive attentive witnessing—albeit sometimes only posthumously, as is the case for both Naomi and Beccah’s mothers, discussed in the previous chapter—Amabelle lacks the solidarity of any listeners. Because she does not have children or, apparently, any other relatives at the end of the novel, she does not even have the opportunity for the passing on of transgenerational traumatic memories.

The Farming of Bones draws on an important theme in Haitian women’s recent literature, which stresses “the importance of memory [...] precisely because memory is the mechanism by which the African diasporic experience has been preserved from generation to generation through the oral tradition” (Chancy 74). In interviews, Danticat has repeatedly noted the significance of oral story-telling for her work, citing in particular the influence of Haitian folklore that was passed down to her by relatives (Shea 384-385). Myriam Chancy argues that Haitian women writers “re-member” because they “have had to rely on a faulty collective memory” tainted by the traumatizing effects of colonization (74); for Chancy, who invokes Nora’s idea of “lieux de memoire,” the effort to recollect the past anew offers the possibility of social healing:

Memory may frame what has been as well as what will be, but the past can only affect our sense of the future (and even of the present) if we know enough (or are willing to know enough) about the past to remember it. It is this element of

choice which forces cultures that have experienced a tragic loss of lives and traditions to insist on reminding a larger public—usually the cultures which have caused their tragedies—that loss has occurred and must not be repeated.

Memory, then, can also serve as a handmaiden to justice. (75)

In order for justice to be achieved, however, a means must be provided to enable less powerful witnesses to speak, and require their oppressors to listen.⁸ In Danticat's novel, those with authority, or even racial and class privilege, refuse to be cognizant of the scope of the violence perpetrated against Haitians.

Danticat has published two novels and one volume of short stories, in addition to a small press publication of her MFA project. Her first widely published work, the novel Breath, Eyes, Memory, recounts the experiences of a young Haitian girl who comes to live with her expatriate mother in New York, where she undergoes a turbulent adolescence of cultural and familial adjustment. The novel was highly successful after it was included in Oprah Winfrey's Book Club; it also garnered critical praise and awards. Danticat's collection of short stories, Krik-Krak, is more overtly political. Danticat describes the lives of a variety of Haitians and Haitian American immigrants, including "boat people" attempting to make their way to the United States, and survivors of the 1937 cane-cutting massacre. When she took up this same event in The Farming of Bones, Danticat explained to interviewers that the novel originated in the accounts of the massacre that she had known since childhood, as well as "an actual story that I had heard.

⁸ The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings are interesting in this context; see Krog.

of a woman who worked all her life in the home of a military man, a colonel, and this woman, while serving supper, was stabbed at the dinner table by her employer" (Wachtel 106). In contrast with the woman whose story was recounted to her, however, Danticat wanted a narrator who survived the events of the massacre, in order "to tell the story" (Wachtel 106).⁹

The Farming of Bones is the first fictional account of the 1937 massacre published in English, and recounts an episode of Haitian-Dominican relations which is not widely known in the United States, but which was once a source of significant political embarrassment to American President Roosevelt. Throughout the 1930s, the U.S. pursued a "Good Neighbor" policy with nearby Caribbean and Central American nations. The goal of the diplomatic agreement was to limit direct military intervention, but assure mutual security through economic treaties and American patronage of the smaller, developing nations, many of which struggled with a transition to democratic forms of government. The United States had occupied both parts of the island of Hispaniola earlier in the century: the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924, Haiti from 1915 to 1934. During this time the problem of illegal Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic was not successfully dealt with by American military officials or, later, the new Dominican military government. Haitians came across to the Dominican

⁹ Danticat also explains that she elected to focus on a single narrator's account because she has "always been extremely fascinated by narrations of history through one voice. Anne Frank's telling of the Holocaust and Elise Wiesel's, all the different individual voices that, in some ways, can tell the larger story" (Wachtel 106). Danticat's effort to locate her own historical fiction within a heritage of autobiographical, rather than fictional, trauma narratives is of interest.

Republic in large numbers to work at the dangerous task of cutting sugar cane, and their presence in the border region, in particular, was tacitly condoned. With Trujillo's rise to power, the uneasy relations between the two nations neared a state of war that Haiti, as a much weaker military power, was anxious to avoid. As a result, when Trujillo ordered military attacks on Haitian cane-cutters living on the Dominican side of the border, the Haitian government was largely helpless to intervene. The massacres killed "as many as 25,000 people," and some estimates place the death toll at as many as 40,000 victims (Atkins and Wilson 53).

