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MIGRATIONS OF MEMORY:  
POSTMEMORY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY  
ETHNIC AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

by

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Cheryl A. Wall

and approved by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION  
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“Migrations of Memory” studies the experience and resolution of inherited traumatic memory as depicted in the late twentieth-century narrative works of Ethnic and African American women writers. Often raised in the shadow of cultural or traumatic memories with which they have no direct experience, but deep affective connection, these writers from traditionally marginalized or subjugated groups find themselves, in the post 1960s era, with greater opportunities than ever before to enter the mainstream of American society and separate themselves from their cultural pasts. My study argues that, in response to this possible loss of cultural moorings, contemporary Ethnic and African American women writers use narrative to theorize their relationship to their cultural inheritance and the influence that relation has on the formation of contemporary identity.

This dissertation builds on the scholarship of Marianne Hirsch who coined the term *postmemory* to describe the relationship the children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma have to their parents' memories. Although Hirsch originated the term

in relation to the Holocaust, my project utilizes the concept as a starting point for a theoretical approach to analyzing narrative representations of the generational impact of traumatic memory in a diversity of cultural contexts and resulting from a variety of experiences. The texts in my study have in common a process of *identification*, *translation*, and *differentiation*, whereby American-born protagonists first identify with or bear witness to their traumatic inheritance, then translate it into the terms of their lived experience, and finally differentiate from it by re-articulating it in a form appropriate to their generational or cultural perspective. Analyzing the experience of inherited traumatic memory depicted in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*, Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*, I argue ultimately that the resolution of postmemory requires representation and consistently engenders formal innovation.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Postmemory describes the relationship of the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories and images with which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is not mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory, 4)*

Although memory has always migrated across generations within families, from parent to child, “Migrations of Memory” is concerned with how this generational process is complicated by the multiplicity of migrations people in modern society may endure—voluntary and involuntary movements across geographical, cultural, class, and other social or psychological boundaries—and by the effects of collective and national traumas that similarly travel with their survivors and their descendants into new settings. I am particularly interested in how these complex and multi-faceted forms of migrating memory challenge contemporary Ethnic and African American women who feel most keenly the divide between the traditions and traumatic legacies of their cultural heritages and the dictates of the society in which they live. This is a critical concern in the post 1960s United States in which women from traditionally subjugated or marginalized groups have greater opportunity to enter the mainstream than ever before and separate themselves from their respective cultural pasts. The writers in my study respond to the anxiety of this possible loss of cultural moorings by engaging in an exploration of their inheritance through the creation of narrative. Often raised in the shadow of cultural or traumatic memories with which they have no direct experience, but deep affective connection, contemporary Ethnic and African American women writers use narrative to



theorize their relation to their inheritance and the influence that relationship has on the formation of contemporary identity.

“Migrations of Memory” builds on the scholarship of Marianne Hirsch who coined the term *postmemory* to describe the relationship the children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma have to their parents’ memories.<sup>1</sup> Although Hirsch originated the term in relation to the Holocaust, my project utilizes the concept as a starting point for a theoretical approach to analyzing narrative representations of the generational impact of traumatic memory in a diversity of cultural contexts and resulting from a variety of experiences. While the Holocaust stands preeminent among traumatic events in the twentieth century, modern history has witnessed other mass traumas that have or will impact generations of the descendants of their survivors. Most notable among these are the experience and enduring legacy of New World Slavery, which is joined in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur as well as the traumatic aftermath of civil wars and military occupation throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Because there is no parallel in these other cultural contexts to the type of scholarship available on the second-generation impact of the Holocaust, the goal of my study is to begin to fill this gap by offering a cross-cultural approach to analyzing narrative representations of inherited traumatic memory in the writings of African American and Ethnic American woman writers.

The texts in my study have in common a process of *identification*, *translation*, and *differentiation*, whereby an American-born protagonist first identifies with or bears

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch’s paradigm is well articulated in “Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning and Post-Memory,” *Discourse* 15:2 (Winter 1992-93): 3-29 and “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14:1 (2001): 5-37.

witness to her traumatic inheritance, then translates it into the terms of her lived experience, and finally differentiates from it by re-articulating it in a form appropriate to her generational or cultural perspective. Because the authors of these works have chosen to approach the traumatic past from the distanced perspective of their second-generation protagonists, the resulting texts highlight the constructedness of their representation of events that their protagonists have experienced only vicariously. As a result, both the text and the second-generation characters within them play with the ambiguity of their positions and the reliability of their sources, critiquing both survivor memory and the literary and historical record of the traumatic events, and seeking to create a new way of representing that traumatic past as it has affected its inheritors. This generally results in two levels of representation—the text itself and the child of postmemory’s effort to represent her inheritance within the text. Both the text and subtext are self-conscious and conflicted and determinedly assert the primacy of the child’s social-historical position over that of the parent. Because narratives of postmemory, on both levels of representation, seek primarily to render the *impact* of events rather than reconstruct the events themselves, they are highly subjective, provisional and ambivalent, both highlighting the impossibility of completely recovering past knowledge and creating a space in which the contemporary protagonist can engage her inheritance. On the textual level, this process of representing the cross-generational impact of traumatic memory requires imaginative means to bridge past and present and often results in formal innovation. Within the text, the protagonist’s efforts to represent her traumatic inheritance gives structure to history that would otherwise haunt her, creating the possibility for beneficial, rather than debilitating, interactions with the traumatic past.

Although Marianne Hirsch builds her concept of postmemory on a limited range of representational possibilities, specifically “autobiographical readings of works by second generation writers and visual artists, artists relying largely on photography,” postmemory suits my purposes for a number of reasons (Hirsch, “The Generation” 3). First, it considers seriously the residual impact of a parent’s experiences on his or her children—a particularly tenuous relationship because the child has neither experienced nor seen what the parent has experienced and seen and often lives both temporally and geographically distanced from the setting of the parents’ traumatic experiences. Members of the generation of postmemory have no rational or definitive way of engaging that past, except through their proximity to their parents and artifacts from the time period; thus, their “memory” of the past is partial and incomplete, if not completely formed by projection and invention. Raised from birth, however, with the stories and images of the traumatic past, these children ingest their parents’ memories such that they become part of their own identity and personal memory. Certainly, experiences of postmemory are not experiences of recall, yet the children of postmemory have a relationship to the memories of their parents that is deep and affective because of the complexity of the parent-child relationship. Ashraf Rushdy’s explanation of this phenomenon in the characters of African American writer Gayl Jones can serve as a prototype for the experience of all children of postmemory: “Jones’ characters listen to others’ stories so attentively as to feel that they are living out the experiences they describe, hearing with such intensity that they assume an intersubjective communion with their narrators” (*Remembering Generations* 35). This idea of intersubjective communion

suggests to me a space of blurred boundaries of subjectivity which two generations paradoxically inhabit at once transcending time and space. Although Hirsch describes postmemory as a “structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (Hirsch, “The Generation” 4), I prefer to think of it as an intergenerational space of memory shared by the survivor and his or her descendants but constructed from multiple inputs. Members of the generation of postmemory contribute imagination (as well as historical and cultural research) to this space to compensate for their incomplete understanding of the traumatic events. Their representation of this intergenerational experience finally results in a text or artifact that begins with the parents’ testimony but ends with the child’s imaginative recreation of those experiences.

#### The Process: Identification:

The important first step in analyzing narrative representations of postmemory is recognizing the complexity of the protagonist’s process of identification which we might think of as *receiving* the inheritance, a process generally accomplished through bearing witness to the survivor’s testimony. Because many of the experiences are transferable, I will use the terms and theoretical precepts generated by scholars in the field of Holocaust Studies to frame my discussion of the process of bearing witness and making testimony in the aftermath of other traumatic experiences. In its best form, bearing witness involves what Dori Laub, psychoanalyst and co-founder of the Holocaust Survivor’s Film Project, calls “the creation of knowledge” (“Witness” 57). Arguing that the survivor’s testimony remains absent until a listener enables the creation of testimony, Laub remarks that “The testimony of 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” (“Witness” 57). This enabling relationship between the survivor and the witness, implicates the listener in the creation of the narrative making him “participant and co-owner of the traumatic event” (“Witness” 57). For the postmemorial generation, the act of listening facilitates identification with both the experience of trauma and the grief of survival and brings the burden of responsibility for the created knowledge.

Because the generation of postmemory relates to the survivor generation’s traumatic experiences from a tremendous temporal and at times geographic remove, their identification with the traumatic past is at once close and distant. The child grows up with both “the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma” *and* the haunting absence of a “horrific, unknown and unknowable past” (Hirsch, “The Generation” 10). Members of the postmemorial generation are made to identify with their traumatic inheritance most concretely through the stories their parents tell and do not tell them but enter in more consummately through the day-to-day experiences of their upbringing with parents whose “loss of family, home, a feeling of belonging and safety in the world ‘bleed’ from one generation to the next” (Hirsch, “The Generation” 10).

Marianne Hirsch frequently cites Art Spiegelman’s two-volume graphic novel *Maus* (1986, 1991) as the beginning of her consideration of the phenomenon of postmemory and uses it as her primary narrative example.<sup>2</sup> Although my three-step paradigm for approaching inherited traumatic memory moves in a different direction from Hirsch’s analysis of Spiegelman, I will use incidents from *Maus* to illustrate each

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<sup>2</sup> See Hirsch, “Surviving Images” 9, as well as “Family Pictures” and *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, Chapters 1 and 8.

step. Even though Artie<sup>3</sup> does not formally bear witness to his father's testimony until he asks to hear it as an adult, every aspect of his upbringing is haunted by his indirect exposure to his parents' pasts. As a result, his understanding of himself and his world is shaped by his parents' traumatic history. The opening sequence of the first volume of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* gives the reader a glimpse into the experiences of a child raised in the home of Auschwitz survivors. After being deserted by friends when his roller skate slips off, young Artie goes to his father for consolation. Vladek, busy in the garage "fixing something," puts Artie to work before taking the time to recognize him or notice his emotional state (*Maus* 1: 5). Vladek's response to Artie's complaint about his friends demonstrates the tremendous distance that separates father and son: "Friends? Your friends? ... If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... Then you could see what it is, friends!" (6) Vladek's statement demonstrates how present his Holocaust memories are over a decade later, how significantly they color his view of the world, and how much they distance him from his son who exists in a very different time and place. His commentary offers Artie no consolation or wisdom appropriate to the situation and dismisses the significance of Artie's experience in comparison to his own Holocaust history. Identifying with his parents' experiences at a deep subconscious level, Artie grows up with a nagging sense of inadequacy, because nothing he will ever accomplish can compare with surviving Auschwitz, and a latent rage, because he has never felt fully understood or appreciated by his parents (*Maus* 2: 44).

Alternately, in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), Ursa, the novel's protagonist is forced to identify with her foremother's traumatic history from birth in the relentless repetition of their graphic narrative of sexual violation on a Brazilian slave plantation.

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<sup>3</sup> I will use Artie to refer to Spiegelman's character in *Maus* and Spiegelman to refer to the author.

Ursa reflects: “*I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk*” (77). Fearing that their story will be lost from the historical record after emancipation, Great Gram and Gram, Ursa’s great-grandmother and grandmother, raise Ursa and her mother to serve as vehicles to deliver evidence to attest to the atrocities they have experienced. Their strategy, to “*make generations,*” passes the story down orally from mother to daughter so it will never be forgotten (41). Ursa explains: “My great-gram told my gram the part she lived through that my gram didn’t live through and my gram told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were supposed to pass it down like that from generation to generation” (9). Raised in a home structured to fulfill an obsessive need to bear witness, Ursa and her mother so fully identify with their foremother’s experiences and their filial duty to make generations that their lives are organized around the repetition of their traumatic heritage, both in narrative and in action, as they unconsciously repeat Great Gram and Gram’s experiences of victimization by men.

As illustrated in *Corregidora*, the greatest danger of the identification process for the postmemorial generation is that the traumatic memory will supersede all other forms of memory and become the frame of reference from which all experience, both for the survivors and their children, is lived. Dori Laub suggests that in the homes of many Holocaust survivors, “It is ... genocide, and genocide alone, that one can give oneself the right to feel as *real* and as *lasting*, making it in this way both the nidus of one’s actual life and the driving force that shapes the meaning of one’s destiny” (“Witness” 65). Privileged above all other life experiences, the traumatic memory then dominates the lives of survivors and their children, rendering the lived experiences of the postmemorial

generation less valid, if not meaningless, by comparison. Viewing the world from the perspective of their traumatic histories, the survivor generation may be unable to understand or appreciate their children born since the traumatic events because of the psychic, temporal, and often spatial distance separating their life experiences from those of their children. Laub cites the example of one Holocaust survivor who completely invalidates the lived experiences of her children by expecting them to “obliterate [their] own existence and be nothing but the substitutive actors of her unexplicated memory” (“Truth” 63). In such cases the child of postmemory’s general feelings of inadequacy in relation to her traumatic history are complicated further by the negation and invalidation of her personal memory and life choices.

The extreme otherness of traumatic events, like the Holocaust, like New World Slavery, cause a break in the continuum of family memory and a psychic gap around which the lives of both survivors and their children are organized. Living according to the dictates of the traumatic events, survivors are separated from their descendants by the historical gap. The identification process requires the child of postmemory to determinedly enter that space of memory which Dori Laub calls “the place of concentration where death took place [which] paradoxically becomes for those children of survivors, the only place which can provide an access to the *life* that existed before their birth” (“Witness” 64-65). This psychic gap becomes the space the child of postmemory must enter in order to begin the process of resolving the inherited traumatic memory that haunts her life.

In cultural contexts where the postmemorial generation’s identification with the traumatic past is challenged by generational distance or consciously broken ties, the



writers studied in “Migrations of Memory” resort to innovative means to re-establish contact and identification with the past. In Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) this is accomplished through time travel, in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998) through reincarnation, and in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) through telepathy and communication with the dead. These more fantastic means of connection are often initiated through contact with physical representations of family memory, which, borrowing from Pierre Nora, I call “sites of memory,” including quilts, family bibles, journals and other narratives. Additionally, where displacement from the traumatic past has also involved displacement from cultural heritage, authors further seek to re-establish identification with the cultural past through alternative points of entry into the space of cultural memory, including ghost stories, santería, shamanism and other spiritual rituals.

Translation:

Translation can be considered a process of *taking ownership* of the inheritance by changing the frame of the traumatic past, internalizing or re-contextualizing it. In this stage the protagonist begins to imagine the traumatic events through the lens of her own experience. Rather than allowing the traumatic experience to remain a haunting, shifting, and oppressive specter, the translation process determinedly gives the experience shape, making it knowable by re-casting it in terms the child of postmemory can visualize and understand. She may begin to imagine it in a cultural mode with which she is familiar, or work to normalize the traumatic events by fitting them into the larger continuum of family history. This process involves a sort of embodiment such that the protagonist consciously filters the traumatic history through her own being, questioning it, and re-

shaping it to fit the contours of her understanding in her contemporary moment. In some texts, the protagonist may perform a contemporary version of the traumatic event in her own life or conduct actual research to gain a fuller understanding of the historical events and cultural experiences. The goal of the translation process is to give the traumatic experience new boundaries and to make the unknowable experience feel knowable by expressing it in terms the child chooses. Clearly, this is a creative process during which the child of postmemory creates her own way of understanding, visualizing and interacting with her inheritance.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* provides many useful means of considering the translation process. First, Spiegelman literally translates his father's verbal testimony into graphic images in the text of *Maus*. In this way, Spiegelman expresses his inherited traumatic history in a form he can understand and visualize, in spite of his temporal and physical separation from the setting of Vladek's historical narrative. Second, Spiegelman uses contemporary images and motifs as points of entry to lead his reader from the present into an engagement with the past. Because *Maus* has two levels of narrative—the outer frame narrative representing Artie's contemporary interactions with his father and the inner narrative providing Artie's graphic rendering of his father's experiences in Europe under the Third Reich—Spiegelman must create a means of bridging the temporal distance and imagining an unimaginable past. At the beginning of the first volume of *Maus*, when the outer frame narrative gives way to the inner frame, Artie indicates the transition to the past with a portrait of a younger Vladek in a circular frame reminiscent of an old family photo. At that moment, Artie translates between time periods using visual means available to him in the contemporary moment. The conventional image of a

family photograph serves as a point of entry into an earlier time that he can not otherwise visualize and marks the reader's psychic journey into the long ago and far away past (*Maus* 1: 12). On the facing page, when Vladek compares himself to Rudolph Valentino, Artie represents that comment with the rendering of an old motion picture poster depicting Valentino as "The Sheik" in some exotic locale having his way with a young woman (*Maus* 1: 13). This cinematic image, once again, translates Vladek's story into terms Artie can visualize in the contemporary era and serves as a point of entry into the past. The image of contemporary Vladek bent over his exercycle, superimposed on the poster of The Sheik, suggests Artie's inability to imagine his father in any form but his current one. Artie's difficulty in conceiving of Vladek as a suave youth, almost requires that the artist conjure a clichéd image to represent it. The use of cinematic and other conventions enables Artie/Spiegelman to translate the past into the present and provides a means to enter a temporal and physical space he has not experienced and struggles to represent in a form that he (and ultimately his readers) can understand.

Spiegelman uses another translation technique in the large unbounded image of Vladek and Anja entering Auschwitz through the often photographed "*Arbeit Macht Frei*"<sup>4</sup> gate at the close of the inner narrative of the first volume of *Maus* (157).

Marianne Hirsch writes that the historical record tells us that the "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" gate was the point of entry into the camp for very few prisoners and that by 1942 (some two years before Vladek and his wife Anja entered the camp), camp expansion had made it an interior gate, not the gate of entrance.<sup>5</sup> Spiegelman, however, uses this conventional image to tap into the reservoir of Holocaust common knowledge to access already

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<sup>4</sup> German for "work brings freedom" or "work will make you free."

<sup>5</sup> See Hirsch, "Images" 18.

encoded memories that bring with them established emotional responses. These images give the postmemorial writer and reader a point of entry to a certain historical space and demonstrate the necessity of “canonization and repetition in our postmemorial discourse” (Hirsch, “Images” 30). The graphic form of *Maus* facilitates a postmemorial journey into a past that neither the author nor his protagonist ever experienced. In this way, Spiegelman creates a hybrid text featuring the testimony of a survivor of an epic history translated into the visual vocabulary of one whose psychic distance from the events requires mediation and the use of materials from his own experience.

Spiegelman finally demonstrates translation as embodiment through the graphic rendering of Artie’s incessant smoking. First, Artie’s smoking can be read in part as an indication of the latent death wish experienced by many children of survivors who, like Artie, secretly confess wishing “I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through” (*Maus* 2: 16). Spiegelman uses Artie’s cigarette to make more concrete this wish for that level of connection to the traumatic history. Spiegelman both graphically connects the smoke of Artie’s cigarette to the smoke of the crematorium at Auschwitz (*Maus* 2: 69) and indirectly connects the cigarettes to the crematorium itself by naming them “Cremo Lights” in his self-portrait at the end of *Maus*. I. Michael Levine argues that these images make a symbolic connection between Art/Artie and Auschwitz and the frustrated desire to fulfill that secret childhood wish.

With each pull on his cigarette Art in effect draws in a breath of Auschwitz. In other words, every drag seems to draw together inside and out, present and past, the inflamed airways of the living and the airborne remains of the dead. With each inhaling moment of concentration Art draws in the scattered ashes of the incinerated bodies of Auschwitz and buries them within himself, only to witness their immediate disinterment and redispersion as he exhales. (91)

Artie's smoking thus suggests a desire to participate in the experience of death that was Auschwitz and to re-assemble its losses within his own body. Ultimately, Artie's exhale demonstrates the impossibility of truly re-constructing or recovering the past; however, these images render graphically Artie's postmemorial process of translation. Just as he brings the smoke into his body to exhale it in a different form, he brings Vladek's history into his own body to release it in a new form in *Maus*. Artie internalizes or embodies his traumatic inheritance through bearing witness to his father's testimony in order finally to create a text that becomes his means of giving substance to his postmemorial experience of this tragic history.

In several of the texts studied in "Migrations of Memory," the translation process, like the identification process is complicated by generational distance and consciously broken ties to the past. In these texts, authors find innovative means to enable their protagonists to translate their traumatic inheritances into their lives in the present. Octavia Butler and Phyllis Alesia Perry cause their protagonists to experience slavery in their own bodies, thereby translating the inheritance of slavery into their contemporary lives. In other texts, the translation process involves actual translation between languages and cultures. In *The Woman Warrior* (1975), for example, Maxine Hong Kingston's protagonist performs research to gain an understanding of certain verbal and written expressions as well as Cantonese cultural practices that do not translate easily into the English language and American culture. Other protagonists, including Pilar in Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, seek to translate their inheritance into visual forms that do not require translation between languages.

Differentiation:

Differentiation is the process whereby the protagonist re-articulates or represents her traumatic inheritance in a form that establishes its difference from herself and her experience. After internalizing the experience to gain a sense of ownership during the translation stage, the protagonist now externalizes the experience by representing it in a form that is different from the one in which it was received and that reflects the shift from the parent or survivor's perspective to the child's perspective. Because the inherited traumatic memory has the ability to overwhelm, dwarf, and invalidate the child's own experience, the differentiation process demonstrates the child of postmemory asserting her agency over the traumatic inheritance, questioning and rethinking its meaning, in order to re-articulate it in a form that makes it usable for her future.

An important result of the differentiation process is *changing the meaning and significance* of the traumatic inheritance. Under the best of circumstances the identification and translation processes enable the protagonist to reconstruct the family narrative, assimilating the traumatic break and the child of postmemory's own experiences into the larger continuum of family history and recognizing the child's experience as an important components of the familial past. I liken this to Hayden White's description of the therapeutic process after psychic trauma, which involves imposing "formal coherency" on the events that have informed one's existence and "re-emptot[ting] his whole life-history in such a way as to change the *meaning* of those events... and their significance [to]... the whole set of events that make up his life" (*Tropics* 99, 87). The differentiation process reflects the child of postmemory's determination to change her relation to her inheritance, to recognize the traumatic events

as a part rather than the sum total of her familial past, and to live a life and form an identity informed by rather than determined by the traumatic past. Here, the postmemorial artist chooses a form for representing her inheritance that is distinct from the form the survivor generation would choose and that changes the meaning of the survivor's testimony by critiquing its veracity and reconsidering events from her generational and cultural perspective.

In *Maus*, the process of representing Vladek's testimony in comic form involves both translation and differentiation. Spiegelman uses a number of techniques to differentiate his artifact of postmemory from his father's testimony. First, he represents Vladek's testimony in comic form—an artistic form that his father has never respected—because Spiegelman's position as the child of Holocaust survivors who has suffered the generational consequences of his parents' experiences almost requires that he find an unconventional form for representing *his* history and experience of postmemory. Although consideration of the voluminous discourse regarding representation of the Holocaust goes well beyond the parameters of this study, I concur with Hayden White's conclusion that the radical otherness of many twentieth-century historical/traumatic events requires that our notions of acceptable representation "be revised to take account of experiences that are unique to our century and for which older modes of representation have proven inadequate" ("Emplotment" 52). Spiegelman's use of comic form reflects his need to differentiate his text from more traditional forms of Holocaust representation to represent a particular type of Holocaust experience. *Maus'* comic form unsettles reader's expectations about Holocaust representation, forces us to experience this history in a new form from a different generational perspective, and allows it to resonate in new

ways. Moving Holocaust representation out of the traditional literalist realm also yields Spiegelman a wider range of representational choices and provides him access to new audiences.

Spiegelman's comics also facilitate his critique of the historical record and enable him to re-appropriate forms used during the Third Reich in the oppression of Jews.

Regarding his use of animal figures, Spiegelman has commented that *Maus* "was made in collaboration with Hitler... My anthropomorphized mice carry trace elements of ... Jew-as-rat cartoons for *Der Sturmer*, but by being particularized they are invested with personhood; they stand upright and affirm their humanity" (qtd in Doherty 74).

Spiegelman's anthropomorphized mice speak against Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda.

Reserving serious art for the representation of the perfect Aryan form, Nazis made ample use of cartoon images to represent their ideas about the less perfect beings in society, particularly Jews who were depicted as vermin, to be exterminated with Zyklon-B, a spray used to kill roaches. Spiegelman's cartoon animals literalize Nazi stereotypes, depicting Jews as mice, Germans as predatory cats, and the liberating Americans as dogs who chase away the cats. The representations, however, are of human figures with animal heads which suggests that the characterizations depict relationships that are assumed, not inherent. Thus Spiegelman's use of animal figures differentiates his work from the historical text of Nazism, changing the meaning of Nazi ideology that victimized Jews and re-appropriating it to affirm the dignity and humanity of the victims of the Third Reich.

Spiegelman's most significant differentiation, however, is his critique of his father, Vladek's testimony. From the very beginning of the text, Artie, consciously



chooses how he will represent his father and what parts of Vladek's story he will include in his narrative. One of the primary ways that Artie differentiates his text from Vladek's testimony is seen in how he takes aim at Vladek's idealized remembrance of his pre-war family by destabilizing the reliability of his witness and rendering graphically the truth that may lay behind Vladek's words. Vladek's selective remembrances of Richieu, the son he and Anja, Artie's mother, lost during the war, and of the now-deceased Anja create an impossible standard for his post-war family, Artie and Mala, his second wife, to meet. Artie laments that his "ghost brother," immortalized in a large photograph in his parents' bedroom, "never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble... [He] was an ideal kid, and *I* was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete" (*Maus 2*: 15). Similarly, Mala, also a Holocaust survivor but not the wife with whom (and for whom) Vladek survived the war, can never live up to Anja's memory. Because *Maus* represents the postmemorial perspective on the traumatic past, Artie's graphic representation changes the meaning of Vladek's words to reflect Artie's subjective response. In his depiction of a family dinner at the beginning of the war, Spiegelman draws Richieu spilling his plate, being chastised by Anja, and having a tantrum (*Maus 1*: 75). This scene does not occur in Vladek's narrative, but allows Artie to undercut his father and humanize his idealized brother. Similarly, our first introduction to Vladek in *Maus I* problematizes his perfect memory of Anja. Noting that his "mother's suicide and [Vladek's] two heart attacks had taken their toll" on Vladek, Artie lets the reader know immediately that tragedy follows Anja after the war until her untimely death (11). Although Vladek maintains that with Anja and her family, "We were happy only to be together," actual events suggest other interpretations (*Maus 1*: 67). In his visual text, Artie explores those other possible interpretations,

graphically interacting with, questioning, and re-presenting Vladek's memories to create a provisional and highly subjective postmemorial text.

Artie's selection of scenes and images suggests motives for Vladek's idealization of his pre-war family while expressing his rage against Vladek's vilification of his post-war family. The text Artie creates then demonstrates that, at best, Vladek's tendency to point out Artie and Mala's failings is a means of deflecting attention away from himself and his own guilt about surviving and not being able ultimately to save Anja and Richieu. At worst, Artie's representation of Vladek's early years with Anja suggests the possibility of a more surprising shame concerning the legitimacy of the family Vladek so idealizes.<sup>6</sup> This second line of reasoning results from Artie's intimations that Vladek's initial interest in Anja is her family's enormous wealth and that Anja's family essentially buys Vladek for the purpose of keeping her away from a certain young man from Warsaw. When Artie asks Vladek about his mother's past boyfriends, Vladek mentions "one tall boy from Warsaw" that she "always ran to see" even after her marriage to Vladek (*Maus* 1: 26-27). We learn later that she interprets Communist literature for this young man and narrowly misses imprisonment for possessing illegal documents. Anja's family's wealth enables them to shift the blame for Anja's crime on the local seamstress (who hides the incriminating documents for Anja and suffers three months imprisonment in her place) and to salvage Anja's marriage to Vladek by buying him a factory to run. Next, when Artie questions the short time span between Vladek and Anja's marriage and the birth of their son, suggesting that Richieu must have been premature, Vladek quickly changes the subject to tell Artie that *he* was so premature that the doctors "thought he wouldn't live" and becomes flustered spilling his pills (*Maus* 1: 30). Vladek's suggestion that Richieu, a

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<sup>6</sup> Bosmajian hints at but does not develop this possibility (33).

strapping baby weighing three kilograms at birth, is born “a little” premature smells of deception and calls into question the child’s paternity. Here, Artie selects aspects of Vladek’s testimony to suggest that his criticism of his very real wife and son and idealization of the lost wife and son may serve as a screen to keep the real wife and son from learning of his shameful and deceptive past with Anja and Richieu.

The final level of differentiation that Spiegelman experiences in the creation of *Maus* is the differentiation of the text from its creator. In *Maus* Spiegelman externalizes his inherited traumatic memory (and his experience with it) and contains it in a discrete artifact. Under his signature at the close of *Maus II*, Spiegelman adds “1978-1991,” the time period he spent creating the two volumes of *Maus* and the length of his postmemorial process of identifying with, translating, and differentiating from his traumatic inheritance. The thirteen-year period, equal to the number of years at which Jewish youths reach the age of accountability, suggests the culmination of a ritual process that has made Spiegelman accountable for the history he has inherited and prepared him to handle its legacy. During this journey, Spiegelman has birthed a text that creates a permanent monument to his parents, giving them life even in their deaths. As Vladek comments in the text, “All such things of the war, I tried to put out from my mind... Until you *rebuild* me all this from your questions” (*Maus* 2: 98). Spiegelman has, in fact, rebuilt his parents in *Maus*, the lives they lived, and their legacy in his life. He has also completed a project that has consumed over a decade of his life. Michael Levine comments that Spiegelman describes his relationship to his work “in pointedly uncreative and self-destructive terms” referring to “the thirteen-year gestation period of *Maus*... as a kind of anti-pregnancy... when the host body of the artist seems to accommodate itself

not only to the unmourned dead who continue to inhabit it but moreover to the *monstrous vitality* of a deadly ‘carcinogenic growth’” (89). Spiegelman’s depiction of the text as tumor suggests the tremendously draining weight of the postmemorial process. The completion of the text, however, excises the tumor finally allowing Spiegelman to externalize his painful inheritance. Separate from its creator the text becomes a site of memory, a repository of a history that embodies the thing to be remembered but remains changeable and subject to future re-interpretation.

Certainly, the creation of a text can not be expected to complete the process of resolving traumatic memory, if such resolution is even possible. The texts studied in “Migrations of Memory” repeatedly demonstrate how traumas of the magnitude represented can never, and possibly should never, be fully resolved and neatly packaged. In each of the seven texts, the artistic product that differentiates the traumatic inheritance from the postmemorial artist settles the traumatic legacy in a consistently incomplete and mutable fashion. This differentiation process, however, yields remarkable variety in form, because the cultural and individual circumstances surrounding the traumatic legacies and those who inherit them produce nearly unlimited means of representing this highly subjective and personal experience with monumental collective traumas.

Although Spiegelman’s *Maus*, like Hirsch’s conception of postmemory, provides a useful starting point for my consideration of narrative representations of inherited traumatic memory, the texts studied in “Migrations of Memory” occupy very different gendered and cultural spaces from *Maus* and complicate my basic model of identification, translation and differentiation. While *Maus* presents a son formally receiving his father’s traumatic testimony and rendering it in graphic form, the majority

of texts studied in “Migrations of Memory” represent the gendered space of the domestic sphere and the multitude of ways daughters witness their mother’s or foremothers’ experiences and the complications these traumatic legacies bring to the daughters’ lives. Of critical importance in these women-centered texts are the special dangers women experience in traumatic situations, particularly the threat of sexual violence as well as other abuses made possible by the misogynistic structure of many traditional cultures. Because the intimacy of the home space deepens the intersubjective communion between mother and daughter, daughters often repeat variations of their mothers’ experiences in their own lives and experience difficulty differentiating from their traumatic inheritance. Additionally, the numerous cultural contexts represented in the texts discussed in “Migrations” yield tremendous variety in the types of traumas experienced, the ways traumatic memory and cultural tradition are transmitted and the challenges the daughter of postmemory faces in translating her inheritance into her contemporary American setting. Because women traditionally are the keepers and transmitters of culture, immigrant mothers, caught between the desire to preserve their cultural heritages and to protect their daughters from traditions that hinder women, often struggle to teach and maintain traditions that alienate their daughters. These mothers and daughters may, also, face the challenge of overcoming culturally prescribed silences on certain issues and of finding ways to communicate with each other from vastly different cultural and linguistic perspectives. Building on the foundation created by Hirsch’s conception of postmemory and Spiegelman’s *Maus*, “Migrations of Memory” explores the ways in which gender and ethnicity complicate the experience and representation of inherited traumatic memory.

### Chapter Breakdown:

Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), the subject of the second chapter of "Migrations of Memory," demonstrates how inherited traumatic memory can enact a type of violence on the descendants of trauma survivors. In this case, identification with the maternal narrative of sexual victimization during slavery causes daughters of postmemory to repeat forms of their foremothers' oppressive history in their own lives. Ursa, the novel's protagonist, processes her traumatic inheritance by translating it through her lived experience and differentiating from it by performing it with a difference by singing the blues and through physical re-enactment. In *Corregidora*, the blues form both determines the structure of the novel and creates a space capable of accommodating the contradictory and ambiguous results of the protagonist's intervention into her ancestral past—a provisional resolution of trauma that highlights the inescapable reality of violence, the co-existence of love and hate, and the irresolvable nature of such inherited memory.

In my third chapter, I argue that the tendency among late twentieth-century African American authors to create contemporary narratives of slavery is best understood as a form of postmemory and represents a need in the post-Civil Rights African American community to reassess its relationship to the legacy of slavery as familial inheritance and basis for community. Although the temporal distance from the era of American slavery to the end of the twentieth century would seem to preclude the use of the term postmemory to describe the relationship between contemporary African American writers and their heritage of slavery, I contend that these writers engage slave history in their literary creations as the ancestral trauma in whose shadow all African Americans are

raised. Further, because the traumas of slavery did not end with emancipation but simply took new form, I would argue that the generation coming-of-age during and after the Civil Rights era are in fact the first generation of African American for which slavery can truly be called postmemory. Authors of contemporary narratives of slavery then explore what relationship twentieth-century African Americans have to the legacy of slavery, a traumatic history to which they have the intimate connection but the “inevitable distance and lack of understanding” that characterizes postmemory (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 13). These narrative explorations offer African American protagonists (and readers) the opportunity to experience the trauma of slavery and restore their connection to lost ancestors. In Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998), contemporary African American women protagonists are presented as literal and figurative orphans, disconnected from their ancestral past due to both generational distance and societal changes that have enabled many African Americans to malign or dismiss the relevance of their history. Butler and Perry, however, use fantastic means to eliminate the temporal distance between their late twentieth-century protagonists and slavery and facilitate bodily experiences with slavery that restore identification with lost or denied ancestors (both black and white) and their inherited legacy of slavery. In this way, Butler and Perry literalize the claim this traumatic history has on contemporary African Americans at a time when societal change could allow them to forget.

In Chapter Four, “Migrations of Memory” shifts from remembrance of New World Slavery to the lingering effects of more contemporary traumatic events. While the abolition of slavery and the progress toward equal rights achieved during the Civil Rights Movement offer post-1960s African Americans greater possibilities for resolving their

traumatic inheritance, the incomplete and shifting nature of contemporary political strife offer its victims no conclusive means of processing their experiences. My fourth chapter explores how Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004) and Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) work through the challenges of resolving inherited traumatic memory when their protagonists' identification processes are complicated by the brutality, personal betrayal, displacement and fragmentation of family and nation that accompany political upheaval in small Caribbean nations. In such contexts, where the rule of dictators is enforced by clandestine and arbitrary violence that pits countrymen and family members against one another, the definitions of victimizer and victim of the political regime are situational and ambiguous, and the child of postmemory's relation to her inheritances is conflicted and divided as are the loyalties of her own family members.<sup>7</sup> In their novels, Danticat and García seem to suggest that resolution of traumatic memory can only occur on foreign soil and must be imagined or projected through the construction of alternative narratives. Both authors figure the United States as a "neutral" space on which to build provisional resolutions to Haiti and Cuba's traumatic histories, while recognizing the United States' complicity with many of these nations' historical challenges. These writers finally use their narratives and the bodies of their American-born or bred protagonists as space on which to re-member the fragmented national body, constructing an image of national healing in these displaced daughters of Haiti and Cuba.

The last chapter of "Migrations of Memory" transitions further into the traumas of the Ethnic American experience to consider the traumatic generational impact of

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<sup>7</sup> Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* blurs the distinction Hirsch generally makes between the experience of a bystander or witness to trauma, which she characterizes as a form of postmemory, and the experience of the perpetrator, which generally does not enter into her consideration.



immigration from Asia to the United States. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997), the subjects of my fifth chapter, represent the challenge American-born daughters of Chinese and Korean trauma survivors experience in identifying with mothers who represent and structure the domestic space around radically different epistemological and ontological systems than their children encounter in mainstream American society. Although their protagonists resist the traditional cultural atmospheres, infused with cryptic stories, ghosts, spirits, and silences, that their mothers create in their childhood homes, their maturation and formation of hybrid American identities require that they embrace their mothers' stories and histories as their inheritance and use them as the space on which to construct new forms of American identity and culture. I argue ultimately that in *The Woman Warrior* Kingston consciously constructs a Chinese American literary and cultural tradition, while Keller appropriates the traumatic legacy of the Korean Comfort Woman as the collective memory of Korean American women, using it to authorize a particular Asian American subjectivity.

"Migrations of Memory" examines texts situated at the juncture between the traumatic past and a future that promises to be radically different. With the threat of African American collective memory and cultural cohesiveness being lost with the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and the opportunities for formerly marginalized immigrant communities to be assimilated into mainstream American culture, contemporary Ethnic and African American women writers use narrative to intervene in the past, respond to the present and create innovative literary forms for representing and theorizing their unprecedented, interstitial position. Their ventures into the realm of traumatic memory

provide the basis for the formulation in this study of a much needed theoretical approach to analyzing narrative representations of inherited traumatic memory from the cross-cultural perspective.

The Critical Context:

“Migrations of Memory” intersects with and builds on the work of many scholars in the areas of trauma studies, memory, African American and Diasporic literatures, Women’s literature, and Ethnic American literature. In the field of trauma studies, I have relied particularly on the work of Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman, in addition to the work of Marianne Hirsch. With the exception of Hirsch (whom I have discussed earlier), these scholars share a concern with the direct experience and after-effects of trauma. Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) focuses on “traumatic experience [as] ... an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs” and explores texts of psychoanalysis and literature that ask “what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands witness” (5). Reflecting that Freud often resorted to literature to illustrate the illusive experience of trauma, Caruth explores this relation by analyzing the representations of trauma in Freud and a small group of literary and cinematic works from the era before and after World War 2. Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman’s work focuses more directly on the Holocaust and issues of bearing witness, particularly in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) and in essays contributed to Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). Although these works often make use of

literary or cinematic representations of the Holocaust, their focus tends to be psychoanalytical rather than literary and does not significantly address the second generation experience of traumatic memory that is the focus of my work. Additionally, my study particularly considers trauma as it relates to cultural memory within marginalized ethnic groups. Thus, Caruth, Laub and Felman offer “Migrations of Memory” useful grounding in psychoanalytic theory, but my study ultimately moves into a different discursive space.

In the field of memory, “Migrations of Memory” builds on contemporary discussions of memory in the African American context, particularly Toni Morrison’s paradigm of rememory and her articulation of the importance of memory in literary creation in her essays “Memory, Creation, and Writing” (1984) and “The Site of Memory” (1987). Sethe in Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988) explains rememory thus: “What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened” (36). Toni Morrison’s suggestion that memory exists in the world separate from the person who experienced it, remains alive even after the person’s death and can be accessed by others is of particular interest in “Migrations of Memory,” because the writers examined in this study seek to access the memories of others to re-create their own cultural or traumatic inheritance. Rememory differs from postmemory in that postmemory is the particular experience of one who has a vicarious, indirect, and highly subjective experience with someone else’s traumatic memories, yet postmemory might be considered to be exactly what happens when a descendant “bump[s] into a rememory that belongs to” her ancestor (Morrison, *Beloved* 36). Indeed the purpose of

narratives of postmemory is to facilitate one's entrance into the space of another's experience (at least for a time) to understand how the inherited or accessed traumatic memory affects the voyeur and to facilitate a healthy differentiation from the traumatic experience.

The process of creating texts of the type studied in "Migrations of Memory" requires a belief that memory can be accessed by others. In "Memory, Creation and Writing" Toni Morrison calls "Memory (the deliberate act of remembering)... a form of willed creation" (385). Because she can not depend on the "literature and the sociology of other people ... to help [her] know the truth of [her] own cultural sources," Morrison uses her memory to tap into a reservoir of African American collective memory to better understand the experiential legacy of African American people ("Memory, Creation" 386, 388). In "The Site of Memory," Morrison clarifies this activity explaining that her task of restoring the interior life and the tragic experiences of previous generations of African Americans requires that she "trust [her] own recollections ... [and] depend on the recollections of others" (111). Interestingly, this form of writing not only requires that the writer access the collective memory of African American people: it also requires that the reader participate in the process by contributing his or her own memory. The authors studied in "Migrations of Memory" similarly tap into the collective memories and discredited knowledges of their cultural heritage to create texts that explore their traumatic inheritance and re-shape that memory to become a useable past that empowers the protagonist's future.

"Migrations of Memory" also exists in conversation with Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, as articulated in his essay "Between Memory and History:

*Les Lieux de Mémoire*” (1989).<sup>8</sup> Nora argues that *lieux de mémoire* come into existence “at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn” (284). Certainly, this reflects my suggestion that the narratives of my study come into being at a time when a break from the past becomes possible and imminent, and Ethnic and African American women writers feel the need to explore their cultural and traumatic past in narrative in order to theorize their contemporary understanding of self. In this way, I would argue that the texts in my study become sites of memory. Using memory, often memory discredited due to the ethnic identity or subjugated status of the subject, to create a counter-history that challenges official history, the authors in my study produce sites of memory that inscribe personal and collective memory to achieve a new narrative of history. Nora theorizes that rapid sociological change leads to a loss of cultural moorings and “the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations... because such activities no longer occur naturally” (289). This impulse results in the creation of *lieux de mémoire*. Nora argues further that “The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of *lieux de mémoire*—that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away” (289). I disagree here with Nora’s polarization of history and memory and his implicit suggestion that history defines advanced society while memory relates to more traditional or “primitive” cultures. Fabre and O’Meally<sup>9</sup> in their reading of Nora’s

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<sup>8</sup> “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*” was originally published in *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 7-25.

<sup>9</sup> Fabre and O’Meally read and critique Nora’s paradigm of *lieux de mémoire* in the introduction to *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (1994), an anthology of essays written from a variety of

paradigm contend first that African Americans have always resisted the American urge to forgetfulness and that in the American context, “neither one, history or memory, can be entirely disentangled from the other. And ... *lieux de mémoire* ... are objects of history and memory, keystone places worked over by the American imagination, by blacks and whites” (8). In the African American context, sites of memory such as slave narratives and oral testimonies serve crucial historical roles as well. Although Nora’s articulation of sites of memory is very useful in my study, I alter his definition slightly to fit the different African American and Ethnic American contexts and reflect the importance of these sites for family memory rather than the type of national memory Nora theorizes.

Because “Migrations of Memory” is primarily concerned with literary representations of inherited traumatic memory in the African American and Ethnic American contexts and because traumatic history is a central theme of African American literature, my study relates most closely to the work of scholars of African American literature but takes their scholarship in new directions. “Migrations,” first, exists in conversation with a number of other texts that consider the contemporary phenomenon of African American authors writing back to slavery. Almost as an aside, Bernard Bell, in *The Afro-American Novel and its Traditions* (1987), coined the term “neoslave narrative” to describe “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom,” using Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* and Ernest Gaines’ *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as primary examples (289). It was Ashraf Rushdy in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) who first wrote an extended discussion of the

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scholarly perspectives using Nora’s paradigm as a point of departure for studying various aspects of history and memory in the African American context.

phenomenon, contextualizing narratives by Ishmael Reed, Sherley Anne Williams and Charles Johnson as reactions to William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, which, in Rushdy's theorization, propelled a generation of black writers to "salvage" the slave narrative from such troubling white appropriation of the form, to "return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject" and to "explore the power relations in the field of cultural production" (6-7). While I admire Rushdy's articulation of the social and historical events of the 1960s that gave rise to contemporary narratives of slavery, I find that he gives too much importance to Styron's text and focuses quite narrowly on the political work of the texts. Additionally, *Neo-slave Narratives* analyzes texts written in the first person voice of slaves in the antebellum era. My study, on the other hand, analyzes texts representing traumatic events from the perspective of protagonists in the contemporary era and considers them in the context of family relations and intergenerational transfers of traumatic legacy. While Rushdy gestures toward the idea that contemporary narratives of slavery result from the same post-1960s cultural environment that inspired other ethnic autobiographies of the 1970s and 1980s, he does not pursue a fuller consideration of the cross-cultural trend of ethnic writers exploring their traumatic inheritance in narrative, which is the space into which my study enters.

My project relates more closely to the mission of Rushdy's second book, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001), which studies what Rushdy calls "palimpsest narratives," novels written in the 1970s by African American writers who position their contemporary African American

protagonists to confront how their “lives and life stories are inscribed on parchment through which the slave past always shows” (8). Critical to Rushdy’s study is the idea that slavery is America’s family secret which will continue to haunt the American populace of both races until it is faced and resolved. Although I am indebted to Rushdy’s insightful readings of Butler’s *Kindred* and Jones’ *Corregidora*, his study is limited in scope to the residual traumas of slavery within the national family. My study focuses more broadly on the impact inherited memory of many different traumatic experiences has on individual subjectivity and family relations and offers applications to the larger issues of ethnic identity and community. Although Rushdy views family secrets related to slavery and their lasting impact, because of its gendered focus, “Migrations of Memory” explores the family secrets that come with trauma and result from the misogynistic structure of many traditional cultures, including the sexual violation of women and the penalties imposed on women who violate their culturally prescribed role and bring shame on their families.

Keith Byerman’s *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2005), argues that contemporary African American writers use historical themes in their texts to re-write the American Grand Narrative to incorporate the story of African American suffering, in the process portraying the black experience in America as one of extended holocaust, a shared experience of suffering. Byerman’s reading of the texts in this study emphasizes the trauma of the black experience and how these novels gesture toward but never fully achieve therapeutic recovery. While Byerman and I share an emphasis on traumatic inheritance and the social/cultural positioning of the authors studied, Byerman calls writers such as Toni Morrison “accidents of history” relative to



the more generalized suffering of black Americans and argues that their writing restores their connection to the African American masses and expresses their “dis-ease” with their own success (4). My project similarly considers the social position of post-1960s African American women writers and the contradictory gains of integration and social mobility, but I connect these concerns to those of women from other marginalized communities noting their similar need to reconsider their relation to their cultural inheritance in light of social change. While Byerman posits the revelation of trauma as the point of the texts studied, I study the remembrance of trauma as a vehicle to initiate reflection and reconsideration within the texts. “Migrations of Memory” emphasizes artistry and representation as a means of resolving inherited traumatic memory and forming contemporary identity, even if those resolutions remain provisional and incomplete and the identities conflicted and ambivalent. One interesting point Byerman raises, that the African American writer tends to believe the past can be accessed and to validate alternative ways of knowing, resonates fairly consistently in the writings of other ethnic women whose projects require a belief that the past can be recovered, at least in part, and imaginatively recreated using a variety of alternative means.

An interesting predecessor text for many recent studies of contemporary African American women writers’ explorations of history is Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History (1991)* which argues “the fundamental necessity of knowing and coming to terms with tribal history to construct tenable black female identities” (7-8). Her study of novels, from Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* through Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, focuses on of the protagonist’s quest to respond (or her failure to respond) to the call from both the African American historical and

literary heritages and offers three essential steps in the process of coming to terms with this “tribal history”: “the decision to explore history, the absorption of heritage, and interpretation of the past’s uses in the present” (22). Although Kubitschek’s emphasis on the African American woman’s need to embrace both her historical and literary past in order to form a tenable contemporary identity and her effort to create a structure for that process run parallel to my emphases in “Migrations,” my cross-cultural focus on trauma and women authors writing from a specific cultural moment yields a greater cohesiveness and depth of insight.

Angelyn Mitchell’s *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002), performs a feminist reading of the phenomenon of the African American contemporary narrative of slavery.<sup>10</sup> Focusing exclusively on texts by African American women writers, Mitchell studies how these writers revisit slavery to instruct their contemporary readers about slavery, its role in shaping American identity and its lasting impact on Americans of all backgrounds. She argues that the writers she studies give witness to what has been unspeakable, not to aggravate old wounds, but to consider the narrative possibilities for healing the wounds of racism. Calling these texts liberatory narratives, Mitchell argues that they theorize the nature of freedom and offer liberation through revelation of the historical and social structures that oppose true freedom in the United States. My project is similar to Mitchell’s in that I look at narratives that intervene into the traumatic past in search of possibilities for healing present wounds. “Migrations of Memory,” however, takes a

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<sup>10</sup> Published just three years later, Mitchell’s text might be thought to expand the scope of Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu’s *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (1999), which studies many of the same texts discussed in *Freedom to Remember* and reads contemporary narratives of slavery by black women writers as an attempt to re-write slave history from the perspective of black women, emphasizing black motherhood as a source of female subjectivity and site of resistance.

cross-cultural approach and explores the mechanisms writers use within their texts to create the means for their protagonists and readers to heal the wounds of the past and choose different futures. In the conclusion of *The Freedom to Remember*, Mitchell gestures toward defining a mechanism whereby texts “emancipate” their readers, indicating that this is accomplished “by facilitating a discussion of slavery as a *lieu de mémoire* and by defamiliarizing slavery through illumination and interrogation” (150). “Migrations of Memory,” on the other hand, begins by delineating the process of identification, translation and differentiation as the theoretical framework for the therapeutic work accomplished in the texts studied. Occupying a similar discursive space as Mitchell’s work, Venetria K. Patton’s *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women’s Fiction (2000)* explores how black women writers from the time of Harriet Jacobs to the contemporary era have represented black motherhood as a means of asserting black womanhood in resistance to the de-gendering effects of slavery and of critiquing prevailing constructions of femininity.

*Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005), Cheryl Wall’s ambitious study of black women writers and literary genealogy, uses the blues trope of worrying the line as a metaphor for black women writers’ concern with lineage, both familial and literary, and their tendency, in the face of breaks in the line, to “subvert the conventions of literary tradition” to restore connections to the past through alternative ways of knowing—including “memory, music, dreams, and ritual” (9). Wall emphasizes the use of images inserted into the narrative that “provoke stories that close the gap between past and present... [as] the images and words combine to create a new kind of text that extends both meanings of the line” (9). Of critical concern

in *Worrying the Line* is how post-1970 black writers worry the line of their genealogical, literary and cultural heritage using their texts to reconstruct and sustain family structures, revisit and recover the suppressed and invalidated literary and cultural products of black women, and revise the canonical texts of Western Civilization to “give voice to stories those texts did not imagine” (13). Wall shares my concern with the cultural position of the writers in her study and the innovative means they use to restore their connections to a familial, cultural, and literary heritage that has never been properly recorded and is in danger of being lost due to social changes. I am particularly indebted to Wall for her remarkably cogent and comprehensive analysis of the use of the blues in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*. *Worrying the Line* looks broadly at the multiple ways contemporary black women writers address lineage in their texts, while “Migrations” considers the writings of a more ethnically diverse group of writers from the more specific angle of inherited traumatic memory.

