2010

Storied Memories: Memory as Resistance in Contemporary Women's Literature

Sarah Katherine Foust Vinson

Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation


http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/176

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

Copyright © 2010 Sarah Katherine Foust Vinson
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

STORIED MEMORIES: MEMORY AS RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S LITERATURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

SARAH K. FOUST VINSON

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people who made this dissertation possible, starting with my wonderful professors in the English Department at Loyola University Chicago. Dr. Paul Jay encouraged me to integrate my interest in the psychology of memory with the field of literature, and he always provided a kind word when I needed it most. Dr. Harveen Mann challenged me to consider the larger implications of my work and supported me throughout the process with an encouraging smile and a positive attitude. Most importantly, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. J. Brooks Bouson, who with seemingly tireless effort provided an abundance of guidance as she patiently read and edited draft after draft of my dissertation. She has ultimately helped me to become a better reader, writer, and scholar.

I would also like to take a moment to thank my mother, Lynne Foust. Over the course of my life as a student, she has read, edited, and suggested revision ideas for every essay I have written. The fact that she was still willing to take on this task when it came to a dissertation is admirable, in itself. But in addition, she consistently inspired me when I faced writer’s block, chastised me when I procrastinated, and encouraged me when the pressures of teaching, writing, and motherhood seemed too much. Not only did she instill in me a love of books, but she has also held my hand throughout this scholarly journey, and for this, thank you just doesn’t seem to be enough.
I must also acknowledge and honor all of the family and friends who cared for my children so that I could research, write, and revise *Storied Memories*. Without people like Aimee Krall-Lanoue and Aaron Krall, Krista and Peter Svach, Ashlee Parker, Kayla Rosenthal, Vicki and Nathan Foiles, and my parents, Lynne and John Foust, I could easily still be researching Chapter One. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Kyle Vinson, and my daughters, Hannah and Paige. Without their support, patience, and constant reminder of what is truly important in life, I would never have made it to where I am today.
For my mother
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**  
iii

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**  
1  
Autobiographical Memory and Contemporary Memory Theory  
3  
Memory, Narrative, and the Construction of Personal and Collective Identity  
7  
Storied Memories in Contemporary Women’s Literature  
14

**CHAPTER TWO: NARRATIVE POSSIBILITIES AND FRAMED MEMORIES IN MASO’S THE ART LOVER AND ATWOOD’S THE HANDMAID’S TALE**  
29  
Frames Inherited from the Past and Adopted for the Future in Carole Maso’s  
The Art Lover  
42  
Frames from the Past that Extend Into the Future in Margaret Atwood’s  
The Handmaid’s Tale  
69

**CHAPTER THREE: TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND NARRATIVE HEALING IN ALLISON’S BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA AND DANTICAT’S BREATH, EYES, MEMORY**  
95  
Storied Integration in Dorothy Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina  
109  
Familial Trauma in Edwidge Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory  
141

**CHAPTER FOUR: RELATIONAL MEMORIES OF THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN KINGSOLVER’S THE POISONWOOD BIBLE AND ROY’S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS**  
174  
Memory and Complicity in Barbara Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible  
187  
Remembering for the Other in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things  
216

**CHAPTER FIVE: COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY IN NAYLOR’S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE AND MORRISON’S PARADISE**  
243  
Walled Memories in Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place  
253  
Creating and Controlling History in Toni Morrison’s Paradise  
277

**CHAPTER SIX: IN CONCLUSION**  
309

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**  
319

**VITA**  
342
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Within the last twenty years, critical texts and studies from various fields investigating concepts of memory have steadily multiplied.¹ Popular interest in literary genres that rely on memory, such as memoir and autobiography, has grown considerably, tripling from the 1940s to the 1990s in a linear progression.² Indeed, as Leigh Gilmore notes, “Memoir has become the genre in the skittish period around the turn of the millennium” (1, her emphasis). Thus, the emergent field of memory theory, which draws upon texts and studies from many different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy, cognitive science, and literary theory, provides a relevant, useful lens through which to examine not only autobiography, but also fiction that emphasizes characters’ autobiographical memories.³ Accordingly, my aim in Storied Memories:

¹ For example, when one performs a keyword search for the term “memory” in the MLA database for the years 1970 to 1980, one finds 2,765 entries. From 1980 to 1990, this number increased to 3,781 entries. From 1990 to 2000, the number nearly doubled, showing 7,561 articles and books focusing on memory. This number continues to grow in the 2000s and reached 23,142 entries at the end of 2009. This is not only an indication of an interest in memory in literary studies, but common growth patterns can also be found in the fields of psychology and other social sciences.

² This growth was noted by theorist Leigh Gilmore after performing a WorldCat Database search for English language volumes categorized as memoir and autobiography (1).

³ There is a lot of theoretical work on the factors that distinguish the novel from the autobiography as generic categories. However, as Suzanne Nalbantian articulates, writers of either genre give us “their characters, images, and artistic technique as clues to the workings of memory” (5), even as she focuses on primarily autobiographical texts in her study Memory in Literature: From Rousseau to Neuroscience. Likewise, Leigh Gilmore notes, “some writers move away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography’s central questions” (7), questions that focus on the dynamics of memory in
Memory as Resistance in Contemporary Women’s Literature is to explore the power for resistance contained within narratives of personal memory. This new approach to examining women’s literature reveals that memory, and its articulation through narrative in both autobiographical and fictional writings, can shape the stories authors tell and, in turn, provide opportunities for resistance to oppression. Since narrative provides a means to communicate memory, and it is the primary way that autobiographical memory is recorded, both autobiography and fiction can act, in Suzanne Nalbantian’s terms, as “a laboratory for the workings of the mind” (1). It is in literature that we can examine both the workings of memory and the ways that authors use concepts of memory in their works to demonstrate memory’s dynamic and changing nature, as well as its power as a tool for resistance.

To limit the scope of Storied Memories, I investigate the ways that current psychological theories about memory illuminate contemporary women’s autobiography and fiction by highlighting the multiplicity and ambiguity in characters’ conceptions of selfhood, cultural identity, and historical knowledge. Women’s literature is an important field for studying the role of memory and resistance, especially since women’s histories and stories have traditionally been silenced within cultures dominated by patriarchal norms. Thus, women’s stories of the past—that is, storied accounts of their memories—become vital records of personal or communal histories that otherwise may not be voiced or even acknowledged. A contemporary recognition of this can be found in Toni
Morrison’s assertion that her job as a “writer who is black and a woman” is to “rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate.’” She continues, “The exercise is . . . critical for a person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic” (“The Site of Memory” 110-11). In a broader sense, Morrison’s task is shared by many women writers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who are revealing women’s memories and histories in new and exciting ways. The stories they tell of the past, and their stories of memory in general, sometimes narrate histories of violence and terror—“proceedings too terrible to relate”—or they validate memories of women’s everyday experiences, as they give voice to those who have traditionally been silenced, providing resistance to dominant narratives and presenting new ways of conceiving of women’s stories, memories, and identities.

**Autobiographical Memory and Contemporary Memory Theory**

In this study, I focus not only on novels that grapple with and provide a profound commentary on memory, including Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, but I also investigate autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works that engage concepts within memory theory, such as Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. As contemporary women authors like Atwood,

---

4 Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, is an effective practical application of her statement. In the novel, she tells the story of Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who killed one of her children, while also speaking to the horrors embedded in the history of slavery and the middle passage.
Allison, Morrison, and Danticat demonstrate the special power of narratives of memory to bear testimony to and resist women’s often oppressed and sometimes even traumatic experiences, they also reveal that contemporary women’s writing can provide counter-memories, and thus counter-histories, to official totalizing versions of history, and these counter-histories can resist and revise limited conceptions of identity and culture. My study is principally concerned with representations of autobiographical memory, the memories that make up the “recollections of [our] lives: a complex tapestry that includes memories of specific moments and more general recollections of larger chunks of time” (Schacter, Searching 89), rather than other forms of memory, such as semantic memory or procedural memory. According to psychologists Ulric Neisser and Lisa K. Libby, the contemporary psychological interest in memory for life experiences began with the 1978 Cardiff Conference on Practical Aspects of Memory, where psychologists considered topics such as “eyewitness testimony, face recognition, arousal, diary studies, [and] recall of medical information” (316). As interest in autobiographical memory has progressed, psychologists have drawn on “ideas and data from neuropsychology, clinical psychology, personality theory, social psychology, and the study of narrative, folk psychology, and laboratory memory research” (Rubin 1). Still, even today, the definition of what constitutes autobiographical memory proper is debated by psychologists and memory

---

5 This is not to be confused with the literary genre of autobiography. Autobiographical memory is a type of episodic memory that consists of “a person’s recollections of his or her life experiences” (Santrock 196). In Storied Memories, I examine this type of memory in both autobiographical and semi-autobiographical novels, and in fiction.

6 Semantic memory refers to memory of factual knowledge. The concept of procedural memory refers to our knowledge of skills and procedures.
theorists. Although most psychologists agree that autobiographical memories are constituted by life experiences, some argue that autobiographical memory should include all forms of “self-related information,” while others prefer to limit the term to “recollections with particular significance.” Indeed, many theorists stress the importance of certain key memories for the life story by calling them “momentous events,” “turning points,” or “nuclear episodes,” that is, “recollections of the most significant single scenes in a person’s life story” (Neisser and Libby 318). In both understandings of autobiographical memory, however, it is clear, as memory theorist Alan Baddeley asserts, “Autobiographical memory is concerned with the capacity of people to recollect their lives” (qtd. in Rubin 1), and it is this more general psychological definition that I use here. My particular focus on autobiographical memory theory relies on a certain understanding of the fundamental structures of memory and the ways in which memories and existing narratives of memory and history shape people’s notions of the self, their group identity, and by extension, the world in general.

Attempting to achieve what Ursula K. LeGuin calls “an archeology of the future”: ‘remember[ing] what has yet to be’ and ‘demand[ing] it as already ours’” (qtd. in Sweeney 62), the women authors I investigate in this study recognize that memory, by its very nature, weaves back and forth, linking past and present, then and now. As memory theorist and psychologist Dan McAdams observes, “Certain events from our past take on extraordinary meaning over time as their significance in the overall story of our lives and times come to be known. In a sense, then our current situation in life and
our anticipation of what the future will bring partly determine what we remember and
how we remember it” (295). This notion that memories change and adapt over time
not only demonstrates the power of memories of the past to affect both the present
and future, but also emphasizes that the present and future can and do affect our
memories of the past. Indeed, memory itself is constructed, for when an individual
attempts to “remember,” he or she combines encoded information with retrieval cues
in order to bring forth a memory. But the memory retrieved is not a snapshot picture
of the past; instead, this new version of the past is based both on how it was originally
encoded into the rememberer’s brain, and then, by the rememberer’s present state.
Thus, as memory theorist Daniel Schacter explains, memory “is constructed from
influences operating in the present as well as from information [that has been] stored
about the past” (Searching 8). How the rememberer initially interpreted an event,
how that event was initially encoded, and how often it was subsequently talked or
thought about, as well as the rememberer’s present state, shapes that person’s
knowledge of the past. Thus, the very concept of memory as an exact replica of the
past is thrown into question, leaving memory as a potentially mutable construction that

---

7 Current theories in cognitive psychology suggest that autobiographical memories can be accessed only by
certain cues. Memory encoding occurs when an original event is recorded in the brain in what is called an
engram. An engram includes fragments of information originally recorded at the time of the event, but it is
also shaped by the person’s subjective perceptions of the event. Encoded cues are those salient pieces of
information attended to at the time of encoding that later prompt recall. Encoded cues must then be
combined with retrieval cues, cues that occur at the time of reminiscence that prompt the activation of an
engram by arousing and combining with the engram to create a memory. For example, if you observe a
fender-bender, you may encode that a blue van hit a red car. Later, when questioned about the event, you
are asked, “What happened when the van smashed into the car?” When you retrieve the memory, you may
recall that the accident was much worse than it was, because of the retrieval cue, “smashed.”
is often multiple, contradictory, ambiguous, and ever-changing. The mutability of memory leads to complications, since we, as rememberers, often truly believe that what we remember is truthful and accurate. However, there is a good chance that the record of the past has been skewed in some way during the encoding or retrieval process. This is not to suggest that we cannot get a good idea of what occurred in our past—studies have shown that when people assess more extended periods of time, they are usually fairly accurate (see Schacter, Searching 91). At the same time, it is important to realize that memory is inherently mutable and sometimes even fallible. And it is the basic fact of memory’s mutability that allows it to become a tool of resistance and a space for construction and reconstruction of the self, of the group, and of the world.

**Memory, Narrative, and the Construction of Personal and Collective Identity**

Once we understand the most commonly accepted precepts of contemporary memory theory, we can begin to comprehend the tie between memory and our sense of self, for it is through the memories that we recount that we attempt to construct our identity. As Nicola King puts it, personal identity “is rehearsed again and again in a narrative which attempts to recover the self who existed ‘before’” (1). Dan McAdams concurs, arguing that individuals create what he calls “personal myths” comprised of

---

8 Current psychological theories of memory are based on the commonly accepted idea that memories are contingent on many more factors than simply empirical experience. This is clearly seen when one looks at current introductory psychology textbooks. For instance, one text notes, "Today’s memory researchers recognize that memory seldom works like a video cassette recorder, capturing every part of an experience exactly as it happens. Rather a memory is a reconstruction—an account pieced together from a few highlights using information that may or may not be accurate. Put another way, remembering is 'not so much like reading a book as it is like writing one from fragmentary notes'" (Wood 155).
their autobiographical memories to create personal identities. A personal myth, as he explains, is “a special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourself and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole. . . . A personal myth is an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future” (12). Just as McAdams focuses on our construction of stories, so does Mark Freeman argue similarly that our concept of our personal and collective identities is “bound up with” the stories we “tell about the trajectory of the past” (12). The stories that we share and the various iterations of the past that we personally and collectively tell become who we are as individuals and as remembering communities, be they relatively accurate historical reconstructions or wholly fictional accounts of our lives and the past.

Our dependence on stories to share our identities is not surprising, when we consider that autobiographical memory, itself, is essentially narrative. As Sidone Smith reminds us, “[M]emory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience,” something that actually occurred in the past. Smith continues, the past can never be “articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling” (45). James Olney expresses this concept in a slightly different way: “Memory enables and vitalizes narrative; in return, narrative provides form for memory, supplements it, and sometimes displaces it” (417). In either case, the conventions of narrative must often be utilized in the structuring of our personal memories and in the telling of a life or of a collective history. Stories generally attempt to account for events in cohesive ways, filling in gaps
and omitting information that is not congruent with the broader narrative; they are shaded by and understood through interpretive lenses; and they may adapt and change with each telling. These narrative conventions can also be seen in the case of memory, itself, and in narratives of memory. It would be impossible to perceive, encode, and remember everything that happens in our lives. Instead, we must weave the meanings we apply to recollections of experience into a narrative, as we attempt to make sense of the past. But we must also accept that, like storytelling, “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content, what we call fact and fiction being rather slippery variables in an intricate process of self-discovery” (Eakin, *Fictions* 17). Still, as McAdams notes, “We create our identities [through narratives of autobiographical memory], certainly. But we do not create them out of thin air, as we might a poem or a fiction. In identity, the good story manifests more than the mere appearance of credibility. It must really be credible, and accountable to facts that can be known or found out. While identity is a creative work of the imagination, it is still grounded in the real world in which it functions” (111-12). This “real world” grounding that McAdams indicates remains important, leading Satya P. Mohanty to argue, “Our experiences do not have self-evident meanings . . . for they are in part theoretical affairs, and our access to our remotest personal feelings is dependent on social narratives, paradigms, and even ideologies” (208). To understand and interpret our histories, we use information from many sources—learned narrative structures, stories we have already been told, and, of course, fragments of our personal
experiences. Thus, autobiographical memory, and therefore, identity, is a potentially changing construction, shaped through narrative.

If our memories of the past are woven between some rendition of historical fact that can never again be accessed in its true form and our own “narrative imagination” (Freeman 223), does this not throw into question our ability to create any sort of truthful history, be it the history of an individual self or the history of a people, a community, or a nation? If history is constructed from memories of past events, then accepted official historical accounts of the past must follow patterns of narrative construction in the same way that memory does. This means that in official versions of history, in any version of history, information is excluded, information is privileged, information is schematized into some form of cohesive plot, information is adapted and changed by the telling and the teller, and empirical reality is intertwined, inextricably, with fiction. This becomes truly problematic when one narrative of history is privileged over others, and we conceive of a history as impermeable fact, for as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin suggest, “[W]hat it means to have a history is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: history and legitimation go hand in hand; history legitimates ‘us’ and not others” (355). Thus, recorded history, based on the myth of historical objectivity, or the belief that we can capture an exact replica of the past, acts as an instrument of control, allowing one constructed version of reality to be favored to the detriment of all other conceptions of the past.
This dependence of memory and identity on narrative, as well as limited official histories, can be problematic for women and others who have been historically constrained by existing narratives that are driven by patriarchal, racist or classist ideologies. In *Literature after Feminism*, Rita Felski suggests that, since people conceive of their life possibilities in terms of plots, “to ask what stories are available for women is to pose a question relevant not just to literature but to life,” for plot is “where social norms assert themselves as literary forms” (96, 103). Similarly, in *Changing the Story*, Gayle Greene notes that “to draw attention to the structures of fiction is also to draw attention to the conventionality of the codes that govern human behavior” (2). While Felski and Greene do not directly address the concept of memory in their texts, their insistence on the importance of plot and narrative structure in telling the stories of women’s lives is directly related to a central idea in memory theory: that memory relies on schema, integrated frameworks of knowledge into which people can incorporate new information and experiences (see Wood, Wood, and Boyde 155). Just as schemas shape what we encode and help us fill in the gaps of memory, so too do the types of narratives and schemas available to us help to determine our possible memories and the ways we narrate them.\(^9\) In a similar way, Greene argues that narrative codes must be exposed so one can see “how they can therefore be changed” (2), and Felski articulates the call of many feminists: “For the world to change, new stories [are] necessary” (96). Such new stories come into existence by using old stories to create new plots through “endless

\(^9\) Put in another way, not only does memory shape the narratives we tell, but available narratives also shape the memories we have.
chains of revision and repetition” (Felski 95), or in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s words, by “writing beyond the ending, [which] produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, [and] hegemonically poised” (5).

Many women writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have created new plot possibilities for their narratives, memories, and lives by “subverting, fragmenting, disrupting . . . undermining . . . embellishing, rearranging, modifying, supplementing, expanding” (Felski 108). It is this type of writing that allows for resistance through the ability to embrace multiplicity, contradiction, and ambiguity. Blurring fact and fiction, such storytelling allows contemporary women writers the opportunity to call attention to (and in some ways mimic in the forms of their stories) the fundamental structures of memory construction and to use this awareness of memory’s mutability to voice their histories and their memories in ways that validate their realities and speak back to hegemonic, patriarchal discourses that have excluded them. Indeed, these women are intent on “writing beyond” the official memory or history or “changing” the official history to embrace something new and to reclaim a space for themselves. By telling new stories of the past, they reframe their histories and validate their memories. In the process, they are able to construct new identities—identities that embrace possibilities previously denied and that resist a history of oppression—while also creating new ways of conceiving of the world and women’s pasts and possible futures within it.
Because, as theorists argue, “memories are not carbon copies of reality” (Nevid 228), contemporary memory theory not only challenges reductive, limiting views of the past, but also insists that new models for understanding the past are necessary, models that accept multiple and sometimes even conflicting versions of history. This becomes even more important when one considers that “time and memory are inextricably interwoven; memory always refers to the past and after, shapes the future” (Schacter, Searching 73). Thus, just as people’s current situations shape the past and the stories they tell about it, so, too, does the past, and the way we conceive of the past, influence and affect the future. In the view of Mark Freemen, once people take control of the selves they construct through memory and narrative, they become subjects in the sense of being subjected to “the determinative power of culture,” and they are also “subjects who have the power—in principle, if not always in practice—to recreate both culture itself and our place within it” (186). Recognizing the ability of the past to affect the future and voicing silenced versions of the past to benefit the future, then, is a means of resistance available to those whose histories have been ignored. In fact, once multiple versions of history have been voiced and considered, and we have overcome the myth of historical objectivity based on singular accounts of history, historical narrative can legitimate multiple constituencies while producing a more accurate (though perhaps less linear and more ambiguous) version of the past comprised of multiple and divergent perspectives (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 355).
**Storied Memories in Contemporary Women’s Literature**

While memory itself has been a topic of study in literature for years—specifically, autobiographies, and more especially men’s autobiographies, have been studied with fervor by many literary theorists—it is only since the 1980s that critical attention has turned towards women’s autobiography. Attention has also moved in recent years towards an investigation of memory in fiction. However, applying current ideas in psychology and cognitive science, such as those detailed in psychologist and memory theorist Daniel Schacter’s study of memory, to literary works is a new endeavor. Making such a connection can be illuminating—Schacter himself develops a discussion of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the introduction to his overview of memory theory, *Searching for Memory*. Evelyne Ender and Suzanne Nalbantian have written the only book-length studies applying contemporary scientific theories of memory to literature. However, Ender focuses most of her study on Proust, George Eliot, de Nerval, Freud, and Woolf, while Nalbantian’s attention remains primarily on male authors, such as Rousseau, Proust, Faulkner, and Borges. James Olney, in another text on life-writing and memory, also focuses on male authors, specifically St. Augustine, Rousseau, Vico, and Beckett. Other authors, like Sidone Smith and Julia Watson, have written extensively on women’s autobiographical texts, but have not focused on memory theory. In *Storied Memories*, in contrast, I apply current concepts of memory theory to the analysis of contemporary women’s literature, and I also focus attention on memory’s potential for resistance to oppression. This new approach to
the investigation of what I call “storied memories,”\(^{10}\)—that is, the memory-narratives that drive many of the stories in contemporary women’s writings—allows for an innovative way of understanding late-twentieth and early twenty-first century women’s fiction and autobiography.

Each chapter of *Storied Memories* is framed around a key issue in current psychological studies of memory theory and uses two contemporary women’s texts to illustrate and investigate the workings of memory in literature and to demonstrate the revision of self through storied memories. In a chapter on Carole Maso’s *The Art Lover* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I show how Maso and Atwood rely on existing story structures and narrative framing devices—models for narrating personal memories and histories—in their works. Demonstrating one of the most basic premises of memory theory, that the individual’s memories of the past are mutable, shaped not only by what was encoded in the past but by the individual’s present state, both Atwood and Maso portray characters who gradually become aware of the power of narrative to shape and frame their memories. As they gain such awareness, they find new and different ways of narrating, or *storying*, their memories of the past in order to survive the present and future.

The characters in Carole Maso’s 1990 novel *The Art Lover* must discover new ways of narrating the past to make sense of and survive in the present. In *The Art Lover*,

\(^{10}\) In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin discusses the notion of “Storied Selves” as he argues that our concept of the self is driven by the stories we tell about ourselves. My interest is similar, but differs in the fact that I am interested in the memories that drive these stories. This has led me to the term “storied memories.”
the main character, a writer named Caroline, attempts to deal with her father’s death and her friend Stephen’s impending death from AIDS by writing a fictional story, a narrative about a family who must cope with a similar experience. As Caroline writes, she also engages memories of her dead father, as well as memories of her mother who died when Caroline was a child, and she begins to realize that, from her father, she has learned a masculinist-model for narrating her memories that distances her from feelings of loss and grief, and silences parts of her mother’s story. As Caroline adopts a new method for framing her storied memories, her personal reality and memories begin to slip into a fictional narrative she is writing. This is pushed to the extreme when Carole (a persona for the author) breaks into the text and recounts her own personal loss of her friend, Gary Falk, who has died of AIDS. Through this layering and narrative reenactment, Maso demonstrates the power of narratives and stories of the past to help one cope with the present. While the aim of Caroline, and the other writer-characters personified in *The Art Lover*, is to tell fictional stories, their own histories surface in these fictional accounts, demonstrating that healing can sometimes only occur through telling the stories of the past. Likewise, Maso also uses Caroline to demonstrate the resistive power contained in learning to adapt and control the way a memory is narrated, for Caroline gains agency and learns to resist a patriarchal mode of understanding her life and her past as she begins to tell her story in a new and different way. As she does this, she revises her understanding of the past, embracing a new version of history that would otherwise be silenced. Thus, it is through storied memories that the characters in *The Art Lover* are

able to resist a debilitating present dominated by grief, turning instead to a more positive future only available through a new and different engagement with the past.

Like Maso’s Caroline, who must re-engage the storied memories of her past in order to gain a more hopeful future, Offred, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s 1985 feminist novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, must also turn to the past to make sense of and survive the present. Like Maso, Atwood engages the issue of narrative frames and their impact on autobiographical memory, but Atwood broadens Maso’s treatment of the subject to explore the implications of limiting patriarchal frames on a much larger scale. In Atwood’s dystopic world where women have been reduced to only their dictated functions by the extremist patriarchal ideology of the Gileadean government—they are now only wives, maids, or bearers of children—the only connection Offred has to her feminist past is her memories. Because the Gileadean government attempts to control even women’s memory, Offred’s continued recollection of her personal memories becomes an act of resistance. Indeed, it is through her maintenance of memories that she sustains hope by keeping alive her past identity as a multifaceted woman with agency. Largely confined to her room, she spends her time imagining and reliving the stories of her past, and it is her memories, and the stories created from them—narratives that deny the official patriarchal narrative put forth by the Gileadean government—that drive her to resist the current regime. Increasingly aware that the past cannot be recaptured directly and that her narrative of the past is constantly changing and fading, Offred nonetheless uses the storied memories of her feminist past to further her resistance. Ultimately, it is
her oral history, played on her tape-recorder, that testifies to and validates the horrific treatment of women in Gilead. Offred’s stories give voice to other ways of being and other possibilities no longer allowed in Gilead and break down the hegemonic, masculinist way of thinking, ultimately demonstrating the damaging consequences of forcing women into singular objectified roles, while simultaneously expressing the necessity for multiple narrative frames to story women’s memories and histories.

In a chapter on Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, I continue my investigation of storied memories with a particular focus on memories of trauma and the healing powers of narrative. Works that deal with personal trauma, Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* emphasize the important relationship between overcoming and resisting trauma and narrating the memories of that trauma that would otherwise remain silenced. Since the time of Freud’s talking cure, it has been accepted that talking about traumatic experiences allows for healing. As Deborah Horvitz asserts, “the greater one’s ability to ‘make story’ out of trauma, which is defined differently for each [teller], the more likely s/he is to regain control of her or his life after trauma” (6). When “memory, remembering, and narrative converge,” trauma victims, as Horvitz explains, “may find both the capacity to remember and the ‘words to say it,’ making healing possible” (10). Schacter, too, notes the effectiveness of “‘testimony therapy’ in which survivors retell and relive their traumatic experiences” to “reduce individual suffering” (*Seven Sins* 178). Since narrative is so clearly tied to identity construction, telling one’s story allows a
trauma victim to make sense of the past in ways that incorporate that past into a manageable part of identity. By telling the story of trauma, the trauma victim also resists “the repetitive cycle of violence or pain” (Horvitz 55), as Dorothy Allison reveals when she narrates her memories of the childhood sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather in her semi-autobiographical 1992 novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

Ruth Anne Boatwright, or Bone, a fictional version of Allison, does not know how to voice the story of what is happening to her when her stepfather, Daddy Glen, begins to sexually abuse her. But, once others find out about the abuse, Bone is able to begin the process of reconstructing and articulating her memories, which helps her to gain the strength and agency to resist when her stepfather rapes her at the end of the novel. Moreover, as Bone begins to identify herself as a storyteller, she begins to create storied memories of her life that help her to resist the silence demanded by Daddy Glen and to overcome the trauma caused by her mother, Anney’s, choice to abandon Bone in order to stay with Daddy Glen. Ultimately, storytelling allows Bone to narrate her traumatic memories of her past in a way that validates her identity as a white-trash Boatwright woman, a woman with faults but also strong character and agency. Moreover, through the use of her fictional projection, Allison is able to navigate, through story, her memories of the traumatic physical and sexual abuse she suffered while growing up, something that may otherwise have remained silenced. Allison also uses the novel to tell the story of her rejection at the hands of her mother: “I knew there was one story that would haunt me until I understood how to tell it—the complicated, painful
story of how my mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl” (qtd. in Gilmore 61). In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, as Allison tells the story of her abuse, she finds the healing force of narrating a previously silenced past legitimating.

Like Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Danticat’s 1994 novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* recognizes the healing forces of expressing memory in story. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie, a twelve-year-old Haitian girl, is sent to live with her mother, Martine, in New York. Martine left Haiti years earlier, after she was brutally raped, and she continues to struggle with her memories of the trauma. When Martine eventually subjects the eighteen-year-old Sophie to the Haitian tradition of “testing,” a symbolic rape in which a mother inserts her finger into a daughter’s vagina to insure virginity, Sophie rebels by wounding herself with a pestle to break her own hymen. However, even after leaving her mother’s house, marrying a supportive man, and having her own daughter, Sophie is continually haunted by the sexual trauma she suffered at the hands of her mother. Unlike her mother, who never finds a way to narrate her traumatic memories, Sophie is able to trace her personal history by exploring, and in some ways reliving, her mother’s traumatic past, as well as her own, and she comes to understand that she is the living memory of her mother’s rape, as well as the product of a horrific, patriarchal tradition that befalls many Haitian girls and women. By engaging and reframing the stories of the Haitian women who came before her, Sophie is able to change her relationship with her mother, and thus, her relationship with her daughter. In this way, she will be able to break the cycle of abusive tradition and resist the patriarchal
process of virginity-testing with her own daughter, while, at the same time, recognizing her innate link with her mother: “Yes, my mother was like me” (234). Likewise, by narrating a story of virginity testing, Danticat voices the once-silenced history of many Haitian women, revising the official historical narrative that denies the practice, and in doing so, questions the custom and illustrates the extreme damage that the patriarchal act perpetuates.

Like my chapters on Atwood and Maso and Allison and Danticat, my chapter on Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* focuses on the power of storied memories to create resistance against patriarchy. We often think of memories as being individual, and they are, to the extent that it is our memories and the stories that we tell about them that help create our personal identities. However, as memory theorists explain, the way we conceive of our identities and ourselves is also based on our relationships with others. Using Jessica Benjamin’s assertion regarding infant development—that at an infant’s very moment of realizing its own independence, the infant is dependent upon another to recognize it (the child must determine it is not the same as its mother, for example)—Paul Eakin concludes that “identity is necessarily relational” (*How Our Lives* 52). He continues, “the self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others” (43). By extension, at least to some degree, the memories that create identity must also be relational, as Eakin observes. Similarly, psychologists Elaine Reese and Kate Farrant argue that a primary function of reminiscing is social and relational: “We talk with others about our past to highlight
events that were meaningful to those involved, as well as to illustrate our own personality characteristics. Thus, reminiscing is inherently social as well as a means of self-preservation” (29). The importance of the relational, social, and interpersonal aspects of memory construction is illustrated in different ways in Kingsolver’s 1998 novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, and Roy’s 1997 novel, *The God of Small Things*.

In *The Poisonwood Bible* the importance of multiple voices creating a larger familial memory becomes clear as the Price sisters and their mother are each given a chance to voice their stories, all derived from the same events, their family’s mission trip to the Congo. Through this, readers are presented with multiple perspectives of the family’s experiences in Africa. The stories of Rachel, twins Leah and Adah, Ruth May, and their mother Orleanna Price, allow readers to see through these characters’ eyes as they account for, and later deal with, a sometimes horrific, sometimes humorous, and ultimately life-altering family history that includes a troubled relationship with their father/husband, survival in a place with a very different culture and climate, and the death of the youngest daughter/sister, Ruth May. As we see how the women’s distinctive conceptions of reality and their memories of childhood shape and create their adult identities, the combination of voices within the text creates a layered and multi-faceted understanding of the personal, yet also communal, history of the Price family. Likewise, it is when the women are recalling their histories and memories together—engaging the social functions of memory—that the most interesting and restorative work is done. Each member of the Price family initially recounts her memories to an unidentified “you,” who
is later identified as the youngest Price daughter, Ruth May, who died in the Congo, years before. Ruth May thus becomes the driving force behind much of the narrative, as she creates a space for interpersonal, shared memory. There must be someone, Kingsolver insists, who is listening to and driving the story that is told, and although Ruth May is not physically present, she fills this need. More importantly, the Price women who find solace in the novel are the ones who speak to each other and who develop interpersonal relationships that are reinforced through shared storied memories. These accounts, while building a cohesive story—the story of the Price family—contain the multiple, shared voices which ultimately must be realized to locate any sort of comprehensive historical account, one that validates their personal memories and histories, and to lead to any form of personal and collective healing. Additionally, it is necessary for each woman to contribute her storied memory to the collective, as it allows her to engage in the healing interpersonal function of autobiographical memory, while also allowing for resistance against a family history of domination propagated by a domineering father/husband, who has abused and silenced each woman in his family. By examining the past, each woman can condemn the father by revising her understanding of him, and then let him go in order to continue her own life. She also creates a more hopeful future by sharing her storied memories and claiming her own, revised history.

Like Kingsolver, Roy, in *The God of Small Things*, not only depicts the need for multiple narratives and revisions when creating a family history, but also reveals that the memories which create identity are relational, for it is the relationship between twins
Estha and Rahel and their ability to deal with a traumatic past together, which leads to historical healing in the text. Rahel and Estha, who as children are utterly connected, are driven apart by a series of horrific events. After spending years apart, Rahel rejoins her brother, yet the two remain distanced from each other. Only when they attend the kathakali plays which recount history in constantly changing and mutable ways, are they able to once again connect and not only find healing, but also tell a new story of the love between their mother, Ammu, and her untouchable lover, Velutha, which offers resistance to the official account. Thus, Roy’s text ultimately provides both a history and a voice for the silent, small beings typically ignored by official, recorded versions of history. As Roy investigates the relationships that drive and shape personal memory in *The God of Small Things*, she insists on the power of relational memory to overcome oppression through the use of storied memory to voice a counter-memory.

Like Kingsolver and Roy, Gloria Naylor in *The Women of Brewster Place* and Toni Morrison in *Paradise*, also focus on memory’s power to resist dominant versions of history, but they also emphasize the importance of collective remembering at communal, and even national, levels. In most ways, collective memory works in a similar manner as personal autobiographical memory—it is narrativized, be it through story, ritual, or other cultural artifact, constructed, and rehearsed. Likewise, like personal autobiographical memory that serves to help create and reinforce personal identity, collective memory works to develop and sustain a group identity. Being part of a community that shares collective memories and histories can provide a nurturing, legitimating experience, but it
can also be limiting if an individual’s personal recollections stand in opposition to or outside of the official collective memory. Naylor and Morrison address the issues of collective memory in their novels by taking on the personal and collective memories of large communities of people in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Paradise*.

In her 1980 novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor demonstrates the power of collective remembering in the lives of the women who live in the run-down Brewster Place housing development. Broken into seven chapters, where all but the last could potentially stand alone as a short story—and in this way voicing the variable, otherwise-silenced stories of the African American women who reside in Brewster Place and must struggle in their different ways with poverty, racism, and sexism—Naylor emphasizes the importance of the personal memories and stories of each resident. Countering the official history of Brewster Place as a development that was created by powerful white men “as an afterthought” (1), Naylor demonstrates the necessity of voicing silenced women’s histories and memories, while at the same time, she also illustrates the need for communal support in each woman’s life. One character, Mattie Michael, who has personally learned the power of *storying* her memories in ways that benefit the present and future, becomes a powerful force in the community, helping other Brewster residents deal with their own pasts by understanding the larger collective implications. Mattie also helps the women understand the implications of their lack of support for Lorraine, a lesbian who, after she is raped, unintentionally kills a man. It is after Lorraine’s rape and the murder
that the women finally begin to remember collectively, dreaming of themselves in Lorraine’s place, knowing her pain and suffering. Moreover, it is Mattie who identifies the collective nature of the women’s memories and dreams, and thus creates the possibility of active resistance for the women who eventually break down the wall that surrounds Brewster Place, a wall that symbolizes the women’s poverty, dependence on a patriarchal system, and general powerlessness. Thus, Naylor demonstrates the inherent power of women who are able to story their personal memories, making their otherwise silenced histories heard, while also becoming a part of a larger collective that provides opportunities for further resistance and agency.

Toni Morrison’s 1997 novel *Paradise* similarly engages questions about community, memory, and history. Morrison demonstrates how the all-black town of Ruby, and its predecessor, Haven, were constructed through a singular, passed-down history of the “Disallowing,” a formative event in the shaping of their collective identity. As they recall how their forefathers were “disallowed,” that is, turned away by an all-black community because their skin was too dark, the town residents reframe this event to cast their dark-skinned forefathers and themselves as God’s chosen people. As the current patriarchs of Ruby, particularly twins Deacon and Steward, struggle to cling to this official version of the past in order to preserve the town, they slip into a repetition of that past historical narrative as a singular, totalizing narrative for the Ruby community, and they use it as justification for a massacre of the Convent women, a group of light-skinned outsiders who live seventeen miles outside of Ruby. In stark contrast to the
patriarchs of Ruby, the women living at the Convent present another method for community construction, one that allows for multiple versions of the past, direct narration of past trauma, and general inclusiveness. The collective memories they create and share ultimately help them to fight against their oppressors, and they serve as a model for the residents of Ruby, who must call for an alternate understanding of the town and its history in order to resist an oppressive past and to shape a new and more hopeful future for the town and themselves. Through this, Morrison insists that those who have been silenced should be empowered to voice their own memories and histories—histories that help the Ruby townspeople to better understand their past, thus allowing for their potential healing in the present which can lead to new possibilities for the future.

Ultimately, as this study of memory in contemporary women’s literature shows, the voicing of memory can be an act of resistance, for it allows for a different future or new possibilities for those who have been oppressed. The contemporary women writers I investigate, as they “write beyond” official storied memories to recreate and validate women’s individual and collective memories in the form of new stories, open new opportunities for personal and communal identity through an understanding of the mutability of memory. Applying current memory theory to an analysis of contemporary women’s literature thus provides a new and vital point of entry into contemporary women’s texts, ultimately illustrating how the characters are able to resist the dominant, official account of the past through the use of storied memories. Most importantly, the focus on the power of memory in the form of story provides a new, vitally important way
of understanding how women writers employ memory to examine, resist, and thus
overcome, oppression in their narratives, in their personal and collective memories, and
in their lives.
CHAPTER TWO

NARRATIVE POSSIBILITIES AND FRAMED MEMORIES IN

MASO’S *THE ART LOVER* AND ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

“Let the fictions change shape, grow, accommodate. Let the medium change if it must; the artist persists.”
—Maso, “Rupture” 68

“I’m a refugee from the past . . . I go over the customs and habits of being I’ve left or been forced to leave behind me.”
—Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 294

In a compelling analysis of the use of memory in literature, literary scholar Evelyne Ender claims, “The architect of memory is also a storyteller” (15). The link between memory and story is emphasized by contemporary women authors Carole Maso and Margaret Atwood. In their novels, *The Art Lover* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Maso and Atwood engage concepts of memory and narrative as a means to better express women’s lives and experiences. The connection between narrative and memory is based on current theories of memory originally proposed by cognitive psychologist Ulrich Neisser, who, in 1967, put forth the now widely accepted notion that only fragments of experience are encoded in autobiographical memory, and rememberers must reconstruct their memories and personal histories from recorded bits of information. Elaborating on this notion of the constructed nature of memory, contemporary memory theorists like David C. Rubin have noted that such reconstructions, which comprise the body of our
autobiographical memories, “usually take the form of stories . . . rather than fragmentary lists of attributes” (2, my emphasis). Thus, the bits of perceived and recorded information are transformed into a narrative, a story of personal experience. Likewise, developmental psychologists Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush have suggested that autobiographical memory is narrativized to allow rememberers to share their histories with others in a coherent, organized fashion, an idea I will investigate in more detail in the fourth chapter. According to Nelson and Fivush, memories are also storied in order to include not only details of lived experience, but also to include spatial-temporal indicators, such as indicating that one event occurred before another in one’s life story—before/after; cause/effect—thus allowing the rememberer to understand events over the continuum of a lifetime. Additionally, storied memories include evaluative details that convey “why this event is interesting, important, and ultimately memorable” (287). As Ender tells us, “stories are central to our experience of self; they are one way of saying who we are” (107). In a similar way, social psychologist Dan McAdams observes, “We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. . . . In order to live well,

---

1 Throughout this study, I tend to use the terms story and narrative interchangeably. I do this purposefully, but with caution. When psychologists and scientists speak of memory, they tend to speak of memory’s narrative structures. Additionally, when we think of story, we generally think of imagination and creativity. Both of these ideas become important when dealing with the way we construct the accounts of our life histories and memories, and thus, I draw on both ideas to examine how memory becomes narrativized and storied, or what I refer to as storied memories.

2 Likewise, “Eyewitnesses, like trauma victims, frequently attempt to infer and construct an explanatory system that creates cause-effect relationships and spatial-temporal sequences, giving coherence and credibility to their narrative accounts” (Barclay 112), as we are more likely to believe accounts that are appropriately narrativized in such a way.
with unity and purpose, we compose a . . . narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves” (11). Not only is autobiographical memory entrenched in story and narrative, but as Ender observes, “Rememberers are not just skillful craftsmen, they are also crafty creators” (107), authors of *storied memories*.

Jerome Bruner, a psychologist who has investigated how “narrative form directs our memory” (Engel 72), suggests that in order to create storied memories, one must have “a grasp of narrative structure” (Bruner and Feldman 291).³ Such structures, what I will call narrative frames, and what cognitive scientist Craig Barclay notes are driven “by known . . . narrative forms” (94), shape our autobiographical memories. Narrative frames, then, concern not only the formal elements of a *storied memory’s* construction—for instance, how the events are ordered and where emphasis is placed—but also the existing narrative models and stories that are available to help us understand and shape our experiences, story forms that we have encountered that provide examples of and models for understanding and narrating our personal experiences. Such frames have a vital impact on the way we tell our memories, for the way we put our memories into story “affects the structure of recall, which in turn affects the structure of later recall” (Rubin 2). Thus, the narrative framing devices that we have been taught⁴ shape the memory that

³ Many psychologists, including David C. Rubin, have noted that “[T]he inability to form coherent stories of one’s memories can lead to difficulties” (2), including the loss of a sense of self. For an example of this, see “A Matter of Identity” in Oliver Sacks’s *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Here, Sacks chronicles the problems encountered by a patient no longer able to craft a coherent life story. Additionally, Dan McAdams tells us of other problems incurred when memories are not narrativized properly: “Not surprisingly, many of the same problems that plague badly told stories can be discerned in narratives of human identity. In the context of personal myth, underdeveloped characters, inopportune images, childish themes, or stalled plots are not mere aesthetic concerns—they result in real human malaise” (174).
is retrieved, and later, the recalled story of that memory becomes part of the memory the next time it is recalled, in a perpetual fashion. Through this chain of memory construction, Barclay notes, we create “narrative selves” by placing our autobiographical memories into “known story forms used to capture the phenomenology of prototypic lifespan developmental trajectories” (96). Indeed, we rely on known narrative frames to create the storied memories that help us to make sense of our lives and form our identities, but this means that the known story forms handed down in families and through culture affect the way we create our memories. This notion is demonstrated by Maso’s main character, Caroline, who must overcome limited framing narratives passed down by her father to embrace a more inclusive way of storying her memories. Likewise, Atwood’s Offred must resist an oppressive culture that attempts to control all ways of narrating and remembering the past.

Psychologists and memory theorists Jerome Bruner and Carol Fleisher Feldman have further emphasized the importance of narrative framing in the way we story our memories:

4 Children not only learn to remember details from their parents, Nelson and Fivush note, “they also learn how to structure their memories into organized narratives” (286). In addition to learning narrative organization, “Family members share not only a stock of stories but a set of interpretive procedures for negotiating meanings” (Bruner and Feldman 294). Thus, we are taught not only how to record and share autobiographical memories, but also how to interpret events and the stories of those events.