Historians G. Pope Atkins and Larman Wilson point out that Trujillo's violent reaction against Haitian workers, and the increasingly shrill tone of his anti-Haitian speeches throughout 1936 and 1937, can best be understood in the context of the Dominican Republic's official policy of "Dominicanization," "a euphemism for [Trujillo's] personal animosity towards Haitians" (72). Trujillo's exhortation to Dominicans to rise up and kill Haitians living among them was directly racist, linked to Trujillo's attempts to ensure a racially "pure" and unmixed society in the Dominican Republic. Further, "Trujillo denied his own Dominican-Haitian mixed mulatto background" and "even recast pictures of his family members and had their racial history officially and falsely authenticated" (79).

Trujillo is a looming presence in Danticat's novel, revered by Amabelle's Dominican employers and feared by her fellow Haitians. The historical Rafael Trujillo was "a towering figure in Dominican and Caribbean history" who maintained "one of the most durable regimes of the twentieth century" (Roorda 21). His rise to power is directly attributable to the enduring effects of the American occupation of the Dominican

Republic, since the American military had allowed the Dominican National Army to take on an increasing role in the country's political system, while disarming the civilian population. Trujillo was a former military officer, trained by the U.S. Navy, and he enjoyed the full support of the United States for most of his thirty-one years of virtual dictatorship. He fostered a legend, which became part of Dominican history and appeared in school texts, that he had single-handedly lifted the Dominican Republic out of backwardness and economic stagnation, while achieving a peaceful settlement with Haiti (Pons 360-361). Trujillo was particularly concerned about his reputation abroad, and notably with United States President Roosevelt. For this reason, the massacre he ordered was designed to look haphazard rather than planned (Pons 369).

The violence of the massacre is prefigured in Danticat's novel by a series of painful events: The Farming of Bones is saturated with images of death and mourning, conveyed in a poetic, lyrical voice which recollects the past and recounts the present almost simultaneously. Amabelle lost her parents when she only eleven, when they drowned while crossing the Massacre River to return to Haiti after an excursion to the Dominican Republic. Amabelle survived, but for a time refused to leave the place where her parents disappeared. She was discovered, and taken home, by Dominicans who were similarly bereaved: Papi had recently lost his wife, and his young daughter, Valencia, who became Amabelle's playmate and eventually her employer, was mourning her mother's death. In her new home, and grown to adulthood, Amabelle remains haunted by her memories and dreams of her parents. Only the presence of her lover, Sebastien, comforts her: "He comes most nights to put an end to my nightmare, the one I have all the time, of my parents drowning" (1). Sebastien, in turn, mourns the death of his own

father, killed in “the great hurricane that struck the whole island—both Haiti and the Dominican Republic—in 1930” (25). Amabelle acknowledges that his father’s death is directly responsible for Sebastien’s healing presence in her life: “a sweep of winds that destroyed so many houses and killed so many people brought him to me” (25).

These tangible losses are only the first few of a series of deaths and disappearances described in Danticat’s novel, culminating in the days and nights of terror that make up the massacre. In the opening chapters of the novel, two significant deaths are juxtaposed: the accidental killing of a Haitian cane-cutter, and the sudden death of an infant boy. The cane-cutter, Joël, dies when the vehicle of Amabelle’s employer, Señor Pico Duarte, a high-ranking Dominican military officer, strikes him. Duarte is returning home to see his newborn twins, born to Señora Valencia; in his hurry, he nearly strikes three Haitians, and accidentally kills Joël. A few days later, the infant son born to his wife dies without any warning, and the child’s heartbroken grandfather perceives divine retribution. Significantly, the grandfather also imagines a broader effort to balance wrongs, as Joël’s father later recounts to Amabelle:

“He told me he killed people in a war when he was a young man [. . .]. He couldn’t remember how many he’d killed but felt like each one was walking kot a kot with him, crushing his happiness. For his woman to die on the night his only son was to be born, for my son to be killed the day his grandchildren saw the first light, he felt this was the doing of the people he killed in the war, people still walking side by side with him. He thought his grandson’s death showed this.” (145)

Papi, a Spanish veteran, perceives a multigenerational legacy of suffering and

punishment. He retreats to the relative comfort of his memories, and withdraws from his family members. Like many of the central characters in The Farming of Bones, his attachment to the dead comes to outweigh his commitment to the living. One of the bleakest aspects of Danticat's work is that the isolation wrought by traumatic histories is only rarely broken by intimate sharing and confession: even at the novel's conclusion, when Amabelle seeks to understand how her former friend and employer could have ignored the plight of the Haitians, she is offered only inadequate and belated excuses. Reconciliation is not held out as a believable possibility in The Farming of Bones.