Arlene Keizer’s *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004)<sup>11</sup> explores the development of black female subjectivity, arguing that contemporary black women writers in the United States and the Anglophone Caribbean intervene in a theoretical debate about identity in the African Diaspora through their representations of slavery. Keizer seeks to demonstrate that black women writers are creating a theory of subjectivity that dovetails with, critiques, and diverges from mainstream theoretical models in their texts about slavery. Keizer and I agree that the texts theorize identity, but my cross-cultural approach demonstrates how the

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<sup>11</sup> For a narrower exploration of black female subjectivity, see Kevin Everod Quashie’s *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject* (2004), which theorizes the formation of black female subjectivity in narrative through the motif of the girlfriend, arguing that “girlfriend subjectivity is the critical icon through which black women artists reconsider and reframe self and then memory and language—these canonical conceits of cultural theory” (1-2).

remembrance of culture-defining traumas becomes a vehicle for theorizing hybrid identities in African American and Ethnic American women writers. Although I am indebted to Keizer for her contextualization of her argument, which included a brief discussion of postmemory in the African American context and helped to move my study into a richer discursive space, I am uncomfortable with her attempt to validate the theoretical work performed in texts by black women authors by demonstrating their ability to be related to mainstream subjectivity theory. I argue that these texts create theory, and I, therefore, analyze that theory in its own right, not relative to others. Additionally, Keizer again focuses exclusively on narratives of slavery while I consider a wider range of traumatic legacies that affect contemporary African American and Ethnic American women writers.

Caroline Rody's *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (2001) and Carole Boyce Davies's *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) have in common a theoretical framing that joins African American and Caribbean women writers, but these texts pursue very different aims. Focusing on texts by women writers that intervene into their historical past, Rody analyzes the trope of daughterly return as an allegory for "the imaginative return of a late twentieth-century woman writer to her traumatic ancestral past" (3). Noting the abundance of contemporary texts, particularly Morrison's *Beloved*, that figure an exploration of history as a daughter returning to a "mother-of-history" to restore familial and cultural lineage, Rody suggests that authors employ this conceit to enter into their ancestral past to rescue enslaved mothers, re-writing the stories of their victimization to highlight their agency in the midst of subjugation. I am indebted to Rody

for her unique focus on narratives featuring contemporary daughters receiving or returning to their traumatic ancestral past and her analysis of the innovations many writers use to create a meeting between present and past generations. “Migrations of Memory” differs from *The Daughter’s Return* in that I focus more directly on inherited memory, the return to a direct ancestral legacy and the affect experiences of trauma have on succeeding generations. I also work with a broader range of daughterly texts to highlight the commonalities across cultural boundaries. Although Rody gestures toward the idea of a more cross-cultural analysis, she leaves this possibility unexplored. Davies’ work looks more specifically at subjectivity related to the experience of migration. She argues that black women’s writing is about boundary crossing, that black women’s subjectivities exist in multiple locations and are constructed of multiple identities that are not always harmonious. Although Davies’ work intersects with mine in its general emphasis on the formation of women’s subjectivities in light of migration, my specific focus on inherited traumatic memory produces very different results from her emphasis on black women and migration.

“Migrations of Memory” finally exists in conversation with a limited number of truly cross-cultural studies. First, in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1998), Kathleen Brogan argues that the recurring device of haunting in contemporary Ethnic American literature relates to a desire to recover the lost cultural past and demonstrates the “troubled transmission of immigrant, slave, or native cultures” (4). Using Morrison’s *Beloved* as a primary example, Brogan argues that the “turn to the supernatural in the process of recovering history emphasizes the difficulty of gaining access to a lost or denied past, as well as the degree to which any such historical

reconstruction is essentially an imaginative act” (6). Although the framing of Brogan’s study is quite similar to Rody’s, particularly in their shared concern with the innovative means authors use to facilitate engagement with the past, Brogan’s work focuses specifically on the use of ghosts or haunting in contemporary ethnic texts: “stories of cultural haunting share the plot device and master metaphor of the ghost as go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another” (6). While I find Brogan’s efforts to theorize the use of supernatural presences in multi-ethnic American literature to be very useful in my work, “Migrations of Memory” looks at haunting as only one of several innovative means contemporary Ethnic and African American women writers use to connect their contemporary protagonists to their ancestral past.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, two anthologies by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, *Memory, Narrative and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures (1994)* and *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures (1996)*, have brought together numerous scholars to write on cultural memory in Ethnic American contexts. While these anthologies include individual essays that are useful in theorizing the intersection of individual and collective memory and how cultural memory informs contemporary identity, these are not extended studies of a focused topic or group of texts. Pursuant to their goal “to demonstrate the range of approaches to ethnic literatures with reference to how memory informs identity and shapes narrative,” the anthologies cover a wide range of texts and topics and seek to open the field for

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<sup>12</sup> Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* (1997), operating in a similar discursive space as Brogan’s text, studies haunting as a social phenomenon to demonstrate that the most important elements of social discourse are often not the ones we assume to be important but the issues that haunt the perimeters of our senses. Although Gordon uses several literary texts as examples, her emphasis is primarily sociological rather than literary.

discussion rather than produce a specific study of a particular issue (*Memory, Narrative and Identity* viii).

Into this discursive field, I submit “Migrations of Memory,” a study that combines issues of memory, trauma, gender, and representation with cultural, literary, and familial inheritance, to produce an original framework for studying literary depictions of inherited traumatic memory in the writings of contemporary Ethnic American and African American women writers.



CHAPTER 2: THE VIOLENCE OF MEMORY:  
The Oppressive Ancestral Narrative in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*

Gayl Jones' first novel, *Corregidora* (1975) chronicles the traumatic history of sexual oppression and victimization in four generations of a family of women. The saga begins on a Brazilian slave plantation with Great Gram, "*the coffee-bean woman*" whom Corregidora, a Portuguese sea captain turned plantation owner and whoremonger, takes out of his fields when she is still a child to work in his whorehouse. Corregidora takes her for himself first to break her in, and she soon becomes "*his favorite,*" his most valued whore, "*Dorita, [his] little gold piece*" (Jones, *Corregidora* 11, 10).<sup>1</sup> The saga continues to Gram, the daughter Corregidora fathers with Great Gram and raises himself after driving Great Gram away when she commits a mysterious unforgivable act. Corregidora raises, rapes and prostitutes his own daughter (as he had her mother), fathering a child by her who is born in Louisiana after Great Gram goes back to the plantation to get Gram. Because the documents of Brazilian slavery are destroyed at emancipation, Great Gram and Gram make it their mission to provide evidence to attest to the atrocities done to them because "when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up" (14). Their plan is to "*make generations*" in order to pass the story down from mother to daughter so it will never be forgotten (41). Mama and her daughter Ursa, a blues singer and the novel's protagonist, the third and fourth generation of Corregidora women, are raised from birth hearing Great Gram and Gram's stories of their history with Corregidora and charged with the responsibility of passing their testimony down to the next generation. As Ursa recalls, "*I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk*" (77). The novel opens, however, with Ursa facing

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, I will simply use the page number to refer to quotations from *Corregidora*.

the crisis of not being able to bring the next generation when her uterus is removed after she is pushed down a flight of stairs by her enraged husband, Mutt. Suddenly unable to fulfill the script her ancestors have passed on to her, Ursa must find a new way to relate to her inherited history of sexual violence.

I have chosen *Corregidora* as the first text in my cross-cultural study of postmemory because the novel is so clearly structured as an interrogation of the destructive effects of inherited traumatic memory. In *Corregidora*, the remembrance of ancestral memory enacts a type of violence on Ursa and her mother who identify so strongly with Great Gram and Gram's narratives of sexual victimization that they unconsciously repeat forms of their foremothers' trauma in their own lives. Ursa's crisis at the beginning of the novel, however, offers her the opportunity to reconsider Great Gram's strategy and ethos, to interact with and translate her familial history rather than passively recite and embody it, and to differentiate from it through blues performance. Ursa uses the blues to change the meaning of her inheritance. Because the blues provide a profoundly personal space in which to consider and express her emotional struggles, Ursa's medium of artistic expression enables her to separate her individual self from the collective history of Corregidora women, reclaim her body and sexuality from historical structures of oppression, and interrogate how the residual structures of slavery challenge intimate relationships between black men and women in the contemporary era. Ursa's experience in the novel demonstrates my contention that postmemory demands representation. As Marianne Hirsch writes, "It is only when they are redeployed, in new texts and new contexts, that [traumatic images and memories] regain a capacity to enable a postmemorial working through" ("Images" 29). Ursa's process of translating and re-

contextualizing her inherited memory suggests the possibility of resolving her traumatic legacy but demonstrates the truly irresolvable nature of such horrific events. Although I optimistically suggest that Ursa's experiences during the novel offer her the possibility of constructing an identity and living a life informed by rather than determined by her familial past, the novel itself does not offer so clear a conclusion, ultimately leaving the results of her exploration of postmemory and the direction of her future ambiguous.

On the meta-narrative level, Gayl Jones, writing in the early 1970s, faces the possibility of the ties to her ancestral and cultural heritage being lost due both to societal changes, particularly integration and social mobility, and to then contemporary Black Nationalist ideology which demanded a decisive break from traditional forms of black cultural expression, condemning the old forms as structures that kept black people bound to the ideologies of slavery. *Corregidora* then becomes a space on which to theorize the contemporary African American woman's relation to her ancestral heritage and critique contemporary discourse. In keeping with Black Nationalist ideology, Jones demonstrates the importance of questioning the past and the danger of uncritically transmitting narratives of oppression from generation to generation; however, she clearly asserts the impossibility of separating the past from the present or of unequivocally categorizing anything as liberating or oppressive. Further, she so thoroughly critiques the construction of femininity offered by Black Nationalist ideology that Toni Morrison suggests that "No novel about any Black woman could ever be the same after this. [*Corregidora*] has changed the terms, the definitions of the whole enterprise."<sup>2</sup> Using the blues as both the formal structure of her novel and Ursa's artistic medium, Jones creates a space in which to explore the myriad ambiguities of Ursa's relation to her traumatic, familial legacy and

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<sup>2</sup> Morrison quoted in Madhu Dubey, "'A New World Song': The Blues Form in *Corregidora*," 72.

of Jones' own relation to contemporary cultural discourse. The blues form can be thought to facilitate Jones' exploration of the complex legacy of sexual violation during slavery and the residual traumas that continue to haunt the descendants of African American slaves, both personally and relationally.

#### Postmemory in the New World Context

In *Corregidora*, postmemory is enacted in a manner appropriate to the African American and African Diasporic historical and cultural contexts. While postmemory related to the Nazi Holocaust is fueled, in part, by the recentness of the events and the pervasiveness of photographic images from the time period, the absence of photographic images and the contradictory nature of official records of New World Slavery cause other modes of transmission to be favored in this context. I would argue that this absence and ambiguity give greater potency to postmemory resulting in an anxiety about passing down narratives that will give evidence to correct official history which omits, denies and discredits the suffering of the survivors of slavery and to counteract the effect of years which create distance from and facilitate forgetting of the events. Appropriately, *Corregidora* focuses on the insistent re-telling of an ancestral narrative of sexual violence during slavery. This repetition from mother to daughter in the intimacy of the home space blurs the boundaries of subjectivity over time creating a collective identity among the Corregidora women and transmitting the original trauma to the succeeding (postmemorial) generations. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth writes that a traumatic 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” (5). In *Corregidora*, this traumatic possession takes the form both of obsessive repetition of their traumatic narratives by the survivors of the trauma and of the uncontrolled intrusion of those narratives into the minds and lives of their descendants. Because traumatic events can not be processed and narrativized as they occur, Dori Laub argues that the need to give testimony and provide evidence comes later and can grow to become “a ceaseless struggle” (“Truth and Testimony” 61). As the children of survivors subjected from an early age to the incessant repetition of graphic narratives of sexual violence, Ursa and Mama “have been *chosen*” to listen to “the impossible... *before* the possibility of mastering it with knowledge. [Thus they experience] ...trauma’s ‘contagion,’ the traumatization of the ones who listen” (Caruth 10). Thrust into the position of witness, they share with survivors both the burden of traumatic history and the identification with victimization.

This identification with violation effects among the *Corregidora* women a preoccupation with the body, which during slavery was a sexual commodity to be bought, sold, and consumed. Great Gram and Gram’s strategy of making generations reclaims the female body from sexual objectification and violation, making it instead a historical archive on flesh, and transforms the sex act from an act of oppression to an act of resistance. Making generations dictates, first, that the purpose of the female body be to bear, raise, and indoctrinate the next generation of *Corregidora* women and, second, that the purpose of the sex act be to produce the next generation who will provide evidence of the suffering of their foremothers. Thus, while “the aim of the *Corregidora* women is to wrest authority from the slave owner,” their means is “self-defeating” (Wall 131). Although they have reclaimed the sex act from overt violence, they continue to *use* sex

for coercive purposes. Reducing it to its most narrow reproductive use, the Corregidora women utilize sex as a means of remembering violence. Sexual intercourse, therefore, remains unredeemed, and the positive, relationship-building purposes of lovemaking unrecognized. Ursa and her mother then find themselves paralyzed by the demands their ancestral legacy places on their bodies. “Ursa is taught to make love in order to keep alive an historical tale of rape. She is bred up to make generations to carry on a saga of the brutality of men to women.”<sup>3</sup> The directive to make generations prepares Mama and Ursa to use lovemaking as “an act of vengeance” and to reenact and perpetuate in their own lives and physical bodies the historical legacy of sexual violence in their contemporary relationships (Wall 131).

In *Corregidora*, the traumatic legacy not only subordinates the bodies of the postmemorial generations to its uses: it subordinates their memories as well. Although Ursa tells her second husband Tadpole that her mama “told me what they *all* lived through,” Ursa soon realizes that her mother’s memories are conspicuously absent from the litany of Corregidora history (9, emphasis mine). In the Corregidora household, only the narrative of oppression gets handed down. Madhu Dubey suggests that through the perpetual and relentless retelling of Great Gram and Gram’s history of sexual victimization, the past becomes a “mythical vision” that “keeps [Mama and Ursa] trapped in the historical past of slavery... and ... thus unable to perceive [the past] as history, or to envision a future untainted by the slavery creed” (78). Here, traumatic memory becomes a gap in the familial legacy through which the survivors, Great Gram and Gram, view every aspect of life since the traumatic events and through which the postmemorial

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<sup>3</sup> Janice Harris quoted in Sally Robinson, *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, 160.

generations, Mama and Ursa, must pass in order to understand their origins and bring closure to the traumatic cycle. Until that traumatic gap is addressed, it is the frame of reference from which all generations experience life. Thus, the repetition of this “mythicized” past traps Mama and Ursa, both psychologically and physically, in a cycle of violence they can neither escape nor transform (Dubey 78). Subjected to the imperative of fulfilling the role scripted for her by her foremothers, Mama never willingly articulates her own story or develops a life independent of her foremothers. Ursa, herself, spends her life “*making dreams*” and “*fight[ing] the night*,” suffering from uncontrolled recurring dreams and relentless repetitions of her foremothers’ stories (103, 97). Ursa’s quest to overcome the oppressive hold of ancestral memory will require that she reconstruct her family history to change its meaning and to give meaning to her own “private memory” (129).

Interestingly, the necessity of dealing with Ursa’s private memory came as an afterthought to Gayl Jones. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Jones explains that she added the stories of Ursa’s and Mama’s pasts to the novel only after her editor, Toni Morrison, asked “What about Ursa’s past?” (Jones and Tate 142). With the incorporation of Ursa’s and her mother’s stories, the novel develops two levels of storytelling—the personal/contemporary and the epic/historical. Jones explains that she wanted to create the “sense of an intimate history, particularly a personal history, and also to contrast it with a varied, broad kind of impersonal telling of the Corregidora story” (Jones and Tate 143). On one level, Jones taps into the collective memory of sexual violence during New World slavery, creating an epic account of this historical trauma, through the telling of one family’s story. On another level, Ursa’s narrative, spoken in simple language,

suggests to Claudia Tate the telling of “a very private story... that Ursa had especially selected me to hear” (Jones and Tate 143). The goal of Ursa’s narrative ultimately must be to wrest her personal story and sexuality from the collective story and identity her foremother’s script for her. These two levels of storytelling are essential to the eventual completion of Ursa’s therapeutic process. Just as Jones and her editor did not deem the novel complete until recounting the full family history, Ursa’s journey in the novel is not complete until she incorporates her mother’s and her own stories into the family history. In this process, Ursa translates her family narrative, changing the meaning and context of the traumatic history, so she can differentiate from it by performing it “with a difference” by singing the blues and through physical re-enactment (Rushdy 62).

#### Postmemorial Identification: Scripting and Enacting

Remembering our earlier discussion of trauma which Caruth defines as being “possessed by an image or event,” some readers of *Corregidora* might argue that Great Gram and Gram’s relentless repetitions of their experiences with Corregidora demonstrate the extent to which they have been traumatized (5). Ursa and her mother, however, suffer postmemorial trauma from their identification with their foremothers’ memories. Ursa struggles throughout the novel with traumatic memories that recur at will and frequently out of her control. These memories often feature her as a small child sitting on Great Gram’s lap as her elder recounts her personal narrative or standing before Gram, a towering figure to a small child, as she tells her stories.

*Great Gram sat in the rocker. I was on her lap. She told the same story over and over again. She had her hands around my waist, and I had my back to her. While she talked, I stared down at her hands (11).*



*Gram was standing in the doorway looking down at me. She looked tall then, because I was little, but Mama said she wasn't no more than five feet. ... I wouldn't take my eyes off her. She kept looking down at me (23).*

As a child, Ursa is helpless before the towering figures of her elders who relentlessly pass on their memories: “*Always their memories, but never my own*” (100). Most disturbing about this scenario is the repetition of sexually graphic stories to one so young. Monier suggests that even as Great Gram presents scenes of violation, the added confusion of her suppressed desire comes through the telling as well: “Great Gram rubs five year old Ursa’s thighs while she describes young slavemaster Corregidora as ‘a big strapping man’: she then ‘catches herself’ and pulls her hands away, but not before evidence of her own suppressed desire leaves its own imprint on Ursa’s memory” (97). Unable to assimilate such violence and desire into the understanding of a child, Ursa reaches adulthood still grappling with the traumatic memories on which she has been raised. Additionally, when on one occasion Ursa questions the veracity of Great Gram’s story, “*She slapped me. ... I was five years old then*” (14). Both Mama and Ursa, literally nursed on their foremother’s stories of Corregidora, experience the trauma of premature knowledge and forced indoctrination into Great Gram and Gram’s belief system. Great Gram’s strong reaction to Ursa’s question reflects the seriousness of her endeavor to create her own history, “a conscious collection of memories that, like official history, eliminates contradiction” (Monier 96).

Ultimately, Ursa and Mama are so well versed in their foremother’s constructed history that they often unconsciously recite that history verbatim. Excerpts from these maternal narratives appear throughout the novel, interrupting Ursa’s narrative, her sleep and the progression of the novel’s plot. According to Dubey, these interruptions “impede

the linear forward movement of the plot. As Ursa tries to recover from her hysterectomy and to create a new story of her sexual desire, the old story of the Corregidora women inexorably carries her back into the past. The vacillating forward and backward movements between the two stories give rise to an acute sense of temporal impasse” (82). This sense of temporal impasse is fitting in a novel about the power of the past infringing upon the present. Possessed by images of the violent past, Ursa and her mother are unable to move forward. Although time literally moves forward in the novel, the two remain trapped in the roles cast for them until articulation of their own histories enables Ursa and to a lesser extent Mama to break free. Although the reader has little access to Mama’s thought and dream life, Ursa observes her mother to be at least as possessed by the Corregidora narratives as she is. When Ursa visits her and asks to hear her story, Mama’s story soon gives way to the narratives that have been recited to her: “Mama kept talking until it wasn’t her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn’t Mama now, she was Great Gram talking” (124). In Mama’s case, her personal narrative remains undifferentiated from and subordinate to her mother and grandmother’s stories. “It was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora women, was her memory too, as strong with her as her own private memory” (129). Her inability to separate herself from the memories passed down to her demonstrates that Mama, like Ursa, remains traumatized, possessed by the past.

Traumatized by their ancestral legacy, Mama and Ursa not only recite but reenact the family history in their own lives. In Mama’s case, “intersubjective communion” with her foremothers developed through years of listening closely to their stories causes her to live out “the experiences they describe” giving primacy in her life to their stories and the

role they script for her and refusing to establish an existence independent of their expectations of her (Rushdy 35). When Ursa returns to Bracktown to hear her mother's story, her mother expresses disappointment that "Corregidora's [history had] never been enough" for Ursa (111). Mama, following her mother and grandmother's lead, has lived her life as if Corregidora were enough for her. When Ursa encourages Mama to tell the story of her relationship with Ursa's father, "Her face tightened for a moment. 'Corregidora is responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn't happened that part of my life never would have happened'" (111). Not only does Mama "not want to give" her history, she attributes the only major event in her history to Corregidora (110). If not to make generations, Mama seems unable or unwilling to consider any reason to desire or engage in a relationship with a man. Just as her foremothers portray themselves as the passive victims of Corregidora's desires, Mama takes no ownership of her desire for Martin, Ursa's father. Recalling her early encounters with him, she remarks, "Something got into me.... It was like my whole body knew. Just knew what it wanted, and I kept going back there.... It was like my whole body wanted you, Ursa" (115, 117). In keeping with the model of reproductive desire taught her by her foremothers, Mama suggests that her own desire to make generations is instinctive. Dubey describes clearly Mama's efforts to convince herself: "Ursa's mother repeatedly asserts the bodily basis of reproductive desire in an unsuccessful effort to naturalize her ancestors' ideology" (79). Convincing herself that her body acts only as a vehicle to make generations, Mama can not articulate or act on her own sexual desire for Martin because such desire would fall outside the parameters of her scripted role. Dubey argues, however, that Mama's "first giving of herself in childbirth, far from exhaust[s] all that she has to give, instead [it]

creates a residue that cannot be given within the terms of the reproductive system” (79). Carrying this “excessive feminine desire” that cannot be contained in the Corregidora ideology, Mama is left, like her mothers, living a life of “*Desire, and loneliness*” (Dubey 79, *Corregidora* 101). Mama’s sacrifice, however, does not guarantee the approval of her foremothers. In a dream conversation with Mutt, Ursa contemplates the reason for Great Gram and Gram’s “resentment” of her mother: “*There was what they never spoke, Mutt, what even they wouldn’t tell me. How all but one of them had the same lover? Did they begrudge her that? Was that their resentment*” (103)? Mama seems to disappoint her foremothers because her task of making generations requires that she deviate from the script by *choosing* a lover. Even this hint of desire separates her from her mother and grandmother and suggests the impossibility, short of returning to Corregidora’s time and place, for Mama to live up to her mothers’ expectations. Because passing down their memories of Corregidora has become their “all-consuming life task,” Great Gram and Gram require the same dedication from Mama even when perfect repetition of their experience is not possible (Laub, “Truth” 63). In spite of her efforts to adhere to her scripted role, Mama experiences both postmemorial feelings of inadequacy because she can not repeat the past and her foremothers’ disappointment in her as an imperfect vessel for transmitting their history.

Mama’s inability to claim her own desire follows the pattern established for her by Great Gram and Gram who deny their desire for Corregidora. Venetria Patton suggests that “The Corregidora women respond to their abuse by repressing their sexuality and focusing on their womb, rather than their vagina” (144). Their embrace of maternity, according to Patton, becomes an attempt to restore them to socially acceptable

gender roles, counteracting slavery's work of de-gendering them by rendering them as purely sexual beings. Separating themselves from the role in which Corregidora casts them restores a modicum of feminine purity, necessarily devoid of sexual desire, to Great Gram and Gram and allows them to cast themselves as passive victims of Corregidora's evil lust. Years later, the Corregidora women keep a picture of their violator, "One Great Gram smuggled out, I guess, so we'd know who to hate" (10). Great Gram explains that the picture gave her "*something to point to, and say, 'That's what evil looks like'*" (12). For Great Gram and Gram, Corregidora's picture provides evidence of the existence of their violator and reinforces both their hatred of him and need to make generations to attest to his atrocities.<sup>4</sup> Amy Gottfried argues that in their post-slavery strategy the Corregidora women re-commodify themselves as they shift from being defined by Corregidora as "pussy" to being "self-defined as womb. The function of woman's body, therefore, is single-minded still: No longer a sexual commodity, it has become a political commodity" (560-561). This re-commodification of the female body leaves Ursa and her mother objectified with few options for forming a sexual identity appropriate to the time and place in which they live. Neither is able to develop healthy relationships with the men in their lives because the inherited family narrative casts all men as rapists and all women as victims. As a member of the postmemorial generation who has already been removed from her scripted role, Ursa is able to question the sexual identity Great Gram and Gram construct for her and look beneath their superficial hatred of Corregidora to characterize Great Gram and Gram's feelings as "*Hate and desire. Two humps on the*

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<sup>4</sup> From the postmemorial perspective, I would argue that this portrait of Corregidora provides for Mama and Ursa a point of entry into a historical space inaccessible to them from their contemporary setting of twentieth-century Kentucky. During the novel, Ursa has the picture in her possession and takes it out "every now and then so I won't forget what he looked like" (10). The picture enables her to access the mythic place of memory in which Corregidora women are trained to live.

*same camel*” (102). The tenacity with which the two older women cling to the memory of Corregidora does cause the reader to wonder, as Martin does, “How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love” (131). The confusion of feeling is compounded when we consider Corregidora’s double relationship to Gram as rapist and father. I would contend that Great Gram and Gram’s litany of hatred toward Corregidora serves to conceal the deeper ambivalence of their memory and deflect attention from their paradoxical devotion to the man who violated them and their refusal, even years later, to act on any other desire in their lives. Nevertheless, Mama’s postmemorial identification causes her to obliterate her own desire and live according to the script her mother and grandmother write for her.

In her marriage to Martin, Mama enacts her maternal scripting. Suffering the paradoxes of being the first Corregidora woman to have a husband who is not Corregidora, Mama maintains the required loyalty to Corregidora much to the detriment of her relationship with Martin. Melvin Dixon suggests in *Ride Out the Wilderness* that Corregidora essentially serves as “husband to all the women, including Mama who, although she married Martin and later separated from him, kept her maiden name” (113). This maintenance of Corregidora’s name suggests a certain acceptance of his patriarchy and the received history that comes with it. The Corregidora women inadvertently allow the sexual roles established on Corregidora’s plantation to remain the rule in their own interactions with men. Although Mama takes a husband, she never allows him to possess her as much as she is possessed by her role as a Corregidora woman. This role causes her to write Martin into the role of violence played by Corregidora. When Mama first meets Martin she refuses to tell him her name. By refusing to give her name, Mama

symbolically maintains her identification with her mother and grandmother and their traumatic legacy. In the novel, only Ursa has a name that distinguishes her from the others, but all four women hold tenaciously to Corregidora's surname. Later after their marriage, Mama refuses to make love to Martin, arguably because he has already fulfilled his usefulness by fathering Ursa, but also because she suspects that her connection to Martin causes Great Gram and Gram to hate her. Mama continually frustrates Martin sexually because her ancestral script allows no room for her to desire, love, or enjoy a healthy relationship with him. The frustration of Martin's desires becomes a group activity when Gram exposes her breasts to him as if to taunt him. When she finally decides to end the game, Gram calls Martin a "black bastard" telling him "you ain't had no right messing with my girl" (130). Here, Gram casts Martin in the role played by the black men on Corregidora's plantation who may have desired Corregidora's women but were emphatically denied access to them. Calling the advances of black men "nothing but a waste of pussy," Corregidora reserved Great Gram for the "cultivated [white] mens" that he sent to her in "private rooms" (124). In the patriarchal system of slave society, the rights to choose the objects of one's sexual desire and to experience sexual satisfaction are the prerogatives of white men. Great Gram and Gram's rejection of Martin as a "black bastard" messing with their girl carries the hierarchy of the plantation to their new home in Kentucky and maintains their loyalty to Corregidora and his valuation of them as too good for black men.<sup>5</sup> Thus, even though necessity requires that a man be found to serve as "surrogate breeder for Corregidora," after his initial act of

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<sup>5</sup> In this instance, their absorption of the slave master's code seems to demonstrate that Great Gram and Gram fit the Black Nationalist conception of the castrating black matriarch who maintains the authority of the white slaveholder at the expense of the black man. The complexity of their hatred of Corregidora, however, evades such easy analysis. See Dubey 73-75 for a fuller discussion.

procreation, all of the Corregidora women's (including Mama's) actions toward Martin are designed to push him away (Dixon 115).

When Martin finally leaves Mama after almost two years, he departs feeling hurt and used. He later draws Mama to visit him in Cincinnati by sending her money he knows she will return (rather than allow herself to be beholden to him). During that visit he releases his rage on her, beating her, tearing her clothes, and sending her down the street "lookin like a whore" (121). Martin humiliates Mama sexually in response to her sexual humiliation of him, but also reenacts the historical legacy of reducing the Corregidora woman to the position of whore. Realizing that she has been complicit in this action, Mama gives up on men explaining "I carried him to the point where he ended up hating me, Ursa. And that's what I knew I'd keep doing. That's what I knew I'd do with any man" (121). Cheryl Wall suggests that upon seeing the hurt behind Martin's violence, Mama must seek to understand that hurt and the "legacy of self-hate that fuels it" (134). She argues further that when Mama and Ursa share their personal stories with each other, they "seize the power to revise the narratives they can shape in the present" (135). While I agree that Mama is profoundly affected by the hurt she causes Martin, the realization seems to paralyze her rather than encourage change. After grudgingly telling Ursa her story, I see little evidence that Mama has decided to change the course of her future. Her inability to break free from the maternal script leaves her to live a life of desire and loneliness. In this character, Jones presents a cautionary tale of what can happen to a child of postmemory who loses herself in the quest to bear witness to her ancestors' traumas and does not perform the difficult work on differentiating from her



ancestral inheritance. Mama finally experiences the greatest danger of postmemory and paves the way for Ursa to do the same.

### The Archive of Flesh

While there are remarkable similarities between Ursa's history and her mother's as they live in the shadow of their inherited traumatic legacy, Ursa's experience differs significantly from her mother's because, as the novel opens, she has lost her ability to make generations. When she comes home from the hospital, she feels "as if something more than the womb had been taken out" (6). Because so much of her purpose in life has been defined by her reproductive capability, the loss of her womb represents even more than the loss of the possibility of motherhood. Not being able to make generations causes Ursa to feel she has let her foremothers down and broken her promise to Mama not to "*bruise any of [her] seeds*" (41). Although Ursa has attempted to establish an identity separate from her foremothers by leaving her hometown and singing the blues, the loss of her reproductive capacity becomes a crisis for her precisely because it makes her unable to fulfill their expectations of her. This crisis requires that she reconsider her relationship to the Corregidora legacy and begin to write a new script for herself.

Because her crisis and traumatic inheritance pertain to the realm of the body, Ursa's struggle with the family legacy is most evident in her preoccupation with her own body. Her first direct mention of the family past follows Tadpole recounting a conversation he has with a nurse who wonders if Ursa might be a gypsy. Tadpole tells the nurse, "if she's a gypsy I'm a Russian" to which Ursa comments, "How do you know you ain't? One a them might a got your great-grandmama down in a Volga boat or

something” (8). This seemingly off-hand comment demonstrates Ursa’s immediate association of her physical appearance (which reveals her mixed heritage) with sexual violence and her assumption of the pervasiveness of such violence. On another occasion when Mutt asks her “*what makes your hair so long?*” Ursa responds, “*I got evil in me... Corregidora’s evil*” (42). Wearing the marks of a history of shame and violence on her body causes her to feel “stained with another’s past.... Their past in my blood. ... *Are you mine, Ursa, or theirs?*” (45). Although Mutt asks the italicized question in her dream, Ursa continually struggles with whether she can claim herself or whether the script written on her body will claim her.

Ursa’s preoccupation with her body, additionally, reflects one of the particularities of postmemory in the context of slavery. Because slaves were valued for their bodies and their bodies’ produce and because the status of slave was passed from the body of the mother to that of her child, postmemory in this context must consider the body and the legacy written upon it. Realizing one day that she favors her foremothers, the issue of her body’s legacy confronts Ursa:

I realized for the first time I had what all those women had. I’d always thought I was different. *Their* daughter, but somehow different. Maybe less Corregidora. ... But when I saw that picture, I knew I had it. What my mother and my mother’s mother before her had. The mulatto women. ... I have everything they had, except generations. I can’t make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby *had* come—what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her*, or *them*? (60, emphasis in the original)

In this passage, Ursa expresses her latent fear of being like her mulatto mothers and forcing her own descendants to adhere to the requirements of the ancestral script. Her changed circumstances, however, enable her to begin to probe the depths of her identification with her family history of miscegenation and victimization. Venetria

Patton argues that because the slave's body was "' charted, zoned, and made to bear meaning, a meaning which is always subsequently apprehended both by the female subject and her 'commentators' as an internal condition'... the treatment of the female [slave]'s exterior leads to the constitution of her interior" (Patton 10). Thus, in slaveholding society, the raped and violated body of the female slave "constructed her as an object to be maltreated" externally and suggested a "naturally immoral and promiscuous" disposition internally (Patton 11, Robinson 154). Although far removed from the time and place of her foremothers' victimization, Ursa considers herself to "have a birthmark between [her] legs" indicating that the sexual exploitation of her ancestors marks her contemporary body (45). Her physical appearance, additionally, causes her to be read as wanton by those who view her. She recalls men in Detroit who try to draw her into prostitution (70-71) and women in Bracktown who call her a "red-headed heifer" assuming she will try to seduce their husbands (72). Thus, Ursa's physical body, which reveals her family history of sexual violation, causes her to be read as ripe for exploitation and adds significant complication to Ursa's experience of postmemory.

In her mental perambulations following her accident, however, Ursa begins to separate her maternal ancestors from their violated bodies: "I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter's father. The father of her daughter's daughter. How many generations? ... And you with the coffee-bean face, what were you? You were sacrificed. They knew you only by the signs of your sex" (59). Ursa's efforts to understand the interiority of her foremothers and the millions of others like them will eventually enable her to see them, not as bodies to be

violated but people who experienced violation. In this way, she will also be able to separate her body from the history written on it and the legacy she has been trained to transmit. Although Great Gram and Gram's strategy of making generations consciously shifts emphasis away from their bodies' sexual functions to their reproductive function, they continue to view bodies, particularly those of their descendants, as objects, "*tabula rasa* upon which they can inscribe their story of sexual violence and rage" (Gottfried 564). After her accident, however, Ursa begins to question this ethos and asks, "Would I have kept it up?" Rendered unable to make generations, Ursa becomes able to consider options other than becoming a vessel for transmitting her familial narrative; however, she will spend years completing the process of reclaiming her body and her self from the dictates of her traumatic inheritance.

Beyond the story written on her body, Ursa, like her mother, experiences in her body the results of her identification with the Corregidora legacy. In her marriage to Mutt, Ursa enacts many aspects of her family history—at times mirroring Great Gram and Gram's relationships with Corregidora and, at other times, her mother's with Martin. The common theme in each case, however, is the reduction of the relationship to sexual objectification and violence. Because Ursa keeps her name when she marries Mutt, she, like her mother, maintains Corregidora as her symbolic husband and casts Mutt to fill Corregidora's role. In their marriage, Mutt demonstrates the same proprietary control over Ursa's sexuality as Corregidora has over that of his slaves. In her dreams Ursa imagines Corregidora inspecting the genitalia of his female slaves: "*I'll ... sing about the Portuguese who fingered your genitals. His pussy*" (54). The emphatic "His" demonstrates his determined ownership and sexual objectification of his female slaves.

Mutt similarly calls Ursa's genitals, "*his pussy*" and verbally establishes his connection to Corregidora, saying "Your pussy's a little gold piece, ain't it, Urs? My little gold piece" (46, 60). Like Corregidora, Mutt demands complete ownership over and sole access to Ursa's sexuality. His anger over her singing relates largely to his suspicion that, when she performs, her sexuality is on display for other men to consume. When she refuses to stop singing, he accuses her of being a prostitute like her foremothers. "If you wasn't one of them you wouldn't like them mens watching after you" (154). Unable to see her singing as an expression of her mind as well as her body, Mutt is obsessed with "safeguarding his woman from the gaze of other men" and engages "in the same proprietary impulse as that exhibited by Corregidora" (Robinson 154-155). Reducing Ursa to a sexual possession, Mutt objectifies her by groping her on the dance floor at Dixieland and threatening to auction her to the men at Happy's. In these situations, Mutt places Ursa in the position of whore and slave, synonymous terms in her family history. He begins his final showdown with Ursa by asking her, "Is you they woman, or mines?" and ends it by resorting to violence (167). The legacy of sexual victimization and violence inherited from Ursa's family past claims another set of victims in Ursa's marriage. After the attack, Ursa holds onto her anger and her status as victim as her foremothers hold onto theirs. Just as Great Gram remembers herself as the unambiguous victim of Corregidora's evil, Ursa at first casts Mutt as the unambiguous villain in her situation: "He left me when he throwed me down those steps. I didn't leave him" (58). Unlike Great Gram, however, Ursa acknowledges, at least internally, the ambiguity of her feelings for Mutt who, after all, is the intended auditor of her mental perambulations. Through dream conversations over the twenty-two year span of the novel, Ursa slowly

moves out of passive repetition of her family history. During this long process, Ursa, like her mother, lives an existence marked by “*Desire, and loneliness*” as she repeatedly refuses the advances of men (101). Although Ursa recognizes her own desire at some level, she has been so well trained to deny it that her primary means of managing her sexuality is withholding. Ursa learns early to push men away, and for years after her brief second marriage to Tadpole, remains alone, paralyzed by her inability to engage in sexual activity that does not repeat the patterns of the past. Her eventual release from the paralyzing grip of history comes when she manages to reclaim her individual self and her body from the dictates of the ancestral scripting and establish an identity separate from the familial identification with victimization.

#### Learning to Improvise on the Past: The Path to Differentiation

Ursa begins the process of differentiating from her ancestral legacy of victimization by translating her family history in narrative and through blues performance. Ursa begins to break away from the passive repetition of the stories she inherits by changing the parameters of the telling. Unable to pass her history down to a daughter, who ideally would absorb it as she ingests her mother’s milk, Ursa must speak her narrative to an alternate auditor who may require explanation, question the meaning and significance of what he is told and even demand the right to respond. In her dream conversations with Mutt, Ursa translates the narratives she has consumed unquestioningly since birth into a form understandable to someone outside the family. In the process she must explain her familial heritage according to the terms of her lived experience. Realizing that her mother’s and her own stories are absent from the Corregidora history,

she determines to incorporate them into the family narrative. In one of Ursa's most important dream conversations, she discusses with Mutt her desire to know her full history in order to understand herself and her experiences with him.

*"I wanted to give you something, Mutt, but now I can't give you anything. I never told you how it was. Always their memories, but never my own..."*  
*"Stop, Ursa, why do you go on making dreams?"*  
*"Till I feel satisfied that I could have loved, that I could have loved you, till I feel satisfied, alone, and satisfied that I could have loved."*  
*"Do you still hate me?"*  
*"Yes. In the hospital, standing over me. You. I hated you...." ...*  
*"You'll come back."*  
*"If I do, I'll come with all my memories. I won't forget anything."*  
 (100, 103-104)

Addressing herself to an audience that will question what she says, Ursa must consider what she has been taught and what she will pass down. Her story is changed as she addresses it to a man, who has stood in Corregidora's shoes (as husband and abuser) but is not Corregidora. In many ways, Mutt is critical to both the beginning and the resolution of Ursa's quest. His jealous rage causes the accident that results in her initial crisis, while her unresolved desire for him precipitates the novel's closing scene. During the 22 years in between, while Ursa imagines telling Mutt her history, the contemporary narrative, representative of Ursa's own life, stalls until she can complete the long and difficult task of translating and re-constructing the entire family narrative. As Ursa slowly reconsiders the history she has inherited, she manages to change the chronological boundaries of the family history, placing Great Gram and Gram's stories within a larger context into which she incorporates her mother's and her own stories.

Ursa's process of re-telling her family history can be thought to consist of a series of recitals beginning with Great Gram. Her first experience with family memory is sitting on Great Gram's lap as she tells her story over and over again. By the time Great

Gram tells her story to Ursa, the third generation of her descendents, the repetition has become the “unchanging story... repeated over and over again” that Nadine Fresco calls a “screen of words” (quoted in *Witness* 64). *“It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger”* (11). By the time Ursa hears Great Gram’s stories the emotions originally associated with them have become encased in the words, such that Great Gram retells her story as her only means of accessing that anger. Her refusal to allow Ursa to question her story reflects her desire to fix her memories, making them unchangeable. In Great Gram’s tale “there’s no ambivalence... no paradoxes since the tale is of pure victimage and equally pure evil, and little feeling that Ursa was supposed to be searching for her own identity at all” (Rushdy 38-39). As in Artie’s childhood encounter with Vladek from the epigraph of *Maus*, Great Gram’s stories provide no lessons useful to Ursa in her current situation and reflect the vast psychic distance between the current day and the scene of violation Great Gram is trying to invoke. In her stories, Great Gram turns memory into formula and requires a formulaic response. In this way the pain of the past bleeds into the present resulting in behavior inappropriate to the contemporary moment. “Almost completely controlled by the coercive language Great Gram uses to describe the persistent sexual assaults she suffered in Brazil, Ursa finds herself falling into a formulaic and impersonal discourse, using ‘Corregidora’ as a germinal word that triggers off a set of complete associations which ultimately form an established narrative she is bound to tell” (Rushdy 37). Being bound by the established narrative keeps Ursa from using Great Gram’s memories to “give value and meaning to [her] personal history” (Rushdy 37). A major component of



Ursa's quest in the novel then becomes unlearning the inflexibility she has learned from Great Gram and learning to improvise on the family narrative, ultimately enabling her to create a continuum between the time and place of Great Gram's history and the lived present.

Although Ursa soon lapses into recitation of Gram's words when she remembers standing before Gram's towering figure as a child, Gram's words allow Ursa the possibility of flexibility which is wholly absent in Great Gram's testimony. Rushdy argues that "Unlike Great Gram's inflexible and resolutely unambivalent tales, Gram's story is about the difficulty of recollection, the fluid quality of experience, the changing of the nature of feelings" (40). While Gram, like Great Gram, rigidly emphasizes the importance of making generations, she also understands that Ursa must interact with the memories passed on to her: "*They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness*" (72). Gram invites Ursa to consider the images and memories that have been put into her mind, burn out the ones that don't advance the purpose of bearing witness and keep the ones that do. Interestingly, Gram, who remembers Corregidora as both rapist and father, is also the one who introduces Ursa to the blues (146) and who acknowledges, what Great Gram will not, that feelings do (and perhaps should) change with time. While Great Gram uses her words to access the same old emotions, Gram realizes that "*it's hard to always remember what you were feeling when you ain't feeling it exactly that way no more*" (79). Gram's narrative gives Ursa permission to interact with the past and make adjustments, which is the goal of translating the traumatic memory. This second recital of the family narrative

makes possible the revision of inherited memory that Ursa enacts at the end of the novel when she acknowledges both her desire for and anger at Mutt but chooses not to repeat on Mutt Great Gram's actions on Corregidora. From Gram Ursa gains the possibility of possessing the family narrative rather than being possessed by it.

From Mama, Ursa gains the pieces that connect her personal history to the matriarchal narrative and learns the dangers of holding too rigidly to the dictates of her maternal inheritance. Trapped in a history far removed from the current time and place, Ursa can not translate the family history into her own personal narrative until she has the missing link of her mother's story. When she realizes the void in her life, she declares "I couldn't be satisfied until I had seen Mama, talked to her, until I had discovered her private memory" (104). In her dream sequence just before her trip to Bracktown, she tells Mutt she will come back "*with all my memories. I won't forget anything*" (104). Leaving Bracktown, Ursa immediately begins to incorporate her mother's narrative into her own, imagining herself hearing the voice of a woman and man. The man asks, "Why do you keep fighting me? Or is it yourself you keep fighting?" (132) She never hears that man's voice again, but the exchange suggests a conversation her parents might have had. Having now incorporated them into her stream of memory, Ursa can begin considering, "what had I done about my *own* life?" and then proceeds to narrate the story of her upbringing and history with Mutt (132). Ultimately, in this third recital of family history, Mama teaches Ursa that "the epic, impersonal tale of a family's travails in slavery can threaten to consume the teller and alienate the listener unless it is supplemented with personal, intimate tales that incorporate the teller's and her more recent ancestors' experience into that epic structure" (Rushdy 42). Once Ursa begins to

re-contextualize the epic narrative and merge it with her mother's and her own personal narratives, she gains the possibility of breaking the hold of the past in her own life.

While re-telling her history successfully translates and re-frames it, because the process remains internal, it does not constitute true differentiation from the traumatic inheritance.

It is through the blues that Ursa will achieve true differentiation.

In *Corregidora*, the blues form serves both as the organizing principle for the novel and the artistic means by which Ursa differentiates herself from the oppressive dictates of traumatic memory. Jones' use of the blues gives her a point of entry into collective African American postmemory because the blues mood, form and lyrics come with already familiar associations for her readers. The circularity of *Corregidora's* narrative structure, the repetitive recitals of family history, and the general tone of raw but tender emotion, all relate to the blues structure of the novel. As a blues singer, Ursa's voice is similarly characterized as hard and tender: "You got a hard kind of voice... like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath.... That kind of voice that can hurt you... Hurt you and make you still want to listen" (96). As she considers the legacy of slavery, Ursa reflects on the hard but tender women whose lives she represents in song: "And what they had to do in those days. I always get back to that. The tobacco fields or coffee ones. Hard because you had to be, but still those tender-eyed women and hands so tender behind tobacco calluses with their men" (41). The recurring images of hard but tender emotion reflect the contradictory and ambiguous nature of the traumatic history. No matter how much Great Gram may try to construct an "official history" of her experiences, her words do not conceal the ambivalence of her hatred and desire for

Corregidora (Monier 96). The blues provides a space, however, that can contain such contradictions.

Ursa's choice of the blues as her medium of artistic expression enables her both to translate her heritage through her lived experience and to differentiate from it by representing her inherited memory in a form very different from the one in which she receives it. Transforming her family narrative into the blues changes it from static repetition to a musical composition that must be repeated with variation. Additionally, because her mother disapproves of her singing, Ursa's performance of the blues immediately becomes a form of resistance to the familial narrative and scripting. After her first performance following her accident, Ursa remembers this conversation with her mother over her singing:

*“Songs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing. The voice is a devil.”*  
*“Naw, Mama. You don't understand. Where did you get that?”...*  
*But still I'll sing as you talked it, your voice humming, sing about the Portuguese who fingered your genitals. “The Portuguese who bought slaves paid attention only to the genitals.” Slapped you across the cunt till it was bluer than black. Concubine daughter. (53-54)*

Ursa's conversation about the blues bleeds easily into a remembrance of the blues history she struggles to articulate. The blues form of the novel ultimately gives Ursa space on which to consider the complex and contradictory emotions both of her personal experience and her historical legacy. Dubey suggests that “The blues form in *Corregidora* ... liberates a black narrative voice that is at once old and new, oppressed and free, anonymous and singular—a blues voice that is unique in its ability to contain such contradictions in a state of creative tension” (82). Thus, Jones uses the blues form in the novel to create “a state of productive disequilibrium” that will allow Ursa to love

and hate Mutt at once, to address both her memories and hurts to him throughout the narrative, to consider Corregidora as rapist and as father, to recognize the co-existence of the present with the past and to deliver an individual and collective history (Dubey 84).

Ursa finally breaks free of her postmemorial entanglement by embodying her history and “perform[ing] it with difference” through blues performance (Rushdy 62). The blues provides Ursa a powerful means of translating and differentiating from her familial legacy of objectification, victimization and sexual violation. As Cheryl Wall cogently articulates in *Worrying the Line*, although the blues tended not to be overtly political, its emphasis on the person and personal struggles of the black blues artist, in fact, subtly politicized the form: “In a system that denied his humanity, [early blues artist Robert] Patton’s insistence on the significance of his feelings... was a heroic act” (118). When Ursa finds herself unable to make generations, she must create a new explanation for herself and her sexuality. Having been raised to fulfill the collective mission of her ancestral legacy, Ursa has not been allowed a personal existence or private memory. In its odd inversion of slavery’s code, the Corregidora agenda has objectified Ursa, enslaving her to the requirement to make generations and obliterate her personal life and identity in service of a larger cause. After her accident, “Ursa struggles to figure out ... how to become her own woman... without having the words to describe the effort” (Wall 124). The blues’ insistence on the person and personal feelings of the singer creates a space in which Ursa can affirm her individual agency, work through and find a means of expressing her own feelings. In performance, she is able to “*give witness the only way I can*” and use her music “to explain what I can’t explain” (54, 56). Rejecting her mother’s suggestion that blues are evil (possibly because they violate the Corregidora

ethos by allowing Ursa to separate from the collective identity to explore her own), Ursa's blues save her, providing her over the years "a perspective and a vocabulary of emotion as well as verbal expression that allows her to work through the emotional debris of her personal and familial history" (Wall 119). As her form of postmemorial differentiation, singing the blues helps Ursa to develop the means to explain herself in light of *and* separate from her traumatic inheritance. This enables her to "sing a song that can express both her sameness and difference from her ancestors" (Dubey 85) and achieve a "whole and consummate being."<sup>6</sup>

The gendered particularities of Ursa's upbringing require that she reclaim herself from sexual objectification, not in this case for men's pleasure but for fulfillment of the requirement to make generations. One of the empowering realities of the experience of the woman blues singer is that singing the blues provides a space for "transforming black women from sexual objects to sexual subjects in their own regard" (Wall 118). This transformation relates again to the blues' emphasis on the personal and on performance. Angela Davis suggests that the blues "incorporate a new consciousness about private love relationships, which had been denied to Black people, except in a rudimentary way, as long as they were slaves. In many ways, in fact, interpersonal relationships functioned as metaphors for the freedom they sought."<sup>7</sup> Forced to engage in sexual intercourse on demand and with strangers, the Corregidora women were made to "*make love to anyone, so they couldn't love anyone*" (104). On the plantation, where the black woman's sexuality was controlled and consumed as the slaveholder's patriarchal prerogative, having the right to choose a lover was a freedom denied black men and women, and

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<sup>6</sup> Gayl Jones quoted in Rushdy, *Remembering Generations*, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Davis quoted in Wall, *Worrying the Line*, 118.

asserting that right was a dangerous act of resistance.<sup>8</sup> In the later Corregidora household, Great Gram and Gram transform the slaveholder's oppressive right into a matriarchal prerogative to determine how their descendants' bodies will be used. The blues, however, assert individual desire and choice and pursue the possibility of personal love relationships between men and women that overturn the codes of both slavery and the Corregidora matriarchy. Although Ursa's relationships with men fall far short of being healthy or affirming, her quest in the novel to feel "*satisfied that [she] could have loved*" requires her to rescue her body and her sexuality from the Corregidora script and explore her own desire (103).