5 Feminist literary critic, Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes, “Any social convention is like a ‘script,’ which suggests sequences of action and response, the meaning we give these, and the ways of organizing experience by choices, emphases, priorities.” Likewise, “narrative structures,” what I’m calling narrative frames, produce and disseminate “the assumptions, the conflicts, the patterns that create . . . boundaries for experience,” ultimately suggesting that “narrative may function on a small scale the way that ideology functions on a large scale” (2-3).
Preserving the facts, in some systematic manner, is obviously essential to any narrated report of events. But these facts do not supply the patterning or schematic structure of narrated reports. Rather, this patterning comes from such narrative features as genre and plot type. In writing an autobiography, there is a wide choice of genres; most event sequences can be retold in several equally accurate renditions, differing chiefly in the meaning they give to reported events. Choice of genre is not dictated by the facts, but in response to other considerations—in particular, to the overall meaning or message that the narrator imposes on the life as a whole. . . . Events are shaped for narrative purposes with a view toward meaning and signification, not toward the end of somehow ‘preserving’ the facts themselves. (293)

Indeed, we rely on narrative frames to give meaning to and narrate our memories. Thus, when author Isabel Allende states, “My life is created as I narrate” (Paula 8), she draws our attention not only to the fact that our life histories and memories are tied up in story, but that the act of putting memory into story actually controls and creates, to some degree, our recollection of what the past actually contained, or, as psychologist Susan Engel puts it, “The memory constructed in narrative is the psychic reality, or becomes so” (72).6

The impact of available narrative frames on storied memories is far reaching, a fact that I will investigate further shortly. First, however, it is helpful to understand the circumstances driving our understanding of memory’s framing structures and their relationship to story. In 1932, very few studies had been focused on how people create their personal, autobiographical memories, but scientist Frederic Bartlett set out to change this. In an effort to better understand human memory systems outside of a

---

6 Dan McAdams would add, “We do not discover ourselves in myth; we make ourselves through myth” (13). In other words, we make ourselves through the story we tell of our lives.
laboratory, Bartlett began to investigate the connection between story and memory, studying the ability of humans to remember stories. In his experiment, he asked subjects to read a Native American folk story, after which, at various intervals, he asked them to record the story from memory. Finding that his subjects routinely demonstrated memory distortions based on what subjects thought the stories “should be like”—participants omitted information that they thought was irrelevant, changed the emphasis to different points in the story, and rationalized sections of the story that did not make sense to them—he evolved the now widely accepted notion of the “schema” (Neisser and Libby 315). To Bartlett, “a schema referred to an organized structure that captures our knowledge and expectations of some aspect of the world. It is, in other words, a model of some part of our environment and experience” (Baddeley 240). Subjects used schemas to fill in the gaps in their memories of the story. However, “since the schema encapsulates what [a person] knows of the world . . . when material is presented that is not readily incorporated into a schema, distortions will occur” (240). Because the Native American folk tale did not fit the structures and schemas currently available to Bartlett’s subjects, they “typically distorted it [the story] by omitting features that did not fit in with their prior expectations or schemas, and by distorting other features” unfamiliar to

---

7 Today, we often think of schemas as generalizations about categories of objects, people, or events. For instance, a person may have a schema for birds: a bird is a small animal with feathers and a beak that flies. When you encounter an animal with these qualities, you rely on your schema to determine it is a bird. However, over time you may encounter a large bird or a bird that does not fly, and your schema must be revised to include this new information. Here, study participants relied on their individual knowledge of what a story is—their story schemas—which later affected their recall of the story.
Thus, Bartlett concluded that people have specific story schemas (sometimes called story grammars) that affect their memories of narratives. Since our autobiographical memories are storied, logic would lead us to the conclusion that our personal memories would also be affected by story schemas and narrative frames, and it is now widely accepted not only that “memories in general are supported and shaped by schematic structures,” but that people “distort” autobiographical memories based on their “generic or schematic” knowledge (Neisser and Libby 315; Rubin 4). As memory theorist Daniel Schacter notes, “Our memories can be distorted by the same pool of preexisting knowledge that usually aids our ability to acquire and retrieve new information” (Searching 104). But at the same time that schemas and narrative frames can lead to memory distortion, such “framing contexts” also “represent private and shared knowledge and the possibilities for emergent reconstructive activities

---

8 In 1989, Michael Ross proposed another way to explain errors in memory. Ross suggested that “memories are shaped in part by people’s implicit theories about particular domains of experience.” For instance, “people in pain clinics recall their pain levels of the last week as ‘largely similar to their pain of today’—the implicit theory here is that nothing much has changed. Those who have had therapy remember the pain last week as being higher—the implicit theory is that the therapy must have done some good. Students who take study skills class underrate their skills from before the course began” (Neisser and Libby 316). Nevertheless, there is still a framework of outside information that shapes and affects our memories of the past.

9 Dan McAdams notes, “A ‘story grammar’ is the implicit set of rules determining what a story is and how it works. A ‘story schema’ is a particular person’s implicit understanding of what a story grammar is. . . . When stories violate these conventions, they may seem odd or confusing, or not even stories at all” (303 n. 5). According to McAdams, story grammar rules may include the following: a setting of some kind, human or humanlike characters, an initiating event that “motivates the character to make the attempt, the effort to attain a certain goal,” and a consequence which leads to a reaction which leads to another episode (25-26).

10 Neisser and Libby note that the concept of story schemas/grammars was “revived and expanded by Rumelhart (1975) and by Mandler and Johnson (1977), but it has also been strongly criticized (Black and Wilensky, 1979; Brewer and Lichtenstein, 1982).” However, these concepts lead to the wide acceptance that memory is shaped by schematic structures (Neisser and Libby 315).
to occur. Without framing, reconstructive activities would not be meaningful or possible because there would be no reference against which to judge the meaning of objectified autobiographical memories” (Barclay 100). Narrative and schematic frames allow us to give meaning to our life-experiences and make connections between personal and collective life-events. Thus, Bruner and Feldman have concluded that autobiographical memory is “dominated” by a “generalized narrative pattern”—learned narrative frames that we employ to _story_ our memories—and by a self schema—“the (interpretive) persona as constituted by (prior, schematized) interpretations of life events”—that itself “undergoes evolution as time passes” (292). As we integrate our life-events with these self schemas, shaped by known narrative frames, we craft our _storied memories_, and “in imagining, constructing, scripting our memories, we give a shape and an identity to an existence that otherwise would be no more than a welter of disorganized physiological and perceptual events” (Ender 3). Although such framing devices enable us to manage our histories and lives, they can also limit us as we develop our _storied memories_.

While we are reliant on narrative and self-schematic framing devices as we reconstruct our pasts, these devices can shape and sometimes even distort our histories,

---

11 Similarly, “Dynamic, changing themes of the self, which are a person’s active set of goals and plans, organize knowledge bases at the time of encoding. Later, when these themes may have changed, they guide processing at retrieval” (Rubin 7).

12 Psychologist Dan McAdams calls this self-schema a _personal myth_. He explains, a personal myth is “a special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourself and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole. Like all stories, the personal myth has a beginning, a middle, and end, defined according to the development of plot and character. We attempt, with our story, to make a compelling aesthetic statement. A personal myth is an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future” (12).
for as Engel observes, “the past is created through narrative rather than being translated into narrative” (12). Both Maso and Atwood demonstrate the complex nature of memory construction, emphasizing that the different ways individuals store the past can change the way they understand and act in the present and future. This is not to suggest, however, that storied memories do not have a “truth value.” Roy Schafer tells us, narrative “is not an alternative to truth and reality; rather it is the mode in which, inevitability, truth and reality are presented” (qtd. in Ender 16). At the same time, if narrative devices can impact and ultimately change our notions of the past, it is important to understand the inherent problem of concepts such as “truth” and “reality” as we currently conceive of them. As McAdams explains, “History is judged to be true or false not solely with respect to its adherence to empirical fact. Rather, it is judged with respect to such narrative criteria as ‘believability and ‘coherence.’ There is a narrative truth in life that seems quite removed from logic, science, and empirical demonstration. It is the truth of a ‘good story’” (28-9). To better flesh out McAdams’s meaning regarding the truth value of our storied memories, we need to turn to John A. Robinson’s discussion of meaning and memory. He notes, “There is the urge to judge one meaning as ‘true’ and others as mistaken or biased. Accuracy is the wrong category to use in these cases. Meaning should be judged by other criteria, such as authenticity and functional impact” (202). Like McAdams’s “narrative truth,” Robinson’s notion of authenticity may be a

---

13 According to Robinson, a memory and its meaning can be authentic if it “reflects the person’s preferred ways of organizing experience” at the time of remembering. Thus, “Both prior and current meaning can be authentic” (203), even if the memory or the interpretation of the memory have changed, for the rememberer has changed over time.
more useful concept when dealing with truth and storied memory construction, since it is possible to tell a story of the past in multiple ways and still tell it “truthfully,” although truth here may be changeable and variant.

It is in realizing the mutability of our pasts—making meaning of our pasts in different ways through storied remembering—that we are allowed access not only to time past, but also to the present and even the future. Schacter’s observation that “the past shapes the present” seems obvious when we consider how our day-to-day experiences reinforce the principle that things that happened in the past can continue to affect us in the present (Searching 7). But Schacter takes the idea a bit further in his account of what he calls “mental time travel”: “The idea of remembering as ‘mental time travel’ highlights something that is truly remarkable: as rememberers, we can free ourselves from the immediate constraints of time and space, reexperiencing the past and projecting ourselves into the future at will” (Searching 17). Through remembering, we can access the past and even attempt to manipulate the future. This notion is reiterated by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who notes that our brains contain both images of the past and “images recalled from plans for the future . . . images of something that has not yet happened and that may in fact never come to pass” (qtd. in Ender 110). These images intermingle, driving how we understand the past, the present, and the future. To further emphasize this connection between memories of the past and images of our plans for the future, one can look to a case where memory has failed. Describing a patient who has amnesia and no episodic memories, Schacter tells us, “It does not occur to him to make
plans, and he has nothing to look forward to” (Searching 150). Without memories of the past, there is no sense of the future. Therefore, “[W]ho we are and who we will become depends on memories that may fade, change, or even strengthen as time inexorably passes” (Schacter, Searching 73). Our future depends on our memories and how we manage, frame, and narrate events from our personal pasts. It is here that we can truly see the implications of narrative frames—models that help us shape our stories of the world—on the past and the future. This idea is particularly important for Maso’s Caroline, who must find new ways of understanding her past in order to overcome the stultifying power of grief and loss that could deaden her future. The same can be said, on a broader scale, for Atwood’s Offred, whose only connection to her feminist past, and thus her identity as a woman with agency, is her memories, memories that a patriarchal regime are attempting to reform and erase.

Both the limiting effects of narrative framing on memory, as well as the potential opportunities for change, become clear when we examine contemporary women’s literature. McAdams tells us, “The different forms our story may take are many. But they may not be limitless. Despite the diversity, there are a finite number of basic story forms that people tend to adopt in creating personal myths [and narrating their histories and memories].” Further, to shape their storied memories and self-schemas, “Women are offered somewhat different resources than are men” (50, 92). With different

---

14 In identifying these possible story forms, McAdams has turned to literary theory: “Literary scholars have found useful the discrimination between four very general forms—comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony” (50). These divisions are clearly seen in the construction of personal life narratives.
narrative frames available to help *story* women’s memories, it is possible that narratives of women’s experiences, histories, and memories could be constrained or even silenced. If we are limited by our understandings of the world by the narrative framing devices available, then our ability to engage the past is stunted. Aware of the limitations imposed by inherited story forms and limited narrative possibilities for women under the traditional patriarchal structure, many feminist literary theorists have claimed that we need new narrative possibilities for women’s stories in order to more fully capture women’s life experiences. As feminist critic Rita Felski articulates, “For the world to change, new stories [are] necessary” (96). And if we can locate and claim these new stories, and the narrative frames available individually and collectively for women expand, we may locate the possibility for resistance against an oppressive, male-dominated past in the spaces of re-remembering, re-interpreting, re-framing, and re-narrating. With new narrative possibilities for women’s memories and experiences, there is possibility for healing and for finding hope for the self and for the future by re-understanding the past.

For indeed, as memory theorist John A. Robinson observes, “The meaning of any experience can change over time. New information or an altered perspective can prompt us to reinterpret specific experiences or entire segments of our personal history” (202). If

---

15 Specifically, McAdams examines the resources young people have for “building identity,” resources such as “social networks that are supportive . . . available job and educational opportunities, relationships in which mature love and intimacy may be experienced, and sundry cultural systems, life-styles, and ways of being.” Another facet of available resources includes the narrative possibilities for men and women to story their experiences and create their personal myths. Noting the impact on one’s environment on available resources, he highlights the class differences in addition to the gender differences inherent to cultural systems, and explains that “a person must do the best he or she can with whatever is at hand” (92).
our memories of the past are tied so clearly to our plans for the future, and if we can find new ways of framing them and making meaning of them, we can change ourselves and our futures. Thus, if we change ourselves, our “ways of interpreting the world may also change” (202). In a similar way, we need new narrative frames and schemas not only to understand and share our memories and our pasts, but also to allow us more positive futures. Barclay tells us, “It is clear that storytelling in oral and literate cultures preserves collective knowledge and leads to the creation of new knowledge through variations upon the themes and formulas that constitute the underpinnings of narrativation” (102). There is a possibility of narrating our histories in new, adaptive ways, and once this occurs, “Not only is history being rewritten, but the historian is also being transformed by the very process of doing so. For the rewritten history, as it were, changes the perspective of the historian who rewrote it. In like matter, the self who constructs the past is changed by the outcome of its own construction” (Bruner and Feldman 292).

Like the feminist critics who argue that women need new narrative frames and possibilities to narrate their lives and memories, Carole Maso in *The Art Lover* and Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale* draw our attention to the impact of narrative framing and inherited plots on accounts of the past, demonstrating its limitations and its possibilities. Like the writers described by Evelyne Ender, who not only have “a vocation for remembrance,” but who are also aware of “its subtle complexities,” Maso and Atwood demonstrate the complexities of memory in their works of remembrance (5). That “artists can best illuminate the impact of memory in our day-to-day lives” (Schacter,
Searching 11) is evident in the novels of these contemporary women authors. Maso calls for new narrative and artistic frames to narrate women’s memories and experiences beyond those passed down by a limited, masculine artistic ideal. In The Art Lover, she models the possibility for narrative frames that embrace multiplicity, ambiguity, and women’s agency. In a slightly different way, Atwood demonstrates the dangerous power of an official, totalizing, patriarchal narrative frame and historical narrative, while at the same time, calling for multiple ways of narrating women’s histories and memories, ways that reclaim what is silenced by the official narrative. Thus, as Maso and Atwood reveal in their works how memories can lead to debilitation or resiliency, they also call for new and varied narrative frames for memory, for they recognize the power of storied narratives to not only report the past but also to change the future.

**Frames Inherited from the Past and Adopted for the Future in Carole Maso’s The Art Lover**

Carole Maso has been described by critics as a “famously difficult and [a] most opinionated” writer (Debord 38); this assessment, whether just or not, likely stems from her outspoken critique of contemporary fiction and storytelling. In essays, she has railed against not only the publishing industry,16 but contemporary authors and storytellers.

---

16 Maso has asked in multiple interviews and essays, “Who decides, finally, what is seen, what is read, and why? And how much else has been deleted, omitted, neglected, ignored, buried, treated with utter indifference or contempt.” (“Rupture” 69). I have left the period at the end of the quote, although it is not grammatically correct, to emphasize the original text. Maso ends with a period, asserting this not as a question but an assured statement, leaving no doubt that multiple texts and narratives have been kept from the public. Along similar lines, Maso asks, “Where have we gotten our small definitions of story? And why?” (“An Essay” 27).
Calling conventional realistic narrative “a prison . . . a prison of character, of plot, of beginning, middle, and end, of circumstance,” she confesses, “I must admit that conventional storytelling bores me silly. The analytic bits, the dreary descriptive impulse, the cause and effect linearity, the manufactured social circumstances” (“A Correspondence” 108; “An Essay” 31). And even more vehemently, she rants against current realist fiction:

The shapes much fiction takes remain unrecognizable to me—they have nothing to do with any real aspects of my experience, and so are not useful. For me, those forms are inherited, artificial impositions. I understand why people still write in them, but for me composition would become meaningless. Fiction for the most part has been and continues to be reductive, and therefore, highly problematic. It has attempted for the most part to try to interpret the world. To narrate it. To manage it. (“A Correspondence” 112-113)

Further, she realizes the problematic nature of both traditional and modernist masculine art and narrative and its lasting impact on the stories that are available today. In a creative essay, Maso rages, “No more monoliths. No more gods. / ‘Let us go then, you and I. . .’” (“Rupture” 63, ellipses hers). In this plea to be free of T.S. Eliot and the modernist canon he represents, she rejects what she sees as the masculine, modernist narrative frames that have shaped narrative possibilities for women for so long. Seeing the possibility of control and manipulation contained in both traditional and modernist, masculine narrative models and structures, she declares that inherited masculine storytelling devices are “an agreed-upon way to shape reality” (“Except Joy” 119), and questions whether these frames can embody women’s stories, memories, and experiences.
Calling for something new, something other than masculine narrative story frames that have long provided examples of what the narratives of people’s lives, memories, and experiences should look like, Maso searches for something better able to story her life experiences and memories as a woman. She says, “I am in the process constantly of trying to forge a credible voice for myself and my material,” since more “conventional structures simply fail to . . . address . . . my visions or . . . concerns” (Maso, qtd. in V. Harris 108). Ultimately, she does not wish “to discard” the male canon, but instead, wants “to enlarge it,” to make room for new ways of seeing and telling: “Wish: That forms other than those you’ve invented or sanctioned through your thousands of years of privilege will arise and be celebrated” (60, 72). In order to tell, “if not the real story, then what the story was for me,” she must reject both conventional and modernist, masculine narrative frames and create a new, contemporary form that will provide new narrative frames and narrative possibilities for women, a form that she calls “an odd amalgam—taken from painting, sculpture, theory, film, music, poetry, dance, mathematics—even fiction sometimes” (“An Essay” 27). Rejecting inherited narrative frames, Maso, instead, wants to “use all and everything that is available to us through observation, memory, fantasy, desire, imagination—so as to get up close next to one’s vision.” By doing this, she says, “Miracles might occur” (27). To her, the novel is a space for possibility, a “huge, shifting, unstable, unmanageable canvas” (“An Essay” 28). To be sure, she does not dismiss narrative framing devices as unimportant, instead claiming, “Narrative—getting from one thing to the next through structural means—is central to my books . . . I
believe content and form are intimately linked; how the story is told is, in many ways, the story. Story is interpreted and re-interpreted, dreamt and undreamt, envisioned, re-envisioned, reinvented through form” (112-113). A useful frame, she asserts, must embrace chaos: “I think there is structure even in the chaos, and structure allows us to mediate and bear and live next to the strangeness and the mystery” (112). Additionally, a useful frame may require “New definitions of story and character” and “entirely new shapes. . . Different ways of thinking, of perceiving” (“An Essay” 27; “Rupture” 68).

The most exciting work, Maso claims, is found in the liminal spaces, where, she says, “we experience the world, I think, in a different way. Something new and beautiful and terrifying opens up in us. Something at once utterly mundane and completely sublime” (“A Correspondence” 112-113).

In this liminal—and to Maso, feminine—space, new narrative possibilities open up: there is “all potential. All what might be. All what might have been. A record of all we cannot remember, all we’ve lost—never to be retrieved” (“An Essay” 28).17 Additionally, there is “Room for the random, the senseless, the heart-breaking to be played out. A form both compressed, distilled, and expansive enough to accommodate the most difficult and the most subtle states of being” (26). For Maso, then, the manipulation of narrative forms and frames offers women writers hope, resistance against

---

17 Maso, here, articulates her interest in and reliance upon memory in her writing. She has tried to capture “a language as ancient as memory, as direct as a moan, as gorgeous as song, as imperfect as utterance” (“Except Joy” 112). On a related note, Victoria Frenkel Harris lists Woolf, Stein, Barnes, Beckett, Sappho, Antonioni, Godard, and Tarkovsky as Maso’s influences (111). Such influences would also suggest a connection to memory and autobiography, in addition to the obvious emphasis on non-conventional form and structure.
oppressive and inherited patriarchal structures, and a way to lay claim to the past and shape the future in new ways. As she remarks in her characteristic prose-poem fragmented style,

the future is feminine, for real, this time. . . .
The future is women, for real this time. I’m sorry, but it’s time you got used to it. . . .
The future: all the dreams we’ve been kept from. All the things yet to dream.
An opening of possibility. (“Rupture” 62)

Formed through new narrative structures and providing new possibilities for narrating women’s memories and experiences, Maso asserts that this “future” of “feminine” possibility will be “plural,” and it will “[resist] categorization” and be “far messier, more voracious, stranger than any existing or prescribed shape could accommodate” (“Rupture 62; “Except Joy” 113). And it will also be a decidedly “feminine space,” for Maso does “not believe in the myth of ungendered writing” (“Except Joy” 123). She wants this move toward new narrative structures and possibilities—toward “utterly original shapes”—to be “treated gently. And with optimism.” (“Rupture” 70). In her early novel, The Art Lover, a book clearly focused around memories of grief and loss, Maso experiments with new narrative structures and frames in her determination to allow her characters to deal with their memories of the past in new, vital ways.18 Specifically,

---

18 In a discussion of her subsequent novel, The American Woman in the Chinese Hat, Maso said, “For me, in this book, the ultimate risk was not to do anything that I knew how to do and not to provide any escape through memory or imagination or sex, not to exploit the potential of language, not to exploit the potential of narrative, and a conventional narrative at that. It’s about breaking down, falling apart, and language unable to do anything about it. In The Art Lover, the opposite is true” (“Carole Maso” 33). This remains important to my reading, as it situates The Art Lover as a work that demonstrates an escape into memory and imagination, while also questioning the potential of narrative. Perhaps it is Maso’s exploitation of conventional narrative that does allow her language to do something—something that Maso firmly
Maso draws attention to the gendered nature of narrative framing devices used to structure and narrate memories by demonstrating the inability of male, modernist artistic works to articulate women’s experience in positive ways. Maso’s women characters search for new, feminine frames to narrate their life-histories, frames that allow for a sense of connectedness and embodiment, while also rejecting the cold distance imposed by oppressive masculine frames. It is only when Maso’s female characters claim these new narratives as models for their own *storied memories* that they are able to find solace in the midst of grief and heal from the pain of losing a loved one.

Maso wrote *The Art Lover* in response to a great personal loss. One of Maso’s good friends, artist Gary Falk, became sick and ultimately died of AIDS. Maso’s attempt to make sense of his illness and death and somehow move on with her life greatly shaped her writing, both in terms of content and structure:

> When I first began *The Art Lover*, it looked very much like *Ghost Dance* [Maso’s first, much more conventional, novel], and then my friend got sick and the book completely changed. It got much fiercer. I had first started writing about the fictive family that Caroline writes about; it had a *Ghost Dance* sort of feel to it. Then these things started to happen. It’s interesting to me how directly I allow my life to be used, not autobiographically, but to be used to write from. (“Carole Maso” 34)

In her struggle to capture her life experience and to deal with her memories of pain and suffering in a manageable way, she described a “time of witness, of storytelling” as she tried to allow herself “to walk into forgetfulness, dissolution. To give up a little. To let the earth go, and the ones I love most” (“Except Joy” 113). In the liminal space between
memory and forgetfulness, she found a new narrative possibility opening up to her, a story that embraced emotional chaos and allowed her to find new shapes for character and plot. A complex final product, *The Art Lover*, includes thirty-two paintings and images, reproduced over and over in varying forms; numerous allusions to film, other literature, and current events; and an intrusive autobiographical section that Maso has termed “a rupture,” which breaks the fictional “fourth wall” and makes Maso, as her fictional projection, Carole, and her friend Gary into characters in the novel (qtd. in Hackett 65). Like Maso, who found it necessary to adopt, and later fight for 19 this new narrative structure, which enabled her to capture her past in a useful way, the characters in Maso’s novel must learn new ways of narrating their lives and memories in order to move into the future with hope. Critic Nicole Cooley has argued that, in *The Art Lover*, “Caroline’s own story and the story of the family she invents are separated by both typography and the use of title sections,” while in *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*, Maso’s subsequent novel, “the narratives blur, and finally, the narratives break down” (186). I would argue, however, that Maso also breaks down the conventional, masculine narrative in *The Art Lover*. But in doing this, Maso adopts a new, feminine narrative frame for her women characters, one that allows for the healing and hope that come from new storied memories.

---

19 Maso’s editor at North Point asked her to remove the graphics and integrate the non-fictional section into the rest of the text. Her response: “I said, that is not possible, this is the book you bought, with graphics and everything in it. I will just take it back. It was a terribly painful period for everyone involved. . . . Compromise simply does not occur to me as an option. I feel very lucky in that way” (“Carole Maso” 33).
Essentially, the different artworks and art forms used in the book represent the framing devices employed, consciously and unconsciously, by the characters as they seek to understand and narrate their memories.\textsuperscript{20} Grant Stirling’s observation that \textit{The Art Lover} “most directly examines how the processes of aestheticization permeate our lives” (591) offers important insight into what happens as the narrative unfolds and we watch the characters, mostly artists themselves, not only struggling to narrate their storied memories, but also questioning how artistic and narrative frames affect their current lives and realities. The description of Cezanne’s art as an effort to put “the flow of the world into an inch of matter” (146) highlights the concept that experience is mediated and shaped the moment it is transcribed into an artistic or narrative form. Just as Maso’s artist characters attempt to capture their histories and experiences in both art and narrative with a goal to “prolong” the past (214), so readers, as they become caught up in the novel’s repeating pattern of stories within stories in which the characters mirror each other, must find new narrative or artistic frames to help mediate their memories and experiences. As Maso shows, the way a memory is framed through narrative shapes both the past and present, and thus affects the life possibilities and memories for the creator, and, in some ways, for the represented.

The limitations inherent in the narrative and artistic frameworks available to the characters become clear in critic Charles B. Harris’s reading of \textit{The Art Lover}. Harris

\textsuperscript{20} By drawing upon many different art forms, including painting, music, film, and literature, Maso demonstrates that story frameworks can derive from many mediums. Thus, in my discussion, I reference both artistic frames and narrative frames, demonstrating how both serve as models to structure our storied memories.
convincingly shows that Maso’s characters are constrained, or even victimized, by the narrative and artistic frames initially available to them—frames that are determined by modernist art. Harris argues that Max Chrysler, Caroline’s father, has adopted a modernist view of art as a way to understand and control his world, but he deems “Max’s aestheticizing [modernist] coolness as ‘a little monstrous’” (161). Max’s accounts of his relationship with his dead wife, Veronica, provide undisputable evidence of the danger of seeing the world through a limiting narrative and artistic frame. As Max repeatedly tells Caroline, he saw Veronica as “a painting by Matisse, a painting or one of those achingly beautiful line drawings. After a while I could not see her any other way. Lying on a striped divan. Her pantaloons. Her breast. But I didn’t have the ability to approximate her beauty” (45). Thus, Max remembers Veronica not as a flesh and blood woman, but as a painting. Similarly, the story that Max tells Caroline, a story that she has asked to hear again and again, turns Veronica’s mounting depression into a distanced piece of art. Towards the end of her life, Veronica wandered away from a party, and Max found her kneeling in the street staring at a stone angel statue on the front of a hospital. “The thing we remember when we think of the end of her life,” Max says of Veronica, is that “her

21 Modernism, here, pertaining to art and criticism, is defined by Charles Harris as the following: “In the modernist view, art’s consolations exist in direct proportion to the artist’s success in transmuting emotion into objective form.” This form’s “singular function [is] to distance these emotions, containing chaotic experience in the analgesic symmetries of art,” emphasizing modernist conventions of “impersonality, aesthetic distance, and transcendence.” Modernist art embodies “false assurances of orderliness and transcendence” (159). Maso has said, “Also my work refuses post-modern game playing, modernist allusion, impenetrability, in-jokes, irony” (“A Correspondence” 111). I would argue, with Harris, that she takes on modern and postmodern forms to demonstrate the limited nature of available narrative forms. Likewise, I agree with Harris that “This modernist view of art, with its false assurances of orderliness and transcendence, must itself be forsaken” before the characters can “get on with their lives” (159).
legs had turned to stone, her whole torso to stone, right there on the sidewalk of West Eleventh Street. She was losing detail. She was disappearing... Strange, like those sculptures on those tombs” (87). As Max memorializes his past, he describes Veronica as a statue: that is, as a manageable, but cold and distanced, piece of art. It is not surprising that Max views his dead wife, or even his life, through an artistic lens, for Veronica was his model. Recalling how Veronica “held very still” and “never moved” when she posed for him, Max describes her as “a wonderful model” (14). But as Maso shows, Max’s masculine, modernist frame, which aestheticizes his memories of the past, is controlling and limiting to those he represents, especially Veronica.

When Caroline begins to confront her memories of her father’s life and his death, she comes to realize that his aestheticization of her mother’s life was a limited, even damaging, way of dealing with the past: “Was it hard for you, her terrible sadness? Did you try to put it on canvas, put it at arms’ length, where it was manageable?” and again, “[D]id you want to turn her into paint and canvas? Put her out there where she was manageable?” (15; 45). Caroline repeats this sentiment over and over in the novel: “Max, did you try to paint her into a life?” (49), and again, “Did you try to paint her into a life?” (72). Caroline’s question to her father speaks not only to his attempt to memorialize Veronica by giving her a life through painting and representation (her recorded image allows her to live on), but also to his supposed power as an image-maker to create “a life”— the life Max wanted—for her: “The attempts: to paint her back into a body, lengthen her thick dark hair and climb it, use it as a rope ladder out of here. The
attempts: to look for her in every other woman. The attempt: to forget her. The attempt: to forgive her. But it did not seem possible to do either” (185). Even as Max uses a modernist, distancing version of art as a controlling device, he is unable to embrace the past in a meaningful or useful way: “Veronica, I still miss you! Though I am not sure I even remember you accurately anymore, or the things we actually did. . . . Even you’ve faded, Veronica. Now I have trouble remembering precisely what is no longer the same anymore” (187). In his reading of this scene, Charles Harris argues that the fact that Veronica “holds still” for Max and then commits suicide provides an ironic commentary on “the stasis to which Max and modernism aspire,” suggesting “the covert truth of impersonal iconic art”—that it is “life-denying” (161). And yet, this “life-denying” modernist artistic frame is the only one Caroline knows, for Max taught this artistic framework to his children: “We had, it seemed, been saying good-bye our whole lives. . . . Even then he was saying good-bye, putting me into a painting, holding me afar and admiring” (11). Thus, as Caroline begins her artistic task of working through Max’s (and later her friend Steven’s) death through her own artistic form—the novel she is writing—it is not surprising that she employs the one narrative frame that she knows, a modernist frame that is cold, distancing, and limiting.22

22 Charles Harris suggests that Caroline’s novel in progress “evinces the same evasive desire to master aesthetically the radical contingencies of modern experience that characterizes the view of art she learned from her father.” When “comparing her initial motives for writing the novel to Max’s reasons for painting Veronica, Caroline evokes the modernist characteristics of distance, impersonality, and order” (162).
Thus, when Caroline begins to tell the story of Maggie, Henry, Alison, and Candace—a perfect family—she begins from a distance:  

“One wants to keep this family well. Seeing them this way from some distance . . . The family comes no closer than this, they hang back, keep their distance. But I have faith in them” (7-8). Caroline’s initial description of this fictional family that she creates as she begins her novel-in-progress reveals as much about her as it does about her characters. Not only does she insist on keeping an artistic distance from her characters, something she has learned from Max, but she remains assured that her characters will continue to “turn at the last moment to maintain the correct distance” (5), just as her own family has been trained to do. At the same time, Caroline, the author/creator, actively responds to her fictional family’s story. Describing a moment when she watches Alison and Alison’s father, Henry, Caroline says, “I can see the intricate jigsaw their bodies make to fit together . . . They will gnaw off an arm if necessary to properly fit” (5, my emphasis). Caroline’s commentary, as the I-narrator in the fiction, raises questions of the author’s relationship with the text, and makes Maso’s later autobiographical entry into the text as “Carole” less surprising. Still, Caroline as the I-narrator at the beginning is distanced from the work. As Caroline stands from afar, observing, she has control over the way she represents the events. In addition, she asserts control through perspective, distance, and narration: “I cannot guess yet how

---

23 The Art Lover involves a complex set of characters which can become confusing for those not familiar with the novel. I will attempt to provide some context here so as to avoid any confusion in my analysis. The main character of the story is Caroline who is mourning her father, Max’s death. She also deals with her friend Steven’s death later in the novel. Caroline writes a novel-in-progress featuring a family made up of a mother, Maggie, a father, Henry, and two daughters, Alison and Candace. Finally, in the autobiographical fifth section of the book, Carole Maso inserts herself into the text as Carole who is mourning her friend Gary who, like Steven, is dying of AIDS.
remote I, the onlooker, I the one who is telling their story, have become, how cautious. If there is a clue in this scene for something about to go awry, I do not see it. I overlook it. Or perhaps I prefer not to see” (8). Just as Max controlled his family and his past through his art, so we watch Caroline struggling to control her characters. However, since the characters in Caroline’s novels are artistic representations of the people in Caroline’s life, including Caroline herself, it becomes clear that she, like her father, is attempting to construct an artistic narrative of her life in a very specific way in order to control and distance the pain caused by the loss of her father. Thus, Caroline’s novel-in-progress begins as the story of a loss of a father.24

*The Art Lover* begins with Caroline’s fictive novel-in-progress. Caroline paints (narrates) a picture of a beautiful, seemingly perfect family—the mother, Maggie, the father, Henry, and their two daughters, Alison and Candace—picnicking at their beach house. Like her, we are convinced, when we look at them from a distance, that the family members fit flawlessly together like a jigsaw. Then we read Henry’s letter to Maggie, a letter that blindsides us as readers, as it clearly must have blindsided Maggie (and must likewise represent the surprise Caroline must have felt at her father’s own death): “You looked so happy and good and beautiful sitting there that I almost changed my mind for a minute. I looked hard, looked at you and our daughters, radiant in this marvelous place, and still, God forgive me, I loved another woman and made up an

---

24 It is worth noting that this is a very different form of loss. Caroline’s father, Max, has died, whereas Caroline’s character, Henry, has left his family for another woman. At the same time, the women in Caroline’s novel must struggle to make sense of a missing father in much the same way that Caroline must make sense of missing Max.
excuse to get up and call her” (28). Suddenly, the stereotypical perfect family is ripped apart and the women are left to pick up the pieces, just as Caroline must pick up the fragments of her own exploded family. Just as Caroline lost her father Max, so in Caroline’s story, Henry abandons his family, becoming another lost father. The connections between Max and Henry are heightened, as Caroline continues her novel. The two men have a girlfriend named Biddy, a Greenwich Village apartment, and a refined taste in food, art, and music. More importantly, like Max, who painted as an attempt to manage and distance his life experiences and memories, we are told that Henry turns to writing to cope with “the most intense of experiences. Ordering them. Perhaps it made them seem more real” (226). In a similar way, the parallels between Henry and Caroline demonstrate the extent to which Max (captured in Henry’s character) has taught Caroline to remember and manage the world through his (and Henry’s) modernist narrative and artistic frames. For example, just as Henry writes notes to order the world and to make the experience seem more real, so Caroline is writing a fictional book that helps her to work through her memories of her father, allowing her to cope and heal from her own loss. Caroline, like Henry, is a product of her father’s modes of thinking and teaching. As Caroline tells us, “You [Max] tried to teach us something about art, its consoling nature, its transcendent nature, its ability to help distance” (185). Max also taught her that, through art, individuals can possess and control the past by integrating their memories into story frames. Caroline recalls Max’s story of a young shepherd who drew pictures of sheep on a boulder with a stone. Responding to her father’s story, the
child Caroline asked if the shepherd drew pictures of sheep “so that he could keep them? So they would not go away?” (52). Aware of the distancing techniques of art, as well as art’s ability to “keep” the past in a specific way, Caroline, as an adult, recognizes that art can affect and control life. As she tells us early in the novel: “Writing too can keep the world at a distance. One uses ‘one’ instead of ‘I.’ One does not look long enough, or one becomes frightened, fainthearted. One turns flesh too often into words on a page. . . . The temptation is to make it beautiful or perfect or have it make sense. The temptation is to control things, to make something to help ease the difficulty” (16). This distanced frame is the only way Caroline knows to make sense of her world and her storied memories of her father, Max, and of her dying friend, Steven.

Caroline’s ability to forge such distance through art becomes abundantly clear in her depiction of Maggie, the mother character in her novel-in-progress. An art-history professor on sabbatical for the term, Maggie views her life and world as a painting. She perceives her husband and her daughter as figures in one of her beloved Rembrandts:

Someone has rendered each detail with such exactness and precision, the curl on the young girl’s brow, the neck of the man, the gentians at their feet. . . . Two figures first. What is the unifying motive here? A girl and a man, moving as they are in a landscape of light. How to compose in pyramidal form a girl, a man, and if I include myself, a woman, intimately linked. . . . Such are my notions of happiness. (17)

At the beginning of Caroline’s novel, then, her mother character, Maggie, frames her family members through the art she studies, for art provides Maggie with an available narrative frame for her experiences, helping her to make sense of her life and her history.

Describing her daughter Alison, Maggie remarks:
There is such gentleness in her face as she [Alison] comes nearer and extends her arms, one arm toward the viewer, one toward the wayward man, rescuing him from obscurity, and forcing the viewer to participate. She is the unifying element . . . one arm in either direction. . . . Note the beautiful, soft upturned arm, the skin at the wrist, the delicate fingers as they reach, reach for something. (18)

Here, as Maggie describes her daughter, Alison, her description could just as easily be of the Magdalene image in the Giotto painting that Maso has included in *The Art Lover* before Maggie begins speaking. A cropped image of the kneeling Magdalene later appears at the end of the subsequent section voiced by Alison, herself. These artistic reproductions help to demonstrate that the frameworks that Caroline’s mother character, Maggie, has for understanding her world and her memories of what her family was before Henry left are those she has learned through her study of art, and Maggie turns more and more towards this framing device as her world begins to fall apart. “One loves art more than life; it’s better than life, don’t you think,” she says to Alison. “It doesn’t disappoint so” (57). Significantly, just as Max’s turn towards art affected Caroline, so Maggie’s immersion into art clearly affects her two daughters, Alison and Candace. Alison becomes the Magdalene, reaching for the father she has lost while always feeling the distance between their hands. Rebellious, teenaged Candace, on the other hand, resists Maggie’s chosen artistic frame. Candace says to her mother, “I am not one of your Renaissance Madonnas” (22). Multiple critics have suggested that Alison and Candace are mirrors of Caroline, and these connections are clear and convincing.25

---

25 For instance, Grant Stirling argues, “Candace becomes the vehicle for Caroline’s anger at her father’s death, while Alison becomes the vehicle through which Caroline expresses love for and closeness with a mother she hardly recalls” (605).
However, like Charles Harris, I also want to suggest that it is Maggie’s journey that most clearly resembles Caroline’s own,26 for like Maggie, Caroline (and by extension, Maso), must learn a new narrative/artistic framework to story her life in order to overcome a potentially paralyzing past.

Thus, after Henry deserts his family, Maggie at first turns towards the art of the Old Masters, just as Max, before, turned to modernist art to distance his own pain. But the masculine artistic frames Maggie has long relied on fail to capture her experience of grief and loss in the present or her storied memories of her past with Henry. Thus, Maggie leaves “the Renaissance behind” and begins “to wander from one painter to the next searching for solace” (61). Eventually, she stops working on her book on the Renaissance (like Caroline and Carole who also stop working on their books during a time of grief), and, instead, turns to painters like Manet, Renoir, and Degas as she searches for new artistic and narrative frames to mediate her experiences. But these male artists do not provide the narrative and artistic frames she needs, and so she continues to flounder: “I don’t know what to do, Alison,’ Maggie whispers. ‘I’m lost” (232).

Finally, she listens to her feminist daughter, Candace,27 who rages:

---

26 Calling Maggie a “mask” for Caroline, Charles Harris argues that “Maggie has also learned well the lessons of modernist criticism” (164). Like Caroline, Maggie must overcome this limited narrative frame. At the same time, Harris argues that it is Candace’s journey that is most important for Caroline’s own growth, while I argue that Maggie provides a more nuanced version of who Caroline must become.

27 Candace, who first deals with the loss of her father by rejecting the artistic frames he represents, acknowledges the distancing effects such frames have on her mother: “Fuck Poussin, Mother. Your husband left you for a twenty-nine-year-old. Let’s show a little emotion. Stop looking for the perfect order, reason, symmetry. There’s no such thing” (96). However, Candace eventually reclaims the artistic medium through her work with the Guerilla Girls, a group that works to “call attention to the andro/eurocentric nature of the art establishment” (C. Harris 165), and finds solace in fighting for new
I do not believe we are powerless. . . . I believe it is still possible to do something. . . .
I do not believe in the limitations of art.
I do not believe we are powerless. I do not believe there are no solutions
I do not believe in any of the fathers. . . . I do not accept that it is a man’s world
I still believe that anything is possible. (160)

To understand her experience, Maggie must begin to find a new, feminist frame in the works of women she had been taught to ignore. Thus, as she gazes upon her daughter, Alison, Maggie ponders:

Such a sight. Her daughter. And the painting she could now see in her mind’s eye. Mary Cassatt. . . . Why had she never thought of Mary Cassatt before? Or any of the others? Vanessa Bell, she said to herself. Frida Kahlo, Sonia Delaunay. Georgia O’Keeffe. There was Rosa Bonheur, Paula Modershon-Becker, Florine Stettheimer and Dathe Kollwitz. She thought she had barely known their names, but now they all came back, in an instant. (220)

This moment of feminist recognition clearly expresses Maso’s political point that the only way to move on from a paralyzing past is to give up patriarchal (and modernist) artistic and narrative forms, and instead, adopt new frames for women’s storied memories.

Once Maggie begins to recognize in the narrative and artistic representations of these women artists frames that better approximate her experiences, she begins to heal. Newly empowered, she asks: “Why didn’t you ever teach me how to make a fire, Henry? But why hadn’t she ever thought to ask, she wondered” (226). Likewise, she begins to view the world in a new way: “For the first time, it seemed, Maggie realized the beauty of voices in the art world—voices who narrate the experiences of those who have been oppressed and silenced. At the end of the novel, Candace has become a painter, which helps her to heal. Her sister Alison tells us, “She’s much better now, Candace is, since she’s made the decision to paint. She seems much better” (221).
of her surroundings. . . . For a moment she did not try to name or arrange anything.”

Instead, what she sees is “The world. All this dirt everywhere. And cow shit. My god” (222; 220). Newly embracing the world and her past through a new narrative framework—a feminist framework that allows for embodiment, connectivity, and new possibility—Maggie’s vision of the world and her future in it drastically changes. No longer is Maggie a distant participant, seeing her life and her personal history through art. Instead, she becomes part of that art, an active participant in her world, which is no longer cold and sterile, but instead is full, complex, and confusing: “Maggie screams. Feathers everywhere. The birds beating against the boat. The wheat so sharp. So beautiful. The sky so dark. Van Gogh in a wheat field lifting his brush” (235). To find healing, Maggie must reject modernist and masculine notions of art that distance her from her life and past. Instead, she embraces her life as a woman and becomes an active part of it. This means she must embrace the “cow shit” with the beauty, the ambiguity with the certainty. In this process, she gains the strength as a woman to resist masculine oppression and to resist other confining narratives, like those espoused by the missing male figures in her life. By reframing the artistic narrative of her past and present, she is able to control her future. Thus, when Maggie has the chance to reunite with Henry, she has the strength to reject the conventional romance narrative: “But things have changed here, and I don’t know if I love you anymore” (227). Finally, she is able to exist in a liminal state of unknowing—and here she can grow, change, heal, and resist. Maggie’s

---

28 Charles Harris reminds us that *The Art Lover* “rejects male-centered definitions of art, not necessarily art by men” (169).
new narrative and artistic frame does not reject art as unfit to frame memories and experience; instead, it broadens Maggie’s conception of art, providing a more useful way for her to deal with her past and continue into the future as a much stronger, more confident woman.