In Danticat's novel, the commemorative rituals associated with the dead are strongly tied to racial and class markers of status. When Señora Valencia's infant son dies, she decorates a coffin for him, painting an elaborate floral tribute on the outside of the container that will hold her son's body; she then proceeds to paint a portrait of her dead son. Survivors have treated other death more casually, not out of indifference, but due to the painful and overwhelming circumstances which made appropriate mourning impossible. Amabelle is aware of her own envy for Señora Valencia, since her employer has the security of burying her child and knowing where his corpse will rest: "At least she could place her hands on it, her son's final bed. My parents had no coffins" (93). Trujillo, in particular, is singled out as one who attempts to control mourning and the commemoration of the dead. Amabelle describes the effects of the hurricane that killed Sebastien's father:

[...] so many houses were flattened and so many people were killed that the Generalissimo himself had marched through the windswept streets of the Dominican capital and ordered that the corpses he encountered during his

inspection be brought to the Plaza Colombina and torched in public bonfires that burned for days, filling the air with so much ash that everyone walked with their eyes streaming, their handkerchiefs pressed against their noses, and their parasols held close to their heads. (45)

In the face of violent suffering, Danticat posits the possibility of attentive listening. The novel explores two forms of testimony: witnessing which takes place within intimate relationships, as lovers share their accounts of loss and death; and public testimonial actions, in the wake of the massacre. Early in the novel, intimate truth telling is depicted in two important scenes where Amabelle and Sebastien express their grief to one another. In the first scene, Amabelle attends to Sebastien's loss by providing attentive listening and leading questions. In this passage, Amabelle's role as interlocutor is complex, since Sebastien is ambivalent about voicing his own losses:

I can tell, he is ready. He wants me to ask about his dead father. I can tell by the endless pause after I'm done speaking, the way he opens his mouth now and again and then only sighs as if to ask himself where he could possibly make himself begin.

"How did the hurricane find your father?" I end up asking. It is not the gentlest or most deft way to ask, but I believe it will help him speak.

He opens his mouth a few more times and moans.

"If you let yourself," he says finally, "you can see it before your eyes. a boy carrying his dead father from the road, wobbling, swaying, stumbling under the weight. The boy with the wind in his ears and pieces of the tin roofs that opened the father's throat blowing around him. The boy trying not to drop the

father, not crying or screaming like you'd think, but praying that more of the father's blood will stay in the father's throat and not go into the muddy flood, going no one knows where. If you let yourself, you can see it before your eyes."

(34)

Sebastien's testimony asks Amabelle to listen, but also to visualize, to focus her full attention on the details of the scene he wishes to convey to her. Instead of expressing his own retrospective grief and loss, Sebastien's narration attempts to make the event clear and immediate, allowing Amabelle to have her own reaction and to empathize more deeply with her lover by imagining herself as a witness of the event. Amabelle can provide a form of retroactive solidarity with the young boy struggling to carry his dying or dead father's body. At the same time, Sebastien repeatedly opens his mouth without speaking, or only moans. His narrative, which is coherent, is nonetheless fractured by expressions of emotional suffering which do not find their way into language.

In turn, Sebastien comforts Amabelle. This time, the act of witnessing must be transformed, not to include an additional viewer, but to permit Amabelle to set down the burden of constantly visualizing her drowning parents. Sebastien encourages Amabelle to rewrite her own past, and to seek consolation in a different image of her parents:

"I don't want you to dream of that river again," he said. "Give yourself a pleasant dream. Remember not only the end, but the middle, and the beginning, the things they did when they were breathing. Let us say that the river was still that day."

"And my parents?"

"They died natural deaths many year later."

“And why did I come here?”

“Even though you were a girl when you left and I was already a man when I arrived and our families did not know each other, you came here to meet me.” (55)

Sebastien’s words offer Amabelle the possibility of revising her own history to avoid the relentless repetition of unbearable memories of loss. In Herman’s terms, Amabelle’s traumatic memories have to be transformed from their static, repetitive state to a narrative that allows for embroidery and revision. Sebastien promises his company as a consolation for her bereavement, in a gesture that suggests that past losses can be compensated for by new attachments. When Sebastien disappears, however, during the massacre, Amabelle is left with a redoubled loss that focuses her attention solely on mourning and commemoration.

Amabelle and her lover gradually become aware of the danger they face in the Dominican Republic. The local Haitian priest, Father Romain, attempts to secure the safety of as many of his people as possible by gathering them together in the church before arranging their transport across the border. Amabelle, however, is delayed by Señora Valencia’s postpartum bleeding, and does not arrive in time to join them. Father Romain’s efforts are thwarted, as Dominican soldiers arrive and seize the Haitians by force. Amabelle flees by foot, and along the way meets several other Haitians who are similarly attempting to make their way to the Massacre River, to cross to the safety of Haiti. In leaving, Amabelle is aware that she is abandoning her lover and his sister, who were likely captured.