On stage, Ursa performs in public a level of sexuality she can not engage in privately. In "'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," Hazel Carby argues that "the woman blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality out of the private into the public sphere" (247). Performing her sexuality in public enables Ursa to reclaim her body from the script of victimization and construct her own empowered sexual persona, or, using Dori Laub's words, to "undo [her] entrapment in a fate that cannot be known... but can only be repeated ... [through] a process of ... re-externalizing the event" ("Witness" 69). Projecting sexual desire "outside [her]self" frees Ursa from the maternal requirement to deny desire and enables "a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated" her and her ancestors' sexual experience (Laub, "Witness" 69). The stage, thus, gives Ursa a space to practice an expression of sexuality that she chooses and

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<sup>8</sup> Such acts of resistance came at great personal cost as demonstrated in the stories Great Gram and Gram tell of the fates of black men who attempt to get close to Corregidora's women (124-129) and of a black woman who resists her master's sexual advances by castrating him only to be forced to watch her own husband be castrated and bleed to death before being hanged herself (67).

controls and that disrupts and re-casts the lessons her traumatic inheritance has taught her about her body, her sexuality, and relationships between men and women. Choosing a man in the audience to which to sing during each performance, Ursa assumes the right to choose the recipient of her desire and assert herself as a sexual subject. Even in performance, however, Ursa does not feel free to sing “any song that had anything to do with opening up” (152). Ursa’s songs enact withholding and sexual restriction even while she performs in a sexually free space. While presenting herself as a sexual subject in performance, Ursa realizes that she “understood more than Mama knew about pushing a man out” (152). Although, as a blues singer, Ursa is able to acknowledge her desire, she still must also learn to act on it.

Ursa, ultimately, uses the blues not only to interrogate her own desires, but to understand better the desires and experiences of women like her. Ursa seeks, through the blues, to transform postmemory into “A new world song. A song branded with the new world” that would “touch my life and theirs,” incorporating her own pain as well as those of her ancestors, and tap into the collective consciousness of black women in the New World (59). Cheryl Wall suggests that “this song would express the realities and the longings of Ursa’s life as well as the lives of her foremothers that intertwine themselves with hers” (122). In this way, Ursa truly uses the blues as her means of bearing witness to herself, her ancestors, and the women of the African Diaspora. Forced to embody a traumatic history, she translates it through her body to transform it into blues composition: “*They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return*” (103). In this process, Ursa differentiates herself from her traumatic legacy by expressing it in a new form. Wall argues that “[t]he call-and-response form of the blues is well suited to



express the contradiction, conflict, and tension that is usually its subject. Those contradictions and conflicts are simply stated—or dramatized—in the blues; they are neither repressed nor resolved” (119). The space of the blues enables Ursa to interact with the multiple voices of her traumatic past—the oppressive voices of both the slave master and of her ancestors—and allows her to enter the conversation to question and respond to what has been passed down to her and choose what she will keep. Dubey suggests that “Ursa’s blues, accommodating as it does the contrary emotions of pleasure and pain, tenderness and violence... constitutes an alternative narrative form” that re-contextualizes the familial legacy (86). Ursa’s new world song may be that alternative narrative that not only re-contextualizes her inherited familial memory but incorporates the story of the Corregidora women into the larger narrative of women in Diaspora.<sup>9</sup>

#### Repetition with a Difference: Creating New Alternatives

The lessons Ursa learns from singing the blues prepares her to improvise on history when she meets Mutt again at the novel’s end. Their final encounter is, of course, marked with ambivalence: “What do they say about pleasure mixed with pain? That’s the way it always was with him” (50). Jones characterizes Ursa and Mutt’s relationship as a “blues relationship” but suggests that their final moments together “point... toward a kind of redemption” (Jones and Bell 285). By the time of their meeting, Ursa has not only found the capacity to act on her sexual desire, she has developed the “structures of feeling that give her access to that part of her family history that was not only unwritten

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<sup>9</sup> Using elements of Brazilian slave history in her exploration of the legacy of slavery in the United States, Jones incorporates a diasporic consciousness into *Corregidora*, quite possibly making this novel her “New World Song.” We might also think of Jones differentiating herself from the traumatic legacy of slavery in the United States by reading American slavery through the codes of Brazilian slavery. See Wall 126-8 and 136-138 for further discussion on the role of Brazilian history in *Corregidora*.

but also unspeakable. [Using] the powers of imagination and empathy” developed from her years of singing the blues, Ursa “fills in the gaps in the stories her foremothers have passed down” (Wall 138). After Mutt comes to see Ursa perform at the Spider, she returns with him to his room and initiates a sexual encounter.<sup>10</sup> As she performs fellatio on Mutt, she unravels the family secret, discovering what Great Gram could have done to Corregidora to cause him to hate her enough to want to kill her but still desire her: “In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love” (184). It that moment, Ursa becomes Great Gram and discovers that hidden within her great-grandmother’s tale of victimization is the possibility of agency. As the boundaries of past and present are blurred, Ursa realizes that Great Gram’s mysterious act resists Corregidora in the arena in which she is most vulnerable to him, the sexual: “A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, ... a moment that stops before it breaks the skin” (184). Great Gram’s act asserts her ability to kill her master and demonstrates her exercise of power even in the midst of oppression. While solving the family secret enables her to complete the family narrative, Ursa’s decision not to replicate Great Gram’s action recognizes her great grandmother’s agency and her own and represents the culmination of Ursa’s postmemorial process. In one moment, Ursa identifies with Great Gram, translates Great Gram’s experience through her body through enactment, and differentiates herself from her inherited traumatic memory by choosing different behavior. Realizing her power over Mutt (“I could kill you.”), Ursa chooses tenderness, pursuing “a course of action in which she would initiate the possibility for Mutt and her to create the space and time for a

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<sup>10</sup> Mahdu Dubey suggests that Ursa’s expression of non-reproductive heterosexuality in this scene affirms “a feminine power outside the reproductive system” and her assertion of her own sexual identity (80).

loving relationship” (184, Rushdy 54). Creating a third option to the historical choice between violence and victimization, Ursa frees herself from passive re-enactment of the destructive relational patterns of her family past and chooses behavior appropriate to her contemporary setting. Even though Ursa knows that she has not forgiven Mutt and their future together remains uncertain at best, this scene redeems Ursa from her oppressive ancestral legacy and makes possible the creation of a very different future.

More than resolution, the ending of Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* suggests the end of a process. The novel which begins with Ursa and Mutt’s separation ends with their reunion. While the reader can not be certain that the novel’s closing scene demonstrates a true reconciliation between Mutt and Ursa, we can be reasonably certain that it represents the culmination of Ursa’s postmemorial process. Having processed her past and its effect on her present, Ursa may be ready to see if she “could have loved” Mutt (103). The novel, nevertheless, ends with an ambiguity that does not allow the simple resolution of so complex a history and the relationships affected by it. Jones, appropriately, ends this blues novel with a blues dialogue between Ursa and Mutt.

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.  
 “Then you don’t want me.”  
 “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”  
 “Then you don’t want me.”  
 “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”  
 “Then you don’t want me.”  
 He shook me till I fell against him crying. “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither,” I said.  
 He held me tight. (185)

After Ursa recognizes her ability to inflict harm on him, Mutt shaking Ursa demonstrates his capacity to inflict harm on her. Although neither wants a lover who will hurt him/her, both recognize their ability to hurt and be hurt. The closing suggests a relationship

marked by pleasure and pain and demonstrates both that the line between victim and victimizer is not as clearly defined as Ursa has been led to believe and that past coexists with present as much as love coexists with hate: “I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora... But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return...?” (184) In interpersonal relationships haunted by the traumatic legacies of slavery, sexual exploitation and victimization, neat placement of blame or vindication is simply not possible. The novel, which offers at best a situational resolution, demonstrates the incomplete and ambivalent results of all postmemorial processes.

Ultimately, Ursa’s inability to achieve a decisive break from the oppressive past and “liberate a new black voice” reflects Gayl Jones’ criticism of the simple binaries of contemporary Black Aesthetic discourse (Dubey 84). First, Jones’ refusal to use her art to advance political purposes “intentionally disqualifies her work from the Black Aesthetic definition of good art” (Dubey 72). While *Corregidora* has been read to criticize the oppressive black matriarchal legacy from slavery, it also demonstrates how thoroughly many of the tenets of Black Nationalism mirror the ideologies of slavery. Great Gram’s strategy of making generations, for example, reflects the Black Nationalist requirement that female reproductive capacity be used for political purpose and demonstrates that the codes of slavery, of the Corregidora women, and of the black nationalists all objectify women’s bodies regardless of the intended end. Jones questions the Black Nationalist construction of black femininity by forcing her readers to ask, along with Ursa, how black womanhood is defined in the absence of reproductive capacity.

Her conclusion that sexual desire more fundamentally defines femininity than reproductive desire thoroughly unsettles prevailing thoughts about women. The novel's frequent examples of women undone by maternity additionally "betrays the contradictory nature of society's ideology of motherhood: at once a source of pride and of shame," and further unsettles the narrow definition of womanhood offered by Black Nationalist discourse (Dubey 79). Jones refuses to allow her novel to fit any neat expectation of Black Aesthetic ideology. She chooses the blues form which certain advocates of the Black Aesthetic (like Ron Karenga) revile as "deeply mired in the past and, hence, an ineffective vehicle for black nationalist discourse" while others (like Amiri Baraka) praise as "the only black cultural form that is free of white ideology" and therefore able to communicate "an authentic black voice" (Dubey 84, 83-84). Finally, rather than representing a decisive break with the oppressive past, *Corregidora's* "structure of incremental repetition refuses the possibility or even the desirability of linear rupture, and institutes instead a processual model of change that contains the terms past and present in a state of productive disequilibrium" (Dubey 84). Ultimately, in response to her cultural moment, Jones uses the blues form to "reconfigure the categories of past and present, individual and community, innovation and tradition" demonstrating the inextricable links between them (Dubey 88). In this way, Jones seems to deny the potential loss of cultural moorings resulting from social change, suggesting instead that the past exerts a powerful influence on the present, an influence which must not be ignored but processed if African American people are to heal the wounds of our history and develop the possibility of full and complete redemption from the codes and debilitating legacies of slavery.

CHAPTER 3: RECLAIMING AND RESTORING ROOTS:  
Contemporary Narratives of Slavery and  
African American Collective Postmemory

Although generations removed from the experience and direct memory of slavery, contemporary African American writers frequently return to this history in their literary works. This obsessive creation of narratives that re-create the experience of slavery suggests the haunting presence of this traumatic history in contemporary American society and its importance as the defining cultural trauma of the African American experience. These literary interventions often use fantastic, supernatural or innovative means to unearth this repressed and unresolved history to enable contemporary characters and readers to engage the slave past and explore its traumatic impact on its survivors and their descendants. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998) are two popular novels that use fantastic means to bring contemporary, African American protagonists into a direct, bodily experience with slavery. As Lisa Long argues, these novels do not seek simply to "set the record straight" by giving a more accurate portrayal of slavery or even to "raise the dead" by allowing enslaved ancestors to speak and live in imagined literary spaces; instead these novels endeavor "to *become* the dead, to embody and enact the protagonists' families' personal histories and our national past" (460). In other words, they literalize their protagonists' engagement with the slave past by enslaving them and causing them to endure the physical and psychological traumas of slavery. In *Kindred* Dana Franklin repeatedly travels bodily to ante-bellum Maryland to preserve the life of Rufus Weylin, a white slave-owning ancestor, and ensure the birth of Hagar Weylin, the first of her foremothers to record her family's history. In *Stigmata*, Lizzie DuBose's deceased grandmother, Grace, and great-

great grandmother, Ayo, travel to the present time to occupy Lizzie's body. I contend that these engagements with an ancestral past, with which these characters have no experiential link but deep affective connection, initiate an experience of postmemory, incorporating into the protagonists' contemporary lives memories of the traumatic ancestral experiences of a different time and place. Although Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents," in this chapter I will consider the experience of collective postmemory which I will define as the relation contemporary members of an ethnic or cultural group have to the historical traumas that have been remembered as the defining collective experience of that group ("Surviving Images" 9).

Unlike Ursa in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* who, more or less, willingly engages the past, Dana and Lizzie's explorations of their familial past are uncontrolled, "urgent, highly personal, and ... isolating" (Sievers 131). Butler and Perry leave Dana and Lizzie physically and psychologically scarred by their ventures into the past and burdened with memories not easily translated into their present circumstances or communicated to their contemporaries. These narratives then ask profound questions about what relationship twentieth-century African American women should have with their ancestral legacy of slavery and how that history shapes their contemporary lives. Thrust into their engagement with slavery involuntarily and without warning, Dana and Lizzie experience, in their twentieth-century bodies, what their captured and enslaved ancestors lived and must translate their new understanding of the past into their present lives. In *Kindred*, Dana completes six trips to nineteenth-century Maryland, her visits ranging in length from a few minutes to eight months and spaced over the interval of years from around

1811 to 1831. Although the mechanics of her travel are unknown, Dana is summoned to the past when her ancestor, Rufus, needs her. Essentially re-enslaved by her slave-holding ancestor, Dana has no control over when and how long she will remain in the past and is subject to increasing violence until she, through violence, frees herself from Rufus' hold. Beginning on her twenty-sixth birthday (June 7, 1976) and ending on the nation's two-hundredth birthday (July 4, 1976), Dana's travels to the past cause her to confront the personal implications of her slave heritage and expose the repressed underside of American history. Married to a white man, Dana must "plumb the depths of her own and America's interracial history" in order "to live in peace in her marriage" (Rody 75). In *Kindred*, Butler subjects Dana and her reader to all of the complications resulting from truly remembering the traumatic history of slavery. Discovering that the origin of her family line, as she knows it, is the rape of her African American foremother, Alice Greenwood, by her white forefather, Rufus Weylin, Dana must face and participate in the violent history of her origins, working to preserve Rufus' life to make possible his rape of Alice in order to ensure Dana's existence. Meanwhile, in *Stigmata* Lizzie's journey begins when, at age fourteen, she inherits a trunk containing her grandmother's quilt and her great-great grandmother's journal. Drawn by curiosity to these relics, Lizzie soon finds herself pulled into the lived experiences of her foremothers, who literally take over her body causing her to re-live the events of their lives, including Ayo being kidnapped from her African village, taken in shackles to the New World, sold at auction and whipped. Equally traumatic, Lizzie experiences Grace's frightening memories of being possessed by and re-living Ayo's experiences, feeling she is losing her mind, and fleeing north to save her family from her troubles. In *Stigmata*, Perry causes



Lizzie and the reader to consider what it would truly cost a contemporary African American woman to engage her history. Lizzie spends over a decade in psychiatric hospitals as she struggles to integrate her foremothers' traumatic experiences into her own being. In time, Lizzie comes to embody three lifetimes (Ayo's, Grace's and her own)<sup>1</sup> and works to reconnect her mother to her maternal lineage.

*Kindred* and *Stigmata* are important early and late participants in a significant trend of African American women writers creating woman-centered contemporary narratives of slavery. These novels which I read as explorations of an African American collective postmemory represent a desire among contemporary African Americans to understand the traumas of their ancestral past and reclaim lost ancestors. *Kindred* and *Stigmata* are notable in this class of novels because of their emphasis on the body as the primary site of memory. Butler and Perry inscribe on Dana and Lizzie's bodies histories that threaten to be lost and revitalize their twentieth-century characters' affective link with the past, thereby creating contemporary memory of and identification with slavery. In their bodies, they literally translate their ancestral traumas into the present time. As narratives of postmemory, Butler and Perry's representations of the slave past originate as much in the authors' cultural, literary, and familial inheritances as in their imaginations. Portraying their characters interacting with ancestral traces (or, borrowing from Nora, sites of memory) and incorporating into their texts conscious allusions to their literary antecedents, Butler and Perry reconstruct the material and literary heritage of slavery from available traces. In this process, the novels interrogate the historical record

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<sup>1</sup> This tripled experience is figuratively rendered in the novel by three distinct narrative threads—one beginning with Lizzie's release from the last of the psychiatric hospitals to which her parents confine her as she endures her frightening engagement with the past, one beginning when Lizzie inherits her grandmother's trunk, and the third rendering Ayo's journal, her oral testimony dictated to her daughter Joy.

and literary tradition, imagine the subjectivity of enslaved ancestors, and recuperate from the past what is useful in the contemporary period. This translation of the past into the present through the experiences of their protagonists enables Butler and Perry to consider how the ideologies of the present day rise out of or willfully misread the African American historical legacy and how that past yet influences the present. Butler and Perry ultimately use their characters' experiences to take their readers through a process of identifying with, translating, and differentiating from the traumatic history of slavery, thereby completing a postmemorial process that empowers their lives in the present and future.

African American Postmemory: The place from which they write

In spite of the temporal distance from slavery, contemporary African American writers engage slave history in their literary creations as the ancestral trauma in whose shadow all African Americans are raised. Writing "from the space of postmemory," these authors explore what relation twentieth-century African Americans have to the traumas experienced by their ancestors, experiences to which they have an intimate connection but "inevitable distance and lack of understanding" (Keizer 6; Hirsch, *Family Frames* 13). Considering contemporary narratives of slavery as expressions of African American collective postmemory explains their emphasis on portraying both the personal and collective horror of slavery and demonstrating the "transmission of cultural trauma" across generations (Hirsch, "Images" 9). Reflecting on slavery as their family inheritance, contemporary African American writers, although not describing memories received directly from a formerly enslaved ancestor, approach the slave past with the

“deep personal connection” that distinguishes postmemory from history (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 22). That deep personal connection can be defined as the identification with blackness, both the physical trait used to justify the debased place given to African Americans in American society and the ethnic culture constructed by the slaves and their descendants. In a broader sense, blackness is an identity position grounded in the trauma of slavery and the institutionalized forms of oppression that succeeded it. Although slavery was legally abolished beginning in 1863, its traumas ended neither literally nor figuratively at emancipation. Because oppression of African Americans simply took new form after Reconstruction, the psychic wound of slavery was kept fresh by new atrocities; thus, the trauma of being black in America was transmitted from one wounded generation to the next.

This generationally transmitted trauma rooted in slavery is arguably the defining characteristic of the African American experience and the unifying force for the African American community. In “Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity,” sociologist Ron Eyerman argues that in the decades following emancipation, when “the dreams of full citizenship and cultural integration were quashed,” African Americans came to see slavery as the basis of black identity “a point of origin in a common past [that would] ...ground the formation of the black ‘community’” (76). Thus, as formerly enslaved people of African descent realized that they would not be assimilated into the American family, but would remain ever outside, marked by race and their history as chattel, they came to see slavery as the experience that separated them from mainstream America and established it as the basis for their collective identity. I would argue further that, since emancipation, the perpetuated

oppression of African Americans has kept the cultural trauma of slavery relevant to the discourse of African American identity as surely as segregation and disenfranchisement has required that African Americans live together and protect each other in community. This idea poses the question, however, of what happens when institutionalized oppression of African Americans begins to be dismantled and American society begins to offer its citizens of African descent the *possibility* of social advancement and integration into “mainstream” America? When African Americans reach the historical moment when the sting of slavery becomes a bit more distant because the promises of America become a bit more available to the descendants of slaves, what relationship do those African Americans have with their slave heritage?

I would argue that this historical moment arrives during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and that the generation coming of age in that decade can be considered the first African American generation with the opportunity to step out of slavery’s shadow. Interestingly, in that moment, contemporary narratives of slavery begin to appear and become an important subgenre in African American literature. Offering a historical reason for the appearance of such narratives, Arlene Keizer suggests in *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* that the “contemporary narrative of slavery began to take shape at precisely the moment that the last of those who had experienced New World Slavery firsthand passed away” (5). Because official History has never told the full story of the experience and legacy of slavery, the loss of living witnesses created a certain cultural anxiety and made pressing the “question of who would be a witness to slavery and how it would be remembered” (Keizer 5). In response to this question, African American writers, beginning with Margaret Walker

(*Jubilee*, 1966) and Ernest Gaines (*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, 1971), began to write narratives that first explicitly and then less explicitly took the form of first-hand accounts of slavery, creating a literary space to preserve memories that threatened to be lost. Octavia Butler took this trend in a new direction in *Kindred* by writing a novel that replicated the slave narrative in form (a first-person narrative of the experience of enslavement and emancipation) but placed a contemporary person in the role of slave, thereby forcing the consideration of how the contemporary African American relates to the slave past. From a slightly different sociological perspective, Caroline Rody argues in *The Daughter's Return* that the abundance of contemporary narratives of slavery published by African American (and Caribbean) women during the 1970s through the 1990s represents “the desire of writers newly emergent into cultural authority to reimagine their inheritance, the stories of their own genesis” (4). Certainly, the cultural authority gained from the Civil Rights Movement and the empowering of women resulting from second wave feminism have enabled African American women writers to assert literary agency to represent their ancestral heritage and re-write the stories of their collective coming of age. I posit, however, that authors writing after the 1960s represent the first generation of African Americans sufficiently empowered and free from the imminent danger of racial violence to reflect back on slavery and its oppression, re-claim it and re-inscribe its meanings. I would call them the first generation for which slavery is truly postmemory. They are also the first generation for which integration, elevation in class, and separation from the black community became a real possibility; thus, the empowerment of the 1960s came with the threat of the loss of cultural mooring to the African American community. These writers then can be thought to look back to slavery

both to memorialize it as the foundational event in the African American experience and to re-assert its relevance in an era when African Americans could choose to forget both their history and their community.

Unfortunately, over a century after emancipation, the process of remembering slavery remains fraught with peril. Authors must work against America's willful forgetting and refusal to acknowledge the trauma and injustice of slavery. Ashraf Rushdy argues in *Remembering Generations* that "Slavery is the family secret of America... [and that] the American slave past is 'that ghost which we have not entirely faced'" (2). Toni Morrison explains that her novel *Beloved* is "about something the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember."<sup>2</sup> In the contemporary era, full engagement with the slave past would require acknowledging it as "a tear in the fabric of history," an experience that "makes the present incomprehensible" and renders contemporary life unlivable (Rushdy 4). Appropriately, many African American writers enter the slave past through characters who would prefer to forget but are forced to remember. I would argue ultimately that the threat of losing ancestral ties, identity and cohesiveness within the black community fuels the trend among contemporary African American writers to create narratives that force the forgetful contemporary figure to remember the slave past.

This engagement requires that writers bridge the temporal and psychic distance separating contemporary African Americans from their enslaved ancestors and establish for their readers the necessity of the journey. Caroline Rody observes a trend in these narratives of figuring such interventions into the slave past as "dramatic, often fantastic

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<sup>2</sup> Morrison quoted in Mae G. Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text," 101.

encounters ... [that] foreground the mother-daughter relationship as the site of transhistorical contact” (3). Rody represents this trend with the paradigm of the “Magic Black Daughter,” best exemplified in the figure of Beloved in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, “who can be seen traveling through time to recover the mother-of-history” (3, 10). Rody argues that the twentieth-century African American writer remedies the separation from or repression of the heritage of slavery by creating a narrative of return that connects a literary daughter to that lost history. This literary daughter, who must overcome temporal, geographic, and psychic distance from her ancestors, often bridges this distance through fantastic means making her a *magic* black daughter. Through the adventures of these daughters, contemporary writers, like Butler and Perry, explore the traumatic past to reclaim their cultural heritage and re-establish generational continuity in an era when separation from both is very possible. Expanding on the idea of the cultural empowerment these texts represent, Rody calls the use of magical means “an expression of the imaginative and interpretative potency of the formerly dispossessed [and]... an authorial will to imaginative transcendence of loss” (Rody 65). Empowered to function in more than one time at once, magic black daughters “open up and liberate time in order to reach and release enslaved foremothers” (Rody 8). Magical means enable authors to re-imagine the ancestral past, taking new authority over its representation to recover the person and subjectivity of lost ancestors and reconstruct family lineage.

In *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, Butler and Perry engage the slave past through characters who could be described as cultural orphans and could choose to forget their ancestral heritage. As a literal orphan, Dana’s connection to her ancestry has been figuratively severed by the loss of her parents. Her marriage to a white man, which her

surviving relatives read as a rejection of family and race, offers the possibility of separating further from her cultural background. During her venture into the slave past, however, Dana comes to see herself as an inheritor of the legacy of slavery because her physical blackness establishes her place in the community of slaves and subjects her to the physical markings of the slave. Dana's experiences in Antebellum Maryland, which literally enable her to (bear) witness (to) her ancestors' traumatic experiences in slavery, restore her identification with this heritage and translate it through her body into her contemporary existence. In *Kindred*, Dana's differentiation from the traumatic past occurs in the past when she determinedly frees her body from enslavement through violent action. In 1976, however, Dana remains marked by her experience as a slave, and she and her husband Kevin have no means of explaining her physical wounds to their contemporaries. As a result, Dana is suspected of being a victim of domestic violence. Lizzie, in *Stigmata*, raised by highly rational, sophisticated upper-middle class parents could easily become a cultural orphan, leaving her ancestral, folk heritage behind as her parents do. Through her experiences with her foremothers, however, Lizzie not only re-lives and identifies with critical moments of the African American past (capture, Middle Passage, and enslavement through Ayo and migration north through Grace), she, also, reclaims the folk tradition through quilting. Although the traumatic memory of slavery is translated through her body, Lizzie has even greater difficulty explaining the writing on her body to her contemporaries than Dana does. Because she is an adolescent when her wounds appear, authority figures, including her parents, do not believe Lizzie's explanation of them and instead read her mutilated body as evidence of insanity and self-destructive tendencies.<sup>3</sup> *Kindred* and *Stigmata* demonstrate both the necessity and danger

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<sup>3</sup> One might argue, however, that Dana and Lizzie's contemporaries are correct in reading the markings on



of engaging the past. While the writers exercise cultural authority by choosing how they will remember the past, they also demonstrate “the inherently violent nature of the pursuit of historical veracity” as their characters experience the disastrous consequences of a contemporary person fully entering the historical past (Long 461). As examples of African American collective postmemory, *Kindred* and *Stigmata* literalize the claim the slave past has on contemporary African Americans and facilitate a postmemorial processing of the traumatic legacy. By re-establishing the generational continuum and the relevance of slavery to contemporary African American life, they remind late twentieth-century Americans of African descent that they are inscribed by their history of suffering and claimed by their heritage and community.

#### Sites of Memory: The Production of and Access to Postmemory

In the absence of reliable historical records of slavery and with the erosion of direct memory of that experience, sites of memory (a term I borrow from but use differently from Pierre Nora)<sup>4</sup> become important in the expression of African American collective postmemory. In my usage, sites of memory function as repositories of the personal and familial history that traditional History excludes and serve as points of entry into the past for future generations. Part memorial and part counter-history, sites of memory in the African American context are objects, or even narratives, invested with cultural/historical significance that are passed down as embodiments of the familial or

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their bodies as the results of domestic abuse and mutilation. From this perspective, the customary treatment of slaves in the antebellum period must be characterized as violence within a family and sadistic mutilation, although the treatment of slaves has not been so labeled in the contemporary or antebellum periods.

<sup>4</sup> Although my use of the term to describe certain things within the texts differs from Nora’s use (particularly because I emphasize familial rather than national memory), on the meta-textual level I would argue that all of the narratives studied in “Migrations of Memory” generally fit Nora’s articulation of *lieux de mémoire*. See Chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of how Nora’s paradigm relates to this study.

cultural past. In *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, certain objects, the texts themselves, and the protagonists' bodies function as sites on which memory is inscribed and provide points of entry into the past. In *Kindred* Dana's family Bible and her body serve as sites of memory, while Ayo's journal, a tiny scrap of dyed cloth, and Grace's quilt as well as Lizzie's body fulfill the same function in *Stigmata*. Within the novels, the protagonists begin the process of recording their experiences in narrative creating their own sites of memory to pass down. The novels themselves finally serve as actual sites of memory as Butler and Perry create narratives that circulate and cause their readers to remember.

In *Kindred*, Dana's family Bible gives her a point of entry into the past but reveals the primary challenge of sites of memory. During her second trip to the past, Dana learns Rufus' full name and connects it to a name in her family Bible. "Maybe he was my several times great grandfather ... still vaguely alive in the memory of my family because his daughter had bought a large Bible ... and had begun keeping family records in it" (Butler 28). Grandmother Hagar, making a conscious effort to record the names and dates of her family in her Bible, creates a site for remembrance. While this site provides access to the past, it does not tell the story of how the past was lived, which causes Dana to wonder: "And why hadn't someone in my family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white?" (Butler 28) Sites of memory point both to what was and to what is no longer: "Hagar Weylin Blake died in 1880... No doubt most information about her life had died with her.... There was only the Bible left" (Butler 28). The Bible, a surviving relic, at once gives Dana a means of remembering the past *and* demonstrates how completely unknowable the past truly is, because the information recorded in the Bible requires a narrative. As a member of the generation of postmemory, Dana must use imaginative

means to fill the gaps in her familial history and accept her inability to recover the past completely: “So many relatives that I had never known, would never know” (28).

Although during her time travels Dana comes to know some of those lost relatives and to record in her narrative some aspects of their lives, the novel ends with an understanding that some elements of the past, like what happens to Rufus’ mother and children after his death, can never be known.

In *Stigmata*, Ayo’s journal, a scrap of African dyed cloth, and Grace’s quilt provide access to the past and become sites of recovery and healing. Lizzie begins her interaction with the past when she inherits Grace’s trunk (containing the journal, quilt, and cloth), which her great aunt Eva, Grace’s sister, calls “the keys that unlock the door to what you call the past” (Perry 118). Through these relics, Lizzie not only encounters but becomes able to transmit the past through her own body as she embodies the memories of her great-great-grandmother and grand mother and provides her contemporary relatives the narratives that explain those relics. Ayo’s journal, a slave narrative, records her life from her capture in Africa through enslavement to freedom but ends with the assurance that another storyteller, Grace, would soon be born. Ayo tells her daughter Joy: “*when Im gone she come to take my place. She gon know thangs that’s comin. She’ll know things and that knowin be a gift from me her family thats lost*” (34). On her death bed, Ayo gives Joy a quilt for her yet unconceived daughter Grace and a scrap of dyed cloth that Ayo has managed to keep from the day she is snatched away from her mother, “the master dyer” whose husband “sings songs about her... by the fire at night” (25). Both the journal and the dyed cloth are sites of remembrance that record loss—the loss of Ayo, renamed Bessie in the New World, and the loss of Ayo’s family,

home, and culture—“*I los my family that day I los my home that day*” (50). Nonetheless, these relics create a generational link from Ayo’s African mother through to her contemporary daughter, Lizzie. Further, Ayo’s journal stands in for the millions lost in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. As she writes in her first entry, “*This is for those whose bones lay sleepin’ in the heart of mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never knew who groaned and died in that dark damp aside a me*” (7). Ayo’s narrative testimony becomes a convergence of history and generations, which she transfers to Grace and then Lizzie. Ultimately, the novel itself, written in dated chapters that resemble journal entries, tells of the convergence of generations in Lizzie and represents Lizzie’s effort to record her personal narrative as Ayo does in order to transmit her generational knowledge into the future.

The story Ayo dictates to her daughter Joy in her journal is the same story that Grace renders graphically on her story quilt. The creation of the quilt represents Grace’s attempt to come to terms with her grandmother Ayo’s frightening possession of her body. Two generations later, Lizzie, now embodying Ayo and Grace, makes a story quilt dramatizing Grace’s life, with her mother, Sarah, the daughter Grace abandons when she flees north. The process of making the quilt demonstrates Lizzie’s mastery of the past and her assumption of the right to translate family history and represent it in artistic form. Further, the quilt-making reconnects Sarah to her lost mother and familial heritage enabling her to face her abandonment and facilitating healing. These quilts become another means of transmitting the ancestral legacy. Lizzie explains, “I’m telling Grace’s story with this quilt—just as she had told Ayo’s story with hers—and the fabric has to hold up at least until the next storyteller comes along” (63). The text assumes that the

quilts will give a future daughter access to the past. Like Dana's family Bible, however, Lizzie's sites of memory demand narratives in order to be read or translated. Upon first seeing Grace's quilt, Sarah dismisses it as "Just some pictures stuck to a background. No rhyme or reason. She wrote about it like it was supposed to mean something" (22). Even with Grace's explanation that "Ayo's whole story is set on it," Sarah is unable to read the quilt. This and other sites of memory can be willfully or unintentionally misread.

Lizzie's quest in the contemporary thread of the novel is to provide her mother with the narrative that will enable Sarah to read the quilt and reconnect her to her maternal heritage. The last piece added to the quilt Lizzie and Sarah make together is the scrap of dyed cloth. Lizzie calls the scrap, "A link to the past," and explains that the quilt is about "The past. And putting it aside when we're through" (228). The journal, the scrap of cloth, and the quilts then facilitate the remembrance and processing of the past for the purpose of empowering the present and future. As the embodiment of her foremothers, Lizzie provides the narrative for these items that facilitates her mother's restoration to her maternal lineage. The novel, however, denies other members of the family the ability to read these sites of memory, necessitating the presence of a special daughter to do so. In the spiritual/metaphysical world of the novel, the body of this special daughter becomes the truest site for generational transmission of memory.

Because the African American experience began with the "willful and violent ... severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire," it is fitting that contemporary narratives of slavery make the body a primary site of memory and point of entry into the past (Spillers 386). Both Dana and Lizzie's bodies are taken captive as they interact with their family history—one body physically removed from her native

time and place, the other body inhabited by ancestors from another time. The physical experience thus creates first hand identification with slavery, eliminates generational distance, and inscribes the protagonists' bodies with a literal testimony of the history already figuratively written on every African American body. Figuring the protagonists' bodies as sites of memory that circulate in time and space, Butler and Perry enable Dana and Lizzie to translate the traumatic past into the present; however, this engagement with the past results in very real trauma to the contemporary body. In both texts, ancestors claim and possess the bodies of their descendants, passing the memory and markings of slavery to them bodily just as the condition of slavery was passed from the body of the slave mother to that of her child. Dana and Lizzie's "histories hunt them down, disfigure them, terrorize their minds" (Long 462). Bodies in pain are the true historical continuum in these novels, representing the convergence of trauma, memory, and genealogical time. The disruptions in Dana's and Lizzie's contemporary existences and the disfiguration of their bodies while they engage the past represent on small scale the large scale disruption of history and destruction of millions of bodies caused by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Both Dana and Lizzie's bodies come to bear the marks of slavery, particularly the whip-scarred back, which in the history of American chattel slavery is "shorthand for the undeniable reality of bondage" (Long 459). Dana's body is disfigured by the two whippings she receives from Tom Weylin, Rufus' father (and, therefore, another of her ancestors), and by the loss of her arm, trapped in the past when Rufus, dying from the stab wound he receives when he tries to rape Dana, grabs Dana's arm as she is leaving the past for the last time. Ever conscious of her re-creation of history, Butler portrays Dana reflecting on the symbolism and spectacle of her whip-scarred back: "I had seen old

photographs of the backs of people who had been slaves. I could remember the scars, thick and ugly” (Butler 113). Butler refers to conventional images of slaves to give her readers a means of accessing a distant historical space. Typically, these photographs would be Dana’s point of entry into the past, but the mechanisms of the novel provide her a more direct portal. Through Dana, Butler renders the slave past on the contemporary body. Lizzie’s union with her enslaved great-great grandmother Ayo causes her to bear the physical markings of a slave as well, as she experiences mysterious bleeding wounds from the iron shackles Ayo wears on her wrists and ankles and from a whipping Ayo receives. When these wounds heal, Lizzie enacts the spectacle of the slave body, disrobing for one of her doctors and revealing her scarred back. Her body becomes a site of memory as she stands in for the “typical nineteenth century nigger with an extraordinary gift” (Perry 204). That gift enables Lizzie to attest to the atrocities of slavery. The markings on her twentieth-century body give her direct memory of slavery, making her experiences real and undeniable, “an extraordinary gift.” The markings on Dana’s body function similarly. When Dana returns in the contemporary time to the site of the Weylin plantation after her time travels cease, she discovers no evidence of the community that exists in the past, except an old newspaper article recording Rufus’ death in a fire. She is grieved to have “looked [but]... found no records” of what happened to the other members of the household (Butler 264). Having no other proof that those people had existed, and she among them for a time, she “touched the scar Tom Weylin’s boot had left on [her] face, touched [her] empty sleeve” and those markings become her evidence (Butler 264). Crossley suggests that “The loss of her arm becomes in fact... ‘a ... birthmark,’ the emblem of Dana’s ‘disfigured heritage’” (x). The mutilation of Dana

and Lizzie's bodies creates an archive of violence on flesh, rendering graphically their birthmarks, the physical inheritances of slavery.

As sites of memory, however, Dana and Lizzie's bodies are perpetually subject to misinterpretation. In *Kindred*, for example, Dana's injuries are read to be the result of domestic violence. Although her husband, Kevin, has no history of violence and Dana vehemently denies the possibility of him harming her, neither can explain the origin of her scars (without being judged insane), and, thus, remain subject to the misreadings of their contemporaries. In *Stigmata*, Perry more deliberately plays with the possible meanings of the markings on Lizzie's body. As Lizzie discusses her wounds with a priest visiting her psychiatric hospital, he comments that "Blood is a powerful sign," but of what? (Perry 212) The priest reads the sign as stigmata, a "mysterious physical trauma" generally associated with religious ecstasy (Perry 214). Lizzie's father and others, however, read it as "a sign of insanity" believing her wounds to be self-inflicted (Perry 212). Just as the stigmata of the saints could not be absolutely confirmed, the source of Lizzie's wounds can never be confirmed except as "a matter of faith" (Long 463). If we believe Lizzie's explanation that her stigmata result, not from being "fixated on the passion and crucifixion of Christ" but from "remembering... something unbelievably traumatic," we must conclude with Stefanie Sievers that these physical manifestations of the trauma of remembering slavery demonstrate that the descendants and inheritors of slavery "cannot escape the occasionally overwhelming confrontation with the violence endured by [their] ancestors" (Perry 213, 214; Sievers 135). In other words, even the physical trauma of slavery can be translated across generations as Lizzie and other descendants of slaves enter the space of postmemory. On the other hand, for those who



view Lizzie from a strictly rational contemporary perspective, “The text written [on her body]... is intelligible only as the result of self-destructive behavior. As part of an already established narrative of mental disturbance, it ensures that Lizzie’s alternative reading cannot be heard at all” (Sievers 135). As a young, black female, Lizzie is easily dismissed by male representatives of the social order (her father and other medical practitioners) and understood only by others marginalized like herself—female, elderly, artistic, or insane (respectively her cousin Ruth, her great-Aunt Eva, her artist-lover Anthony Paul, and Mrs. Corday, another psychiatric patient). In the presence of powerful males, Lizzie simply can not be heard and for a space of two years chooses silence. *Stigmata* particularly questions mainstream society’s willingness to remember or even entertain the presence of those that remember the traumatic past. The vast distance between Lizzie’s interpretation of her experiences and that of the authorities at whose hands she suffers imprisonment suggests Lizzie as a Christ figure—martyred in her efforts to bring the truth of the past to light in a world unable or unwilling to acknowledge its residual presence. Lizzie, marginalized and invalidated in her process of engaging the past, is doubly isolated by the traumatic experiences themselves and by larger society’s denial of her experiences. In both novels, Lizzie and Dana’s bodies stand in for the repressed and disremembered history of slavery which yet demands full representation.

Ultimately, Lizzie’s body is the site of convergence of past and present in *Stigmata*, enabling her to reconnect her mother to her maternal lineage and restore generational continuity. In the novel’s last encounter between Lizzie and Sarah, Lizzie

finally succeeds in convincing her mother that she (Lizzie) is also Grace, who can finally explain to the child she abandons the reasons for her disappearance:

I put down the needle and tell her. About the day before, with George taking his bath and me searching for my suitcase. About the memories I was having. About the pain.

She says nothing when I finish, just sits there with tears on her cheeks. Without wiping them away, she picks up the needle... and finishes the stitching [of the scrap of dyed cloth to the quilt]. The circle is complete and my daughter sits across from me with the gap finally closed. (Perry 230)

Sewing the scrap of dyed African cloth to the quilt represents Sarah's reconnection to and embrace of her maternal heritage. Last seen with her head on Lizzie's lap, Sarah receives from her daughter/mother/great-grandmother the comfort denied her as a child. Thus, Lizzie's body, possessed and marked with the past so she "won't forget again," facilitates a resolution of past hurts in the present time, to enable Lizzie and her mother to "remember and move on" (Perry 193, 213). Through re-incarnation, Perry makes full knowledge and reconciliation of the past possible in Lizzie's body and circumvents the idea that the past can never be fully recovered. Lizzie's happy ending, however, comes after many years of being literally torn apart by her ancestors' memories. In one scene, Lizzie momentarily communicates her pain to her cousin, Ruth, who upon feeling it responds, "I'm sorry they hurt you... I don't know why they have to do that" (Perry 193). In an earlier scene, Grace's complaint about Ayo could be Lizzie's complaint about Grace: "*She's all pain, my grandmother. What I have of her is all pain*" (144). In their possession of her body, Grace and Ayo force Lizzie to re-live the painful traumas of their lives, refusing to see Lizzie as distinct from themselves, but as a vessel for family history. Only when Lizzie accepts her role does the terror stop. For this reason, Lizzie who

comes to identify with and translate her traumatic inheritance never really differentiates from it. Instead, she fully integrates the past into her present life.

*Kindred*, on the other hand, makes no assumption that the past can be fully known or that engagement with the past renders the contemporary person more whole than before. Rushdy suggests rather that “Butler, who is writing a kind of genealogy in *Kindred*, literally represents history (or remembrance of the past) in the process of destroying a body. What Dana’s physical losses signify is that fleshing out the past means leaving part of one’s being there” (108). Here, as in *Stigmata*, the agents of the destruction of Dana’s body are her ancestors—Rufus and Tom Weylin. Dana’s recovery of her ancestry reveals foremothers subject to abuse and victimization and forefathers who abuse and victimize. The most positive outcome of her time travel is Dana’s exercise, in the past, of agency denied her foremother Alice. Killing Rufus, Dana “avenges her victimized mothers and wins escape from the past” (Rody 75). Avenging Alice, who exercises the most extreme form of agency, killing herself, to free herself from Rufus, Dana re-writes her familial history of victimization. Further, her experiences give her an authorial agency in the present time of the novel. During her travels, Dana begins to keep “a journal in shorthand” that the reader can imagine will become *Kindred* (Butler 229). Rody suggests that “Dana’s ... narrative asserts a certain measure of authority and freedom on the part of a black woman of the late 1970s: the freedom ...to begin writing history as if it were her own story” (75). Although I generally concur with Rody’s argument that Dana’s experiences in the past enable her to gain a sense of ownership over a history that, for a time, literally owns her and to avenge the suffering of at least one of her enslaved foremothers, Dana’s disfigured body (and morals)

demonstrate the tremendous price of the authority she claims. In her life after her time travels, Dana will always be haunted by the mutilation of her body and memories of the ordeal that caused it; however, the creation of her narrative may yet offer her the possibility of achieving a differentiation from her traumatic experiences. Although Butler and Perry figure Dana and Lizzie's bodies as texts on which to write the slave past (however subject to misinterpretation they may be), *Kindred* and *Stigmata* also suggest the necessity of creating narratives to commemorate the protagonists' encounters with the slave past, narratives better able to circulate and be shared than the characters or their bodies.

The creation of narratives to give substance to ancestral experiences and speak into the silences in both survivor memory and the historical record is the most basic point of postmemorial writing. Speaking of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison writes in "A Bench by the Road," "There is no place you and I can go to think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of, slaves... And because such a place doesn't exist..., the book had to."<sup>5</sup> Contemporary African American writers write narratives of slavery to create sites of memory that "extend, fill in and complement" the existing historical record and surviving traces (Morrison, "Sites" 120). Although these texts often self-consciously demonstrate that the past can never be fully recovered, they speak into the silences, reconstruct lost family lines, and bridge the temporal distance between past and present to recover the living, breathing people who endured the traumas of slavery and to imagine the subjectivity of these ancestors. The final goal of this exercise ultimately is to explore the possibilities of agency, psychic freedom and personhood, even in the midst of physical enslavement.

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<sup>5</sup> Morrison quoted in Stefanie Sievers, "Embodied Memories—Sharable Stories?" 131.

For writers living with slavery as postmemory, assuming agency on the part of the enslaved appears to be a psychological and textual imperative... denying the possibility of such agency to the enslaved and recently freed constrains our own sense of agency in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These texts seem to be saying that we need to imagine those ancestors as psychically free if we are to imagine ourselves as psychically free. (Keizer 16, 17)

I would argue ultimately that Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* enter into the traumatic past to explore the experience and subjectivity of enslaved ancestors and, from this legacy, construct the foundation on which to build the contemporary self.

#### Roots: Restoring and Reconsidering Lineage

Caroline Rody has noted eloquently that "For an African American writer, slavery is a story known in the bones, and yet not at all" (24). By extension, contemporary African Americans are at once deeply connected to slavery as their familial inheritance and deeply estranged from it because of generational distance, slavery's destruction of kinship bonds, and America's repression of this history. It is this historical void, populated by unknown and unnamed ancestors, that contemporary African Americans must enter to claim and name lost forebears, reconstruct family history, and restore origins. *Kindred* and *Stigmata* literalize such returns to the slave past to enable Dana and Lizzie to know their ancestors, uncover family origins, and become co-owners with their ancestors of the violent history of slavery. In *Kindred*, Dana's returns to the past are suggestively figured as homecomings. During one return to 1976, Dana recalls her previous arrival in the 1800s: "I could recall walking along the narrow dirt road that ran past the Weylin house and seeing the house... [and] feeling... that I had come home.... I had been home to 1976, to this house, and it hadn't felt that homelike" (Butler 190-191).

Although she reminds herself that the Weylin plantation is “an alien, dangerous place,” in many ways, it is home, the place of origin of Dana’s family line (190). This familiar, yet dangerous, place represents well the traumatic ancestral past that must be recovered to restore family history and origin.

In order to make possible the meeting of generations over the historical void of slavery, Butler and Perry themselves must enter the void. Just as Dana and Lizzie need sites of memory and fantastic means to access the past, Butler and Perry use their literary and cultural antecedents to gain access to the repressed history of slavery. As postmemorial writers, Butler and Perry “reinscribe received historical narratives in order to debunk and purge them; ... to challenge prevailing discourses of power and knowledge, infuse the oral tradition into the written, and reassert devalued folk memory; and to reinvent ethnic, political, and literary bloodlines” (Rody 5). In *Kindred*, Butler self-consciously makes use of the conventions of slave narratives as a point of entry into the world of slavery, causing Dana to experience the full scope of slave experience—capture, Middle Passage, life as a slave, and emancipation—and enabling her to identify fully with the female slave’s experience. Dana’s contemporary circumstances necessitate her entrance into the historical void in order to gain understanding of the larger context of her life choices and restore her connection to her ancestry. An orphan estranged from her relatives, Dana’s disconnection from her contemporary family represents a greater disconnection from her ancestral past that the mechanisms of the novel seek to remedy. Dana’s travels enable her to restore her connection to her familial lineage, avenge her foremothers’ suffering and choose how she will define kinship in her contemporary life. As an inheritor of the magic black daughter form, Perry samples other magic daughter

texts and takes them one step further in *Stigmata*, literalizing what other authors have only portrayed figuratively, causing Lizzie to engage three historical time periods, rather than two, and positioning the daughter as the true conduit of history rather than the mother. Writing from the space of postmemory, Butler and Perry use their texts to respond to, critique and expand the legacy left by their predecessors.

Octavia Butler uses the form of the slave narrative in *Kindred* as a point of entry into the historical space of slavery to give structure to Dana's experience of being born into slavery, coming of age as a slave, accomplishing her escape from bondage, and narrativizing her story and to critique the silences and absences in the African American literary inheritance. Dana's first two journeys to the past occur on her birthday suggesting her birth into slavery and her rite of passage into accountability for her ancestral legacy. First, "kidnapped in time and space," Dana's "dreadful, disorienting, involuntary" time travel replays and re-contextualizes the Middle Passage, during which Dana, like the captive Africans, is reborn as a slave (Crossley xi). During her second trip, Dana both learns to what time and place her travel takes her and has her first experience with the reality of slavery when she witnesses the beating of Alice Greenwood's father. This scene recalls Frederick Douglass' story of the beating of his Aunt Hester in his 1845

*Narrative:*

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heartrending shrieks of an own aunt of mine.... I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I ... never shall forget whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. (Douglass 397)

This famous scene of sexualized violence records Douglass' awakening to the atrocities of slavery and his rite of passage from youthful ignorance to maturing knowledge of the system. Watching the beating of Alice's father has a similar effect on Dana, being the "blood-stained gate," that gives her "entrance to the hell of slavery." In Butler's re-creation of this scene, however, Dana highlights what is missing from the recorded testimony of slavery and critiques the failure of other, later forms of representation to convey adequately the full horror of a beating:

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying nor far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike (36).

Reacting like a child to what she witnesses, Dana experiences both a new awareness of the conditions of slavery, knowledge for which she will soon be held accountable, and an early moment of identification with Alice, her foremother and nineteenth-century twin, through whom Dana will learn the full context of sexualized violence and moral complicity in slavery. She like Douglass will soon become both "witness and participant" in the evils of the institution.

As a literary person, Dana, like Butler, attempts to understand the past in terms of things she has read. She discovers repeatedly, however, that "Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me" (Butler 177). Although Dana is referring in this passage to a failed attempt to escape the Weylin plantation, the truth of this statement applies to all of her experiences in the past and suggests both the inadequacy of the written record of slavery and the impossibility of the contemporary person fully apprehending the experience of slavery without *having* the experience of slavery. While



the novel represents Butler's attempt to "rip the veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" to represent the inner lives of enslaved people and reveal what the historical and literary record of slavery left untold, Butler's insistence within the text of the inadequacy of books to convey the trauma of slavery suggests a postmemorial inadequacy (Morrison, "Sites" 110). Although empowered in her cultural moment to represent the atrocities of slavery in ways a fugitive slave could not (for fear of offending his/her audience) and to use imaginative means to fill in the inherited narratives of slavery, Butler maintains that no efforts can truly render the slave past or reconstruct that historical void.