As we watch Maggie grow, change, and survive, we are reminded that she is Caroline’s creation. It is no surprise, then, that Caroline undergoes a very similar metamorphosis, allowing her, like Maggie, to reject the masculine, modernist, static and distancing narrative to claim a wider narrative frame for women that allows her to better endure ambiguity, pain, and change in the past and present. After her father’s death, Caroline returns to New York to put his estate in order. To cope with his loss, she turns, like Maggie, to what she knows: “I am going to write now, because I am a writer” (15). Like Max, who tried to paint Veronica into a life, Caroline tries to recapture Max through her art form: “I am going to write now. It is a way of telling the truth. Or nearing the truth. The absolute truth? The literal truth? Well, yes. Well, no. But something of the whole. Something of what it means to be alive” (15). To create art, then, is to somehow capture one’s memories, life history, and sense of being alive in a creative, storied way. Caroline says to Max, “Shall I write you an epitaph? You who have no stone?” (71), suggesting that her novel-in-progress is, in effect, an attempt at some sort of epitaph, some sort of way to remember him, or even write him into a life. Indeed, Max is given a voice throughout the entire novel—he is written into a life. And yet, as Caroline begins to write, she questions whether existing artistic and narrative frames can truly capture her
experience. Recalling her mother, Veronica, Caroline notes, “She was a painting by Matisse. It was so hard to see her otherwise” (15). Recognizing her inability to know Veronica in any other way than the narrative and artistic representation passed down by Max, Caroline realizes that Max’s representation failed to truly capture her mother’s history: “She was a painting by Matisse, but she took sleeping pills” (16), and later, “We name it. And what good does it do? We arrange it on a page . . . You were a painting by Matisse, but you took sleeping pills” (138). The modernist and male artistic frame that Max has imparted to Caroline is insufficient; it does not capture Veronica’s reality as a woman, nor did it save her or paint her back “into a life.”

When Caroline realizes that Max’s masculine framing and distancing devices are unsuccessful, that “Things are not in our control” (9), she begins to search for alternative, female narrative frames that will help to make sense of her experiences as a woman, while also beginning to question the efficacy of her own art form: “This is as good a place as any to write a book, if it’s a book I’m writing” (34). Like Maggie, she begins a search for a frame that works better to capture her experiences as a woman. As she begins her novel-in-progress, she creates lists, lists of things that are still here and things that are new; she collects flyers of things that are lost; and she “fills calendars to avoid falling asleep,” calendars that “could [somehow] serve as a blueprint” (128). She turns to her childhood catechism, and looks at star charts, hoping to find a way to order and make sense of her experience: “And buried in each Sunday Times is a map of the stars accompanied by a little story. You can, if you like, simply by looking up into the sky,
chart them with this handy diagram. This is one perfectly safe and reliable part of the paper” (11). But, Caroline finds these masculine frames that attempt to create order and simplify experiences unsuccessful at capturing the complexity of her reality or framing her past in a way that is useful or healing. Max’s voice breaks into her recitation of the catechism: “What is it? What is it, my beauty, my work of art” (99), and not only do the star charts sometimes get it wrong, but “sometimes even the sky is dangerous. I look up and see your face in the stars” (12). Like the representations of Veronica, the star charts don’t capture the full reality: “the real universe was much larger than suspected” (130). In addition, The Art Lover includes a child’s drawing of a night sky, with the heading “This is a picture of space” (75). It seems as if Maso is trying to suggest that this child’s drawing could be just as real or truthful as the star charts in the paper.

While Caroline is trying to find a way to deal with Max’s loss, her best friend Steven is admitted to the hospital. Because he is dying of AIDS, Caroline is unable to protect herself through the distancing frames she learned from her father: “The words don’t work anymore, given all of this” (143). She abandons her novel, finding herself unable to access the right words. She says to herself, “You sit, even now, with a pen in your hand. You hold it like a paintbrush sometimes. Sometimes like a staff. Sometimes like a weapon. Now and then you still think of Maggie and Alison, of Candace and Henry” (150). However, even here, at the height of her despair, she refuses to abandon the idea that art is powerful, that words and the creative act can affect change, that they can be weapons. At the same time, she grasps the limiting effects of her father’s
modernist narrative frame: “Do I try to find a manageable shape for you? Do I put my rage for you into art, where it is acceptable?” (117). In using her father’s modernist frame to capture her life history, she has distanced herself from her true experience as a woman. As she realizes this, however, her answer is not to abandon art. Instead, Caroline recognizes the importance of her attempt to narrate. She clings to the idea that “It should be possible to say something, to do something with words,” and “It should be possible to paint with words” (148, 166). At the same time, she realizes the alternative: “Silence Has Always Equaled Death” (163). As she tries to find words and a voice to capture her experiences with and memories of Steven’s illness and subsequent death, she says, “I flesh him out. I will not turn him into paint and canvas where he’ll be manageable” (142). But even as she attempts to capture him, to flesh him out, she realizes that she must find a new way to narrate her memories, one that will help her in the present and make her life seem livable in the future.

Thus, even though she realizes she “did not get to him in time,”29 she finds that “not everything disappears” (11, 174), not everything is lost. Her task, then, is to take the sometimes messy and contradictory fragments of her memory and find a way to make sense of them in a narrative that approximates her experiences. Just as Maggie realized the beauty of dirt and cow shit, Caroline sits in the “city of light” and comes to realize it is also the “City of dark, city of death. City of beauty and scum” (165). And when

---

29 This line can be read in two ways. Literally, Caroline did not arrive in New York before Max’s death, but the more interesting reading is that she could not reach him in time, and instead she can only find him outside of time in her memory and imagination. Thus, he is given a voice and a life even after his death, which suggests that Steven, too, can live on, outside of time, in Caroline’s storied memories.
Caroline prays, “Then do something, dear God,” God’s response is, “No, Caroline, You do something” (234). Here, Caroline acts. Just as Maggie, in becoming an active participant in the world, also becomes an active part of her art, so Caroline becomes part of her art, as her story merges into her novel-in-progress. She rejects conventional narrative restrictions, for immediately after Caroline prays, her story blurs into Maggie’s story: “Maggie cries out in the night. She is angry now. She does not hold still and then die” (234). When Caroline finds her voice and her ability to speak about her past through her pen and through her art, she discovers a new way to narrate her storied memories. Instead of using the masculine, distanced narrative frame imparted by her father, she identifies with her women characters, which allows her to feel their shared loss and their pain, to exist within them, and to “realize it is as perfect a moment on earth as I can expect” (238). And so Caroline finds solace through her empathic fiction and art, because, unlike Max’s masculine, limiting, and constricting narrative frame, she has opened herself to something new, something that embodies the contradictions and the binaries, and allows for pain and beauty, both: “I’m still hoping we might rise. Or maybe, just perhaps, holding hands here through this final fiction, we’ve already risen” (229). The “final fiction,” in which she places so much of her hope, is her newly framed storied memory of her past, a past full of hurt, but also a past full of the love, friendship, and connectedness of women that can lead to healing and strength.

---

30 Unlike the standard section headers that divide the novel-in-progress from Caroline’s personal sections, there is no header here. There is only a small space on the page, and suddenly we are in Maggie’s world.
This pattern repeats once again in the autobiographical elements of *The Art Lover*. Like her characters and fictional projections, Maggie and Caroline, who find distancing narrative structures insufficient to capture their experiences and their memories, and thus stop writing for a period, Carole Maso abandoned her novel in the midst of great suffering. In an interview, she told Nicole Cooley,

> What I tried to do for a long time was write *The Art Lover* in the morning, then visit my friend in the hospital in the afternoon. One day I sat down in the morning to write, and I looked at all this stuff and I thought of the rest of my day, and I thought, this is so absurd, you are such a fool if you think you can create and control all these things. I stopped writing for a year. I just visited him and felt like I don’t have any language for this so I’m not going to write. Later, the harrowing task and the real test of faith was to try to approximate it, even a little. (“Carole Maso” 33-4)

Maso, too, collected images, which become the images Caroline sees in the book: “I started collecting those images after he got sick. I was collecting things to keep the world in place. I didn’t know what the book would be, or if it would be” (34). Additionally, she found that she “had no form for all the stuff inside” (32), that the conventional narrative structures for fiction were too constrained. Thus, “I moved into the first-person nonfiction section because I came up against the limits of fiction” (Maso, qtd. in Hackett 66). Maso’s penultimate section, then, seen by her original publisher as a breakdown in the text, was simply her attempt to find a narrative structure that better contained her past, a narrative that could approximate her grief and allow her to experience pain and joy together, rather than distance herself from them. As she tells us, “[N]arrative can of course be many things. Not just what we’ve been handed,” and “It is essential, I believe, for women to make their own shapes and sounds, to enact in prose and poetry and all
other genres, and in all other mediums, their own desire, and not just mimic the dominant forms. We must refuse to emerge already constructed” (“Carole Maso” 32; “Except Joy” 123). Like her characters, Maso’s personal story blurs with her art form in the novel she is writing, *The Art Lover*. Her autobiographical “rupture” into the novel allows her to embrace a new narrative structure that helps her to narrate her past, which also aids in her healing: “I am trying to get this down, Gary . . . I am trying to get this down . . . I am trying to get this down for good” (198-199). Thus, *The Art Lover* becomes a feminist narrative of Maso’s past, her *storied memory* of her life, and a narrative that is healing and hopeful because of its rejection of conventional masculine structure and modernist narrative frames. The text begins with a dedication to Gary, “who saw hoops of gold,” and ends with Gary’s “wonderful, perfect sight,” paired with an image of Carole and Gary, suggesting that through this new narrative frame, Maso is able to find new hope and possibility as she comes to terms with her past characterized by grief and loss. As Maso affirms, “This is what art does for me: it opens new places, it affords glimpses not glimpsed before. Without it I not only fail to live fully, but I begin to die. All too aware of the loss, I become a mourning thing” (“Except Joy” 122). She is able to move on through her art and live, because she has discovered new women’s narrative frames that do not limit or reduce her memories and life experience, especially her experience of grief. Instead, Maso finds new ways of narrating her past, allowing her to truly mourn while also helping her to conceive of new life possibilities even as she celebrates her past with her friend. Thus, it is no surprise that Maso has said, “I find *The Art Lover* a very
hopeful book. . . . Experimentation still seems possible. Someone there is still trying to arrange the fragments” (“Carole Maso” 27). In writing *The Art Lover*, Maso was able to incorporate her memories of Gary into a story about women artists and thus move into a more hopeful future.

The possibilities located in this new women’s story are not limited to Maggie, Caroline, or even Maso, herself, but instead are meant to reach women readers who can benefit from the new narrative frames.\(^3\) Within her oeuvre, Maso has attempted “[t]o escape the burden of the already-constructed and received forms . . . And this is how I regard the old fictions. I want something else. . . . A space that encourages new identity constructions for the reader as well as the writer. New patterns of thought and ways of perceiving. New visions of the world, renewed hope” (“Except Joy” 124). Such hope can be found through narratives that allow women to engage the past in more useful, connected ways—ways that allow them to voice “if not the real story, then what the story was for me” (Maso, “An Essay” 31). Denying masculine and modernist forms that demand distance, control, and stasis, these new, more inclusive, feminist frames must be able to “embrace oppositional stances at the same time. Contradictory impulses, ideas, motions. To assimilate as part of the form, incongruity, ambivalence. . . . The tentative,

\(^3\) Like all of the authors considered in this dissertation, Maso is aware of the dynamic between her work and the reader: “Also the hope is that in the spaces the reader will be allowed to live, to find her place. You can go a million places in those empty silent space breaks, and then come back to the book [here she is discussing her novel, A\(\text{VA}\)], informed by your own story and then keep going, or whatever you want . . . I’ve always had to stop the tyranny of the narrative and just dream for a while. But when I came I back [sic], I never was allowed back in” (“Carole Maso” 34). Thus, in her own work, she attempts “To create whole new worlds through implication, suggestion, in a few bold strokes. Not to tyrannize with the narrative. Allow a place for the reader to live, to dream” (Maso, “An Essay” 31). In creating this space for the reader, she also creates new narrative possibilities for their lives.
the unresolved, the incomplete” (31), in order to fully voice women’s storied memories. Such open narrative frames allow for freedom, resistance, hope, and a way to “live with uncertainty, ambivalence” (Maso, qtd. in V. Harris 109). And “with any luck it opens up a place of allowance, an option, of freedom in the reader. . . . To take the text where she or he will—to bring one’s life to bear in a different way than what a more conventional novel allows” (‘A Correspondence” 109-110). The possibilities, then, do not stop with the characters or the author, but open new spaces and new hope for readers—spaces that allow new narrative frames to shape and express readers’ storied memories and histories.

Frames from the Past that Extend Into the Future in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale

Like her female characters, Maso herself struggles to find narrative frames, models for narrating life experiences, that allow her to voice her life story and her memories in ways that help her to “live well, with unity and purpose” (McAdams 11). In The Art Lover, she discovers that this sense of wellness can only be achieved through the use of storied memories created through narrative frames that truly capture women’s life experiences. Although Caroline, Maggie, and Carole do seem to find frames that allow for women’s connectedness and healing, The Art Lover also demonstrates how dangerous and potentially damaging memory can be when framed in confined and fixed ways, like the masculine, modernist, distancing frame so important to Max. While Maso, in The Art Lover, strives to discover new narrative frames and forms to story women’s memories
and histories, Margaret Atwood, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, engages the same subject in a slightly different way. Focusing on larger historical narratives of the past, Atwood emphasizes the danger to women’s understanding of their histories and identities when they are shaped by controlling, limited, official narratives of the past. Like Maso, Atwood expresses concern about the male control of memory’s framing devices, but she does this by broadening the space that Maso engages—moving from a personal family history to a larger historical narrative—and emphasizing the implications for women’s lives. Unlike Maso’s writer-characters who must reject male-centered modernist artistic frames to overcome grief, Atwood’s Offred must reject a totalizing, patriarchal, official narrative of the past that rewrites a nation’s history and controls the stories available to women in order to survive. In Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the theocracy of Gilead has not only deprived women of their names, their money, and their free choice, it has gone so far as to attempt to regulate women’s memories and histories by controlling and minimizing the narrative frames available to tell the stories of women’s lives.

Indeed, women are silenced in Atwood’s dystopia. Set in the future, Atwood’s novel is predicated by the oppression of the contemporary generation of postfeminist women. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the totalitarian, patriarchal regime of Gilead takes over in a political coup in the United States at a time when fertility rates are dangerously low. Denied their previous rights and forced into submissiveness, women are defined by the needs of the extremist Gilead government and are forced into the singular roles of wives, maids, or Handmaids, bearers of children. Women who refuse to follow the new
regime or who speak out against it are sent away to clean up nuclear waste or perform other horrific, often dangerous, activities, or they are simply killed. Thus, the Commanders of Gilead have taken complete control over all aspects of women’s lives.

Ultimately, the success of the Gilead regime depends on the government’s ability to erase, control, and in time recreate women’s memories of any other ways of life. Once women no longer remember their past lives, as feminists and postfeminists, pre-Gilead, they will no longer rebel against the current totalitarian, patriarchal society: “You are a transitional generation,” Aunt Lydia tells the women at the Red Center, a training center for the so-called (re)education of Handmaids. “It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. . . . For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. . . . She did not say: Because they will have no memories of any other way” (151). Later, at a group wedding, Offred comes to the same realization: “Start them soon is the policy, there’s not a moment to be lost—still they’ll remember. And the ones after them will, for three or four or five years; but after that they won’t. They’ll always have been in white, in groups of girls; they’ll always have been silent” (283). Without memories of or even knowledge of the possibilities for women contained in the life before the Gilead regime, resistance to this women’s patriarchal nightmare will become less and less likely in the future. Thus, one aim of the Gileadean system is to heighten women’s forgetting by utterly controlling every aspect of the narratives available to them. In this way, the Commanders, the patriarchs of the Gileadean government, demand and compel obedience. This is seen most clearly at the Red Center. No longer allowed to
read or write, the women are taught new versions of the beatitudes. Commenting on the new version, Offred remarks, “I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking” (115). The Handmaids are also taught to intone a “Biblical” script to enforce proper behavior: “Blessed be the fruit,” says one. “May the Lord open,” the next replies (25). Stripped of their names—and, thus, their personal histories and identities—the Handmaids are recreated in Gilead’s image. Indeed, the end goal of the Handmaids’ reeducation is “brainwashing” (Stein, “Talking Back” 162).

It is significant that such brainwashing begins with the erasure and denial of the “more recent history” of women’s liberation (41), for as Arnold E. Davidson reminds us, “How we choose to construct history partly determines the history we are likely to get” (115). Determined to control women, the Commanders of Gilead choose to erase the twentieth-century narratives of feminism and post-feminism, while at the same time, creating a future for women out of a chosen historical past in which women were oppressed in order to control the present reality. As Stephanie Barbé Hammer tells us, “The republic of Gilead strikes us, not as a techno-dystopia but as a reactionary step backwards in time, to a kind of government and lifestyle that resembles that of the Middle Ages—based on one part biblical patriarchy, one part Islamic militantism, and one part Hindu caste system” (45). More accurately, as is abundantly clear by the book’s dedications and setting, there is a return to seventeenth century Puritanism, or what

---

32 *The Handmaid’s Tale* is dedicated to Mary Webster, an ancestor of Atwood’s who was convicted as a witch but survived the resulting punishment, hanging, and Perry Miller, an academic Atwood encountered at Harvard who studied Puritan culture.
Offred calls, “A return to traditional values” (9). In what Coral Ann Howells calls a “new ideological reinterpretation of the nation’s history” (Margaret Atwood 97), Gilead reshapes recent history by erasing and reframing events. As Howells remarks, the “collective social memory of life in late twentieth-century America,” especially those associated with the feminist movement, is “vilified and erased” in Gilead (97). For example, Offred is taught that films of Take Back the Night marches by feminists in the 1960s show women “wasting time” (152), and the idea that men could be sterile is forbidden, at least officially (79). At the same time, some representations of history remain available, as they provide an historical narrative that supports Gilead’s current goals. In a church the Handmaids are allowed to enter, Offred remarks, “You can see paintings, of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors” (41). In essays, Atwood has emphasized the historical nature of her speculative fiction/dystopia. 33 Calling The Handmaid’s Tale “a book about [her] ancestors,” Atwood argues that “no society ever strays completely far from its roots” (Writing with Intent 97). The book emphasizes the connection between constructed historical narrative and the resulting present and future, and, thus, as Madonna Miner notes, “The Handmaid’s Tale encourages us to read the future in light of the past, and the past in light of the future” (161). Aware of the connection between the patriarchal past and future, the officials of Gilead consciously

33 According to Atwood, “I wanted to try a dystopia from a female point of view… However, this does not make The Handmaid’s Tale a ‘feminist dystopia,’ except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered ‘feminist’ by those who think women ought not to have these things” (Writing With Intent 291). Therefore, she chooses to call The Handmaid’s Tale speculative fiction.
control how the regime will be viewed in the future by shredding official documents and deleting computer hard-drives in an attempt to dictate the historical information available to those women who come after Offred’s generation. They also control more personal historical documents, specifically photographs. The Handmaids’ faces cannot be captured in a photograph—“What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth,” as Offred remarks (38)—since capturing the Handmaids’ images on film would be a way to validate their humanity and document their personal histories. Gilead’s manipulation of historical narrative, however, does not stop at the level of the women’s history or even at personal documentation. The Commanders reach far into the psyches of the Handmaids, recreating their personal life-stories and storied memories through damaging narrative frameworks that attempt to strip women of power and ensure the male control of women.

At the Red Center, the Handmaids are forced to reframe their personal life stories and memories to fit the new Gileadean narrative. During a testifying session, it becomes clear how far Gilead will go to change the women’s memories. Janine, who was gang raped at fourteen and later had an abortion, is forced to reframe her memory to implicate herself in the attack: “It was my fault . . . It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain” (93). Reeducated to blame the female victim rather than condemning the male victimizer, Offred and the other Handmaids-in-training “despised her. . . . We meant

---

34 Like the women at the Red Center who are reeducated in order to change the way they understand their pasts, the Commander also demonstrates his changed narrative of the past when he takes Offred to Jezebel’s: “The ‘past’ called up by the Commander, the past that brings delight into his voice, is one in which women are on display for men, and are dependent on men” (Miner 156).
it, which is the bad part” (93). Even as the Handmaids are victimized by the Gileadean regime, they are also becoming complicit in their own victimization. Brainwashing women to believe in a new patriarchal system, and to reframe their own life stories and memories as such, seems to be a quite effective method of oppression, ultimately limiting resistance and subversion.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear just how effective this new controlling history is on the women who are oppressed by it. Offred clings to her memories of her feminist past as a mode of survival. But while her memories “remind her of the gap between her present life and the life she once led, paradoxically giving her a stronger sense of her own identity as separate from its present Gileadean frame” (Howells, “Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian” 166-7), Offred is relentlessly shaped by the new Gileadean patriarchal system, even as she attempts to resist her indoctrination. One afternoon in her bedroom, while exercising and thinking of her husband Luke, Offred says, “I’m only having an attack of sentimentality, my brain going pastel Technicolor, like the beautiful sunset greeting cards they used to make so many of in California. High-gloss hearts. The danger is grayout” (258). To not remember is to lose contact with the past and then to lose a vital sense of her identity as an independent woman. However, “grayout” is exactly what is occurring to her mind and memories as she adopts

35 Lee Briscoe Thompson provides an intriguing reading of the testifying scene. He suggests that the groups of young women who are “being trained (reeducated) to be handmaids are required to inform on others or to testify against themselves. To comply with these demands they start to invent stories about themselves. Thus, ironically, the oppressive institutions of Gilead train Offred to become a better storyteller and to perfect her means of resistance” (qtd. in Stein, “Talking Back” 162).
the Gileadean way of thinking, even as she tries to resist. As she and her shopping partner, Ofglen, encounter the Japanese tourists, Offred observes their “Westernized” dress and sees their high heels “like delicate instruments of torture” and their “lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall.”

Before remembering that this is the way she used to dress, she is “fascinated, but also repelled” (37-38) by these intense colors and articles of clothing. She initially sees this form of dress and makeup as garish and inappropriate, not as natural and as a part of her personal past. She must consciously work to recall that this sort of adornment was once ordinary to her. Thus, she is constantly in danger of adopting the patriarchal Gileadean narrative and way of seeing, a way that oppresses women and curtails their freedom, and as this occurs, her understanding of her past and future becomes gray and limited.

Likewise, when she visits the Commander in his study for the first time and he says “Hello,” she is unable to retrieve the appropriate response, for a simple “hello” no longer fits the Gileadean script: “I can think of nothing appropriate to say in return” (177). Her memory also seems to have faded when she sees her former friend Moira at Jezebel’s, an unofficial brothel frequented by the Commanders and their guests. Moira is wearing a cotton tail, two floppy ears, a black bow tie, fishnet stockings, and high heels. Offred tells us, “The whole costume, antique and bizarre, reminds me of something from the past, but I can’t think what. . . . What is the significance of it here, why are rabbits supposed to be sexually attractive to men?” (311). In the pre-Gilead narrative, Playboy featured sexy bunny costumes, something that Offred should have easily remembered.
from her life before. However, the new *official* narrative holds no room for this sort of sexual demonstration. Thus, it is no surprise that Offred is unable to retrieve this bit of memory from her past life.

Yet Offred can and must remember her pre-Gilead past in order to resist and overcome her current situation. She tells us, “When we think of the past it’s the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that” (41), demonstrating the power of memories to provide what Howells calls “a deliberate escape strategy” (“Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian” 167). Offred is able to escape her current reality, and, in a sense, leave Gilead by recalling these other, happier moments, through what Schacter calls “mental time travel.” Through memory, Offred is also able to keep her pre-Gilead friends and family alive (Stein, “Talking Back” 162), which provides her with the much needed hope that she will see them again and that the oppressive Gilead regime will end. Offred’s memories of the past also allow her to mourn her lost freedoms, as an independent woman: “I’ve mourned . . . already. But I will do it again, and again” (329). Clearly, she finds comfort in her storied memories. Indeed, when she tells the Commander that Gilead has forgotten the importance of love, she thinks, “There is a good deal of comfort, now, in remembering this” (292). Similarly, she is able to find comfort in her bond with other women through shared memory and experience. When the Handmaids collectively share the birth experience, their birthing pain and shared joy,

---

36 Atwood’s allusion to *Playboy* in this context emphasizes that like the Gileadean regime, *Playboy*, Jezebel’s, and Gilead in general, turn women into sexual objects. However, my interest here is Offred’s inability to remember her past. Additionally, although places like Jezebel’s do unofficially exist in Gilead, they are outside of the official narrative used to indoctrinate women within the society.
we are told, comes from memory: “Our happiness is part memory. What I remember is Luke [her husband] with me in the hospital, standing beside my head, holding my hand” (162). But perhaps, most importantly, as J. Brooks Bouson reminds us, memory allows Offred to cling to “her identity” and remember “what she was and is” (Brutal Choreographies 150). Offred’s only hope of maintaining her past identity as an independent woman is to reject the patriarchal historical narrative frame controlled by the Gileadean government and to maintain her autobiographical memories and narratives of the historical, feminist past.

Although she can remember the events of her past, recalling memories denied or silenced by the official Gileadean narrative, remembering does not always provide comfort because of the trauma she has suffered. In fact, Offred often wishes that she could simply forget her past, especially the painful memories of the political coup and her attempted but failed escape out of Gilead. While remembering often brings her the only joy she experiences in Gilead, there are also painful memories that she doesn’t want to recall. She often expresses her discomfort in relating her past experiences: “I don’t want to be telling this story,” she says, and “I wish this story were different” (291, 343). She describes her memories as “attacks of the past” that can “hardly be borne” (68). Additionally, she spitefully pictures a pregnant Janine, now Ofwarren, who “Stares out the window. . . .Thinks of nothing” (148). This ability to think of nothing, to remember nothing, prompts Offred’s awareness that it would be easier not to hold on to a past that is now being slowly erased from existence. And for Offred, and other oppressed women,
memory can be dangerous. Offred describes the smell of yeast as “a nostalgic smell . . . a treacherous smell,” explaining that it leads to memories she must “shut out” (62). Like the smell of yeast, Offred also has a strong reaction to the smell of nail polish: “I remember the smell of nail polish. . . . The woman with painted toes shifts from one foot to the other. I can feel her shoes, on my own feet. The smell of nail polish has made me hungry” (39). This physical reaction to a memory suggests the power of memory to move us and stir us to action—however, action in this patriarchal context could be quite dangerous. Thus, when she imagines what must have happened to her husband, Luke, envisioning him shot dead on the ground, she thinks, “I pray that at least one hole is neatly, quickly, and finally through the skull, through the place where all the pictures were, so that there would have been only one flash” (133). To Offred, a quick death that erases all pictures of the past, all memories, would be the only humane way to die. 37 To have no memories is somehow less painful, less dangerous. At the same time, Offred concludes that to not feel the pain and to not remember “will never do” (291). To accept the Gileadean historical narrative and frame that attempts to void her memories of her personal past would be easier, but it would also negate any sense of agency that Offred maintains. As literary critic Hilde Staels remarks, “painful recollection is necessary” to Offred’s “survival.” Indeed, “Pain is still possible because of memory, and memory is what the narrator tries to keep alive. The destruction of memory, which Gilead aims at, involves a numbing of the site of personal desire and creative energy” (“Margaret

37 This also emphasizes the horror of what is happening to her—Offred is slowly losing her memories in Gilead.
Atwood’s” 460, 463). Without desire and without energy to resist her seeming hopeless situation as a woman who has lost her subjectivity, Offred exists in a state of patriarchal malaise and utter female submission in which there is no hope for change, no hope for release, no hope for a different story or different narrative possibilities for women other than that imposed by the oppressive Gileadean government. So, even as Offred explains that “it hurts me to tell it over, over again,” she continues her “sad and hungry and sordid” and her “limping and mutilated story” of the memories of her life experiences, now denied by the official narrative, because it is all she can do to resist the Gileadean narrative frame and to survive (344).

Offred’s storied memories of her pre-Gilead past as an independent woman are different from, and even contradictory to, the imposed Gileadean meta-narrative. As Offred provides an alternate version of history by expressing storied memories that are in conflict with the official patriarchal version of Gileadean life, her story “exposes the lies of official history” (Howells 166-7). Thus, as critics like Howells have claimed, one of Atwood’s aims in giving a silenced, oppressed woman a voice is to signal “a significant shift from ‘history’ to herstory,”’ which makes Offred the “most important historian of Gilead” (Margaret Atwood 93). Offred’s documentation of her storied memories, which

---

38 See Katherine A. Nelson-Born’s “Trace of a Woman: Narrative Voice and Decentered Power in the Fiction of Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, and Louise Erdrich” for an overview of the power of voice and narrative in Atwood’s text. In the essay, Nelson-Born argues, “A shifting narrative structure decenters power and dissolves the possibility of a totalizing narrative, thus disrupting and pluralizing a projected world of discourse” (4).

39 In a different essay, Howells supports this notion by noting that “Offred has nobody to whom she can talk [so] she resorts to telling other women’s stories within her own, creating the impression of a multi-voiced narrative which undermines Gilead’s myth of women’s silence and submissiveness” (“Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian” 168).
she records onto cassette tapes, allows her to “bear witness” to events that would otherwise be lost, ultimately creating awareness for future generations of women and, thus, making “possible social and political change” (Stein, “Talking Back” 162; Hogsette 270). Her alternate historical narrative of women’s lives is of great importance, for it provides a fuller notion of history, giving voice to women who have been silenced under the Gileadean Regime. Just as important is Offred’s attempt to expose the constructed nature of her memories, and, thus, the constructed nature of all histories and memories.  

Offred is very aware that she, like her Gileadean male oppressors, is creating a narrative out of fragments by placing the recalled details of the events of her life into a narrative framework that shapes her story. However, unlike the Gileadean patriarchal narrative that only provides one narrative possibility for women—to the Gileadean male establishment, there is only one possible way of seeing and narrating the world, at least officially—Offred’s narrative is, at times, intentionally disorganized, its pieces resisting a fixed order, closed interpretation, and singular narrative frame.  

She apologizes that her narrative is “in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire” (343), and she reminds readers/listeners repeatedly that “This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It’s a reconstruction now, in my head . . . [and] if I’m ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove” (173). Unlike the Gileadean government, which approves of only one

---

40 Numerous critics have made this argument. For example, see Rashke and Davidson.

41 Since the actual narrative was found on a set of disorganized cassette tapes, the sense of fragmentation is heightened, even after the academic-historians transcribe it.
official patriarchal narrative framework and one possibility for interpreting women’s lives, Offred struggles with the real implications of her constructed memories as a woman and the resulting narratives: “It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many” (173-74). In order to account for these inherent gaps between the event and the storied memory, Offred’s resulting narrative is unlike the fixed Gileadean male narrative. Indeed, Offred’s women’s tale is a flowing, unfixed, fragmentary narrative that embraces ambiguity, multiple possibilities, and multiple narrative frames, for this is the only way she is able to encompass and explain her past and present life experiences while maintaining the identity of the woman she was in her earlier life.\(^{42}\)

In making use of the metafictive/metahistorical form employed by so many contemporary women authors, Atwood demonstrates how Offred adopts multiple, open-ended narrative frames and narrative possibilities for women by telling multiple versions of past events that engage women’s frames that are no longer allowed in Gilead.\(^{43}\) Offred

\(^{42}\) Hilde Staels suggests that even Offred’s language opposes the fixed language of Gilead: “Offred’s poetic discourse teems with metaphors, similes, and synaesthesiae which counter the predominance of categorizations and binary oppositions of the dominant order. The exuberant flow of similes proved traces of Offred’s destabilizing unconscious processes, they are symptomatic of her oppressed inner life, and of her wish to reactivate the lost potential of language” (“The Eclipse” 204).

\(^{43}\) Women in Gilead are no longer allowed to read or write, and their ability to communicate with each other is effectively stunted. Thus, the sharing of narratives outside of Gilead’s primary meta-narrative is limited. Instead, Offred must turn to the narrative frames she employed in the past to retain her past identity.
literally creates varied *storied memories* by relying on the narrative possibilities and story frames for women from her past. To do this, she narrates two encounters of her meeting with the Commander, one where she plots to stab him, another where she kisses him and in doing so, sees his humanity and finds him to be “so sad” (181). Likewise, she narrates multiple, contradictory, possibilities for Luke (he is dead in a ditch, he has been captured, and he is free, plotting the resistance), and even multiple possibilities for her daughter, mother, and friend, Moira. Although these seemingly fragmented and fictionalized accounts of her pre-Gileadean history as an independent woman living in the post-sexual revolution world of the 1980s cannot all be factual in the sense we often demand when considering “truth value,” they are truthful in the sense that they all fit into the narrative of who she was and who she could have been before she became a Handmaid. As cognitive psychologist Martin A. Conway explains, “The adequacy of autobiographical knowledge presumably depends on its ability to support and promote continuity and developments of the self” (88). Thus, Offred uses the narratives available for independent women from her past to frame her experiences and memories, demonstrating the importance of having multiple narrative possibilities and multiple narrative frameworks for women’s life stories, while also emphasizing the fact that there are multiple ways to narrate women’s stories. In Offred’s case, her storied memories allow her to craft an identity as more than an oppressed Handmaid. She creates a life-story that is true to herself as she existed in the past, and this allows her to survive in Gilead as

---

44 Offred is quite aware that “The things I believe can’t all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything” (135).
more than simply a body waiting to be impregnated. Instead, as Tina Letcher argues, “she chooses more roles for herself (lover, author, speaking self) than Gilead offers her. . . In the revisions and reconstructions of her story, she suggests a larger realm of possibility” (qtd. in Stein, “Margaret Atwood” 275). In order to retain these identities, Offred must gain control over her present experiences and her recollected past, and it is through story that she is able to do this.

But Offred cannot just ignore her current experience in Gilead or simply narrate her way out of the Gileadean reality. She is not always able to choose what events occur or which story she must tell. As Atwood explains in an interview, “You’re dealing with a character whose ability to move in society was limited. By the nature of her situation, she was very circumscribed. She couldn’t communicate well with people. It was too dangerous. She was boxed in. How do you tell a narrative from the point of view of that person?” (“Tightrope Walking” 216). Consequently, after spending the night in the hotel with the Commander, Offred says, “I’m trying not to tell stories, or at any rate not this one” (66). She is uncomfortable with the details, uncomfortable with what actually has occurred, for she has been treated like she has choice, when she actually has none. Even as she contemplates how she does not want to be alone with the Commander, she screams at herself, “Fake it. . . You must remember how” (331). However, she must tell

45 Atwood continues, “The more limited and boxed in you are, the more important details become. If you are in jail in solitary, the advent of a rat can be pretty important to you. Details, episodes separate themselves from the flow of time in which they’re embedded—a flow which tends to be monotonous—and become significant, luminous” (“Tightrope Walking” 216). This emphasis on detail is interesting, as we see that of the attempted escape, Offred best remembers what she calls the “sentimental” details: “I know all the details. They are sentimental details, but I can’t help that” (108). Offred, like all humans, only has some control over what details are retained and what can be included in narrative.
her story, for it is part of her life-experience, and what she is able to control is the way she translates these experiences into storied memories, incorporating them into her sense of self. If she can consciously incorporate these life events into her life narrative, she gains a feeling of control. She realizes the possibility of resistance early in the novel as she ponders, “I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance” (52). To have control over the way her pre-Gilead life and her Gileadean present are put into story is to have a chance to resist a victimizing narrative frame. However, Offred struggles, as so many critics have struggled, with the idea that “It isn’t a story I’m telling.” There are real events, “lived-experience[s]” (Bouson, Brutal Choreographies 158), which cannot simply be fictionalized. However, Offred continues, “It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along” (52). Her experience is a lived-experience, but equally, it is a storied experience based on memory, and if she can cling to narrative frames that allow for possibility, open-endedness, and ambiguity, there is a potential for hope that is denied in the Gileadean meta-narrative. Thus, she relies on the frames she knew in her pre-

---

46 Critics have struggled with the implications of Offred’s claim that to tell the story of the past is a way to make it “less frightening” (187). For instance, J. Brooks Bouson reminds us that there is a “terrifying reality—the material presence—of history”; thus, she argues, “history is more than a story we tell ourselves” (Brutal Choreographies 158). However, as Martin A. Conway reminds us, “Despite this incompleteness of autobiographical knowledge as a record of experience it does not follow that autobiographical knowledge, or autobiographical knowledge when configured as a memory, is a necessarily inadequate and inaccurate account of an event” (88). Thus, Dominick M. Grace notes, “Her life is not a story, but a genuine sequence of experiences—but it is also a story, a sequence of experiences given meaning and context by her process of self-composition, and the truth resides more in the story Offred constructs (or reconstructs) than it does in the facts” (486).

47 Additionally, as Debrah Rashke has pointed out, “Her narratives . . . are . . . liable to slippage, which means Gilead narratives too are liable to slippage” (263).
Gilead life to provide alternate narrative possibilities to understand her experience of oppression and to cling to who she was when she was an independent, free woman.

The frames Offred employs allow her to see her experience in Gilead in terms of previous narrative possibilities and narrative frames available to women, ultimately providing an alternative to the limited Gileadean one. For instance, as Offred considers the existence of the secret resistance force, Mayday, she can only understand it through the narratives she learned in the past: she conceives of Mayday “like the spy novels I used to read on weekends . . . this does not seem as if it ought to be the true shape of the world. But that is my own illusion, a hangover from a version of reality I learned in a former time” (261). There is no room in the official Gileadean narrative for a resistance force; thus, she must turn to another, alternate narrative to conceive and understand it.

Likewise, many critics have commented on Offred’s use of narrative frames such as the fairy tale and the love story. 48 Indeed, when she sees her reflection in the hall mirror, she thinks in terms of the narratives available from her past, specifically the fairy tale: “I see myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger” (11). Similarly, when she sneaks into Nick’s room, she thinks to herself, “I must be back at the house before midnight; otherwise I’ll turn into a pumpkin, or was that the coach?” (330).

In both cases, she is able to reframe the true horror of what faces her—the symbolic

48 For a more thorough understanding of the fairy-tale elements, see Sharon Rose Wilson’s *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*. For a reading of the romance plot, see Madonne Miner’s “‘Trust Me’: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” and Sarah R. Morrison’s “Mothering Desire: The Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer’s *The Madness of a Seduced Woman*.” I draw on Miner extensively here.
displacement of her previous identity, now overshadowed by a red cape and white wings, and the extreme punishment or even death she could suffer for her relationship with Nick—into something that seems less real and thus more manageable.49

Offred also relies on the traditional romance plot to frame her storied memories, leading Madame Miner to note, “We must attend to the novel’s statements about love’s tendency to follow decidedly conservative narrative forms.” In doing so, Miner suggests that “while there may be something importantly human about falling in love, narratives enact this emotion according to a limited number or scripts (those provided in magazines, romance novels, fairy tales) and we readers all too easily buy the line these scripts are pushing.” She goes on to argue that The Handmaid’s Tale operates within these “underlying grammars” and does “not question [the] rules” (Miner 150, 164, and 165).

Indeed, “Offred wants to imagine these men as unique: Luke as her ‘real love,’ husband, and father to her child; the Commander as her Gileadean ‘sugar-daddy’—powerful, distant, in control of her future; Nick as her illicit love, companion in crime” (Miner 153). Likewise, she suggests that Nick “functions as a fairy-tale prince, setting the princess free with a kiss” (161). It is hard to disagree with Miner’s observations if one looks at Offred’s storied memories of her encounter with Nick: “I have no rose to toss, he has no lute. But it’s the same kind of hunger” (248). And yet, like the other instances of her accounts with the Commander and with Luke, Offred’s storied memories of her love

49 Many feminists would argue that fairy tales (and romance plots) present a view of women as submissive and, thus, condemn them for enforcing patriarchy. Although this is often the case, here, Offred is able to use these old stories to provide an alternate narrative possibility to that offered by the Gileadean government, ultimately making these oppressive tales a tool for resistance.
affair with Nick do not stop with the one romantic account. Instead, as Miner notes, Offred draws on the language of “mass-market bodice-rippers” (163). “He’s undoing my dress, a man made of darkness,” remarks Offred of an encounter with Nick. “I can’t see his face and I can hardly breathe, hardly stand, and I’m not standing. His mouth is on me, his hands, I can’t wait and he’s moving, already love” (338). Offred also engages the narratives available through the romance “scripts” she recalls from 1960s movies: “‘You come here often?’ ‘And what’s a nice girl like me doing in a spot like this’” (338).

However, here, Offred is very aware of the constructed nature of this script: “This is an acknowledgment that we are acting, for what else can we do in such a setup? . . . We’re quoting from late movies, from the time before. And the movies then were from a time before that; this sort of talk dates back to an era well before our own. . . . Possibly nobody ever talked like that in real life, it was all a fabrication from the beginning” (338-39).

Critics have commented on the limiting possibilities for women enveloped in these movie scripts and romance novels. For instance, Miner indicates how “worrisome . . . Offred’s reliance upon traditional grammars with which to structure her relationship with this man” become, and she notes:

> Sadly, both of the reconstructions she offers us, as well as the fairy-tale construction she employs when she thinks about this affair, limit the range of activities and options available to male and female characters. Operating within this traditional grammar (men are princes or made of darkness; women are princesses or damsels in distress), Offred can individuate neither herself nor Nick; both fall into roles assigned to them by fairy tales and romances. (163, 164)
Likewise, Sarah Morrison argues that *The Handmaid’s Tale* exposes “the dangerously seductive elements of women’s romantic fiction by showing how their heroines are paralyzed or trapped by the old plots” (332). These critics are right to be concerned by the limiting possibilities for women provided in these narratives.

However, other critics have drawn our attention to Atwood’s conscious parody of the romance plot to shape Offred’s storied memories, suggesting that it is not simply Offred’s failure to resist these problematic story-structures that are narrow and limiting for women. Bouson has commented on “the narrative’s reluctance to commit itself to the romance plot,” citing Nick, who says, “I could just squirt it into a bottle and you could pour it in” (338). Therefore, Bouson argues, Nick becomes the “commodity,” which “recuperates and interrupts” the romance plot (“A Feminist” 126). Likewise, Hammer asserts, “Although [Offred] recognizes the fallacy of reading romance in her affair with Nick, she is unwilling to regard him and her feelings for him in any other light” (41). This suggests that Offred is self-consciously engaging, and also resisting, this plot, rather than being forced into it or unintentionally falling into it, which demonstrates the control she has over the narrative, and thus her storied memories. While the narrative frames and story plots she engages may be limiting, they do provide a possibility for resistance in a world that attempts to deny all possibilities for women. More importantly, they provide a different way of narrating her experiences, outside of what is offered by Gilead. Therefore, we see that while Atwood may be calling for new narrative frames for women, frames that allow for experiences outside of the official historical narrative, she is also
reminding us of the necessity for varied and sometimes contradictory frames, like the parodic use of romance plots and the fairy tale plots seen here, to best understand and narrate women’s life stories and experiences. Women need multiple frames to choose from, not just a single frame like the one provided by Gilead that defines women and their past experiences as submissive sex-objects. To have only one narrative possibility is to be trapped in Gilead forever.