Images of death and devastation accompany the Haitian refugees. They hide in

the bushes as an ox-drawn cart passes by, driven by Dominican soldiers and carrying the wounded bodies and corpses of Haitians who have been attacked with machetes. In order to disguise the military participation in the massacres, Trujillo has ordered that bullets not be used if possible, and that Haitians be murdered by means which will allow the government to claim that individual farmers were responsible for the attacks. For the same reason, as many of the murders are concealed as possible. Amabelle and her fellow Haitians come to one former settlement which has been burned to the ground, its human inhabitants killed and even their remains destroyed:

There was no mistaking the stench rising towards us. It was the smell of blood sizzling, of flesh melting to the last bone, a bonfire of corpses, like the one the Generalissimo had ordered at the Plaza Colombina to avoid the spreading of disease among the living after the last great hurricane. (181)

They arrive, feeling hopeful, at a farm where they plan to seek refuge. The area appears deserted, but the mystery of the fate of the Haitians living there is soon revealed when Amabelle notices figures hanging in the trees. She observes, “they were dangling at the end of bullwhip ropes: feet, legs, arms, twelve pairs of legs, as far as I could count. Their inflated faces kept the nooses from releasing them. Three men. Five women. And two young boys” (186). Danticat’s terse prose enumerates the dead without apparent emotional affect on the part of Amabelle, who appears too shocked and stunned by her own losses, and by the enormity of the horrors she is witnessing, to relay her responses.

An attack on Amabelle herself, as they are preparing to leave the Dominican Republic, comes as a surprise assault, in the midst of a celebration honouring Trujillo. Amabelle and her fellow survivors are confronted in a marketplace by Dominicans who

taunt them by holding up parsley and asking them to pronounce its name. Earlier in the novel, one Haitian woman had recounted “rumors of groups of Haitians being killed in the night because they could not manage to trill their “r” and utter a throaty “j” to ask for parsley. to say perejil” (114).¹⁰ Amabelle and the others are not granted time to even attempt to say the word in a Hispanic accent. They are recognized as Haitians, and handfuls of parsley are thrust into their mouths, before they are assaulted with stones and fists. Danticat’s description is painful to assimilate and, like Mate’s diary entries about imprisonment and torture, challenges readers to empathize with extreme physical suffering:

A sharp blow to my side nearly stopped my breath. The pain was like a stab from a knife or an ice pick, but when I reached down I felt no blood. Rolling myself into a ball, I tried to get away from the worst of the kicking horde. I screamed, thinking I was going to die. My screams slowed them a bit. But after a while I had less and less strength with which to make a sound. My ears were ringing; I tried to cover my head with my hands. My whole body was numbing; I sensed the vibrations of the blows, but no longer the pain. My mouth filled

¹⁰ Like Kogawa’s *Obasan*, *The Farming of Bones* is partly dependent on a Biblical discourse of victimization and loss. Danticat’s epigraph is drawn from the Book of Judges:

Jephthah called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, “Let me cross over,” the men of Gilead asked him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” If he replied, “No,” they said, “All right, say ‘Shibboleth.’” If he said, “Sibboleth,” because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-thousand were killed at the time.

with blood. I tried to swallow the sharp bitter parsley bubbling in my throat.

Some of the parsley had been peppered before it was given to us. (194)

Danticat's recreation of an assault which was said by surviving Haitians to occur repeatedly during the weeks of the massacre bears witness to the countless occasions when victims were silenced, first by being rendered literally wordless, and then by the actions of the various governments which conspired to suppress accounts of violence. In this passage, Danticat highlights the gratuitous sadism of Amabelle's attackers, and draws attention to the important fact that while the government of Trujillo ordered and encouraged these kinds of attacks, they were often carried out by "ordinary" Dominicans.¹¹

Amabelle's physical survival is crucial to her ability to testify, but she finds that her availability as a willing speaker is insufficient in a variety of contexts, some of which seem to offer the possibility of attentive witnessing. At a Haitian rescue station, refugees from the massacre haltingly find words with which to convey what they have seen and suffered. They testify not only in order to explain their own experiences, but also to commemorate the dead, whose murders have been carried out surreptitiously. As survivors testify, they each begin with the phrase "I was there" (209) to indicate the

¹¹ The publication of Goldhagen's controversial study, Hitler's Willing Executioners, brought renewed attention to the debate about the responses of the large majority of the German population who did not directly carry out the genocide of Jews and others during the Third Reich. Similarly, Danticat's novel explores the culpability and complicity of Dominicans who were relatively privileged and informed, yet chose to avoid criticism of Trujillo's regime in order to protect themselves, and because his government's views of Haitians was shared by many. In Alvarez's novel, we have seen, some extraordinary members of this class of Dominicans *did* take action.