When the episode beginning with the beating of Alice's father ends with a white patroller attempting to rape her, Dana's new knowledge of the reality of slavery is made practical as she experiences the black woman's vulnerability to sexual objectification and victimization. After beating Alice's father, one of the white patrollers returns to rape Alice's mother, who although free, holds a very tenuous place in a society structured to enforce the subservience rather than freedom of black people. Finding Dana before he finds Alice's mother, the patroller willingly interchanges one victim for another. Choosing, after some deliberation, to defend herself against this attack, Dana sets in motion the processes that will enable her to defend herself against Rufus' attempted rape at the end of the novel. In an interesting example of reverse translation, Dana brings her twentieth-century values into the antebellum period and must convince herself that her "squeamishness belonged in another age" (Butler 42). At least cerebrally, she eventually overcomes her moral struggle against the use of violence by resolving (after the patroller's attack) to use deadly force, in the form of a switchblade, to protect herself

should she find herself in such a situation again. Like Frederick Douglass who wins his psychological freedom from Mr. Covey by fighting, Dana's freedom, in both this second trip to the past and her last, is secured through violent action. Christine Levecq suggests that Dana's "rugged individuality" and "the fact that she has physically to fight the master in order to achieve her freedom lends her story an important attribute of the male slave narrative" (544). By contrast, Levecq characterizes Alice's internal, rather than external, resistance to her sexual bondage to Rufus as representative of the female tradition of slave narratives (545). Although Levecq figures Dana and Alice as rival "representatives of the male and the female slave narrative respectively," I would argue that Dana bridges the distance between these gendered representations of slavery in her triangular relationship with Alice and Rufus and her moral struggles over the choices she must make to survive in that time period (546). Reminiscent of Harriet Jacobs' struggles in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Dana's experiences prove Jacobs' conviction that "the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (55).

In *Kindred*, Butler provides her contemporary audience a modern perspective on slavery by placing Dana to witness the traumatic experience. In the novel's rather explicit twinning of Alice and Dana, Dana identifies more deeply with her traumatic inheritance as she experiences through Alice the life she may have lived had she been born in the early nineteenth-century and as she unwillingly participates in the violation of her foremother. Looking and, at times, fighting like sisters, Alice and Dana, both born free and reborn into slavery on the Weylin plantation, occupy similar places in the life of

the plantation, their fates finally determined by the time of their births. Although Alice and her mother are the mothers to which Dana, as magic daughter, returns, these mothers-of-history are models of vulnerability. Before even meeting Alice's mother, Dana sees her knocked unconscious by the same patrollers who beat her husband: "The woman, unconscious and abandoned, was in need of help. I got up and went over to her" (Butler 37). Years later, Dana must mother Alice, nursing her from infant-like helplessness to independence after she is almost beaten to death for helping her enslaved husband escape from his master. Revising Harriet Jacobs' relationship with a free black man, Alice's desire to establish a traditional home with the man of her choice is made impossible by the condition of slavery whose injustices limit the options of free as well as enslaved blacks. As Jacobs writes, "If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared" the moral compromise she later makes to evade her master's sexual predations (54). As she ultimately strengthens Alice to become Rufus' sexual slave, Dana learns the awful complications and complicity of the slave woman's experience. Kubitschek suggests that "Through nursing and reeducating Alice, Dana has experienced a relationship analogous to that of the slave mother/child and felt the terrible burden of socializing kin into slavery" (Kubitschek 36). In her exploration of the experience of the female slave, Butler reveals subsidiary traumas rarely recorded in the historical record. Seeing his opportunity to possess the woman he desires, Rufus buys Alice after she is apprehended and forces her into sexual bondage. Although in a later time period, Alice and Rufus could have had the type of relationship Dana and Kevin have, what love Rufus may genuinely feel for Alice is corrupted by the inequity of their roles in nineteenth-

century slave society. Not having to win her love, Rufus is content to possess her body through rape. As his desire for the slowly recovering Alice grows, Rufus considers his relationship with Alice in contrast to Dana's with Kevin: "Maybe I can't ever have that—both wanting [each other], both loving [each other]. But I'm not going to give up what I can have" (Butler 163). Dana faces one of her greatest moral challenges when Rufus appeals to her to intercede with Alice on his behalf, threatening to beat Alice into submission if Dana does not win her compliance. Although she knows that helping Rufus to rape Alice is wrong, she also knows that he will rape her anyway (he already has), and that her own existence *depends* on Alice and Rufus bearing a child who will become her many times great-grandmother. In this situation, Dana becomes co-owner of this violent history, being complicit both as co-conspirator in her foremother's victimization and as generational beneficiary of her exploitation.

Eventually, Dana's ability to evade sexual victimization becomes more and more precarious as she becomes enmeshed in a figurative love triangle with Alice and Rufus. In Dana's fifth trip to the past, Rufus now an adult with an established, although still coerced, relationship with Alice, calls Alice and Dana one: "Behold the woman... You really are only one woman" (Butler 228). Although Rufus' statement reflects his joining of the two in his mind to make one perfect woman for him, he also hints at a necessary inter-relatedness between them. The tenuous balance of Rufus' relationships with Dana and Alice requires that both women be present on the plantation, so each can keep sacred some part of herself that Rufus would attempt to possess. As long as Dana exists to meet Rufus' emotional/intellectual needs, Alice is free to preserve her private self and her loyalty to her husband. "Submitting her body but not her spirit... Alice posits her

strategy of resistance: Rufus cannot buy her private self, her affections, or her desires” (Mitchell 51-52). Realizing that she can not own her body, Alice contents herself to own her mind. On the other hand, as long as Alice fulfills Rufus’ sexual desires, Dana is able to preserve her personal integrity and resist slavery’s objectification. Born in a time when a black woman can experience some physical freedom, Dana cherishes that foremost. The tragedies of the novel occur when this balance is upset. When Alice begins to feel affection for Rufus after Hagar’s birth, she grows to hate herself and determines to run away. At that time, Dana sees Alice “keeping [Rufus] happy—and maybe finally enjoying herself a little in the process” and surmises that “this was what was frightening her so, driving her away from the plantation” (Butler 237). This subtle shift is enough to send Alice on a desperate and doomed attempt to escape with her two small children. As the only member of the triangulation vested with social authority, however, Rufus is most able to damage and destroy the subtle balance. When Rufus, in a fit of anger, strikes Dana for the first time, she reacts by cutting her wrists, not to kill herself, but to put her life in sufficient peril to transport her back to 1976. Dana later explains to Kevin Rufus’ part in maintaining the balance: “He has to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying” (246). Although Dana is referring to herself, the same holds true for Alice. When Rufus oversteps his bounds to demand of each woman what she can not give, she exercises her agency to escape him—Alice by dying and Dana by killing. When Rufus claims to have sold her children, depriving her of what she holds most dear, Alice chooses to deprive Rufus of his most prized possession—herself. Alice’s suicide becomes the ultimate means of resistance available to the slave woman, a way of “usurp[ing] Rufus’

institutionally sanctioned power and opt[ing] to exercise her own personal power... by removing herself permanently from him” (Mitchell 54). When Rufus summons Dana to the past the last time, she finds him, not in mortal peril but, bereft after Alice’s suicide. Having already enslaved Dana through his ability to call her across time and space, Rufus attempts during this trip to take full possession of what he believes to be his property. Attempting to replace Alice with Dana, he brings to fulfillment the conflict that the novel has been anticipating since its beginning—his sexual assault and her violent self-defense. As Mitchell argues, “Killing Rufus, instead of submitting to him as Alice does, is Dana’s way of maintaining her self-esteem and psychic wholeness. For Dana, to submit to Rufus would be the same as accepting his definition of her as chattel, and this she cannot do.... Dana refuses to relinquish her right to self-definition” (50). This action enables Dana to reclaim her body from the dictates of her traumatic inheritance, avenge Alice’s victimization and untimely death, and finally free herself from her enslavement by Rufus. This action differentiates Dana from her inherited traumatic legacy, asserting her difference from her enslaved ancestors. Knowing that she can physically escape the nineteenth-century gives Dana an option unavailable to Alice. Dana’s ability to separate herself permanently from her entanglement with the past reflects the experience of Butler’s readers who enter the slave past with Dana but ultimately return to the present at the end of their postmemorial experience. Through Alice and Dana, Butler demonstrates how few and costly were the possibilities for resistance available to our enslaved ancestors, yet portrays the possibility of agency even in the most extreme situation of physical bondage.

Ultimately, neither Dana nor Alice escape from slavery on the strength of their individuality, personal power, or growing consciousness of the injustice of slavery, as might be the case in the male tradition of slave narratives. Their escapes result from taking drastic measures to preserve self in the face of personal betrayal. The disruption of the delicate relational balance among Alice, Dana, and Rufus, leads Dana to seek her escape from the past in a manner morally reprehensible in her time but essential to her psychic integrity in another. Dana's assumption of the violent ethos of the antebellum period reflects a reverse translation. In the process of the novel, Dana comes to accept an "ethic of compromise" in the morally impossible situation of enslavement and moves "painfully toward ... ethical relativism" (Crossley xxi, xxii). Although Dana may exhibit many of the characteristics of the male protagonist of traditional fugitive slave narratives, her sexual vulnerability and moral struggles clearly establish her affinity with the prototypical female slave protagonist, Harriet Jacobs, demonstrating Jacobs contention that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs 56). By portraying Dana in relation to both male and female traditions of slave narratives, Butler ultimately demonstrates the insufficiency of either model to represent the complexities and traumas of the enslaved female's existence.

Dana's entrance into the historical void of slavery causes her not only to remember her familial history of enslavement but to confront her hidden inheritance of miscegenation and consider how that history will affect her contemporary choices. As the wife of one white man and the emotional wife of another, Dana enters a second triangulation with Kevin and Rufus in order to "work out an identity crisis and to test her

marriage, to discover what black and white have meant in her history and what they ought to mean in her life” (Rody 70). While Dana’s explicit twinning with Alice enables her to understand and avenge the suffering of her slave foremothers, the implicit twinning of Rufus and Kevin enables her to consider the historical context of her contemporary marriage and assume the freedom to define and choose her kin. Because slave women were often denied the right to choose their mates and frequently chosen for violation by white men, Dana’s differentiation from her ancestral heritage requires that she claim the right to choose whom she will love and separate her marriage from slavery’s legacy of violation of black women by white men. Similarly, because slavery severed legitimate kinship ties among slaves and forced unnatural “kinship” between the slave and slave owner, asserting the right to choose her kin is essential to Dana’s postmemorial process.

Although initially shocked to discover that her oldest known forefather is a white slave-owner, Dana immediately takes advantage of the opportunity afforded by her time travel to influence the man young Rufus will become, planting “a few ideas in his head that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in years to come” (Butler 68). Her naïve, if not misguided, belief in her ability to reform Rufus in spite of the overwhelming influence of his society causes Dana to become too intimately engaged with Rufus and finally puts her at risk of being forced to fulfill his socially constructed understanding of race and gender roles.

Dana attempts to educate Rufus into being a more benign master, but must ultimately confront the fact that having access to property ownership in other people sanctioned by various institutional apparatuses in the larger society is too powerful a socializing force to counter with formal or informal counseling.... Rufus in the end is too immersed in the powers available to him...to remain satisfied with any human relationship he can’t control through ownership. (Rushdy 122)



In spite of Dana saving his life numerous times and sharing years of intimacies with him, Rufus ultimately attempts to claim ownership of her, objectifying her through rape and demonstrating how completely corrupting is the power to own human beings. Dana, on the other hand, has allowed herself to develop such affection for Rufus that when she sees the inevitable coming, she almost loses her resolve to defend herself: “He lay with his head on my shoulder, his left arm around me, his right hand still holding my hand, and slowly, I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this” (Butler 259-260). When Dana does kill Rufus, she consciously chooses to dissociate herself from a blood relative who lives an ethos she can not accept. She, thus, rejects blood lineage as the basis of kinship, choosing instead to affirm her kinship with Kevin by learning to differentiate her twentieth-century husband from her nineteenth-century ancestor.

Although Kevin returns to the past with Dana on her third trip hoping for an adventure in the glorious frontier years of American history, the five years he spends trapped in the past force him to consider the origin of American racism, establish his loyalties, and understand the larger historical context of his marriage. While Dana calls nineteenth-century slave society “one of the most dangerous” historical eras for her to enter, Kevin enters the past “thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it—go West and watch the building of the country” (Butler 77, 97). He even suggests that the picture of slavery he sees on the Weylin plantation is not as bad as he’d imagined: “No overseer. No more work than the people can manage” (Butler 100). Dana has to inform him that “you don’t have to beat people to treat them brutally” (Butler 100). Caroline Rody argues that Kevin expects to find a “mainstream white, male history-surfing

postmodern aesthetic—all the past his own Smithsonian, to explore with no risk of his own implication” (74). What Kevin does not realize is that his dream of return to a glorious white, male past is also “his nightmare” (Rody 73). Although he remains blissfully unaware of his exercise of white, male privilege in his own society, in the nineteenth-century, Kevin will have to acknowledge and choose a response to that society’s injustices. During his five years in the past, Kevin has his own moment of recognition of the horrors of slavery and soon becomes involved in efforts to dismantle it. Like Dana, Kevin’s “blood-stained gate” is a whipping, of a pregnant woman “strung up by her wrists” and beaten until her baby drops to the ground and the woman eventually falls dead (Butler 191). Confronted with such injustice, Kevin must decide whether he will remain silent and complicit in maintaining the social order or reject and oppose it. Kevin chooses to oppose it by giving aid to runaway slaves: “I fed them, hid them during the day, and when night came, I pointed them toward a free black family who would feed and hide them the next day” (Butler 193). The fact that Kevin, like Dana, returns from the past physically scarred suggests that he too has been injured, implicated, and permanently changed by his engagement with history: “Their disfigurements may also be read symbolically: both Black and White Americans have been scarred by the institution and legacy of slavery” (Mitchell 59). In Kevin, Butler suggests both that white Americans must understand the deeply-entrenched structures of racism in the United States and that they may choose a postmemorial identification with the inherited trauma of slavery by recognizing their complicity in its injustices and identifying with its victims as an ethical choice.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Marianne Hirsch discusses this alternative form of postmemory in “Surviving Images,” 10.

Ultimately, Butler renders her exploration of slave history in black and white through Dana and Kevin, and suggests how the past continues to haunt and disfigure Americans of both races in the late twentieth-century. As Mitchell suggests, Butler's choice to place the African American woman protagonist in relationship to a white man creates the possibility not only of Dana reconciling her origins in slavery but of America coming to terms with its slave history.

Their interracial relationship can be read as a metaphor for how America may be healed. Their relationship... represents what is necessary for Americans to do to alleviate the pain of our common history: they each must confront the past. ... Butler's liberatory narrative teaches that both Black and White Americans must confront their shared past of racism, must acknowledge the pain and the scars of the past, and must live together as kindred. (60)

After confronting her familial heritage of miscegenation and sexual exploitation through Rufus, Dana establishes the possibilities for racial reconciliation and romantic equity with Kevin. Although both she and Kevin "gambl[ed] against history" with limited success (Butler 83), knowing that Kevin "acted on his beliefs and tried to alter the past" enables Dana to claim her spiritual kinship with Kevin because his "ethics, his actions, and his motives are what give them the 'shared experiences' that makes family a meaningful concept" (Rushdy 116). Thus, when Dana enters the historical void of slavery, she not only gains personal knowledge of slavery, recovers lost ancestors and reconstructs her lineage, but also develops her own definition of family which will empower her life and future in the twentieth century. Her relationships with Kevin and Rufus then stage "the specific strategies by which family becomes familial... the way we fabricate kinships with people genetically distant from us and disestablish kinship with people who aren't" (Rushdy 125). Entering the historical void together, Dana and Kevin are able to chart new possibilities of healing and reconciling the traumatic past.

Moving from the first magic black daughter narrative to the last, we find in *Stigmata* a novel that makes some formal use of slave narratives but primarily responds to its more recent literary antecedents. Ayo's journal can be considered a slave narrative within the text. Likewise, Lizzie's narrative, which describes her capture by the past, experience in captivity (while hospitalized), emancipation and life in freedom, follows the basic form of the slave narrative. Perry, however, relies most heavily on her literary predecessor, Toni Morrison. Literalizing Morrison's rendering of an intersubjective, intergenerational space of remembrance in the choral sections of *Beloved*, Perry portrays Lizzie inhabiting a space of communal memory with Ayo and Grace. Further, literalizing Morrison's trope of rememory, not only does Lizzie "bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else," she lives out her foremothers' rememories (Morrison, *Beloved* 37). Perry enables Lizzie to live in this communal space of memory by circumventing the conventions of linear time. Unlike Butler who represents time linearly in *Kindred* (even if Dana moves between time periods), Perry's representation of time causes the historical void of the ancestral past to collapse upon itself. Rather than stepping into and filling a gap in the historical timeline, Lizzie's engagement with the past is figured as entering a vortex. Ayo begins to explain this concept in her journal: "*We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven, we live in a circle. We back and gone and back again*" (7). Lizzie's great aunt Eva adds that "The past...is a circle. If you walk long enough, you catch up with yourself" (117). In the world of this narrative, time is circular; hence, the past hasn't really passed, being ever behind and before. Lizzie renders this vision of time graphically at the novel's ending, in a painting she creates while hospitalized:

On the white-primed canvas, I draw a swirl of red, a hurricane with a small dark eye, a doorway.... A dark, naked shape drifts toward the vortex. The red spiral moves, rises to meet it. Small legs and arms fly out in a confused jumble, needing something solid but finding nothing to cling to.... I take up another brush to paint a grey ship and a brown girl standing at the rail. (234-235)

In that moment, the novel's three narrative threads come together. As Lizzie paints, she hears Grace describing one of Ayo's memories of the Middle Passage, telling the story of a young boy being thrown overboard from the ship. That boy is the dark shape drifting toward the vortex that Grace calls "*the doorway to heaven*" (234). Lizzie brings Ayo more tangibly into the moment by painting her standing at the rail of the slave ship. The dark shape in the painting is also a figure for Lizzie who is being pulled into the vortex of memory. Representing both Ayo and Grace's memories on one canvas is the beginning of Lizzie embracing and entering the circle of remembrance that is her inheritance.<sup>7</sup> In this scene Perry renders the Middle Passage as the vortex of memory, the place of rupture and transformation "to which all present-day attempts to make meaning [of the African American past] ultimately have to return" (Sievers 138).

Like many writers of contemporary narratives of slavery, Perry returns to the Middle Passage in her text, but transforms its legacy of rupture into a continuum across generations and continents, from the African master dyer to Lizzie. In spite of slavery's efforts to destroy kinship ties among slaves and Ayo's lament that she "*los [her] family that day*" she wanders away from her mother in the African market, Perry uses fantastic means to restore those losses (Perry 50). Through reincarnation, Perry renders three lives and historical time periods at once in Lizzie, giving her over a century and a half of active, generational memory. Perry, therefore, goes one step beyond her literary

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<sup>7</sup> Although her representation of the Middle Passage on canvas suggests a sort of differentiation, Lizzie remains saturated with Grace and Ayo's memories.

predecessors by entering three distinct historical moments when African American generational continuity could be ruptured—the moments of capture and transport from Africa to the New World, of northern migration, and of movement into middle class, integrated society. Through Ayo, Grace and Lizzie, these historical movements are re-figured as points of entry into the vortex of memory where characters wander in space and time. In her journal, Ayo recalls, “*Daughter I have always been a wanderer. My mind went places and my feet followed*” (Perry 50). Although Ayo’s wandering feet lead her to the loss of her African home and family, her Middle Passage begins a new family and generational legacy while maintaining her connection to the old. Lizzie’s memories inherited from Grace are framed by images of movement, men and music, the blues, reflecting Grace’s wandering from city to city as a northern migrant. Even as a fourteen-year-old child, before her engagement with the past begins, Lizzie feels “older than old. Ancient and restless and wandering” (Perry 8). Upon finishing her work with Sarah, Lizzie too begins her wandering, first to Atlanta, a move which will likely be followed by others: “The world turns and I have to get moving. Tuskegee, Johnson Creek, my parents’ house—places I’m from but not where I’m going” (Perry 129). The novel leaves Lizzie’s future unclear, but makes clear that she will continue the legacy of movement and transformation begun with the Middle Passage and continued through migration. Thus, in *Stigmata* Perry re-contextualizes the ruptures and displacements of the Middle Passage, re-establishing ancestral continuity through reincarnation and embracing the transformational possibilities of Diaspora.

Perry's efforts to appropriate and supersede her literary antecedents<sup>8</sup> in *Stigmata* are both the novel's strength and weakness. While Perry's use of magic empowers her to enter the historical void of slavery and completely re-construct lost lineage, her use of reincarnation to make complete recovery possible shuts down other imaginative possibilities for reconnecting to the past. Stefanie Sievers suggests that Perry's strategy avoids "some ... central questions about how historical information can at all be processed to result in 'genuine' or 'appropriate' contemporary understanding" (138). Further, because "Lizzie's authority to 'know' is contingent on the assumption that there is no gap between Ayo, Grace, and herself," Perry "circumvents an answer to the questions of how the historical gap can in fact be bridged, and ... how 'a writer...and her reader...[may] be able to remember another person's "body in pain"'" (Sievers 138).<sup>9</sup> While other writers of magic black daughter narratives leave space in their works to allow the reader's imaginative participation in the reconstruction of the past and to recognize the impossibility of complete recovery, Perry's strategy reduces the possibilities of imaginative engagement and avoids the question of how, short of reincarnation, the contemporary African American can enter the ancestral past.

Perry also moves the magic black daughter convention from the realm of the mysterious to the spiritual when she introduces the element of stigmata and positions Lizzie as an exemplary devotee, who must restore her mother (and by extension Perry's literary foremothers) to the faith. Caroline Rody suggests that "*Stigmata* ... takes the mythification of black matrilineal identity to a new level, making it something on the

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<sup>8</sup> See Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return*, 224, n12, for further discussion of Perry's allusions to Butler's *Kindred*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*.

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Sievers quoting Sabine Bröck, *White Amnesia—Black Memory? American Women's Writing and History*, 28.

order of a religious faith. Indeed, we might call Lizzie a born-again black daughter” (93). Along this vein, Rody highlights the novel’s emphasis on the contemporary daughter as the site of generational convergence and conduit of ancestral memory. Lizzie’s primary task in the contemporary thread of the novel is to convert her mother to the faith by enabling her to see Lizzie as her daughter and mother as well as her great-grandmother. Lizzie, the generational authority in the text, must restore her lost and disconnected mother to her ancestral past. The generational dynamic Perry creates in *Stigmata*, thus, positions a wise daughter in a quest to reform a wayward mother and “envision[s] the black daughter’s imaginative triumph in the mother’s submission” (Rody 94). This set-up, which Rody finds disturbing, may reflect Perry’s position as an inheritor of an already entrenched literary form and her attempt to create space for a new generation of daughters to add their unique contribution to the field of literary representations of African American collective postmemory. Perry almost contentiously demonstrates the impotence of a mother who, in her rational, middle-class world, has lost her connection to her ancestors, suggesting perhaps that Perry’s literary foremothers similarly need to yield to the wisdom of their daughters. Rody characterizes this move as being “born of the belated moment of this novel’s creation. For if by 1998 the paradigm of a black, female imaginative power to reclaim a matrilineage has become an article of faith—canonical, even—for a broad sector of the reading public, perhaps a younger writer takes up the magical conceit with a certain antagonistic edge, with a perceived need to battle her way in, against entrenched powers” (Rody 95).

Perry further complicates her re-articulation of the magic black daughter form by bringing the daughter’s experience into the public sphere of rational, scientific discourse.



When we consider *stigmata* as the plural of *stigma*, “A mark burned into the skin of a criminal or slave... A mark or token of infamy,”<sup>10</sup> we must see stigmata as marks on the body for the benefit and interpretation of those viewing the bearer. Departing from prior magic black daughter narratives who generally allow the characters to endure their engagement with the past in relative seclusion within a family or the black community, Lizzie’s experiences take her into the public sphere where her marks are generally read as tokens of infamy reflecting hysteria, suicidal tendencies and insanity. In the bourgeois world of the novel, Lizzie’s family, well integrated into the mainstream of society and distanced from its roots, is unable to embrace Lizzie’s magic, finding it a source of embarrassment, if not failure on their part. Taken into a society intent on looking forward, not back, Lizzie’s physical testimony to the history of slavery remains unintelligible. In *Stigmata*, Perry literalizes the trend of contemporary narratives of slavery circulating as sites of memory by causing Lizzie’s body to circulate in her own society as a site of memory, which is consistently misread. Ultimately, Perry seems to want to up the ante, pushing these literary interventions into the past beyond the black community to mainstream society, forcing it to remember and recognize the lingering effect of slavery as well.

### The Contemporary Context

As representations of African American collective postmemory, *Kindred* and *Stigmata* illustrate the legacy and lasting impact of slavery in the contemporary African American community. Remembering that slavery is the “ever shifting and reconstructed reference point” of African American identity, contemporary literary interventions into

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<sup>10</sup> “Stigma,” Def. 1 and 2, *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 1985.

slavery by African American writers must be read in relation to present day issues in the African American community (Eyerman 78). Considering their publication in the wake of the Civil Rights Revolution and integration, *Kindred* and *Stigmata* confront contemporary issues of cultural identity and community at a time when the slave past could be willfully maligned or forgotten.

In a 1991 interview with Randall Kenan Butler explains that she wrote *Kindred* in “reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents [and previous generations of African Americans] for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery” (Butler and Kenan 496). The novel places Dana Franklin in slavery in order to demonstrate how easy it is for contemporary African Americans to criticize ancestors from their empowered position in the late twentieth-century but just how complicated and few means of resistance truly were. Reacting to 1960s militants whose critique of previous generations was based on a simplified version of the past, Butler remembers in her novel “the privations [experienced by] earlier generations of black Americans” and recognizes those members of the black community “who still struggle for an identity” (Crossley *xiii*). Butler further claims those marginalized members of the black community that the Black Power movement rejected as inauthentic or not black enough, because of mixed racial heritage or “access to white power,” which was read as disloyalty to the African American community, culture, and political agenda (Rushdy 121). In an era when “activists were judged on the purity of their motives, the purity of their actions, even the purity of their descent,” Butler’s insistence on interracial relationships and the interconnectedness of races both in the

contemporary and slave eras demonstrates the impossibility of racial purity within the African American family (individual and collective) and points to the larger impossibility of purity in the American family (Rushdy 100-101). Dana's discovery of her interracial ancestry and her efforts to protect the white slave owner, both as a means of protecting the slave community and as a means of ensuring her own existence, illuminate the hypocrisy of certain contemporary African American ideology, demonstrate the need to look more critically at the slave's experience, and complicate contemporary interpretations of the choices available to enslaved ancestors. Her complicity in Rufus' rape of Alice mirrors her own generation's implication in the subjugation of preceding generations whose survival ensured their existence.

Dana's interactions within the community of the Weylin plantation significantly complicate the Black Power movement's simplified perspective on slavery, particularly on slave resistance. Keizer argues that "As a response to the overvaluation of direct, armed slave resistance or successful escape, the contemporary narrative of slavery demonstrates how fraught with difficulty resistance is and has been" (9). After her encounter with the patroller during her second trip to the past, Dana reflects on the consequences that could have come had she killed her assailant: "if the patroller's friends had caught me, they would have killed me. And if they hadn't caught me, they would probably have gone after Alice's mother.... So either I would have died or I would have caused another innocent person to die" (Butler 51). Dana learns early that physical resistance to whites can mean suicide for rebellious blacks and cause suffering for many others in the larger slave community. From Isaac and Alice, she learns the tremendous cost of individuals running away from captivity. Too valuable to kill, Isaac is maimed

(his ears cut off), severely beaten and sold to Mississippi after he is caught. Having no value because she is free, Alice is nearly beaten to death for helping Isaac escape.

Although miserable in her bondage, Alice remains hesitant about running away again: "I can't run again. I can't. You be hungry and cold and sick out there, and so tired you can't walk. Then they find you and set dogs on you... My Lord, the dogs" (Butler 168).

Because of the interconnectedness of the slave community, one slave's failure in his effort to escape becomes a cautionary tale to others who learn the consequences of resistance and fear white reprisal.

Through Dana's relationship with Rufus, Butler explores further the complexities of the relationship between slave and master and the interconnectedness of their fates. During the corn husking party toward the end of the novel, Dana notices that the other slaves "seemed to like [Rufus], hold him in contempt, and fear him all at the same time. This confused me because I felt just about the same mixture of emotions for him myself. I had thought my feelings were complicated because he and I had such a strange relationship. But then, slavery of any kind fostered strange relationships" (Butler 229-230). Slavery, which created unnatural intimacy between slave and master, resulted in relationships marked by ambivalence, rather than stark hatred of the oppressor. Again, hatred of and resistance to the master was often disadvantageous to the slave community. After Rufus sells three slaves to settle debts following his father's death, Dana expresses regret for having saved Rufus' life so many times, feeling "like a traitor" for sustaining the life of one who can so callously determine the fates of her ancestors and others in the slave community (Butler 224). Carrie, a mute slave mother, helps Dana understand how

important her efforts have been to the well-being of every slave on the plantation by demonstrating what would happen if Rufus dies.

Carrie clasped her hands around her neck again. Then she drew closer to me and clasped them around my neck. Finally, she went over to the crib that her youngest child had recently outgrown and there, symbolically, clasped her hands again, leaving enough of an open circle for a small neck.

She straightened and looked at me.

“Everybody?” I asked.

She nodded, gesturing widely with her arms as though gathering a group around her. . . . She was almost surely right. . . . Both the land and the people would be sold. (223-224)

Although her twentieth-century contemporaries might call Dana a mammy for protecting Rufus and some of the slaves on the plantation, particularly Alice, her alter-ego, even criticize her as more “more white than black” in her loyalties, Butler re-frames Dana’s actions as an expression of loyalty to the community whose fortunes are so dependent on the survival of one white man (Butler 224). “Butler rewrites the stereotyped ‘Mammy’ image, highlighting instead her quiet strength in making circumstances better for her family and her community” (Mitchell 53). Further complicating the idea that resistance to whites is a demonstration of loyalty to the black race, Butler shows in *Kindred* that the interconnectedness of the blacks and whites in slave society often required blacks to protect and cooperate with whites in order to protect and sustain their community and their progeny.

Through Dana’s relationship with Sarah and Dana’s contested place in the slave community, Butler deals with contemporary stereotypes about slaves and issues of authenticity. When she first meets Sarah, the plantation cook, Dana criticizes her apparent complacency, reading her according to the rhetoric of Dana’s contemporaries. Sarah “had done the safe thing—had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid.

She was the kind of woman who might have been called ‘mammy’ in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief head, the female Uncle Tom” (Butler 145). In time, as she is accused of the very same things and grows in understanding, Dana begins to defend the choices all slaves make to stay alive. In response to a field hand’s criticism of her closeness to Rufus and what “some folks” say about it, Dana speculates on how “‘some folks’ let Fowler [the overseer] drive them into the fields every day and work them like mules. ... They do it to keep the skin on their backs and breath in their bodies. Well, they’re not the only ones who have to do things they don’t like to stay alive and whole” (Butler 238). In this scene, Butler confronts and dismantles the idea of authenticity demonstrating that field hands, who were farther from the big house and white power, were no more worthy of respect for their distance than the house slaves worthy of scorn for their proximity. Because all slaves suffered and made difficult choices in slavery, one group’s choices could not be validated and privileged over another’s. Carrie again confirms Dana’s place in the slave community irrespective of her relationship to Rufus. Rubbing Dana’s face hard, she demonstrates “it doesn’t come off.... The black. ...the devil with people who say you’re anything but what you are” (Butler 224). Carrie reminds Dana of the one requirement for entry into the class and community of slaves. Similarly, Butler confirms every black person’s membership in the African American community regardless of what its more militant members might think. Dana’s place is confirmed among the slaves on the Weylin plantation when Alice, Carrie and Tess defend her by beating a slave who betrays Dana’s attempt to escape the plantation: “Dana’s ambiguous status receives some clarification when [Alice], Sarah,

Carrie and [Tess] avenge the betrayal that thwarts her attempt at escape. Despite its observation of her peculiarities, the community recognizes Dana as a full-fledged member deserving of its protection” (Kubitschek 37). In *Kindred*, the simple fact of blackness and the challenges that result from it are sufficient to secure Dana’s place in the slave community. By extension these factors should be sufficient to assure every African American’s claim to his heritage and place in her community. In *Kindred*, Butler interrogates contemporary assessments of slaves and slave life to reveal them as simplistic, stereotypical, and ahistorical. Through Dana’s experiences, she honors the choices made to ensure their own survival and that of future generations.

*Stigmata* confronts the willful forgetting of the past and folk culture that seems to come with elevation of class. In a time of unprecedented opportunities for integration and class mobility for African Americans, *Stigmata* demonstrates the consequences that come with losing the connection to the ancestral past and uses Lizzie to restore generational continuity. Lizzie’s attraction to her folk heritage is established early in the novel as she relishes the time spent in Johnson Creek, her family’s rural home, visiting her great aunts, listening to their stories, playing with her cousin Ruth in her grandparent’s abandoned home, and speculating on the mystery of her grandmother’s disappearance and the contents of her trunk. When she inherits the trunk, Lizzie’s father tells her that the gift of “Strange letters, quilts and old dusty bits of the past” particularly suits her, and her mother concludes that it is “just mysterious enough and quirky enough for Lizzie” (Perry 23). While Lizzie’s “skin tingles” when she sees the quilt and recognizes that it tells a story, her parents dismiss Grace’s quilt as the product of “a crazy

country woman who died more than twenty years ago” (Perry 23, 21). Perry creates a stark contrast between Lizzie who seeks connection to the past and her parents who exist in an uptight world of “middle class order. Not just neat, not just clean, but true to the standards demanded by our position” in what Lizzie calls “this little belch of a town” (Perry 30). In the world of the novel, Lizzie must reclaim her parents who in their quest for social status are disconnected from their ancestral legacy and orphaned in their bourgeois world. Lizzie’s portrayal of her mother who “has a place for everything, including herself” stands in remarkable contrast to that of her African foremother who she experiences through Ayo:

“We have a long way. We must start,” she says in a strange language. It isn’t the weary voice of Mrs. Dr. Sarah Lancaster DuBose speaking her college-bred English; music falls from the lips of a full-brown woman....

...she smiles at me inquiringly, but it isn’t Mrs. Dr. DuBose; it is the full-brown woman, her head caressed by bright cloth. I smile back. I love going to market, because my mother is a master dyer. My father sings songs about her, his first wife, his only wife, by the fire at night... (Perry 25)

This memory suggests the reclamation of an originary Mother Africa and an authentic African culture untainted by western influence. It is Sarah’s class and disconnection from folk culture that cause her at sixty-years-old to be “completely unaware of her own immortality” (Perry 30). Disconnected from their ancestral heritage, upwardly mobile blacks are portrayed as having lost their “ancient properties” (Morrison, *Tar Baby* 305). Perry illustrates the consequences of this willful disconnection from the past and from folk tradition in *Stigmata* and demonstrates what healing and wholeness come when that breach is remedied. Lizzie restores her mother’s connection to her ancestry all the way back to its source, to the full-brown master dyer. What is particularly interesting about this process is that the source of ancestral connection is not the mother but the child who



repeatedly demonstrates her own wisdom over her elders. She shows her superiority over the members of the medical establishment, finally outsmarting them by performing their version of sanity to win her release from the psychiatric hospital. She subtly mocks the wisdom of the scientific world, noting that her doctor “is so sure he’s cured my madness.... Poor guy. He doesn’t know there is no cure for what I’ve got” (Perry 6). In the world of the novel, Lizzie, fully connected to her ancestral roots, needs no cure. Instead she is (quite impossibly) the perfect cure for contemporary African American society’s disconnection from its ancestral and cultural origins.

The most important work Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* do in the contemporary era, however, is ask how the African American slave past will be remembered and what relation the contemporary African American will have with that history. Writing from the position of postmemory, Butler and Perry enter the historical void of slavery to reconstruct lost lineage, recover lost ancestors and recontextualize the slave past to determine its relevance to contemporary life. In *Kindred*, when Dana returns to the site of the Weylin plantation to learn what happens after she kills Rufus, she finds that the other slaves, most likely Nigel, have created a narrative to explain Rufus’ death and protect themselves from violent reprisal. After Nigel sets a fire to cover Rufus’ murder, the historical record indicates that “Rufus was assumed to have burned to death” (Perry 263). While this scene demonstrates the agency of the slaves to write their own story to protect themselves, it also demonstrates just how susceptible history is to misinformation and how truly impossible it is to recover the past. Although the novel leaves Dana empowered to write her own story of her ancestral past, to employ

“the conceit of magic black female authorship... to mediate or ventriloquize ethnic ancestral voices,” the novel yet leaves her physically and psychically wounded and unable to articulate her experiences to her contemporaries (Rody 67). *Stigmata*, on the other hand, allows Lizzie full access to her “inherited power” to tell her ancestral story, yet leaves troubling questions about how, short of reincarnation, the ancestral past can be accessed (Rody 67).

Ultimately, there are no simple answers to the question of how contemporary African Americans should remember the traumatic history of slavery. Butler and Perry suggest that engagement with that past is necessary but that the only way to truly know the ancestral past is to experience it bodily. These novels then illustrate Walter Benn Michaels’ contention that, “It is only when [history is] reimagined as the fabric of our own experience that the past can become the key to our own identity” (7). Butler and Perry’s use of twentieth-century protagonists creates the possibility for the contemporary reader to imagine herself as a slave, facing the same challenges her ancestors did. Although the journey is painful and leaves physical and emotional scars, the fact of taking the journey, even as a reader, is empowering, because it gives the sojourner ownership of a traumatic history that has previously owned him and his ancestors. As narratives of African American collective postmemory, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* create a bridge between the traumatic past and the present, acknowledge and ennoble the suffering of enslaved ancestors, translate their experiences into the contemporary African American context, and restore connections to cultural origins. Butler and Perry ultimately facilitate a postmemorial process for their

readers who identify with their traumatic heritage through contemporary protagonists but differentiate from it by containing it in a circulating textual site of memory.

CHAPTER 4: RE-WRITING OUR INHERITANCE:  
 Fragmentation and Re-membering  
 in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*  
 and Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

*Los libros sirven para cerrar las heridas que las armas abren.  
 (Books serve to close the wounds that weapons open.) - José Martí*

In the wake of war, history has repeatedly witnessed the wanderings of masses of traumatized survivors—displaced, exiled, and cast out. Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004) and Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) explore postmemory in the aftermath of political turmoil and exile from the Caribbean island nations of Haiti and Cuba respectively. In both texts a daughter of postmemory raised in New York City by parents exiled from their homeland confronts the lasting repercussions of her parents' traumatic experiences under dictatorship and displacement from their country and culture. In the very first story of *The Dew Breaker*,<sup>1</sup> Ka Bienaimé, the daughter of Haitian exiles, is confronted with the revelation that her father has served as a torturer during the violent regime of François Duvalier rather than being a prisoner of the evil dictator as she has been led to believe.<sup>2</sup> Her father's confession causes Ka to question the relational and affective foundation of her life, her understanding of her parents as righteous victims of political oppression and of herself as their child. In her experience of postmemory, Ka learns first-hand that in a political structure enforced by arbitrary and clandestine violence, the perpetrators and victims of brutality often exist within the same family, resulting in profound divisions in the individual and national families of Haiti.

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<sup>1</sup> A novel composed of nine interconnected stories, *The Dew Breaker's* fragmented form represents the fragmentation of the Haitian community and Danticat's effort to re-member it in narrative.

<sup>2</sup> Ka's father is a former member of the Tonton Macoute, the volunteer militia that enforced the rule of dictators François Duvalier (1957-1971) and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier (1971-1986). Named by the elder Duvalier after a figure from Haitian folklore who kidnapped naughty children at night and called *choukèt lawoze* (translated dew breakers) by the common people, these militiamen were known to come early in the morning, disturbing the dew, to collect their victims.

The goal of her postmemorial process will be to reconcile the father she loves with a past she can only despise. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar struggles to determine how to relate to her family's history in Cuba and balance her loyalty to her grandmother, who passionately supports Fidel Castro, with her loyalty to her mother, who vehemently opposes Castro. Her divided loyalties reflect the divisive aftermath of Castro's rise to power, which resulted in a nation divided against itself. As a child of postmemory, far removed from the conflicted political ground of her homeland, Pilar apprehends the ideological divide between her parents and grandmother with a level of dispassion nearly incomprehensible to her relatives.

In the aftermath of dictatorships that have fragmented the national families of Haiti and Cuba, causing countrymen to fight each other literally and figuratively, the resolution of postmemory requires a will to coherence that will re-member the fragmented family and nation in alternative spaces—on the soil of a foreign nation and in the imagination. The daughter of a perpetrator and of a victim of violence, Ka embodies both the result and the resolution of national upheaval. The narrative of postmemory she creates based on her experiences with her parents allows her to claim personal agency over the history that has traumatized and permanently altered the history of her family and nation and to imagine an alternative to the divisive effects of tyranny which seem to offer the Haitian people the possibilities only of being victims or perpetrators of violence. Meanwhile, Pilar embodies, re-contextualizes, and in some way repairs the traumas experienced by her grandmother, mother, and aunt. Pilar's real and surreal connections to her female relatives enable her to construct a narrative of postmemory that restores her fragmented family (and nation) and her connection to her cultural source. In both *The*

*Dew Breaker* and *Dreaming in Cuban*, Danticat and García ultimately attempt to reconstruct their torn and divided homelands in narrative.

#### Postmemory and the Historical Context

The experiences of postmemory in Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* and García's *Dreaming in Cuban* differ significantly from those seen in other texts studied in "Migrations of Memory" due to the nature of the history and nation-building experience of Haiti and Cuba. Although both nations gained their independence from their colonial masters in the nineteenth century (Haiti from France in 1804 and Cuba from Spain in 1898), their actual experience of autonomy has been contested and complicated by their relations with other nations, particularly the United States. With the withdrawal of European colonial nations from the Western Hemisphere, the United States became the New World's imperial power, interfering with the political affairs and self-determination of its Caribbean and Latin American neighbors, occasionally occupying them and frequently supporting leaders that upheld U.S. interests to the detriment of their own people.

Formerly known as Saint-Domingue, Haiti won its independence from France in 1804 after defeating the armies of Napoleon and proclaiming its independence. Born out of a slave rebellion, Haiti actualized a nightmare for the world's leading nations and their slave-holding colonies. Refusing to acknowledge a nation governed by its black former slaves, France granted unconditional recognition of Haiti's autonomy only in 1838 after the fledgling nation committed itself to generations of debt, promising to repay France for its losses in the colony. The United States, whose proximity gave it even greater reason

to fear Haiti, withheld its recognition of the new nation until 1862. When Haiti spiraled into chaos in 1915, after over a century of political volatility, the United States intervened and occupied the island nation until 1934. Although the American presence generally stabilized the nation, it reformed Haiti around a central government and strong national army. In the decades that followed the U.S. withdrawal, the Haitian people, eager to rebuild their nation, fell prey to dictators who terrorized the people. Backed by the national army who allowed only one candidate, François Duvalier was elected president of Haiti in 1957 and immediately began taking measures to destroy his opposition and secure his position as president for life. Under Duvalier, the rule of law became arbitrary, and the people were divided between those with power to inflict pain and those vulnerable to receive it. The Western Hemisphere's poorest and economically least developed nation, Haiti remains plagued by political volatility and poverty causing masses of its citizens to flee the nation each year seeking safety and economic opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

Providing asylum to Cuban freedom fighters, including Jose Martí, from the early part of the nineteenth century, the United States generally supported Cuba's quest for independence from Spain. When, however, Spain nearly defeated Cuban independence forces in 1898, the United States intervened and secured Spain's defeat by invading and taking possession of the island. The United States occupied Cuba until 1902, when it released the island nation into a conditional independence, maintaining through the Platt Amendment the "right to intervene" in Cuban affairs "to preserve its independence" and restricting Cuba's ability to enter into agreements with any foreign power other than the

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<sup>3</sup> For a more a comprehensive discussion of Haitian history, see Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods*, Fick, *Making of Haiti: The San Domingue Revolution from Below*, Ott, *The Haitian Revolution: 1789-1804*, and Montague, *Haiti and the United States, 1714-1938*.

United States. The United States remained a constant presence in Cuba, exerting economic dominance and viewing it as its tropical playground, until 1959 when Fidel Castro rose to power, reformed Cuba as a Communist nation and soon established the nation's economic independence from the United States. Castro's victory over American-backed dictator Fulgencia Bautista was Cuba's first true triumph of self-determination, having finally achieved its revolutionary goals without the interference of Spain or the United States. Although Castro's revolution initially won wide popular support, his economic reform policies soon alienated wealthy Cubans (as well as U.S. interests) who suffered the confiscation of their property and the violent reprisals of Castro's more plebeian military forces. Over time, Castro too established himself as president for life and used more and more repressive means to destroy opposition. In Cuba under Castro, patriotism soon became confounded with unquestioning support of an increasingly autocratic and idiosyncratic dictator, and dissenting voices were condemned as enemies of the state. Finally, ideological differences resulted in trenchant divisions across all facets of the Cuban populace, causing many Cubans to choose exile, most frequently to the United States. Under Castro, Cuba has suffered economic and cultural isolated and stagnation due largely to United States embargo.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of political upheaval and exile from Haiti and Cuba, both history and memory of the traumatic events are contested. The official history created by dictators records their victories and wide spread popular support, rather than their violent suppression of opposition. Similarly, memory of events differs significantly based on the

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<sup>4</sup> For brief background on Cuba's relations with the United States before and after Castro and the development of Cuban American literature and culture, see Luis, *Dance Between Two Cultures*, 1-36 and Behar, *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba*, 1-17. For more extensive historical background, see Richard Gott, *Cuba: A New History*, José M. Hernández, *Cuba and the United States: Intervention and Militarism, 1868-1933*, and Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy*.



rememberer's position relative to the dictator. In *The Dew Breaker*, Ka's parents have very different memories of the events immediately preceding their exile from Haiti because of their differing positions relative to the Duvalier regime. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, Pilar's grandmother, Celia, a supporter of Castro, remembers his ascent to power as Cuba's birth as a free nation, while Pilar's mother, Lourdes, an opponent, remembers it as Cuba's death. As a result, Ka and Pilar, as children of postmemory, become heirs to the fragmentation, division, confusion and betrayal that result from these complex historical events. In their distanced locations in a foreign land, their experience of postmemory is complicated by the absence of any physical or historical evidence of crimes committed and the shifting nature of recent and, in fact, on-going political intrigue. In this context, how does a child of postmemory begin to resolve inherited trauma when her inheritance is not just fragmentary, contested and contradictory, but unsettled and constantly subject to change? How does she define her position relative to her parents' traumatic histories when they themselves differ in ideology?

In such cases, the postmemorial artist must imagine her own way of representing the atrocities suffered and balancing the ambiguity of the inherited memory in order to enact a will to coherence that facilitates a remembering and re-unification of her otherwise wounded, divided, and betrayed people. In *The Dew Breaker* and *Dreaming in Cuban*, this occurs through conscious creation of alternative narratives, through translation, and through embodiment. Within Ka's family, the conscious creation of an alternative narrative for the events that precede her parent's exile from Haiti makes possible the establishment of their family, in which a former perpetrator and a former victim of violence co-exist. Their daughter Ka embodies and unites the extremes in the

Haitian people and creates her own narrative that imagines an alternative to being either victim or perpetrator of violence. The text of *The Dew Breaker*, additionally, creates a composite portrait of the Haitian community through interconnected stories, becoming a space on which to explore possible means of resolving the traumatic aftermath of the Duvalier regime. In *Dreaming in Cuban* the translation of elements of Cuban and Latin American culture into Pilar's American setting forms a bridge between Pilar's home and family in New York and her otherwise alienated Cuban homeland and family. As Pilar's experiences in New York re-contextualize her grandmother, mother, and aunt's experiences in Cuba, she becomes able to produce a text that re-members her divided family and nation in the space of narrative. In both texts, the United States, in spite of its complicity with Haiti and Cuba's historical challenges, provides the space in which these complications can be explored and in part resolved.

#### Creating Alternatives to Loss in Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*<sup>5</sup>

In the present time of *The Dew Breaker*, Mr. Bienaimé, the former Tonton Macoute, lives a quiet, peaceful life with his wife and daughter in a Haitian community in Brooklyn, New York—the only evidence of his violent past a rope-like scar on his right cheek which he has led his daughter to believe is the result of a year spent in a Haitian prison. In “The Book of the Dead,” the novel's first story, Mr. Bienaimé explains his violent past to Ka, his adult, American-born daughter. The last story in the text, “The Dew Breaker,” recreates his final day as a macoute when he tortures and kills an

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<sup>5</sup> Danticat's fourth work of fiction, *The Dew Breaker* revisits Haitian history, a constant preoccupation in her oeuvre. Although the recentness of its publication has given the literary world little opportunity to produce extended criticism of this text, Danticat's other fictional works, *Breathe, Eyes, Memory* (1994), *Krik? Krak!* (1995), and *The Farming of Bones* (1998) garner increasing critical attention.

outspoken preacher and decides to leave his violent life, being both disgusted by his work and poised for a fall from grace. Just moments after his departure from Casernes Dessalines, one of the primary sites for torture in Port-au-Prince, he meets Anne, the woman who becomes his wife, who is herself fleeing after her step-brother, a well-known preacher, is taken by a macoute. On that day, both experience a death that facilitates their rebirth in the United States, a rebirth that centers heavily on the birth of their daughter.

From the novel's opening, the challenge that faces the Bienaimé family reflects the larger challenge of the Haitian community. To explain his past to his daughter, the former dew breaker recites a Haitian proverb: "One day for the hunter, one day for the prey. Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey" (Danticat 21).<sup>6</sup> Ka, stunned by her father's confession, must re-assess everything she has known about her father and herself but, with reflection, begins to wonder if "maybe [her father's] past offered more choices than being either hunter or prey" (24). In *The Dew Breaker* Danticat pushes the usual limits of the definition of postmemory to consider how the daughter of a perpetrator of violence will interact with her father's past. In this process Danticat breaks down the assumed dichotomy between victim and violator, asking: Can this man's violent past be redeemed? Can he be forgiven, loved? Can his place in the Haitian community be restored? Danticat cites as the origin of *The Dew Breaker* the story of Emmanuel Constant, a Haitian man who in the early 1990s founded a militia called FRAPH (Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti), which is known to have tortured and killed many hundreds (if not thousands) of Haitians who had supported ousted president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. When Aristide later returned to power, Constant, who many including

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<sup>6</sup> Henceforth, I will simply use the page number to identify quotations from *The Dew Breaker*.

Danticat believe had been backed by the CIA<sup>7</sup>, fled to New York where, although condemned in Haiti, he lives free in the middle of the Haitian community in Queens—no doubt in close proximity to some of his victims and their relatives. Danticat recalls being “intrigued by the idea that someone can migrate to another country and can still come face to face with somebody who once tortured them back home. [...] It’s also intriguing that he [Constant] isn’t afraid to walk among the community. It speaks to the tolerance of the community” (quoted in Valbrun 42). From this scenario, Danticat creates a series of stories that considers how a former torturer—“not a famous ‘dew breaker’ [...] just one of the hundreds who had done their job so well that their victims were never able to speak of them again”—might recreate his life after leaving his violent profession and how he might live in the Haitian community where he constantly faces the possibility of meeting one of his former victims (77).