This lesson regarding the need for multiple frames and narrative possibilities for women is reinforced when we contrast Offred’s multiple and varied storied memories with the Gileadean representative, Aunt Lydia, “who was in love with either/or” (10). Aunt Lydia’s “seductive, reductive simplicity of a monologic either/or” stands in stark opposition to Offred’s “dialogic, double-voiced” language (S. Grace 198), ultimately privileging Offred’s multiple narrative frames to Gilead’s limiting one. The importance of multiple frames is highlighted when we consider one of Offred’s most emotional experiences in the novel: that of seeing her daughter’s photograph. Offred’s daughter, who was taken away from her after a failed escape attempt during the initial Gilead coup, is being raised as the child of another rich Commander and his family. Before Offred sees the photograph smuggled in by Serena Joy, she is able to imagine her daughter’s history and life story, filling in the gaps in multiple ways that provide comfort and hope for a mourning mother. But after Serena Joy gives her the picture, Offred feels, not the contentment that finding her daughter alive should provide, but a great sense of loss: “[S]he exists, in her white dress. She grows and lives. Isn’t that a good thing? A
blessing? Still, I can’t bear it, to have been erased like that. Better she’d brought me nothing” (296). To fix the narrative in Offred’s mind, to fix the story of the past and the subsequent present into one possibility, into an either/or (I exist to her or I do not), is more debilitating than the unknown world of possibility.

Therefore, in the patriarchal world of Gilead, Offred believes in “resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light” (134). She can hold both shadow and light in her mind, experience both, and understand her life through both lenses at once. She denies the either/or to embrace multiple possibilities for her life narrative, because this is what provides hope, and resistance stems from this belief in possibility. This denial of the either/or carries to the very end of her tale. As the Eyes, accompanied by Nick, storm into Offred’s room, either to punish her or to help her escape, she contemplates, “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing . . . And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (378). For Offred, the light holds the possibility of the darkness, and the darkness holds the hope of the light, simply because she has the ability to narrate more than one version of her past, present, and future. Thus, the ambiguity at the conclusion of her story is fitting, for both the beginning and the end, the light and the dark, become potential carriers of the past and the future.

However, the Tale does not end with Offred, but with another example of someone who attempts to fix the narrative by fitting it into a very specific narrative.

---

50 See Rashke for a detailed analysis of how “Offred’s way of reading and interpreting stands in direct contrast to the Gilead mode of representation, which is fixed, incontrovertible” (264).
frame. In the “Historical Notes,” Debrah Rashke argues, male historians Professor James Darcy Pieixoto and “Professor Wade, who appends the title onto the unnamed narrative, imposes his frame on Offred’s story, thus changing not only how one thinks about the contents of the ‘document,’ but how one judges its implications for both audience and genre” (261). The academics’ masculine framing of Offred’s story, made clear in their lecture, “Problems of Authentication in Reference to The Handmaid’s Tale” (380), quickly falls back into the patriarchal rhetoric and the troublesome either/or structure so highly prized in Gilead. Professor Pieixoto wants to know if Offred escaped or not. He wants to know if Offred’s Commander was Frederick R. Waterford or B. Frederick Judd. “Only one answer is possible,” Dominick Grace notes, “and we as readers probably wonder also. However, the answers are really irrelevant, except as facts. As we have seen, one of Offred’s comforts is considering possibilities, not facts, and leaving the truth unfixed and open” (489). Pieixoto attempts to fit Offred’s storied memories into a fixed narrative that “demands closure, linearity, and finality” (Rashke 260), clearly seen in the way he titles his lecture, transcribes Offred’s random tapes into a fixed form, and questions whether her narrative is a true historical account. Likewise, Hilde Staels notes, from the “reductive perspective,” of Professor Pieixoto, “material documentation is more important than individual memory” (“The Eclipse” 205). Specifically, Pieixoto faults Offred’s personal story for the “gaps” that “remain” that “could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind” (393). As the academic-historians try to “decipher” Offred’s history (or herstory) “precisely” (395), they do it
harm. For as Atwood, herself, has remarked, when her fictional academic historians try to force Offred’s woman’s story into their fixed, masculine frame, once again, they diminish “how the fact [of experiencing the events of history] feels to a human being” (“Finding the Inner” 177). By ignoring the multiple storied memories of Offred’s experience, the male historians erase her complex subjectivity.

While the “Historical Notes,” as Atwood has commented, do offer readers hope “that the Third Reich, the Fourth Reich, the Fifth Reich” will not “last forever” (“Tightrope-Walking” 217), they also provide a reminder that we must not fail to “read beneath” (123) the fixed, patriarchal Gileadean and academic narrative and locate alternate narrative frames to voice women’s varied and even contradictory life experiences and memories. Remarking on the open-ended closures of her narratives, Atwood states, “I leave the endings open enough so the reader can make some choices, because readers in fact make choices all the way throughout books in any case” (“Awaiting the Perfect” 262). Like Atwood, Offred is clearly aware of her future audience throughout her narrative. As she writes, she addresses her future readers as “you”: “I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get a chance” (344). Ildney Cavalcanti suggests that the use of this you “prompts the ‘readers’ into [a] sympathetic, interactive response” (172). It does more than this, though. Offred’s narrative also emphasizes that it is extremely important to share stories, for one story, one narrative frame, one possibility, one way to communicate women’s lives, our pasts, our memories, and our identities is not enough. As women, we need many voices, many possibilities,
many narrative frames, for it is these that allow for hope, change, and resistance to a dominant oppressive patriarchal force like Gilead. Offred does not have the chance to talk and share with other women, so she must turn to the narratives of her remembered pre-Gilead past as a free woman as her only mode of resistance. Although these memoried narratives are not perfect, there is power for subversion within them because they provide Offred with multiple ways to create and narrate her storied memories, and thus, survive her present as a virtual prisoner under Gilead’s regime.

Maso, most likely, would fault the narrative frames that become so instrumental to Offred’s survival for being limited and for their inability to voice women’s personal life experiences and memories. But Maso would not critique Atwood’s message that to survive oppression women need multiple possibilities for narrating their life histories and memories, and the characters in The Art Lover would never be able to locate or create a useful way of expressing their storied memories without the possibility of multiple and contradictory narrative frames that provide varied, hopeful possibilities for women. Like Maso, who calls for new narrative and artistic frames that provide a new structure for women’s storied memories, Atwood emphasizes the importance of multiple and varied interpretations of women’s lives, especially those that deny official, totalizing historical narratives. Through this, Offred resists her present oppression and clings to hope for a future beyond the oppressive Gilead. In both cases, women’s storied memories have power to shape the future and to reveal new and varied possibilities for both the tellers and the listeners of women’s storied memories.
CHAPTER THREE

TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND NARRATIVE HEALING IN ALLISON’S BASTARD

OUT OF CAROLINA AND DANTICAT’S BREATH, EYES, MEMORY

“But the desire to live was desperate in my belly, and the stories I had hidden all those years were the blood and bone of it. To get it down, to tell it again, to make something . . .”

—Allison, Trash 7

“In our family, we had come to expect that people can disappear into thin air. All traces lost except in the vivid eyes of one’s memory.”

—Danticat, Breath, Eyes, Memory 170

Carole Maso and Margaret Atwood both depict how their female characters use narrative frames to story their autobiographical memories in beneficial ways, ways that prompt healing and aid in their resistance to outside oppression. The use of narrative frames to story memories of the past becomes even more important, and often more difficult, when a person is grappling with memories of trauma, a lesson illustrated in the works of authors Dorothy Allison and Edwidge Danticat, who explore the impact of sexual abuse on women’s memories and lives.1 Whereas Allison’s white-trash character, Bone, is molested by her stepfather, Daddy Glen, who rapes her when she is about to turn thirteen, Danticat’s Haitian-American character, Sophie, who is the product of her

1 Psychologists Tania Pantchenko, Marie Lawson, and Marie R. Joyce remind us that “individuals differ in their classification and conceptualization of what constitutes trauma or negative experiences, making ambiguous the subjective boundaries between the traumatic and the negative” (252). However, my discussion in this chapter focuses primarily on sexual abuse, something that can and should clearly be defined as traumatic.
mother’s rape, is sexually abused by her mother when she is eighteen and is forced to undergo a series of rape-like virginity tests at the hands of her mother.

As Allison and Danticat demonstrate, there is a distinct difference between traumatic memories and more mundane autobiographical memories. Memory theorists and psychologists have long attempted to explain this difference by suggesting that typical experiences are automatically understood through existing cognitive structures, whereas “frightening or novel experiences may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and either may be remembered with particular vividness or may totally resist integration.” Indeed, “Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently. . . . When that occurs, fragments of these unintegrated experiences may later manifest as recollections or behavioral reenactments” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 160). Traumatic memories do not fit our standard memory schemas or frames for understanding experience, because, as Holocaust survivor and trauma theorist Dori Laub explains, trauma is defined by its “radical otherness to all known frames of reference,” which situates the experience of trauma “beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine” (68). Because the way we process trauma is different from our processing of everyday events, traumatic memories are set apart from less emotional, everyday memories.

Unlike child psychiatrist Lenore Terr, who claims that traumatized children retain “‘burned-in’ visual impressions” of the trauma (qtd. in Schacter, Searching 202), most
psychologists agree that traumatic memories, like other memories, are not recorded in our minds as snapshots or exact replicas of the past, but are rather a mutable reconstruction of the past that is affected by both present-day elements as well as encoded details of the past. While renowned memory theorist Daniel Schacter agrees with Terr that “memory for emotional trauma is frequently more accurate than memory for ordinary events” and that traumatic memories are “characterized by intense and absorbing visual imagery,” he also confirms that, like normal autobiographical memories, traumatic memories are “sometimes subject to distortion,” which most commonly occurs in reference to the “specific details” of the traumatic event (Searching 205, 210, 209). Schacter further explains that during a traumatic event, “arousal may also influence what is remembered,” as a victim’s attention is likely to be focused on “salient, emotionally arousing parts of the episode,” and, “consequently, less attention [is] ‘left over’ for the details” (Searching 209, 210). Because of these differences in focus at the time of encoding, traumatic memory is often fragmentary, leaving a survivor with only memory flashes of the most horrific, emotionally disturbing elements of the trauma.

Because of the fragmentary nature of these memories, the recall of traumatic events impacts people in striking ways. Sociologist Kai Erickson chronicles the effects of trauma and its impact on memory:

The classic symptoms of trauma range from feelings of restlessness and agitation at one end of the emotional scale to feelings of numbness and bleakness at the other. Traumatized people often scan the surrounding

---

2 This phenomena is known as weapon focusing, for multiple studies have indicated that victims of violence often fixate on the weapon rather than the other details of the event, and thus have “rather poor memories of other aspects of the event, including the criminal’s face” (Schacter, Searching 210).
world anxiously for signs of danger, breaking into explosive rages and reacting with a start to ordinary sights and sounds, but at the same time, all that nervous activity takes place against a numbed gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness, and a general closing off of the spirit, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm. Above all, trauma involves a continual reliving of some wounding experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations, and in a compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances. Paul Valery wrote: “Our memory repeats to us what we haven’t understood.” That’s almost it. Say instead: “Our memory repeats to us what we haven’t yet come to terms with, what still haunts us.” (183-84)

Feminist philosopher Sue Campbell, who emphasizes the devastating impact of the inability to come to terms with trauma, explains that a “traumatized person is often unable to integrate the effects of a traumatic past with an ongoing sense of self” (80). Because traumatic memories are often not integrated in the same fashion as other memories, fragments of memory can “appear unbidden . . . in surprising ways, as if possessed of a life independent of will or consciousness” (Culbertson, qtd. in Campbell 49). As uncontrolled flashes of memory appear, Campbell explains, trauma victims often endure “a loss of the experience of a doubled self, of one’s past and present held together, which normally grounds one’s sense of security and competence as a rememberer” (49). Like Campbell, Schacter also stresses the damaging power of traumatic memories that blur the past and present. Citing a study of veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), he notes, “Some veterans become fixated on remembering their war experiences to the point where it is difficult for them to remember much about other times in their lives” (Searching 210). Indeed, as Schacter explains, “The most common post-traumatic symptom is unbidden recollection of the
trauma, which occurs in the context of emotional disturbances and spotty memory problems” (Searching 203). And the unbidden recall of traumatic memories, as psychologists have noted, can lead to a “loss of well-being experienced as negative psychological and psychophysical reactions to the stress associated with the trauma,” which defines the experience of many trauma survivors (Pantchenko, Lawson, and Joyce 251).

One way for sufferers of PTSD to regain a sense of well-being is to find a way to communicate their memories of the trauma they have suffered to others. Psychologists who have studied the importance of narrating memory provide valuable insight into the experiences of Allison’s Bone and Danticat’s Sophie, who suffer from many of the symptoms of PSTD. As psychologists have shown, victims of trauma have “learned to live with memory’s power by telling their stories, trying to fit these aberrant incidents with the rest of their lives” (Schacter, Searching 205). Contemporary therapy for trauma is thus still modeled after Freud’s famous talking cure. And the therapeutic process, as Amia Lieblich and her collaborators explain, can also be viewed “as a literary affair”:

> Therapists and clients coconstruct stories, create and revise narratives with the hope of finding solutions to personal problems, better coping strategies to meet life’s challenges, enhanced growth and development, and greater psychological insight. Many forms of psychotherapy—from psychoanalysis to cognitive-behavioral therapy—involve life storytelling and retelling; in other words, they are based on narrative. (4)

This drive to tell stories in the hope of finding solutions to personal problems does not occur only in therapeutic circles. “As adults,” Ruthellen Josselson explains, “we similarly take confusing or upsetting moments in our lives to talk over with friends and
confidants. We are likely to come away saying that this discussion helped us put our experience in perspective and it is that perspective that forms the narration we are likely to carry with us about that experience” (125). Our need to understand our lives in story has even led some psychologists to argue that “narrative should be seen as the root metaphor for the entire field of psychology” (Maruna and Ramsden 130).³

In her study of trauma stories in contemporary women’s literature, literary critic Deborah Horvitz similarly concludes that since narrative is “inextricably entwined with memory and the process of remembering, the greater one’s ability to ‘make story’ out of trauma . . . the more likely s/he is to regain control of her or his life after that trauma” (6). Yet, interestingly, this control also comes, at least partially, from the trauma victim’s inability to narrate the full power of the trauma and to capture the trauma in language, for in that inability resides the hope for the victim to move past the trauma. As Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain, as distance grows between the event and the

---
³ In the cases of extreme trauma, the struggle to tell the story of one’s trauma can itself be traumatic. As abuse survivors Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale have argued, it is important to note that not all trauma victims find healing through narrating their memories (214-215). Likewise, as Cathy Caruth observes, “Trauma can be experienced in at least two ways: as a memory that one cannot integrate into one’s own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others” (Caruth and Keenan 256). Often trauma victims experience an inability to capture the full scope of the horrors they have experienced in language. Caruth explains, “the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own and other’s knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall” (153). Likewise, she concludes, “To cure oneself—whether by drugs or the telling of one’s story or both—seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth” (Caruth vii). Laub also identifies this danger of dilution: “The horror of the historical experience is maintained in the testimony only as an elusive memory that feels as if it no long resembles any reality” (62). Because a story of trauma is unable to encompass the full extent of the horror-experience, many victim-survivors find themselves “inhabited by the impossibility of telling, and therefore, silence . . . commonly prevails” (Laub 64). On the other hand, Laub also asserts that “The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events” (64). Thus, one’s storied memory of trauma may not be able to capture the full reality of the past, but that same reality will be lost even if a victim remains silent.
storied memory of the event, “the traumatic memory starts losing its power over current experience,” which begins to “soften the intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror” (178). Likewise, Susan Engel explains that the act of “telling a story about something that has happened to you can give you relief from the unpleasant feelings you had because of, or during, the remembered event” (133). Elaborating on what Jerome Bruner calls “the cooling function of narrative,” Engel continues, “Putting a bad experience into a story form allows you to distance yourself from it” (133, 134). Part of the reason that the narration of a traumatic memory provides a “cooling” or distancing function is explained by the fact that, as emotions and images are converted into words, the way a person conceptualizes the trauma changes. In a similar way, researchers James W. Pennebaker and Janel D. Seagal observe that once a trauma victim can integrate the memories and feelings of the trauma into a coherent narrative of the experience, the event can be “summarized, stored, and forgotten more efficiently” (1248). Thus, “Translating distress into language ultimately allows us to forget or, perhaps a better phrase, move beyond the experience” (1251). Clearly then, putting one’s memory into a storied-form allows the healing process to begin, an idea that is integral to both of the trauma narratives I investigate in this chapter, Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory.*

---

4 As Pennebaker and Seagal explain, “Once a complex event is put into a story format, it is simplified. The mind doesn’t need to work as hard to bring structure and meaning to it. As the story is told over and over again, it becomes shorter, with some of the finer detail gradually leveled. The information that is recalled in the story is that which is congruent with the story” (1250-1).

5 Or, as Nicola King suggests, narrating the memories of trauma allows trauma victims to put the past “into its proper place” (161).
Although it may not be ideal to actually forget a traumatic experience, finding a way to move it from the forefront of a victim’s mind and to overcome the uncontrolled memory flashes that so often define traumatic memory remains paramount to the healing process. Such healing comes, most commonly, through the integration of traumatic stories into one’s life narrative. As Shoshana Felman explains, memories of trauma seem to be “composed of bits and pieces of a memory that [have] been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference” (16). In order to control these “bits and pieces of memory,” trauma victims use *storied memory* to help them “understand their experiences and themselves” (Pennebaker and Seagal 1243). By converting memory fragments into a cohesive narrative, victims are able to “organize and remember events in a coherent fashion while integrating thoughts and feelings. In essence, this gives individuals a sense of predictability and control over their lives. Once an experience has structure and meaning, it would follow that the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable” (1243).

---

6 Horvitz emphasizes “the crucial need to understand and integrate one’s past, especially when that story derives from and is embedded in sexual/violent trauma” (40).

7 The power of narrative to reduce intrusive fragments and emotional effects of traumatic memory was evident in a study that prompted subjects dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to make linguistic sense of their emotional distress. As researchers John H. Krystal, Stephen M. Southwick, and Dennis S. Charney explain, many individuals with PTSD have difficulty “in linguistically interpreting their emotional states.” They found that “by linguistically encoding information and emotional responses associated with the trauma, the voluntary control of linguistic function can be brought to bear to achieve the regulation of previously uncontrollable feelings and memories” (163).
Thus, when victims tell the story of their trauma, they begin the process of translating their unspeakable memories into manageable *storied memories*. If traumatic events or occurrences typically “do not fit with the ongoing personal narrative, or . . . call into question the established story” the individual tells of his or her life, telling the story of trauma ultimately allows a victim “to synthesize a cohesive life narrative” and make his or her “history make sense” by transforming it “from a series of unintegrated fragments of plots into a magnum opus” (Adler and McAdams 213; Vaughan 159).

Successful integration, as Laub explains, allows the rememberer to “reassert the veracity of the past and to build anew its linkage to, and assimilation into, present day life” (62). And such linkage between past and present and integration of traumatic memory into a manageable self-narrative often leads to new insight and understanding, elements that Jonathan M. Adler and Dan P. McAdams have linked to a high measure of well-being (223). Likewise, Pennebaker and Seagal have demonstrated the numerous mental and physical health benefits associated with narrating memories of trauma (1244). Both

---

8 Adler and McAdams continue, “Significant negative experiences . . . are precisely the type of troubles that present the most difficult narrative challenges for people, for they are often especially hard to reconcile with one’s ongoing self-story. They directly resist easy resolution in the search for happiness and they often require difficult work for meaning to be made out of them. Thus, psychotherapy can be understood as an unusual personal project in which the individual seeks help working on his or her story in an effort to move clear to a personal narrative that supports desired outcomes” (213-14).

9 Additionally, Vaughn argues that there are physical changes to the brain that occur as trauma patients create and rehearse the narratives of their traumatic experiences: “We now have solid scientific evidence to suggest that the so-called ‘talking cure,’ originally devised by Freud, literally alters the way in which neurons in the brain are connected to one another. This rewiring leads to changes in how you process, integrate, experience, and understand information and emotion. . . . These physical changes in how neurons are connected help us to produce new internal representations of self and other, changing the ingrained neural patterns about relationships that were laid down during early childhood development” (4).
Allison’s Bone and Danticat’s Sophie must narrate their stories of trauma, and in doing so, integrate those memories into their larger sense of self, in order to find healing.

Although integration is perhaps the most important reason for the trauma victim to narrate his or her story, in that the process enhances healing and a sense of well-being, there are other by-products of the narrative process that greatly benefit the trauma victim. Often, simply the act of being heard and seen by another individual in the process of telling is healing. As Clare Woodward and Stephen Joseph explain, “the experience of being listened to and being seen by another person can be a powerful validation for those who have felt unheard and invisible. It is about being seen and heard for who you are and what you have experienced” (276). Likewise, Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gary-Rosendale explain that survivors, “who often have been silent because they feared retaliation or increased humiliation, and who have been carrying around the burden of a hidden agony for months, years, and even decades, report the experience of speaking out as transformative as well as a sheer relief” (200). Such relief may come from the fact that a victim who may not have been able to act finally has a chance to assert agency through the telling of *storied memory*. As van der Kolk and van der Hart observe, “Many writers about the human response to trauma have observed that a feeling of helplessness, or physical or emotional paralysis is fundamental to making an experience traumatic: the person was unable to take any action that could affect the outcome of events” (175). The ability to speak out about the trauma is, in effect, an attempt to recover from emotional paralysis. It is, in itself, “a form of action,” a reclamation of agency and power (Laub
It is also, in the case of abuse, a chance to “defy [a] perpetrator’s threats” (Barringer, qtd. in Naples 1166). The narration of traumatic memory, then, provides an important opportunity for the traumatized individual to resist, or overcome, continued oppression.

Translating the memories of a traumatic experience into narrative also allows victims to achieve a new understanding of themselves and to revise their sense of who they believe themselves to be. Mark Freeman argues that it is “only when memories are appropriated into the fabric of the self—which is to say, only when one commences to rewrite the self by incorporating one’s memories within the context of a plausible narrative order” that there can be any “measure of psychic healing” (Rewriting 171). Numerous studies have also shown that having the ability and opportunity to engage in memory narratives is “fundamental not only to developing and maintaining a sense of self but to repairing a sense of self rendered vulnerable through harm or abuse” (Campbell 43). Just as “autobiography offers an opportunity for self-transformation” (Gilmore 11), so narrating the experience of trauma actually changes the person and the recollection of the experience. This change is evident in the shift from understanding oneself as a victim to viewing oneself as a survivor—a term usually “reserved for those who have self-consciously redefined their relationship to the experience from one of ‘victim’” (Naples 1151). Indeed, to identify and understand oneself as a survivor is “to have one’s suffering recognized and to be entitled to special forms of social support that

---

10 This idea is reiterated in Maruna and Ramsden: “By telling you who I am, I tell you my fate. To change my fate, I must redefine who I am; I must reconstruct my story” (White, qtd. in Maruna and Ramsden 132).
would otherwise not be available. The trauma story anoints the survivor with a heroic status—as the bearer of unspeakable truths” (Haaken 356). Understanding oneself first as a survivor and then as some type of hero is integral to many healing therapeutic journeys. Therapist John McLeod, for instance, highlights the importance of the “heroic” narrative in emotional healing: “In therapy, it can be useful to be given the opportunity to generate different versions of a story concerning life issues. Usually, the telling and retelling of the story produces at least some heroic and success narratives. . . . This process of sense-making helps to develop a perspective on the problem” (23-4). With perspective and integration comes healing.

Just as the “hero” story is useful in many healing-narratives, so too are themes of community and generativity. As psychologists Shadd Maruna and Derek Ramsden have shown, “themes of embeddedness or deep connections to the social and natural world” are common in trauma-healing narratives. Moreover, recovery is more likely when an individual’s narrative includes themes of “unity, community belonging, cooperation, and inclusion” (144). Sue Campbell also identifies the importance of this type of narrative in cases of women’s memory of abuse, highlighting the importance of family connections in overcoming abuse. As Campbell explains, “How family members associate in their attempts to form, maintain, enforce, and transmit a shared understanding of the past may tell us much about women’s experience in the family relevant to understanding such

---

11 Maruna and Ramsden also identify many other scripts, such as one that suggests “suffering can be redemptive” and another that emphasizes personal responsibility (143). I have chosen to highlight the embeddedness and generativity scripts here, for these are the ones most evident in the novels I will consider in this chapter.
abuse” (191). For women, understanding the experience of trauma through the lens of family history can provide both a sense of belonging and unity, while offering a fuller understanding of one’s self and one’s trauma. Literary critic Deborah Horvitz also identifies the importance of family in women’s narratives of trauma and healing when she argues that “neither individuals nor civilizations can survive severance from their familial and historical ancestries, despite the sadomasochistic relationships within them” (18). Although Allison’s Bone and Danticat’s Sophie both must endure suffering caused by their respective family members, they also find healing within the community of women who make up their extended families, and these women help them to understand the historical context that prompted the abuse. In both cases, their understanding ultimately leads to a sense of connection and unity that helps the characters overcome their traumatic pasts. Many survivor narratives, as Maruna and Ramsden explain, also contain a generativity script, which is defined by the rememberer’s “concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation” (142). A concern for the next generation becomes increasingly important in the case of sexual or physical abuse, especially for women with children, for, as Horvitz explains, through narrative “the cycle of violence can end, because the narratives, not the . . . trauma, are repeated and passed on” (134). The generativity script proves to be a driving force for Danticat’s Sophie who works to overcome her own traumatic past so that she does not unintentionally traumatize her own daughter.
Ultimately, with successful integration of the traumatic memories into the story of the self, and with a healing narrative frame, some victims of trauma can even come to see their experiences as somewhat beneficial. As Woodward and Joseph explain:

[T]here are three possible outcomes: survival, recovery, or thriving. Those who merely survive never regain their previous level of functioning. Those who recover return to their previous level of functioning. Those who thrive, however, move beyond the original level of psychosocial functioning, flourish, and grow as a result of their experience. Post-traumatic growth experiences are therefore not just about learning to live with the effects of trauma, or about bouncing back from trauma, but are likened instead to the springboard to further individual development, thriving, and personal growth. (268)

Arguing that forty to seventy percent of trauma survivors “later report some form of benefit from their experience,” Woodward and Joseph have suggested that through successful narration of traumatic memory, people can perceive themselves or others in a more positive light, or change their philosophy of life (268). It is possible to overcome traumatic experiences and even grow from them, suggesting that “it is how people react to them”—how people story their traumatic memories—“rather than what they are that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have” (Erikson 184). And there is hope in the act of narration, for, as Engel explains, in putting traumatic experience into story, “you have a chance to rework it, go over it and over it until you understand it, until you can find another way of looking at it, or until it feels comfortable to you” (134).

Like so many theorists and readers who have come before her, Susan Engel examines the importance of those who tell the story of trauma through autobiography or
in a novel to be read by others. By making “something beautiful out of something awful,” the writer can “write beyond the silencing meted out by trauma” (Engel 134; Gilmore 23). “Committed to bearing witness to oppression,” such artists fight for political change as well as private healing, and they do so in a way that reveals “trauma’s prevalence and capacity to signify representativeness” (Horvitz 18; Gilmore 19). Two such authors, Dorothy Allison and Edwidge Danticat, have dedicated their respective novels, *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, as spaces to *story* memories of trauma, and they demonstrate that healing and resistance are possible through narration, communication, and women’s community. Bone’s and Sophie’s individual journeys illustrate the potential for recovery found in the act of narrating their memories of traumatic sexual abuse. Because they find the words to *story* their trauma, they survive, recover, and perhaps even thrive.

**Storied Integration in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina***

Author Dorothy Allison describes her first encounter with Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* as “a slap on the back from my mother’s hand, as if a trusted, powerful voice were telling me, You know something about incest—something you fear, but had best start figuring it out. I began to figure things out in story” (*Trash* xii). After reading Morrison’s account of a father raping his own daughter, Allison began to search through her own memories of childhood physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather,
as well as her personal shame derived from her self-proclaimed white-trash identity. In a book of essays, she relates what she calls “the central fact” of her life:

I was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina, the bastard daughter of a white woman from a desperately poor family, a girl who had left the seventh grade the year before, worked as a waitress, and was just a month past fifteen when she had me. That fact, the inescapable impact of being born in a condition of poverty that this society finds shameful, contemptible, and somehow deserved, has had dominion over me to such an extent that I have spent my life trying to overcome or deny it. (Skin 15)

Thus, in her own writing, published in the genres of short-story, memoir, performance art, autobiography, and novel, Allison has grappled with her storied memories of incest, trauma, and class-based shame. As she returns again and again to the same topics—a stepfather who abused her, a mother who literally and figuratively abandoned her, an extended family for whom she both loved and felt ashamed—she offers what Moira P. Baker calls “an uncompromising vision of the ugliness and injustice of poverty” (117). Other critics have called Allison’s semi-autobiographical novel, Bastard Out of Carolina, “one of the most courageous novels of our time,” and “one of American literature’s most harrowing fictions of child abuse” (Hart 170; Horeck 47). Her repeated focus on these topics in so many of her written works illustrates Allison’s ability and need to recount her history of trauma in multiple ways: indeed, she is constantly searching for ways to tell and retell her storied memories.

---

12 Allison has also emphasized the importance of a conscious-raising group she mistakenly stumbled upon while in college: “It was people sitting around basically telling stories, and I knew how to do that. But there were people telling stories that I had never heard before. And there was a woman there who started to talk about her own experience of incest. And it didn’t matter that she was using a lot of early feminist rhetorical language. What mattered was that it was my story . . . and she was telling a story that I knew in my bones absolutely” (“Moving” 74).
Allison records her memories again and again, for, as she explains in the introduction to her collection of short stories, *Trash*, there was “only one thing” she could do that “helped” her through her depression in her early twenties. As she recalls, “Every evening I sat down with a yellow legal-size pad, writing out the story of my life. I wrote it all: everything I could remember, all the stories I had ever been told, the names, places, images—how blood had arched up the wall one terrible night that recurred persistently in my dreams—the dreams themselves, the people in my dreams. My stepfather . . .” (3). She found that the act of “writing it all down was purging” and that “putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them” (*Trash* 3). She explains that starting at the age of twenty-four, she spent a few years “just figuring out what the hell had happened to me . . . how I had gotten into this enormously tight, walled, closed place.” But ultimately, it was writing that helped her “break out of it. Writing became the way that I could say things that otherwise I had no other way to talk about” (Allison, “Moving” 74).

Allison is acutely aware of the complex interplay of forces that have governed her life. As she explains to her critics, it is necessary not “to ignore how much my life was shaped by growing up poor and talk only about what incest did to my identity as a woman and as a lesbian. The difficulty is that I can’t ascribe everything that has been problematic about my life simply and easily to the patriarchy, or to incest, or even to the invisible and much denied class structure of our society” (*Skin* 15-6). All of these interconnected elements, many of them traumatic, have shaped her as a person and as a
writer. At the same time, in describing her inspiration for *Bastard Out of Carolina*, she explains, “I knew there was only one story that would haunt me until I understood how to tell it—the complicated, painful story of how my mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl” (*Skin* 34). The relationship between the protagonist of Allison’s semi-autobiographical novel, Ruth Anne Boatwright, nicknamed Bone, and her mother, Anney, then, becomes the key element in understanding both the novel and Allison’s own life and traumas. Bone and Anney’s relationship is shaped by patriarchy, incest, poverty, and shame—something that can also be said for Allison and her own mother. Thus, as literary critic Jillian Sandell has explained, Allison is “trying to perform what Minnie Bruce Pratt calls ‘practicing memory’” as she develops the character of Bone in her semi-autobiographical novel. Like the victims of trauma described by psychologists, Allison “uses the narrative form as a safe space to hold culturally specific memories and family stories,” specifically memories of trauma (217). In an attempt “To tell the truth and to pay homage to the people who helped to make me the person I’ve become” (Allison, qtd. in Sandell 215), Allison has created, in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, a narrative that is “not biography, and yet not lies”—a narrative that “resonate[s] to the pulse of my sisters’ fear and my desperate shame” (Allison, *Trash* 7). And in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Allison captures both horrific scenes of violence, abuse, and shame as she tells the story of

---

13 Leigh Gilmore has commented on how Allison’s blend of fiction and autobiography has been pivotal to our understanding of the genre of autobiography: “Allison’s work . . . raises a larger question about how fiction and autobiography reach into each other, and whether they may, for some subjects, even require each other” (45).
Bone’s traumatic coming of age and also shows how Bone, like the typical trauma victim, struggles to understand her abuse and integrate it into her larger life narrative.

As Allison writes the story of Bone and her white-trash family, the Boatwrights, she also tells the story of her own white-trash family, the Gibsons. “The thing that must be kept in mind about Bone is that I gave her my family. Or at least a version of my family,” Allison explains in an interview. “And one thing that happened to me after I wrote the book is that when I went around with it, I had to answer for my family. There was no way not to talk about my real family in contrast to Bone’s imagined family. . . . Sorting out reality from fiction is really difficult to do. And I’m not tied too tightly to the real world” (“Giving Back” 7). Thus, as Allison celebrates the people who have shaped her life—the Gibsons—through the characters she depicts in the novel, she also demonstrates how flawed and damaged they are. The Boatwright men, Bone’s uncles Earle, Beau, and Nevil, are “all big men with wide shoulders, broken teeth, and sunken features” (22). Half the county goes “in terror of them” and fears the “deadly . . . Boatwright boys,” for they are known for their drinking, fighting, and constant stints in jail (22, 12). However, as Bone explains, they are “invariably gentle and affectionate” with her—something that is demonstrated again and again over the course of the novel (22). Bone’s mother and her aunts treat her uncles “like overgrown boys—rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried over—and they seemed to think of themselves that way too” (23). In Bone’s world, “Men could do anything, and
everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding” (23), leaving Bone to often wish she had been born a boy.

Unlike her boyish uncles, her mother and her aunts, Ruth, Raylene, and Alma, seem “old, worn-down, and slow, born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men” (23). The women are “nasty and strong,” something that Bone finds comforting, but as Moira P. Baker explains, “Without a man in their lives, most of the Boatwright women feel worthless” (122). Uncle Earle is described in the novel as the sort of man a Boatwright woman desires and “needs” like “a starving woman needs meat between her teeth” (41). Earle is “a sad wounded man who genuinely likes women,” and he is a “hurt little boy with just enough meanness in him to keep a woman interested” (25). This leads Baker to argue:

Anney and most of her sisters have so internalized patriarchal norms that the discourse they speak among themselves cannot counteract the powerful interpolative effects of the surrounding society’s discourses on femininity, sexuality, and the family that bombard them from every quarter, telling them that their life is incomplete without a male lover, that ultimately their validation comes from bearing children to their husbands, and that they are nothing without a man no matter how much income they bring home to support their children. Though they share a woman-centered kinship network on the margins of society, the grid of heteropatriarchy is superimposed on their lives. (121)

The patriarchal norms shaping the Boatwright women’s lives become clear in the first chapter of the novel, after Anney’s first husband, Lyle Parsons, dies when Anney is just nineteen. After Lyle’s death, Aunt Ruth tells Anney, “Nothing else will ever hit you this hard” (8). To lose a husband and lover is the hardest thing that a Boatwright woman can imagine. Ruth continues, “Now you look like a Boatwright . . . Now you got the look.
You’re as old as you’re ever gonna get, girl. This is the way you’ll look till you die” (8).

Ruth’s description of Anney’s pain tells much about what it means to be a Boatwright woman—to be a Boatwright is to feel pain and to show that pain on the body.

Additionally, a Boatwright is both ugly and beautiful at the same time, something reiterated to Bone as a child: “‘Pretty ugly,’ Granny whispered . . . ‘Almost pretty. Oh, you’re a Boatwright all right, a Boatwright for sure’” (21). Bone clings to her identification with the Boatwright women and finds solace in their homes throughout the novel: “It didn’t matter where we were living so long as we could go stay with one of our aunts. . . . It was alive over at the aunts’ houses, warm, always humming with voices and laughter and children running around” (80). For all their flaws, they help to save Bone from the trauma she experiences after her mother marries Daddy Glen.

It is Anney’s patriarchal belief that her children, Bone and Reese, need a father figure that prompts her to marry Glen Waddell. Anney tells herself, “He’d make a good daddy” (13), and she clings to the belief that her family will be better taken care of in a traditional family structure. Likewise, Anney is driven by her shame that her daughter Bone is illegitimate. Indeed, Bone has been marked “a bastard by the State of South Carolina,” her birth certificate marred by a stamp declaring in “oversized red-inked block letters” that she is “illegitimate” (3, 4). Even though Granny tires to convince Anney that the birth certificate does not “matter,” Anney continues to be burned by memories of “the stamp she knew they’d tried to put on her. No-good, lazy, shiftless” (3). Glen, who was raised in a middle-class family, initially provides Anney with an escape from her
white-trash shame—she truly believes that he will help her to rise out of poverty and become a “legitimate” father for her children. However, “Daddy Glen” Waddell ultimately becomes a patriarchal tyrant who beats Bone, molests her, and ultimately rapes her.

Exhibiting classic abuse behavior even during his marriage proposal, Daddy Glen reveals his possessive nature from the start. He tells Bone and Reese, “Call me Daddy ’cause I love your mama, ’cause I love you. I’m gonna treat you right. You’ll see. You’re mine, all of you, mine” (36, my emphasis). Likewise, after Anney and Glen are married, he begins to isolate Anney and her daughters from the Boatwright family: “‘We don’t need nobody else,’ he whispered. ‘We’ll do just fine on our own’” (50). As Laurie Vickroy observes, “Allison’s depiction of Glen matches well with profiles of abusers as possessive, isolating and totalitarian in their control over their families. . . .

acknowledging his desperate need for love, she accounts for his violent rages as attempts to assert his will and patriarchal identity after being denigrated within his own family, particularly by his abusive, unloving father, around whom he becomes a scared, uncertain child” (39-40). Anney constantly makes excuses for Glen, arguing that “Anybody can see how Glen got bent, what his daddy’s done to him. I an’t never seen a boy wanted his daddy’s love so much and had so little of it. All Glen really needs is to know himself loved, to get out from under his daddy’s meanness” (132). And although Anney believes that she can love him enough to save him, she is unable to save her daughter, Bone, from his abuse.
Glen first molests five-year-old Bone while she and her sister are sleeping in the car in the hospital parking lot, waiting for their mother to have a baby that does not ultimately survive. Pulling Bone into the front seat of the car, Glen rocks her on his lap, and as he holds “himself in his fingers,” Bone “knew what it was under his hand,” just as she knew that “he was hurting me, hurting me!” (47). But after he leaves the car, returning to Anney in the hospital, she wonders if she “had dreamed that whole early-morning scene. I kept squeezing my thighs together, feeling the soreness, and trying to imagine how I could have bruised myself if it had been a dream” (48). Although she knows it was not a dream, as a pre-teen, she “remembered those moments in the hospital parking lot like a bad dream, hazy and shadowed,” and she thinks, “Maybe it had not happened” (51). That Bone does not have a clear, integrated memory of the event, but instead she recalls blurry fragments of the trauma, reveals the haunting power of traumatic memory. While she does not repress her molestation, she does wonder about what actually occurred, asking herself, “Sex. Was that what Daddy Glen had been doing to me in the parking lot?” (63). As a five-year-old, Bone simply does not have the language to understand the traumatic event that has occurred.14 As Leigh Gilmore explains, “Bone’s pain, terror, and disorientation at the time of the initial molestation is compounded by the absence of language in which to say what has happened and is continuing to happen to her, as well as the absence of context in which to form this

14 Allison is aware of the lack of language available for childhood trauma victims: “Allison herself refers to learning how to speak the words rape, child, relentless ‘as a sacrament, a blessing, a prayer, Not a curse’” (Hart 187).
language” (58). Likewise, Lynda Hart observes, “[O]ne of the effects of incest for the abused child is that she is unable to tell her ‘secret,’ not only because she has no language, as a child, to articulate a sexual experience that surpasses her linguistic command but also because the ‘experience’ itself surpasses the lexicon of ‘reality’” (188). Thus, it is not only Bone’s age that makes her unable to narrate her memories of trauma. She is also encountering the struggle to put the unspeakable into language.

At the same time, Bone is taught at an early age that she must protect her mother. After her family returns from the hospital after the first molestation, Aunt Raylene says to Bone, “When a woman loses a baby, she needs to know that her other babies are well and happy. You be happy for her, Bone. You let your mama know you are happy so she can heal her heart” (49). This becomes Bone’s task—to protect and heal her mother’s pain without consideration of the costs to herself. Even if she had the language to narrate her memories, she would continue to carry the burden herself to protect Anney. Therefore, as the abuse continues and becomes both sexual and physical, Bone refrains from telling her mother. A ten-year-old Bone reflects, “It seemed like Daddy Glen’s hands were always reaching for me, trembling on the surface of my skin, as if something pulled him to me and pushed him away at the same time. I would look up at him, carefully, watchfully, and see his eyes staring at me like I was something unimaginable and strange. ‘You don’t look like your mama’ he said once” (105). His comment that she does not resemble Anney speaks directly to Bone’s concern that she does not look like the other

15 Hart also argues, “[J]ust as Bone cannot find a way ‘to tell,’ Allison carries with her the particular mark of the incest survivor” as she attempts to narrate her own trauma in her semi-autobiographical novel (174).
Boatwrights: “My mouth wasn’t like that, or my face either. Worse, my black eyes had no gold. I didn’t look like anybody at all” (30). As Shawn E, Miller explains, “Bone is in search of self knowledge,” and since the Boatwrights’ “individual identity is tied so closely to family affiliation,” to suggest that that affiliation is missing is to diminish who Bone conceives herself to be (139, 145–6). Playing on her insecurities that she doesn’t fit anywhere, Glen’s abuse is not only physical and sexual, but mental as well.

Glen later contradicts himself—while holding her “body tight to his, his hands shaking as they moved restlessly, endlessly” over her, he tells Bone, “You’re just like your mama” (108). While conflicting messages continue to confuse Bone, she still knows that what is occurring is wrong. However, like many victims of sexual abuse, Bone begins to blame herself: “I only knew that there was something I was doing wrong, something terrible. He said, ‘You drive me crazy,’ in a strange distracted voice, and I shuddered but believed him” (109). Likewise, she begins to exhibit many of the classic symptoms of the trauma victim described by psychologist Kai Erickson. That Bone experiences the trauma victim’s “gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness, and a general closing off of spirit” becomes more and more evident as the abuse continues (Erickson 184). Over time, Bone begins to believe what Daddy Glen says of her. “Maybe I was a bad girl, evil, nasty, willful, stupid, ugly—everything he said.

16 As Allison explains, Glen’s affect on Bone is disturbing: “All the things she’s being told about herself by Daddy Glen are horrible,” for he begins to treat her with contempt (“Moving” 73). For instance, he tells her that she is “Cold as death, mean as a snake, and twice as twisty” (111). And, as Allison explains, Bone “takes those things, and we watch it have an impact on her” (“Moving” 73). Miller also articulates the negative affect he has on her: “Yet Bone, for a time, also loses herself as she becomes Glen’s creation, understanding herself as victim, exile, and to a certain degree as a victimizer herself” (152).
Maybe I was, but it didn’t matter,” she thinks at one point (252). Subjected to Daddy Glen’s contempt, she becomes deeply demoralized: “When I saw myself in Daddy Glen’s eyes, I wanted to die. No, I wanted to be already dead, cold, and gone. Everything felt hopeless. He looked at me and I was ashamed of myself” (209). At the same time, she also begins breaking into the “explosive rages” that often are seen in trauma victims, further exhibiting her post-traumatic symptoms (see Erikson 184). As she stands in Daddy Glen’s parents’ yard, she says, “I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes that lit up everything I glanced at. It was dangerous, that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn everything up” (103). Later, when she has a fight with one of her only friends, Shannon, she has a similar reaction: her anger is a “raw boiling rage in my stomach” (207). Over time, her rage begins to extend toward everyone and everything she encounters. As Bone asserts, “I was a bowl of hatred, boiling black and thick behind my eyes” (252).