authority of their eyewitness accounts. Attempts at testimony are urgent, as stories are shared quickly, “the haste in their voices sometimes blurring the words [. . .] one could hear it in the fervor of the declarations, the obscenities shouted when something could not be remembered fast enough [. . .]” (209). There is even a kind of competition to contribute, as if there is not possibly enough time for all the accounts to be aired, all the atrocities to be enumerated, without interrupting one another. This testimony can, at first, only be carried out within a survivor community. Among other Haitians, who have not experienced the massacre first-hand, the return of survivors is greeted with cries and moans of discomfort: “They recognized us without knowing us. We were *those* people, the nearly dead, the ones who had escaped from the other side of the river” (220). The Haitian survivors are set apart by their peculiar, violent knowledge of the massacre, which makes non-survivors uneasy.

At the medical centre, Amabelle is not yet able to participate in constructing testimony, but some time later she has recovered enough from her own awareness that her lover must be dead to be able to speak publicly. She learns that a local magistrate is writing down the oral testimonies of people who come to see him, and that a small amount of money provided by the Haitian government will be distributed among survivors. This funding, which quickly runs out before even a fraction of the survivors can speak, is the Dominican Republic’s official “compensation” for the massacre of the cane-cutters. The magistrate is asked to “listen faster” (233) in order to allow more survivors to testify; he is forced to flee secretly, when the funds and his time are exhausted, to avoid confronting the angry crowd outside the courthouse. Amabelle does make a further testimonial effort. She learns from Yves, who travelled with her from

Haiti, and who has lost his own lover, that the nearby Catholic priests are also collecting accounts of the massacre: “‘They don’t promise you money [. . .] they’re collecting tales for newspapers and radio men” (246). Even this effort, however, is thwarted. At the conclusion of the novel, it is clear that only the Massacre River—and Danticat’s readers—have heard Amabelle’s account.

In Alvarez’s postscript to *In the Time of the Butterflies* she argues that the events she depicts “can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination” (324). Danticat, similarly, asks for forgiveness for the “reach” of her “artistic license” in the Acknowledgements that follow the text of *The Farming of Bones*. Both writers undertake testimonial efforts which include significant elements of feminist historical revision: Alvarez elects to rewrite the history of four Dominican women, while Danticat offers an invented biography to supplement the lack of documentation of lost Haitian lives in the wake of the massacre. These two authors stress the importance of telling trauma, and of receiving horrifying stories, but they also implicate the United States in a complicated and violent contemporary Caribbean history. The events depicted in these novels remain largely unresolved as the works conclude. Alvarez’s novel offers its central “rememberer” the possibility of putting the past to rest, and embarking on a new romantic relationship; Danticat’s Amabelle is alone, addressing her sorrowful elegy to the “mother of the rivers” in the absence of human witnesses. Neither political situation, however, is satisfactorily arranged. Gilbert H. Muller points out that renewed American neo-colonialism actually followed in the wake of the deaths of the Mirabal sisters, and Trujillo’s assassination, some months later:

[...] the years after Trujillo’s assassination in May 1961 led to instability.

renewed American intervention, and, until recently, the frustration of Dominican aspirations for genuine autonomy. The dominant influence of the United States over Dominican politics—and the consequent surge of emigration from the Dominican Republic to New York City in the period after 1960—is part of the tapestry of imperialism typical of the American Century’s role in the life of the Hispanic Caribbean. (118-119)

In implicating the United States in the affairs of the Caribbean, Danticat and Alvarez make a crucial point about the formation of national histories and cultural memories, insisting that these are forged in the crucible of international affairs, and in the context of extreme power differences between “superpower” neo-imperial nations, and most notably the U.S., and developing countries dependent on the largesse of their larger trade partners.

In their testimonial historical novels, the two authors make differing, but equally risky artistic decisions: Alvarez elects to attempt multiple first-person perspectives in her portrayals of the four sisters, and to divide the novel, nearly evenly, between them; Danticat relies on a single eyewitness as her narrator, but attaches a responsibility to Amabelle to convey the sufferings of a multitude of victims. In each instance, the novel’s prose qualities are strongly inflected by narrative method. Alvarez’s characters speak and think in more colloquial language, liberally sprinkled with Spanish words, and the repetition of particular Dominican expressions. They are keen observers of their political environment, but the four sisters are perhaps not adequately differentiated from one another, as Alvarez relies on recounting facts about each sister’s life in order to distinguish the individual narrations. At times, the breathlessness of Mate’s narrative, in