Causing fiction to imitate real life, Danticat imagines the possibility of such a confrontation in “The Book of Miracles.” In this story, the Bienaimé family, attend Christmas Eve midnight mass in a Haitian church, and Ka thinks she sees Constant, whose picture has been posted on flyers throughout the neighborhood. Ka, who does not know her father’s secret at that point, stands, in her mother’s words, “fuming, shifting in her seat and mumbling under her breath, all the while keeping her eyes fixed on the man’s profile” (80). At that moment, Anne ambivalently experiences pride in her daughter’s “righteous displeasure” and terror that someone could be looking at her husband the same way—or worse, that her own daughter may look at her father with the same disdain: “But what if she ever found out about her own father? About the things he had done?” (80). As the relative of a man killed by macoutes, Anne desires that her

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<sup>7</sup> See Danticat and Barsamian 2.

daughter abhor the violence of the perpetrators, yet, as the wife of a reformed macoute, she desperately dreads the possibility of exposure. In the end, neither the man in the crowd nor Mr. Bienaimé is confronted. Anne herself confirms that the man is not Constant and feels “strangely comforted, as though she, her husband, and her daughter had just been spared bodily harm” (82). For Anne the possibility of exposure is a threat to the very foundation of her life and something to guard against at all costs. After that Christmas Eve, Anne releases her husband and daughter from the duty of accompanying her to midnight mass, hoping that her daily attendance at mass will cover her daughter’s professed atheism and her husband’s apparent paganism. Her panic in the face of exposure, however, demonstrates the fragility of the life she and her husband have created as well as her own ambivalence about “acknowledging [the] kinship of shame and guilt that she’d inherited by marrying her husband” (81). As one who has chosen to love a former perpetrator of violence, Anne by necessity must find a way to live with her husband and with herself.

Through the conscious creation of alternative narratives, Anne and her husband build their life in the United States and model the first of many means presented in *The Dew Breaker* of recovering from Haiti’s violent past. Anne’s faith, particularly her belief in miracles, enables her to create a story of transformation that makes possible her life with her husband. When, en route to Christmas Eve mass, Ka asks her mother to tell a miracle story, Anne recites this story to herself before answering:

*A long time ago, more than thirty years ago, in Haiti, your father worked in a prison, where he hurt many people. Now look at him. Look how calm he is. Look how patient he is. [...] That was the miracle Anne wanted to share with her daughter on this Christmas Eve night, the simple miracle of her husband’s transformation, but of course she couldn’t, at least not yet, so instead she told of another kind of miracle (72).*

Anne offers Ka the more mundane story of a Filipino man who sees the Madonna on a rose petal. Although the miracle of her husband's transformation serves as the very foundation of her family life, she withholds it from her daughter, protecting the silence with which she and her husband have surrounded his violent past. Her miracle narrative's first purpose then is personal, to enable her to love a killer. This alternative history supersedes her story of personal loss that would place an impossible wedge between herself and her husband. Anne chooses instead to embrace the miracle of her husband's reformation and, with him, to proclaim the second foundational narrative of their life together, the oft-repeated story of Ka, their "good angel, ti bon anj" (17).

Mr. Bienaimé's narrative about Ka's name complements Anne's miracle narrative and speaks to the importance of their daughter's presence in the life they have built together. Before his confession, Mr. Bienaimé recites to Ka the story of her name: "I call you Ka," he says, "because in Egyptian world—" A ka is a double of the body, I wanted to complete the sentence for him—the body's companion through life and after life. It guides the body through the kingdom of the dead" (17). Ka, who knows this story so well that she can repeat it verbatim, does not realize the silences behind it until after her father's revelation. At that point she understands that she "should have heard something beyond" the words of his recitation—that she is the evidence of his redemption and his hope of forgiveness (23): "When you born, I look at your face, I think, here is my ka, my good angel" (17). When Ka asks her mother how she could love her husband, Anne echoes her husband, telling Ka how much he has wanted to tell "his good angel" the truth (25). She then continues in a whisper: "I don't know, Ka. [...] You and me, we save him. When I meet him, it made him stop hurt the people. [...] You, me,

we make him take root” (25). So deeply entrenched are Anne’s silences about her husband’s past that even when the truth has been revealed, she hesitates to tell her truth, instead whispering a thin summary of the miracle story that begins with her self and reaches its fulfillment in Ka. After learning the truth, Ka realizes further that she and her mother are both “his kas, his good angels, his mask against his own face” (34). Holding the love of his wife and daughter as proof of his worthiness, Mr. Bienaimé covers over his past, enabling him to fulfill the role Anne scripts for him in her miracle story and live up to the name he chooses for himself after leaving Haiti. A creation like every other aspect of his life in the United States, the surname, *Bienaimé* meaning “well-loved,” re-imagines the former macoute as the extreme opposite of what he is in Haiti and demonstrates the transforming power of love.<sup>8</sup>

Although Anne’s narrative gives her a means of resolving her internal conflict over her husband’s past, that resolution remains fragile and tenuous. When Ka leaves the midnight mass, she apologizes for overreacting, realizing that she would not have done anything to the man she suspects to be Emanuel Constant because “I don’t really know what happened [in Haiti]. I wasn’t there” (86). Meanwhile, Anne’s relief that her family has not been exposed is complicated by the anger that rises as she recalls “But I was [there]... almost” (86). Having only inherited traumatic memory, Ka feels, at best, a mediated passion about the crimes Constant may have committed because she has no first-hand knowledge to give substance to her emotions. As depicted in “The Dew Breaker,” however, Anne can recall the brutal murder of her brother, and must make determined effort to keep her thoughts of her husband separate from her memories of her brother. Anne imagines her life as a “pendulum between forgiveness and regret, but

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<sup>8</sup> I must acknowledge Brent Edwards for this very useful insight regarding the meaning of the family name.

when the anger dissipated she considered it a small miracle” (86). The balance between forgiveness of her husband’s past and regret over her losses (including possibly the loss of the girl who should have remained loyal to her suffering people over a killer) remains tentative, requiring the constant fortification of alternative narratives and well-selected silences. Further, the small miracle, the “it” in the second part of the passage could refer to her life after Haiti or the dissipation of her anger. In either scenario Anne requires miracles to build her faith in her present life and keep her memories at bay. As a charm, she buys mistletoe each Christmas: “She’d once heard a mistletoe vendor say that mistletoe had all sorts of reconciliatory qualities, so that if two enemies ever found themselves beneath it, they would have to lay down their weapons and embrace each other” (74). In the Bienaimé family, the creation of alternative narratives enables two people that should be enemies to embrace, love each other well and build a life together.

Mr. Bienaimé, Ka’s father, chooses a different means of remembering and resolving his violent past. In a text generally preoccupied with death and mourning, he develops an obsession with Ancient Egyptians burial rituals. Nearly every Saturday afternoon, Mr. Bienaimé visits the Ancient Egypt exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, taking Ka as his companion when she is a child. In the Ancient Egyptians, he claims a mythic ancestral identification and finds a model to reconcile his own troubled relationship with his past and his countrymen: “‘The Egyptians, they was like us,’ [he] likes to say. The Egyptians worshipped their gods in many forms, fought among themselves, and were often ruled by foreigners....But what he admires most about the Ancient Egyptians is the way they mourn their dead. ‘They know how to grieve’” (12).



Like the Ancient Egyptians, the Haitian people are influenced by pagan and folk beliefs, have been prone to inflict violence on each other, and have suffered political volatility and occupation by foreign nations. The Ancient Egyptians, however, excelled, where the Haitian people have not, in mourning their dead. His study of Ancient Egyptian burial rituals and their *Book of the Dead* enables Mr. Bienaimé to ennoble death, appreciate its gravity, and mourn the lives ended by his own hands.

As is the case with Anne's adherence to miracles, however, her father's fascination with Egyptian burial rituals provides Ka only limited revelation about his past. When Mr. Bienaimé takes Ka to the Egyptian exhibit, he attempts to show his daughter his image of himself, although he never fully explains the significance of the presentation and she can not translate the images before her into her understanding of her father. During their conversation about his past in "The Book of the Dead," Ka's father recalls "when I took you to the Brooklyn Museum, I would stand there for hours admiring them. But all you noticed was how there were pieces missing from them, eyes, noses, legs, sometimes heads. You always noticed more what was not there than what was. [...] Ka, I am like one of those statues" (19). While her father recognizes himself as scarred and broken, Ka, with the limited knowledge of a child of postmemory, can not fully understand his implication of being wounded and in some ways dead. She does, however, intuit that more is missing from her parents' stories than is present and that their stories are at best fragmentary and incomplete. She knows, for example, that her father "has never wanted the person he was, is, permanently documented in any way," that her parents have no friends and have never returned to Haiti, and that her mother "reacted strongly to cemeteries," but never learns why (34, 72). Although Ka blames many of her

parents' oddities on "some event that happened in Haiti," her artistic pursuits demonstrate her desire to bring wholeness to the fragments of her father's life (72). Her early exposure to Egyptian sculpture inspires her to become a sculptor and portray her father as she imagines him. Becoming what she calls "an obsessive wood-carver with a single subject thus far—my father," Ka focuses her artistic exploration on the locus of unresolved trauma for her family, her father's prison experience (4).

In her sculpture, Ka remarkably renders much more of her father than even he feels comfortable seeing. In "The Book of the Dead" Ka and her father travel together to Florida to deliver her first completed sculpture to a Haitian American actress and art collector. The statue, a "three-foot mahogany figure of my father naked, kneeling on a half-foot square base, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his very long fingers and the large palms of his hands," represents Mr. Bienaimé as Ka "had imagined him in prison" (6). Before the sale of the sculpture can be completed, however, Mr. Bienaimé destroys the statue and, after explaining its fate, confesses the truth of his past. The sculpture's unexpected accuracy returns him to his past and forces him to confront it through Ka's eyes. Although Ka does not know the full story of her father's prison experience, the image of her father's downcast eyes looking at his hands fittingly depicts a man haunted by the damage his hands have done and seeking redemption. Two very different moments in the text provide the reader a portrait of the father's deadly hands. After telling Ka the fate of her sculpture, Mr. Bienaimé grabs her wrist to quiet the derisive laughter she uses to mask her anger at his destruction of her work: "I feel his fingers crushing the bone, almost splitting it apart, and I can't laugh anymore." After catching himself and letting go of her wrist, Ka's father "looks down at

his own fingers, then lowers his hand to his lap” (20). In “The Dew Breaker,” during his last day as a macoute, Ka’s father stills the hand of the preacher in the same way: he “snatched the preacher’s wrist and pressed down on it hard, almost stopping the blood flow to his fingers” (226). The references to the dew breaker’s hands connect the moment of revelation to the most damnable act in his career as a macoute. Without realizing it, Ka creates in her sculpture a portrait, not of her father as a prisoner in Haiti, but of the father who raises her, a man imprisoned by haunting memories of his past atrocities. Her artistic effort reflects an attempt to translate the traumatic past through the prism of her own experience and represent her father’s fragmented history in the means most appropriate to her generational position. Conversely, the statue, also, creates an icon that freezes her father in time and negates the transformation he and his wife have worked so hard to achieve. The sculpture, at once, presciently reveals her father’s soul—“when I first saw your statue, I wanted to be buried with it, to take it with me into the other world”—and also portrays him in a manner that denies his evolution (17). The combined uncomfortable accuracy of the sculpture and the static nature of its depiction of him drive Mr. Bienaimé to destroy it, but in the process force him to open the door to the past, revealing the truth that Ka has hitherto accessed only by intuition and will come to understand fully only through imaginative reconstruction.

#### Of Silences Maintained and Broken

Her father’s confession complicates Ka’s already complex relationships with her parents, giving her a hint of how much she does not know about key facets of their histories. Although she chooses silence in her interactions with her father immediately

after learning his truth, Ka is comforted by his affirmation of what she does know about their relationship: “Ka, no matter what, I’m still your father, still your mother’s husband. I would never do these things now.’ And this to me is as meaningful a declaration as his other confession” (24). Ka, nevertheless, has new traumas to process. The morning after his confession, Ka sees her father sitting on the edge of his bed with his head in his hands. “If I were sculpting him at this moment, I would carve a praying mantis, crouching motionless, seeming to pray, while actually waiting to strike” (26). This moment demonstrates a shift in Ka’s image of her father, from a victim she can pity to a predator whose gentle demeanor she can no longer trust. Here, Ka begins to imagine other representations for her father’s history and to confront the broader implications of his revelation. Her thoughts turn to her mother: “Was she huntress or prey?” (23). Having always considered her parents a unit, Ka now attempts to see her mother separate from her father and places herself in her mother’s shoes: “Another image of my mother now fills my head, of her as a young woman, a woman my age, taking my father in her arms. At what point did she decide that she loved him? When did she know that she was supposed to have despised him?” (23) Realizing the similarities between herself at that moment and her mother when she marries her father, Ka begins a process of reasoning within herself how she can love her father. The difference between Ka and Anne, however, is that Anne chooses her union with her husband while Ka is their offspring. The blood of the torturer runs through her veins. While Anne lives with constant ambivalence over her choice, Ka must find a way of understanding her father’s legacy as her own: “With each step forward, he rubs the scar on the side of his face, and out of a

strange reflex I scratch my face in the same spot” (32). Scarred by his history, Ka must come to terms with what it means to be her father’s daughter.

Her first step in that process is confronting her mother, but Ka’s relationship with her mother is characterized by greater silence than is her relationship with her father, because Anne never tells her daughter of her traumatic past or even of the miracle that makes her present life possible. Among Anne’s traumatic experiences in Haiti are the tragic and sudden deaths of both of her brothers. Her younger brother dies accidentally, drowned in the sea one afternoon when Anne is watching him but has an epileptic seizure. When she recovers from her seizure, her brother is gone and Anne is left haunted by her unburied brother “walking the earth looking for his grave” (71). That childhood trauma is compounded by the revelation in “The Dew Breaker” of the death of her older step-brother, the preacher, at the hands of macoutes. Once again, Anne does not receive her dead to be buried. Instead she is told that her brother “set his body on fire in the prison yard at dawn, leaving behind no corpse to bury, no trace of himself at all” (242). These unresolved traumas are Anne’s personal nightmares and the reason why she closes her eyes and holds her breath while passing cemeteries and has not gone near the sea since her younger brother’s disappearance. Anne, however, never communicates these traumas to Ka, and when Ka asks her how she can love her husband, Anne repeats the well-worn story of Ka, their “good angel.” Ka ends her phone call with her mother at that moment: “I tell myself that I could continue this particular conversation at will [...]. Whenever I’m ready” (25-26). Anne’s stilted and stale ways of dealing with the past will not enable Ka to understand or resolve her traumatic legacy, the true parameters of which she is just beginning to discover.

On the other end of the phone line, however, Anne replays her history with her husband in a flurry of unspoken words before realizing that Ka has exited their conversation. In her mind, Anne tries to express how her relationship with her husband begins as a “benevolent collaboration, a conspiratorial friendship” and evolves into love, “not the kind of love her daughter or girls like her stumbled into or might expect one day. It was a more strained kind of attachment, yet she could no longer imagine her life without it” (240). She reflects further that in the early years of their relationship, “there had been more silence than words between” her and her husband, but that Ka’s birth forces them to talk to and about her. When Ka learns to talk, “it made things all that much easier. She was like an orator at a pantomime. She was their Ka, their good angel” (241). Even in her mental perambulations, Anne returns to the same old narratives, relating to her traumatic experience through indirection by projecting a “screen of words,” similar to what Nadine Fresco observes among Holocaust survivors: “The silence [about the past] was all the more implacable in that it was often concealed behind a screen of words... always the same words, made up of selections from the war” (quoted in Hirsch: “Images” 28). Anne masks her silence with the oft-repeated narrative of Ka’s name and other forms of verbal non-communication:

She had hoped to close the call [with Ka] by saying something tender and affectionate to her daughter, something like, “You are mine and I love you.” Or maybe she would reach for a now useless cliché, one that she had been reciting to herself all these years, that atonement, reparation, was possible and available to everyone. Or maybe she would think of some unrelated anecdote, a parable, another miracle story, or even some pleasantry, a joke. Anything to keep them both talking. But now her daughter was already gone... (242)

Ka ends the conversation with her mother before Anne can fill the space between them with meaningless platitudes. Unlike her husband, who after speaking devastating words

to his daughter, ends their conversation with words of affirmation that give comfort, Anne's tender expressions of love will do nothing to address Ka's feeling that her mother "has betrayed [her] by not sharing [her] confusion" over her father's revelation (26). Nor will her "useless clichés" convince Ka of her father's ability to be forgiven, in the religious sense (atonement) or the political sense (reparation). After all, years of repetition of those same clichés have just barely convinced Anne of her husband's redemption. After her husband breaks his silence, Anne's communication by indirection—unrelated anecdotes, parables, miracle stories, pleasantries, and jokes—will not distract her or Ka from the traumas suddenly revealed. Anne discovers, once the silence is broken, that she has nothing to speak into the black hole of memory except clichés that will do nothing to equip Ka to resolve the trauma of postmemory.

"The Dew Breaker," the last story of the text, ends with Anne reflecting on unspoken words and her brother's unburied body. Interestingly, the burning of the preacher's body, which can be thought to stand in for the thousands of Haitians lost and not grieved due to political violence, also facilitates the projection of new truths and narratives onto it. In this context, the mutability of history and absence of historical evidence enables the Bienaimés to construct their own version of their pasts in Haiti. Like most adult immigrants, Anne and her husband devote their energy in the United States to "revising who [they are] now, or who [they want] to become" (241). When Mr. Bienaimé and Anne leave their homeland and the dead preacher behind, they leave as much as they can of their past, keeping with them only those things that will not be left behind, the memories that haunt their dreams. Ultimately, it is Ka who will project onto

the absent body of the preacher a narrative that brings some sense of closure to the traumatic wound.

Raised in the shadow of her parents' haunting memories, Ka is invested with both the need and the means to represent her parents' wounds. As the American-born child of a Haitian perpetrator and victim, Ka in many ways represents the ideal alternative between hunter and prey, an embodiment of a re-membered Haitian community situated on foreign soil. Her first attempt at representing her father's past in sculpture creates a static image of him that does not convey the full complexity of his experience, but precipitates his confession which opens the door to a deeper exploration of the past. Although Ka "had never tried to tell [her] father's story in words," the text positions her as the only one who can narrate that story (6). Reflecting on words her father recites to her from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, Ka may realize that she is "the keeper of both speech and silence" and "the child who travels the roads of yesterday, the one who has been wrought from his eye" (32). Ka then uses imagination to look beyond her parents' speech and silence and travel the road of history to resolve their traumatic past. As the one "wrought" from their eyes, she has inherited her parents' traumas but from her distanced vantage has the space to consider them more dispassionately and begin the process of healing through narrative.

#### Re-imagining History, Closing Wounds

The last story in *The Dew Breaker* from which the text derives its name completes the story of the Bienaimé family, entering into the historical void to reconstruct the events that precede their departure from Haiti. Although Ka is not directly associated



with this narrative (as narrator or protagonist), I would argue that “The Dew Breaker” is a narrative of postmemory that Ka constructs. Her history convenes the two halves of the story her parents determinedly keep separate, beginning at the moment of crisis, on the day her father “came to kill the preacher,” and slowly unfolding to reconstruct the events surrounding the preacher’s death (183). Through multiple points of view, Ka’s narrative imaginatively recreates what little she knows of her parents’ pasts and fills in parts of the story that *neither* one could know. The narrative begins with Ka’s father, remembering his career as a macoute, continues to recount his encounter with the brave preacher who will not be silent in the face of oppression, and concludes with Anne’s reflection on how she has lived with this traumatic history. The story performs work of reconstruction that only Ka, the neutral party between her parents, could accomplish.

This last entry in the Bienaimé story reveals the line between victim and perpetrator to be situational because Ka’s father is himself a victim of the Duvalier regime, his family destroyed after their land is taken by local military officials, his father descends into madness and his mother disappears. Hungry and powerless at age nineteen, he attends a presidential rally, where, dazzled by the spectacle of order, majesty and power, he accepts an invitation to join the Miliciens or Volunteers, later called the Tonton Macoutes.

When he got to the city, he followed the throng of people to the vast, meticulously trimmed lawn of the national palace. He was mesmerized by the procession of humanity, standing before the whitest and biggest building in the whole country. ... He listened for hours as the president read what seemed like a hundred-page book, in perfect nasal French. From the entire speech, he managed to retain only a few lines. If anyone tried to topple him, the president threatened, blood would flow in Haiti as never before. The land would burn from north to south, east to west. (192-193)

Duvalier's display of fearless and determined power appeals to the impressionable youth who that day "felt himself transformed into an adult" (192). Upon joining the Miliciens, he receives an identification card, uniform, a .38, and automatic amnesty for anything he does to protect national security. He then needs only to remind people of his position in order to receive freely everything he needs from food to clothing to a place to sleep to women to sleep with: "I volunteered to protect national security. Unfortunately, or fortunately as you like, this includes your own" (196). This intoxicating power enables him to be a hero when he chooses, as is the case when he restores his father to his home and grants favors to people from his hometown. In spite of his position, however, he feels nervous as he waits for the preacher and can not do his job "without the smoke and temporary cloudiness his cigars and cigarettes [and alcohol] allowed him" (190). Ka's narrative reconstructs the past to humanize the macoute without minimizing his treachery and to allow Anne and her brother to tell their stories.

In the sections of the story focused on the preacher, Ka makes obvious connections that have been buried during the rest of the text. In these sections, for example, we learn that the preacher the dew breaker awaits is Anne's brother. The preacher's reflections on his younger brother drowning in the sea and his sister Anne coming to live with him in the capital reveal Ka's father's last prisoner to be her mother's brother for the first time in *The Dew Breaker*. The preacher's narrative additionally provides elements of his story that neither Ka's mother nor father could or would want to know but that Ka can imaginatively reconstruct, including the preacher's thoughts and feelings right up to the moment of his death. He dies hoping that his death will "stir the flock out of their stupor... move his people to revolt, to demand justice for themselves

while requesting it for him” (227). Ka’s text honors the man who risks his life to stand up to Duvalier, whom the preacher calls “the beast,” and connects that brave man to the man who scars her father (185). In his final moments with the macoute, the preacher wanting to resist his torturer, finds a jagged piece of wood and tears the macoute’s cheek down to his jawline. The macoute then shoots him dead. Ka’s narrative impossibly records the preacher’s thoughts on his last act of resistance:

...at least he’d left a mark on him, a brand that he would carry for the rest of his life. Every time he looked in the mirror, he would have to confront this mark and remember him. Whenever people asked what happened to his face, he would have to tell a lie, a lie that would further remind him of the truth (227-228).

This passage reflects the preacher’s efforts to maintain his agency and leave a lasting impact even in death; thus, in spite of the eventual absence of his body, the preacher leaves a mark in flesh that attests to his presence. This passage also demonstrates Ka’s construction of this narrative, because the preacher’s sentiments mirror her thoughts from her first-person narrative in “The Book of the Dead”: “Maybe the last person my father harmed had dreamed moments like this into my father’s future, strangers seeing that scar furrowed into his face and taking turns staring at it and avoiding it, forcing him to conceal it with his hands, pretend it’s not there, or make up some lie about it” (32). In “The Dew Breaker” Ka reconstructs the preacher’s last moments to turn the victim into a victor, who in death powerfully influences his killer, causing the macoute to renounce his violent life and never kill again. In this narrative of postmemory, Ka leads the reader into the black hole of traumatic memory to reconstruct the pivotal moment in her parents’ past and narrativize the legacy she has inherited. Through her reconstruction Ka gains insight into her father as reformed predator and her mother as conflicted victim and reclaims an

uncle, whose victory in death bridges the distance between hunter and prey, providing Ka a model of righteous resistance to oppression.

Layers of narrative abound in “The Dew Breaker,” however, because Anne’s preacher brother is never mentioned in the text before the last story. Mr. Bienaimé does not discuss him with Ka in “The Book of the Dead,” nor does Anne reminisce about him in “The Book of Miracles.” He could arguably be Ka’s creation, a catalyst in her parents’ story that sparks her father’s reformation, motivates her mother’s departure from Haiti, and provides a point of convergence in their lives. I would argue that Ka creates this third figure to answer her question from “The Book of the Dead” about whether her father’s “past offered more choices than being either hunter or prey” (24). In the preacher, she creates a victim who fearlessly goes to his death, dying in a manner that shames the hunter and empowers the prey. Ka writes herself into the past through the preacher who also experiences the pressure of her father’s hands and shares her thoughts about his scar. A third party that, like Ka, stands between her parents, the preacher provides a point of entry into the past for Ka, who doesn’t “really know what happened” because she “wasn’t there” but can use imaginative means to reconstruct her family’s history (86). Both Ka and the preacher offer resolutions to the dichotomy between victim and perpetrator in the Haitian community—one formed by the complicated and consciously created union of the two extremes and the other a victim who refuses to relinquish his agency even in the face of terror. Ultimately, Ka’s narrative represents her way of loving her father well, allowing her to gain insight into his past but differentiating herself from both her father’s violence and her mother’s excuses for that violence. Identifying with the preacher, she can imagine a position that seeks the good of the

Haitian people, speaks the truth about the evil of their society, but offers even the perpetrators the hope of grace, the unmerited favor that creates the possibility of loving her father without excusing the violence of his past.

### Rebuilding Community

Among the remaining stories of *The Dew Breaker*,<sup>9</sup> “The Bridal Seamstress” provides the most useful contribution to our discussion of postmemory. In “The Bridal Seamstress,” Aline, the American-born daughter of Haitian immigrants, a journalist for a small Haitian American periodical, is sent to interview Beatrice, a retiring wedding dress maker. In the course of the interview, Aline uncovers a story far more interesting than Beatrice’s retirement, when Beatrice casually points out the house across the street that she believes belongs to the “Haitian prison guard” who tortures her in her youth (128). Beatrice insists that the macoute lives on her street and has followed her from residence to residence throughout her life in the United States. Upon investigating the house, Aline finds it abandoned—the next door neighbor advising her that it has been empty for some time. This moment becomes an epiphany for Aline who “had never imagined that people like Beatrice existed, men and women whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives. Maybe there were hundreds, even thousands, of people like this [...]. These were the people Aline wanted to try to write about now” (137-138). Beatrice’s unresolved and unrepresented trauma travels with her to the United States, a haunting specter that materializes from time to time in the form of the prison guard so closely

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<sup>9</sup> Structured to consider the story of the reformed dew breaker and others whose lives he may have touched, *The Dew Breaker* includes four stories focused on the men who rent the basement of the Bienaimé family’s home in Brooklyn—among them Dany, the protagonist of “Night Talkers,” who believes Mr. Bienaimé murdered his parents. Two other stories, “The Bridal Seamstress” and “The Funeral Singer,” feature women haunted by violence experienced in Haiti.

associated with that trauma. Like Ka, when faced with Beatrice's suffering, Aline feels compelled to represent it in some way. The desire to do so is the impulse of postmemory. Similarly, her generational distance and displacement from Haiti creates the space in which she can explore the traumatic past to find resolutions for herself and for those traumatized by events suffered in Haiti. In this process, Aline may imagine a model of resistance (like the preacher) that provides a place to enter the struggle against violence or a model of reconciliation (like Anne) that wills herself to forgiveness for the betterment and viability of the community.

In *The Dew Breaker* Danticat creates a text that mourns the suffering of the Haitian people on all sides of the Duvalier regime and uses the space of narrative to remember Haiti's fragmented and conflicted people. Danticat writes about Haiti in English from outside Haiti, believing that this perspective strengthens her writing. In a roundtable discussion for the journal *Meridian*, she explains that being "inside and outside a culture... adds some nuance, some depth ... [and that] distance can also give you another kind of eye with which to examine things" (Danticat: *Meridians* 82). Having some differentiation from both her home culture (Haiti) and host culture (the United States) enables Danticat to look at each with greater nuance and impartiality than could a Haitian living in Haiti or a native-born American. Living in the US but haunted by the Haitian past, she translates her Haitian past into her American present in *The Dew Breaker*, mourning the homeland lost and the violence that divides its people and sets them against each other. Distanced from but still affected by this violence, Danticat imagines the resolution of that violence in Ka and in her text of postmemory. Just as Ka

gives substance to her family's legacy of violence in "The Dew Breaker," Danticat gives substance to a traumatized Haitian community in *The Dew Breaker*.

#### Translations and Transformations in García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

*Diaspora, like death, interrupts all conversation.*  
- Jorge Luis Arco

Cristina García's first novel *Dreaming in Cuban* considers the consequences of the Cuban Revolution in a family torn apart ideologically, geographically, and culturally by Castro's rise to power. The novel focuses on the Del Pino family: Celia, its matriarch; her daughters, Lourdes and Felicia; Lourdes' daughter, Pilar; and Felicia's son Ivanito and twin daughters, Luz and Milagros. Although Celia is approaching fifty when Castro comes to power, her adult years are marked by a growing militancy that causes her to denounce the dictators that precede Castro and enthusiastically support Castro's revolutionary government. Lourdes, who marries into the wealthy Puente family, staunchly opposes Castro whose reform policies result in the confiscation of the family's extensive business and land holdings. These and other traumas suffered under Castro force Lourdes and her husband Rufino to flee into exile and raise their daughter Pilar in New York City. Felicia remains in Cuba, neither supporting nor opposing Castro, inhabiting her own world of imagination and periodic bouts of madness into which she draws her sensitive son while alienating her more conventional daughters, who have been socialized to the mores of Castro's Cuba. Within the Del Pino family, Castro's rise to power results in an ideological divide as differing political affiliations are read as personal betrayal in light of pre-existing relational conflicts.

García uses multiple narrative points of view to render the fragmentation Castro's regime causes in the Del Pino family, which serves as a microcosm for the larger Cuban family. Continually shifting between family members, the narrative gives the reader access to a multiplicity of perspectives on life before and after Castro as well as life in Cuba and in exile. García consistently uses the third-person voice to present the thoughts and actions of Celia, Lourdes, and Felicia, but generally renders the grandchildren in the first-person voice, suggesting her particular concern with the generation raised in the wake of Castro's ascendance to power. Of these grandchildren, Pilar has more sections of narrative devoted to her than the others combined, making her the novel's primary focus. A child of postmemory, raised in the shadow of the profound traumas and losses her parents suffer under Castro, Pilar grows up resenting the power of politicians to decide the course of her life and separate her from her family and heritage. Born in the very month of Castro's rise to power, Pilar represents the unintended consequences of revolution, her life in exile symbolic of a fragmentation of the Cuban family unimaginable before Castro's regime. Pilar's quest to recover and understand the Cuban side of her Cuban American identity, however, creates the possibility of reconciliation of that fragmentation. In her efforts to access her familial and cultural legacy and translate them into her American present, Pilar ultimately creates a narrative of postmemory that gathers together the disparate pieces of the Del Pino family, making possible a remembering of a family and people fragmented by the events of 1959. Because the development of the narrative causes Pilar to experience in her own body, forms of the history and trauma Celia and Lourdes experience, Pilar becomes a bridge between past and present and the repository of family history.



### Accessing and Creating Alternative Histories

Pilar's narrative takes ownership of historical events that have traumatized her parents and affected every aspect of her upbringing. By re-imagining the Cuban past, Pilar assumes control over events that have deprived her and her parents of their autonomy, their homeland, and their family. While her parents grieve the events that destroyed Cuba and their Cuban lives as they know them, Pilar grieves the absence of such specific memories of Cuba and resents being a pawn of history. "I resent the hell out of the politicians and the generals who force events on us that structure our lives, that dictate the memories we'll have when we're old. Every day Cuba fades a little more inside me, my grandmother fades a little more inside me. And there's only my imagination where our history should be" (García, *Dreaming* 138).<sup>10</sup> Pilar's narrative seeks to recover the memories and family history she fears losing permanently and to create a record of individual lives affected by larger historical forces. In an interview, Cristina García explained that her intention in writing *Dreaming in Cuban* was to "excavate new turf, to look at the cost to individuals, families, and relationships among women of public events such as a revolution" (García and López 107). Pilar similarly seeks to excavate the stories of her grandmother, mother and aunt to create a personal, woman-centered counter-history of the Cuban revolution. While particularizing the individuals affected by this historic event, García conscientiously generalizes the politician/general whose actions dictate the course of millions of lives. Throughout *Dreaming in Cuban* Castro is never named directly but referred to as *el Líder*. Pilar, critical of traditional history, which in her opinion only records "one damn battle after

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<sup>10</sup> Henceforth, I will simply use the page number to identify quotations from *Dreaming in Cuban*.

another,” prefers to “record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they were to rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. ... Who chooses what we should know or what’s important? I know I have to decide these things for myself” (28). Even in her musings about history and what stories are worthy to be told, Pilar concerns herself with the lives of women, particularly those who have no voice in traditional history. In her narrative, Pilar reclaims herself and her family from the tyranny of history by consciously choosing and recording what will be important to remember, what will enable her to understand her familial past, and what will empower her future.

Pilar’s challenge in this process is the challenge of the postmemorial position; separated by time and space from the events that have divided her family, Pilar’s only immediate source of information about that past is her parents. Still wounded by unresolved traumas and separated ideologically from their country and countrymen, Lourdes and Rufino Puente provide little substantive assistance in Pilar’s recovery effort: “Mom refuses to talk about Abuela Celia... Dad is more open, but he can’t tell me what I really want to know, like why Mom hardly speaks to Abuela or why she still keeps her riding crops from Cuba” (138). Pilar needs to know that her mother has felt alienated from Celia since birth and that her riding crops testify both to the life of luxury and prestige she lives in Cuba and to the painful losses that propel her exile. Completing her narrative of postmemory will ultimately combine the limited information Pilar receives from her parents with information received from alternative sources, including imagination. Pilar’s use of alternate means to access her familial history will enable her

to re-imagine the legacy she has inherited, translate it into her American present, and bridge the divide between past and present and between Cuba and the United States.

The primary means García provides to enable Pilar to bridge these divisions is magical realism, which enables Pilar and Celia to communicate telepathically and Lourdes and her father Jorge to communicate from beyond the grave. Several characters, including Pilar, Lourdes, and Celia additionally have the power to recall everything they have experienced since birth. The conventions of magical realism facilitate both the interaction of people distanced by time, space and death and the meeting of Latin American and North American literary traditions in one text, thereby creating a hybrid text. According to Isabel Alvarez Borland, *Dreaming in Cuban* demonstrates “that the Cuban-American production at its best is a mix of Latin American and North American literary traditions, a production that borrows from both, a writing of Cuban culture in English” (155). As in *The Dew Breaker*, the American setting provides the distance and physical safety to explore and question the Cuban past and present under Castro; however, the severing of ties experienced in exile requires the reclamation of the Cuban/Latino legacy both in familial relations and in cultural production. Magical realism facilitates this process, translating Latin American literary conventions into an American text and bridging the divides between characters to enable Pilar to create a narrative that connects Cuba and the United States. Kathleen Brogan suggests that these magical translations “reframe cultural inheritance, rendering the past in the terms of the present” (11)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Although Brogan discusses cultural translations at length in her discussion of *Dreaming in Cuban*, I find the most interesting “translations” to be experiential as Pilar experiences in her own body versions of events occurring in the lives of her maternal relatives in Cuba. This embodiment of experience enables

In the novel, magical realism literalizes Pilar's metaphorical connections to her grandmother, mother and aunt causing her to experience elements of their Cuban history in her own body, thereby rendering them in her American present. As the novel's cultural translator, Pilar is "haunted by [her] 'source' culture in order to render it into [her] 'target' culture: contemporary America" (Brogan 11). Pilar grows up haunted by her desire to reconnect to (or identify with) her lost homeland and family. Early in the novel she wonders "how [her] life would have been if [she]'d stayed" in Cuba with her grandmother and concludes that "If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged" (32, 58). After her physical return to Cuba late in the novel, Pilar does in fact know where she belongs, but that experience is preceded by numerous magical returns that enable her to connect to her familial and cultural lineage in Cuba. Pilar's emotional connection to Abuela Celia, magically rendered through telepathic communication, remains intact in spite of their physical separation making Celia Pilar's primary means of accessing her Cuban culture and history. Pilar's connection to her mother, literalized by her experience in New York of a traumatic event reminiscent of one her mother experiences in Cuba, balances her grandmother's unquestioning support of Castro and enables Pilar to access the underside of Castro's reign. Finally, her spiritual affinity with her aunt Felicia, represented in Pilar's attraction to and dreams of *santería* ritual, enables Pilar to see the dangers Castro's rule poses to individuals who are unable to conform to his social dictates. These magical processes of identification (through embodiment) and translation enable Pilar to create a narrative of postmemory

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Pilar to translate her Cuban maternal heritage into her American experience, rendering her truly Cuban American, a hybrid identity.

that re-members the disparate elements of Cuban society in spite of the divisive impact of Castro's rise to power.

#### Recovering the Mother/Motherland

Of critical importance in Pilar's process of accessing and translating the past is her relationship to her grandmother Celia, who becomes her personal and textual source. Although literally torn from her grandmother when her family flees Cuba, Pilar remains intimately connected to Celia through telepathic conversation. Through these conversations, Celia imparts to Pilar her spiritual and creative energy. Even though she has not seen Celia since the age of two, Pilar comments at age thirteen that "Most of what I've learned that's important I've learned on my own, or from my grandmother. . . . I hear her speaking to me at night just before I fall asleep. She tells me stories about her life and what the sea was like that day" (28). These telepathic conversations overcome the physical distance between New York and Cuba and re-connect Pilar to her familial and cultural source. Because Pilar records Celia's stories in "a diary [she keeps] in the lining of her winter coat, hidden from her mother's scouring eyes," their conversations are the first step in Pilar's process of translating the Cuban past into her American present and writing her narrative of postmemory (7).

Distanced from her mother but intimately connected to her grandmother, Pilar becomes the repository of Celia's memories and spirit. Pilar inherits from Celia the tendencies to consider important things that would never appear in traditional histories and to transgress boundaries. Celia, like Pilar, dreams of unnamed women in distant locales: "Of massacres in distant countries, pregnant women dismembered in the squares.

Abuela Celia walks among them mute and invisible” (218). Celia’s silence and invisibility suggests her perceived lack of power to help these suffering women, but their presence in her dreams demonstrates an empathic connection nonetheless. Although Celia never leaves Cuba or writes a history read by anyone but Pilar, she travels to the United States with Pilar telepathically and imparts to Pilar her concern for the dispossessed and her desire to create narratives that give voice to those without voices. Raised by a great aunt who introduces her to the piano and poetry, inspiring her lifelong love of Debussy (particularly the passionate *La Soirée dans Grenade*) and of the poetry of Federico García Lorca, Celia learns to question boundaries early in life. Tía Alicia teaches Celia to reverence the ancient ceiba tree in the Plaza de las Armas in Havana calling it “a saint, female and maternal” and to look with skepticism at organized religion (43). “Her aunt did not attend church and derided those who did” (93). Celia maintains and passes on to Pilar her aunt’s passion for the arts, her skepticism of religion, and her reverence for the ceiba which connects Celia to the spirit of her motherland. Celia transgresses customary proprietary boundaries with her brief, but passionate and adulterous, affair with Gustavo, a married Spanish lawyer working “to document the murders in Spain” in order to spur revolution (36). Although the affair begins and ends before her marriage to Jorge Del Pino and Gustavo disappears from Celia’s life as suddenly as he appears, Celia remains emotionally connected to Gustavo throughout her marriage. From this relationship Celia also develops a revolutionary zeal which gains strength as she matures. The affinity between grandmother and granddaughter contrasts the significant distance between Lourdes and both Celia and Pilar. Lourdes criticizes her

mother and daughter for being “disdainful of rules, of religion, of anything meaningful” (168).

Celia’s grandmotherly comfort and encouragement provides Pilar the maternal nurturing she needs to navigate her confusing life in the United States, particularly her difficult and un-nurturing relationship with her mother. “I might be afraid of her [Lourdes] if it weren’t for those talks I have with Abuela Celia late at night. She tells me that my mother is sad inside and that her anger is more frustration at what she can’t change” (63). With a mother unable to understand or appreciate her, Pilar is mothered telepathically by Celia. Transmitted to Pilar in the night, Celia’s words have the quality of lullaby, spoken directly to Pilar’s heart to nourish and comfort her in her mother tongue. Imagining Pilar “pale, gliding through paleness, malnourished and cold without the food of scarlets and greens,” Celia “closes her eyes and speaks to her granddaughter, imagines her words as slivers of light piercing the murky night” (7). Celia’s words sent to warm and nourish Pilar require no translation and connect Pilar to the warmth and spirit of her motherland. Even when Pilar and Celia lose their connection when Pilar is thirteen, Pilar continues to be sustained by the legacy she receives from Celia: “a love for the sea and the smoothness of stones, an appreciation of music and words, sympathy for the underdog, and a disregard for boundaries. Even in silence, she gives me the confidence to do what I believe it right, to trust my own perceptions” (176). Through telepathic communication, Pilar connects to her grandmother’s spirit and receives bodily Celia’s narrative history and cultural sense. In this way, Pilar accesses her family history and Cuban heritage and translates them into her American existence.

The term *translate*, however, is a vexed term for a child born in a Spanish-speaking nation but raised in an English-speaking one who writes in English a narrative received and experienced in Spanish. Although Pilar maintains her ability to understand and express herself in Spanish, her dominant language as she matures is English. Celia laments that Pilar “writes to her from Brooklyn in a Spanish that is no longer hers. She speaks the hard-edged lexicon of bygone tourists itchy to throw dice on green felt or asphalt” (7). Over time, Pilar’s native Spanish becomes Americanized and reminiscent of the Spanish spoken by American tourists in the years before Castro, tourists who came to consume the pleasures of the island. When she speaks Spanish, Pilar’s American-inflected dialect carries with it negative connotations that hinder its translation into the Cuban context. Knowing the limits of her ability to express herself in her mother tongue, Pilar avoids forms of expression that require translation: “Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English” (59). Instead, Pilar finds refuge in artistic expression, particularly painting: “who needs words when colors and lines conjure up their own language” (176)? Celia encourages Pilar to pursue art lessons and, as an adolescent, art provides Pilar the comfort and avenue for self-expression that in part replace her severed connection to Celia. Pilar’s connection to Celia dies when at the age of thirteen, Pilar attempts to return to Cuba, traveling as far as Miami before being intercepted by relatives and sent back to New York. Unable to fulfill her mission, Pilar feels powerless, “like my destiny was not my own” (199). This loss of personal agency (and cultural mooring) causes Pilar to lose her sense of purpose and ability to access her grandmother, at which point her connections to Celia and to Cuba begin to die. During the years between when Pilar loses her connection to Celia and when she returns to Cuba



as a young adult, artistic expression nourishes her soul. In Cuba Pilar's sense of personal agency is restored as she re-connects with Celia and completes the process of collecting and translating her cultural and familial heritage.

While in Cuba, Pilar receives Celia's textual legacy, a box of letters written to her former lover Gustavo on the eleventh day of every month from November 1934 to January 1959. Although Celia does not narrate her story in the first-person voice in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Celia's voice is heard in the novel through the incorporation of selections of her letters. These letters, written faithfully each month but never mailed, are Celia's attempt at narrative creation and form an archive of memory that become Pilar's inheritance. In her last letter written on January 11, 1959, Celia defines Pilar's role in her life as well as Pilar's relation to Castro's revolution.

My dearest Gustavo,

The revolution is eleven days old. My granddaughter, Pilar Puente del Pino, was born today. It is also my birthday. I am fifty years old. I will no longer write to you, *mi amor*. She will remember everything.

The connection between Pilar's birth and Castro's rise to power suggests their equal and possibly parallel significance to Celia. Celia's deferred dreams for her nation and herself find fulfillment in Castro's rise and Pilar's birth. Castro will deliver the nation from the tyranny of dictators, and Pilar will become the perfect auditor and repository for Celia's memories authorizing her narrative. Celia will no longer need to conjure the memory of Gustavo to create an object for and to justify her narrative impulses. Instead her granddaughter, who shares her birthday, will become her heir and translator, writing Celia into history.

Samplings of Celia's letters appear unmediated and largely uncontextualized throughout *Dreaming in Cuban*. Disembodied from their source and unrelated to the

chronology of the narrative, Celia's letters become a textual version of her telepathic conversations with Pilar. They speak directly to the reader from Celia's heart, providing access to elements of Celia's and Cuba's past that the reader would have no other way of knowing. Her letters reveal her psychological breakdown at the time of Lourdes' birth: she writes, "The baby is porous. She has no shadow. The earth in its hunger has consumed it. She reads my thoughts, Gustavo. They are transparent" (50). This traumatic experience, which includes a stay in an asylum, contextualizes Lourdes' lifelong estrangement from her mother. In another letter Celia discusses the aftermath of this early separation:

That girl is a stranger to me. When I approach her, she turns numb, as if she wanted to be dead in my presence. I see how different Lourdes is with her father, so alive and gay, and it hurts me, but I don't know what to do. She still punishes me for the early years. (163)

Lourdes remains a stranger to Celia throughout her life, the difficulties of the early years later complicated by their adversarial positions relative to Castro. Celia's letters additionally reveal her growing militancy: "That bastard Batista stole the country from us just when it seemed things could finally change. The U.S. wants him in the palace. How else could he have pulled this off?" (162) Celia's letters, finally, allow her voice to penetrate the text and guide its development. Her last letter ends the narrative and designates Pilar as the keeper of the family history. At this point, Alvarez-Borland argues that readers "realize they have been reading the contents of Pilar's diary all along.... Here author Cristina García identifies Pilar as the inner narrator of her novel" (141). With Celia as her source, Pilar connects spiritually and textually to her Cuban heritage, translates it into her American present, and creates a narrative of postmemory that re-members her familial and cultural lineage. Pilar's telepathic connection to Celia

restores her connection to her matrilineage and motherland as she drinks in her cultural and familial heritage from Celia like milk. This virtual ingestion enables Pilar to embody (identify with) Celia and reproduce her in narrative. Meanwhile, the incorporation of Celia's letters into the text similarly nourishes Pilar's larger narrative with Celia's rich narrative source material.

### Shared Trauma, Incomplete Translations

Although Pilar interacts with her mother on a daily basis, the difficulty of their relationship allows little emotional intimacy. Pilar's bond with her mother, therefore, is not rendered through intimate communication as is her bond with Celia; instead, her connection to Lourdes is presented through shared experiences, particularly as Pilar lives a form of her mother's traumatic history during the novel. Among the experiences Pilar shares with Lourdes is the ability to remember precisely everything she has experienced or witnessed since birth. Pilar explains, "I remember everything that's happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversation" (26). Pilar's recall does not, however, give her perfect understanding of everything she witnessed as a child, nor does it give her access to the memories of others. Pilar benefits from her memory because it gives her some recall of Cuba including her last day with Celia. Lourdes' experience of total recall, on the other hand, causes her to remember and feel profoundly the hurt from the circumstances surrounding her birth. Lourdes' earliest memories of Celia reflect Celia's descent into madness after her pregnancy and her inability to communicate love to her daughter. Lourdes remembers "herself alone and shriveled in her mother's womb [and] envisioned the first days in her mother's unyielding arms.... If it's true that babies

learn love from their mothers' voices, then this is what Lourdes heard: 'I will not remember her name'" (74). Celia's inability to love Lourdes in her infancy reflects both Celia feeling bound to Cuba by the birth of a daughter and her husband Jorge's efforts to punish her for her loyalty to her Spanish lover. Before Lourdes' birth, "Celia wished for a boy, a son who could make his way in the world. If she had a son, she would leave Jorge and sail to Spain, to Granada. She would dance flamenco" (42). Celia imagines that one night while dancing in Granada Gustavo will find her and resume their affair. She would not, however, abandon a daughter: "If she had a girl, Celia decided, she would stay. She would not abandon her to this life, but train her to read the columns of blood and numbers in men's eyes, to understand the morphology of survival" (42). Celia does succeed in raising Lourdes to be a survivor, but as a young woman, Celia's devotion to a romantic ideal damages her relationship with her husband and eldest daughter and causes her to resent the mundane life of wife and mother. As a mature woman, Celia clings to a romantic vision of revolution that further alienates her from her husband and daughters. When he goes to live with Lourdes in the United States, Jorge leaves his wife feeling defeated finally by Celia's continued pursuit of impossible love: "I couldn't bear to watch her. She had fallen in love again. She thought only of the revolution. There was nothing I could do but eat my own sour guts" (194). Lourdes' total recall enables her to remember and despise her mother for her inability to commit herself to Lourdes and her father. Lourdes' hostile relationship with her mother is balanced, however, with an intimate and loving relationship with her father.

Just as Pilar experiences intimacy with her grandmother through telepathic communication in spite of their physical separation, Lourdes experiences a continued

intimacy with her father after his death. Using another magical realist convention, García allows the dead to interact with the living in the novel. After his death in New York, Jorge Del Pino appears once in Cuba to Celia and then makes frequent visits to his beloved Lourdes in New York over the course of several years. In the magical realist world of *Dreaming in Cuban*, separations between characters caused by diaspora, exile or death interrupt but do not end conversations between loved ones truly bonded to each other. Her father's presence after death represents Lourdes' need in exile to connect to her Cuban heritage, her childhood memories and her otherwise estranged family. Jorge both materializes Lourdes' repressed connection to Cuba and provides her the type of comfort Pilar receives from her grandmother, these magical connections working to offset more distanced maternal relationships—Pilar's with Lourdes and Lourdes' with Celia. Jorge helps Lourdes to understand, for example, that her spirited and authority-questioning daughter “doesn't hate you, *hija*. She just hasn't learned to love you yet” (74). Before his final departure, he additionally encourages Lourdes to reconcile with her mother.

More important than his role as comforter, Jorge, in his spectral state, serves “as go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure, moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another” (Brogan 6). Both in life and death, Jorge causes Lourdes to confront her traumatic memories of Cuba and presents her the opportunity to resolve those traumas by translating and re-imagining them in the present. Jorge Del Pino spends the last months of his life in New York with Lourdes and her family seeking treatment for stomach cancer. Her father's very presence returns Lourdes to memories of her painful childhood in Cuba and to the reason for her family's departure from Cuba. After her

father's death, Lourdes "imagines her father... heading south, returning home to their beach, which is mined with sad memories. She tries to picture her first winter in Cuba. It was 1936 and her mother was in an asylum. Lourdes and her father traversed the island in his automobile.... From the car window, Lourdes saw the island's wounded landscapes, its helices of palms" (24). Lourdes' earliest memories are full of stolen moments with her father which compensate for more painful moments with her mother. Her memories of her homeland are framed through the window of her father's car as she travels with him selling American-made consumer products door-to-door throughout the island. Understandably, Jorge's appearance in the United States, weakened and frail from illness, has a profound effect on Lourdes. "She remembers how after her father's arrival in New York her appetite for sex and baked goods increased dramatically. The more she took her father to the hospital for cobalt treatments, the more she reached for the pecan sticky buns, and for Rufino" (20). After gaining 118 pounds and exhausting her husband, Lourdes' hunger remains unsatisfied: "Lourdes was reaching through Rufino for something he could not give her" (21). In addition to creating in Lourdes an understandable grief over his imminent death, Jorge's presence in New York causes Lourdes to experience again the loss of her homeland and the circumstances surrounding her departure. Brogan suggests that Lourdes' appetites are a means of affirming her connection to life in the face of death. "Lourdes' quickly amassing body and voracious sexual appetite would deny her father's slow diminishment; in her dreams of bread multiplying prodigiously, she counters death (and Cuba's betrayal) with a yeasty affirmation of life" (Brogan 101). I would argue further that Lourdes' appetites seek to

fill the void of tremendous losses Lourdes experiences in Cuba, losses which Jorge brings painfully to mind.