Still, believing that she is at fault for her abuse, and believing she has no power to stop it, Bone does not tell her mother about the sexual abuse:

He never said “Don’t tell your mama.” He never had to say it. I did not know how to tell anyone what I felt, what scared me and shamed me and still made me stand, unmoving and desperate, while he rubbed against me and ground his face into my neck. I could not tell Mama. I would not have known how to explain why I stood there and let him touch me. It wasn’t sex, not like a man and woman pushing their naked bodies into each other, but then, it was something like sex, something powerful and frightening that he wanted badly and I did not understand at all. Worse, when Daddy Glen held me that way, it was the only time his hands were gentle, and when he let me go, I would rock on uncertain feet. (109)
And when Daddy Glen begins to beat her—supposedly for her own good—Bone realizes that her mother cannot save her. The first time Glen beats her, Anney stands outside the bathroom door, helpless. Bone recalls:

I stumbled back against the tub, terrified, praying Mama would come home fast. Mama would stop him. . . . I heard the sound of the belt swinging up, a song in the air, a high-pitched terrible sound. It hit me and I screamed. Daddy Glen swung his belt again. I screamed at its passage through the air, screamed before it hit me. I screamed for Mama. He was screaming with me, his great hoarse shouts as loud as my high thin squeals, and behind us, outside the locked door, Reese was screaming too, and then Mama. All of us screaming, and no one could help. (106)

As the beatings continue and Anney notices Bone’s bruises and fractures from the beatings, Bone is unable to explain what is actually occurring, for she feels responsible in her abuse. She explains, “I was always getting hurt, it seemed, in ways Mama could not understand and I could not explain. . . . I didn’t know what to say to her. To say anything would mean trying to tell her everything, to describe those times when he held me tight to his belly and called me sweet names I did not want to hear. I remained silent, stubborn, resentful, and collected my bruises as if they were unavoidable” (111). Bone’s unwillingness to share her abuse with her mother, as Leigh Gilmore argues, suggests more than Bone’s inability to narrate the abuse:

That Bone cannot say what Daddy Glen is doing to her goes to her education in her mother’s shame and Bone’s desire not to compound it, but also to her (accurate) sense that Daddy Glen is structurally well positioned to continue his abuse. Who could or would be able to stop him without setting off what Bone believes are catastrophically sprawling

---

17 This passage demonstrates the fragmentary details of traumatic memory. The focus remains on the weapon—the belt—recalling what psychologists term weapon-focusing, and on the screaming, suggesting that this detail was much more salient at the time of encoding than other details of the trauma. As such, the mother’s inability to help remains a key element of the trauma for Bone.
consequences: the exposure of Anney as a “bad mother,” the unleashing of county police on her family (not limited to Daddy Glen), no less than the appropriation by the law of her own anger and desire for revenge. (58)

Anney’s presence outside the locked door remains a constant factor in Bone’s story of physical abuse: “When Daddy Glen beat me there was always a reason, and Mama would stand right outside the bathroom door. Afterward she would cry and wash my face and tell me not to be so stubborn, not to make him mad” (110). Anney’s response also seems to remain the same throughout the years of abuse—she continually places the onus of abuse onto her daughter. She cries, “Oh girl, Oh, honey. Baby, what did you do? What did you do?” (107). In effect, she blames Bone and excuses Daddy Glen.

Without her mother’s protection, Bone is left to fend for herself, and she ultimately finds some semblance of protection in her emerging ability to tell stories, which is what many psychologists would argue will ultimately help her to survive and move beyond her trauma. Bone has always thirsted for family stories, and the skill of narrating a story is one Bone learns from her family and develops over the course of the novel. The Boatwrights are notorious storytellers. Bone describes how Granny “would lean back in her chair and start reeling out story and memory, making no distinction between what she knew to be true and what she had only heard told. The tales she told me in her rough, drawling whisper were lilting songs, ballads of family, love, and disappointment. Everything seemed to come back to grief and blood, and everybody seemed legendary” (26). The uncles and aunts are also tellers of family lore. The uncles would go out to Aunt Raylene’s to fish, and although “the bells would tinkle now and
then,” signaling they had a bite, “they didn’t always stop to go get their catch. Sometimes the whiskey and the stories were too good” (181). Anney, however, does not share the gift of story that her brothers and sisters hold so dear. This becomes evident when Bone searches for information about her real father. Bone recalls, “There weren’t any pictures of my real daddy, and Mama wouldn’t talk to me about him—no more than she would about the rest of the family” (25). Bone continues, “I was so insistent on knowing anything about my missing father. I wouldn’t have minded a lie. I just wanted the story Mama would have told. What was the thing she wouldn’t tell me, the first thing, the place where she had made herself different from all her brothers and sisters and shut her mouth on her life?” (31). Allison further emphasizes Anney’s resistance to the stories and memories of her past in another incident, as Earle tries to tell Bone about her Aunt Carr, who has moved to Baltimore. Earle says to Bone, “You know your mama don’t want me to tell you that story”; to Anney he jokes, “You just don’t want me telling stories where you can’t hear, little sister.” Anney retorts, “One of these days your stories are gonna come back on you. You an’t gonna know what to say then, I swear” (90). Here, Anney demonstrates her knowledge that sharing stories of the past could affect her, or even come to haunt her. And if Anney ever did share her family inclination to tell stories of the past, her relationship with Glen simply silences her: “She just got quiet, more and more quiet all the time. I begged her to tell me stories like Granny did, but she

---

18 It is Aunt Alma who eventually shares Bone’s only story about her father, an incident when Bone’s father visited and the newborn Bone urinated on him. Bone contemplates, “She looked like she’d been waiting to tell me this story since I was born, waiting to praise and thank me for this thing I didn’t even know I had done” (25-6).
said I was too young to hear such things” (110). As Deborah Horvitz argues, just as
Anney is unconscious when Bone is born, she is “metaphorically ‘unconscious’ to Glen’s
abuse.” Horvitz asserts that this “addresses the potentially cataclysmic repercussions of
lying to oneself and refusing to bear witness to one’s own story” (52). Anney never tells
her story—and she suffers for it.

Additionally, it is no surprise that Glen does not like the girls hearing the
Boatwright family stories, for the stories and memories connect them to a rich family
history that he desires to destroy. As Bone explains, “Daddy Glen didn’t like us listening
to all those stories Granny and Aunt Alma were always telling over and over again. ‘I’ll
tell you who you are,’ he said. ‘You’re mine now, an’t just Boatwrights.’” He continues,
“Our granny is the worst kind of liar. That old woman wouldn’t tell the truth if she
knew it. . . . You stay clear of that old woman. I’ll tell you what’s true. You’re mine
now. You and Reese just keep your distance from her” (52). Although Bone “didn’t
trust Daddy Glen, didn’t believe him when he said all Granny’s stories were lies,” she,
too, had struggled with the distinction between reality and fantasy. She explains, “I never
could be sure which of the things she told me were true and which she just wished were

19 Allison notes that her own mother was also unconscious to Allison’s childhood abuse: “But I also know
that my mother had no idea what was going on in our home: partly because she was telling lies to herself to
stay sane, partly because the world had lied to her and us about the meaning about what was happening.
The world told us that we were being spanked, not beaten, and that violent contempt for girl children was
ordinary, nothing to complain about” (Skin 55). In a later book, Allison concludes, “I need to say that my
mama didn’t know what was going on, that I didn’t tell her, that when I finally did tell someone it was not
her. I need to say that when I told, only my mama believed me, only my mama did anything at all, that
thirty years later one of my aunts could still say to me that she didn’t really believe it, that he had been such
a hardworking, good-looking man” (Two or Three 42). As Timothy Dow Adams argues, “While she needs
to say these things, she also signals the reader that she hasn’t literally said them, and that she is not really
able to exonerate her mother completely. . . . She seeks a way of telling what can truthfully accommodate
both her actual history and her need to protect her family’s history” (87).
true, stories good enough to keep even if they were three-quarters false. All the
Boatwrights told stories, it was one of the things we were known for, and what one
cousin swore was gospel, another swore just as fiercely was an unqualified lie” (52-53).
As Sandell argues, Bone comes to realize “how meanings and histories are always both
relational and contestable. There is no single truth, only versions of the truth” (218). By
accepting that there are multiple versions of the past, Bone learns from her family the
power of a good story to change the account of the past, and this is a lesson that will help
her survive haunting memories of traumatic abuse. After hearing a family story in which
Aunt Alma threw her housedress at the county sheriff as she was being evicted, Bone is
told, “Oh no, girl. That’s just what people tell. She didn’t really do that. She just
threatened to do that.” And Bone concludes, “It’s a better story if she had done it, which
is probably why they say she stripped down to her panties, huh?” (189). If the
Boatwrights can change family history to make a better story, a more bearable storied
memory can make a history of traumatic abuse easier to survive and overcome.

Allison, herself, is very aware of the power of story to reflect different versions of
the past. As she describes the Boatwright family in an interview:

[T]hey all tell stories, and they have a way of storytelling that in some way
parallels gospel music. Like choruses that repeat . . . and essentially they
repeat each other’s stories to a certain extent. Just different versions.
There are a whole lot of stories about the Cherokee great-grandaddy, and
they all had their own view about it and they each had to have a different
voice. . . . And everything was constructed around what these people, who
were essentially aunts and uncles, were giving [to] Bone: a sense of who
she was in the world—what her possibilities were. (“Moving” 72)
And so, as Bone spends time with each of the aunts in order to avoid encounters with Daddy Glen, she begins to learn of “her possibilities” as a Boatwright woman—possibilities that are defined by shame and by strength. As Shawn E. Miller notes, “Throughout the remainder of the novel, Bone will concern herself with learning the lore of that matrix [the Boatwright clan] as a method of determining her place in it, and whether in fact she has any place at all” (141). It is this lore that will ultimately help her to integrate her experiences of abuse and loss into her understanding of who she is as a person and who she is as a Boatwright woman.

Significantly, when Bone begins to tell her own stories, she tells horrific stories of “boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered”—stories, that is, of abuse (119). As the storytelling “habit” becomes “strong” in her, she compulsively tells stories, and the more stories she tells, the better the storyteller she becomes: “My cousins loved my stories. . . . I got to be very popular as a baby-sitter; everyone was quiet and well-behaved while I told my stories, their eyes fixed on my face in a way that made me feel like one of my own witches casting a spell” (118-9). As she conveys her own horrific abuse in her horror stories, she feels empowered as a storyteller, and this power correlates with the power she achieves in her masturbatory fantasies of her abuse. Indeed, Allison’s novel, as Vincent King contends, “focuses on Bone’s awkward efforts to survive, and even

---

20 This is particularly true when Bone spends time with her Aunt Ruth, who “wanted to make sure I understood who our people were and what they had done” (126).

21 As Tanya Horeck argues, “The child’s relation to storytelling in the face of paternal prohibition accords with Allison’s description of the feminist writer’s reaction to dominant fiction that purports to represent the reality of the marginalized” (51).
transmute, these horrors” (124). Bone, in part, survives because her fantasies allow her, in the realm of fiction, what Tanya Horeck describes as “a space of self-preservation where she can survive the everyday violence she must endure” (51). While Bone has these fantasies because of Daddy Glen’s abuse, to Horeck, “the crucial point is that she desperately needs them,” for they are one of the only places where she is in control (52). Not only do the narratives provide her a sense of control, but they also allow her to story her memories of abuse in such a way that prompts her to shift her conception of self from the powerless victim of oppression to the defiant survivor.

As Bone rewrites the memories of her abuse in her masturbatory fantasies, Allison explains, “she retains a sense of power in a situation where she has none” (“Moving” 72). For instance, when she masturbates with the chain she finds in the lake, using the lock she found on the river bank to fasten the chain around her hips, she feels “locked away and safe. What I really was could not be touched. What I really wanted was not yet imagined. Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me” (193). Likewise, Bone gains “comfort,” according to Allison, by “retelling herself the story in which she is not the victim,” but instead, “becomes the heroine. Even when she’s the martyred heroine, she’s still the heroine and they love her fiercely”

---

22 Further, “Scenes in which the child rewrites her violation in story and sexual fantasy correspond to Allison’s engagement with literary narrative as a ‘process of survival’” (Horeck 48).

23 Many critics have reiterated this point, including Brenda Boudreau, who argues, “Bone is empowered through the control she takes of her own fantasies, one of the few places Daddy Glen cannot have any control” (53).
This is most clear in her masturbatory fantasy in which people watch Daddy Glen beat her:

Now I imagined people watching while Daddy Glen beat me, though only when it was not happening. When he beat me, I screamed and kicked and cried like the baby I was. But sometimes when I was safe and alone, I would imagine the ones who watched. Someone had to watch—some girl I admired who barely knew I existed, some girl from church or down the street, or one of my cousins, or even somebody I had seen on television. Sometimes a whole group of them would be trapped into watching. They couldn’t help or get away. They had to watch. In my imagination I was proud and defiant. I’d stare back at him with my teeth set, making no sound at all, no shameful scream, no begging. Those who watched admired me and hated him. I pictured it that way and put my hands between my legs. It was scary, but it was thrilling too. Those who watched me, loved me. It was as if I was being beaten for them. I was wonderful in their eyes. (112)

Bone further explains, “I loved those fantasies, even though I was sure they were a terrible thing. They had to be; they were self-centered and they made me have shuddering orgasms. In them, I was very special. I was triumphant, important” (113). In them, she can see herself as a heroine, and this helps her to bolster her fledging sense of self. Likewise, as J. Brooks Bouson notes, “If in this replay of her stepfather’s physical and sexual abuse, Bone attempts to gain active mastery over passive suffering, she also defies her stepfather through her autoerotic pleasures and thus achieves a secret sense of ‘pride’” (“You Nothing” 111-12). She uses her masturbatory memory-narratives, then, as space to regain power over her identity.

The fact that Bone is able to derive any pleasure out of such horrific abuse suggests the import of her storied memories. As Katherine Henniger claims, “Daddy

---

24 Bone’s need to see herself as a heroine mirrors therapist John McLeod’s argument that the “heroic” narrative in therapy can lead to emotional healing.
Glen may claim access to her body, physically and sexually, but Bone learns to use storytelling as a way of re-claiming the power of that access” (99). This allows Bone to preserve a relationship with her body, “the body she is made to believe she should hate” (Horeck 53). Her storied accounts of her abuse do not stop at the level of fantasy, however. Instead, after her fantasy in which people are watching, she is able to bring elements of her storied memory of abuse into the reality of her beatings. Thus, when Daddy Glen beats Bone before Aunt Ruth’s funeral, just as in the fantasy, she does not scream: “I would not scream. I would not, would not, would not scream” (234). Afterwards, she concludes, “There was only one thing that mattered. I had not screamed” (235). In both cases, her storied accounts of her abuse—her fantasies—provide a form of agency and resistance that she would otherwise not have had.

Bone’s ability to create a story for herself and her memories of trauma, however, stalls before she is able to voice her trauma to someone outside of herself. She does come close to disclosure in a discussion with Aunt Ruth, before Ruth’s death. Bone tells her aunt, “Daddy Glen hates me” (122). Ruth goes on to ask, “Bone, has Daddy Glen ever . . . well . . . touched you? . . . Has he ever hurt you, messed with you? . . . Down here, honey. Has he ever hurt you down there?” But instead of telling her aunt the truth

---

25 Saxey also argues that “Bone’s imaginative connection with stories allows her to reconstruct her sexual desire despite, and beyond, the silence surrounding the abuse. The abuse becomes the center of a story that she tells to reclaim the authoritative position in the abusive situation. She cannot shift the central fact of the abuse from her imagination but she can attempt to rework it” (44-5).

26 Ruth’s initial response is, “Tell me, Bone. . . . You think I’m dying?” (122). Lynda Hart suggests that “Ruth does recognize that Bone has spoken the unspeakable, but rather than responding to the child’s demand she sees it as her own opportunity to ask the unspeakable question that has hovered around her illness” (189).
about her abuse, Bone simply whispers “No.” Inside she screams, “Tell her all of it. Tell her,” but all she manages to utter is “He scares me,” which elicits the same response she has heard from her mother—“Oh honey . . . What are we gonna do with you?” (122). Thus, Bone continues to protect her mother by not sharing her narrative of abuse. As Eunjoo Woo explains, “The mother/daughter relationship in the novel is interrelated with the issue of silence. Silence is the tacit agreement between mother and daughter. In silence, the daughter, Bone, is loved and identifies with her mother, Anney. Breaking the silence means to Bone that she breaks or loses fellowship, trust, and agreement with her mother” (692). Rather than sacrificing her relationship with her mother, Bone remains silent. When questioned by an angry intern at the hospital about her broken coccyx—a product of one of Daddy Glen’s beatings—Bone refuses to tell what happened. Seeing her mother’s terror, she concludes that the intern “didn’t know us, didn’t know my mama or me” (114). Likewise, after they leave the hospital, even though the “pain” is “hot,” Bone finds that she cannot “hurt her” mother by telling her story, so she simply whispers, “I’m sorry” (116). Later, after a different beating, Raylene finally sees the bruises and welts under Bone’s skirt. As opposed to finding solace in the fact that someone finally shares her secret, all Bone can do is panic about the pain the public exposure of her abuse will cause her mother: “Mama! I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” she pleads (246). As Bone

---

27 This happens once again after the rape at the conclusion of the novel. Bone finds herself wanting to tell the sheriff what happened, “But it all seemed so complicated in my head, so long and difficult.” Then she realizes that he is a figure of patriarchal oppression, a “Daddy Glen in uniform,” a man with “the same paternal privilege and imposition of male power mark[ing] them capable of the same mistreatment of her mother, and ultimately, of Bone herself,” and she gives up, hopeless and ready to die (296; Gilmore 57).
explains, she is “More terrified of hurting her than of anything that might happen to me” (118).

Instead of sharing her trauma with her mother after the encounter with the intern, Bone lies alone in bed, and as she masturbates, making herself “as hard and rigid as I could make myself,” she thinks of Glen. It is in this moment, when attempting to remember the cause of her abuse, that she finally comes to realize her mother’s complicity in the abuse, and she is able to truly condemn Glen for his horrific perpetuation of victimization. As she lies in bed, thinking, she tries “to remember how it had started. What was it I had done? Why had he always hated me?” (252). She realizes, then, that she “had been so proud of not crying that last time, so sure it was important,” and she asks, “Why had it mattered?” And she comes to an important realization: “Whether I screamed or fought or held still, nothing changed” (252). She continues, “it did not matter whether I had screamed or not. It had all been the way he wanted it. It had nothing to do with me or anything I had done. It was an animal thing, just him using me” (252-3). With this hopeless realization that she has no control,28 she finally begins to “hold people responsible” and get “angry,” which Allison argues will “save her” (“Moving” 73). Thus, as Bone talks with her mother about what she believes will be Anney’s imminent return to Daddy Glen, she tells Anney, “I know you’ll go back, Mama, and maybe you should. I don’t know what’s right for you, just what I have to do. I can’t

---

28 Vickroy also argues that it is “Not until she realizes that she does not have any control over Glen’s or her mother’s actions [that Bone can] overcome her defenses and accept her own sorrow in a lengthy process of mourning which begins as the novel ends” (41). However, she argues that this realization comes later, after the rape.
go back to live with Daddy Glen. . . . [N]o matter what you decide, when you go back to Daddy Glen, I can’t go with you” (276). Finally deciding that she must protect herself rather than her mother—a lesson she learns after returning to face her memories of abuse—Bone exerts the agency necessary to begin the process of saving herself.

Unfortunately, the most brutal scene of violation is yet to come, as Glen comes to find Bone at her Aunt Alma’s and begs her to return to her family home. When she refuses, he sets himself upon her, brutally attacking and raping her. However, this time, Bone fights back as she attempts to resist him physically and mentally: “I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn’t matter. I didn’t care anymore what might happen. I wouldn’t hold still anymore. I tried to wiggle free” (283). Likewise, she tries to stab him with a butter knife: “I jerked that knife up and rammed it into his side as hard as I could. It slid along his belt, smearing peanut butter on his shirt, not even tearing the material but hurting him anyway. I could tell” (283). She tries to kick and bite him, “All the time my left hand was flailing, reaching, scrambling for anything, something. Where was that knife?” (285). And when she is unable to fight his physical advances and he pulls her to the floor to rape her, she threatens to tell her mother, and fights him with her words: “‘You!’ I told him. ‘Mama’s never gonna go back to you. I won’t let her. I hate you.’” (284). Likewise, she curses him: “Damn you! Damn you! Damn you! God will damn you! . . . You fucker!” (285).

As Laura S. Patterson observes, “While not ultimately effective, Bone gains agency in the scene, acting out her own sexualized violence, though pale in contrast with what she
experiences” (51). She continues, “For Allison, the rape scene might not contain a fully defended victim, but it keeps the rising agency and voice in control of the victim rather than in control of her male aggressor or male defenders” (51). The voice that Bone now has come to use and control is even more important than Patterson indicates, for Bone has taught herself how to resist domination by narrating the stories of powerful characters and survivors, and here, she applies these stories to the reality of her life. Thus, after the rape, as Anney walks in and sees Daddy Glen’s body on top of her daughter, Bone is ready to tell her story—the story of a girl who resisted: “I had to tell her that I had fought him, that I had never wanted him to touch me, never” (287). Her act of resistance belies a reclamation of her own self-worth.

However, the most devastating moment in the novel occurs after Anney carries Bone to the car to take her to the hospital. Glen, after begging Anney to kill him and insisting that he cannot live without her, begins to beat his head against the car door, and Anney responds by turning to Glen and comforting him. That Anney turns away from Bone in her most desperate time of need is, in many ways, more painful than the rape itself, for it signifies Anney’s abandonment of her daughter as she chooses Glen over Bone. After dropping Bone at the hospital, Anney disappears with Daddy Glen, and so it is Aunt Raylene who visits Bone at the hospital and who takes Bone home, comforts her, and helps her regain her health, for after dropping Bone at the hospital, her mother’s abandonment, as much as the rape, has left Bone “older, meaner, rawboned, crazy, and hateful” (301). But by drawing on lessons from her family’s history, Bone is able to
begin to overcome her hatred for herself and her mother. Raylene tells Bone that she must “Stop thinking about what happened. Don’t think about it. Don’t try to think about nothing. You can’t understand it yet. You don’t have to. It don’t make sense, and I can’t explain it to you. You can’t explain it to yourself. . . . It’ll be better in time, I promise” (301). Raylene understands both the “cooling function” of time on memory, but also that Bone’s trauma and her mother’s abandonment cannot yet be integrated into her understanding of herself. Sharing her own memory of asking her lover to choose between herself and her child, Raylene tells Bone, “We do terrible things to the ones we love sometimes. . . . We can’t explain it. We can’t excuse it. It eats us up, but we do them just the same” (301). Raylene’s memory will ultimately help Bone understand her mother’s life choices more clearly, but for now, Bone simply remains silent. She “was willing to eat and sit up, but not to speak” (303), but her memories of trauma and abandonment are simply too much to put into language, and they simply hurt too much.

But then, when Anney appears on Raylene’s porch a few days later, Bone sees the truth in Raylene’s assessment of Anney—“She loves you more than her life, and she an’t gonna forgive herself for what she’s done to you, what she allowed to happen” (301). Anney’s face has changed, confirming that there are things in life much harder than losing a man: “Now that face was made new. Bones seemed to have moved, flesh fallen away, and lines deepened into gullies, while shadows darkened to streaks of midnight” (306). Anney’s choice has hit her harder than anything else in her life, as is made clear in her changed appearance. And seeing this, Bone realizes that just as she was unable to
control her situation of abuse, perhaps Anney also has suffered from events outside of her control. She thinks, “Maybe it wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t mine. Maybe it wasn’t a matter of anybody’s fault. Maybe it was like Raylene said, the way the world goes, the way hearts get broken all the time” (307). This realization leads her to start to understand her memories of hurt in a new way, and she begins, at least, to express her pain. As she presses her face into her mother’s neck, she lets go of her “grief,” “anger,” “guilt,” and “shame” (307). In this final brief encounter with her mother, Bone voices her pain and anger, and thus begins to integrate her traumatic experiences and memories into the larger picture of her life and the life of her mother, while also letting go of some of her hatred and shame. As Baker explains, “Allison interrogates the bias toward mother-blame in dominant theories of sexual abuse, family pathology, and psychotherapy. . . . And she rejects it.” Baker continues, “For the sake of narrative compression, she distills into thirty pages and a matter of only a few fictional days a process that can take years, decades, or even a lifetime to complete, if ever” (135). After Anney leaves, it is clear that Bone has reclaimed her voice. When Raylene says that she doesn’t know where Anney and Glen are going, Bone is able to fill in the details of the story: “California, I said. “Or Florida, maybe. He always talked about taking us off there sometime” (308).

Part of Bone’s healing process comes from a gift, which was left by her mother. In her lap, Bone finds a copy of her birth certificate. The top half reads, “RUTH ANNE BOATWRIGHT. Mother: ANNEY BOATWRIGHT. Father: UNKNOWN,” and the bottom half “was blank, unmarked, unstamped” (309). As Miller observes, Bone’s birth
certificate invokes “the old ‘family legend’ and an image of Anney as strong and determined.” He continues, “this story, not the certificate, is Anney’s real healing gift” (151). But this story is not only one about Anney’s strength as a younger woman, strength that Bone must emulate to overcome her abandonment and trauma, but it is also a story of mother-love. Early in the novel, Bone remembers a story shared by her Granny: “Once Granny had told me how Mama carried me down to the courthouse after I was born and fought with the man there about the way they had made out my birth certificate. Telling me that story, Granny’s eyes had glittered and her mouth had turned up in a fierce smile. ‘You don’t know how your mama loves you,’ she had said. ‘You can’t even imagine’” (261). In Granny’s account, it is clear that she was proud of her daughter even though she always questioned Anney’s repeated attempts to get an unmarked birth certificate. Likewise, Bone is reminded of the love her mother has for her, and the shame her birth brought into her mother’s life. Thus, when Bone notices the unstamped certificate, she begins to reflect on her mother’s life in its entirety, and she sees it as a life defined by oppression and shame.

Bone realizes that she does not know who her mother was before she was born, and “Once I was born, her hopes had turned and I had climbed up her life like a flower reaching for the sun. Fourteen and terrified, fifteen and a mother, just past twenty-one

29 Critics have argued about the significance of the birth certificate. For instance, V. King suggests that “Bone herself will be responsible for filling out the blank spaces of her own identity” (135), while Horeck argues that the certificate “does not change the fact that her family lineage and heritage irrevocably mark Bone” (55).
when she married Glen. Her life had folded into mine” (309). This realization provides important information for Bone—it provides a context in which to understand her mother’s abandonment during and after the abuse. Bone begins to grasp the effect of her mother’s poverty, her white-trash shame, and her dependence on patriarchal modes of thinking on the choices she made. In an interview, Allison described the frustration and confusion she felt surrounding her own mother’s choices: “The hardest thing for me to understand was why my mother stayed in this bad, bad marriage with a brutal man. And it took me my whole life to begin to understand” (“Moving” 76). Bone begins to understand, much more quickly than Allison, herself, that her mother was “powerfully caught” in the things she was “supposed to do. . . keep kids safe, find a good man, save him, and hang on for dear life” (Allison, “Moving” 76-7). Once Bone begins to understand the true context of her mother’s life, she is able to integrate her memories into that larger context in a way that is healing.

Also, as Bouson argues, “In a reparative gesture, the closure suggests that Bone’s connection to her extended family makes her feel connected to her estranged mother” (“You Nothing” 118). At the closure of the novel, weeks before turning thirteen, Ruth Anne “Bone” Boatwright concludes, “I was already who I was going to be . . . someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman” (309). Like Anney and the women before her, Bone has survived trauma that is now written on her body. Thus, it is correct to interpret Bastard Out of Carolina, as Minrose Gwin does, as a story “primarily about survivorship” (424). And the way Bone ultimately survives is to follow the model
identified by psychologists Maruna and Ramsden: she must understand herself and her trauma through her “embeddedness” and her “deep connections” with her family. By finally believing in the “unity” of her life with her mother’s, and accepting her “inclusion” as a true Boatwright woman, she tells the story of her survival (Maruna and Ramsden 144). At the end, Bone leans against Raylene, “trusting her,” and in doing so, she aligns her life with Raylene’s. Bone is aware that following Raylene’s life model may not be an easy path. She thinks, “If I followed her lead I might come back with worse scars, or not come back at all” (179). However, “Raylene was probably the only person any of us would ever meet who was completely satisfied with her own company” (179), and because of this, Raylene is able to teach Bone one of the most important lessons in the book. She jokes, early in the novel, that “Trash rises. . . . Out here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time” (180). It is a lesson Allison holds dear: “You can create redemption for yourself” (Allison, qtd. in Reynolds 44).

As multiple critics have noticed, Bone does find redemption, as is evidenced in the narrative voice of Bastard Out of Carolina. As Vincent King observes, Bone is “at least seventeen” when she narrates the novel. He argues, “In the years following the end of the novel, she transforms herself from a Boatwright to a storywright, from the victim of a story into the author of one” (136). Likewise, Horeck notes, “The opening of the

---

30 Ruth teaches Bone a similar lesson. As Bone separates a large bucket of Wandering Jew into smaller containers, Ruth says, “People say it’s a weed but I’ve always liked it, specially since it don’t take any effort to keep it going.” Ruth tells her that “some of it would die back but if I could avoid bruising the fine hairs on the roots, most of it would live” (130). Later, Bone considers her plant: “The cutting drooped already, getting ready to lose half its growth,” she says, “But the stem was moist and flexible under my fingers. Strong. It would come back strong” (134). She, too, has strong roots, and she, too, will come back stronger.
novel underscores the narrative voice as that of the mature storyteller: one who speaks from the present as a survivor of past events” (48). And Hart comments, “In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, one notices that Bone’s consciousness is not a consistent realist representation of a twelve-year-old girl” (202). What critics ignore, however, is that Bone’s narrative power and ultimate survival comes from her ability to tell the story of her trauma in a way that helps her overcome the horrors of her past. It is not only important that she tells her story, then, but that she tells it in a way that provides her hope and agency in the future. Thus, *Bastard Out of Carolina* is Bone’s storied memory of endured and survived traumatic sexual and physical abuse and abandonment. Through it, she comes to know herself as one who was able to face great trauma and overcome great oppression. As Sandell observes, “Allison uses not just the trope of storytelling to empower Bone but specifically the trope of therapeutic recovery” (220). Bone ultimately narrates her trauma, and successfully integrates it into a larger understanding of herself and her family, situating her at the end of the novel, not as a victim, but as a survivor.

And yet, this story is not only Bone’s, but also Allison’s. Woo argues that “Allison not only re-creates herself as a girl in the novel but also makes the protagonist break her silence and speak out against the oppression in order to find her own identity” (689)—the identity of a writer and a storyteller, defined by both Bone and Allison. In Allison’s *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*, a performance piece that is often read as a companion piece to *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Allison concludes that “The story becomes the thing needed” (3). The storied memories of trauma allow both Allison and
her fictional representative, Bone, to overcome their pasts which were driven by pain, suffering, and domination. Likewise, understanding the history of her family allows the survivor of trauma to more fully integrate that trauma into the context of that history—a process Allison values. She writes, “Two of three things I know for sure, and one of them is just this—if we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as seed in a wind” (12, her italics). We must be able to name our story of trauma; we must also understand it in the context of our larger histories. Allison also writes, “Two or three things I know for sure and one of them is that telling the story all the way through is an act of love” (Allison, Two or Three 90). Bone must understand her mother’s life and the life of her aunts to find forgiveness and love for her mother, and forgiveness and love for herself. Allison, too, has found that telling the story is a route to forgiveness and hope: “I made peace with my family. I forgave myself and some of the people I had held in such contempt—most of all those I loved. That forgiveness took place in large part through the writing of these stories, in a process of making peace with the violence of my childhood, in owning up to it and finding a way to talk about it that did not make me ashamed of myself or those I loved” (Trash viii). Bone tells her story of victimization and traumatic memory from the position of the survivor, and through it, she resists the lasting repercussions of painful traumatic memory. Allison, too, finds solace, forgiveness, and healing in her narrative, her storied memory of trauma and love.
Familial Trauma in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Like Dorothy Allison, who has identified both the compelling need to share her stories of trauma and the possibility for resistance and healing that is embodied in the act of narrating those traumatic memories, Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat has articulated her awareness of the power of such memories in the lives of the women she writes about. In her discussion of *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women’s Stories of Survival and Resistance*, a book of testimony written by women who were victims of trauma during a 1993 coup in Haiti, Danticat describes the importance of *storying* memories of trauma. As she explains, “There’s a sense that you must tell where it might be better for you to be silent or, if you’re raped, your husband might leave you. . . . [T]here is that feeling that if you have a voice, you must speak. . . . Women in particular because our society is like other societies where women, especially poor women, are not often given the opportunity to speak” (“A Conversation” 117-18). In a forward composed for that collection, Danticat further emphasizes the need of women victims to testify to their trauma and to narrate the stories of their traumatic memories. “As they recount their survival, their resistance, their joy, their pride, their pains,” Danticat explains, “the tone is almost matter-of-fact, as if they are simultaneously asking themselves, their interviewer, and now their readers, ‘What would you do if you were in my place?’” And one possible answer Danticat provides the readers of the collection is that if women are to survive, they must narrate their memories of trauma: “I would pray to have lived to testify” (x). Recognizing that trauma is often recorded in fragments and sometimes seems to be
unutterable, Danticat argues, “what makes these narratives so exceptional” is that “their attempt at defining the indefinable” is, in itself, “an act of renewal, a celebration of survival, a moment of witness, for both the speakers and the listeners” (*Walking*).

In her own fiction, Danticat has demonstrated the importance of narrating traumatic memories, and, like Allison, has shown how individuals can better understand their personal histories through integrating their memories into a larger life narrative. From a young age, Danticat, who has been described as having “perhaps the most stellar literary career of any black woman writer anywhere in the world” (Fulani 75), has recognized the power of narrative to help her understand the events of her own life. Explaining why she kept a journal, she remarks that the “only way” she knew how to “better understand” what was happening in her life was “by reading and writing” (Danticat, qtd. in Rossi 214). Her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, began as an essay she composed in high school for a newspaper that asked her to write about her experience of immigrating to the United States at the age of fourteen. But, like Allison, Danticat quickly learned “the possibilities of fiction, like being able to expand and broaden a story and invent parts of it,” to better tell her story (Danticat, “An Interview” [Lyons] 185). And even in the genre of fiction, Danticat has gained self-understanding by narrating her own life. As she explains, “Using some of my own experiences in fiction helped me to understand ‘my story’ in a much deeper way” (“Splintered Families” 198). Still, although her novel bears some autobiographical elements—Danticat’s parents immigrated to the U.S. leaving their daughter with family in Haiti, and she later joined
them in the U.S., an experience shared by Breath, Eyes, Memory’s protagonist, Sophie—Danticat is clear that even though she bases her work on “some autobiographical material,” she is “not writing memoir” (Danticat, “Edwidge” 22). In fact, Spratling says, “[I]t would be more accurate to call the book emotionally autobiographical, because although there are some parallels between her life and Sophie’s there are some drastic differences” (qtd. in Rossi 213).

At the same time, when she describes her audience in interviews, Danticat claims that she thinks “of the girl I was when I was fifteen. I write what she would have liked to read. So I write for me” (“My Turn” 127). Always searching “to know the larger context of my history,” she finds herself, “looking for it everywhere and searching to patch the pieces together” (“The Voice” 39).31 Danticat realizes that her story, the story of the Haitian woman who has immigrated, the story of a girl growing up in Haiti, and the stories of so many other Haitian people have yet to be told. In an interview, she explained the importance she places on telling women’s stories:

Well, traditionally women are the purveyors of culture—they pass things from generation to generation. But women often aren’t the ones who write history. They don’t go to war and recount the victories—although Simone de Beauvoir equates childbirth with the experience of going to war, and we can find great women warriors in the histories of many African countries, as well as Haiti. But often these warrior women don’t end up writing their stories or being featured in history books. This is why

---

31 In an interview about her book After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival Jacmel, Haiti, Danticat described her work as being “about memory, re-membering, as Toni Morrison has said, putting pieces of ourselves back together again” (“An Interview” [Collins] 472).
I am extremely interested in the role of women in historical and cultural preservation, in both the private and the public realms. ("My Turn" 117)

As literary critic Katherine Thomas reminds readers, “In the face of colonialism and imperialism, Haitian women have been doubly marginalized, denied a voice. . . . Gender, race, poverty, powerlessness have excluded the Haitian woman from discourse and raped her cultural identity. She is absent from the pages of history and has only recently begun to reclaim the memories that forge her identity within her home environment” (35-6).

Thus, as an author, Danticat attempts to reclaim this voice for women and reaffirm their previously silenced memories, stories, and histories.

Indeed, although Danticat claims that she is “not a historian,” she remains “fascinated by history and especially the way that it manifests itself in the present” and feels that authors like her, “on some level,” are “filling in the gap,” and “plugging in a hole” in the historical record through their efforts to share women’s stories (Danticat, “Dyasporic Appetites” 35, 34). The way Danticat chooses to fill this gap is through story and narrative. As she explains:

[T]hink of the way we learn and remember things. Someone can tell you a fact and you might remember it. However, if they tell you a story you are

32 Of Breath Eyes, Memory, Danticat says, “I wanted the book to have a matriarchal family. . . . Some people have said that I purposely excluded men; however, the way I see it is that it’s like taking a photograph. You decide what you want to focus on from a larger landscape. I wanted to explore how a family of rural women passes things down through generations” (“An Interview” [Lyons] 186).

33 Multiple historians and critics, including Edouard Glissant, have argued that the traumatic history of Haiti, and the Caribbean in general, have left a hole in the collective memory of many Haitians. Specifically, “The traces of violence, rupture, and dislocation continue to possess and to haunt generations of Haitians,” which creates what Glissant terms a nonhistory defined by “a present that is played out as repletion and recurrence, endlessly circling around a central lacuna of loss and dispossession” (C. Sweeney 54). In a convincing argument, Sweeney argues that Danticat, and others like her, write to narrate and validate that Haitian history that has been defined by collective trauma.
more likely to remember the event through story. Stories make events come alive. You can use a story to illustrate something in a manner that a fact cannot, and with fiction you can make up as many scenarios as you want to illustrate one thing, so you have more routes at your disposal. Something factual never changes, but with fiction the means you have of illustrating your “truth” are endless. ("Edwidge" 20)  

Realizing the power in narrative to affect the ways we understand history, Danticat tells stories of those who have been silenced and forgotten. In doing so, she does not turn away from the traumatic and disturbing, for memories of such events should not be neglected or denied. Thus, she finds herself:

drawn to stories that haunt me, that make me want to cry, and those are the ones I tend to write. . . . They seem to choose me. I am drawn to painful situations, things that make me sad. I write about them until I feel a little better. I wouldn’t say I turn painful situations into joyful ones. But pain can be a powerful muse. It can force one to sit down and express something from very deep within. . . . The trick is to try to make some kind of art out of that pain. ("My Turn” 116-7)

34 Of a later novel, Farming of the Bones, Danticat explains, “I didn’t want to make this a history lesson. There are nonfiction books on this event that people can read. What I wanted to do was write in the voice of a person telling her own story in the best way she could, in the best way I could” ( "The Voice” 39). Likewise, she states, “I have always been fascinated by history, but the kind of history that’s told by ordinary people; that to me is the biggest story of history/herstory—the personal narrative. . . . I’ve always been fascinated by these individual voices in history and the fact that one person’s voice adds to another and that creates a chorus” (36). This seems to be her goal throughout most of her work—to make the reality of a past event palpable through the eyes and voice of one limited viewpoint or person, a person who may not otherwise have a chance to share his or her account of history.

35 Danticat is also aware that there are many different stories that embody women’s lives, and that it is important to value each woman as an individual. She writes in an afterword added to the paperback version of Breath, Eyes, Memory in 1999, “I write this to you now, Sophie, as I write it to myself, praying that the singularity of your experience be allowed to exist, along with your own peculiarities, inconsistencies, your own voice. And I write this not to you, thanking you for the journey of healing—from here and back—that you and I have been through together, with every step wishing that both our living and our dead will rest in peace” (236). Likewise she has commented on her frustration that Sophie has been taken to “represent every girl child, every woman from this land that you and I love so much. Tired of protesting, I feel I must explain. Of course, not all Haitian mothers are like your mother. Not all Haitian daughters are tested, as you have been” (236). Still, it is important that her story is told.
Likewise, she explains, “If you feel you are honoring some kind of past pain, it’s different than staring at a wound every day” (qtd. in Fulani 76). Often, this “honoring” of “past pain” becomes the task of her characters as well. Those who are able to narrate, making some kind of art—some kind of *storied memory*—out of their pain, find a way to survive horrible trauma, while those who remain stuck coping with unintegrated fragments of traumatic memory find themselves unable to survive. In either case, as Helen Scott describes, “History is a living presence in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, a palpable force that shapes the present and may either sustain or destroy living” (461). The way Danticat’s women characters deal with their histories of trauma determines their future and the future of their daughters.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the two main characters, Martine Caco, a Haitian woman who is raped at sixteen and who moves to the United States to escape her traumatic past, and her daughter, Sophie, the product of that rape, struggle to resist and survive devastating memories of trauma. Sophie has grown up in Haiti in the care of Martine’s sister—her Tante Atie—and at the beginning of the novel, at the age of twelve, she immigrates to New York to join her mother. It is clear that even years after the rape, when Sophie joins her mother in New York City, Martine is still haunted by her traumatic memories of the past. Martine’s inability to forget is what defines her life, for Martine’s

---

36 Through Danticat’s narratives, Haitian women and their traumas finally become part of an historical record. As Donette A. Francis argues, “If dominant narrative forms have failed to tell Haitian women’s stories of sexual violations, then, for Danticat, the novel serves as an appropriate space from which to write sexual histories. Unlike old-style political history that chronicles the victories of great men and legitimizes their point of view as the nation’s official memory, Danticat centers poor, peasant, migrant, laboring women to inscribe their ‘unofficial’ memories into the historical narrative of the Haitian nation-state” (76).
traumatic past is constantly with her, as is evidenced through the persistent, haunting slivers of memory that permeate her experience in the U.S. In an interview, Danticat emphasized the importance of memory when uprooting one’s life to settle in another country: “I think memory is the great bridge between the present and the past, between here and there, even between life and death. It’s what helps us rebuild and start over in another country, to reconstruct our lives” (“My Turn” 125). But Martine’s memory remains so focused on her traumatic past that she finds herself unable to “start over.” As Danticat further explains in the interview: “I know many people who would rather forget the past, but even trying to forget is a chore. . . . even amnesiacs have memory” (125). Thus, even as Martine tries to turn away from her past, refusing or unable to confront the details defining the true horror of her rape—as she tells Sophie about her past she admits that recalling the rape is simply “too much” for her—it is clear that it is also impossible for her to simply forget. In fact, she is constantly recalling and reliving the rape, as she is bound in a continual repetition of her initial trauma.

Martine does tell Sophie of the rape. She says, “I thought Atie would have told you. . . . it happened like this. A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you. . . . I did not know this man. I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me” (61). Sophie reflects, “She did not sound hurt or angry, just like someone who was stating a fact. Like naming a color or calling a name. Something that already existed and could not be changed. It took me twelve years to piece together my mother’s
entire story. By then, it was already too late” (61). As Donette A. Francis remarks, Martine “had hoped that her sister Atie would have told Sophie the story of her birth, relieving Martine from having to narrativize her trauma” (80). As it stands, Martine only “concisely states the essentials” (80), and her unwillingness to story her traumatic memory exhibits her inability to process the events in her past and overcome her pain. Indeed, Martine is unwilling, or perhaps unable, to confront the horror of her past, and thus her pain remains constant and disturbing. As Carole Sweeney explains, “As an act of acute violence, rape not only physically and psychologically traumatizes its victims but, in a particularly gendered manner, also writes women out of history by the unwitnessed act of violation that is undocumented and thus remains latent” (58).  