particular, seems artificial and forced, and the external events in the lives of each woman are granted far more attention than their inner states. A wealth of domestic detail is inserted into each account without creating a comprehensive portrait of the sisters' drive to overcome the climate of fear and repression fostered by totalitarianism. Danticat's depiction of Amabelle, in contrast, relies on a strongly lyrical voice: Amabelle's lament is conveyed in poetic terms, interspersed with terse factual depictions of violence, and the juxtaposition of these two modes is generally effective. Both works have received mixed reviews, and have been compared unfavourably to the authors' previous, more autobiographically-inflected fiction. In turning away from their personal stories and towards the collective accounts of their homelands, Alvarez and Danticat take up a daunting ethical, as well as artistic, responsibility, and their efforts suggest that careful research and reconstruction must accompany the creation of believable, fully rounded characters and expressive narrators in order to attract readers.

Conclusion

In her introduction to a recent anthology of women's writings about human rights, Marjorie Agosin cites Theodor Adorno's famous dictum about the barbarity of writing poetry after Auschwitz. On the contrary, Agosin argues, "literature grants us the ability to endure and encompass traumatic and horrifying events, to articulate them through writing and the evocative power of memory" (xvii). "These women write not only to bear witness," Agosin insists, "they write to make the readers bear witness to this horror. They do not see writing as an aesthetic diversion; rather, their writing has a purpose: to create a literature of resistance and to bear witness" (xx). Agosin's formulation suggests that it is appropriate for literary texts to embody a mission, for writers to espouse activism, and for readers to participate in the creation of testimonial efforts. Historical traumas exert an overt pressure on us to respond appropriately to disclosures of past atrocities, and to listen as witnesses describe their suffering, even if their physical injuries have long since healed. At the same time, Agosin's invocation of Adorno raises the pressing ethical question of the conversion of human pain into art: as I noted in my Introduction, writers and critics of trauma stories have often been more comfortable with a documentary approach that does not seem to aestheticize painful experiences, and even Agosin's own formulation seems to equate aesthetics with "diversion" from a witnessing gesture.

The historical novels studied in this dissertation do not eschew aesthetics: the lyricism of parts of Alias Grace, Obasan and The Farming of Bones is particularly marked. Notably, however, all five novels use contrasting forms of prose, so that Kogawa's proems and invocations are juxtaposed with government documents and

family letters, while Atwood's deployment of an intense internal monologue is placed side by side with a range of textual sources, including snippets of poetry, and trial transcripts. These various discourses do not compete with one another, but offer a more comprehensive and developed view of the differing means by which past historical traumas can be approached and represented.

Trauma's dependence on the concept of belatedness, on wounds that fester until they can be adequately witnessed, fits closely with recent historicizing impulses. The first chapter of my dissertation discussed the strong imperative that the late twentieth-century has experienced in a range of contexts to memorialize the past and noted, as well, the proliferation of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic discourses which suggest that traumatic or nostalgic approaches to history are equally beside the point, that we have entered an era of "post-histoire." In turning to the past, the novels I have examined insist on the continuing relevance of events that we can only access indirectly. These authors have researched eras ranging from the middle of the twentieth century back to the early part of the nineteenth century; not surprisingly, the more recent events are the ones that remain most fraught: the comfort woman and Japanese internment redress movements have taken place during the last twenty years, while other twentieth-century atrocities, and most notably the Holocaust, remain a source of great tension in historical writing and memorialization. Of the events that these novels depict, only Margaret Atwood's representation of a sensational crime in Upper Canada may lack a clear political and historical import, but by inserting Grace into the context of fraught debates surrounding recalled memories of violence Atwood takes up a recent, and pressing, feminist concern.

The accounts of trauma featured in these five novels demonstrate some of the multiple forms of interpersonal violence and political repression that inform twentieth-century testimonies. In the wake of overwhelming events, these works suggest, survivors struggle to recall the past, and are sometimes forced to rely on fragments of memory and the narratives of others in order to create a coherent representation. Some fortunate survivors quickly locate appropriate allies who can also function as witnesses; most, however, are at least partially bereft of comfort and company, having endured experiences which set them apart from their families and communities, and alienate them even from the selves they had once been. While these trauma survivors are deprived of a community of listeners, fiction establishes the possibility for a different form of communication, as readers come to serve as the recipients of histories that have been elided or suppressed. It is notable that the novels I have studied, and many similar works, position readers as empathic observers: these novels do not seek to titillate readers with descriptions of graphic violence, and they do not place them in the uneasy position of voyeur. A recent study by Laura Tanner, in contrast, focusses on novels, like Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho, which attract more ambivalent reader responses, particularly from female readers, who are simultaneously invited to identify with women victims of horrifying sexual violence and with the sense of power experienced by their tormentors. The historical novels I have examined shed little light on the perspective of victimizers, highlighting instead the experience of victims.