Jorge's presence, first, causes Lourdes to remember the loss of her second child—"A boy she would have named Jorge, after her father"—just weeks before her departure from Cuba (227). This loss comes with the memory of revolutionary soldiers coming to take control of Rufino's beloved dairy farm as part of Castro's land reform and distribution policies. After being thrown from her horse during a ride around the property and crawling most of the way back to the house, Lourdes arrives at their villa to find Rufino being held at gunpoint by two young soldiers attempting to evict them from their property. As she chases the soldiers away, "Lourdes felt the clot dislodge and liquefy in her breasts, float through her body, and slide down her thighs. There was a pool of dark blood at her feet" (70). Lourdes' lost child, absorbed into the soil of the Cuban estate her family is forced to relinquish, becomes emblematic of all the losses she suffers in the wake of Castro's rise to power. Lourdes' experiences her second great loss when the soldiers return a week later to find Rufino away on business. The soldiers again lay claim to the land, presenting Lourdes "an official sheet of paper declaring the Puentes' estate the property of the revolutionary government" (70). She again resists them, tearing the document in half. In response, however, the soldiers lay claim to Lourdes, one holding her down while the other rapes her, placing his knife flat across her belly. When he finishes raping her, the soldier "lifted the knife and began to scratch at Lourdes' belly with great concentration. A primeval scraping. Crimson hieroglyphics" (72). This scraping suggests the soldier writing his ownership of Lourdes' body, but, when she later tries to read the soldier's writing, she finds "it was illegible" (72).

From that moment, Lourdes ceases to be at home both in Cuba and in her body; they become illegible to her. Soon after these incidents, Lourdes and Rufino flee Cuba, moving as far away from Cuba and all that they associates with it as possible: “‘I want to go where it’s cold,’ Lourdes told her husband,” and she demands that they drive north from Miami until they reach New York where Lourdes finally feels “cold enough” (69, 70). In New York, Lourdes recreates herself in opposition to her Cuban self:

Unlike her husband, she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention. Lourdes relishes winter most of all—the cold scraping sounds on sidewalks and windshields, the rituals of scarves and gloves, hats and zip-in coat linings. Its layers protect her. She wants no part of Cuba, no part of its wretched carnival floats creaking with lies, no part of Cuba at all, which Lourdes claims never possessed her. (73)

Lourdes, upon leaving Cuba, attempts to empty herself of her Cuban-ness and reinvent herself as an American, feeding on Jell-O molds and TV dinners and excessively embracing patriotism and capitalism, attending parades on every American holiday and starting a business she calls the Yankee Doodle Bakery. Escaping the heat and sensuality of the tropics, she settles in the frozen north where layers of clothing protect her from the dangerous memory of her losses and violation. Her father’s appearance in New York, however, undoes the fragile balance of Lourdes’ new life. The sight of his “stomach ... shaved and tracked with stitches” brings to mind the markings on her own stomach and the accompanying memories of her departure from Cuba (21). Brogan suggests that “despite her disavowals,” Lourdes remains possessed by Cuba and by the “haunting memory” of her body and land being taken possession of by Castro’s soldiers (Brogan 98-99). Betrayed by her homeland, Lourdes recreates herself as a stereotypical American but can not eliminate the haunting memories that follow her from Cuba. Her father’s ghostly presence serves as just one representation of that haunting. Although she



attempts to fill and reconstitute herself with American food and sex, neither can fill the void of her lost homeland, home, and child. Further, her inability to put Cuba's betrayal behind her becomes a sort of betrayal of the self that causes Lourdes to become the difficult, unhappy woman that raises Pilar.

In addition to causing Lourdes to remember her past, Jorge also provides the opportunity to resolve past traumas. Before his final departure from her in the fall of 1979, Jorge urges Lourdes to return to Cuba to seek reconciliation with her mother as well as to mourn her sister, Felicia, who has just died. Confessing his part in Celia's madness at the time of Lourdes' birth, Jorge implores Lourdes to "tell your mother everything, tell her I'm sorry" (197). Through their magical realist connection, Jorge helps Lourdes "understand" the extenuating circumstances surrounding Celia's behavior after Lourdes' birth: "After we were married, I left her with my mother and my sister. I knew what it would do to her. A part of me wanted to punish her. For the Spaniard. ... I left her for a long trip after you were born. I wanted to break her, may God forgive me. When I returned, it was done" (195). Jorge leaving Celia with his cruel and abusive mother and sister leads to her mental breakdown and her inability to love Lourdes. Jorge hopes that his confession will enable Lourdes to understand the larger context of her past with her mother; however, Lourdes' strained relationship with Celia is irreparably damaged by Celia's adoration of Castro and loyalty to his regime. The betrayal that Lourdes feels from her motherland extends to her mother who so ardently supports her violator. Lourdes would thus need to reconcile herself both to Cuba and to her mother to resolve her traumatic past.

Although Jorge begs her to return to Cuba to begin this process, Lourdes travels to Cuba only after Pilar insists they go in April 1980. There, Lourdes' alienation remains. First, she is alienated from her culture: when, nineteen years after her departure from the island, Lourdes speaks to Cubans about her life in the United States, "The language she speaks is lost to them. It's another idiom entirely" (221). Although Lourdes certainly speaks the language spoken in Cuba, two decades of ideological and geographic separation have resulted in a cultural divide between Cubans living in Cuba and Cubans living abroad. Lourdes now lives and expresses her Cuban identity in a way quite alien to the current residents of Cuba. Their lifestyle and mode of expression are similarly alien to her. Second, Lourdes remains alienated from her mother. While at dinner one night, she watches her mother dining on coconut ice cream (in homage to her recently deceased daughter Felicia) and concludes: "She is a complete stranger to me... Papi was wrong. Some things can never change" (223). After several days in Cuba, Lourdes realizes, "she cannot keep her promise to her father, to tell her mother that he was sorry.... The words refused to form in her mouth" (238). She instead feels "the grip of her mother's hand on her bare infant leg, hears her mother's words before she left for the asylum: 'I will not remember her name'" (238). Finally, Lourdes remains alienated from Cuba itself. When she returns to the villa where she and Rufino live before their departure from Cuba, she finds that her home has been transformed into a mental institution. There, "Lourdes studies the checkered linoleum, longs to dig for her bones like a dog, claim them from the black-hooded earth, the scraping blade" (227). What this passage suggests is unresolved, unmitigated loss. Lourdes loses her child and herself to the black-hooded earth and the soldier's scraping blade. Fearing that "her rape, her

baby's death were absorbed quietly by the earth... that they are ultimately no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day," Lourdes "hungers for a violence of nature... to record evil" (227). In Cuba Lourdes confronts old memories but, unable to re-contextualize them by seeing them with new eyes or forming new words to describe them, Lourdes returns from her trip much the same as she arrives. In Cuba, she dreams only of escape: "That night, Lourdes dreams of thousands of defectors fleeing Cuba" (238). For Lourdes, there will be no reconciliation with mother culture, mother, or motherland. All remain irrevocably tainted by the pain of her traumatic experiences.

Although Lourdes' proves unable to make such translations, the narrative causes Pilar to experience in her body a version of her mother's trauma, which translates Lourdes' Cuban past into Pilar's American present, giving her new understanding of her own cultural identity and her mother's pain and enabling her to recover her mother's body from her violation. Just before Pilar's culminating trip to Cuba, she experiences an attack that in some ways channels her mother's rape in Cuba, but with very different results. While her mother's rape precipitates her departure from Cuba, Pilar's assault precipitates her return to Cuba. After visiting a *botánica* on Park Avenue and receiving instructions to "Bathe in [bitter] herbs for nine consecutive nights" after which she "will know what to do," Pilar finds herself suddenly surrounded in Morningside Park by three boys:

The tallest one presses a blade to my throat. Its edge a scar, another border to cross. ...

The boys push me under the elm, where it's somehow still dry. They pull off my sweater and carefully unbutton my blouse. With the knife still at my throat, they take turns suckling my breasts. They're children, I tell myself, trying to contain my fear. (201, 202)

Although clearly not a rape, Pilar experiences a sexual assault reminiscent of rape that puts her unwillingly in the position of nursing mother. A violation that forcefully appropriates maternal nurture, Pilar's experience connects to Lourdes' rape which occurs soon after the miscarriage of her second child. Brogan reads Pilar's assault as a perversion of the maternal, familial connection: "The sexual assault on Pilar... violently parodies the bond between children and their mothers; with their eyes 'hot and erased of memory,' Pilar's young attackers represent the perversion of family connection" (Brogan 115, quoting García, *Dreaming* 201).<sup>12</sup> Pilar may have been accosted by figures like herself that are displaced from familial connection. Pilar's attack could be read to represent her severed ties to her motherland, her un-nurturing relationship with her own mother, and the inability of these mothers to mother her—Pilar's body serving as the space on which these losses are written. As in her mother's experience, the blade of a knife figures prominently in Pilar's assault, representing phallic domination and coercion. But Pilar calls the knife, "another border to cross," suggesting her entrance into new territory, possibly a new level of knowledge that will enable her to understand her mother and her traumas. Pilar remarks later that "Since that day in Morningside Park, I can hear fragments of people's thoughts, glimpse scraps of the future" (216). Pilar may cross into a new level of consciousness as she glimpses her future as a creator of culture.

I would argue that the scene in the park forcibly marks Pilar as a new type of mother, fertile but not yet having given birth. Pilar will give birth to a new cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Brogan additionally makes the obvious connection to Sethe's experience of a similar assault in Morrison's *Beloved* linking both scenes "to the destruction of family ties" (115). Although both incidents demonstrate gendered violence, I would argue that the randomness of Pilar's attack substantially differentiates it from Sethe's experience of racialized violence. Both incidents do, however, propel these women toward journeys that re-affirm their family ties and enable them to fulfill their familial roles.

identity, one uniquely Cuban and American. In the moment of her assault, Pilar hears “the five-note pounding of Lou Reed’s ‘Street Hassle,’ that crazy cello with its low, dying voice” (202). In the midst of being hassled on the street, Pilar hears a cello which Brogan connects to the bass Pilar purchases after discovering that her lover Rubén has cheated on her (Brogan 116). Pilar purchases the enormous bass and feels “like I’m buying my own heirloom” (181). This bought heirloom gives Pilar a sense of creating tradition, originating a cultural heritage. Later as she plays the bass, she proclaims—“I feel my life begin”—suggesting that Pilar finds her life in the expression of a cultural heritage that she herself creates (181). Pilar’s experience in Morningside Park has a significant impact on the culture she will create. During and after her attack, Pilar rests upon an elm tree: “I press my back against the base of the elm and close my eyes. I can feel the pulsing of its great taproot, the howling cello in its trunk.... I don’t know how long I sit against the elm, but when I open my eyes, the boys are gone” (202). This moment calls to mind Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and the moment when Milkman, separated from the men of Shalimar during a hunt in the dark woods, rests against a tree that so grounds him in his surroundings that he can feel an attacker approaching him. In Pilar’s situation, the tree becomes a refuge from which she gains strength in the midst of her attack. Like the ceiba in Havana, the elm tree in New York suggests Pilar being rooted in her surroundings and finding strength in her connection to place. Pilar, thus, rooted in America, becomes an originator of a new cultural identity—the Cuban American. Just before her attack, Pilar remembers a night in Cuba when she and her nanny experience “a furious thunderstorm” which splits the royal palm outside her bedroom in half (201). This split tree represents the separation of Pilar from her cultural

and familial roots in Cuba, but the close proximity of this memory to the scene in the park connects the elm tree to this earlier moment of crisis and serves to counteract this loss of roots. Brogan suggests that Pilar's connection to the elm tree demonstrates that she "has in a sense replanted her felled Cuban tree in American soil" (115). Pilar transplants her fragmented Cuban roots in America to begin a new family line. The "pulsing of the taproot" of the tree connects to the reverberation of Pilar's bass suggesting a link between her bought heirloom and the American soil. Pilar will construct her heritage in America from her connection to the soil and borrowed pieces of old and new. She will define the parameters of her legacy and create the traditions and heirlooms she will pass on to her children.

Ultimately, Pilar's ability to find strength in the moment of her violation through her rootedness in her landscape in some ways redeems Lourdes' violation and the "miscarriage of her...Cuban identity" (Brogan 116). While Lourdes is violently estranged from both her body and her land after her rape, Pilar manages to keep her connection to her body through the strength of her connection to the land. Further, the cleansing she receives during her nine days of herb baths counters the violating impact of her assault by grounding her in *santería* ritual, an important expression of her Cuban cultural heritage. Thus, Pilar's ability to overcome her traumatic experience results from her connection to both the solidity of her American identity and the spirit of her Cuban heritage. Re-contextualizing her mother's traumatic experience, Pilar resolve her inherited trauma by bridging the distance between her two cultures. This experience gives Pilar a magical, psychic connection to her mother and enables her to embody and translate Lourdes' repressed memory into her contemporary setting. Pilar's experience in

the park, finally, symbolically establishes her Cuban American identity in the United States, but a return to Cuba will be necessary to define Cuba's role in her hybrid identity.

#### The Return to the Source

Pilar's journey in *Dreaming in Cuban* which begins with her failed attempt to return to Cuba at the age of thirteen ends with the fulfillment of her goal. Her time in Cuba completes her task of collecting her family narrative and receiving Celia's inheritance as well as defining the parameters of the Cuban part of her Cuban American identity. After completing the nine-day bath ritual prescribed by the owner of the *botánica*, Pilar knows what she must do to "finish what [she] began" at the age of thirteen: "On the ninth day of my baths, I call my mother and tell her we're going to Cuba" (200, 203). Pilar begins to lose her sense of direction and agency at the age of thirteen; by age twenty-one, she feels "something's dried up inside me, something a strong wind could blow out of me for good" (198). Thus, nineteen years displaced from Cuba and eight years separated from Celia, Pilar begins her journey back to herself and her Cuban heritage when she enters a *botánica* on Park Avenue. *Santería*, a spiritual system created in Cuba by African slaves who translated the language of Catholicism into African religious ritual, represents well the translational/hybrid aspects of traditional Cuban culture and becomes a way for Pilar to access her Cuban heritage and translate it into her American present. She feels drawn to *santería* because "it's the simplest rituals, the ones that are integrated with the earth and its seasons, that are the most profound" (199). Similar to Celia's reverence for the ceiba tree in Havana, Pilar feels drawn to a form of spirituality that is based in nature and rooted in the earth. Although *santería* is a

syncretism of non-indigenous elements, it is a cultural form born in Cuba that for Cubans in exile comes to represent what is essentially Cuban; thus, Pilar's entrance into a *botánica* becomes a means of connecting to her Cuban heritage and her baths enable her to soak in and embody one aspect of the Cuban spirit. "Both Pilar's visit to the *botánica* and her experience under the elm tree, connected as they are to the worldview of *santería*, anticipate her recovery of the essentially Cuban; yet, as shown, the 'essentially' Cuban turns out to be something of the immigrant's devising" (Brogan 117-118).<sup>13</sup> *Santería*, itself a hybrid Cuban spiritual practice, becomes an optimal means for Pilar to begin her journey back to her Cuban heritage.

The rituals of *santería* have been in the background of Pilar's life throughout the novel. On her failed trip to Cuba, Pilar dreams of herself in a *santería* ritual:

It's midnight and there are people around me praying on the beach. I'm wearing a white dress and turban and I can hear the ocean nearby.... I'm sitting on a chair, a kind of throne.... The people lift me up high and walk with me in a slow procession toward the sea. They're chanting in a language I don't understand. I don't feel scared, though. I can see the stars and the moon and the black sky revolving overhead. I can see my grandmother's face. (33-34)

Pilar's vision of a ritual later revealed to be the *asiento*, the final initiation rite for a *santera*, connects her both to Cuba as she sees the face of Celia, her Cuban source, and to her aunt Felicia who is later initiated as a *santera*. Pilar's dream suggests that for Pilar coming home to her Cuban self will involve coming to *santería*.

In Cuba Pilar re-connects with Celia and her Cuban culture and in the process comes to embody both. When she returns to Cuba, she physically draws in Celia's life force as she has ingested her telepathic conversation during her youth: "As I listen, I feel my grandmother's life passing to me through her hands. It's a steady electricity,

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<sup>13</sup> For a fuller discussion of the role of *santería* in *Dreaming in Cuban* and the Cuban experience of diaspora, see Brogan 104-118.



humming and true” (222). In this moment Pilar’s emotional/spiritual connection to Celia is restored literally as she touches her grandmother and feels the transfer of her energy. Celia completes the transference of her memory to Pilar when she bequeaths her letters. Pilar, additionally, begins to dream in Spanish during her trip suggesting a recovery and re-vitalization of her Cuban self: “I wake up feeling different, like something inside me is changing, something, chemical and irreversible. There’s a magic working its way through my veins. There’s something about the vegetation, too, that I respond to instinctively” (235). In her homeland, Pilar is immersed in the language and sensual stimuli of the island and comes to embody the spirit of Celia, her cultural source, and of the island itself. The island inspires her artistically as well. Bringing her paints with her, she creates portraits of her grandmother: “I paint her in blue. Until I returned to Cuba, I never realized how many blues exist” (233). Pilar’s efforts to represent Celia, to capture her visually and in narrative, however, allow Pilar to relegate Celia and ultimately Cuba to the realm of the aesthetic. Brogan argues that for Pilar Cuba and Celia “belong to the blue, ghostly world of the imagination” (121). During her return to Cuba, Pilar at once fully ingests her Cuban heritage and consigns her Cuban homeland, family, and culture to her imagination, particularly as she realizes that the United States is “where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here” (236). Upon her return to the United States, Cuba will remain with Pilar, but will be fully alive only in her dreams.

Learning about her aunt Felicia and the role of art in Castro’s Cuba is critical to Pilar’s final understanding of where she belongs. In Cuba, Pilar asks her cousin Ivanito to take her to “Herminia Delgado’s house” so she can “learn the truth about [his] mother, to learn the truth *about herself*” (231, emphasis mine). Herminia, Felicia’s Afro-Cuban

best friend who has always “been more than a sister” to her, is the daughter of a *santería* priest who introduces Felicia to the spiritual practice (189). Distanced from her own family and infected with syphilis by her abusive and philandering first husband, Felicia is initiated as a santera shortly before her death. In *santería*, she finds an adopted family that she hopes can replace her own estranged relationships with her father Jorge, who rejects her when she marries against his wishes, and with her mother, who grieves Felicia’s apathy about the revolution. Unfortunately, no magical connections or even the transcendence of *santería* can save Felicia from the ravages of syphilis and an untimely death. As Felicia’s story unfolds during the novel, however, connections between her and Pilar become increasingly evident. Like Pilar, Felicia dreams of the dispossessed: “She grieves in her dreams for lost children, for the prostitutes in India, for the women raped in Havana last night. Their faces stare at her, plaintive, uncomplaining. What do they want from her?” (82) Felicia, like Celia, does not feel empowered in her dream to help these women, but she grieves for them nonetheless. Like Pilar, Felicia resists conforming to and blindly accepting her society’s standards: regarding Castro’s Cuba, “all she sees is a country living on slogans and agitation, a people always on the brink of war. She scorns the militant words blaring on billboards everywhere. WE SHALL OVERCOME... CHANGE DEFEAT INTO VICTORY” (107). Her apathy about the revolution puts her at odds both with her mother and her very conventional daughters. Her only refuge in her family is her son Ivanito with whom she shares her love of dance, music, and poetry. In her bouts of madness, Felicia shuts out the rest of the world, losing her ability to understand or communicate words, but keeps Ivanito close because “Everything makes sense when they dance” (78). She and Ivanito dance and sing Beny

Moré songs throughout the day even though their “record is warped and scratched from the heat and so much playing, and the words bend as if they’re underwater. But Ivanito and his mother sing them that way after a while” (83). Although her passion for dance, song and poetry, demonstrate her artistic sensibilities, her singing of warped songs suggests the extent to which Felicia is out of step with her family and society. Celia “ruefully” realizes early in the novel that Felicia’s talents “lay in her unsurpassed drama for the everyday. In the post office, in the plaza, or in the beauty shop where she worked, Felicia could have earned ovations and showers of red carnations” (118). I would argue that Felicia lives her life as a performance artist who has no creative outlet in Castro’s Cuba. Finding only momentary peace in *santería*, Felicia ultimately dies alone and unfulfilled. As she channels her aunt in her exploration of *santería*, Pilar discovers the benefits and limitations of this cultural practice. Felicia’s life and death, further, serve as a cautionary tale for Pilar on the fate of the artist in Cuba.

Pilar reaches her conclusion about where she belongs and where she can best express her Cuban American identity when she comes to understand the role of art in Castro’s Cuba. When Pilar asks Celia if she would be free to paint whatever she desires in Cuba, Celia responds “yes, as long as I don’t attack the state. Cuba is still developing, she tells me, and can’t afford the luxury of dissent” (235). Very soon after this conversation, Pilar decides that she cannot stay in Cuba, that even though she is “afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again,” she can not live in a place that stifles her expression (236). Believing that “Art... is the ultimate revolution,” Pilar realizes that a revolution that does not value art is not a revolution that truly values freedom. As “probably the only ex-punk on the island,” Pilar comes to understand that as much as she

has longed to be restored to Cuba, she has been powerfully marked by her upbringing in the United States and the freedom she has experienced there (235). In the United States, even her very conservative mother protects her right to self-expression when she unveils Pilar's punk rendition of the Statue of Liberty at the opening of her second Yankee Doodle bakery. Learning from her aunt Felicia the perils of living on the fringes of Cuban society, Pilar realizes that Castro's Cuba is no place for an artist and that her hybrid Cuban American identity position is best lived in the United States. Pilar's trip to Cuba enables her to see her lost homeland with adult eyes, define the parameters of her relationship to her Cuba, and therefore clarify her loyalties. In this process, however, she completes the work of collecting and embodying the spirit of her homeland and of her maternal ancestors. Upon her return from Cuba, Pilar is ready both to express fully her Cuban American identity and to begin re-membering her divided family in her narrative of postmemory.

#### The Death of the Mother

Although García appears to hold open during much of *Dreaming in Cuban* the possibility of redeeming anti-Communist assumptions about Castro's Cuba, the novel ends with a clear indictment of Cuba under Castro and the destruction of Pilar's connection to Cuba. Brogan argues that "in embracing her 'translated' identity as Cuban American, not Cuban, Pilar forever relinquishes Cuba as her true homeland" (126). Once Pilar receives her inheritance from Celia, she for all intents and purposes leaves Celia to die. Pilar even foresees Celia's death, imagining "Abuela Celia underwater, standing on a reef with tiny chrome fish darting by her face like flashes of light... She calls to me but

I can't hear her" (220). The novel which begins with Celia flirting with the possibility of drowning herself ends with her death by drowning. Having already lost her sensitivity to Celia's telepathic communication, Pilar will not likely be able to hear or connect to Celia through her watery grave; thus, Pilar's separation from Cuba and Celia will be complete upon her departure. After deciding that she will not stay in Cuba, Pilar completes her break with Celia by lying to her grandmother to help Ivanito escape Cuba in the Mariel boatlift. Although Lourdes takes Ivanito to the Peruvian embassy to seek asylum, Pilar has the opportunity to restore Ivanito to his grandmother but chooses to leave him at the embassy being fully aware that his departure from Cuba and hers will leave Celia little reason to live—all of her children and grandchildren either dead (Felicia and Javier), exiled (Lourdes, Pilar, and Ivanito), or estranged (Luz and Milagros). Even Luz and Milagros plan to pursue careers abroad when they complete school. To her death, Celia remains passionately devoted to the revolution but mournful of the divisions that it causes: "We have no loyalty to our origins," Celia tells Pilar. "What do all the years and separations mean except a more significant betrayal" (240). Celia dies alone in the waters separating Cuba and the United States. Pilar and Ivanito leave the island to enter the larger world where they will be able to pursue their dreams, Pilar to become an artist-anthropologist and Ivanito an interpreter, their exile to the United States re-affirming its role as the space of freedom for Cuban intellectuals and artists.

The ending of *Dreaming in Cuban* positions Cuba as a place of stagnation that can not nurture the life, growth and development of its children. On her return to Cuba, Pilar feels "like we're back in time, in a kind of Cuban version of an earlier America" (220). Castro's revolution has not re-created Cuba as a vital, modern nation; it has

instead made it a parody, a tropical version of an America that has already passed away. Luis argues that the novel characterizes the revolution as a failure, noting that among those fleeing Cuba with Ivanito are a significant number of “young people,” the very generation for whom “the revolution had been made ... the future of the new Cuban society. But their efforts to leave the country represented a sound rejection of the so-called accomplishments of the revolution” (221-222). Cuba, as a mother, has no ability to provide sustenance for her children. Celia becomes a representation of this failing when Pilar finds her exhausted after a late night swim, still wearing the worn and faded bathing suit she finds among Felicia’s things. Pilar notices at once that “Abuela is missing a breast. There’s a scar like a purple zipper on her chest” (218). Once returned to Cuba, Pilar finds Celia, her cultural source and the mother of the Puente family, exhausted, having lost her ability to produce motherly nurture, her source of nourishment permanently zipped away in her scarred chest. Celia stands in significant contrast to Pilar whose full breasts suggest her ability to nourish a new generation of those willing to make the transition and embrace a hybrid/translated identity. Her departure from the island and Celia’s death suggest the death of Cuba as Pilar’s motherland and cultural source. The Cuba Pilar knows as a child, the Cuba her parents know in their youth and young adult years has passed away and become the stuff of dreams. The new Cuba developed after two decades under Castro is as foreign to Pilar as to her mother: “Cuba is a peculiar exile... We can reach it by a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it all” (219). From her Cuban American vantage point, Cuba has become unknowable to Pilar; thus, the development of her Cuban American identity will require that she destroy her ties both to the imaginary old Cuba and to the unknowable New

Cuba. A representative of both the old and new Cubas, Celia must relinquish her hold on Pilar (in death) in order for Pilar to establish her Cuban American identity. Having fully embodied Celia and the spirit of Cuban culture, however, Pilar leaves Cuba's stagnation, returning to the United States as a re-figuration of her grandmother, to become the mother and cultural source of a new Cuban American culture.

The novel finally suggests a rather problematic solution to the question of how Pilar will access the Cuban part of her Cuban American identity once Celia has passed away and her ties to Cuba have been severed. First, throughout the novel Pilar interacts with her Cuban culture through consumption. She consumes her grandmother, first, through telepathic conversation and, later, through direct contact as her "grandmother's life" passes to her "through her hands" (222). When there is nothing left to consume of Celia, she is discarded. Although the ending of the novel renders Celia's death romantically as she releases herself and her precious pearl-drop earrings to the embrace of the sea, Celia's life has been used up by her children, grandchildren and the revolution by the time of her death. Additionally, in the United States Pilar's primary means of accessing her Cuban heritage is through commercial exchange. Just before her pivotal visit to the *botánica*, Pilar purchases an old Beny Moré album as a means of connecting to her Cuban culture. Her visit to the *botánica* which suggests her attempt to access her Cuban heritage through *santería* also demonstrates that her culture is something to be bought. Inside she finds the Cuban culture rendered in consumer goods: "snakeskins and *ouanga* bags... painted wooden saints... alongside plug-in Virgins with sixty-watt bulbs" (199). Although Pilar laments the commercialization of fringe movements like punk culture, she willingly accepts a form of her cultural heritage that she can access through

commercial exchange. Elena Machado Sáez argues that *Dreaming in Cuban* portrays Cuba “as a space of unproductiveness, sickness and death” due to “its isolation from the global market” (141). Like a body of water that does not allow movement in or out, Cuba, isolated in its revolution, becomes stagnant and diseased. Pilar must leave Cuba to escape the stagnancy with which it has become synonymous. In the United States, however, “Pilar [has] access to commodified Cuban culture (such as Beny Moré and *santería*) and also to a marginalized American identity... There, Pilar can be Cuban *and* American” (Machado Sáez 143-144). In this scenario, the packaged and processed version of Cuban culture does not destroy its authenticity; instead it allows it to escape Cuba’s stagnation through circulation in the global market. Machado Sáez finally concludes that “*Dreaming in Cuba* melancholically posits nostalgia as a product of entrance to the global world, and a better fate than never being part of the global market” (144). Thus, the establishment of Pilar’s trans-national identity requires that she live with the nostalgia of the irredeemable loss of her Cuban homeland and learn to circulate in the modern, global market. While this view of culture as circulating commodity deviates from a more romantic view of culture, it does reflect the reality of a global society in which cultures collide and impact each other and cultural identity can never be fixed.

Although García’s novel problematically depicts life and culture in Cuba as a “slow extinguishing” in a stagnant culture, Cubans in diaspora suggest a future for Cuban culture through circulation. After Celia’s death, Pilar’s body, through which Celia’s narrative and spirit and Lourdes’ experiences pass, becomes a repository of her familial and cultural legacy, a type of cultural artifact that through circulation keeps Cuban culture vital and current. As Pilar writes her narrative of postmemory, she creates a



cultural artifact with even greater ability to circulate than her own body. The novel which re-members her Cuban family and heritage captures the life that once exists in Cuba and enables that portrait to circulate beyond the stagnation of Castro's Cuba. Both Pilar and her narrative then become bridges between Cuba and the world, between past and present. Ultimately, Pilar Puente Del Pino, whose full name means Pillar of the Bridge of Hard Wood, becomes, through embodiment and translation, a means for Cuban culture to be transplanted in foreign soil, while *Dreaming in Cuban* becomes her narrative of postmemory that completes the work of translating and differentiating from her inherited traumatic memory. Alvarez Borland cites Michael Seidel who defines an exile as "one who inhabits one place and projects the reality of another" (141). This statement usefully characterizes postmemory for children raised in exile due to political strife. Although Pilar inhabits one space she remains attached in the realm of imagination to another; thus, postmemory can be considered a type of exile.

#### Transplanted in Foreign Ground

Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* and Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* explore the experience of postmemory related to political upheaval and exile in the modern-day experience of two Caribbean island nations, Haiti and Cuba. Both texts explore the challenges faced by the American-born daughter of exiles to access her cultural and familial legacy and resolve the traumas inherited from her parents.

Compounding the usual challenges of postmemory in this context is the additional complication of addressing the aftermath of political upheaval in small island families, the betrayals and divisions that precipitate exile and the severing of familial, national, and

cultural ties. These texts ask how such experiences of exile are to be remembered and how divided families can be re-membered. In *The Dew Breaker* the Bienaimé family attempts to resolve their traumatic history in Haiti through the creation of alternative narratives that facilitate the co-existence of hunter and prey. Ka, who represents the space between her parents, resolves her experience of postmemory by writing a narrative that imagines a third option in the Haitian dichotomy being hunter and prey and a means of extending grace without excusing the actions of the perpetrators of violence. In *Dreaming in Cuban* Pilar, through embodiment and translation of her maternal antecedents' experiences, becomes a repository of her familial and cultural heritage, resolving her inherited traumas in her body and in narrative. Both texts suggest that the resolution of their national traumas and the re-membering of the divided and wounded Haitian and Cuban people must occur in alternative spaces, in the imagination and on foreign soil.

These texts finally seem to suggest that the future of these cultures is found in being transplanted in foreign soil and that their vitality can only be fully expressed in diaspora. The United States, often complicit in Haiti and Cuba's historical challenges, is nonetheless the privileged place of exile and transplantation in these novels. Although both Danticat and García demonstrate the complications inherent in the process of translating a family from one cultural context to another, both of their texts portray the United States as the space of freedom that enables the transplantation of cultures and the resolution of traumatic memory. From their American homes, Danticat and García have the space to consider the complicated legacies of their island homelands, to individuate and narrate the stories of the nameless people who suffer at the hands of dictators like

Castro and Duvalier and of the innumerable revolutionary soldiers and macoutes that enforce their rule. It may ultimately be only in circulation, from outside the island homeland that the solution to the problems within can be visualized.

CHAPTER 5: GIRLHOODS AMONG GHOSTS:  
 Reclaiming the Maternal Inheritance in  
 Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*  
 and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975) and Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997) present the stories of two Asian American daughters attempting to embrace their maternal cultural inheritances as a means of constructing bicultural identities. Although both writers are Asian American women, Kingston and Keller write from dramatically different ethnic particularities, the Chinese American and Korean American. Kingston, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, writes an imaginative autobiography that explores the stories she receives from her Chinese mother and re-articulates them in a way that reflects and informs her Chinese American identity. In *The Woman Warrior* folktales and ghost stories serve as the interface between Maxine's mother, Brave Orchid's traditional Chinese heritage and Maxine's American upbringing. While young Maxine<sup>1</sup> resists her mother's stories, condemning them as incomprehensible, incomplete, and often misogynistic, the adult narrator Maxine rearticulates the stories she has inherited, inflecting them with the particularities of her Chinese American experience in order to give voice to her hybrid cultural identity. Keller, the daughter of a Korean immigrant mother and a white, American father, felt compelled to write her novel, *Comfort Woman* after hearing the testimony of Korean former comfort woman, Keum Ju Hwang in 1993, and finding herself haunted by the woman's traumatic experiences. Although Keller's novel with its dual narrative voice allows Akiko, a former comfort woman, to tell her own story, the

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<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the youthful protagonist of *The Woman Warrior* as young Maxine and the adult narrator as narrator Maxine, although neither are named directly in the book and both are Kingston's literary creations.

text is framed from the perspective of Beccah, Akiko's American-born daughter, whose words begin and end the novel. Soon into her narration, Beccah comes to the painful realization after her mother's death that she doesn't know enough about her mother to write a meaningful obituary. The novel ends with Beccah having completed a quest to discover her mother's hidden past (including learning her mother's true name, Soon Hyo) and to embrace her own confusing cultural legacy. Although the two texts have significant differences, they share the challenge of negotiating the formation of a hybrid Asian and American female identity through exploration of the relationship between an Asian immigrant mother and her American-born daughter.

These negotiations are complicated by the vast cultural differences between East Asia and the United States, differences which marginalize both mother and daughter in American society and place the daughter in the position of outsider in both cultures. In *The Woman Warrior* and *Comfort Woman*, Maxine and Beccah, as postmemorial writers, create narratives that attest to both the tremendous traumas their mothers have suffered in the immigration process and the residual traumas they themselves have experienced as daughters raised between two worlds. In addition to the obvious geographic, linguistic, and cultural differences between the rural Cantonese village where Brave Orchid lives a life of privilege as a midwife-doctor and Stockton, CA, where she lives a life of invisibility unable to speak the dominant language and required to perform the most menial and exhausting physical labor to ensure her family's survival, the fundamental ontological differences between Chinese and American cultures further alienate Brave Orchid from her new country and complicate Maxine's ability to translate between her two cultures. Although Akiko experiences similar immigration-related traumas in

*Comfort Woman*, these are generally superseded by the trauma of her experience as a comfort woman to Japanese soldiers during World War II. Interestingly, in the culturally diverse Hawaiian setting of this novel, Akiko's ontological differences become a source of strength as she serves the Asian immigrant community as a shaman. Akiko's privileged position in that community, nevertheless, remains circumscribed and untranslatable into larger American society. Like Maxine, Beccah's ability to function outside her home is complicated by her mother's decidedly non-western practices. Unlike Maxine, Beccah experiences conflict even in the home as she struggles to balance her white, Christian father's worldview with her mother's Korean shamanism. Brave Orchid and Akiko's ontological foundations manifest themselves in cultural practices not easily translated into their new American settings—Brave Orchid's talking-story and fighting ghosts (both spiritual and physical) and Akiko's conjuring and channeling ghosts as a shaman. Although both mothers are empowered by their spiritual connections to their heritages, their forms of expression alienate their daughters who straddle two dramatically different cultures inside and outside of the home and fully understand neither one.

Contrasting each mother's excessive verbalization about and with ghosts is her silence on issues critical to her daughter's understanding of her cultural heritage and familial inheritance. Brave Orchid's silence about traditions and aspects of the familial past and Akiko's silence about all aspects of her past in Korea cause Maxine and Beccah to grow up haunted both by the ghosts that populate their mother's lives and the ghosts of stories not told and personal histories not shared. Each daughter's quest in her text is to identify with a cultural inheritance that seems inexplicable in her childhood and use it to

translate between two inassimilable cultural extremes—her mother’s home culture and her own American culture. Eventually, both daughters come to embrace their “girlhood[s] among ghosts” and write into the silences of their cultural and familial pasts. Their narratives of postmemory, ultimately, are composed as much of input from their cultural sources (their mothers) as from their own experiences, conflicts with their mothers, research, and imaginative recreation. Their writing becomes a means of translating their cultural inheritances and differentiating from them a form of expression that represents their hybrid Chinese American and Korean American identities.

#### Bicultural Insanity: Liminality and Marginalization in *The Woman Warrior*

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine stands at the nexus of two cultures that neither understand nor respect each other and struggles to negotiate a space for her hybrid identity. Never fully understanding traditional Chinese or mainstream American culture, Maxine is nevertheless criticized on the one hand as insufficiently Chinese and on the other as insufficiently American. A prime example of Maxine’s untenable position occurs when Brave Orchid sends young Maxine to the druggist to demand that he give candy in retribution for “taint[ing their] house” by sending the Hong family the wrong prescription (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 170).<sup>2</sup> Maxine feels “sick” at the prospect of confronting the druggist, knowing he will think her a beggar (170). While Brave Orchid expects Maxine to confront the druggist and boldly demand reparation (as would any of Brave Orchid’s villagers), Maxine instead attempts to counter the druggist’s anticipated negative response to her request by presenting herself as “cute and small,” performing the posture American society requires of Chinese women—small, silent and

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, I will use just the page number to refer to quotations from *The Woman Warrior*.

non-threatening (170). Her best attempt to translate her mother's demand is to request "Some free candy... Sample candy" because "that is the way the Chinese do it" (170). Although young Maxine can not identify with her mother's cultural perspective, she is forced to translate its dictates into both the English language and the American cultural setting. Before the druggist, she feels "the weight and immensity of things impossible to explain," things that young Maxine simply does not have the ability to translate (171). When the druggist begins sending out-of-season candy to the Hong household on a regular basis, Maxine feels the sting of his charity, but Brave Orchid interprets his action as her having "taught the Druggist Ghosts a lesson in good manners" (171). Amy Ling cogently describes Maxine's difficult position:

Neither party understands the other; only Maxine understands both, but, as a child, she was powerless to explain one to the other. Furthermore, to add to her own psychic pain and confusion, Maxine found the druggist (an outsider) more comprehensible than her mother (to whom she owes her life), and as a small child she had to carry out the wishes of this incomprehensible mother. (125)

From birth, Maxine stands between two opposing cultural traditions, unable to identify fully with either one, yet obliged to fulfill each one's requirements of her, and desiring to be fully accepted by both while realizing that the full acceptance of one requires the rejection of the other.

In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston explores the liminal space between Chinese and American cultures through the stories shared between a Chinese mother and her American-born daughter. The text becomes a space of cultural interface, where Kingston represents the impact of both Brave Orchid's traumatic uprooting from her culture and transplantation into a completely alien environment *and* Maxine's bicultural confusion from being raised under two opposing sets of cultural norms. Brave Orchid and others of



her generation enter the United States seeking opportunity but instead find invisibility, grueling hard work, and a host culture that threatens to destroy them and consume their offspring. Reflecting on her years in the United States, Brave Orchid tells adult Maxine, “This is terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away” (104). Against the imminent threat of the hostile American environment, Brave Orchid and others of the immigrant generation structure their homes to uphold traditional Chinese values—even those that restrict women—as “a means of constructing, reinforcing, and commanding family-communal loyalties and socioeconomic survival” (Ho 120). The home then becomes a hedge to protect American-born children from complete assimilation and a refuge to preserve the parent’s Chinese self. Brave Orchid’s powerful presence in her home as a “champion talker” with a voice “strong and bossy” balances her near invisibility in American society (202, 172). Brave Orchid, who successfully blends ancient and modern epistemologies in China to become a successful shaman-midwife-doctor in her community, can neither transfer her profession into her new setting nor practice her skill at synthesizing old and new. Never learning to speak English, Brave Orchid remains an inassimilable alien in American culture, calling “‘ghosts’ those who confuse her or otherwise differ from what she is familiar” with including “Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts” (Gao 37; Kingston, *Warrior* 97). In her old age, she is “worn down and ...tired of unsuccessfully fending off the mundane ‘ghosts’ ... who occupy her ordinary life” (Ho 128). In the midst of her battle against American ghosts, however, Brave Orchid, by her ability to talk-story<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> In *In Her Mother’s House*, Wendy Ho describes talk-story as an oral tradition representing “the social, gendered space of women’s talk and culture” (12). Kingston’s talk-story, which is not exclusive to women’s talk, has its origin in the “peasant talk-story Cantonese tradition (‘low,’ if you will) which is the heritage of Chinese Americans. In this tradition, stories change in the flux of social-historical

speaks against the realities of her current situation to present herself as she once was, “an educated, independent woman and feisty ghost-fighter at the height of her powers in a changing China” (Ho 128). Through her stories she can show her children “how much I have fallen coming to America,” so that they do not assume that the worn and overworked woman who raises them is all their mother has ever been (77).

Brave Orchid’s adherence to Chinese traditional culture is not always beneficial, however, as she remains entrenched in traditions that keep her from forming a successful Chinese American identity and that force others to adhere to customs that are outdated and even dangerous when practiced beyond their traditional setting. This is most poignantly seen in “At the Western Palace,” when Brave Orchid brings her sister Moon Orchid to the United States to confront the husband who abandons her (in every way but financially) after emigrating to the United States decades before. Forcing her sister to adhere to cultural traditions that are out-of-place in their new setting, Brave Orchid bullies Moon Orchid to “go to your husband’s house and demand your rights as First Wife” (127). Demanding her rights would involve Moon Orchid moving into her husband’s home, making life unbearable for his new wife, and driving the junior wife (his only legal wife in the United States) from her home. Inevitably, her much younger husband rejects Moon Orchid, shattering the fantasy around which she has structured her life and causing her to suffer a mental breakdown. The experience, also, forces Brave Orchid to see herself through her more successfully acculturated brother-in-law’s eyes. When Brave Orchid meets Moon Orchid’s husband, she finds he has become a successful doctor, because “He was smart enough to learn ghost [in this case modern American]

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circumstances” (Kingston quoted in Ho 27, n1). Talk-story assumes that stories will be revised, not recited, and transformed with each telling. Ho argues that this process of revising and often subverting received traditional stories becomes one of the ways women create culture.

ways” (149). His success only highlights her failure to transfer her medical training into a livelihood that could provide for her family in their American setting. Further, she realizes that she and her sister have become ghosts in his eyes, “people in a book I had read a long time ago”—insubstantial and irrelevant (154). At this moment, Brave Orchid recognizes herself as invisible and marginal in both American and Chinese American societies. Brave Orchid’s stagnant reconstruction of Chinese culture most significantly affects her own children who feel suffocated in the family home. Narrator Maxine reflects “Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe” (97). Brave Orchid creates for her children an image of Chinese culture that does not incorporate the progress of time and the cultural changes China has experienced since her emigration. Narrator Maxine reflects: “Nobody told us that the Revolution (the Liberation) was against girl slavery and girl infanticide... Girls would no longer have to kill themselves rather than get married” (190-1). Instead Brave Orchid speaks traditional misogynistic adages that infuriate young Maxine and alienate her from her family. Although Brave Orchid’s faithfulness to Chinese custom gives her a space of safety from and site of resistance to a society that marginalizes and invalidates her, her home ultimately exists in a realm parallel to the vitality of both contemporary Chinese and American cultures. A form of Chinese American culture, Brave Orchid’s home confines rather than fosters growth.

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong argues, however, that Brave Orchid’s rigid adherence to what she understands to be Chinese culture is itself traditionally Chinese. Her habit, for example, of calling all non-Chinese persons “ghosts” reveals a very different and traditionally Chinese way of seeing the world and the self. The term *kuei*, translated

ghost and used to refer to all non-Chinese people, foreigners from the Chinese perspective, reflects the cultural belief that foreigners “are not real human beings, in contrast to the Chinese” (Ken-Fang Lee 112). Used in the American context, where the Chinese are foreign to the predominantly white majority, the term reflects a desire both to make the incomprehensible other invisible by sheer force of will (without denying its malevolent potential)<sup>4</sup> and to uphold the traditional belief in the superiority of Chinese culture. Among the “cherished cultural ideas” of traditional Chinese culture are “the superiority of Chinese civilization over the cultures beyond her borders [and] the irreconcilability of the different ways of life” (Wong, “Chinese Sources” 33). This belief system underlies Brave Orchid’s sister, Moon Orchid’s observation that her American nieces and nephews “must have many interesting savage things to say, raised as they’d been in the wilderness” (133). While the belief in the superiority of Chinese culture and in the inability of the Chinese to be re-acculturated may prevent many Chinese immigrants from creating Chinese American identities in their new homeland, these beliefs bring even greater complication to the immigrant generation’s relation to their American-born children whose futures depend on their ability to blend American and Chinese cultures. Chinese immigrant parents often feel alienated from their children who “had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were [them]selves ghost-like” (183). These parents treat their ghostly children like American ghosts whom they must

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<sup>4</sup> Sato explains that Kingston consciously chose to interpret the Chinese word *kuei* as “ghost” in *The Woman Warrior* while she translated the same word as “demon” in *China Men*, the text in which she explores her male relatives’ immigrant experience. She uses ghost in the female space she creates in *The Woman Warrior* “to reflect immigrant women’s indirect interaction with society” and to appropriate the “range of meanings *ghost* embraces—threat and coercion mitigated by indefiniteness, seductive beauty and charm” (Sato, “Chinese-American Constructs” 199).

constantly guard against, particularly to protect their tenuous status as immigrants<sup>5</sup>: “They must try to confuse their offspring as well [as the American ghosts], who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways—always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable” (5). Among the unspeakable things with which Chinese American children struggle are the cultural traditions that a Chinese child absorbs naturally when raised in the Chinese setting but that Chinese American children continually misunderstand. Young Maxine reports that “the adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask [about traditional customs]. You get no warning that you shouldn’t wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day” (185). The Chinese American child, expected to know that white ribbons recall the white wool flower worn in the hair after a parent’s death, receives angry judgment for her cultural ignorance, while the parent secretly mourns the child’s incomprehensible otherness.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Woman Warrior, Ho Chi Kuei*, the term Chinese immigrant parents use to refer to their American-born children becomes emblematic of the distance between generations: “‘Well, Ho Chi Kuei,’ they say, ‘what silliness have you been up to now?’ ‘That’s a Ho Chi Kuei for you,’ they say no matter what we’ve done” (204). Like many other Chinese terms, *Ho Chi Kuei* is not easily translated, and parents provide their children little help in understanding its meaning. Maxine’s efforts to translate the term only add to her confusion: “So far I have the following translations for *ho* and/or *chi*:

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<sup>5</sup> Because of the restrictive nature of immigration laws for the Chinese, many Chinese immigrants entered the United States under false pretense, were constantly wary of white officials, and were forced to lie to maintain their status. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (1996).

<sup>6</sup> King-kok Cheung explains that “the mother withholds verbal explanation about the exact nature of the daughter’s misdeed because she believes in—forms of ‘speech acts’” which become true simply by being spoken (Cheung 92).

'centipede,' 'grub,' 'bastard carp'" (204). As an adolescent, when her "throat burst open" with a verbal barrage against her mother, Maxine vents her frustration over years of cultural misunderstandings, particularly related to her mother's stories: "I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories....I can't tell what's real or what you make up" (202). In response, Brave Orchid explains some things to her daughter, but adult Maxine recalls, "It seemed to hurt her to tell me" (201, 203). Having to explain cultural basics to her daughter hurts Brave Orchid who realizes both her failure to impart understanding of Chinese ways to Maxine and the tremendous divide between generations. When Maxine persists in her verbal explosion, the scene ends with Maxine threatening to leave her familial and cultural home and Brave Orchid telling her to "Leave then. Get out, you Ho Chi Kuei. Get out. I knew you were going to turn out bad. Ho Chi Kuei" (204). Soon after this incident, Kingston does flee her family home to enter mainstream American culture where there are "no ghosts" (8). Eventually, however, she realizes that her personal development requires that she return to her cultural source and work to construct an identity that encompasses all aspects of her heritage (8). Although Kingston never settles on a definitive translation of *Ho Chi Kuei* in *The Woman Warrior*, Ken-fang Lee understands the term to mean "ghost-like," composed of *Ho Chi* which in Cantonese means "similar" or "like" and *Kuei* which means "ghost" (109). Foreigners both in the eyes of their parents and of their American countrymen, Kingston and other Chinese Americans struggle to define a cultural identity that embraces their in-between status.

Caught between two dramatically different cultures, Maxine grows up with a form of bicultural insanity: “Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves” (186). As portrayed in *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine’s upbringing in her parents’ home and surrounding Chinatown community does not offer her a workable explanation for herself as a girl. Constantly assailed by adages about the low value of girls—“Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds... There’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls”—young Maxine rejects traditional Chinese gender expectations by breaking dishes, wearing wrinkled clothing, and throwing tantrums, in the hope that being “a bad girl [will make her] almost a boy” (46, 47). Hearing stories of girl babies sold in China, Maxine is secretly thankful to be raised in the United States, yet feels condemned by her parents as “useless, one more girl who couldn’t be sold” (52). As an adult, narrator Maxine notes that the very structure of the Chinese language forces women to communicate their lack of value: “There is a Chinese word for the female *I*—which is ‘slave.’ Break the women with their own tongues!” (47) Unable to explain herself based on her understanding of traditional Chinese culture or to reconcile how her parents could love her while she “watch[es] such [misogynistic] words come out of my own mother’s and father’s mouths,” Maxine flees her family home and Chinatown community to “get out of hating range” (52). From afar, living in mainstream American society, which at least affirms her right to eat, Maxine “can believe [her] family loves [her] fundamentally” (52).