Sweeney continues, “As she is being raped, her face is pushed down in the sugar cane field, her eyes blinded and her mouth filled with the dirt of the earth. Silenced and devoiced, she cannot even cry out to protest. . . . In the cane field, the site of so much violence to Haiti’s population, Martine is raped of her language, the dirt in her mouth a grotesque mirroring of degradation of the genital rape” (60). So Martine remains silent about her trauma, her mouth still figuratively filled with dirt, and she is plagued by flashes of memory of her trauma. As Martine fails to give witness to her own rape, fragments of her traumatic past remain always at the edges of her consciousness, demonstrating that, like the trauma victims described by psychologist Kai Erickson, she

---

37 Additionally, Carole Sweeney notes how common Martine’s untold story of rape is within Haitian history: “[S]tories of intense sexual trauma suffered by Haitian women during periods of political turmoil continue to remain unspoken, latent wounds outside of representation and interpretation” (57).
has not “yet come to terms with” the trauma that “haunts” her (184). It is Sophie who
must piece together the story of Martine’s trauma. Martine never does put the details of
her trauma into a *storied narrative*, nor is she able to voice the unutterable horror of her
ordeal.

Caught in the grip of her trauma, Martine, as critics have observed, “exhibits
classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder . . . includ[ing] the will to forget or
amnesia about the traumatic event, the attempt to dissociate that generally includes a
sense of fragmentation, and, the ‘unspeakableness’ of the trauma itself” (Francis 80).38
Likewise, uncontrollable visual flashes of traumatic memory haunt her, and her sleep is
constantly visited by nightmares of her brutal rape, where she relives “the experience
over and over again” (219). The first night Sophie stays with her mother, she wakes to
hear Martine “screaming as though someone was trying to kill her” (48). Martine
explains to her daughter how common this experience is for her—“‘It is the night,’ she
said. ‘Sometimes I see horrible visions in my sleep’” (48)—and on multiple occasions
throughout the novel, Sophie recounts her mother’s night terrors. Martine’s nightmares
began immediately after the rape, when she “was afraid that he would creep out of the
night and kill her in her sleep. . . . At night, she tore her sheets and bit of piece of her
own flesh when she had nightmares” (139). And her terror continues to haunt her dreams
throughout the rest of her life. Sophie says, “I knew the intensity of her nightmares. I

---

38 Semia Harbawi also identifies Martine’s psychological symptomology as Post-Traumatic Stress
Disorder: “Through Martine’s character, Danticat examines a woman’s experience of trauma at its worst.
Martine suffers from the syndrome of post-traumatic stress disorder” (41).
had seen her curled up in a ball in the middle of the night, sweating and shaking as she hollered for the images of the past to leave her alone. Sometimes the fright woke her up, but most of the time, I had to shake her awake before she bit her finger off, ripped her nightgown, or threw herself out of a window” (193). As Francis explains, “These nightmares and self-mutilation, in addition to Martine’s reluctance and inability to confront and tell her own story, all demonstrate that she still suffers from the trauma of rape,” and thus, traumatic memory (80). Carole Sweeney further explains that Martine is unable to heal from the rape because her “experience of the trauma is not properly remembered but only registered and repeated and thus remains latent in her nightmares as a place of absolute horror” (60). Martine has never integrated her memories into her larger understanding of self, nor has she learned to story the trauma in a healing way. Even after a twelve year distance from the trauma, she has not begun the process of healing.

Martine initially moved away from Haiti to escape the horror of her past, but it is clear, from the moment that the twelve-year-old Sophie first sees her mother at the airport, the move did not provide the distance that Martine so desperately desired. As Francis observes, “The rape remains a persistent body memory” (80). Thus, Sophie sees the longtime effects of the trauma on her mother’s face and body. Instead of the beautiful woman Sophie had seen in pictures, her mother’s “face was long and hollow. Her hair had a blunt cut and she had long spindly legs. She had dark circles under her eyes and, as she smiled, lines of wrinkles tightened her expression. Her fingers were scarred and
sunburned. It was as though she had never stopped working in the cane fields after all’’ (42). Because Martine’s memories of trauma have remained etched on her body, she is never comfortable in her body. Likewise, when Martine is presented with memory cues that prompt her to recall the rape, she experiences even more uncontrolled flashes of her faceless attacker. When Sophie first comes to New York, Martine tells her, “But now when I look at your face I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father” (61). Although Martine never saw her rapist’s face, she is haunted by an image she has created of him, one that she sees in the visage of her daughter. Martine later tells her daughter, “When I first saw you in New York, I must admit, it frightened me the way you looked” (169). Likewise, although it is Sophie who must wake her mother from her nightmares, Sophie reflects, “When she saw my face, she looked even more frightened” (81). Because Martine has projected the face of her rapist onto her daughter, Sophie’s presence serves to further traumatize her. As Carole Sweeney explains, “Sophie’s physical appearance holds terror for Martine as it endlessly recalls the scene of the trauma in the field and the moment at which her voice and vision were destroyed and where she existed only as meaningless cavity” (61). Similarly, when Martine eventually returns to Haiti to help plan her mother’s funeral, she is plagued by even more persistent nightmares. She tells Sophie, “Whenever I’m there, I feel like I sleep with ghosts. The first night I was there, I woke up pounding my stomach” (189). By returning to the location of the initial horror, but never facing that horror head-on or

39 Not only does Martine constantly attempt to bleach her skin but she remains embarrassed about having a sexual relationship with her long-time boyfriend, Marc.
integrating the memory into a manageable story, Martine endures an intensification of her post-traumatic symptoms, and she is constantly barraged by fragments of her traumatic memory intruding into her life.

Martine’s inability to tell the full story of her rape, which would give Sophie a clear idea of her parentage, leaves Sophie, like *Bastard Out of Carolina*’s Bone, without a clear personal story of her origins. Also like Bone, Sophie is bothered by the fact that she does not look like the women in her family, for it is not clear where she fits into the lineage of Caco women, women who are “strong” but who have had hard lives, demonstrated by the “dirt under” their “fingernails” (185, 20). As a child in Haiti, Sophie reflects, “I looked like no one in my family. Not my mother. Not my Tante Atie. I did not look like them when I was a baby and I did not look like them now” (45). Likewise, when she finally meets her mother, she says, “There was no resemblance between us. I knew it” (55). Sophie lacks a bond with her mother and does not understand her mother’s history. Florence Ramond Jurney emphasizes this lack of connection in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*: Sophie “doesn’t know the story of her mother, which puts her own identity into question. . . . Sophie demonstrates her inability not only to identity vis-à-vis herself, but also to claim her right to the heritage that is hers because she doesn’t know her mother’s story” (n. pag.). As Jurney indicates, such a connection

As Danticat explains in the afterward, the Cacos are “named after a bird whose wings look like flames, and named after revolutionaries who fought and died in flames” (235). Thus, Sophie comes from a line of women meant to resist oppression.
could be fostered by shared stories of the past, stories that bring the women together, but instead, the only stories of her past that Martine offers Sophie leave her connectionless.  

Sophie does finally find a connection to the Caco women, and to her mother, but it is a connection based in trauma. When Martine first tells the twelve-year-old Sophie of her rape, she also tells Sophie about another form of sexual violation that she had to endure as a child. Martine explains to Sophie, “When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside. . . . The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure” (60-1). As Newtona Johnson explains, “Testing is, therefore, a part of the cultural heritage of the Caco family transmitted from one generation of Caco women to the next” (156). And thus, years later, when Martine suspects that her own eighteen-year-old daughter is becoming sexually active, she tests Sophie, ultimately traumatizing her daughter in the way that she, herself, has been traumatized.  

Martine is cognizant of the fact that the sexual violation is like a form of rape, for she has connected the two events in her own

---

41 Interestingly, although Sophie struggles to see the connection she shares with her mother, other characters see them as intimately connected. For instance, Atie tells Sophie, “Everything I love about you, I loved in her first” (20).

42 Numerous critics have suggested reasons that Martine would test her daughter. Nancy F. Gerber argues that the testing is a form of punishment: “Although Martine later acknowledges that she hated the testing, she is unable to prevent herself from punishing Sophie for the rape. For Martine, the rape and testing are inseparable” (195). Although I agree with Gerber that the rape and the testing are inseparable forms of trauma, each haunting Martine, I am more convinced by the theory put forth by Rossi, who argues that the testing is Martine’s attempt to assert her control over her daughter, for control is something Martine has clearly lacked in her own life. As Rossi argues, “Although she cannot control either men’s actions, or her daughter’s actions outside the home, Martine can control the home space, which she demonstrates by denying Sophie sexual autonomy” (207).
mind. As Martine tells Sophie, “My mother stopped testing me early,” ultimately suggesting that there was no need to continue the tests after she had been violated by a man, but also specifically connecting the horror of testing to the horror of rape (61). Likewise, much later in the novel, Martine admits that “the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about me being raped was that it made the *testing* stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day” (170). And so, as Martine first tests Sophie, she is surprisingly gentle, and she talks to Sophie throughout, trying to “distract” her from the horrific Haitian, maternal custom being perpetrated on her body (85). Likewise, after she completes the first test, she does seem to grasp what she has done to her daughter, for “She pulled a sheet up over my body and walked out of the room with her face buried in her hands” (85). But no matter how gentle her mother is, or how ashamed Martine is for perpetuating this horrific practice, the testing is a form of sexual abuse, and it is damaging to the eighteen-year-old Sophie.

Describing the virginity testing, Jennifer C. Rossi argues, “Pain becomes a legacy inherited by daughters, and the secrecy of this practice becomes a connection uniting mothers and daughters in their collective pain” (207). Finding a connection to her mother’s pain through the testing, Sophie, like her mother, must begin the search for ways to deal with such violation. Not surprisingly, this new connection of pain and

---

43 Carine Mardorossian emphasizes the surprising contradiction embodied in the testing—that “It is striking, for instance, that the very same women who are perpetrators of this shocking violence are also the most lucid as to its destructive effects in their daughters’ lives” (26). She goes on to suggest that “They are cultural transmitters [of trauma] independently of their own volition” (26). Although this conclusion suggests that the women cannot control perpetuating the abuse, and thus cannot stop it, which is not the case, it does adhere with the fact that people who have been abused themselves, are more likely to become abusers themselves.
trauma does not bring Martine and her daughter closer. Indeed, the abuse at the hands of her mother further isolates her from her mother. As Sophie explains, “My mother rarely spoke to me since she began the tests” (86-8). Not only do the tests further isolate Sophie, they leave her traumatized, “like there was no longer any reason to live” (87). As Carole Sweeney explains, “When Sophie is tested by her mother for her virginity, she experiences the familiar domestic simulacrum of rape, a violation of the body forcing the mind and the imagination to position itself elsewhere in order to survive the trauma” (62).

In order to separate herself from the traumatic abuse, Sophie tries to dissociate herself from her body during the testing. She “mouthed the words to the Virgin Mother’s Prayer: Hail Mary . . . so full of grace. The Lord is with you . . . You are blessed among women . . . Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pray for us poor sinners” (85). Finding this distraction not enough, she tries “to relive all the pleasant memories I remembered from my life. My special moments with Tante Atie and with Joseph and even with my mother” (85). This separation of the mind and body, what Sophie later calls doubling, both helps her survive and suggests the great psychological damage that occurs during the abuse. As Sophie explains, “I had learned to double while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known” (150). Literary critics have referred to “the life-saving process of ‘doubling,’” suggesting that “Self-erasure entails self-inflicted mutilation as an additional strategy of survival” (Harbawi 41, 42). In an interview, Danticat confirms this reading: “Sophie is saying, ‘I’ll gain strength. This is my body,

---

44 As Rossi notes, Martine initially tests Sophie to ensure she is not losing her daughter to someone else. But as Rossi explains, “the testing has the opposite effect, distancing Sophie from her mother” (207).
but I will go somewhere else. The core of me is somewhere else.’ In her case, she thinks of pleasant things—she imagines being in Haiti” (“The Dangerous” 385). Indeed, readers see Sophie, here, using her memories of the past to preserve herself in the present moment. At the same time, as Francis observes, doubling also suggests the “psychological state of dissociation” (83), a state that has lasting negative implications on the psyche of an individual.\(^{45}\) Until Sophie is able to face the memories of the testing, in conjunction with the more positive memories of her life, she will continue to suffer.

We see such negative implications on Sophie’s life, for instead of confronting her mother, she “is frequently passive when she interacts with her mother by not voicing any opposition to her” (D. Smith 135). Likewise, when she does finally find herself overcome and unable to deal with further testing, she does not act out against her mother to stop the testing but instead injures herself, her actions suggesting that she no longer feels a connection with her body:

> My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. I took the pestle and the bloody sheet and stuffed them into a bag. It was gone, the veil that always held my mother’s finger back every time she tested me. My body was quivering when my mother walked into my room to test me. My legs were limp when she drew them aside. I ached so hard I could barely move. Finally I failed the test. (88)

\(^{45}\) For Sophie, the concept of doubling also helps her understand how her mother could be both loving and abusive, simultaneously. She explains, “There were many cases in our history where our ancestors had \textit{doubled}. Following in the \textit{voudou} tradition, most of our presidents were actually one body split in two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home and play with their children and make love to their wives” (150). Danticat further explains in an interview: “Sophie also thinks of doubling as an explanation for cruelty. How could these people who have wives and children they play with murder people? But with doubling they could have these two selves: the kind-hearted person and the evil side. Doubling acknowledges that people make separations within themselves to allow very painful experiences, but also the separation allows people to do very cruel things” (“The Dangerous” 385).
As Marie-José N’Zengou-Tayo argues, Sophie’s “schizoid attitude,” demonstrated in her dissociative *doubling*, allows her “to postpone confrontation with her mother for the longest while possible. When confrontation appears unavoidable, she resorts to self-inflicted mutilation, turning toward herself the violence that could be directed at her mother” (130). We cannot be surprised that Sophie does not attack her mother, for she is simply responding to a lesson learned from her mother. Sophie knows that her mother’s own testing stopped after she was raped. Knowing no other possibilities for response to this situation, she replicates the story that she knows—she metaphorically rapes herself to stop the abuse.

Thus, critics see Sophie’s self-mutilation as “an act of resistance” that “ends the cycle of abuse,” as an example of “embodied protest,” and as an exhibition of “agency . . . as a means of escape from the horror of her mother’s testing” (Thomas 37; Francis 86; Duvivier 50), but also as a “self-rape” and a repetition of “the act of violence endured by her mother,” which continues “the vicious circle of victim/torturer” (Loichot 105, 104). Both are right—Sophie’s self-mutilation does signify her ability to act, demonstrating agency, and it does stop the testing—in fact her mother kicks her out of her home—but it also has a devastating impact on her life, as it brutally damages her body. Even as Sophie describes her act as “an act of freedom” (130), then, it is freedom that comes with a cost. Both the testing and her self-mutilation leave deep wounds, and like her mother, she must now live with the traumatic memories of two rapes, the one perpetrated by her mother and the one perpetrated by herself. Although Sophie leaves her mother’s home, the
physical and psychological traces of the abuse remain with her, as does the story and the trauma of her mother’s rape. As she explains:

After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother’s anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had ‘caught’ from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn’t both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl. (193)

Not only has Sophie taken on her mother’s nightmares, but, as Nancy F. Gerber explains, her rape “shapes the consciousness of the Caco women. The story of the rape is told and retold in varying detail” (195). Indeed, Sophie’s life has blurred with her mother’s life, leaving her to overcome not only her own pain, but also Martine’s.

Like her mother, trauma also has lasting physical implications for Sophie—she becomes bulimic,⁴⁶ and whenever she is with her husband, Joseph, she is unable to engage in a healthy sexual relationship.⁴⁷ Instead, she doubles, dissociating herself from what should be a pleasurable sexual act. And although her first sexual experience with

---

⁴⁶ Many critics have attempted to explain Sophie’s bulimia. Francis suggests, “For many bulimic women, eating serves to numb the pain and enable them to cope with bodily violations” (84). Francis adds, “Feeling she has no control over her body during intercourse, then eating and purging after sex is her faint attempt to exercise some control over her body” (84). Thomas concurs: “Denied control over her own body through the testing, Sophie stakes a claim for bodily autonomy in the only way she can, through her eating disorder” (38). Loichot describes Sophie’s bulimia as “the embodiment of Sophie’s forced amnesia,” that the act of “painfully swallowing a plethora of incompatible nutrients and vomiting them forcefully” demonstrates the “indigestible combination” of events in Sophie’s life (104).

⁴⁷ As Carole Sweeney notes, “Both Martine and Sophie are incarcerated in a prison of ever-repeated trauma, played out in a violent self-mutilation or starvation, skin bleaching, and self-harm” (59). She continues, “Martine and Sophie’s traumas are addressed not through language but through the starving and bleaching and straightening of the body in an effort to discipline the unruly memories of the past lodged in the body” (63).
her husband is certainly not rape, it shares elements of her mother’s traumatic experience:

Even though it occurred weeks later, our wedding night was painful. It was like the tearing all over again; the ache and soreness had still not disappeared. Joseph asked me several times if I really wanted to go through with it. He probably would have understood if I had said no. However, I felt it was my duty as a wife. Something I owed to him, now that he was the only person in the world watching over me. That first very painful time gave us the child. (130)

Just as Sophie is a result and record of Martine’s rape, so, too, is Brigitte, Sophie’s daughter, a record of Sophie’s pain. But unlike Sophie, who remains a constant reminder of her mother’s trauma, Brigitte provides Sophie with a drive to heal herself and break the tradition of violence and abuse in the Caco line. Because of Brigitte, Sophie returns to Haiti, determined “to remember” (95) both her own life there and her mother’s.

Remembering is Sophie’s only hope for resistance and survival, for although positive memories of the past did help her survive the immediate impact of the testing, ignoring her traumatic memories of the past can only leave her damaged in the future.

Having watched her mother attempt to repress the details of her past, Sophie has seen how the refusal to confront the past has damaged her mother. She has also come to realize that she must face not only her own traumatic memories, but also those of her mother. When Sophie was first told, as a twelve-year-old, about the testing and about her

---

48 It is necessary to emphasize that Joseph does not directly harm or traumatize Sophie in any way. He remains constantly caring and understanding through the entire novel. For instance, when she asks Joseph “What if I never get fixed?” he responds, “You’re not a machine. You can’t go to a shop and get fixed. It will happen slowly. I’ve always told you this, haven’t I? I will be there for you” (185). At the same time there are similarities between her relationship with her body, her uneasiness with sex, and the painful creation of her daughter, and her mother’s own experiences.
mother’s rape in the cane field, she did not fully understand because she was young and naive: “I did not press to find out more. Part of me did not understand.” However, she also consciously tried not to understand fully, for such knowledge—that you’re a product of rape and trauma—can be traumatic in itself. Thus, she admits, “Most of me did not want to” (61). It is after the adult Sophie has her own daughter that she realizes that she can no longer abide in ignorance, and that, as Rossi explains, she “will need to confront these memories” (208) in order to break the cycle of violence that has plagued the women in her family.

Realizing that she must save herself to save her daughter, Sophie takes Brigitte with her to Haiti. It is there that she initiates her journey of personal healing, and it is a journey that begins with a willingness to face the pain she feels. As she is bathing in Haiti, Sophie begins to let herself truly acknowledge and feel the pain of her trauma, something that did not occur while she was doubling: “I scrubbed my flesh with the leaves in the water. The stems left tiny marks on my skin, which reminded me of the giant goose bumps my mother’s testing used to leave on my flesh” (112). Additionally, in Haiti, she begins to verbalize the horror that has happened to her. Acknowledging that she has been tested herself, she asks her grandmother why mothers test their children.49 Her grandmother explains, “If a child dies, you do not die. But if a child is disgraced, you are disgraced. And people, they think daughters will be raised trash with no man in the house. . . . I had to keep them clean until they had husbands” (156). With her

49 Interestingly, when Sophie asks her grandmother about the practice, the word “testing” is not italicized, as it is throughout the majority of the book. This suggests Sophie’s ability to now talk about it.
grandmother, she also hears the story of Ti Alice. As Sophie and her grandmother hear a girl returning home to her mother after spending time with a young man, Grandmè Ifé tells Sophie, “She is going to test to see if young Alice is still a virgin. . . . The mother, she will drag her inside the hut, take her last small finger and put it inside her to see if it goes in. You said the other night that your mother tested you. That is what is now happening to Ti Alice” (154). This encounter shared with her grandmother allows Sophie to understand two things. First, Sophie is reminded that she is not alone in what has happened to her, and that this practice of testing, while horrific, has been passed down culturally. Likewise, she begins to understand that her grandmother performed the test because she believed she was doing what was best for her children. Grandmè Ifé tells her, “Now you have a child of your own. You must know that everything a mother does, she does for her child’s own good” (157). As Sophie begins to more fully understand why and how this traumatizing practice can occur, she is able to better cope with her past.

It is this knowledge collected in Haiti that helps Sophie better understand and integrate the practice of testing in a manageable way. If Sophie once believed that her mother tested her simply to punish her, she here begins to understand the practice for what it is: horrific patriarchal abuse against women. As Johnson explains, “This violation of a woman’s body and constraint on her sexual freedom occurs solely for the benefit of men, as it is men who are honored when the women they marry are proved to be virgins on their wedding night” (154). And like Allison’s Boatwright women who

---

50 Numerous critics have noted the patriarchal nature of virginity testing. In addition to Johnson, see Gerber, who argues that “the text explores the ways in which patriarchal violence is internalized and
are described as both strong and strongly influenced by the patriarchal romantic ideal, the Caco women are both “very strong” (103), while at the same time, dangerously affected by the patriarchal idealization of virginity and the insistence that women must be virgins at the time of marriage, for “the Cacos have internalized, and consequently have accepted without coercion, their society’s expectations of women” (Johnson 154). By understanding her traumatic memories within the greater context, Sophie, as Thomas remarks, “recognizes that the problem lies not with the women with whom her life is inextricably bound but with the patriarchal system which imposes its values on them” (38). This recognition allows Sophie to better process her own pain and suffering. In finally talking with her grandmother, and beginning to integrate her memories of trauma into a greater understanding of Haitian culture and her own family history, Sophie is able to voice the pain the practice has caused her. She tells her grandmother, “I hated the tests. . . . It is the most horrible thing that ever happened to me.” And when her grandmother tries to suggest that her memories of trauma will go away “with patience” and time, Sophie refuses to diminish her pain and the trauma the practice has caused her. She responds, “No Grandmè Ifé, it does not” (156).

perpetuated by women from one generation to the next” (188). Thomas, who recognizes that “The women of the Caco family have been so totally coopted by the patriarchy that they themselves perpetrate a form of rape on their daughters” (37), Harbawi, who says, “The mother turns into a ruthless minion on behalf of a patriarchal system that expects women to be virgins on their wedding night, for the sole smug satisfaction of a bolstered male ego. The hymen becomes the talisman ensuring the wholeness of the female body and the seal guaranteeing its patriarchal objectification and regimentation” (40), and Scott, who asserts that “The weight of women’s oppression gives rise to the virginity testing that drives the plot” (466).

51 It is also useful to note, as Rossi does, that for Martine and Atie, “Purity testing fails in both cases; it does not bring marriage, with its attendant social honor and economic benefit, to either daughter” (206-7).
Once she talks to her grandmother and she can better understand and thus vocalize her pain, she speaks to her mother who has traveled to Haiti at the insistence of Grandmè Ifé. Sophie asks, “Why did you put me through those tests?” When her mother tells her that she will answer only if Sophie never asks her again, Sophie is unwilling to be silenced: “I wanted to reserve my right to ask as many times as I needed to” (170). Through the act of facing her traumatic past, Sophie has become more powerful—she is more willing to demand what she needs. When Martine states that she tested Sophie because her “mother had done it to” her, Sophie fully recognizes the necessity for her to break this cultural and familial cycle of maternal violence: “I had a greater need to understand, so that I would never repeat it myself” (170).

Following her grandmother’s advice that “secrets remain secret only if we keep our silence” (123), Sophie goes to therapy when she returns to the U.S. As Francis asserts, “the importance placed on therapy in the novel recognizes that it provides a safe space enabling Sophie to speak her trauma” (85). And she does speak of her trauma, both in her sexual phobia group and with her therapist, a “gorgeous black woman who was an initiated Santeria priestess” (206). At her phobia group, she writes her mother’s name on a slip of paper, recognizing “textually” her abuse at the hands of her mother (C. Sweeney 64), and she watches “as the flames consumed it” (203). Now recognizing that “my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too,” Sophie sees her therapy as a way to “avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had
her name burnt in the flames” (203). Likewise, she talks to her therapist about her realization that “my grandmother, and her mother before her, had all been tested” (207). In their exchange, Sophie realizes that she cannot feel anger for her grandmother or her mother, because each was “only doing something that made her feel like a good mother.” Thus, Sophie realizes that she “can’t feel mad anymore” (208). She can react only against the patriarchal underpinnings of the practice, which allows her to feel sorry for her family-members who were caught within such a practice. Thus, Sophie starts to experience the “cooling function” of narrating memory, which begins to free her. Likewise, she adopts a way of understanding the past—as an example of horrific patriarchal oppression—that helps her more easily overcome her trauma.

Just as Bone found she had to understand her mother to forgive her, Sophie also comes to this recognition, and for Sophie the stakes are higher because she is responsible not only for herself, but also for her daughter. When looking into Brigitte’s face, Grandmè Ifé tells Sophie, “The tree has not spilt one mite. Isn’t it a miracle that we can visit with all our kin simply by looking into this face?” (105). As Sophie “realizes that she is part of a chain of women extending from her grandmother Ifé through to her own baby Brigitte” (Peepre 227), she also worries that her daughter will also experience the trauma the Caco women have endured. Thus, in Haiti, Sophie turns to her infant daughter and asks her “questions that she could not possibly answer, questions that even I didn’t know the answers to. ‘Are you going to remember all of this? . . . Are you going to inherit some of Mommy’s problems?’” (110). And to keep her daughter from
becoming another link in a chain of abuse, Sophie feels “the sudden urge to tell her a story,” just as “Tante Atie had always seen to it that I heard a story, especially when I could not sleep at night” (110). When Sophie was a child, Atie’s stories “were mostly sad stories, but every once in a while, there was a funny one. . . . Whether something was funny or not depended on the way Tante Atie told it” (19). This lesson—that the way a story is told shapes its meaning—proves important for Sophie’s healing, for as Gerber notes, “Atie’s stories focus on stability and attachment and provide Sophie with comfort, security, and strength. These fanciful tales stand in marked contrast to Martine’s story of rape” (194). Likewise, Sophie’s concern for her daughter is an example of the generativity script that Maruna and Ramsden have identified in so many survivor-narratives. Sophie must save herself to save her daughter.

Sophie must find a way to narrate Martine’s story and her own story—and with it her family history, a history defined by trauma and pain—in a way that is not damaging to her or to her daughter.\(^\text{52}\) And thus, Sophie must fill in her mother’s history and her own. As literary critic Carole Sweeney argues, for Sophie, “speaking the ‘tale’ through the silence of the trauma is a narrative process of breathing life back into a blocked memory, a vital part of recovery in therapeutic strategies for trauma victims. Speaking and telling the tale gives shape and presence to memory that has been spectral in its ability simply to disappear. . . . This implies the need to articulate and give form to

\(^{52}\) Sophie also learned at a young age that words have strength, and can be violent or healing. She explains that in Haiti, “People rarely hit each other. They didn’t need to. They could wound just as brutally by cursing your mother, calling you a sexual misfit, or accusing you of being from the hills” (54-5).
memory, as well as to embody women’s experience of history as a document” (63-4).

She continues, “[T]he struggle presented in the text is the need to inscribe trauma as narrative. . . . The urgency is to ‘pass it along’ in a language that can transform the cyclical deadened sedimentation of trauma into redemptive language” (57). Not only must Sophie story her past, she must do it in such a way that will help her, and by extension, her daughter, to gain agency and resist future oppression. And this she does. As an adult, Sophie retells the story of Martine’s rape, filling in details that her mother was unable to face:

My father might have been a Macoute.53 He was a stranger who, when my mother was sixteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school. He dragged her into the cane fields, and pinned her down on the ground. He had a black bandana over his face so she never saw anything but his hair, which was the color of eggplants. He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up. (139)

Later in the novel, Sophie tells her therapist that she does not want to refer to the unknown man who raped her mother as “father.” Her therapist responds, “We will have to address him soon. When we do address him, I’ll have to ask you to confront your feelings about him in some way, give him a face” (209). Sophie’s therapist is a

53 The Tonton Macoute was a secret police force started in 1959 Haiti under the regime of Francois “Papa” Duvalier. They were known for their brutal treatment of Haitian citizens. For a complete discussion of the Tonton Macoutes and their use in Breath, Eyes, Memory, see Dorsia Smith’s “A Violent Homeland: Recalling Haiti in Edwidge Danticat’s Novels.” As Smith explains, “Rape survivors feared further retaliation from the Tonton Macoutes while the remaining targets worried about their potential subjection to sexual violations. Hence, the unreported sexual assaults remain ‘invisible’ and Duvalier’s regime uses the unspoken narratives to quell any future narratives of rape and sexual misconduct by the Tonton Macoutes” (135). Katherine M. Thomas also emphasizes the importance of the Macoutes in the novel and in Haitian history: “Sophie’s Haitian homeland is dear to her due to family ties and childhood memories, but always in the background is the terror of a postcolonial/patriarchal system which openly wields sexuality as a weapon. The tonton macoutes terrorized by rape and by forcing unnatural sexual acts” (37).
proponent of “confrontational therapy” (207), of facing the horrors of the past, and in this way, integrating them. Sophie begins such confrontation in the narrative as she tells of her history and her mother’s. Although Sophie cannot describe the rapist’s face directly in the above passage, she does call him her father and does suggest he is a Macoute, which is the beginning of a history and profile, and thus a “face” for him.

Just as Sophie starts to face her mother’s trauma in the narrative she tells as she narrates Breath, Eyes, Memory, so she relates her own story, the story of her trauma. In an interview, Danticat said of her character, “I wanted her to tell the story. I wanted her to live” (“A Conversation” 108). In emphasizing the importance of sharing women’s stories, Danticat also demonstrates the power that testifying one’s storied memories holds for the survival of the trauma victim. And as Gerber reminds us, “Psychoanalytic theory teaches us that to tell a story is not only to remember it but to imagine it differently, creating the possibility for the writing of new scripts. . . . [T]he narrative art of telling a story empowers [Sophie] to rewrite the script of the mother-daughter relationship. In so doing, she transforms it from a relationship dominated by recrimination, loss, and violation to one marked by reconciliation, hope, and freedom” (188-9).54 Francis argues a similar point, explaining that “Sophie sees her mother’s failures as part of a larger dominant cultural narrative that she must willfully choose to rewrite in order to be a

---

54 Carole Sweeney provides a similar reading: “In breaking the transgenerational haunting of the memory of rape and sexual violation, Danticat’s novel suggests a way of narrating a traumatic past without repetitively passing it on as the only tale, and thereby of possessing history in a way that embodies rather than repeats. The passing along of the tale becomes the translations of repetitive traumatic memory into a more redemptive narrative language and consequently into the possession of history” (59).
better mother to her own daughter. This moment in the text marks Sophie’s shift from an epistemology of subjection to an epistemology of relational thinking” (86). But Sophie’s story does more than just imagine a new relationship with her mother for the sake of her daughter. It also demonstrates the need for women to narrate their histories in ways that resist the bonds of oppression that traumatize them. Therefore, in telling her story, Sophie is able to create a different relationship and a new model for dealing with a traumatic past for both herself and her daughter, but she is also able to tell her story to save herself in a way that resists the patriarchal practice that has traumatized her. Such resistance begins in the act of voicing her pain. As Mardorossian argues, “the first person narration in this novel converges with the feminist emphasis on narrative voices as a metaphor for female agency and ‘coming to voice’” (25). Rossi agrees, arguing that Sophie “must develop an internal narrative, by recovering memories of her abuse; then she must tell a public narrative, testifying about her abuse, in order to heal from trauma and end the cycle of secrecy. In this manner, memory and storytelling become acts of resistance against fragmentation and silence” (Rossi 208). Thus, in gaining her voice, Sophie is able to both recount a history that had been silenced and speak out against an oppressive practice. What Mardorossian and Rossi fail to note, however, is the importance of how Sophie narrates her past. To just tell the story of her traumatic memories is not enough to ensure survival and resistance. Instead, she must tell it in a way that helps her to create a positive future for herself and her daughter by establishing herself as a survivor who will actively resist future oppression.
Unlike Sophie, who begins to work through the story of her past, Martine remains silent and, thus, damaged. As Sophie’s therapist recognizes, “Your mother never gave him [her rapist] a face. That’s why he’s a shadow. That’s why he can control her. I’m not surprised she’s having nightmares” (209). But instead of seeking therapy, which requires an abused woman to speak her pain, ultimately helping her to integrate the past into her ongoing sense of self, Martine keeps “pretending to be happy,” for she is afraid of “anything that would make this more real” (219). When Sophie suggests that Martine should get help, her mother responds, “I know I should get help, but I am afraid. I am afraid it will become even more real if I see a psychiatrist and he starts telling me to face it. God help me, what if they want to hypnotize me and take me back to that day? I’ll kill myself” (190). And so Martine never finds the words to speak her trauma. When Sophie asks her mother why she had not responded to letters and pictures Sophie had mailed, Martine responds, “I couldn’t find the words” (161). This is Martine’s ultimate problem—she never finds the words to story her traumatic memories and she is thus never able to integrate traumatic flashes of the abuse into a manageable self-narrative. And clearly, this is the lesson Danticat wants us to take from Martine’s experience. Danticat describes that she was once “invited to participate in a psychiatry training program at a hospital in the Bronx after Breath, Eyes, Memory was published.” She continues:

They were using characters in novels as case studies. At the conference they discussed Martine as a woman having post-traumatic stress disorder and suggested possible treatments for her. They were trying to learn how to do more culturally specific psychotherapy and to recognize that some of
their patients are not going to suffer solely from a bad relationship with their mother. Julia Alvarez’s sister, who works with trauma survivors, has told her, as Julia reports in her book *Something to Declare*, that once victims can tell their stories, they are going to be OK. The biggest obstacle is often telling the story of what happened to you. In some cultures being raped is almost the worst thing that can happen to you and the last thing a woman wants to do is talk about it. That’s Martine’s problem. I see Sophie’s telling her story as an act of triumph. (“An Interview” [Lyons] 197)

Because Martine never talks about her traumatic memories, never *stories* them, never faces them and integrates them, she is ultimately overcome by her traumatic experience.

As Francis explains, “Martine’s inability to speak this trauma results in her death. Martine literally becomes subsumed by the traumatic after-effects of her rape because she never confronts nor revises the trauma” (82). Thus, when she finds herself pregnant with her boyfriend Marc’s baby at the end of the novel, her post-traumatic memories overcome her. As Martine tells Sophie, “It’s like getting raped every night. I can’t keep this baby” (190). When she thinks of the baby, she begins “seeing him. Over and over. That man who raped me” (199), and then she begins hearing the baby speaking to her in the voice of the rapist: “Everywhere I go, I hear it. I hear him saying things to me. You tintern, malpròp. He calls me a filthy whore” (217). Unable to narrate her story and free herself from memories she projects onto her unborn child, Martine kills herself in a final, fatal reenactment of the rape as she stabs herself seventeen times.

Just as it is left to Sophie to *story* her mother’s memories, and story them in a way that proves beneficial to Sophie’s own life narrative, it is also left to Sophie to take her mother’s body to be buried in Haiti. After her mother’s funeral, Sophie takes a step that
Martine never could—she returns to the cane field were her mother was raped to face, if not the person, her father, then the place. She is able to speak “to the spot where it happened” and she is able to reject the “ghosts” of the past that have haunted her (211). Thus, as she “attacks” the cane, she lets go of all anger and all of the feelings that are left that cannot be narrated, “the words” that “would not roll off my tongue” (234). As Danticat explains, “Sophie’s breakthrough comes when she beats and pounds the cane” (“An Interview” [Lyons] 194). In the cane, she experiences agency—the ability to do something that expresses her anger in both words and actions—as she lashes out against the most salient example of patriarchal oppression in her life. Likewise, she claims her relationship with Haiti and with her mother: “I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head. . . . My mother was as brave as stars at dawn. She too was from this place. . . . Yes, my mother was like me” (234). In accepting her connection with her mother, she claims her place as a Caco woman, a woman who embraces her embeddedness in a group of strong, although somewhat damaged, Haitian women. She has been able to forgive her mother, and but she has also found a way, through speaking her *storied memories*, to overcome her trauma. Thus, she is able to answer honestly the question that her grandmother and aunt put to her: “*Ou libéré?’* Are you free from your heavy load?” (96). To this Sophie can honestly answer: “*Ou libéré!*” (233). And the last words of the novel come from Sophie’s grandmother, who invokes the voice of a mother: “There is always a place

---

55 As Francis notes, “the violence is enacted on the canefields rather than on her own physical body,” demonstrating that she has found a more productive way to end her pain and her trauma (87).
where, if you listen closely in the night you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: ‘Ou libéré?’ Are you free, my daughter? . . . Now you will know how to answer” (234). The fact that Sophie’s daughter “could sleep meant that she had no nightmares, and maybe, would never become a frightened insomniac like my mother and me” (193) is testament to the fact that Sophie is finally free. Her freedom is found not in the rejection of memories of family trauma, but in the possibility of family unity found only through an integrated account of pain.

As Rossi argues, “By recovering her memory and using it to create a cohesive self-identity, Sophie’s internal narrative ensures her survival. When she tells the story to others in a public narrative, this becomes an act of resistance” (216). Through her *storied memory*, Sophie effectively bears witness against a traumatic practice, and fights for change and recognition, both in her own life, and in the lives of other Haitian women who have endured similar trauma. In the afterward, Danticat writes a letter to Sophie, where she recognizes that readers have attempted to interpret Sophie as being representative of “every girl child, every woman from this land you and I love so much” (236). Although Danticat resists such a reading, noting that not all Haitian daughters are tested, she thanks Sophie for “the journey of healing” that “you and I have been through together” (236). Thus, like Allison, who has used a fictional narrative to find healing after personal trauma and abuse, Danticat recognizes her own healing through the telling
of Sophie’s story. Danticat hopes that “the singularity of your [Sophie’s] experience be allowed to exist” (236). One may easily read this as a rejection of Sophie’s representivity, but it is also a call for change and a call for resistance. Danticat prays here that Sophie be one of the last females who will have to endure such pain for the sake of a matrilineal tradition that perpetuates a damaging patriarchal ideal.

Dorothy Allison and Edwidge Danticat each demonstrate the possibilities inherent in the act of *storying* memories of trauma. Allison’s Bone and Danticat’s Sophie both understand the importance of integrating their stories of abuse into the stories of their mothers, for it is through integration that they are able to understand the horrific events of their lives, and they are thus able to forgive and move forward. Likewise, they have learned to narrate their memories of the past in ways that help situate themselves in the role of survivor—a role that embodies strength and power rather than weakness and oppression. Although neither narrator would claim that they are better off for enduring their painful traumas, they do find a way to recapture a sense of well-being that is denied so many victims of trauma. Additionally, like Danticat, whose “trick” is to “make some kind of art out of that pain” (“My Turn” 117), Bone and Sophie use their storied traumatic memories in ways that prompt a more positive future for themselves and for those around them.

---

Danticat has never said that she was subjected to virginity testing. However, the impact of Sophie’s story on Danticat, and on readers in general, demonstrates the power of storied memories to affect the lives of readers and listeners, suggesting the power of shared memory.
CHAPTER FOUR

RELATIONAL MEMORIES OF THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN KINGSOLVER’S
THE POISONWOOD BIBLE AND ROY’S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

“Now I am on the other side of that night and can tell the story, so perhaps I am still alive.”
—Kingsolver, The Poisonwood Bible 366

“One of her ambitions was to own a watch on which she could change the time whenever she wanted to (which according to her was what Time was meant for in the first place).”
—Roy, The God of Small Things 37

As Dorothy Allison and Edwidge Danticat illustrate in Bastard Out of Carolina and Breath, Eyes, Memory, telling the story of one’s trauma can ultimately lead to personal healing, while it simultaneously allows for resistance to further oppression. As Bone and Sophie both demonstrate, the trauma victim who learns to story her memories of pain and suffering in a way that fits into a larger understanding of her life can begin to overcome the oppressive terror of a traumatic past by cultivating a sense of self that allows for agency and resistance, even in the face of great pain and suffering. In The Poisonwood Bible and The God of Small Things, Barbara Kingsolver and Arundhati Roy also demonstrate the importance of storying traumatic memories in a way that positively impacts the future. Moreover, Kingsolver and Roy emphasize the value of sharing storied memories with others, highlighting an important function of autobiographical memory: the social function of memory. Ultimately, the characters in The Poisonwood
Bible and The God of Small Things exhibit the need not only to narrate their memories, but also to share them with others. Through this exchange of storied memory, characters both reframe their sense of self in positive ways and also develop and maintain relationships that ultimately sustain them as they cope with pasts defined by trauma and oppression.

In an attempt to answer the question, “[W]hat do individuals use the memories of their life for?” (92), Susan Bluck, Nicole Alea, Tilmann Habermas, and David C. Rubin have identified three theoretical functions of autobiographical memory: a directive function, a self function, and a social function, each evident in Kingsolver and Roy’s novels.¹ Autobiographical memory provides a directive function, as the psychologists explain, by allowing individuals to use the past to guide their behaviors in the present and future, as well as to help individuals to evaluate and reevaluate the past as a way to have “the best ‘old information’ available to use” in directing their “present and future” (109). Autobiographical memory also provides a “self” function, since individuals rely on their memories of the past not only to understand who they are in the present, but also to experience the “continuity and development” of the self over time and to provide an “identity maintenance” function (93, 110). Finally, autobiographical memory has a social function which is important in “developing, maintaining, and nurturing social bonds” (94). Bluck and her fellow researchers argue that the social function of memory manifests itself in two ways— “learning about another’s life in order to form a new

¹ Bluck, Alea, Habermas, and Rubin’s work draws on Pillemer’s 1992 study that identifies these particular functionalities of autobiographical memory.
relationship and maintaining warmth (e.g. empathy) and social bonding in existing relationships”—and in their view, social bonding is the “most central social function” of autobiographical memory (110, 111). While my previous chapters focused primarily on the directional and “self” functions of social memory that determine how we use our memories of the past to maintain our selves in the present and future, in this chapter I am more interested in the social and interpersonal dynamics of autobiographical memory. However, it is important to understand that the functions are not mutually exclusive, for as Rudiger F. Pohl, Michael Bender, and Gregor Lachmann remind us, having a concept of the self created through memory is a “precondition for the interpersonal functions” of autobiographical memory, which, in turn, is focused on “successful social interactions” (745-6). While Kingsolver and Roy both extol the personal benefits of shared storied memories, they simultaneously demonstrate that characters overcome the pain of traumatic memories best by creating and maintaining interpersonal bonds. Thus, the authors clearly link the interpersonal aspects of autobiographical memory to the development of more positive notions of the self and the future.

Due to the constant blurring between inter- and intra-personal memories, it is no surprise that we tend to think of our personal autobiographical memories as just that, personal. Our memories are what make up our personal life histories and, therefore, help us to constitute a sense of self. Thus, when we think of our autobiographical selves and our autobiographical storied memories, we tend to focus on the intrapersonal functions of

---

2 In this chapter I am focusing only on familial social reminiscing, or on memory sharing in close relationships, rather than examining cultural or large group memories. This latter category is the focus of the following chapter, where I investigate collective memory.
memory, often ignoring the impact of others on our memory systems. This has largely been the case in the study of autobiography, notes literary critic Paul John Eakin.

Referring to the classic Gudsorfiian model of autobiography that was “emphatically individualistic,” and highlighting Mary Mason’s feminist opposition to this model, Eakin claims that Mason’s notion of “relational identity” should reframe our discussion of what constitutes autobiography (*How Our Lives* 47). Arguing that “all identity is relational,” Eakin demands recognition of “the relational self and the relational life,” where “the story of the self is not ancillary to the story of the other” (*How Our Lives* 43, 58). Mark Freeman presents a similar realization: “[W]hile the proximal source of personal narrative is the self, the distal source is the Other. Indeed . . . it might also be said—cautiously—that the Other is the distal source of selfhood itself” (“Narrative and Relation” 18). Both critics bring our attention to the importance of others, and thus the interpersonal, in the development of our storied selves. Indeed, this focus on the interpersonal is essential to our understanding of the impact of others on the memory systems that constitute and create our autobiographical, relational selves.