In an essay that describes his collaboration with American playwright Karen Malpede for a theatrical work about a Bosnian mass rape survivor, psychotherapist Stevan M. Weine analyzes his own desire to be responsive to the traumas suffered by

others. Weine has worked with the survivors of genocide, including Bosnian Muslims. As well as his professional training, however, Weine cites the influence of historical fiction in shaping his interest in survivors:

Had I not had the experience of reading Regeneration I might have done nothing at all. This literary work, however, helped to provide me with the internal structures for negotiating a relationship with genocide and its survivors that I did not receive through my medical education or psychiatric training. Regeneration gave me the sufficient imagination for the work that was to follow. (171)

Traumatic literary works give voice to suffering, and urgently demand, as Ross Chambers explains, an attentiveness and responsiveness on the part of readers. Some of these readers, as A.S. Byatt notes in her recent study of historical fiction, may be uncomfortable with the demands posed by texts. Traumatic stories, “if written with political fervour, can be both powerful and uneasy—the correcting vision of the committed storyteller can create an unease in the less committed reader, who may feel persuaded or hectored—but in either case feels that the text has designs on him or her” (On Histories and Stories 58). The novels I have studied in this dissertation *do* have designs on their readers: they aim to inform readers and create engaged humanitarian communities.

The political goals of testimonial fiction are most clearly expressed by the novels I examined in Chapters 3 and 4. As Inger Agger and Soren Buus Jensen write, “Silent and invisible people are easier to manipulate and dominate. Testimony is one way to ensure that the silent victims are given voice. Testimony documents social memory” (228). These novels break historical silences, insisting that Japanese Canadians were

unfairly interned and dispersed, a policy based more on racial prejudice than on legitimate wartime security measures; that Korean women, as well as many other women, were forcibly imprisoned for use as sexual slaves by the Japanese Imperial Army; that Haitians were deliberately massacred in the Dominican Republic; and that the murders of the three Mirabal sisters, also in the Dominican Republic, were politically motivated. In each instance, a set of false statements, shrouded in bureaucratic language or political rhetoric, gives way to truth telling, and a retrospective view of these tragedies is shown to be more objective and just.

In order to tell characters must remember, and the fraught processes of autobiographical recollection are central to the novels that this dissertation has examined. The mechanism of traumatic memory, as I have suggested, is particularly crucial in novels interested in the ideological stakes of memory retrieval. While psychological theories underlie the research on memory and amnesia, there are also significant political concerns that shape the extent to which memories of the past are solicited or marginalized. Like many contemporary therapists dealing with the after-effects of violence, Margaret Atwood's Dr. Jordan argues that, in the context of sexualized trauma, what is forgotten, repressed, or denied can be of greater significance than what the speaker tells. Alias Grace rethinks a recent preoccupation with the category of repressed memories of trauma, and with images that may or may not accurately represent historical experience. Atwood's novel resembles—yet fits uneasily with—a range of 1980s and 1990s fictional works by other women writers dealing with the recall of a traumatic past. A recent essay by Marita Sturken points out that “recovered memory is emblematic of American culture at the end of the twentieth century because it exposes contemporary

confusion and ambivalence about family relationships, sexuality, and gender power relations,” all particularly fraught when the past is under discussion (“Narratives of Recovery” 231). While many authors depict a quest for increased self-knowledge through the resuscitation of the past, Atwood suggests a more complicated possibility: that the recollection of previous events is so tempered by a range of interests that it may be virtually impossible to distinguish a single truth. Grace’s survivor speech, then, is suspect; her account remains one among many, privileged by her status as an eyewitness and participant, yet equally tempered by her investment in the events she describes.

While Atwood’s novel is willing to consider the possibility of an exfoliating set of narrative truths, the other four novels that I examined in this dissertation are more intent on establishing an unambiguous historical record. Joy Kogawa’s Obasan inserts government documents as intertexts, demonstrating the power differences between official and private histories. Nora Okja Keller’s Comfort Woman documents trauma in the form of a recording of an oral lament, heard only after the death of the speaker, while Edwidge Danticat’s central character never does reach a listener—except for the novel’s readers. Only Julia Alvarez’s In the Time of the Butterflies offers the possibility of a truly hopeful future for a trauma survivor: at the conclusion of each of the other three novels, the work of mourning remains incomplete. Like Alias Grace, these four works demonstrate that traumatic memories are not easily recalled, or incorporated into cultural memory. Instead, diligent and repeated efforts are required in order to relay the truth about the present to contemporary readers and listeners, and even extraordinary attempts may fail, because listeners are not sufficiently attentive or responsive.