Meanwhile, in the American world Maxine is literally silenced, unable to explain herself, and rendered invisible. Being unable to speak English when she first attends school, Maxine fails kindergarten and is recorded as having a zero IQ. In her school

setting, Maxine receives an explanation of herself that can not serve her but also makes her first attempts at creative expression:

My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns... I was making a stage curtain...the moment before the curtain parted.... I spread [my pictures] out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas. (165)

Although young Maxine has all the creativity of childhood and an astute intellect, she lacks the tools to explain herself in her American setting. She is confused by the very concept of the individual self in English: “I could not understand ‘I.’ The Chinese ‘I’ has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American ‘I,’ assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight?” (166) Caught between two cultures, young Maxine can not accept the expressions of self offered by Chinese or American culture and is often confused by the task of balancing their conflicting requirements.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, young Maxine has trouble identifying where she belongs: “The other troublesome word was ‘here,’ no strong consonant to hold on to, and so flat, when ‘here’ is two mountainous ideographs” in Chinese (167). In both written language and the minds of the immigrant Chinese, “here” meaning the United States is thin and flat compared to the weighty and substantial “here” signifying China. Their children, born in the United States, have the opposite experience, struggling to “figure out how the invisible world the emigrants build around [their] childhoods fits in solid America” (5). Even as an adult, in work settings, Maxine is rendered invisible by the imposing presence

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<sup>7</sup> Ken-fang Lee suggests that even the Chinese “I” with its intricacies does not serve Maxine because it “claims a militant and male-centered identity” (109). Composed of the ideographs for a flag and an ancient military weapon, the Chinese “I” suggests a coat of arms intended to identify the property and power of a feudal lord. Based on possession and military power, this definition of self expressly excludes females and other subordinate members of Chinese society.



of white, male giants: “business-suited in their American executive guise, each boss two feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye” (48). Speaking in her “bad, small-person’s voice,” Maxine makes “no impact” (48). Although Maxine’s entrance into the American world enables her to leave behind the misogynistic, ghost-filled world of her youth, she is no more successful in constructing a meaningful explanation of her self there than she is in her trenchantly Chinese home.

Sato argues that Maxine ultimately finds mainstream American society to be “a sterile world. A central paradox of *The Woman Warrior* is that the very ‘ghosts’ that drive the narrator from home bring her back, for she realizes that banishing them all means banishing all poetry and magic too” (Sato, “Search for Ghosts” 140). In her return to her Chinese heritage, traditional stories become Maxine’s point of entry into her cultural past, and her translation of them becomes the basis for the formation of her Chinese American self. Brave Orchid’s stories finally rise out of the cultural confusion and entrenchment of Maxine’s upbringing to provide her the tools needed to construct her own hybrid Chinese American identity and resist the oppressive forces of both Chinese tradition and American culture. Starting with Chinese oral tradition, which Wendy Ho argues has “no fixed, unitary story, no one ‘right’ story,” Kingston creates her own “vibrant hybrid” talk-stories out of her “diverse cultural landscape in this country” (108). Claiming the talk-story tradition as her own, Kingston assumes the agency to re-tell traditional stories in ways that inform her contemporary American existence, create a useable past and enable her to construct both a Chinese American identity and a Chinese American literary tradition. Kingston’s “conscious mutation of Chinese tradition” may be “a hallmark” of her style according to Cheung, but it is also the essence of

differentiation, as the child of postmemory consciously tells old stories in “‘a new American way’ ...precisely dismantling traditional authority” (Cheung 85). Situated at the juncture between her Chinese heritage and American experience, the stories Maxine receives from her mother create a space on which to question the repressive past and objectifying present and build a new American identity and tradition.

### Stories to Grow Up On: The Maternal Inheritance

*The Woman Warrior* is designed around the repetition of stories that serve as points of entry into the mother-daughter space Kingston will use to explore her experience of postmemory and the development of her Chinese American identity.<sup>8</sup> The text literally begins with her mother’s words: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (3). Without any additional narrative interruption, Brave Orchid continues to deliver the secret story of Maxine’s No Name Aunt who disgraces the family by having an illegitimate child. After the villagers violently attack the family for violating social custom, this aunt gives birth to her “little ghost” child and drowns herself and her baby in the family well (15). *The Woman Warrior* thus begins with Maxine and the reader being pulled into a secret, enjoined to silence and cautioned about the grave consequences of social transgression. Brave Orchid delivers her tale to highlight the new danger to which Maxine is susceptible with the onset of her menses: “‘Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you.

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<sup>8</sup> Inherent in Maxine’s retelling of Brave Orchid’s stories is the process of translation as Kingston tells in English stories she received in Cantonese in order to consider their meaning in her American cultural setting. Additionally, Kingston refused to visit China until after she had finished writing both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* because she wanted to portray “the mythic China” of her childhood (Kingston, “Eccentric” 67). Kingston’s writing then attempts “to find the words for” or translate the ghosts that populated her childhood home, her mother’s stories and her dreams (67).

Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful" (5). Maxine's entrance into adolescence, thus, is framed by a tale that tells her what she should not do or be, rather than what she can do and become, and that threatens her with both societal and familial retaliation for breaking tradition. Brave Orchid's story suggests that the only appropriate action for a transgressive female in traditional Chinese culture is suicide<sup>9</sup> (self erasure) and compels Maxine to participate in No Name Woman's punishment by maintaining the silence: "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born" (15). Brave Orchid delivers to Maxine "a story to grow up on" telling her "once and for all the useful parts" (5, 6). Brave Orchid's story tests Maxine's "strength to establish realities" and teaches her the "brute survival" skills that would enable a member of the immigrant generation to survive in the United States and not die "young and far from home" (5). The story, however, establishes a reality very different from the social context in which Maxine is raised, leaves little room for Maxine to explore her own subjectivity, and offers her few tools that translate into her contemporary circumstances.

Amid the silences in Brave Orchid's story, however, Maxine finds space to enter, translate her aunt's history into the terms of her own life, and differentiate from the original form and intent of the story elements she will use to establish her Chinese American identity. First, by writing the story, Kingston refuses to participate in her aunt's punishment and brings others, her readers, into the family secret. Proclaiming her freedom from repressive institutions, Maxine's narrative enacts an "unghosting" of her

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<sup>9</sup> Gao explains that in Chinese tradition when a woman's chastity is compromised "the only permissible resolution was to pay the cost in the coin of one's life and commit suicide. Having thus redeemed herself and glorified her clan, the unhappy decedent would be labeled a *heroic woman*, and a stone *pailou* (memorial archway...) erected in her honor" (25).

aunt and “writ[es] her back into family history” (Sato, “Search for Ghosts” 142) transforming her “from a maxim...into a ‘life’” (Smith 63). She begins this process by musing about why a married daughter would be living in her father’s home rather than her father-in-law’s home. She imagines her No Name Aunt as a particularly beloved daughter, cherished enough to engender the jealousy of the youngest son in the family (Maxine’s father) whom their father may have “once ... traded for a girl” (11). With this musing Maxine both inverts the misogynistic value system of traditional Chinese culture, making the daughter the desired offspring and the son the less valued, and questions her own father’s motive in demanding that his transgressive sister be forgotten (Ho 136). Maxine enters further into the silences in Brave Orchid’s story to establish not just the consequences of her aunt’s transgressions but the causes and to identify how “her [aunt’s] life branch[es] into” her own to provide “ancestral help” for Maxine’s contemporary existence (8). Rejecting her first inclination to envision her aunt as a victim of rape in a misogynistic society, Maxine chooses to portray her as a willful woman who violates custom to establish her own identity, combing “individuality into her bob” in a culture that considers paying attention to one’s personal appearance a sign of eccentricity (9). When her quest for a secret life of passion and individuality bears its fruit, the villagers punish her “for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (13). In her exploration of her aunt’s history, Maxine finds the basis, even a model, for her own transgressions. Devoting pages of paper to this transgressive aunt, Maxine differentiates herself from her patriarchal inheritance, giving gifts to a dead ancestor in a manner that subverts the tenets of Chinese ancestor worship and resists the injunction to forget.

Maxine's writing both rejects traditional Chinese customs that do not serve her American life and establishes a foundation for her Chinese American heritage. Kingston remarks that when she was "writing 'No Name Woman,' [she] was thinking about Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* as a discussion of the Puritan part of America, and of China, and a woman's place" (Kingston, "Eccentric" 72). Connecting her aunt to Hawthorne's American classic "converts her aunt's transgression into an extension of the range of American literature" (Sato, "Chinese-American Constructs" 198). In "No Name Woman" Kingston creates a myth of origin and alternate genealogy for the Chinese American woman. Writing of her aunt from her American setting, Maxine translates her into American culture, making her a migratory figure and giving her new life on American soil. As the only daughter in her household with her brothers gone to seek their fortune on Gold Mountain (the United States), Maxine's aunt would be the one expected "to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection" (8). Rather than fulfill her expected role, however, Maxine's aunt experiences an "urge west," similar to her brothers' migratory urges, and finds her own way to cross "boundaries not delineated in space" (8). Her sexual transgression violates the boundaries of any traditionally conceived role for women but creates a model for Maxine, who as a Chinese American woman writer, must also transgress her parents' and her community's limited expectations for her. Smith suggests that her aunt's excessive sexuality parallels Maxine's excessive textuality (64): both excesses ultimately produce subversive fruit. Devoting paper to her aunt, Maxine creates what Sato calls a "paper daughter" analogous to the "paper sons"<sup>10</sup> Chinese men

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<sup>10</sup> Becoming Paper Sons allowed men to receive immigration papers and entrance into the United States as the sons of unrelated men already in the United States. See Ho 230-231 (n17) and Nee and Nee, *Longtime*

became in order to gain entry into the United States (Sato, “Chinese-American Constructs” 197-198). Kingston thus positions *No Name Woman* as the “forerunner” of other Chinese American women, who migrated over geographical and cultural boundaries (8). “By making her aunt a ‘paper daughter’ to permit her emigration to America, Kingston ... expands the terms of that history to acknowledge women as cultural founders” (Sato, “Chinese-American Constructs” 197). Using her mother’s terse cautionary tale as a point of entry, Maxine enters a trans-cultural female space in which she appropriates her mother’s story and rearticulates it as a means of exploring the causes and consequences of boundary crossings, gaining greater understanding of her bicultural self, and authorizing herself as an artist representing and formulating a Chinese American literary tradition.

Maxine’s choice to write her aunt’s story both establishes writing as her own mode of resistance and highlights her tendency to silence. In “White Tigers,” Maxine reports that the swordswoman’s identity must be carefully guarded because the “Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations” (39). Using the written word to tell her aunt’s story doubly resists patriarchal authority as Kingston both defies the command to forget her aunt and does so by appropriating the male reserve of literacy. Wendy Ho implies (very indirectly), however, that Kingston’s appropriation of the written word might be considered a continuation of a tradition of secret female writing that existed for centuries in feudal Chinese society. *Nushu* “was a language by which Chinese women shared their joys, hardships, loneliness, and anger in the inequities they suffered.” Its existence “suggests an unbroken, subversive discursive tradition by

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*Californ*’ (1972) for more information.

which women attempted to counter oppressive patriarchal definitions and institutions... [and] asserted the centrality of their experience and the rights to its articulation in language” (Ho 146, n9). Although a tradition of Chinese women’s secret writing does exist, Kingston’s project in *The Woman Warrior* is very public. She invites readers of all backgrounds into her family secret and uses writing as a space to construct a Chinese American woman’s subjectivity.

Her very public expression, however, is complicated by Kingston’s admitted difficulty with speaking and by the dangers inherent in publicly communicating private excesses. I would argue that writing allows Kingston to be a word warrior without actually having to speak the words her parents forbid her to speak.<sup>11</sup> Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, narrator Maxine comments on her difficulty with expressing herself vocally. In addition to being silent as a child, “I have a terrible time talking [even as an adult]. ... It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open” (165). The most dramatic expression of her self-loathing as a silent child occurs when young Maxine torments a Chinese American girl who is even more silent than she is. Cornering the girl late one afternoon in their school bathroom, Maxine determines to make her speak: “You are going to talk. ... I’m going to make you talk, you sissy-girl” (175). From this beginning, young Maxine’s confrontation with the silent girl evolves into a dramatic and emotionally charged showdown between Maxine and her deepest personal and cultural fears. Maxine’s hatred of the girl’s “baby soft” skin which she associates with “fragility” reflects her secret desire to replace her own soft skin with

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<sup>11</sup> Ken-fang Lee makes a similar observation noting that Kingston “does not *tell*; she only *writes*” (113, emphasis in text). Translating stories she receives in Cantonese into written English, Kingston makes English her “language of freedom and transgression” (Ken-fang Lee 113). The translation process enables this postmemorial author to take ownership over traditional structures that imprison her without directly challenging them.

“tough skin, hard brown skin” like the Mexican and Negro girls who are the confident talkers and fighters in school (176). After squeezing the other girl’s cheek and making her cry, Maxine imagines what other violence she could do to her: “If she had had little bound feet, the toes twisted under the balls, I would have jumped up and landed on them—crunch!—stomped on them with my iron shoes” (178). The mention of bound feet directly expresses young Maxine’s hatred both of her Chinese heritage and of an aspect of Chinese femininity that is frequently stereotyped in the American exotic image of Chinese women. Maxine’s determination to make the girl speak manifests her desire to break out of the “double binds” China “wraps around my feet” (48) and to achieve a more American form of femininity:

“Why won’t you talk?” I started to cry. ... “... You don’t see I am trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb... your whole life? Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompom girl? ... you are a plant. Do you know that? That’s all you are if you don’t talk. If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality... You’ve got to let people know you have a personality and a brain...” (180).

Maxine fights the girl’s silence as if *her* life depends on it, and, at that moment in the sixth grade, this may have seemed to be the case. Wrapped up in her ability to speak are several determinants of American success—intelligence, social acceptability and popularity. Maxine struggles with the girl in the same way she struggles against her own silent self, hoping that if she can help the girl, she may be able to help herself. In the end, Maxine, tearful and emotionally overwrought, is unsuccessful in breaking the girl’s silence. She then sinks into a mysterious illness that silences her for eighteen months, keeping her home in bed. Adult Maxine, however, remembers that experience as “the best year and a half of my life [because] Nothing happened” (182). During that period young Maxine, well cared for by her family, does not have to negotiate the tension



between her Chinese and American selves. Ultimately, *The Woman Warrior* becomes Kingston's "textual child," the result of years of exchange between her Chinese and American selves (Smith 63).

When Maxine finally gains "the verbal skills and perspective of adulthood" to facilitate the "articulation of a 'Chinese American'" self, she writes rather than speaks her identity position, recognizing that even that form of expression comes with its own perils (Sato, "Search for Ghosts" 144). Kingston closes "No Name Woman" with this caveat:

My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now... I alone devote pages of paper to her... I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost... waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute. (16)

In resurrecting her transgressive aunt as a forerunner for her own subversive textual adventure, Kingston has reason to fear the repercussions of her actions both within her family and the larger Chinese, Chinese American and mainstream American societies. Remembering that the character Kingston creates and calls "No Name Woman" is a fiction based on a skeletal outline of a story told by her mother, we should realize that the self Kingston creates through the narrative voice of *The Woman Warrior* is also a literary creation. These creations propose a Chinese American women's myth of origin and construct a provisional model for the Chinese American women artist, but only time will tell how well these fictions serve Kingston and other Chinese Americans. In stepping into unknown territory to explore and reveal Chinese American women's subjectivity, Kingston may discover that telling the full story leads "to madness and to self-destruction rather than to legitimate self-representation" as is the case with her aunt (Smith 64).

In contrast to her story of Maxine's discarded and consciously forgotten aunt, Brave Orchid also teaches her daughters the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the Chinese maiden who takes her father's place in battle, fights gloriously and returns to reclaim her traditional place in her village. Reflecting on other folktales told her by her mother of swordswomen trained by mystic guides of great power, adult Maxine realizes that she "too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (19-20). As an adult, Maxine receives Brave Orchid's stories as a gift and claims them as her training to become a word warrior. The chant of Fa Mu Lan reminds Maxine of her mother's implication that she too could become a woman warrior: "I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up to be a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (20). In this statement a mature Maxine realizes that alongside the misogynistic words she frequently hears her mother speak are stories which create a space in which her daughter can grow up to be more than Chinese patriarchal tradition would typically allow. Wendy Ho argues that such stories reflect a powerful Chinese feminine oral tradition common among daughters in both peasant and gentry households that served to counteract "the Confucian discourse that socialized young girls and women into their ideal [subordinate] roles in Chinese society" (Ho 147 n10). Stories of warrior women were a "projection of the dreams [mothers] had originally for [them]selves and later gave to" their daughters (Ho 147 n10). In "Shaman" Kingston explores Brave Orchid's exploits as a woman warrior. Leaving her husband's family home for a period of two years, she goes away to be trained in the ways of modern and ancient medicine and returns to her village to heal

the sick in the surrounding area. In the course of her training, Brave Orchid battles many ghosts as well as her latent fear that her husband, already several years absent in the United States, may never return or send for her (Sato, "Search for Ghosts" 141). It is Brave Orchid's reunion with her husband in the United States that returns her to the position of wife and slave, her body soon exhausted from both reproductive and physical labor. Yet, even in her diminished state, Brave Orchid teaches her daughters the chant of Fa Mu Lan, encouraging them to think beyond their circumstances.

In "White Tigers" Maxine revises the warrior woman story she receives from her mother adding shades of complexity that reflect her socio-cultural position. The traditional "Ballad of Mulan"<sup>12</sup> tells the story of a maiden so concerned about her father's safety that when he is conscripted by the emperor to fight rebels she goes in his place, disguised as a man. She fights so valiantly that when she faces the emperor whose dominion she has re-established, he offers her a powerful position in his government. Mulan's only wish, however, is to return to her village, her family, and her loom. In Kingston's hands, the story becomes far more intricate showing Maxine to be "an outlaw knot-maker" taking the threads of stories she has received and weaving them into tales so complex they could blind the knot-maker, indicating again the subversive possibilities of her re-articulation of her literary inheritance (163). The original folk ballad, for example, includes no details about Mulan's upbringing. Kingston's version in "White Tigers," however, focuses extensively on the swordswoman's<sup>13</sup> training. This part of the story reflects the hours young Maxine spends at the Confucius Church watching movies of

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<sup>12</sup> See Wu-Chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo, *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1975), 77-80.

<sup>13</sup> For clarity, I will refer to the warrior woman Kingston creates in "White Tigers" as "the swordswoman," the warrior woman of Brave Orchid's chant as "Fa Mu Lan," and the traditional folk heroine of "The Ballad of Mulan" as "Mulan."

“swordswomen [who could] jump over houses from a standstill [and] didn’t even need a running start” (19). Kingston explains that “White Tigers” “is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody” (“Mis-Representations” 97). The inclusion of elements from the kung fu movies of her childhood translates the swordswoman story into the terms of Maxine’s (and Kingston’s) Chinese American upbringing and provides a point of entry into the inherited memory. Kingston’s swordswoman story is awash with cultural references and allusions, most of which are “conventional and derivative” according to Wong (“Chinese Sources” 30). As a postmemorial artist, Kingston begins with the Chinese traditional tale her mother teaches her but uses a variety of cultural resources from her own American childhood to translate, visualize and construct a Chinese cultural space she has never seen.

In the end, the traditional tale of filial devotion is updated to represent young Maxine’s ideal of filial perfection. As a narrative of postmemory, Kingston’s story of the swordswoman is designed to address several major issues from Maxine’s childhood. First, the femaleness of her swordswoman is valued as a source of strength. Although she is disguised as a man during her time in battle, she is a fully functioning woman. Unlike Maxine whose entrance into puberty is greeted with fear that she may use her body’s new potency to transgress the patriarchal order and create “disruption and disintegration in the community,” the swordswoman’s menses is identified simply as her entrance into adulthood and the possibility of maternity (Smith 60). The old woman who trains her tells her, “You’re now an adult.... You can have children,” but admonishes her to put off maternity until she has accomplished her mission (31). Soon her menstruation is connected to her mission, to the power to give and to take life: “I bled and thought

about the people to be killed; I bled and thought about the people to be born” (33).

During the course of the story, she menstruates, marries, bears a son and nurses him, all while fighting in battle. Bearing her son in the midst of battle suggests her ability to do male and female things with equal excellence. Further, the swordswoman leads her army as an accomplished fighter and maternal presence: “I inspired my army, and I fed them. At night I sang to them.... My army did not rape, only taking food where there was an abundance. We brought order wherever we went” (37). In her revision of Brave Orchid’s chant of Fa Mu Lan, Maxine creates a swordswoman whose power is in her femaleness, rather than her ability to conceal or subordinate it.

Second, unlike Maxine who feels unvalued as a girl in her family and Chinatown community, the swordswoman saves her parents and community, earning their love and respect. Her parents know from birth that she will be taken away and trained for a special duty. She, a girl, is the child chosen to “avenge [her] village,... recapture the harvests the thieves have taken... [and] be remembered by the Han people for [her] dutifulness” (23). When she returns to her village after her training, this daughter is greeted with “much love,” and her parents kill and steam a whole chicken, “as if they were welcoming home a son” (33, 34). When the time comes for her to go to battle, the villagers accept and authorize her leadership by entrusting to her their most precious assets, their sons (36). This daughter, valued like a son and even more than son, models perfect filial devotion to her family and village. After her “public duties are finished,” the swordswoman, like Mulan, returns to her village (in this case her husband’s village) and resumes her traditional duties, promising to spend the rest of her life “doing farmwork and housework, and giving [her in-laws] more sons” (45). Thus, after a remarkable career in

martial arts and combat, the swordswoman fully upholds the tenets of “perfect filiality” by happily and completely submitting to the role patriarchy has designed for her—wife, mother of sons, and servant (45). In her construction of the swordswoman, Maxine redeems the value of daughters, vicariously enjoying the blessings traditionally given only to sons and experiencing the full approval of her parents and elders.<sup>14</sup> This idealized rendering of perfect approval can only be called a “childish myth,” to use Kingston’s words, of filial perfection (“Mis-representations” 97). In this youthful fantasy, Maxine attempts to carve out a space *within* the patriarchy for a woman to be exceptional and powerful in both male and female terms. This ideal daughter embodies young Maxine’s desire for the perfect love and approval of her family and community.

Finally, Maxine constructs her warrior woman to reflect the particularities of her Chinese American experience. Unlike Mulan who upholds the power of the emperor, Maxine’s swordswoman fights the prevailing power structure to destroy those who have oppressed her own family. She finally kills the emperor and returns home to kill the local baron who robs the villagers and sends her brother to his death in battle. Maxine’s swordswoman changes the prevailing order, establishing a more just society. In a world where it may not always be easy to tell friends from enemies, her parents “carve revenge on [her] back” before she goes out to battle, writing “oaths and names” (34).<sup>15</sup> Physically marked with her purpose, the swordswoman goes out to avenge her family and destroy those who would destroy her villagers, their lands and their livelihood. This revision of

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<sup>14</sup> See Gao 13-17, 20-22 for a broader discussion of the ways in which the swordswoman becomes Maxine’s altar ego, achieving in fantasy the victories the narrator has been denied in real life.

<sup>15</sup> In this scene, Kingston appropriates the story of Yue Fei, a national hero “who fought against the Mongols to defend China in the twelfth century. His mother cut into his back four Chinese characters—meaning *to serve one’s country with adamant loyalty*—to remind him of his responsibility for defending his motherland” (Gao 22). Kingston’s use of this story appropriates for her swordswoman a form of heroism traditionally reserved for men and provides a segue into her explanation of herself as a word warrior avenging her Chinese American community with the words on her back.

the Mulan tradition suggests Maxine's desire to protect her family and the "emigrant villagers" in Chinatown from a social order that devalues them and from "tyrants who for whatever reason can deny [them] food and work" (46, 49). In this desire, however, Maxine realizes the limitations of the warrior woman stories both as told to her and as constructed by her. She can not stand up to the "business-suited" giants with the power to hire and fire her or take away her family's livelihood (48). Invisible and impotent before the powers of American society, Maxine only feels inadequate to the task of emulating Fa Mu Lan and her own swordswoman: "To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists; I'd have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. Nobody in history has conquered and unified North America and Asia" (49). Maxine's task of being a woman warrior, complicated enough in the traditional Chinese setting, is impossible in her contemporary setting, because she would need to battle on two fronts—China and America. Once again, we realize that as a Chinese American, Maxine must chart unknown territory, finding new ways to wage war to defend her people.

Both her physical limitations and the realities of violence propel Maxine to choose another course: "What fighting and killing I have seen have not been glorious but slum grubby.... The corpses I've seen had been rolled and dumped, sad little dirty bodies covered with a police khaki blanket" (51). A mature Maxine differentiates herself from the patriarchal valorization of war inherent in the warrior woman stories. Choosing instead to be a word warrior, she seeks to avenge her people by reporting the crimes against them: "The idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (53).

Ultimately, we might consider *The Woman Warrior* to be Maxine's way of waging war and her offering of filial loyalty to her community: "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs.... And I have so many words—'chink' words and 'gook' words too—that they do not fit on my skin" (53). This plaintive closing to "White Tigers" suggests a daughter desperately seeking the validation and approval of her parents and community. Like them, she has suffered a great deal and seeks understanding and appreciation of her love and loyalty to her people.

Although Kingston begins "White Tigers" as an exploration of the story her mother teaches her to empower her to dream bigger dreams, it ends with a thorough dismantling of the idea that Fa Mu Lan or the swordswoman provide Maxine with an appropriate model to emulate. Because both her mother's chant and her story remain entrenched in a desire to imagine perfect filiality within the confines of the prevailing social order, they do not begin the work of changing the system that makes such perfection impossible, particularly for females. Beneath the surface of her text, however, Maxine draws a picture of complete subversion of the social order that her swordswoman upholds. After the swordswoman executes the evil baron, she frees a group of "cowering, whimpering women... [who] could not escape on their little bound feet" (44). These women, unclaimed daughters, miraculously become a "band of swordswomen... a mercenary army [who] rode as women in black and red dresses.... They killed men and boys" (44-45). Sidonie Smith calls this side story, "a truly subversive 'story' of female empowerment" (66). Fighting as women, these witch amazons wield "unauthorized power," leading "daughters against fathers and sons, slaying the source of the phallic



order itself” (Smith 66). Cheung argues instead that this “tale within a tale is hardly more liberating than the central fantasy. Leading daughters against fathers and sons seems to be just the obverse of the phallic order” (Cheung 87-88). I would argue that the key to understanding this subversive element is the narrator’s own caveat: “I myself never encountered such women and could not vouch for their reality” (45). On the conscious level of discourse in “White Tigers,” Maxine’s narrative upholds the patriarchal tradition in hopes of finding a place for herself within it. On the subconscious level, Maxine entertains the idea of inverting the system altogether by portraying women who fight as women to avenge the suffering of their sisters through the destruction of male dominance. Although Maxine immediately disavows the existence of such women, the possibility of complete subversion remains in play. Wendy Ho suggests that the benefit of this subtext is that it creates a wilderness space in Maxine’s tale:

“Wilderness” is the home of the female avenger and outlaw storyteller, an unexplored space beyond the prison house of racist, sexist images and narratives. This wild territory is to be appropriated and transformed into a rich and imaginative female space that displaces male power.... The narrator learns to traverse this unexplored territory in speaking and writing as a woman, and not disguised as a male warrior (136).

What I find appealing about the idea of a wilderness space is that Kingston builds into the text the possibility of her protagonist entering unknown territory: there she may construct a Chinese American female identity that exists within but is not a product of the prevailing American social order. Although adult Maxine rejects the image of women using violence to defeat male domination, she does allow her subconscious to entertain the idea that warrior women can exist and fight to destabilize oppressive social structures. Maxine may then see herself released from the imprisoning, socially-constructed feminine and racial roles she has been taught and enabled to create her own construction

of Chinese American femininity. This will enable her to choose and fight the battles that are meaningful to her. Like her mother who speaks the Sitting Ghost out of existence in “Shaman,” Maxine will

be a storyteller and heroic fighter of ghosts that terrorize or hurt people.... But rather than fight the bad Chinese warlords or hairy ghosts and ape-men that inhabit her mother’s imaginary, Maxine [will] make some coherent sense of her various worlds by defining and explaining the mysteries and terrible secrets in her family, by breaking the imposed silences and speaking the grievances that have shaped and haunted her life” (Ho 123).

As a word warrior, Kingston does battle in *The Woman Warrior*, using the text as the ground on which she can accomplish her mission.

The very last Brave Orchid story Maxine relates in *The Woman Warrior* suggests a sharing between storytellers, an offering from one to another: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (206). The story that follows, unlike the story of Maxine’s no-name aunt, is told in Maxine’s voice in paraphrase, demonstrating that Brave Orchid no longer has the power to usurp Maxine’s narration. Further, Brave Orchid begins the story but Maxine is fully empowered to translate it and choose her own ending. Brave Orchid’s story tells of her grandmother’s insistence that her family attend a performance of a play even though bandits are known to attack family homesteads when the members of the household attend the theater. Refusing to fear bandits, Brave Orchid’s grandmother instructs her servants to leave the doors open and demands that the entire family, including household servants, go “to the theater without worries” (207). That night the bandits strike—not the home but the theater itself. No one from the family is harmed, however, providing “proof to my grandmother that our family was immune to

harm as long as they went to plays” (207). This odd story demonstrates the transcendent power of art—as community builder and as protection—even as it highlights the risks that come with the creation and enjoyment of art.

Maxine continues *Brave Orchid*’s story by imagining that during some of these performances the family hears the songs of Ts’ai Yen performed. She then tells the story of Ts’ai Yen, the daughter of a famous scholar captured by raiders and forced to be the concubine of a Hsiung-nu chieftain. During her twelve years with the barbarians, she bears the chieftain two sons and fights in battle when necessary. Although she believes, like most Chinese, that her barbarian captors are without culture, she discovers one night that they are capable of making beautiful, haunting music with flutes they fashion from reeds. “One night she heard music tremble and rise like desert wind. She walked out of her tent and saw hundreds of the barbarians sitting upon the sand.... Their elbows were raised, and they were blowing on flutes. They reached again and again for a high note, yearning toward a high note, which they found at last and held—an icicle in the desert” (208). Although she, at first, tries to distance herself from the haunting music, Ts’ai Yen eventually joins in: “the barbarians heard a woman’s voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts’ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger” (208-209). After being ransomed and returned to her people, Ts’ai Yen continues to sing her songs among the Han (traditionally Chinese) people. “She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is ‘Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,’ a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well” (209). Both *Brave Orchid*’s beginning and Maxine’s

ending stories demonstrate the power of art to form and strengthen community, but Maxine's story emphasizes performance and suggests that the artistic product can translate between cultural settings. Appropriating the barbarian cultural form, Ts'ai Yen communicates her sorrow in a hybrid form that is neither Chinese nor barbarian but sounds familiar to both. Her songs, foreign to both barbarian and Chinese, somehow translate well.

This story, which concludes *The Woman Warrior*, represents a departure from Kingston's customary use of traditional stories. First, unlike Fa Mu Lan, Ts'ai Yen is a documented historical figure born in 177 AD: the daughter of a scholar and statesman, she too was a reputed scholar, speaker, and musician. Neither Ts'ai Yen nor her surviving poetry is common to Cantonese oral tradition. Instead, they are part of the Chinese high literary tradition, a tradition that Kingston can access only through research (Wong, "Chinese Sources" 32-33). Kingston's rendering of this historical story, however, deviates significantly from the original. In Kingston's version, Ts'ai Yen's return to her homeland, the dramatic emphasis of the original, is mentioned almost as an afterthought. Completely absent is her painful scene of separation from her barbarian children whom she must leave behind when she returns to the Han people. The dramatic focus of Kingston's Ts'ai Yen story is the creation and performance of art. Sau-ling Wong notes this "shift in emphasis: the last pages of *The Woman Warrior* celebrate not return from the remote peripheries to a waiting home but the creation of a new center through art" (Wong, "Chinatown Tour" 46). Wong argues further that for Kingston to celebrate the poet's return to her homeland, she would "negate the validity of her life as an American-born Chinese" (Wong, "Chinese Sources" 33). Instead Kingston

emphasizes the poet “Singing a song that transcends cultural boundaries” (Wong, “Chinatown Tour” 46). Gayle Sato similarly calls Ts’ai Yen’s song the “bridging of two cultures into one song [which] frees Ts’ai Yen psychologically from captivity” (“Chinese American Constructs” 212). When she sings with the reed-pipes, Ts’ai Yen leaves her tent and sits by the fire in community with the barbarians. Kingston chooses to conclude *The Woman Warrior* with a story that emphasizes the creation of a hybrid art form that expresses the personal sorrows of the liminal figure yet creates the possibility of community between cultures.

If we consider Ts’ai Yen to represent Kingston the artist, we must conclude that her hope is to create art that transcends the boundaries of two cultures and creates, from elements of each, one expressive form. Although not totally understandable to either source culture, this new artistic form perfectly represents the experience of the one in between. Sato argues that, like Ts’ai Yen, Maxine at the conclusion of the text has learned to embrace the “‘barbarian’ elements of her family history and culture, the various ghosts that alienate her” (“Chinese American Constructs” 212). Having learned to accept the parts of her Chinese heritage that repel her and her own foreignness to traditional Chinese culture, she harnesses the oppositions and ambiguities between cultures to produce art. Although many scholars suggest that Ts’ai Yen’s experience more reasonably approximates Brave Orchid’s,<sup>16</sup> Smith argues that Kingston uses Ts’ai Yen to portray a “total identification” between Brave Orchid and Maxine who both use story to express their sadness, anger and fear (80-81). I would argue, however, that only

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<sup>16</sup> Amy Ling suggests that Ts’ai Yen represents both Brave Orchid and Maxine at various moments in their developments. She is Brave Orchid trapped, by economics, in a foreign land raising ghost-like children who barely speak her language and mock her attempt to speak theirs. She is young Maxine who enters school unable to speak English and fearful of “ghosts,” and Brave Orchid again communicating her sadness and anger in stories her children understand and appreciate only with maturity (129-130).

Maxine has the ability or desire to translate between cultures, yet the results of her effort never perfectly render either. Instead, like Ts'ai Yen's song, her text inhabits a middle space and is fully understandable only to others that live in that middle space, connected to but separate from both traditional Chinese and mainstream American cultures.

Finally, Kingston's conclusion begs the question: what exactly is it that "translated well"? Upon her return from the savage lands, Ts'ai Yen's songs were passed down among the Chinese, played on their own instruments. This fact suggests that a foreign experience with which few Chinese could identify translates well into their traditional cultural context. If we relate this statement to Kingston's text, we must read the closing of *The Woman Warrior* as an expression of hope, rather than fact—hope that Kingston's Chinese American literary product will translate well between her source cultures. What I suspect translates well in Ts'ai Yen' story is her "sadness and anger" (209). This self-expression may ultimately be the point of her song and of *The Woman Warrior*. Alternately, if we, like Cheung, consider other meanings of the term translate, we may gain a fuller perspective on Kingston's artistic product: "To translate... is also to traduce, to speak falsely, to betray—a charge that has been leveled repeatedly against *The Woman Warrior*" (Cheung 96). As an outlaw knot-maker, Kingston incessantly, even obsessively, reconfigures her cultural inheritance, changing what she has received into shapes the originators never intended and often do not recognize. In *The Art of Parody*, Gao speaks of Kingston engaging in a "double-voiced dialogue" with her sources and translating them into "a parallel realm [of] parody... meaning a song sung alongside another" (4, 6). Kingston's text can be thought to exist alongside her cultural sources, representing a cultural space alongside of, even between, but always separate from its

sources. Having no tradition on which to build, Kingston traduces her American and Chinese cultural and literary inheritances to construct a cultural expression that is uniquely Chinese American. The cultural space carved out in *The Woman Warrior* translates well the cultural ethos Kingston is trying to create but thoroughly traduce its sources. In Kingston's translation of the Ts'ai Yen's story "an outcast becomes a survivor, a slave becomes a warrior, a silent woman turns into a singer" (Gao 47). Similarly, in *The Woman Warrior* Maxine's half-ghost status becomes a full-bodied cultural experience. Kingston returns to the term *Ho Chi Kuei* just pages before the Ts'ai Yen story and offers one last attempt to translate it: "Or perhaps I've Romanized the spelling wrong and it is *Hao Chi Kuei*, which could mean they are calling us 'Good Foundation Ghosts.' The immigrants could be saying that we were born on Gold Mountain and have advantages. Sometimes they scorn us for having had it so easy and sometimes they're delighted" (204-205). Although Ken-fang Lee argues persuasively that the best translation of *Ho Chi Kuei* is, in fact, half-ghost, Kingston chooses the translation that best suits her purposes and best establishes her sense of herself. In her postmemorial rendering of her upbringing between cultures, Kingston finally accepts her half-ghost status but finds in its transience an opportunity to construct from it her uniquely Chinese American identity.

American, Chinese or what?: Construction of Chinese American Identity and Culture

An analysis of the critical reception of *The Woman Warrior* quickly reveals the political complexity of the cultural work Maxine Hong Kingston's text attempts to perform. In "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers" Kingston expresses dismay

that early reviews by American (non-Chinese) critics tended to judge *The Woman Warrior* based on its adherence to or deviation from stereotypical constructions of Chinese identity.

I had really believed that the days of gross stereotyping were over, that the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement, and the end of the war in Vietnam had enlightened America, if not in deeds at least in manners. Pridefully enough, I believed that I had written with such power that the reality and humanity of my characters would bust through any stereotyping of them.... I had not calculated how blinding stereotyping is, how stupefying. The critics who said how the book was good because it was, or was not like the oriental fantasy in their heads might as well have said how weak it was, since it... did not break through that fantasy. (95)

Attempting to create a new space in which to construct a uniquely Chinese American culture and identity position, Kingston is criticized for her deviation from expected images of Chinese culture from both American (non-Chinese) and Chinese American critics. Chinese American critic and author Frank Chin, for example, vigorously opposes the classification of *The Woman Warrior* in the genre of autobiography and repudiates Kingston's creative use of Chinese sources, remarking that Chinese "historical facts and legendary heroes and touchstones [are] violated beyond recognition by Maxine Hong Kingston" and that her work "confirm[s] the white fantasy that everything sick and sickening about the white self-image is really Chinese" (Chin 27, 28). Chin further accuses Kingston of writing a fake Chinese American autobiography that panders to white stereotypes. Sau-ling Wong characterizes Chin's argument as expressive of a male-oriented Chinese nationalism that subordinates artistry to political purpose: "If Chinese-American literature [and culture] is... distinguished by emasculation..., then Chinese American writers cannot afford to wash the culture's dirty linen in public. Frank Chin declares that personal pain... must be subordinated to political purpose" (Wong,



“Chinatown Tour” 35). Using her text to theorize her unique socio-cultural position, Kingston flagrantly flouts such culturally “correct” requirements.

Kingston defies both non-Chinese and Chinese American critics that require her adherence to a particular, fixed vision of Chinese heritage. In response to the exotic stereotypes American readers require of her, Kingston writes: “To call a people exotic freezes us into the position of being always alien—politically a most sensitive point with us because of the long history in America of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, the deportations, the law denying us citizenship when we have been part of America since its beginning” (Kingston, “Misreadings” 96). Rather than accept the white American requirement that Chinese Americans be the eternal Other, Kingston stresses the importance of recognizing her work and her characters as American: “my books are much more American than they are Chinese. I felt that I was building, creating, myself and these people as American people... I am creating ... another tradition of American literature” (Kingston, “Eccentric” 71-72). Responding to accusations from Chinese American, generally male, critics that claim she distorts Chinese sources and offends the sensibilities of traditional Chinese culture, Kingston argues “that myths have to change, be useful or be forgotten. Like the people who carry them across the oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American. That’s why they often appear as cartoons and kung fu movies. I take the power I need from whatever myth” (Kingston, “Personal Statement” 24). Realizing that she is not Chinese but Chinese American, Kingston uses her Chinese traditional sources to serve her goal of representing her uniquely Chinese American experience.

*The Woman Warrior*, as Kingston's narrative of postmemory, enables her to work through the tension between her Chinese cultural heritage and her American cultural experience. In the resulting narrative, Kingston claims the right to use traditional Chinese sources because these are her cultural legacy, but insistently does so in an American rather than Chinese way. Because she is American and not Chinese, Kingston herself struggles to understand her Chinese sources: "From fragmentary and haphazard evidence, the protagonist [Maxine] has to piece together a coherent picture of the culture" she has inherited (Wong, "Chinatown Tour" 44). Further, Kingston does not try to hide the fact that she both struggles to understand Chinese tradition and often supplements her limited understanding with imagination and research. Although some readers have suggested that Kingston's "Mandarin transliteration of some names in *The Woman Warrior* betrays how Kingston passes library research for her Cantonese mother's bedtime stories, Kingston does not attempt to cover her trails" (Wong, "Chinatown Tour" 46). As a postmemorial artist, Kingston consciously traduces the resources at her disposal to represent and theorize the complexity of her cultural position and her conflicted relationship to the heritage received from her parents. Ultimately, the perceived and actual differences between her Chinese and American cultures make this process perilous and subject to criticisms from both sides of the cultural divide.

#### Between the Living and the Dead: Liminality and the Cultural Divide in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*

Constructed as a dual first-person narrative alternating the story of a former comfort woman<sup>17</sup> with that of her daughter, Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* is

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<sup>17</sup> Comfort woman is the euphemistic term used to describe a woman, often taken by force from lands occupied by the Japanese (including Korea which suffered Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945) and

generally read as a means of giving voice to the traumas endured by comfort women and the lasting effect those experiences have on their lives. The voice of the daughter is seen as little more than a framing device to make the central story more manageable.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Keller began the novel as a series of short stories written from the perspective of a former comfort woman, but, as was the case with Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, she realized that the story was not complete until she added the daughter's perspective. After writing several short stories in Akiko's voice, Keller recognized that

I needed another access point. Everything from Akiko's point of view was emotionally heavy, and also set in that one particular time. I thought of bringing in the daughter to give an emotional time-out to the reader and to myself in writing it. Beccah brings the story more up to date and gives an American, present-day viewpoint that helps the readers access her mother's story. (Keller and Johnson 98)

Beccah provides both Keller and her American reader an essential point of entry into the traumatic history of the comfort woman, serves as an intermediary to bridge the distance between two vastly different cultural and temporal spaces and provides "some perspective" on the comfort woman's story (Keller and Johnson 102). Contrary to other readings of the novel, I contend that Beccah's presence in the novel transforms a story of traumatic memory into a story of postmemory in which an American-born daughter uses narrative to explore and gain understanding of her traumatic maternal inheritance. Even though Beccah does not know her mother's history until after her death, as a child of postmemory, she lives her life in "response to her mother... responding to how her mother

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kept in "recreation camps" to serve the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers during World War II. Although military personnel from that era were generally aware of the existence of comfort women, the issue did not gain international attention as a violation of human rights and, in fact, a war crime until the early 1990s. For more information, see Yoshiaki, Tanaka, Stetz and Oh, and Schellstede.

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Brogan is one critic who focuses her discussion of *Comfort Woman* on Beccah, arguing that Beccah's process of learning to understand and mourn her mother is a means to accepting her ethnicity. Although So-Hee Lee ends her article with a brief discussion of the formation of Beccah's subjectivity through her embodiment of her mother's spirit and culture, Lee's analysis does not recognize or explore the centrality of Beccah's development to the purposes of the novel (185).

raises her because of [her] past” (Keller and Johnson 100). Beginning and ending the novel, Beccah’s reflections represent her slow unraveling of her mother’s history and its affect on her life and position her as the central figure in *Comfort Woman*. I would argue further that Beccah’s postmemorial investigation and eventual embrace of her mother’s traumatic history render in the imaginary space the experience of Keller and other Korean American woman artists who intervene into the history of the comfort woman, as if from the space of postmemory, to construct a Korean American women’s collective memory and subjectivity.

The split narrative structure of the novel foregrounds the relationship between the Asian immigrant mother and her American-born daughter to reveal cultural confusion and dislocation of the sort seen in Brave Orchid and Maxine’s relationship in *The Woman Warrior*. Although on the surface of their relationship, Akiko’s cultural practices, particularly her shamanism, appear to be the primary reason for Beccah’s alienation from her mother, Akiko’s traumatic past, about which Beccah is completely unaware for most of her life, informs every aspect of Akiko’s adult life and determines her cultural practices. Orphaned at the age of twelve and sold by her eldest sister to Japanese soldiers to provide a dowry for marriage, Soon Hyo, renamed Akiko by her captors, spends two years in a Japanese recreation camp during World War II, first serving women already forced into sexual servitude and then becoming a sex slave herself. The fourth daughter in a poor Korean family, Soon Hyo is the victim both of patriarchal Korean culture and of Japanese imperialism. When, after escaping the camp, Akiko is taken (actually sold) to American missionaries, the conquest of her soul (and body) by American missionary

Rick Bradley subjects her to a different form of imperialism.<sup>19</sup> Knowing she has no family to which to return and that her experience of sexual violation removes her from any acceptable feminine role in traditional Korean society,<sup>20</sup> Akiko marries Bradley and returns with him to the United States. In the years following her experience in the camp, she maintains the name Akiko, believing that the girl named Soon Hyo died in the camps, and finds her reason for living, first, in attending to the spirits of the dead, particularly one named Induk, and, later, in caring for her daughter, Beccah. After Bradley's death, Akiko raises Beccah in Hawaii where she earns her living as a shaman, interacting with the dead on behalf of the living. Although Akiko's shamanism, which results directly from her experience as a comfort woman, creates great difficulty in her relationship with her daughter, Beccah ultimately discovers in shamanistic ritual the key to connecting to her mother, identifying with her traumatic past, and translating her maternal inheritance into narrative.

The opening chapters of *Comfort Woman* quickly establish the key tensions that inform this mother-daughter relationship. The novel opens with Beccah, the adult narrator, remembering the day when she and her mother prepare the *chesa* (memorial feast) for the fifth anniversary of her father's death and her mother "confessed to his

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<sup>19</sup> Keller's second novel, *Fox Girl*, focuses on what she calls the "descendants of the women of World War II," Korean women living in "America Town," a camp town outside an American military base, and serving American GIs as prostitutes (Keller and Lee 158). They, like the comfort women, exist outside of mainstream Korean culture. Akiko's transition from sexual exploitation by the Japanese to a less oppressive yet still coercive relationship with an American missionary parallels South Korea's transition from the brutal imperialism of the Japanese to a more "benevolent" neo-colonial relationship with the United States.

<sup>20</sup> As was the case with Kingston's *No Name Aunt* in *The Woman Warrior*, traditional Korean culture offers Akiko only one remedy for her disgrace, suicide. Kun Jong Lee defines Akiko as a *hwanhyangnyo* or "home-coming woman," a term originally used for a Korean woman sent to Qing China as human tribute and returned to Korea when her "usefulness was exhausted and [her] youth had withered" (447). Upon her return, a *hwanhyangnyo* was considered a disgraced woman whose only recourse was suicide. Lee argues that labeling these women as promiscuous exempted Korean men from the responsibility of defending their nation and their women and safeguarded "masculine authority at the expense of women's lives" (447).

murder” (Keller CW 1).<sup>21</sup> Becca’s fear at the moment of revelation, which occurs when she is ten, is not that her mother has actually murdered her father but that Akiko is slipping into one of her frequent spells of spirit possession during which she “turned off, checked out, and someone else came to rent the space” of her body for a period of days, if not weeks (4). Fully in her right mind, however, Akiko explains that “I wished him to death... Every day I think, every day I pray, ‘Die, die,’ sending him death-wish arrows, until one day my prayers were answered” (12). She then uses her confession to teach Beccah that “sickness, bad luck, death, these things are not accidents” but things “people wish on you,” offering this lesson as a means “to protect” her daughter (13). From Akiko’s cultural and ontological perspective, protecting Beccah from things in the spirit realm that can cause harm is an important part of her care of her daughter. For Beccah, however, feeling protected means being able to rely on her mother’s physical presence and care. As a young child, Beccah’s greatest fears are, first, that her mother will abandon her for the spirit world and, second, that the authorities of mainstream American culture will see Akiko during one of her trances, declare her insane, and institutionalize her. From her youngest days, Beccah performs her own interventions into the spirit realm on behalf of her mother. Setting aside small portions of food from her meals as “a sacrifice for the spirits or for God, in case either exists,” Beccah utters a prayer: “Please, God—please, spirits and Induk—please Daddy and whoever is listening: Leave my mother alone” (3). In addition to not translating well into the American cultural space in which they live, Akiko’s shamanism subjects Beccah to constant fear for her own and her mother’s well-being. After years of being repeatedly abandoned and realizing that her mother will never be “normal like the moms on TV,” an adolescent Beccah starts

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<sup>21</sup> Henceforth, I will simply use the page number to refer to quotations from *Comfort Woman*.

“hoping” her mother would be taken away (2, 12). The opening chapter ends with Beccah’s confession: “It has taken me nearly thirty years, almost all of my life, but finally the wishes I flung out in childhood have come true. My mother is dead” (13). Beccah’s wishes for her mother’s disappearance and death represent her rejection of her mother’s very traditional expression of Korean culture and the tremendous cultural and ontological divide between mother and daughter. The novel’s first chapter, which begins with the remembrance of one death, ends with the announcement of another. With the revelation that Akiko has died, Beccah’s quest in the novel is to understand and reconcile herself to her maternal inheritance. In this process, the text enters the liminal space between life and death and renders a dialogue between a living daughter and her dead mother, or more precisely a channeling of the mother’s spirit by the daughter.

Akiko’s first chapter of narration begins with another startling revelation—that her daughter, Beccah, is born after she (Akiko) has already died: “The baby I could keep came when I was already dead” (15).<sup>22</sup> Although Akiko can not determine exactly when she dies—“It must have been in stages, beginning with my birth as the fourth girl and last child in the Kim family, and ending in the recreation camps north of the Yalu”—she is certain that she is dead by fourteen when she escapes the recreation camp after the camp doctor performs a barbaric abortion that nearly kills her (17). Crossing the Yalu River back into Korea, Akiko looks for her reflection in the water “and, finding no face looking back at me, knew that I was dead” (15). At that moment on the bridge, she longs to “let the Yalu’s currents carry my body to where it might find my spirit again” but is hurried across by Japanese soldiers wary of Koreans using the bridge as a popular spot to commit

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<sup>22</sup> Akiko’s narrative begins with Beccah’s birth and focuses on what she desires to pass down to her daughter, again positioning Beccah as the central figure in the novel.

suicide (15). Believing herself to be spiritually dead from that moment, Akiko's only attachment to the living is her daughter who, reminding her of her dead mother, is "the only living thing I love" (18). Receiving her daughter as a gift some twenty years after the abortion of the child conceived in the camp, Akiko celebrates Beccah in the manner Korean tradition generally reserves for boys: "I want my own child to know that I gave her a hundred-day celebration, that I love her and thank the spirits for her health, even though she is not a boy and not in Korea. Or perhaps I celebrate her because she is a girl, an American girl" (119). Because Akiko has nothing to which to return in Korea, she, unlike *Brave Orchid*, does not resist the United States, consciously raises her daughter to be an American, and chooses to pass on to Beccah those Korean traditions that communicate love and empowerment. Akiko recognizes her daughter's and her own liminality and interconnectedness: "Blooming in the boundary between Korea and America, between life and death, this child, with the tendril of her body, keeps me from crossing over and roots me to this earth" (116-117). Although Akiko's every action toward her daughter is intended to love, protect, and empower, a clear divide exists between the mother's intention and the daughter's perception.