The social and relational aspects of autobiographical memory have been studied most fully within the context of developmental psychology. Researcher Katherine Nelson, as well as many other developmental psychologists, “enthusiastically embrace” the social-interaction theory of memory.\(^3\) This theory, which is based on observations of

---

\(^3\) Elsewhere, Nelson and her colleagues have termed this concept “socialization practices,” and they note that these social interactions begin “in early childhood and continu[e] into adulthood” (Nelson and Fivush 283).
young children, holds that young children “learn” how to form autobiographical memories during their preschool years based on conversations with adults, like their parents or caregivers, “about happenings in the present and past, as well as the future” (Nelson 13). During this time, children learn how to form their memories into coherent narratives that take “a mundane event” and give it a “setting” and a “central action or goal,” as well as a “conclusion.” Additionally, they are taught to remember and narrate “a highpoint of surprise, success, or failure” and also to highlight the emotional experience of the event, ultimately providing “an evaluation” of the event. Most importantly, this learned and shared “verbal form both organizes the experience and provides a rationale for remembering it as significant personally [and] socially” (13).

Thus, children are taught both how to relate episodic details, but also they learn how to narrate their personal pasts through social interactions.

Indeed, the ways parents structure conversations about the child’s past with their children “appear to facilitate children’s developing abilities to report past occurrences in coherent and elaborated ways” (Nelson and Fivush 286). Numerous studies, including those by Elaine Reese and Kate Farrant, demonstrate that different styles of parental reminiscing affect children’s autobiographical memories. Specifically, Reese and Farrant found that children whose parents have a highly elaborative reminiscing style tend to foster children’s memories of the past that are “richer accounts” than those whose parents

---

4 When discussing past events with their children, parents who use a highly elaborative reminiscing style follow up their children’s statements with questions, “ultimately providing a great deal of information about the event in the course of their statements and questions” (Reese and Farrant 30). The opposite is true for those with low-elaborative reminiscing styles.
employ a “low elaborative, topic switching, or paradigmatic” reminiscing style (31, 30).

In a similar study, Catherine A. Haden demonstrated that “mothers who are highly elaborative early in development clearly facilitate their children’s abilities to report on their past experiences in a detailed manner” (53). The investigations of psychologists like Reese, Farrant, and Haden emphasize the social and relational aspects of autobiographical memory construction in two ways. First, our sense, as adults, of our autobiographical selves is tied extensively to our relational interactions and discussions about the past, a process that begins in early childhood. In fact, some developmental psychologists go so far as to argue that “early reminiscing begins in an interpersonal process and only becomes intrapersonal over time” (Engel 27). Second, and perhaps more interesting, is the fact, from our earliest moments as children, our memories are constructed specifically to allow for communication and social exchange. As Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush explain:

[R]eporting the past is not simply a matter of recalling many details; memory must be organized coherently for sharing with others. Children not only learn to provide details in their episodic reports through parent-guided conversations, they also learn how to structure their memories into organized narratives. The recounted event must be placed in an appropriate spatial-temporal context in order to orient the listener, and most important, personal narratives must include evaluative information that conveys why this event is interesting, important, and ultimately memorable. Evaluative information provides the subjective perspective on the event: why this event is personally significant and worth relating to. (286-87, my emphasis)

---

5 This assertion seems to contradict Pohl, Bender, and Lachmann’s idea that the intrapersonal is a precondition for the interpersonal. The fact that this contradiction exists highlights the reality that the inter- and intrapersonal functions of autobiographical memory are integrally linked.
In order for a child to communicate his or her life to another and create the “social and affectional bond” constituted through shared memory, he or she must learn to form memories in ways appropriate for social exchange (Nelson 15). As Nelson explains, sharing memories “require[s] deliberate organization, linguistic articulation, specific location in time and place, and the unique perspective of the self as narrator” (15). The growing child must learn how to be a social-rememberer, and he or she learns how to do this from social contact.

The social dynamic integral to early autobiographical memory development is not limited solely to how children learn to narrate and form their memories. Parents also have a direct impact on what information specific memories contain, leading some psychologists to suggest that parents “collaboratively” construct their young children’s autobiographical memories by providing “a perspective on the child’s experience that may be adopted as the child’s own, or may contrast with the child’s perspective and is therefore resisted” by the child (Nelson 15). Likewise, “language-based interactions during events can have a profound impact on how young children come to comprehend and represent those experiences” (Haden 50). One 1994 study observed four-year-old children and their mothers touring exhibits at a museum. Children only recalled objects and activities that were “jointly discussed” with their caregiver, not those noted by only the mother or only the child (Nelson and Fivush 288). Catherine Haden has also noted the tendency for children to integrate later discussions about past events into their memories of the events. “As parents ask questions, and follow in and elaborate on the
children’s responses,” Haden remarks, “new knowledge can be added to memory beyond
that available at the time of initial encoding” (56). The social dynamics that develop in
childhood influence us as we age, for the lessons we have internalized regarding how we
construct our memories in narrative and storied forms and how we share our memories in
ways that allow for communication and social exchange stay with us. Likewise, such
social “intrusions” into memory occur not only in childhood, but also in adulthood. As
psychologist Susan Engel describes this process, the recollections of adults are “often
elected by and formed with” other people:

For instance, if you are sitting among a group of friends who are
reminiscing about their first kiss, you may recall an episode you have
never consciously thought of before. Not only do other people direct you
to this memory, the process of telling stories with these friends may
literally guide your search for the until-now-forgotten kiss and shape your
construction of that moment long ago. (12)

According to Engel, when two adults “exchange memories, they influence one another’s
memories.” Thus, autobiographical memories “are transformed as they are listened to
and shared” in both childhood and adulthood (34). Indeed, other people have an impact
on all stages of autobiographical memory, from initial encoding, to retrieval, to rehearsal
and subsequent retrieval throughout our lives. Interestingly, both The Poisonwood Bible
and The God of Small Things include adult characters who recall events from their
childhoods. In each novel, the narrated events evidence the way the events were
understood when the characters were children, while also emphasizing how the
characters’ understandings and memories have changed as the characters age. For
instance, as a child, Kingsolver’s character Leah idolizes her patriarchal father.
However, as she ages, and as she shares her memories with her sisters, her perspective of him drastically shifts and she begins to see him for the patriarchal tyrant that he is.

Likewise, Roy’s characters Rahel and Estha do not fully understand the events that occur in their lives until they are much older. As adults, they engage their memories together, and through this act, they are able to reframe the way they understand the past, which ultimately allows them to reject the official, oppressive version of their history and share a new, more hopeful version of that past.

The interpersonal and social aspects of memory evident in both childhood and adulthood highlight both the impact of others on the formation of our memories and the power of shared storied memories to create bonding experiences between people. In a similar way, Bluck, et al., note that autobiographical memory provides “material for conversations, thus facilitating social interaction” (94), and Pohl, Bender, and Lachmann also suggest that autobiographical memory is one of the “building blocks of social competence,” which they define as “the availability and competent use of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills that lead to successful social interactions,” something that is continually developed throughout our lives (746).⁶ Autobiographical memory thus promotes social bonding by prompting conversations and fostering social exchanges. But, more importantly, it may also promote intimacy. Indeed, our relationships—those with our families, our friends, our romantic partners, even our coworkers—“rest on shared

⁶ Pohl, Bender and Lachmann go on to suggest that autobiographical memory is also “an important prerequisite for social skills” that may include “such abilities as empathy, collaboration, conflict management, assertiveness, and leadership” (754, 746).
memories” that “grow out of what happens between people,”7 and “people recall shared experiences as a way of confirming their intimacy, of finding common ground, and of reigniting the feelings they had at that earlier moment” (Engel 24, 42). Thus, Engel highlights the intimacy function of sharing storied memories as it pertains to relationships between friends: “There are two ways friends use the past in the service of friendship. One is to exchange experiences as a way of becoming close. . . . [And two,] as people continue a friendship they are very likely to spend more of their time retelling shared experiences . . . re-establishing connection, by re-establishing the past” (Engel 40-41). Thus, sharing memories develops or maintains intimacy by developing “interpersonal bonds based on a sense of shared history” (Fivush, Haden, and Reese 341). This leads Alea and Bluck to conclude that when autobiographical memories “are shared, intimacy is enhanced” (167).

Intimacy that occurs through sharing storied memories leads to empathy, another commonly recognized function of autobiographical memory. As Pohl, Bender and Lachmann explain, “the central interpersonal function” of autobiographical memory—the maintenance and extension of relationships—“is achieved through the ability of converting one’s own experience into recallable symbols that enable a person to derive predictions about other people’s behavior. This ability acts as a necessary basis for developing empathy” (746). Further, the individual “cannot ‘feel into’ someone else (a) without knowing [oneself] to a certain degree and (b) without realizing that people may

7 In fact, “social relationships can suffer when episodic remembering is impaired” (Bluck et al. 94).
share experiences making them understandable to oneself” (754). Thus, we rely on our shared experiences and autobiographical memories to “elicit empathy from others or provide empathy to others” (Alea and Bluck 165-6). Interestingly, while females tend to focus their autobiographical memories and storied narratives “on affiliative topics,” males tend to focus “on memories about mastery and performance” (Pohl, Bender, and Lachmann 749). Likewise, “women reminisce more often than men for the social function of maintaining intimacy in relationships” (Alea and Bluck 170). This may explain why women tend to show more empathic qualities than men. Kingsolver and Roy both demonstrate the importance of intimate, empathic relationships in the lives of their female characters, and through this, they suggest the power of empathy and intimacy fostered by interpersonal memories to help characters move into more hopeful futures, futures defined by agency and power, rather than subservience and oppression.

In addition to the gender differences that underlie the functions of social remembering, differences that may explain the driving force of female voices in the novels I will subsequently examine, there are several other factors that affect our relational remembering. Alea and Bluck explain that the social function of an individual’s autobiographical memories depends on where the individual is in his or her lifespan. For instance, a person may be “focused on finding a mate in young adulthood,” so the main social function of autobiographical memory may be “developing intimacy.” On the other hand, when a person is “raising children and guiding a future generation,” the focus of

---

8 Alea and Bluck also identify a final social function of autobiographical memory—we share our memories “to teach and inform others” (165-6).
autobiographical memory “may be to teach others” (Alea and Bluck 169). Likewise, the speaker’s general personality traits can shape his or her use of autobiographical memories: “[I]ndividuals with certain personality traits are more likely to reflect on the past to serve functions that are consistent with their personalities” (Alea and Bluck 171). For example, extroverts are more likely to share their autobiographical memories in order to teach and inform than someone with an introverted personality. The listener’s characteristics also affect the relational memory exchange. The listener’s “familiarity to and similarity to the speaker” affect the autobiographical memory, since we recall more with people we know well (Alea and Bluck 171). Likewise, in studies, rememberers tend to “provide more emotional evaluations and personal reactions when retelling a story to a peer who is similar to them than when recalling for an experimenter who is dissimilar” (172). Although factors like age, personality, and relationship with the listener all affect the autobiographical act, there is no question that autobiographical memory is, in many ways, social and, thus, we must pay close attention to the relational aspects of memory when examining the functions of autobiographical memory in literature.

Barbara Kingsolver, in *The Poisonwood Bible*, and Arundhati Roy, in *The God of Small Things*, demonstrate the importance of the interpersonal and relational aspects of autobiographical memory for their women characters. Both novels show how adverse

---

9 Alea and Bluck also note that listener responsiveness makes a difference while relating a storied memory, as does the length and strength of the speaker/listener relationship (172-3).
childhood experiences of trauma can lead to memory disturbances, and both works also show how intrapersonal memory may help women overcome patriarchal oppression. Damaged as children and isolated as adults, the female characters in both novels suffer from memory disturbances, and thus, their relationships and the interpersonal aspects of their autobiographical memories have become limited at best. It is only when these oppressed female characters share their storied memories with others as adults, enhancing their intrapersonal memories through shared storied memory, that they can overcome the horrors of their childhoods.

In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the oppressed female characters—Orleanna, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May—become a community of female voices, suggesting the power found in communities of women who listen, share, and develop empathy and intimacy with one another. An even closer intimate bond is demonstrated through the interpersonal relationship of the twins, Estha and Rahel, in *The God of Small Things*, which allows Roy, whose feminist consciousness extends in the novel to engage other, larger issues of oppression, to demonstrate autobiographical memory’s power to transcend intrapersonal boundaries to revise and reclaim the past.

---

10 A 2007 study by Brown et al. demonstrated that “experiencing multiple forms of child maltreatment and related traumatic stressors is associated with an increased likelihood of autobiographical memory disturbances related to childhood” (967). The study examined adverse childhood experiences, such as childhood abuse (emotional, physical, sexual), household dysfunction (substance abuse, mental illness, mother treated violently), an incarcerated household member or criminal behavior in the household, or parental separation and divorce. They defined memory disturbances as an “inability to remember events from childhood” (962).

11 In addition to women, Roy also depicts the importance of shared memories for her other oppressed characters, including children and untouchables.

12 Admittedly, Roy’s characters, Estha and Rahel, do not verbally story their memories in the way other characters do. Still, as I argue, they do share their memories through their intimate metaphysical connection—the interpersonal bonds between them are so blurred, that without speaking they glean the benefits of vocalized, shared storied memories.
Thus, while Kingsolver focuses on patriarchal oppression, Roy broadens her feminist ideas to take on not just patriarchal oppression, but also oppression based on caste, class, and age as well. Both novels demonstrate the power of social storied memories to create intimacy, develop and maintain relational identities which foster empathy, and help women (and in Roy’s case, children and untouchables) to overcome oppressive pasts defined by trauma, patriarchy, and denied social and familial bonds.

**Memory and Complicity in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible***

Described as perhaps one of “the most important books of the 1990s” (Wagner-Martin 20), Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* engages issues of imperialism and postcoloniality in Africa as a way “to change the world” (Kingsolver, qtd. in Demory 189). Kingsolver believes that “fiction is an extraordinary tool for creating empathy and compassion,” and she wants “people to be hopeful” and to hear the stories of those who have been silenced by imperialism and neocolonialism, as well as by racial and gender oppression (qtd. in Demory 189; qtd. in Wagner-Martin 13). Kingsolver’s goal for her fiction has inevitably led critics to comment on her “highly politicized agenda” in *The Poisonwood Bible* (Fox 406), and, indeed, when we consider the inspiration for Kingsolver’s novel, we cannot deny the centrality of her political message to her American readers:

> I’ve been thinking about this story for as long as I’ve had eyes and a heart. I live in a country that has done awful things, all over the world, in my name. You can’t miss that. I didn’t make those decisions, but I have benefited from them materially. I live in a society that grew prosperous...
from exploiting others. . . . We like to think we’re the good guys. So we persist in our denial, and live with a legacy of exploitation and racial arrogance that continues to tear people apart, in a million large and small ways. As long as I have been a writer I’ve wanted to address this, to try to find a way to own our terrible history honestly and construct some kind of redemption. (Kingsolver, “Frequently”)

Intent on exposing American complicity in the exploitation of other countries and finding some form of redemption, Kingsolver uses *The Poisonwood Bible* to tell the story of five women, the wife and four daughters of a white American missionary, Nathan Price, who takes his family to the Belgian Congo in 1959. Kingsolver chooses to tell the personal story of the Price family through the reflections of the “powerless” Price women.\(^\text{13}\) While their stories mirror the political events occurring at the time, including the Congo’s struggle to gain independence from Belgium and the assassination of Patrice Lumumba—and these events are of great import in the novel—Kingsolver also portrays the negative and very personal effects of patriarchy on the women by focusing on the relationship between Nathan Price and his family. Thus, although Kingsolver’s position regarding the European and American role in the history of African oppression is vital to understanding the novel, the more local oppression and abuse the women characters suffer at the hands of Nathan Price must also be investigated, and will remain my focus here.\(^\text{14}\)

Kingsolver, herself, has said of the family conflict in the novel that while some readers see the conflict between Nathan and his wife and daughters as “a male/female

\(^\text{13}\) Linda Wagner-Martin argues that one of the most “striking” conventions of the novel is Kingsolver’s “choosing as narrators the story characters who are shown to be, initially, powerless” (24).

\(^\text{14}\) In the novel, the personal oppression suffered by the women and the larger issue of colonial oppression are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are directly linked. However, my focus here is on the more personal, direct oppression that the Price women suffer.
issue,” that idea “never even crossed” her mind. “Nathan,” she insists, “obviously doesn’t represent maleness! He represents an historical attitude [of arrogance that is] useless, offensive or inapplicable. I knew most of my readers would feel unsympathetic to that arrogance. . . . Male or female, we are not like him” (“Frequently”). Indeed, the reason we do not identify with Nathan’s arrogance towards women and the people of the Congo is because, as the Price sisters share their memories and the stories of their pasts, so they succeed in exposing their father’s patriarchal abuse and oppression. Ultimately, they are able to claim, as Kingsolver does, that “It’s not his story. It’s ours” (“Frequently”). In reclaiming a voice for their storied memories, the Price women find ways to survive and overcome an oppressive family history. Indeed, *The Poisonwood Bible* provides a space for its female narrators to share their personal histories as they create a multi-vocal record of their family trip into and out of the Congo. Kingsolver once explained that her short story, “Homeland,” demonstrates the “burden and the joy and the responsibility of holding on to the voices that are getting lost. That’s what I want to do as a writer. . . . that’s the reason I live” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 14). She achieves this goal in *The Poisonwood Bible* by giving a voice to a once-abused wife and mother, Orleanna Price, and her four daughters, Rachel, the twins Leah and Adah, and Ruth May, while silencing the patriarchal husband/father, Nathan.  

---

15 Nathan’s story is told through the eyes of the Price women; he is not given a voice to tell his own story in the novel. When Kingsolver was asked if she felt she did justice to Nathan’s character, she responded, “Nathan is single-minded all right, but hardly one-sided. He's ferocious and cowardly; charismatic and revolting; brilliant and tedious. I'm not sure what you mean by ‘doing him justice.’ I certainly don't owe him anything” (“Frequently”).
Numerous critics have commented on the narrative structure of Kingsolver’s novel. All but the final two sections begin with Orleanna Price, the mother, who narrates her experiences in retrospect. As the elderly Orleanna recounts her memories of the circumstances that led to the death of her daughter, Ruth May, she pleads for forgiveness from “the eyes in the trees,” a reference, as we later learn, to Ruth May, who was killed and buried in the Congo decades before.\(^\text{16}\) After the mother’s opening narration, the daughters pick up the story of the circumstances of Ruth May’s death, taking turns as they share their often limited knowledge of events, while they also comment on their own involvement in and understanding of their family’s past. Unlike Orleanna’s retrospective voice, the Price daughters’ stories are told in the present tense—as if the events are happening now, in a continuous narrative present—and thus their voices reflect their adolescent-selves. This narrative form allows the now dead Ruth May to narrate sections of the novel and provides Kingsolver a way to demonstrate the change and growth in the maturing voices of Rachel, Leah, and Adah as they move beyond their teenage years into their difficult adulthoods.\(^\text{17}\) Initially, it seems that Rachel, Leah, and Adah are recording their experiences of the Congo as they happen, rather than remembering the past. But there is also a subtle awareness in each of the stories, evident in the frequent use of

\(^\text{16}\) Critics have interpreted the eyes in the trees as a version of Ruth May, who encompasses something more than herself. Henriette Roos suggests that Ruth May “becomes part of all dead children, becomes all Africa” (201). Similarly, J. U. Jacobs argues that the eyes become “a framing optic to encompass and transcend the individual perspectives of Orleanna, Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May herself” (110). Each of these readings suggests that there is a compilation of voices necessary to tell a story of the past.

\(^\text{17}\) During their family’s mission trip to the Congo, Rachel, the oldest, turns sixteen, twins Leah and Adah are fourteen, and Ruth May is a precocious five year old. Throughout the novel, all but Ruth May grow into adulthood, and in the final pages, Rachel turns fifty.
foreshadowing, of what will occur in the future, \textsuperscript{18} something critic Anne Marie Austenfeld hints at when she describes “the varied ways the narrators bring the events, thoughts, and feelings of the past into the narrative present” (300).

By having the Price daughters tell their stories as if they are occurring at the time of the events, Kingsolver emphasizes the limitations of their interpersonal memories and perspectives, but at the same time, as Diane Kunz remarks, Kingsolver attempts to “enrich, explain, and reveal the past through the approximation of contemporaneous voices” (286). Moreover, as Pamela H. Demory explains, readers need the narratives of the Price women “to find out what happened in Africa, because each of them knows or reports things that at least some of the others don’t know. None of them knows the whole story” (188). Thus, through the shared voices of Orleanna and her daughters, readers are able to understand the Price family history more fully and clearly. Likewise, their voices and stories come together to provide a new understanding—a feminist revision—of that history. The fact that women’s voices are very different and represent different political philosophies adds to the complexity of Kingsolver’s narrative strategy. The Price sisters and Orleanna, as Kingsolver explains, “represent five separate philosophical positions, not just in their family but also in my political examination of the world. This novel is asking, basically, ‘What did we do to Africa, and how do we feel about it?’ It’s a huge

\textsuperscript{18} For instance, early in the novel, Leah says of Ruth May, “She tears through her life like she plans on living out the whole thing before she hits twenty” (117). Likewise, Ruth May says, “I dreamed I climbed away up to the top of the alligator pear tree and was a-looking down at all of them” (259). Many comments like these suggest that there is at least some element of reflection and of future knowledge shaping what is included in the contemporaneous stories the girls tell.
question. I’d be insulting my readers to offer only one answer. There are a hundred
different answers along a continuum, with absolute paralyzing guilt on the one end and
‘What, me worry? I didn’t do it!’ on the other end” (“Frequently”). As the novel unfolds,
the different female voices of the Price women offer what Anne Marie Austenfeld labels
a “feminist alternative” to male-centered historical writing.19 Austenfeld further suggests
that Kingsolver “delivers what history books rarely do: examples of how a variety of
individual human beings act and are acted upon every day in the context of rapid and
difficult social, political, and economic changes” (294). Thus, Kingsolver effectively
demonstrates that each female voice and each storied memory is important, and as
Demory articulates, “truth is subjective,” and “it is as much about the telling of the tale as
about the tale itself” (181).

In their contemporaneous narratives, Leah, Adah, and Rachel, like their mother,
are speaking to their lost sister, Ruth May, thereby sharing the storied memories of their
lives. By taking up the same story even when they are not sitting in the same room, the
Price women are joining into an ongoing familial discourse and speaking both directly
and indirectly to each other. The exchange of memories between the characters is
integral to Kingsolver’s novel. The interactions between the characters—the shared
moments where they reflect on each other, speak to each other, and share their individual
storied memories with each other—not only provide the possibility for relational

19 Austenfeld further explains, “We may identify the collective, turn-taking, layered narrative structure of
Kingsolver’s novel as an organic female form: a group of female voices sharing a story that is of vital
importance to them. The reader is drawn into a private circle, implicitly a place where truth can be told
without silencing influences from the world at large” (300).
remembering, but also eventually lead to healing as the sisters overcome the death of Ruth May and resist the influence of their oppressive, domineering father. It is in these shared moments—the moments where the women come together, demonstrating the social aspects of memory—that redemption and hope can be found.

It is of utmost importance that the Price women do come together, for as Wagner-Martin asserts, in the eyes of their husband/father, they are “literally without price” and are “worthless” (24). Each Price daughter, as she is growing up, is often reminded of her worthlessness by her patriarchal father. Leah, who, as a girl, dreams of winning her father’s approval, reflects, “He often says he views himself as the captain of a sinking mess of female minds. I know he must find me tiresome” (43). Clearly, Leah has internalized her father’s negative view of her. 20 Likewise, Adah is aware of her father’s sexist attitude regarding the education of his daughters: “Sending a girl to college is like pouring water in your shoes,’ he still loves to say, as often as possible. ‘It’s hard to say which is worse, seeing it run out and waste the water, or seeing it hold in and wreck the shoes’” (68). Unlike Leah, who desires the recognition and love of her father, Adah, who often observes from afar, passes judgment against him for his disapproving attitude toward his daughters. In her characteristic sarcastic voice, Adah remarks on her father’s sexist behavior: “Our Father merely looked at us all and heaved the great sigh of the put-

20 Over time, Leah does come to question both her father’s faith and his oppressive nature. She explains, “For Father, the Kingdom of the Lord is an uncomplicated place, where tall, handsome boys fight on the side that always wins. . . . But where is the place for girls in that Kingdom?” (292). Later she says, “It was hard to believe I’d ever wanted to be near to him myself. If I had a prayer left in me, it was that this red-faced man shaking with rage would never lay a hand on me again” (398). Finally, as she sees her father for the last time before she follows her mother out of Kilanga, she sees him as “a simple, ugly man” (439).
upon male. . . . He was merely trying, that sigh suggested, to drag us all toward enlightenment through the marrow of our own poor female bones” (93). Even Rachel, the oldest and most self-involved of the daughters, known in the book for her malapropisms, is aware of her father’s sexism: “Then Father’s whole face changed and I knew he was going to use the special way of talking he frequently perpetuates on his family members, dogs that have peed in the house, and morons, with his words saying one thing that’s fairly nice and his tone of voice saying another thing that is not” (163).

A domestic tyrant, Nathan treats his daughters as if they were “without price,” and he also terrifies his family, physically abusing his wife and daughters. As Orleanna remarks, “Hell hath no fury like a Baptist preacher” (9). Adah is more succinct: “Mostly he shouts, ‘Praise be!’ while the back of his hand knocks you flat” (257). Ruth May, who is only five at the beginning of the novel, and who often lacks the knowledge and maturity to truly understand the events occurring around her, also knows to fear her father. As she thinks about the family who is living in their home in America while they are in the Congo, she reflects, “I hope they know about Father’s chair because if they sit on it, oh, boy. They’ll get it” (66). Likewise, when she is sick because she refused to take her Quinine pills to prevent malaria, she thinks, “Father isn’t listening so I can say it. Her real name is Mother and Misrus Price but her secret name to me is Mommy Mommy. He went away on the airplane and I said, ‘Mama, I hope he never comes back.’ We cried

21 Interestingly, Adah, too, comes to value her own life only later in the novel, suggesting that her father’s treatment did have implications for her self-worth, as well as for her twin’s.

22 The abuse is not foregrounded in the novel. Although it is clear that Nathan has hit both his wife and his daughters, it is only mentioned in passing and made clear by the fear the daughters have for him.
then” (259). Perhaps the most telling, though, is the scene that occurs after the adolescent Leah defies her father by participating in a great hunt with the Kilanga villagers. After Leah runs into the jungle, Rachel and her sisters are afraid that all the sisters will be punished: “We started to get scared about what he’d do when he finally came in, for there was really no telling. Our doors didn’t lock, but Mother came in our room with us and helped us push the beds around so the door was blocked. We went to bed early, with metal pot lids and knives and things from the kitchen to protect ourselves with” (407).

An autocratic man and a domestic tyrant, Nathan oppresses and terrifies his wife and daughters. While Orleanna feels she must protect her girls, she perceives herself to be helpless. Internalizing the years of abuse she has suffered at Nathan’s hands, she believes herself to be “an inferior force” (232). Although she “revile[s]” Nathan “with every silent curse she knows,” she believes “there are no weapons for this fight” (231). In describing Orleanna’s helplessness, Ruth May compares her mother to Adah, who was born with hemiplegia, which has left one side of her body paralyzed: “In our family, Mama comes last. Adah is next to last because her one whole side is bad, and then comes Mama last of all, because something in her is even worse hurt than what Adah’s got” (285). Thus, as children and teenagers, the Price daughters often feel that they must protect their mother from the wrath of their father. As Leah explains, “I know I’m the one to turn my back on her the most. Once in a great while we just have to protect her.

---

23 Orleanna also recognizes the lack of possibilities for women at the time: “Conquest and liberation and democracy and divorce are words that mean squat, basically, when you have hungry children and clothes to get out on the line and it looks like rain” (456). In her mind, leaving Nathan is not even something to contemplate.
Even back when we were very young I remember running to throw my arms around Mother’s knees when he regaled her with words and worse” (83). As Mary Jean DeMarr observes, “the psychological abuse worked on the daughters is evident” (135), and, thus, it is no surprise that while the girls grow into adulthood and escape Nathan’s direct domination, they are still haunted by the memories of their father and the destructive impact he has had on their lives.

A central charge brought against Nathan is that he is responsible for the death of Ruth May. In 1960, as the Belgian colonists prepare to leave due to the Congo’s impending independence, Nathan and his family are warned to return to the United States immediately. Even though their mission will no longer be funded by the Mission League, Nathan hard-headedly refuses to abandon his post, regardless of the danger his decision poses for his own children, for it is clear the family is not wanted in the village, especially by the village leaders. Villagers who have helped the family begin to find poisonous snakes in their homes, in places “where you wouldn’t think it was natural for a snake to be” (427). In response, Leah decides to trap whoever is leaving the snakes, and, following Daniel’s lead in the Apocrypha’s story of Bel and the Serpent, a favorite of her father’s, she and her sisters spread ashes over the chicken house floor. Early the next morning, the girls rise to discover a green mamba snake in the chicken house, and six-toed footprints on the chicken house floor, a clear sign that the village witch doctor, Tata Kuvudundu, has left the snake to scare or even kill Nelson, a boy who has been sent to help the Prices. In a split second, tragedy occurs, as the snake leaps at Ruth May, killing
her almost instantly. Adah recalls her horror: “Without breathing we stared at the place where the snake had been until our eyes caught up and we could all witness our memory of what had passed before us. Green mamba mistress of camouflage, agility, aggressiveness, and speed” (433). The only way for the Price sisters to understand what has happened to Ruth May is to rely on their memories, and these adolescent memories continue to haunt the Price daughters throughout their lives. After Ruth May’s death, Orleanna is prompted to act. Finding strength she has never had before, she bathes and mourns her dead daughter, and then she walks her remaining daughters out of the village of Kilanga and leaves her husband behind.  

The Price daughters feel responsible for Ruth May’s death, for without their influence, Ruth May would not have been in the hen house that morning. Thus, their guilt for Ruth May’s death, in addition to their relationship with their abusive father, haunts the Price women as adults.  

It is for this reason that the narrative structure is so important, as there are holes in each story that only a collection of their voices can hope

---

24 Perhaps part of Orleanna’s newfound strength comes from the community of women who grieve with her. Throughout her entire time in Africa, Orleanna feels ostracized from the Congolese women: “I took a deep breath and told myself that a woman anywhere on earth can understand another woman on market day. . . . However I might pretend I was their neighbor, they knew better” (106). However, at the time of Ruth May’s death, the women finally understand each other through their shared experience of loss. Leah explains, “They fell down at the edge of our yard when they came, and walked on their knees to the table. All of them had lost children before, it dawned on me through my shock. Our suffering now was no greater than theirs had been, no more real or tragic. No different” (442).

25 I want to emphasize the number of adverse childhood experiences the Price women have endured. When examining their experiences under the parameters set up in the memory study performed by Brown et. al, it is evident that as girls they suffer emotional and physical abuse, household dysfunction—Orleanna is treated violently by Nathan, and although the girls do not observe this directly, Nathan is later reported as insane, suggesting he may have been suffering from early stages of mental illness for years—and parental separation. When one also adds the trauma of Ruth May’s death, one can expect, based on Brown et al.’s findings, that the Price women will exhibit some form of memory disturbance.
to fill. Even more importantly, by sharing their stories with each other and with a now dead Ruth May, the women achieve a level of social remembering that promotes a sense of intimacy and support from someone outside of themselves, allowing for shared empathy, compassion, and understanding. And as their complex play of voices provide a multi-vocal explanation of the past, the women begin to dismantle the unitary patriarchal worldview and disrupt the monolithic discourse of their father-patriarch. It is in the relationships of women, then, and in the shared moments of storied memory, that the women begin to resist their oppressive past and thus begin the process of healing. Thus, my interest is in the intersections of the characters and understanding how their interwoven voices and storied, autobiographical memories lead to their feminist resistance and ultimate healing. Unarguably, the most important relationship in *The Poisonwood Bible*, as it provides the frame for the novel, is Orleanna’s relationship with her dead daughter, Ruth May. The villagers call Ruth May “Bandu,” which, Ruth May tells us, “means the littlest one on the bottom. And it means the reason for everything” (286). The dead Ruth May, then, is the reason that the stories in this book are shared. Kingsolver’s narrative, thus, illustrates the fact that, as psychologists Alea and Bluck have concluded, autobiographical memories “can be used for social functions in the absence of memory sharing,” evident in the example of those individuals who report that they think about past experiences they had with someone who has died “in order to maintain intimacy with that person” (166). Orleanna’s obsession with her dead daughter, as well as her pleas for forgiveness and judgment, reflect her need to maintain a
relationship with the dead Ruth May. Her constant reminiscence fully manifests itself right after she has left her husband in the Congo and returned to her home in Georgia and continues into her old-age.

To preserve her relationship with her dead daughter, the elderly Orleanna speaks to “the eyes in the trees.” It is not clear in the first pages of the novel who Orleanna is talking to, but we discover the “eyes in the trees” can “look at what happened from every side and consider all the other ways it could have gone” (5, 8). Ultimately, what Orleanna desires of the eyes is a judgment of guilt or innocence. She wants the eyes to “decide what sympathy” Orleanna and her surviving daughters “deserve,” but “especially” Orleanna (5). As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the eyes in the trees are those of five-year-old Ruth May, something sensed by Leah at the very moment of Ruth May’s death. Leah recounts:

I only remember hearing a gulp and a sob and a scream all at once, the strangest cry, like a baby taking its first breath. We couldn’t tell where it came from, but strangely enough, we all looked up at the treetops. . . . Not one of us looked at Ruth May. I can’t say that Ruth May was even there with us, in that instant. Just for the moment it was as if she’d disappeared, and her voice was thrown into the trees. (433-4)

Thus, central to The Poisonwood Bible is Orleanna’s storied memory, sent up to the dead Ruth May, the “eyes in the trees,” for judgment and forgiveness. Although Orleanna considers her story “too unbearable” to share (244), and she never spoke of it to her

---

26 Ruth May is taught the Congolese belief that one can escape death by quickly moving the soul to a secret hiding place. She decides that the safest place is “a green mamba snake away up in the tree. You don’t have to be afraid of them anymore because you are one” (366). Thus, she tells readers, “If I die I will disappear and I know where I’ll come back. I’ll be right up there in the tree, same color, same everything. I will look down on you. But you won’t see me” (328).
husband and daughters, she feels compelled, in her old age, to share her story with the long dead Ruth May. As she tells her dead daughter:

I have my own story, and increasingly in my old age it weighs on me. Now that every turn in the weather whistles an ache through my bones, I stir in bed and the memories rise out of me like a buzz of flies from a carcass. I crave to be rid of them, but find myself being careful, too, choosing which ones to let out into the light. I want you to find me innocent. As much as I’ve craved your lost, small body, I want you now to stop stroking my inner arms at night with your fingertips. Stop whispering. I’ll live or die on the strength of your judgment, but first let me say who I am. (10)

Orleanna finds her voice by sharing her memories with Ruth May, and she discovers “who” she is—a woman who did the best that she could and who deserves forgiveness—in the course of the telling.

Just as the memory of Ruth May haunts Orleanna, so it haunts her sisters, and they, too, must tell their own storied memories to find peace and find out “who” they are. Leah tells us, “As long as I’m carrying Ruth May piggyback through my days, with her voice in my ear, I still have her with me” (521); Adah says, “I have willed myself to forget, forget, forget, and not forget, for those eyes will see through anything, even my dreams. Ruth May with the eyes of an Easter morning” (432). And so Orleanna says to Ruth May, “Ask the children. Look at what they grew up to be” (12). The sisters’ stories, then, are also sent up to Ruth May in the hope of finding a measure of solace, but also in hope of understanding who they are—how their memories of the past have shaped their lives today. Adah tells us that her mother “constantly addresses the ground under her feet. Asking forgiveness. Owning, disowning, recanting, recharting a hateful course
of events to make sense of her complicity.” As Adah explains, all of the Price women are “Trying to invent our version of the story” (590). Thus, Kingsolver’s novel can be read as a record of interpersonal, storied memories, memories shared with a dead daughter and sister in order to find forgiveness, and ultimately, healing.27

If Kingsolver’s narrative is driven by the need to understand the relationship that Orleanna and the Price daughters have with Ruth May, the relationships that the remaining Price women have with each other are also vital, for as the women speak to each other of their memories, they develop shared intimacy and empathy. One of the primary relationships in the text is that of the twins, Adah and Leah, who, as adults, must find a way to talk about their memories in order to maintain their interpersonal bond. Interestingly, although critics do suggest that all of the characters in the novel are fully developed, they still tend to read either Leah or Adah as the protagonist of Kingsolver’s text.28 Also, as Feroza Jussawalla points out in her attempt to classify The Poisonwood Bible as a postcolonial novel, Kingsolver’s novel uses a “familiar pattern” found in postcolonial writing, in which “a child (or a pair of twins) grow[s] up at a moment of

27 Ultimately, a dead Ruth May is able to contribute to the conversation. In the final section of the novel she acknowledges that the Price sisters, in addition to Orleanna, are speaking to her throughout the novel. Ruth May addresses them: “You plead with me your daughter sister for release” (641). Note that she does not speak to Rachel, for as I will discuss, Rachel’s strategy for healing is different than that of her other sisters.

28 For example, see Stephen D. Fox who reads Adah as the most important character, and Christina Ljungberg who calls Adah “the main narrator” (252). Likewise, Linda Wagner-Martin suggests that Adah “becomes the reader’s mind. She says directly what the reader intuits” (Wagner-Martin 32). On the other hand, Feroza Jussawalla argues that Leah’s life journey is necessary if one is to call this a postcolonial novel, and Henriette Roos argues that it is Leah’s story that “really evokes the sense of catastrophic exploitation” (204). In my reading, I argue that it is Adah who is most important to the novel, as her way of seeing and refusing to judge makes her the perfect character to evoke interpersonal communication between characters.
historical change, usually in a Third World country” (169). The appearance of twins in both Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* emphasizes how important social relationships are to traditionally oppressed characters, while also symbolizing the blurred lines between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal self. Unlike the twins in Roy’s novel, who I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, the twins in Kingsolver’s text do not have a close relationship growing up; instead, the emphasis is on the damaging implications of their relationship in the womb. Adah was born with hemiplegia, a disease that has left half of her body paralyzed. Because they are twins, Adah always compares herself to Leah, making Leah an example of what she should have been. Likewise, she has come to believe that her disability is Leah’s fault:

My right side drags. I was born with half my brain dried up like a prune, deprived of blood by an unfortunate fetal mishap. My twin sister, Leah, and I are identical in theory, just as in theory we are all made in God’s image. Leah and Adah began our life as images mirror perfect. We have the same eyes dark and chestnut hair. But I am a lame gallimaufry and she remains perfect. Oh I can easily imagine the fetal mishap: we were inside the womb together dum-de-dum when Leah suddenly turned and declared, Adah you are just too slow. I am taking all the nourishment here and going on ahead. She grew strong and I grew weak. (Yes! Jesus loves me!) And so it came to pass, in the Eden of our mother’s womb, I was cannibalized by my sister. (40)

29 Jussawalla continues, “The child who functions as the hero or heroine grows up seeing herself connected to the land and identifying with the growth or independence of the country,” and argues that Leah represents this character (169).

30 According to Juliana de Nooy, who writes about the appearance of twins in contemporary literature, twins are extensively used “to depict fissures in national, ethnic, or cultural identity.” She continues, “twins suggest the possibility of overcoming divisions,” especially in cases where twins are separated early in life and must come together later to “rekindle a relationship” (xvi, 116). Emphasizing “an underlying sameness beneath superficial cultural differences,” the use of twins seems particularly important in tales of nation-building. At the same time, as de Nooy observes, “The assumption of resemblance as the basis for harmonious relations between cultures is . . . problematic in a postcolonial world of hybrid identities and multi-ethnic nations” (xvi, xvii).
Leah, too, blames herself. She wonders, “Did I do that to Adah? If I showed her more kindness now, could I be forgiven for making her a cripple? But a debt of that size seems so impossible to pay back it is a dread thing even to start on,” and later she states, “I already spent a whole childhood thinking I’d wrecked the life of my twin sister, dragged after me into the light” (288, 560). The dynamic of blame that frames and shapes their developing relationship divides the twins, especially in their early teen years while growing up in Kilanga in the Congo.

Although, as teenagers, both sisters have a sense that their relationship should mirror the connection found in many twins—a bond that goes deeper than the connection with others—their actual relationship always seems to fall short.\(^{31}\) When they are sent into the jungle to fetch water, Adah reflects, “Sent together, the twin and the niwot, chained together always in life as in prelife” (166). However, when Leah takes the water and goes ahead because Adah is slow, Adah explains that their mother “never did realize that whenever she sent me anywhere with Leah, such as to the creek that day to carry water, it would mean coming back alone” (170). Leah, too, recognizes the lack of closeness in their relationship: “I envied these daughters, who worked together in such perfect synchrony. It’s what Adah and I might have felt, if we hadn’t gotten all snared in the ropes of guilt and unfair advantage” (276). Leah also expresses a wish to be different.

\(^{31}\) Interestingly, from the outside, their relationship looks to be an extremely close one. Rachel contemplates, “Those two were always connected in their own weird, special way. Even when they can’t stand each other, they still always know what the other one’s talking about when nobody else does. . . . Maybe one time I was a little jealous of Leah and Adah being twins” (579).
from her sister: “You always see twins dolled up together as kids, but you never see two grown women running around in identical outfits, holding hands. Are Adah and I expected to go on being twin sisters forever?” (178). Indeed, as adults, they do end up being divided—Leah stays in Africa, marries Anatole, and works for peace and justice, while Adah returns to the United States with her mother and becomes a doctor.

However, over time and with distance, Leah and Adah ultimately become close enough to move on from the trauma of their early family history, something that is prompted when the women finally discuss their memories of their father. When Adah, Leah, and Rachel tour West Africa as middle-aged adults, Rachel is suddenly aware that Adah and Leah are talking about their hated father, Nathan. As the sisters recall Nathan, Leah says “This is going to make me sick,” and Rachel responds, “What, smoking? Or telling about Father?” Leah “kind of laughed. ‘Both,’” she says (581). Rachel continues, “I could see it was hard for Leah. I reached out and took hold of her hand. . . . ‘He was our daddy. . . . But he was mean as a snake’” (582). By confessing their shared pain, they begin to heal. At the end of their emotional conversation, the Price women are able to laugh about the stories that the Congolese now tell about Nathan and his “five wives,” who Adah realizes “must have meant us” (588). As they begin to find relief, Leah and Adah’s relationship becomes identifiably stronger. Observing from afar, Rachel says:

Leah and Adah happened to be walking in front of me . . . and as I looked at them I was shocked to see how alike they were. They’d both bought wild-colored wax shirts in the Senegal market, Adah to wear over her jeans and Leah to go with her long skirts . . . and Adah really doesn’t limp a bit anymore. . . . She’s exactly as tall as Leah now, too, which is simply unexplanatory. They hadn’t seen each other for years and here they even
showed up wearing the same hairstyle! Shoulder-length, pulled back. (576-77)

Additionally, as adults, Leah and Adah become obsessed with finding balance. Leah views their journey as “a great enterprise of balance” (22), and later she focuses on “the balancing scales of justice” (96). Likewise, Adah admits that she, too, is “obsessed with balance” (483).