The notion of attentiveness is particularly stressed by Kogawa's novel, which prizes careful and subtle forms of communication between close family members. In the wake of historical traumas, she suggests, the past must be approached carefully, not silenced or expunged, as Obasan and Uncle's omissions tend to do, or put forward too abruptly and emphatically, as in Aunt Emily's polemical utterances, which fail to take into account her niece's individual needs for healing and understanding. Neither Kogawa or Keller offers the possibility of reconciliation between living mothers and daughters, and the painful legacies of Naomi and Beccah include the need to confront their mothers' histories in the absence of these mothers. Lost family members are also uppermost in the thoughts and recollections of the central characters of the novels by Alvarez and Danticat, and The Farming of Bones, in particular, shares Kogawa and Keller's emphasis on the particularly acute forms of mourning experienced by bereaved daughters. Additionally, however, Alvarez and Danticat make strenuous claims on the political sympathies of contemporary readers, since the growing size of both the Dominican and Haitian communities in the United States have brought increased attention to neo-imperial relationships in the Americas. Like Joy Kogawa, both Alvarez and Danticat have been passionate advocates for their dispersed and exiled communities: Alvarez undertakes political work on behalf of the Dominican Republic, and has broader interests in Latin America, while Danticat has recently edited the first collection of writings by Haitian Americans. All three of these writers have acted as public intellectuals, and their historical novels are part of a clear political project.

Contemporary interest in traumatic histories does not, at this time, appear to be diminishing. Political and legal affairs are frequently dominated by questions of

historical redress, ranging from the arrest and prosecution of former government leaders who oversaw genocides and purges, to the less violent but equally pressing recent efforts of many countries to increase women's political, economic and legal equality and overcome the legacy of patriarchal power structures. In Canada, aboriginal peoples have been particularly successful over the last several years in achieving long-held ambitions of sovereignty and land re-appropriation, after decades and even centuries of paternalistic government policies which have relegated them to less desirable regions of the country. African Americans have been putting forward redress claims more than a hundred years after the abolition of slavery, and recent media coverage suggests that a legal suit against the federal government may be imminent. While childhood abuse now receives less attention than many other claims of past traumatic experience, substantial legal reforms have succeeded, allowing adults who recall violence to pursue civil or criminal cases against their attackers many years later. All of these instances, however, inevitably pit advocates of "leaving the past behind" against those who insist on telling the truth about their own lives and histories, and as the novels I have studied in this dissertation demonstrate, traumatic stories cannot empower their narrators if they are not successful in engaging the interest and solidarity of listeners and readers.

In creating testimonial fictions, these novels also respond to a broader preoccupation with the appropriate role of contemporary feminism, which, a number of critics have claimed, overemphasizes female victimization rather than female initiative or agency. In her introduction to a recent collection of essays entitled New Versions of Victims, Sharon Lamb worries that the critique launched by neo-feminist writers Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, Camilla Paglia, and Rene Denfeld is in fact well-founded, that

feminism may be too closely identified with notions of female powerlessness. As Susan Gubar analyzes, claims of oppression can become competitive within feminist discourse, creating a debilitating focus, she suggests, on identity politics. These forms of critique tend to depend on a loose historicizing which marks a sharp division between past acts of violence and subjugation experienced by women and a contemporary state of relative empowerment and freedom. Progress made by women in spheres ranging from education to politics and the law is then used to justify an abandonment, or a tempering, of concern with women's status. The feminist slant of many recent historical novels, then, may also reflect a certain ambivalence about representing contemporary women's lives, particularly if authors wish to explore issues of abuse and oppression.

My study of contemporary feminist historical fiction has taken place within a fortunate context, as the kinds of novels that interest me here have continued to appear with regularity, and have received significant attention and acclaim. In recent months, a new Canadian novel has described the traumatic legacy of the Armenian genocide; two Toronto theatrical productions have explored the sacrifices of Chinese railway workers in western Canada; several memoirs have appeared that commemorate the Cambodian "Killing Fields" and the Chinese Cultural Revolution; studies of Holocaust fiction, poetry, drama, and autobiography have continued to proliferate; and a variety of academic programmes have been developed, particularly in American graduate schools, to examine trauma from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes attention to literary works. Increasingly, trauma studies seem able to incorporate research from law, political science, history, and the performing arts, and the emerging field of traumatology, although still largely rooted in psychotherapeutic theories and approaches, offers the

possibility of increased dialogue between academic disciplines. Historical novels will remain an important element of testimonial efforts, offering readers an imaginative and ethically engaged encounter with the past.

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