When Akiko succeeds in crossing over to the world of the dead, Beccah discovers that she "did not have the facts for even the most basic, skeletal obituary ... and did not know how to start imagining her life" (26). A professional obituary writer, Beccah, like her mother, chooses a career centered on translating the dead. Beccah's task in the novel, to bridge the distance between herself and her mother to find a way to narrate her mother's life and legacy, is complicated by her rejection of her mother's cultural expression, by Akiko's silence about her past, and by the limits of language. Both



Beccah and Akiko face the challenge of finding language, free of sexist, hegemonic structures, to express and explain themselves. Eventually, shamanism becomes an alternate means of expression that enables mother and daughter to embody and translate the dead. This process empowers Beccah to write her narrative of postmemory which represents in words her mother's past, her relationship with her mother and her challenging girlhood among her mother's ghosts.

Akiko's shamanism, the most prominent aspect of her cultural expression in Hawaii, is also the part of her Korean inheritance that most alienates Beccah. This cultural tradition, nevertheless, empowers Akiko and enables her, in some way, to redeem her traumatic past. In interviews, Keller has frequently discussed her long-standing interest in Korean shamanism and her reasons for portraying Akiko as a shaman.<sup>23</sup> First, women, like Akiko, who experience significant psychic trauma often become shamans because, according to Youngsook Kim Harvey, an expert on Korean Shamanism, "spirits in search of human victims to possess are particularly attracted by those whose souls have been 'fractured' ... by personal tragedies or exploitations others have caused them to suffer" (238). Further, the female-dominated tradition of shamanism offers marginalized and sometimes disgraced women a position of power in traditional Korean society. Although shamans remain outcasts (particularly because of the implication of having suffered socially embarrassing circumstances), they experience a level of power otherwise unattainable to Korean women. According to Harvey, their initial experience of spirit possession facilitates their "transition from being helpless housewives ... to

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<sup>23</sup> See particularly Keller and Johnson, "Trying to Inhabit a Soul," and Keller and Young-Oak Lee, "Nora Okja Keller and the Silenced Woman: An Interview."

being shamans who transcend the natural (culturally defined) limits of being a woman, who have a system of social support independent of their domestic role, who have economic autonomy, who have clear professional identities in the larger society” (237). Although poverty, cultural and racial difference place Akiko at the margins of American society, as a shaman, she plays a vital role in the Korean immigrant community in Hawaii, providing a bridge between the new world and the old and reconnecting immigrants with ancestral ghosts left behind in Korea. In her mediating role, the shaman performs critically important work in the aftermath of military occupation, war, and the division of Korea into two separate and antagonistic nations: “These ruptures imply a moral breach in the ritual continuity of generations and expose the family to supernatural danger. A *mansin* [shaman] confirms the deaths of relatives lost in the North or separated during the war. Through a cathartic ritual confrontation and by subsequent offerings, family members alleviate grief and guilt as they draw lost kin back into the home” (Kendall qtd. in Brogan 157).<sup>24</sup> By figuring Akiko as a shaman, Keller allows her to participate in one of the oldest forms of Korean traditional culture, transforms her from a marginalized victim to a woman of power and cultural authority, even in her American setting, and enables her to achieve a level of financial independence.<sup>25</sup> As a child, Beccah remembers how “respectful” and “in awe” people were of her mother (11). Through shamanism, Akiko turns trauma and survival into a means of ministering healing to herself and her larger community.

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<sup>24</sup> Laurel Kendall, *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life*, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Like the woman blues singer in the early twentieth-century African American cultural context, the shaman has a level of financial freedom and personal autonomy as well as a means of self-expression unknown to most women in Korean society.

For Beccah, however, the spirits that her mother conjures and interacts with become a source of fear, confusion and alienation. Beccah grows up imagining that malevolent spirits “lived in the spaces between our walls” (43). She particularly fears Saja the Death Messenger, Guardian of Hell, “[t]he demon waiting to snatch me off to hell if I did not carry a red-packeted charm. Saja was the devil my father preached about and, through my mother’s chants and offerings, became more real to me than my father ever was” (43). As a young girl, Beccah spends many sleepless nights haunted by terrifying vision of Saja’s “bubbling skin, black and green, fermenting with pus,” and, one morning, wakes convinced that Saja has entered the apartment to take her away (44). Akiko, however, quickly defeats Saja by throwing a raw chicken wrapped in Beccah’s nightgown into the street and shouting, “Goodbye, Beccah’s ghost” (45). In contrast to Beccah’s feeling of helplessness before a horrifying image of Saja, Akiko knows she can fool him by sacrificing a chicken in place of her daughter because “Saja may be handsome, but he’s not too smart” (45). From her postmemorial perspective, Beccah lacks sufficient grounding in Korean culture to visualize Saja in his traditional form—“young and handsome, a dark soldier, alluring and virile” capable of wooing a woman into his arms (46). Instead, she spends sleepless nights in fear of a spirit her mother characterizes as a glutton, easily placated with a chicken in place of a person. Beccah’s meeting with Induk, her mother’s familiar spirit, yields further confusion. On the day of her first menstruation, Beccah dreams of walking across a “bridge of fire” and finding “a beautiful woman waiting for” her (188):

At first I thought the woman was my mother, then I realized it was myself. “My name is Induk,” the woman said through my lips. I looked into the face that was once my own and wondered who she saw, who stood in my place looking at the body that Induk had now claimed.

I looked at my new hands, trying to find a clue to my present identity, but as I looked, the hands melted, then dissolved into ash.... I knew I was being devoured by flame ravenous as a dragon... I waited, a thin column of ash, for the dragon's breath, the wind that would blow my body apart" (188).

Beccah imagines Induk, who already inhabits her mother's body, claiming her body at the onset of puberty when her body feels most alien to her. Although she envisions herself as a beautiful woman in this dream, Beccah can not claim her new body and watches the body she inhabits disintegrate and blow apart. So integral to her home life are her mother's spirits that Beccah imagines every moment of her upbringing in terms of the spirits Akiko conjures to participate in their lives. Beccah, however, imagines these spirits desiring to possess and destroy rather than strengthen or empower her.

Compounding Beccah's fear of the spirits is her constant anxiety that Akiko will permanently leave her for the spirit world. Learning that Saja is a handsome, young soldier, Beccah begins to visualize him in the form of her father: "If I imagined Saja looked like my father, it helped me understand why my mother flirted with death" (46). Reminiscent of the scene at the Yalu River, Akiko attempts on more than one occasion to find her lost spirit by drowning herself. Although the authorities that rescue her from her bathtub and the Ala Wai Canal choose to believe that her near-drownings are accidental, Beccah remembers how, in trances, her mother "would cajole the soldier of death, tease him, beg him to take her with him" (46). Fearing abandonment in the ultimate form, Beccah again intervenes in the spirit realm on her mother's behalf: "Later, after my mother tried to drown herself the second time, ... I knew that I had become the guardian of her life" (125). Believing that, in her dreams, Akiko travels to other worlds where Beccah can not follow, Beccah develops the habit of "holding the thin blue thread of [Akiko's] life while her spirit tunneled into the darkness of the earth to swim the dark red

river toward hell. ... And in the morning, before I even opened my eyes, I'd jerk my still clenched, aching hand to my chest, yanking my mother back to me" (125). As a child, Beccah hopes that, through the sheer force of her will, she will be able to keep her mother attached to this life. She continues that practice into her adult years and believes that had she been paying more attention, she could have saved her mother on the night she dies. Beccah literally becomes the "tendrils" rooting Akiko to this life: Her mother even tells her that "when she lay down to die, her body marked and open for Saja, she felt [Beccah's] hands pulling her feet, holding her back" (126). Certainly, Beccah's simultaneous desire for her mother's death and tenacious hold on her life demonstrate the tremendous ambivalence of Beccah's position in relation to her mother. On the one hand, Beccah the child desperately needs her mother "to remember" her and to realize "that she was bound to" her (48). On the other hand, an adolescent Beccah's desire for her mother's death is a rejection of her mother's culture, which confuses and confines her. In a different way from her mother, Beccah, also, "dreams of drowning and sinking and struggling for breath while unseen hands wrapped around my legs and pulled" (33). She later realizes that "it is my mother wrapped around my legs" (141). Her mother whom Beccah determines to hold to life also seems to pull Beccah to her death. Her ambivalent feelings about her mother mirror her feelings about her cultural heritage, which she primarily accesses through her mother's frightening and often bizarre activities.

Like Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*, Beccah's ambivalence about her mother and her culture is complicated further by the fact that her mother's cultural expressions do not translate easily into the society in which they live. Although Akiko's shamanism is well-respected in the Korean immigrant community, when she leaves her home and travels to

Beccah's school to perform a shamanic rite, Beccah sees her mother through the eyes of mainstream Hawaiian culture and rejects her and the Korean culture she represents. The incident occurs soon after Beccah enters puberty, when Akiko reads her "out-of-control body" as a sign that *sal*, "evil-energy arrows" imbedded in Beccah's body at birth, has begun to surface (73). On Beccah's twelfth birthday, Akiko begins a vigilant fight against the *sal* with which she believes Beccah has been afflicted as a result of the presence of white male doctors at her birth and of her half-white ancestry. To combat the *sal*, Akiko makes Beccah "stop feeding the sickness in [her] body, and starve the *sal* out of [her]" (84). Following her mother's instruction, Beccah begins to satiate herself on the food of the spirits:

When I stopped fighting and ate only what was acceptable to my guardian spirits, I wondered why I fought in the first place. Eating food that had been blessed, I began to feel the spirits fill my body, making me stronger, smarter, purer than my normal self. ... I became so full that I consumed only what the spirits themselves ate, feasting on the steam evaporating from freshly made rice, on the scent of oranges and pears. I saw food take flight from its physical manifestation, turning into light that shot through my body. ... The bigger the light in me became, the smaller my body got, until I seemed to shrink into myself.... (84-85)

Protecting Beccah from *sal*, Akiko adds to the normal disruptions of puberty and causes her daughter to become alienated from her own body, starving herself rather than allowing it to change. When Akiko travels to Beccah's school "to purify the campus," however, Beccah sees her mother through her classmates' eyes: "When I saw the frail, wild-haired lady in pajamas throwing handfuls of pebbles into the crowd, I didn't realize she was my mother. Only when she raised her arms into the air and ... I caught the faint cry of 'Induk,' did I recognize her" (87). On her way to the school, Akiko draws a crowd of school children jeering her and calling her "bag lady" and "crazy lady" (86). In the

beginning of the scene, Beccah as narrator renders her mother's responses to the crowd as Beccah hears and understands them: "Shame on you! Your mothers must be so sad to have given birth to monsters" (87). After seeing her mother from her classmates' perspective, she renders her speech as they hear it: "Shame-u, shame-u, sad-u, sad-u!" (88) When Akiko comes to claim her daughter, "Name is Roh-beccah Blad-u-ley," Beccah runs and hides (88). In that moment she experiences at once the tragedy of denying her mother, "the only part of [her]self that [she] thought contained power," and the victory of reclaiming her body which she now sees as her school mates see it—"feeble, scrawny... skeletal" (87). This scene demonstrates both how unsuccessfully Akiko's Korean cultural expressions translate into the American context and how damaging full immersion in Akiko's worldview would ultimately be to Beccah's development. At this moment she begins to reject her mother and her culture, but, as is the case with Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*, Beccah's maturation requires that she return to her mother as her cultural source. Only when she embraces her mother and her shamanism, will Beccah find the tools to create her hybrid Korean American identity.

Beccah's bi-racial heritage adds further complication to the construction of her hybrid identity. Within her home, the differences between her mother's shamanism and her white Christian missionary father's belief system engage Beccah in an ontological battle. Because he dies when she is only five, Beccah struggles to remember her father, finding at times that the annual ceremony commemorating his death "supplanted my dim memory of an actual man" (1). In her fertile imagination, this absence enables Beccah to conjure a father who will save her from her chaotic life with her mother. Beccah visualizes her father as Mr. Rogers and waits "for him to wrap me in that cardigan

sweater, which would smell of mothballs and mint and Daddy. He would spirit me away, to a home on the Mainland complete with plush carpet and a cocker spaniel pup. My daddy, I knew, would save my mother and me, burning with his blue eyes the Korean ghosts and demons that fed off our lives” (2). In her waking dreams, Beccah looks to her father to save her, but, as she sleeps, her father joins the pantheon of spirits that frighten rather than help her: “when he rolled me into the sweater, binding my arms behind me, my father opened his eyes not on the demons but on me. And the blue light from his eyes grew so bright it burned me, each night, into nothingness” (2). As a member of the spirit world, Beccah’s father can not be imagined very differently from the other spirits that her mother invokes. Further, because Beccah’s few actual remembrances of her father center on him “alive and drunk and yelling about God,” her father’s belief system offers her little more peace or security than her mother’s (32). Beccah comes to associate her father and his religion with divine retribution, but even this conception becomes confused with aspects of her mother’s belief system:

I had always imagined the angels in heaven as stern-faced men draped in beards and clothed in the voice of my father. In the dimness preceding sleep, they often visited me, looming over my bed to threaten me with the end of the world.

“Read this,” an angel would say, shoving a stone tablet into my face.

I would try to open my eyes wide, try to focus on the tablet that melted even as I tried to read it. “Aaagh,” I croaked, wanting to say something anything, to delay heavenly retribution. But I was always too late, the tablet turning to water and the words hopping off the page like little black frogs before I could decipher even the first letter. (155)

Here, Beccah’s dream begins with images of angels from the Christian belief system but end with frogs, which figure prominently but ambiguously in traditional Korean beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Beccah devotes great energy to decoding her mother’s story of the Heavenly Toad, a figure from Korean folklore who is adopted by human parents but scorned in his attempt to marry a girl from a wealthy family. When he reveals his heavenly power, the youngest daughter in the family willingly sacrifices herself, marrying the toad, to save her family. The toad then takes his parents and the girl to heaven. Akiko uses



The tablet Beccah can not decipher becomes the intermediary between the two systems. For young Beccah this dream represents her alienation from both cultures and the failure of language to help her to negotiate the divide between the two. Eventually, Beccah's embrace of her mother's shamanism will give her access to alternate ways of knowing and expression that will enable her to develop the means to resolve the conflicts of her complex cultural legacy.

### Language of Subjugation and of Liberation

Beccah's next challenge in identifying with her traumatic inheritance is ignorance, because her mother does not speak of her experience as a comfort woman. Certainly, Akiko's silence reflects the injunction, common to many cultures, that violated women bear their shame in secret; however, her silencing begins in the recreation camp where Japanese soldiers deny comfort women the right to speak. "At the camps where the Japanese called us *Jungun Ianfu*, military comfort women, we were taught only whatever was necessary to service the soldiers. Other than that, we were not expected to understand and were forbidden to speak, any language at all" (16).<sup>27</sup> Refusing to allow the women self-expression and self-definition denies their humanity and autonomy but is only part of the Japanese strategy of subjugation. The Japanese fill the silence surrounding the women with racist, sexist discourse that seeks to justify the conquest of

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this story to compel Beccah's obedience, but Beccah has trouble understanding what it is intended to teach her: "Though the story remained consistent, I could not decide what it meant" (157).

<sup>27</sup> Laura Hyun Yi Kang explains in great detail the different meanings and political implications of the various names given to these women. The Japanese *ianfu*, *wianbu* in Korean, essentially refers to a sex worker, while *jugun* translates as "following the military" in pursuit of one's profession. The term clearly implies prostitutes that voluntarily follow the military to sell their services. In more recent years, Koreans have used the term *chongshindae* to refer to these women, meaning "corps volunteering their bodies." This euphemistic term removes the assumption of sex work and makes no mention of coercion. The term finally adopted by the UN to refer to the experience is "military sexual slavery by Japan"; however, terms abound and reflect differing political agenda. For more information, see Kang 44-45.

their bodies based on their supposed inferiority. Remembering her last day at the comfort camp when the camp doctor performed an abortion on her, Akiko recalls both her physical pain and the pain of the words the doctor speaks during the procedure:

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. Base, really; almost like animals, he said.

...Luckily for the species, Nature ensures that there is one dominant male to keep the others at bay and the female under control. And the female will always respond to him. He squeezed my nipples, pinching until they tightened. See?

I followed the light made by the waves of my pain, tried to leave my body behind. But the doctor pinned me to the earth with his stick and his words. (22)

During an earlier visit, this doctor rapes Akiko before opening the curtain to allow other men to watch him examine her: “This one is still good, he called over his shoulder... See? He said. Still firm and moist” (35). The doctor’s actions literalize the violence of the words he speaks over Akiko during their interactions. His words reflect the rhetoric of Japanese hegemony over the national body of Korea and over the bodies of Korean women.<sup>28</sup> According to Kun Jong Lee, the doctor “is a true spokesman of the military sex slavery” (447). Comfort women, often referred to as a gift from the emperor, were considered essential supplies for Japanese soldiers and an important component of patriarchy. To the doctor’s way of thinking, “women are mere objects to be controlled by the dominant male, the Yamada male. Thus deprived of sexuality and humanity, comfort women were easily commodified as mere ‘military supplies’ and demoted onto the status

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<sup>28</sup> In “Haunting History: Violence, Trauma and the Politics of Memory,” Jodi Kim explores more fully the connection the novel makes between the violation of women’s bodies and of the feminized national body and argues that Keller’s woman-centered novel creates a counter-history that directly challenges Korean (and Japanese) patriarchy and constructions of national identity as well as American neo-colonialism in Korea. She establishes Induk, Akiko and her mother as female patriot/martyrs that represent the violent history which mainstream Korean society represses.

of ‘food rations, ammunition, [and] boots’ under the most blatant form of Japanese patriarchy” (447, Lee quotes Keller 65). Forcing the women to be silent frees the Japanese men from recognizing their humanity and the unspeakable violation perpetrated against them. Classifying Korean women as promiscuous and upholding the right and duty of Japanese men to use these inferior women to satisfy their sexual needs and maintain social dominance, the Japanese further absolve themselves from moral responsibility.

Only one of the comfort women Akiko remembers dares to resist the injunction to silence. Induk, the woman called Akiko before Soon Hyo becomes Akiko #41, decides one day to reclaim her identity at the cost of her life.

One night she 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 have a family just like you do....

Men left her stall quickly, some crying, some angrily joining the line for the woman next door. All through the night she talked, reclaiming her Korean name, reciting her family genealogy... Just before daybreak, they took her out of her stall and into the woods.... They brought her back skewered from her vagina to her mouth, like a pig ready for roasting. (20-21)

Induk becomes a lesson for the other women on the penalty of breaking the code of silence, her punishment graphically demonstrating her violation of the terms of her objectification. The spear symbolizing male phallic power rapes and silences Induk for eternity. She becomes, however, much more than a cautionary tale for young Soon Hyo, who soon takes her place as Akiko #41, and later embodies her spirit. Although others consider Induk to have cracked the night she reclaims her name, Akiko recalls her as “going sane” and “planning her escape” through death (21). She becomes a symbol for the reclamation of language, self, and country.

When Akiko escapes from the camp, she has been so traumatized that, for a time, language fails her. In her days of wandering after leaving the camp, Akiko has a vision of her mother, holding a basic school primer: “When she began to turn the pages, I strained to read what it said, but to my surprise, I found I could not understand the words” (53). Although unable to apprehend the written words, Akiko easily recognizes the images she sees: “I saw myself underneath the pumping bodies of Japanese soldiers and, in the later pages, saw my oldest sister beneath the same soldiers. I saw myself sitting in the river, and I saw myself walking and sleeping, walking and sleeping, until I died” (54). This incident demonstrates the inability of language to make sense of her experiences. She can see the scenes of her life but can not read them or create a narrative to explain them. She further imagines her experience of violation as being her oldest sister’s experience too, suggesting either the universality of violence against women in that historical/cultural context or a premonition that the sister who betrays her receives her same fate. Upon arrival at the American mission, she is surprised again to find that she can neither speak nor hear the sounds of life around her. Instead she hears the sounds of the comfort station and becomes consumed with working, hoping to keep her memories at bay: “I remember thinking that I could not stop cleaning, washing, cooking, gluing, because if I did, the camp sounds would envelop me and I would be back there, trying to silence the noises I made eating, crying, relieving myself, breathing, living” (65). Akiko’s remembrance demonstrates clearly that the injunction of silence serves as a means of erasure, a denial of her very existence. Her hearing is restored when she recalls the sounds of the women’s resistance: “I heard things that I had almost forgotten: the enduring whisper of women who continued to pass messages under the ears of the

soldiers; a defiant Induk bellowing the Korean national anthem even after the soldiers had knocked her teeth out; the symphony of ten thousand frogs” that she hears after Induk is killed (71). Akiko’s ears are opened and her ability to speak restored when she remembers women determinedly expressing themselves as a means of resistance and psychic survival. Although Akiko remains wary of language, her recollection of her fellow comfort women’s alternate means of communication restores her ability to speak and hear. Akiko later devotes her life to preserving the memory of these women, honoring them with ritual remembrance that gives them the dignity in death denied them in life.

Akiko’s battle against the words spoken over her by the Japanese continues in a different form with her husband who uses coercive Christian rhetoric to command his wife’s obedience to him and silence about her past. “Wife, be subject to your husband, as sayeth the Lord,” he dictates to her without relating the Apostle Paul’s instruction about a husband’s duty to his wife (112). For some twenty-five years after her escape from the comfort camp, Akiko remains silent about her past, until one day, like Induk, she explodes, reclaiming her identity, including being a survivor of military sexual slavery.

Late in the novel, Beccah recalls witnessing this exchange between her parents:

...my mother laughed and spat at my father. “I will never, never again lay down for any man,” she said...

My father stood and clasped his hands to his chest, “Forgive her, Father. She knows not what she speaks.”

“I know what I speak, for that is my name. Soon Hyo, the true voice, the pure tongue. I speak of laying down for a hundred men—and each one of them Saja, Death’s Demon Soldier—over and over, until I died.... (195)

In her verbal battle with her husband, Akiko does not overcome her husband's use of coercive language because, like the camp doctor, he backs his words up with violent action. After commanding her to "keep corrupt talk from your lips, or... ye shall be struck down," Rev. Bradley strikes Akiko down, silencing her physically before commanding her to remain silent for Beccah's sake. "What if Beccah hears you? Think of how she would feel, knowing her mother was a prostitute.... I ask you to protect our daughter, with your silence, from that shame" (196). Rev. Bradley's response reflects his adherence to patriarchal values that hold women responsible for the violence done to them rather than protect them for the abuses of men. Although Akiko reclaims her body from her husband's conquest, she submits to his command to be silent and never uses his language (English) to convey her truth to her daughter.

In opposition to the patriarchal uses of language under which she has suffered, Akiko attempts to communicate her love for her infant daughter non-verbally: "I try to balance her with language I know is true. I watch her with a mother's eye, trying to see what she needs—my breast, a new diaper, a kiss, her toy—before she cries, before she has to give voice to her pain" (21). Akiko uses the physical language of love to counter her husband's oppressive discourse and offers Beccah the power to name and own herself and her body, even before she learns language: "each night, I touch each part of her body, waiting until I see recognition in her eyes. I wait until I see that she knows that all of what I touch is hers and hers to name in her own mind, before language dissects her into pieces that can be swallowed and digested by others not herself" (22). In advance of being objectified by the language and actions of men, Akiko empowers her daughter to name and validate herself. Desiring her daughter to be an American girl, she asks her

husband to choose for her a strong American name: “It does not matter that [she] cannot pronounce Roh-beccu” (116). Akiko, however, chooses her own name for her daughter: “Bek-hap, the lily, purest white” (116). This name, reminiscent of the purity of Akiko’s original name and the traditional Korean color of death (white), ties her daughter to herself. Unfortunately, the intent behind Akiko’s actions and uses of language remain unknown to Beccah until after her mother’s death.

Akiko finds her truest self-expression as she communicates with the dead, mourning them and airing their grievances. When Beccah recalls her mother singing to the spirits, she does not hear music but “crying... long wails of complaints and demands and wishes for the dead” (27). Akiko remembers those whose deaths would otherwise go unmourned, including Induk who complains: “No one performed the proper rights for the dead. For me. For you. Who was there to cry for us in kok, announcing our death? ... Who was there to write our names, to even know our names and remember us?” (38) In her ritual, Akiko mourns and chants the names of Induk, other comfort women, and Soon Hyo, her lost self, refusing to allow their passing to go unnoticed. In this process she vents their grievances and her own. Jodi Kim suggests that Akiko’s chanting represents a “refusal to ‘heal,’” a constant stirring of her traumatic wound to keep the crimes against her from being forgotten or repressed (63). I would argue that the verbal nature of her shamanistic expression becomes her means of resisting the silences imposed on her by Korean, Japanese, and American patriarchy and that her chants creates an alternate history for Korean women lost to war, violence, and violation.

As a shaman, Akiko embodies and translates the dead, providing them a home in her own body and becoming the descendant that enables them to rest in peace by remembering and mourning their passing. After her escape from the comfort camp, Akiko is met by Induk who, finding her “sprawled next to an unnamed stream above the Yalu, the place where [she] had discarded [her] empty body,” invites herself in (36). Induk replaces Akiko’s (or more precisely Soon Hyo’s) lost spirit, filling her such that “there is no me except for her, Induk” and leading Akiko to become a shaman (36). Burying Induk in her own body and performing annual ritual remembrances of Induk, her female relatives and other comfort women, Akiko keeps these women who died unmourned from becoming *yongson*, which Becca defines as “the ghost of a person who traveled far from home and died a stranger” (140). Kun Jong Lee gives further nuance to the term specifying that a *yongson* “is the spirit of the person who died violently, far away from home, without leaving a male progenitor who will remember him or her in the annual ancestor worship” (443). For traditional Korean people, to be forgotten is the greatest possible calamity. Even before becoming a shaman, Akiko expresses great concern for lost spirits, particularly those separated from their descendants due to the calamities of war:

Did they follow their sons and daughters across the country? Or did they remain at home, abandoned and uncared for? ... I think of my own mother and father, who stayed behind, or got lost, following another daughter or another family. I wonder if their spirits are fed and clothed, content, or if they have turned outlaw and beggar, without kin, without home (104-105).

Akiko mourns these spirits in her shamanistic ritual, giving them a home in her body and becoming the descendant who will remember them. Like Maxine in “No Name Woman,” Akiko calls these Korean spirits to her in the United States, making them



migratory figures and giving them new life in a new country. Performing the duties of a son, Akiko again revises Korean patriarchal tradition, assuming an authority generally denied women and asserting her connection to these women by remembering them as her ancestors. Rather than mourning male ancestors as tradition requires, Akiko remembers the comfort women, creating a new model of female filiality and an alternate line of descent, female forerunners, for Korean American women. Through shamanism, Akiko finds an empowering alternative means of expressing and grieving the pains of her past.

Although Akiko does not speak her history to her daughter while she is living, she leaves for Beccah a tape and a number of documents that become her archive, her legacy to her daughter. When Beccah discovers the audio tape marked with her name, she remembers her mother making tapes for customers but never imagines that her mother has had to perform the rituals of mourning for herself: “Never would I have thought that my mother performed the ceremony for herself. Never, as a child, did I think about whom my mother had had to leave behind, and whom she cried for” (172). In her tape, Akiko is both the rememberer and the remembered. Knowing that Beccah will not know how to mourn her, Akiko prepares the tape and documents to reveal to her daughter who she is and how she should be remembered. Among the documents, Beccah finds letters Akiko has received in response to her inquiries about the whereabouts of her lost sisters and discovers that the Seven Stars whose names she has often heard in her mother’s chants actually include her mother, Soon Hyo, and her sisters, Soon Mi, Soon Hi and Soon Ja. She learns “that my mother once belonged to a name, to a life, that I had never known about. That the names I had known only in relation to the Seven Stars belonged to women I could have called *imo* [aunt], and that my mother, once bound to others

besides myself, had severed those ties—my lineage, her family name—with her silence” (173). Through her tape and archive, Akiko reconnects her daughter to her ancestry, female descent line, and traumatic inheritance at the moment in her life when she becomes able to receive them.

Forcing herself to listen beyond the high-pitched keening of her mother’s chant, Beccah begins to embrace her mother’s form of cultural expression and finally hears her “singing words, calling out names, telling a story” (191). In her tape, Akiko provides Beccah instruction on how to mourn and prepare her body for burial, how to cry “for the dead. To show proper respect. To show love” (172). She models this process by calling the names of the dead, the women she remembers as Beccah’s and her own ancestors: “*Induk. Miyoko. Kimiko. Hanako. Akiko. Soon Hi. Soon Mi. Soon Ja. Soon Hyo. So many true names unknown, dead in the heart. So many bodies left unprepared, lost in the river*” (192). She then airs the grievances of the dead, revealing the secret history she has “guarded and cultivated like a garden” (173):

*Chongshindae: Our brothers and fathers conscripted. The women left to be picked over like fruit to be tasted, consumed, the pits spit out as Chongshindae, where we rotted under the body of orders from the Emperor of Japan. ... Under Emperor’s orders, the holes of our bodies were used to bury their excrement. Under Emperor’s orders, we were bled again and again until we were thrown into a pit and burned....*

*The Japanese believe they have destroyed an entire generation of Koreans. That we are all dead and have taken the horrible truth with us, but I am alive. (193-194)*

Akiko’s emphatic declaration of life and survival transforms the “weak and vulnerable” woman Beccah remembers into a survivor of the most unimaginable trauma (194). Beccah hears her mother resisting her own erasure and boldly condemning the Emperor of Japan, the “Descendant of Heaven who had the power to sacrifice thousands” (100).

She discovers the truth in Akiko's business partner, Reno's words: "Your maddah was one survivah. ... Das how come she can travel out of dis world into hell, cause she already been there and back and know the way" (203). Upon learning of her mother's traumatic past, Beccah begins to understand her mother's shamanism as a powerful means of remembering, grieving, and protesting, and of enabling others to do the same. By opening herself to her mother's chosen form of self-expression, Beccah comes to see Akiko chanting as "an avenging angel recounting the crimes of men" and demanding justice, rather than as a crazy woman raving (194). Akiko then passes on to her daughter the responsibility to remember: "*Beccah-chan, lead the parade of the dead. ... Clear the air with the ringing of your bell, bathe us with your song. When I can no longer perform the chesa for the spirits, we will look to you to feed us*" (197). Through her tape, Akiko finally gives her testimony of her suffering, and Beccah, bearing witness, identifies with and becomes co-owner of her mother's traumatic history.

As she listens, Beccah begins to transcribe her mother's words, first on scraps of paper and then on a sheet from her bed: "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... and caught my mother's words" (192). Here Beccah begins the process of translating her mother's experience through her own psyche and into the terms of her contemporary existence. As a writer, Beccah exercises a power over the English language that has eluded her mother. Translating her mother's free-form speech into written narrative, Beccah actually liberates her from the objectifying structures of language and uses language to love and remember her mother, her suffering and survival, take ownership over her traumatic legacy, and memorialize a history that might otherwise

be lost. The narrative of postmemory Beccah finally creates represents her contemporary reflections on her life with her mother and her efforts to inhabit her mother's soul to tell her story. The stream-of-consciousness narratives that render Akiko's voice suggest the musings of one set free from the structures of the living. Akiko's narrative, lacking clear detail about time and place and including no direct dialogue, primarily conveys the emotion and the consciousness of experience that transcends the moment and might be considered eternal. This lack of detail also suggests the postmemorial writer attempting to access the space of traumatic memory from across the temporal and physical divide that separates her from the setting of her mother's experiences. Beccah's refusal to attempt to render Korean speech in English further demonstrates her sensitivity to the challenges of translation and suggests that she has channeled Akiko's narrative as if directly from her spirit and rendered the essence of her story. Beccah reveals her creation of the text by changing Akiko's name to Soon Hyo in the chapter after she learns her mother's true name.<sup>29</sup> In the creation of her narrative, which becomes the novel, Beccah translates her mother's shamanistic ritual and her traumatic inheritance into the artistic medium that best fits her contemporary moment. Her narrative composed equally of input from her own experience and of her rendering of her mother's experiences creates a testimony that gives voice to her mother's traumatic experiences and her own. Like Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*, Beccah devotes pages of paper to reclaim and honor the memory of her mother and other comfort women.

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<sup>29</sup> Chuh suggests that Beccah's restoration of her mother's name in the chapter entitled "Soon Hyo" represents Akiko's "liberation from her past as a 'comfort woman,' from her life as Akiko" (17). Chuh argues, however, that Soon Hyo's emergence replaces Akiko's "victimage" with "a heroic figure of successful survival" (18). She then criticizes Keller for leaving the reader no option besides seeing Beccah's mother as a victim or a hero. I would argue, however, that Chuh's reading does not consider Akiko's heroism simply in surviving and determining to use her traumatic experiences to remember and strengthen others. Akiko as shaman refuses to repress the past and becomes a symbol of heroic resistance.

In asking Beccah to continue the tradition of the chesa, Akiko asks her daughter to serve as a shaman and embody the dead. Although Beccah's primary remembrance of her mother's traumatic legacy occurs through her narrative, her physical enactment of mourning rituals enable her to reconcile herself to the woman who raises her and to the culture her mother represents. Unsure how to mourn her mother, Beccah takes her first steps in this process by repeating her mother's actions: "I performed the actions of my mother, caring for the spirits of the house, in order to feel my mother once again. I wanted to be able to feel her next to me... I knew she would come to me, feeling my need for her" (169). During this exercise, Beccah discovers the tape and papers her mother has left for her. After listening to and transcribing her mother's tape, she performs a private ceremony to prepare her mother for burial. During the ceremony she serves as her mother's shaman, remembering and guiding her spirit to the next world: "I will care for your body as your spirit crosses the river. I will stand guard. I will send you on your way" (208). As she washes and anoints her mother's body, she learns to accept her physical body and the foreignness it represents: "My mother lay naked under her dress, in the body that had always embarrassed me both in its foreignness and in its similarity to mine. I looked now, fighting my shame, taking her body piece by piece... until I could see her in her entirety, without guilt or judgment" (209). In this moment, Beccah reclaims the sanctity of her mother's body, which has been dissected and consumed by others all her life, and returns to her mother in death the gift Akiko gives her as a baby. After wrapping her body in her own words, written on strips of cloth, to tie "her spirit to her body," Beccah restores Akiko's right to own and name her own body (209). Beccah's final duty, after cremating her mother's body, is to scatter her ashes in the river

behind her house, to enable Akiko finally to search for her lost spirit and return home to Korea. Before scattering the ashes, Beccah touches her mother's ashes to her lips, receiving "Your body in mine... so you will always be with me, even when your spirit finds its way home. To Korea. To Sulsulham. And across the river to heaven to the Seven Sisters" (212). Finally releasing her mother, Beccah, also, buries a part of her in her own body. In the last moment of the novel, Beccah dreams again of feeling her mother's arms dragging her down and decides to yield to her pull: "I opened my mouth to drown, expecting to suck in heavy water, but instead I breathed in air, clear and blue. Instead of ocean, I swam through sky, higher and higher, until ... I looked down to see a thin blue river of light spiraling down to earth, where I lay sleeping in bed, coiled around a small seed planted by my mother waiting to be born" (213). Having finally embraced her mother's culture, discovered her traumatic past and heroic survival, reclaimed her body, and yielded to the pull of her maternal legacy, Beccah discovers that her mother and the culture Beccah spends most of her life rejecting do not destroy her but give her life. Although Beccah differentiates from her traumatic inheritance by representing it in narrative, the novel ends with her embodying her mother and culture through the seed implanted in her. This seed suggests the imminent birth of Beccah's Korean-American identity and cultural expression. Beccah finally learns what it means to be her mother's daughter.

Beccah's narrative connects her mother's traumatic history and ancestral legacy to her contemporary existence, while her ritual of shrouding her mother's body in words, figuratively encases her mother in words of love, truth and resistance that refigure the ways language has been used to violate her in the past. In accordance with her mother's

wishes, Beccah takes responsibility to remember her and those who have suffered like her and enters into community with the dead. Interestingly, however, at the novel's end, Beccah "has not at the same time acquired a living community" (Brogan 160). While Reno holds an elaborate funeral to honor Akiko's role in the Korean immigrant community in Hawaii, Beccah mourns her mother alone and is alone at the novel's end. Although Beccah's private ceremony reflects the fact that only she truly knows her mother, her isolation from community suggests that her mother's experiences as a comfort woman remain unspeakable and forever isolate Akiko and Beccah from active participation in contemporary society. Beccah appears unable to translate her new knowledge into a more vital experience of life among the living. While *Comfort Woman* goes far beyond the simple obituary Beccah hopes to write at the beginning of the novel, it remains a conversation between a living Korean American woman and the dead. Lisa Yoneyama argues that, at the novel's end, "Beccah cannot confirm her mother's final truth in the latter's absence," but that "Beccah need not necessarily know whether her mother actually lived the past that now demands redress" (72). Yoneyama's observation calls into question the veracity of Beccah's narrative of postmemory but suggests once again that postmemory need not render the historical truth. Instead, Yoneyama suggest that "the text may be pointing to a radical reconstitution of subjectivity beyond the literal Korean-ness that ties Beccah to her mother... It may suggest that the collectivity to which the subjects of redress belong need not necessarily exist prior to their active engagement in the pursuit of justice" (73). Yoneyama then connects Beccah to a community of the living and the dead seeking justice for the atrocities perpetrated on women to whom the current community may or may not be connected by blood or even

culture of origin. Kandice Chuh, on the other hand, criticizes the novel's emphasis on Beccah and its apparent indication that "the retrieval of this history" is intended only to benefit "the next (U.S.) generation" (19). Reading *Comfort Woman* as a narrative of postmemory, I contend that Beccah's exploration of this history to restore her connection to her ancestral legacy and empower her future is the very point of the novel; however, I concur with Yoneyama in understanding that Keller's intent in the novel is to connect Beccah and her text to a larger community of artists and activists demanding justice for the comfort women. Keller's decision to leave Beccah alone at the novel's end, however, calls into question her stated objective in writing the novel.

#### A Postmemorial Community: Comfort Women and Korean American Collective Identity

Although she leaves Beccah alone at the end of *Comfort Woman*, Keller as a writer seeks to participate in a community of Korean American artists, activists and scholars who have embraced the cause of the comfort woman, ostensibly to seek justice for the atrocities suffered. Keller has explained in interviews that she felt compelled to write *Comfort Woman* after hearing a former comfort woman speak and feeling "so haunted" that she "began dreaming about images of blood and war" and "realized that the only way to exorcise the dreams and the story from [her] mind was to write it down" (Keller and Hong 13). In the writing process, Keller recalls feeling "like a medium" channeling the words of the comfort woman (Keller quoted in Kun Jong Lee 431). Brogan suggests that this haunting experience forces Keller, like Beccah, to deal with her cultural heritage: "in calling the author to bear witness, [this ghost] recalls her to her denied Koreanness" (153). Indeed, Keller explains that writing the novel was "an



apology to her [mother] for all of my rebellion against her and rejecting her culture, her traditional identity. I think of the novel as my coming home” (Keller and Johnson 108). Feeling a combined urgency to give voice to the Korean women who suffered as sex slaves in Japanese recreation camps during World War II and to return to her cultural home, Keller mixes the pursuit of social justice with the effort to explore and reclaim her cultural past. Although Keller has no known ancestors who were comfort women, she writes from the space of postmemory, taking responsibility for what she sees and hears and using this traumatic history as a means of connecting to, or more precisely constructing, a Korean American women’s collective consciousness.

In this process, however, Keller effectively participates in a cause célébré, feeling compelled, like many other Korean American artists, to represent the history of the comfort woman after hearing the testimonies of those recently emerged out of silence to tell the world of their traumatic experiences.<sup>30</sup> Laura Hyun Yi Kang argues, however, that the recorded testimonies of these former comfort women demonstrates their ability of giving voice to their own story; thus, the creation of narratives and artistic representations to give voice to women that are not silent must serve alternate goals (31). The centrality of Beccah’s postmemorial experience to the formal structure of *Comfort Woman* and Keller’s indication that writing the novel helped reconnect her to her Korean heritage suggests that the exploration of the history of the comfort woman serves as a means of understanding what it means to be a Korean American woman, at least in this case. From this perspective, the novel may be read as an expression of a Korean American collective

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<sup>30</sup> In “Conjuring ‘Comfort Women’” Laura Hyun Yi Kang discusses a number of contemporary artistic representations of the history of the comfort woman, including multimedia artist Soo Jin Kim’s 1993 video work, *Comfort Me*; Dai Sil Kim-Gibson’s 1999 film *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* and her 1997 article “They were our Grandmas”; Change-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999); Therese Park’s *A Gift of the Emperor* (1997); as well as Keller’s *Comfort Woman*.

postmemory similar to the African American collective postmemory expressed in Butler's *Kindred* and Perry's *Stigmata* (see chapter 3). In this context, however, the history of the comfort woman, which occurred fairly recently and has only recently been revealed, has not had sufficient time to achieve a significant place or influence on the Korean or Korean American collective memory and identity. Instead, Keller's appropriation of this history reflects a desire among Korean American women to construct from this history a Korean American women's collective memory that may become the defining moment in the formation of Korean American feminist identity.

Interestingly, artistic renderings of the comfort woman by Korean American women (and some men) tend to focus on the violated body and psyche of the comfort woman almost to the point of voyeurism.<sup>31</sup> Beyond this, the most common characteristic of these renderings is their distinct American-ness, their tendency to instantiate “not their sameness, but their distance and difference from the Korean ‘comfort woman’” (Kang 27). Generally produced for an American audience, these artistic works adhere to “a particularly American grammar and regime of representation” (Kang 32). In these renderings, the experience of the comfort woman is often mediated through an American figure, like Beccah, on a quest to understand his or her cultural identity. In some cases, the comfort woman is actually absent from the story altogether—for example, Akiko is dead. The mission of these representations thus appears to be an exploration of identity rather than a drive for social justice. Their American focus and voyeuristic approach may even be thought to objectify the already objectified historical subject. Kang suggests that acting on a perceived need to give voice may in fact “authorize the Korean/American writer/artist/scholar to assert her own voice or vision in the act of ‘giving voice’ to the

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<sup>31</sup> See Kang 26, 28 for a fuller discussion of this idea.

‘comfort woman’” (Kang 31). I would argue that artists like Nora Okja Keller appropriate the history of the comfort woman as a way of creating a Korean American women’s collective memory which enables the creation of a Korean American women’s subjectivity. In claiming the comfort woman as ancestor, they construct a unifying cultural trauma that makes possible the assertion of a collective identity and serves as a myth of origin for Korean American women. While we may question the politics of appropriating a legacy of victimization, the comfort women may be an appropriate, if not extreme, representative example of the traumas experienced world-wide by women living under the tyranny of patriarchal cultures and imperialism.

#### Defining the Cultural Parallel Space

Although very different in form and focus, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* represent the experiences of American-born daughters interacting with their Asian immigrant mothers’ expressions of their traditional cultures as a means of constructing their bicultural identities. Although both daughters initially reject their mothers and the cultures they represent, they find with maturity that their mothers are their cultural sources and that their inheritances provide them the tools they need to understand and formulate their hybrid cultures and identities. In both texts, these efforts require their protagonists to carve out of their traditional and American cultural legacies a third space that is in communication with but separate from both source cultures. While *The Woman Warrior* clearly demonstrates Kingston’s efforts to construct this space, *Comfort Woman* leaves the creation of Beccah’s hybrid cultural representation incomplete, although I would argue that the novel itself demonstrates

Keller's construction of this space. In both cases, this process is fraught with political perils. Writing in the mid-1970s Kingston suffered the backlash of Chinese American male nationalists, who resented her idiosyncratic appropriation of traditional Chinese sources and her representation of Chinese Americans in a less than perfect light. Writing two decades later, Keller may be accused of appropriating a tragic history to create a space on which to construct a Korean American women's collective identity. These contemporary writers demonstrate, however, the continuing need of Ethnic American women to explore and theorize their cultural positions, particularly in light of the severe dislocations experienced in immigration from East Asia and of the residual traumas of military occupation, imperialism, and misogynistic traditional cultures. In this process, these writers seek to create a space on which to build new traditions within American literature and culture that may be able to represent the unique complexities of their particular types of American identities.

CONCLUSION:  
Thoughts on Women, Trauma and Memory

Although it has traveled far from its source, “Migrations of Memory,” in many ways, ends where it began, with a story of women suffering sexual victimization as the result of hegemonic oppression. Postmemory begins with the assumption of the lasting generational consequences of collective or cultural traumas, which generally result from oppressive social structures whether the trade in human flesh and dehumanizing, perpetual bondage based on race, or the arbitrary violence and betrayal within the national and individual family resulting from dictatorship and political upheaval, or the invasion, occupation, and violation of the national and personal body, which are the standard practice of imperialism. What “Migrations of Memory” has sought to explore is how literature represents the impact the traumas that result naturally from hegemonic structures particularly have on women and how the residual memory of these experiences continues to affect the descendants of survivors for succeeding generations. Within this study, the United States has been the site where the traumatic past meets a very different present, but even within the nation millions have entered seeking refuge from more pronounced forms of oppression, systemic and institutionalized structures of racism, sexism, and imperialism continue to hinder and enact a type of violence on those residents that are not of the race, gender, class, or nation of origin American society was designed to benefit. In the contemporary era when the formerly marginalized and openly oppressed people of the United States have greater access to the benefits and promises of America than ever before, Ethnic and African American women, of all Americans, are most cognizant of the limitations on their progress. Yet, in this land, where people from

all possible backgrounds seek to live together as one nation, the impulse of these contemporary daughters of slaves, refugees, boatpeople, coolies, and comfort women is to look back to the traumas of the past and the hegemonic structures that caused them to better understand their present-day position in hopes of formulating a contemporary identity that uses the struggles and survivals of their ancestors to inform and empower their present and future. The narrative representations of these explorations of traumatic history appropriately employ numerous formal innovations to render a contemporary experience that represents the culmination of generations of cultural and experiential memory.

In my own life, I have engaged in this sort of exploration of the past. In 1992, I embarked on the adventure of a lifetime, traveling to Africa to perform community work for the United Methodist Church. Although I have since grown in my understanding of the faith that should have propelled my journey, the reason for my travel could not truthfully be called spiritual or necessarily altruistic at the time. The child of a northern, middle-class African American family, I had lived precisely half of my childhood in a predominantly black, urban center and the other half in a predominantly white, affluent suburban town. Like many in my generation, I felt the secret shame of feeling far more comfortable in the latter setting than the former. A significant factor in my decision to visit Africa was a desire to return to my cultural source, to spend time among Africans who had sustained successful communities and cultures for centuries to try to get a glimpse of what Africans in America may have lost during the Middle Passage and centuries of enslavement and oppression. During my year in Zimbabwe, Southern Africa, I learned just how far from our African source, my tribe, the African Americans,

had evolved. I was shocked to discover that, although I looked like them, culturally, I was almost completely unrecognizable as African to my Zimbabwean acquaintances. I was also surprised to discover that, at least in southern Africa in 1992, the American music with which people most identified was not the music that African Americans cultivated from our African roots but country-western music, which most closely approximated African musical tastes because of its emphasis on story. Nor did I find in Zimbabwe a people unencumbered by the hegemonic structures under which my people had suffered. Instead I found an independent, black nation in which whites completely controlled the economy and the major means of production, in which a white man could assault and nearly render unconscious a black boy on the street that he found annoying without any fear of repercussion, in which a white person offering a ride to a black hitchhiker would share the cab of his truck with his dog and never think of allowing the black person to sit anywhere but in the cargo bed. Although black Zimbabweans had, to my perspective, the privilege of having been able to stay, of not being dragged across the continent and the ocean, and never having been slaves, they were not immune to the structures of hegemony and, in many ways, were far less conscious of how imperialism and colonialism had affected them than were the descendants of the ones taken away.

I would not say, however, that my trip to Zimbabwe failed to meet my need to find a cultural source. One of the places I frequently visited in Zimbabwe was Great Zimbabwe, an extensive network of stone walls and structures, ruins of an African civilization that prospered nearly 1000 year ago. Little is known about the Empire of the Munhumutapa except that it was rich in gold, controlled an area covering most of Zimbabwe and parts of several surrounding nations, and thrived in the heart of sub-

Saharan Africa centuries before Columbus and European imperialism. Although my African ancestors probably were not from Zimbabwe, Great Zimbabwe provides me an African cultural, historical source, a mythic identification with African greatness.

Returning to the United States in late 1993, I soon began my second assignment for the United Methodist Church, serving in the Sea Islands outside of Charleston, SC. Having seen Julie Dash's remarkable film *Daughters of the Dust*, I spent more than my fair share of time looking for Ibo Landing and that majestic live oak tree on the beach where Yellow Mary and Trula lounged during one of the movie's many beautiful panoramic scenes. I moved from the source of my ancestry to the place in the United States where African Americans were most isolated and most retained our African culture. Although I never found Ibo Landing or that magnificent tree, I was not disappointed by the Sea Islands and the black people I found there. There were more African cultural remnants, particularly in language and food, among these people than I'd seen among any other African Americans. They lived in a close-knit community and carried with them generations of memory of life on those islands—life in slavery, in isolation and oppression after slavery, and the slow opening of their community to the outside world. Although many apologized for how their irregular grammar and sentence construction might sound to this standard English-speaking northerner, I also saw pride in the Gullah lilt and rhythm of their speech, in their rich and varied culture, and in the sense of rootedness that came from living in one place for so long. Of course, they carried with them scars of our traumatic past. The dark days of segregation, oppression, and isolation were not that long past for them. I noticed that few of the women and men over the age of 50 were proficient readers and learned that the first high school for blacks



on the islands had been build less than 30 years before my arrival. Although the numbers were dropping quickly, in 1994, there were still homes without indoor plumbing and outhouses remained a common sight. All of my friends there had stories of lynched, shot, raped, and abused ancestors and of lands stolen, and all carried with them the contemporary threat of their island home going the way of Hilton Head, taken over and transformed by developers into a playground for the wealthy and white. They lived daily with the insult of retirement communities which consistently had the word “plantation” somewhere in their name and prided themselves on capturing the tradition of “gracious southern living,” which the black Sea Islanders know was gracious only to a very small and privileged few. Rooted in their past, however, they seemed to faced their futures with a sense of empowerment. A little closer to home, I found another cultural source.

“Migrations of Memory” grows out of my own struggle to understand what it means to be an African American woman in contemporary American society and my understanding that the pervasiveness of hegemonic structures and traumatic histories has resulted in traumatized masses of people from a multitude of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This study has sought to consider how late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century American women writers use narrative to work through their struggles to reconcile their traumatic, ancestral inheritances and their place in contemporary American society. Because this is an academic exercise several years in the making but not pretending to be comprehensive, I recognize that “Migrations of Memory” has not exhausted the full range of narrative representations of postmemory by Ethnic and African American women writers. Certainly, this study stands in the shadow of much of Toni Morrison’s oeuvre and has not considered the peculiar traumas of Indigenous

Americans and even Chicanos, whose actual or mythic cultural/ancestral source is on this continent but who have, nonetheless, suffered tremendous disruptions in their lineages due to the creation of this nation. There remain many additional possibilities for exploring postmemory in the writings of contemporary African American and Ethnic American women writers.

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