Ultimately, neither twin is able to reject the other or distinguish herself fully from the other. Instead, even from afar, they develop an interpersonal relationship that allows for both forgiveness and healing. When the adult Leah endures times of great hardship and despair in her life in Africa, she writes letters: “By lamplight when the boys are asleep I write short letters to Anatole, reporting briefly on the boys and our health, and long letters to Adah about how I’m really faring. . . . I tell Adah my sorrows. I get dramatic” (566). Her ability to truly share her life with Adah helps to carry her through troubled times.\(^3^2\) Likewise, Adah is able to come to terms with her past and present. She reflects, “Such childhood energy I spent on feeling betrayed. By the world in general, Leah in particular. Betrayal bent me in one direction while guilt bent her the other way. We constructed our lives around a misunderstanding, and if ever I tried to pull it out and fix it now I would fall down flat. Misunderstanding is my cornerstone” (637). Although the past “misunderstanding” that has framed Adah’s relationship with Leah—the belief that Leah somehow caused Adah’s hemiplegia—cannot be forgotten, just as her past with

\(^3^2\) Leah also converses silently with her sister Rachel, having “imaginary arguments with an absent Rachel” (606).
her father and Ruth May should not be forgotten, she has found a way to live with it by learning to share her storied memories.

Interestingly, it is also Adah who talks with Orleanna, helping her mother to heal. The middle-aged Adah comes to understand the importance of interpersonal relationships in part because of her reserved nature—for years of her youth, Adah chose not to speak, finding “Speaking . . . a distraction” (69). But even as a teenager, Adah came to realize the power of voice—initially, she was the only one who was able to fully grasp the complexity and power of the language spoken in Kilanga. But, she also realized that she did not speak “as well as” she could “think”—something “true of most people” (41).

Additionally, Adah was less likely to pass judgment on others. When the Price family first arrived in the Congo, Adah tells us that, unlike her, the other members of her family were judgmental. She attributes her ability to see “slant” (483) and to read “things backward” (524) to her hemiplegia, and she values the fact that she can appreciate the many sides and nuances of a story. She explains, “When I finish reading a book from front to back, I read it back to front. It is a different book, back to front, and you can learn new things from it” (69). Adah, then, is the perfect companion for discussing the past, for she understands the power of telling a storied memory and can read the past in various ways—from front to back and from back to front in her unique, palindromic style. Thus, it becomes Adah’s task to use memory to help others in her family heal.
Immediately after Ruth May’s death, Orleanna and Adah return to the United States, while Leah and Rachel remain in Africa. Adah and her mother initially spend much of their time sitting in silence. Adah remarks, “When I visit her we never talk much, and are both relieved by the silence, I think” (487). But years later, when the middle-aged Adah returns from her visit with her sisters in West Africa where they talked about their father, she is left to tell her mother that Nathan has died. The discussion that follows finally allows Orleanna to speak, to tell her story, something that she has not previously been able to do. She tells Adah, “Not one woman in Bethlehem [Georgia] ever asked me how Ruth May died. Did you know that? . . . And all those people I worked with in Atlanta, on civil rights and African relief. We never once spoke of my having a crazy evangelist husband still in the Congo somewhere. People knew. But it was embarrassing to them. I guess they thought it was some awful reflection on me.” When Adah responds, “The sins of the father,” Orleanna retorts, “The sins of the father are not discussed. That’s how it is” (594). When Adah then asks Orleanna if she wants to forget, her mother replies, “Are we allowed to remember?” (594). And remember she does, “fling[ing]” her story “at others,” even at the “risk to their ease” (11) through the pages of the novel. Her exchange with Adah also prompts Adah to “discuss” her memories of Nathan with her mother, bringing their family’s pain into the open: “I despised him. He was a despicable man” (594). Like Orleanna, Adah, too, comes to

---

33 Although Leah and Rachel do not return to the United States with their mother, they do not stay with their father. Instead, Rachel moves to South Africa with mercenary pilot Eeben Axelroot, while Leah remains with Anatole, an African man who helped their family. Leah and Anatole later marry and have children of their own.
realize the importance of speaking her story and sharing it with others. She says, “[B]ury them, forget. You have nothing to lose but your chains. But I don’t happen to agree. If chained is where you have been, your arms will always bear marks of the shackles. What you have to lose is your story, your own slant. You’ll look at the scars on your arms and see mere ugliness, or you’ll take great care to look away from them and see nothing. Either way, you have no words for the story of where you came from” (594). Just as Adah’s relationships with her sisters and her mother give her the strength and provide the forum to tell her story, so Adah’s ability to embrace and respect alternative points of view, ambiguity, and contradiction—all elements of a revised, feminist history—helps her sisters and her mother to find a voice through which to share their storied memories.

Unlike Adah, who finds solace and healing through interacting with others, the middle-aged Rachel employs a very different strategy. Instead of embracing her past and finding healing through the sharing of her story, Rachel decides that the only way to survive is to remain silent. Immediately after Ruth May dies, Rachel acknowledges that “There’s a strange moment in time, after something horrible happens, when you know it’s true but you haven’t told anyone yet.” She continues, “We thought we could freeze time for just one more minute, and one more after that. That if none of us confessed it, we could hold back the curse that was going to be our history” (436, 438). Rachel never admits to her involvement in the plan to catch the village witch doctor, Tata Kuvudundu, nor in Ruth May’s resulting death, for she is intent on holding back “the curse” of history. Instead of confronting the past, she denies that part of her life: “I ask myself, did I have
anything to do with it? The answer is no” (555). When she thinks about her sister’s death she blames other people. She explains that Ruth May’s death “was all because of Leah, but really, mainly, it’s probably Father’s fault because the rest of us just had to go along with whatever he said” (506). Rachel’s silence, as well as her desire to blame others, works as an ineffective coping mechanism. She believes that if she can ignore and quiet her memories, and disregard the female community found through a relationship with her sisters, her troubled memories of the past will not affect her.

Rachel attempts to turn from the past because she senses that, for her, it would be dangerous to dwell on her troubled history. Before Ruth May died, Rachel tells us, she thought she “could still go home and pretend the Congo never happened. The misery . . . we saw and endured—those were just stories I would tell someday with a laugh and a toss of my hair, when Africa was faraway and make-believe like the people in history books. The tragedies that happened to Africans were not mine” (437). However, right after Ruth May’s death, she realizes that people’s “stories” are not just stories; instead, if she tells her story it will change her. She imagines her American friends asking her what Africa was like, and she wonders, “What would I say? Well, the ants nearly ate us alive. Everybody we knew kept turning up dead of one disease and another. The babies all got diarrhea and plumb dried up. When we got hungry we’d go shoot animals and strip off their hides. Let’s face it. I could never have been popular again at home” (616).

---

34 Jacobson provides another example of Rachel’s denial of complicity. When tourists mistake her hotel for a brothel, “Rachel abnegates personal responsibility for her business’s outward appearance and the history that informs why men may misinterpret her trade. The viewer’s moral fiber is questioned, not Rachel’s” (116).
Throughout her life, then, Rachel refuses to share her history with others, and she avoids memories of her past, for even as a middle-aged adult, she desires to be “exactly the same Rachel as before” (438). Thus, Rachel’s way of dealing with painful memories is simply not to think about or talk about them. For instance, when she first hears about the horrors involved in the African diamond trade, she pictures African workers “digging diamonds out of the Congo dirt” and thinks, “Gee, does Marilyn Monroe even know where they came from. Just picturing her in her satin gown and a Congolese diamond digger in the same universe gave me the weebie jeebies. So I didn’t think about it anymore” (155).

But when the adult Price sisters meet in West Africa, Rachel’s coping strategy begins to erode, at least temporarily, when she falls under the influence of her sisters. The sisters tour the Palace at Abomey, which like the diamond trade, gives Rachel the “heebie-jeebies.” Rachel explains that “with those dead remains all around us,” what the sisters had been “crabbing” about during their trip seems “to fade for that moment” (576). After the tour, the women are able to discuss their father and the loss of Ruth May, a conversation Rachel does participate in. But, unlike her sisters, who find healing and intimacy in their exchange, Rachel distances herself once again. Shutting herself off before really allowing herself to deal with her family history, she concludes, “But really, after what we’d just seen in that palace: wife murdering and slave bones in the walls! These horrible things had nothing to do with us; it was all absolutely hundreds of years

---

35 Rachel describes the “ancient palace” as a tourist attraction where the Abomey kings “just killed people right and left” and “put the skulls of their favorite enemies into their household decor.” Likewise, “they’d just haul off and kill a bunch of slaves, grind up all the blood and bones, and mix it up with mud for making more walls for their temples,” and “whenever a King died, forty of his wives would have to be killed and buried with him” (574, 575-576).
ago” (587). Likewise, she concludes that their trip has been “simply a sensational 
failure” (568). She considers anything that could make her feel—really, anything that 
could make her delve into her past and remember—a threat. Thus, she rejects her family 
and her past: “I have put the past behind me and don’t even think about it. Do I have a 
family? I sometimes have to stop and ask myself. Do I have a mother, father, and sisters? 
Did I even come from anywhere? Because it doesn’t seem like it. It seems like I’m just 
right here and always was” (505). At the same time, Rachel’s coping strategy—her 
rejection of the past—leaves her alone and scared. Even though she says that “there is no 
sense spending too much time alone in the dark,” she is, in fact, haunted by her past, and 
because she refuses to confront the past, she is unable to ever fully heal (556).

Clearly, Kingsolver has depicted Rachel in a way that suggests that readers are 
not to emulate her method of dealing with the past. Rachel often comes across as 
ignorant and even despicable, especially when it comes to her racist views. For instance, 
when she does discuss the family’s experiences in Kilanga with her sisters, she only 
considers white people worth remembering: “Who did we know? I honestly couldn’t 
think of a soul. We left, Axelroot left. The Underdowns went all the way back to 
Belgium” (578). Likewise, when she thinks of Leah’s marriage to an African man, 
Anatole, she says, “That one I will never understand. After all this time I can certainly 
work with the Africans as well as anybody can, mainly by not leading them into 
temptation. But to marry one? And have children? It doesn’t seem natural. I can’t see 
how those boys [Leah and Anatole’s sons] are any kin to me” (554). Because of Rachel’s
objectionable personality, Kingsolver was surprised when she learned that some readers identify with her character. “I know, from reading my mail,” Kingsolver remarks, “that every reader takes something different from this book. Readers have written in their votes for most beloved character and favorite scene, and practically everything gets a vote. (Even the dum-dum Rachel is far more popular than I expected)” (“Frequency”). Critics have also been more kind to Rachel than one would initially expect. For instance, Kristin J. Jacobson observes, “Rachel is not simply evil. Her likeable qualities and keen insights hinder the reader’s too easy dismissal of her as ‘unlike me’” (117). Likewise, Elaine R. Ognibene argues that “Rachel sees truth about the things that concern her,” citing as an example Rachel’s critique of her father’s chauvinism and small-mindedness (31). However, even if readers garner some understanding of Rachel, it is important to note that the narrative emphasizes that Rachel’s strategy for coping with her past is ineffective. Although Rachel claims that she is the “type of person” who never “look[s] back,” Adah describes Rachel as someone who “seems incapable of remorse,” but is not: “She wears those pale white eyes around her neck so she can look in every direction and ward off attack” (617, 589). Her fear of attack is evidenced in her final passage in the novel: “If there’s ugly things going on out there, well, you put a good stout lock on your door and check it twice before you go to sleep” (619-20). Through her character, Kingsolver demonstrates the necessity for a woman like Rachel to tell her story, even if it is one that gives her the “heebie jeebies,” for this is the only way to truly release the past.

36 When teaching this novel, I was amazed by the number of my own students who sympathized with Rachel, believing their own reactions would mirror Rachel’s.
and move on to a new peace. But, because Rachel continues to deny and alienate her sisters who would listen to her story, she does not find this peace.

Unlike Rachel, who denies her story, locking herself away from her memories of the past, Orleanna, Adah, and Leah all find a release through the telling of storied memories. Orleanna, who speaks directly to Ruth May, tells her, “My little beast, my eyes, my favorite stolen egg. Listen. To live is to be marked. To live is to change, to acquire the words of a story, and that is the only celebration we mortals really know. In perfect stillness, frankly, I’ve only found sorrow” (458). As Ognibene explains, “Free of Nathan’s control, she chooses to speak and in voice comes redemption. . . . She accepts responsibility for her complicity” in Ruth May’s death, as well has her inability to protect herself or her daughters from Nathan’s patriarchal rule, and she “acquires the words for her story. For Orleanna, telling her story is a syncretic process, as she aims to reconcile what has gone before” (23-4). Adah tells us that her mother “will put down that burden . . . on the day she hears forgiveness from Ruth May herself” (592). Through sharing her storied memories not only with Adah, who remains alive, and but also with her dead child, Ruth May, Orleanna finally gains forgiveness. Ruth May, who speaks as “the eyes in the trees,” tells her to “Slide the weight from your shoulders and move forward. You are afraid you might forget, but you never will. You will forgive and remember” (649). Ruth May also explains that “being dead is not worse than being alive. It is different though. You could say the view is larger” (643). Through this larger view, Ruth May is able to see her mother’s story, as well as those of her sisters, and understand the past as
something different than their personal, limited views. She tells Orleanna, “Mother, be still, listen. I can see you leading your children to water and you call it a story of ruin. Here is what I see” (641). By telling her story to her daughter, then, Orleanna is able to understand her personal experience in a new and different way—a way that allows her to observe the patriarchal dynamics that shaped her life. Likewise, Orleanna and her daughters provide a feminist revision of patriarchal history that does not ignore their interpretations of history, but instead, includes and validates them. This leads to new insight and healing available only through shared, interpersonal storied memories. Thus, the framework of the final two sections of the novel changes. The final sections no longer begin with Orleanna’s retrospective voice and pleas for forgiveness. Instead, Orleanna is silent, for finally having the chance to share her story with her daughters, she has found peace.37

Leah and Adah also discover peace through their shared story. The end of the novel finds Leah and her family in Angola where Leah is teaching African families how to grow crops. Years before, as she watched her father plant American crops in African soil, she declared, “Someday perhaps I shall demonstrate to all of Africa how to grow crops” (45). But now, her perspective has changed, and she helps families grow crops that are local to Africa, in an attempt to return to “the ways of the ancient Kongo” (629). Likewise, her lessons include much more than simple teachings about farming. Instead, she provides a way for the African women who venture onto the agricultural station to

37 Austenfeld has noted that Kingsolver’s emphasis on a shared women’s community evokes “a recognizably feminist mode of discourse” (297).
speak and tell their storied memories. As Leah explains, “At first they don’t speak at all. Then after a week or two the women usually begin to talk, very softly but without cease, until they’ve finished the accounting of the places and people they’ve lost” (626).

Having found her own sense of closure based in shared storied memories, Leah becomes a listener, part of a community of women who help others to find the same peace. And Adah, too, finds balance through story. As an adult, she is able to retrain her brain, and she ultimately loses her limp. However, she also loses her ability to see life through palindromes: “I am still Adah but you would hardly know me now, without my slant. . . . Along with my split-body drag I lost my ability to read in the old way” (590). Instead of celebrating her newfound normality, she realizes that “I liked how I was,” and asks, “How can I explain that my two unmatched halves used to add up to more than one whole? . . . And how can I invent my version of the story without my crooked vision?” (590, 591). At night, “in secret,” Adah “still limp[s] purposefully” trying to reclaim her “old ways of seeing and thinking” (637). She also writes about “lost sisters and the Great Rift Valley and my barefoot mother glaring at the ocean. All the noise in my brain. I clamp it to the page so it will be still” (590, 637). Only by relating her story can Adah find peace and stillness.

Ultimately, Kingsolver’s women characters are able to overcome the patriarchal oppression that defined their pasts and find forgiveness for their own complicity in that oppression through the intimacy fostered by sharing their personal storied memories with each other, a familial, female community. Although the women never forget the details
of their past, each shared voice is integral to understanding the larger picture of events, which allows for a revised, feminist understanding of their personal histories. Likewise, finding an empathetic listener who allows each of them to remember and communicate their memories helps them to heal and overcome their powerlessness. Interestingly, Kingsolver has stated that she believes “the creation of empathy is a political act” (qtd. in Austenfeld 297). Thus, in her feminist, “political” novel, Kingsolver exposes the vital nature of shared storied memories to reshape and revise women’s stories and personal histories by providing a greater understanding and a narrative context for their memories. Likewise, she demonstrates the possibility for healing and the power for change found in close intimate relationships with other women. Only through their shared storied memories and their relational remembering can Kingsolver’s characters begin to heal from the loss of their sister, and resist and, ultimately, overcome the damage done by their patriarchal, abusive past.

**Remembering for the Other in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things***

Like Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* strives to provide women who have been traditionally oppressed and silenced with a voice. Roy also uses her feminist consciousness to engage a much bigger project as she looks at multiple forms of oppression against those categorized as inferior—women, children, and the untouchables—and so demonstrates her interest in global human rights by constructing a revisionary history that contains once-silenced storied memories and
counter-memories, while also contradicting the limited and oppressive official history. Not only are Kingsolver and Roy interested in telling the stories of those who have been ignored or judged unimportant, but they are also personally invested in the politics of empathy, as they are determined to help people to find the resources and avenues necessary to share their storied memories and histories. When, for example, Roy offered *The God of Small Things* to the Dalit Sahitya Akademy—the Academy of Untouchable Literature—she remarked: “I would be honoured if you will publish it in Malayalam. I hope you will publish it and sell it and use the royalties . . . to help Dalit writers to tell their stories to the world” (qtd. in Benoit 106). Likewise, just as Kingsolver’s novel about the Congo is constructed around the personal, or what Roy would call the “small” memories of her women characters, *The God of Small Things* locates itself in India, within the local and the personal memories of its characters. The text focuses on the dizygotic twins, Rahel and Estha, and their extended family both in 1969, when the twins are children, and in 1993, when they return to their childhood home at the age of thirty-one. As Roy tells the story of the twins, she resists the large, national events pertinent to 1969 India—the effects of Independence and Partition—and, instead, focuses on the everyday lives of Estha, Rahel, and their family members. Within the novel, as Julie Mullaney notes, “history is to be found in the ordinary moments or fragments” (41), as opposed to the overarching grand historical narratives of large public events. And just as Kingsolver’s Orleanna describes her frustration that “Conquest and liberation and democracy . . . mean squat, basically, when you have hungry children and clothes to get
out on the line and it looks like rain” (456), so we see in Roy’s novel how the shift of
“women’s experience to centre-stage displaces, indeed replaces, the national . . . from the
foreground” (Boehmer 87). This shift, in itself, provides a feminist, revisionary history
that gives voice to traditionally silenced, oppressed people.

Roy’s novel, then, is not to be dismissed as nonpolitical, for Roy deliberately
instills the private space with public meaning. As Sudir Kumar argues, Roy’s novel can
be read “as a discourse of protest in which the personal is made political” (67). Similarly,
Sheena Patchay explains that “by intricately interweaving the ‘small things’ (the histories
of the characters and the ‘unofficial’ events . . .) with the ‘large things’ (the submerged
histories of the caste system and the officially documented version of what happened),
the novel uses the personal (small things) to challenge the political (large things)” (146).
Drawing on their autobiographical memories as they recall their stories, the twins invoke
local politics, the caste system, patriarchy, social taboos, and traumatic elements from
their own private histories, and thus, within their story, the large and the small, the local
and the national, become entwined, and ultimately, tangled. Thus, Roy’s book has been
subject to similar criticism as Kingsolver’s regarding its political nature. For instance,
Madhu Benoit suggests that *The God of Small Things* is “an angry book, a book which is
a political statement” (105). Likewise, Mohini Khot highlights the book’s political
agenda: “As a voice of protest against exploitation of the lower classes and of women, it
is a novel of rebellion” (313). Roy, herself, who is known as both an author and an
activist,\textsuperscript{38} celebrates the political element of her novel, explaining in an essay that although “\textit{The God of Small Things} is a work of fiction . . . it’s no less political than any of my essays” (“\textit{India Will Not Behave}” 79).\textsuperscript{39}

The connections between \textit{The God of Small Things} and \textit{The Poisonwood Bible} reach beyond the authors’ goals for political change, for although they tell very different stories of characters who reside in distinct cultures and locations, there are clear connections between the main characters, for each novel contains not only a character or characters who read backwards,\textsuperscript{40} but also a set of twins who must come together to use their interpersonal memories of the past to deal with oppression and trauma. But unlike Kingsolver’s Leah and Adah, Roy’s twins, Rahel and Estha, experience the close connection that Kingsolver’s twins lack. From the beginning of their lives, in the “early amorphous years when memory had only just begun,” Estha and Rahel “thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us.” Thus, although they are “two-egg twins,” they have “joint identities”—not in their looks, but in “a

\textsuperscript{38} In the same essay, Roy resists this classification: “Now, I’ve been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote \textit{The God of Small Things} is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? . . . [S]ince when did writers forgo the right to write nonfiction?” (“\textit{India Will Not Behave}” 79).

\textsuperscript{39} An interesting and similar debate has arisen regarding the novel’s position as a “feminist” text. One critic argues that “Feminist concerns pervade this novel,” while another calls it “authentically a feminine narrative” (Chanda 39; M. Roy 79). On the other hand, other critics, like Madhumalati Adhikari, allow that the novel does “[contain] the vision of a female writer,” but posit that “This is not a feminist novel” (42). Roy, herself, disagreed with an interviewer who suggested that “the novel doesn’t have any particular impact on the ‘women’s questions’” (“\textit{An Interview}” 91).

\textsuperscript{40} For a thorough analysis of the function of palindromes and backwards reading in both novels, see Christina Ljungberg’s “‘Damn Mad’: Palindromic Figurations in Literary Narratives.”
Their connection, described as a “single Siamese soul” (40), allows them to communicate with each other and know each other on a metaphysical level. Rahel is able to decipher “Estha’s frantic thought signals” (77), and they share a knowledge of each other’s thoughts and memories that goes beyond a normal sibling relationship. For instance, “Rahel has a memory of waking up one night giggling at Estha’s funny dream. She has other memories too that she has no right to have” (5). Those around them, even close family members, don’t fully understand the twins’ connection, but evidence of it is so commonplace in the family’s life that they do not question it. For instance, the seven-year-old Rahel opens the door to let Estha into a hotel room she is sharing with their uncle, Chacko, before Estha even knocks or otherwise indicates he is there: “Chacko didn’t bother to wonder how she could possibly have known that Estha was at the door. He was used to their sometimes strangeness” (113).

The twins’ connection, though, goes beyond simply sharing their thoughts, memories, and dreams. Instead, they are actually part of each other—“whatever She was, He was too” (82). Likewise, when their mother, Ammu, asks them to promise that they will “always love each other,” they cannot find “words with which to tell her that for them there was no Each, no Other” (214-15, Roy’s emphasis). It is through this connection that, as adults, Rahel and Estha are able to find solace despite the terror of their childhoods—terror that has rent a gaping hole in their memories of the past and their hope for the future.

---

41 de Nooy argues that twins often “suggest the possibility of overcoming divisions” (116). This observation seems particularly apt when considering Rahel and Estha, for they are depicted as “twin midwives” who bring Ammu and Velutha, a touchable and an untouchable, together (318).
Estha and Rahel’s deep connection is particularly important to my understanding of the novel, for although they do not share their stories and memories verbally in the same way that Kingsolver’s characters do, or even in a way psychologists would expect to see in most instances of interpersonal remembering, they do share their memories throughout The God of Small Things. Because the twins are “physically separate, but without [separate] identities” (5), they do not have to literally speak to story their memories and derive the benefits associated with interpersonal memory. Instead, emphasizing their connected psyches that set them apart from others, even other sets of twins, Roy asks readers, “What was there to say” between Estha and Rahel, when it is always already “as though they’d discussed it (though they hadn’t)” (283, 195).

Throughout the novel, then, as one twin engages memories of the past, the other shares those memories, and through this, they find a way to overcome the horrors of their lives.

The horror, terror, and oppression the twins face as children, terrors recalled through relational storied memory throughout The God of Small Things, particularly by an adult Rahel’s memories of the past, range from the everyday to the horrifically painful. As the twins are growing up, they live with their mother, Ammu, their uncle, and Rahel is standing at the window, suggesting that her recollections are driving the narrative (30). Much later in the text, Rahel sits in the garden thinking about a childhood encounter with the Untouchable Velutha. After a long description of the children and Velutha, “The garden reappeared. . . . With Rahel sitting in it” (182). Clearly, then, the stories we hear are Rahel’s recollections of the past. Likewise, it is Rahel who, “looking back now,” wonders about her family’s tampering with “the laws that lay down who should be loved and how” (31). The book, itself, becomes a “practical” investigation of “the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how” (34, 33), suggesting that Rahel’s questioning mind and storied memories determine the structure of the text.

---

42 Although it seems that The God of Small Things is narrated by an omniscient, third-person narrator, there are many suggestions that the story unfolds in relation to Rahel’s, and later Rahel and Estha’s, memories of the past. For instance, in the early pages of the novel, after Rahel returns to Ayemenem, she looks out the window which leads into a narrative about Rahel’s great-grandparents and the river that used to be visible from the window. As this short reminiscence concludes, readers are reminded, again, that Rahel is standing at the window, suggesting that her recollections are driving the narrative (30). Much later in the text, Rahel sits in the garden thinking about a childhood encounter with the Untouchable Velutha. After a long description of the children and Velutha, “The garden reappeared. . . . With Rahel sitting in it” (182). Clearly, then, the stories we hear are Rahel’s recollections of the past. Likewise, it is Rahel who, “looking back now,” wonders about her family’s tampering with “the laws that lay down who should be loved and how” (31). The book, itself, becomes a “practical” investigation of “the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how” (34, 33), suggesting that Rahel’s questioning mind and storied memories determine the structure of the text.
Chacko, their grandmother, Mammachi, and their grand-aunt, Baby Kochamma, in Ammu’s family home, for Ammu divorced their alcoholic father after he abused her and attempted to prostitute her to his boss in order to save his job. Ammu’s return to her family’s house should have provided escape for both herself and the twins, but, instead, she is condemned for being divorced, a condition considered by Mammachi to be “far worse than Inbreeding” (59). The oppression that Ammu and the twins experience at this home is driven by both the lack of opportunities for a divorced woman with twins and by the patriarchal nature of the family that is still present even after Pappachi, the family patriarch, has died. However, the patriarchal oppression is overshadowed by the other traumas depicted throughout the remainder of the novel. Roy first depicts Estha, at seven-years-old, being molested by a man running the concession stand at a movie theater while the rest of his family is immersed in The Sound of Music inside the theater. Weeks later, the twins find themselves accused of involvement in the death of their cousin, Sophie Mol, who drowns while the children are attempting to cross a river. Although the twins were unable to help her, their controlling Grand-Aunt, Baby Kochamma, tells them, “[Y]ou did it. . . . You are murderers” (300). They also struggle with their personal complicity in the death of their mother’s untouchable lover, Velutha. After Rahel and Estha, “Blue-lipped and dinner-plate eyed” (292), watch as a group of policemen beat Velutha, their friend and father figure, to near death, their grand-aunt, Baby Kochamma, convinces Estha to incriminate Velutha for crimes that he did not commit in order to save Ammu, or so Estha is led to believe. When the police inspector,
at Baby Kochamma’s behest, asks Estha if Velutha kidnapped the children and caused the
death of their cousin, Sophie Mol, Estha gives the answer he believes will save his
mother from blame:

The Inspector asked his question. Estha’s mouth said Yes.
Childhood tiptoed out.
Silence slid in like a bolt.
Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared. (303)

These events haunt the twins throughout their lives. Although they do not “ask to be let
off lightly,” neither twin is prepared for the impact that these childhood traumas will have
on them as they grow up, “grappling with ways of living with what happened” (309, 54).
After the deaths of Sophie Mol and Velutha, the seven-year old twins are separated, and
they do not see each other again for twenty-three years. While separated, they are unable
to work through the deaths and the other horrible events that define their childhood, and
their separation becomes yet another traumatic experience they must endure.

After Sophie Mol and Velutha die, Ammu is sent away from her family’s home,
and unable to find work, she has no choice but to return Estha to his father after a “twin
expert” in Hyderabad announces that “two-egg twins were no different from ordinary
siblings and that while they could certainly suffer the natural distress that children from
broken homes underwent, it would be nothing more than that. Nothing out of the
ordinary” (32). The twin expert could not be more wrong, as is clear in the connection
Roy makes between the sexual abuse that occurred during *The Sound of Music* and
Estha’s subsequent departure on the train as he is returned to his father. After he was
molested, Estha told his mother that he was “Feeling vomity” (102). Later, as his train
pulls out of the station, he wails, “Ammu! Feeling vomity!” (309). Rahel also equates these events when she links Estha’s sexual abuse to his trip on the train to Madras: “She remembers, for instance, (though she hadn’t been there), what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man did to Estha in Abhilash Talkies. She remembers the taste of the tomato sandwiches—Estha’s sandwiches that Estha ate—on the Madras Mail to Madras” (5). Their separation, then, is equated with the other traumas the children suffer, for through this separation, as Maya M. Sharma explains, each loses his or her other “half and is not able to function as a whole person” (130). Without the other, there is no one to share their storied memories with, and, thus, no way to heal or move on with their lives. Separated as seven-year-olds, they have lost the relational identity that defined their early childhoods. Through their twenty-three year separation, Estha and Rahel stop thinking of themselves as a pair, and, instead, see themselves as “They, because separately, the two of them are no longer what They were or ever thought They’d be. . . . Their lives have a size and a shape now. Estha has his and Rahel hers. Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons” (5). After enduring such horrors, when each most needs the other, they are ripped apart, to deal with their haunting memories of the past on their own. Likewise, the separation leaves each twin isolated as an adult, with no one to talk to. They are unable [to purchase, for a fee, some cheap brand of exorcism from a counselor with a fancy degree, who would sit them down and say, in one of many ways: “You’re not the Sinners. You’re the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the victims, not the perpetrators.”] It would have helped if they could have made that crossing. If only they could have worn, even temporarily, the tragic hood of
victimhood. Then they would have been able to put a face on it and conjure up fury at what had happened. Or seek redress. And eventually, perhaps, to exorcize the memories that haunted them. But anger wasn’t available to them and there was no face to put on this Other Thing that they held in their sticky Other Hands, like an imaginary orange. There was nowhere to lay it down. It wasn’t theirs to give away. It would have to be held. Carefully and forever. (182)

Even as adults, they remain isolated, holding the burden of the past in stultified memory.

As an adult, Estha finds himself unable to confront his memories of the past. Directly following the initial sexual abuse, we watch the seven-year-old Estha attempt to “pickle” his memory of the event—“It was pickled, sealed and put away. A red, tender-mango-shaped secret in a vat” (191). At the same time, he concludes that “Anything can Happen to Anyone” and “It’s Best to be Prepared” (189), which suggests that he is trying to cope with what has occurred by suppressing the event and not directly dealing with it. When he is subsequently faced with the death of Sophie Mol and Velutha, and then he is separated from Rahel, his coping strategy is similar. He simply stops talking. As the train pulls out of the station, returning him to his father, seven-year-old Estha “left his voice behind” (309). As Sharma and Talwar suggest, “It seems a little unnatural that Estha should become so mute that no ideas appear to be crossing his mind, when his dilemmas really call for vigorous internal activity” (39). However, by not talking, not sharing his pain or his story, he is attempting to “pickle it”: that is, to store it away at a distance so he
can forget. What follows is the adult Estha’s ongoing attempt to hold his childhood memories at bay:

Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms. . . . It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of his skull, hovering the knolls and dells of his memory, dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue. It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb. . . . He grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past. Gradually the reason for his silence was hidden away, entombed somewhere deep in the soothing folds of the fact of it. (13)

Estha’s silence, which follows him into adulthood, allows him some relief. Interestingly, it also rocks him “to the rhythm of an ancient, fetal heartbeat” (13), reminding him of his connection with his sister, which has been severed by their separation. Without her, all he has is silence. He is unable to cope with his past in any other way. It is important to note, however, that his coping strategy is unsuccessful. As Patchay explains, “Just as oil seeps from the jars, histories (long since pickled) seep from the seals used to bottle them, staining the lives of the characters” (152). Thus, the adult Estha still carries and is haunted by his past:

Rain. Rushing, inky water. And a smell. Sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze. But worst of all, he carried inside him the memory of a young

---

43 Sharma and Talwar go so far as to suggest Estha’s silence is an indication of autism. I would argue that his silence is perhaps better understood as a conversion disorder and can thus be analyzed through the notions of primary and secondary gain. Primary gain describes symptoms that serve a psychological purpose. Estha’s silence allows him to avoid discussion regarding his abuse and his betrayal of Velutha. Secondary gain describes the unexpected responses to symptoms that sustain the symptoms by reinforcement. Estha’s silence leads to memory loss: “He grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past” (13). If the memories are inaccessible, Estha does not have to process, nor deal with, the past. Likewise, his symptoms are classic symptoms of trauma and the resulting traumatic memories.
man with an old man’s mouth [Velutha, whose teeth have been knocked out by brutal policemen]. The memory of a swollen face and a smashed, upside-down smile. Of a spreading pool of clear liquid with a bare bulb reflected in it. Of a bloodshot eye that had opened, wandered and then fixed its gaze on him. Estha. And what had Estha done? He had looked into that beloved face and said: Yes. Yes, it was him. The word Estha’s octopus couldn’t get at: Yes. (32)

Therefore, even after his return to Ayemenum as a damaged, silent adult, Estha occupies “very little space in the world” (12), and his silence remains, along with the memories he tries to conceal.

Rahel, too, is left damaged from their childhood experiences and their separation.

We are told that, as a child, she had endured “an accidental release of the spirit” that has left her, as an adult, intimidating to others due to her “waywardness and almost fierce lack of ambition” (18, 19). Although she does pursue a degree in architecture, her professors are “a little wary of her” because of her “bizarre, impractical building plans, presented on cheap brown paper, her indifference to their passionate critiques” (19). Thus, after her childhood traumas, “Rahel drifted,” haunted by the knowledge that “Worse Things had happened. . . . Worse Things kept happening” (19, 20). Even after she gets married, her husband is “offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else. Someone watching. Looking out the window at the sea. At a boat in the river” (20). What Rahel’s husband sees in her eyes is “a hollow where Estha’s

---

44 As noted in other chapters, and as Roy notes here, “Smells . . . hold memories” (94). Thus, throughout the novel the characters, who “smelled its smell and never forgot it. History’s smell. Like old roses on a breeze” (54), are constantly reminded of the smell of old roses. As Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas explains, “The characters’ olfactory memory in the story becomes a signal of doom, of foreboding, in the narrative” (147).

45 It is also interesting to note that Estha realizes the power of language. By speaking the word, “Yes,” Estha falsely condemns a man. If he speaks again, his words could have disastrous consequences.
words had been” (20). Rahel, too, is damaged and lost without her twin. Simply put, “the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other” (20-21). Their separation, then, leads to “Not death. Just the end of living” (304). To find solace, each must rejoin with the other and, thus, re-establish their relational identity.

Interestingly, the two share another loss, one that is generally passed over by critics as it seems to pale in comparison to the other traumas the twins have suffered. Both Rahel and Estha blame themselves for what they consider a betrayal of their mother. After Estha is returned to his father and Ammu has been sent away from the family home by an angry Chacko, she grows quite sick. On one of her infrequent visits to see Rahel, Ammu “coughed up a wad of phlegm into her handkerchief and showed it to Rahel,” and later, when Chacko tells Rahel to “see her [mother] off,” Rahel pretends she hasn’t heard him: “She thought of the phlegm and nearly retched. She hated her mother then. Hated her” (153). Because Rahel never sees her mother alive again, she believes that she has betrayed her mother, just as Estha betrayed Velutha. Although Estha never saw his mother when she was “Wild. Sick. Sad,” he, too, feels he has had a hand in his mother’s death (152). When he is on the train, waiting to be returned to his father, he asks Ammu when he will see her again, and she responds, “As soon as I get a job” (307). Intending to express his dismay at how long this could take, Estha says, “But that will be never!” (308). The impact of that childish hyperbole haunts the adult Estha: “It was his fault that the faraway man in Ammu’s chest stopped shouting. His fault that she died alone in the lodge with no one to lie at the back of her and talk to her. Because he was the one that
had said it. But Ammu that will be never” (308). Estha feels guilty, almost as if his words have somehow caused Ammu’s death. As Christina Ljungberg explains, “Words unwittingly serve as means of betrayal, while also inevitably failing as means of exoneration” (257). Not only did his words betray Velutha, but they also destroyed Ammu.

As adults, Estha and Rahel remain haunted by their grief, their loss, and their perceived betrayals that led to the deaths of Sophie Mol, Velutha, and Ammu; indeed, “the impossibility to forget is put forward as the driving energy in the protagonists’ lives and in the narration” (Baneth-Nouailhetas 149). What they seem to be haunted by, however, is the memory of losing their loved ones. As the narrator explains, “It is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined. Over the years, as the memory of Sophie Mol . . . slowly faded, the Loss of Sophie Moll grew robust and alive. It was always there” (17).

What is central to the novel, then, is the attempt of Rahel and Estha to remember the lives

---

46 Baneth-Nouailhetas also observes the connection between the novel’s emphasis on memory and its formalistic qualities: “The importance of memory, recollection and their corollaries (the sense of foreboding or of déjà vu, or expectation or of familiarity) is somehow hammered into the reader through the stylistic characteristics of this text; mainly, the unabashed, sometimes disconcerting use of repetition, semantic and structural, in a spiraling narration that brings the past to bear on the future, and the present to reconstruct the past” (144).

47 In an interesting reflection on the novel, Deepika Bahri asks why the novel is often “voiced by a third person, even though it is clearly focalized through her [Rahel]?” She continues, “No intact ‘I’ is made available in The God of Small Things to unify experience in the psyche of the one in search of lost time. There are memories, but there is no remembering self. To put it in another way, even though there is no unifying remembering self, there are memories. Is the textual device of the third person a response to the dissociative mechanisms of the psyche in response to traumatic events, or does the text thus signal the fundamental separation of the experience and its representation through anonymous narration?” (238). My reading suggests that the narrator/Rahel focalization is such because the narration embodies interpersonal memories rather than intrapersonal, strictly focalized ones.
of their loved ones, as well as to find a way to cope with their deaths. Therefore, when thirty-one year old Rahel returns to Ayemenum, to her twin brother, and to the location of her memories of Velutha’s “ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been” (119), the twins must first repair their relational identity, and then they can attempt to heal themselves by remembering the stories of Ammu and Velutha’s lives through shared storied memory. And when they are finally together again after being separated for twenty-three years—and after Estha and Rahel have both returned to their childhood home—there is immediately a connection, although distant. On Estha’s part, “he knew that Rahel had come,” for “with her she had brought the sound of passing trains, and the light and shade . . . that falls on you if you have a window seat. The world, locked out for years, suddenly flooded in, and now Estha couldn’t hear himself for the noise” (12, 16). Likewise, Rahel “could feel the rhythm of Estha’s rocking, and the wetness of rain on his skin. She could hear the raucous, scrambled world inside his head” (22). As the twins begin to overcome the boundaries between them, they must redefine their interpersonal relationship, which is based on years of absence. As Rahel enters Estha’s room and observes Estha bathing, she watches “Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin. . . . He was a naked stranger met in a chance encounter. He was the one that she had known before life began. . . . Both things unbearable in their polarity. In their irreconcilable far-apartness” (89). Indeed, Rahel doesn’t know how to understand their relationship, which is simultaneously based on complete distance and total connectedness.
It is not until, as adults, the reunited twins attend the Kathakali performance at the temple that they begin to reclaim their relationship as it once was. “Drawn by . . . memory,” Rahel goes to the temple, and soon after she senses her twin’s arrival: “She didn’t turn her head, but a glow spread inside her. He’s come. She thought. He’s here. With me” (183; 222, Roy’s emphasis). The emphasis Roy places on Estha’s arrival through the italics and separation of the words “With me” suggest more than a simple arrival at a location. Instead, the words signify a rejoining of the minds and souls, and thus, a reclamation of the fully connected interpersonal relationship they shared as children. And what joins them is “a story” performed by the Kathakali men, the story of Karna, an abandoned child and his mother, which prompts the paired twins to turn, together, to the “memory of another mother” (222). As the reunited twins watch the dancers dance “To apologize for corrupting their stories [and for] Misappropriating their lives” (218), they recognize themselves in both the dancers and the story. They, too, have allowed “History’s” version of events to prevail, and have suffered personally by focusing on the death and loss of their loved ones rather than emphasizing the stories of their remembered lives. And they, too, have been abandoned by a mother, and thus silently ask their own mother the same questions Karna asks his: “Where were you, he asked her, when I needed you most? Did you ever hold me in your arms? Did you feed

---

48 Kathakali, originating in Kerela during the sixteenth century, is a dance-drama where players act out classical Indian stories. Most of the plays were originally created to last an entire night, but as their commercial popularity has grown, the performances have grown shorter. In *The God of Small Things*, the Kathakali dancers perform poolside, entertaining tourists at a large hotel across the river from Ayemenem. However, when they perform in the temple in Ayemenem, “they danced to jettison their humiliation” caused by the “truncated swimming-pool performances” (218). Thus, the performance Rahel and Estha attend is an attempt “to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories” (218).
me? Did you ever look for me? Did you wonder where I might be?” (221). Likewise, as they, together, watch the Kathakali men perform the death of Dushasana—Dushasana “clubbed . . . to the floor. . . . hammer[ed] . . . until [he] was stilled” (221)—they see a reenactment of Velutha’s beating being played out before their very eyes. As Antonia Navarro-Tejero explains, “If the Karna-Kunti relationship brought back the memory of their mother, the killing of [Dushasana] made them recognize the kind of frenzy that accomplished Velutha’s death. Both these performances serve as microcosmic projections of their own macrocosmic familial history” (92). The twins recognize this connection: “It was no performance. [Estha] and Rahel recognize it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage. Another kind of frenzy . . . The brutal extravagance of this matched by the savage economy of that. They sat there. Quietness and Emptiness, frozen two-egg fossils . . . Trapped in the bog of a story that was and wasn’t theirs” (224). It is necessary, however, that they experience this event together, for together they can begin to deal with their personal versions of these “Great Stories,” relying on their interpersonal storied memories. Although they do not verbalize their memories, they experience the stories together, which prompt them to ask and to begin answering questions that have long been silenced in regards to their own histories. Thus, as they walk home together, once again Estha and Rahel become “We and Us” (225), reclaiming their relational identity.

Coming back together allows the twins to begin to delve into their memories of the past, both to rewrite the incorrect recorded “History,” and to re-understand and re-
member the lives of those who have died. Thus, as many critics have noted, Rahel “summons their joint memories to relate their stories, as well as their dead mother’s, twenty-three years after the ‘stories’ told by their great-aunt, Baby Kochamma, and by the police, who were instrumental in disrupting their lives” (Balvannanadhan 97). As she does this, Rahel is able to revise the oppressive, recorded history of the past. It is interesting here that Rahel is able to access memories of her mother and brother that she should not technically possess. Deepika Bahri has expressed this concern about the “proliferation of memories . . . that no one single character has the right to have” (240). But, as Baneth-Nouailhetas explains, in The God of Small Things, “Memory is revealingly associated with a sense of transgression . . . indeed, memory itself is a transgression of limits and boundaries, those imposed by time and forgetfulness in the ‘natural’ course of things” (146-47). In this novel, memories also transgress intrapersonal boundaries, as demonstrated in the twins’ shared memories. Thus, it is clear that in The God of Small Things, Rahel vocalizes a version of the family’s shared past—a storied memory that embodies the interpersonal memories that include her own, her mother’s and her brother’s. Rahel uses the pieces of their memories, “like the salvaged remains of a burned house—the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture” that “must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for. Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with

49 As I have argued in other chapters, and as Madhu Benoit, notes in relation to The God of Small Things, “The past is always in the present, and the present is always shaping the future.” Benoit continues, “This fluid backwards and forwards movement deconstructs chronological temporal sequences” (98).
new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story” (32). Thus, Rahel is able to reconstruct the family’s story, as she tells a story of life and of death.\footnote{Bahri notes that in “recalling the terror that has taken place,” memories “cannot be recalled so much as invented” (241). It is likely that there is some invention that occurs, just as there is some necessary invention in the construction of all autobiographical memories.}

In order to construct the storied memories of their lives, Rahel must rely on “the bleached bones” of memory, for as Andrew Hock Soon Ng argues, “Rahel and Estha’s trauma resulted not so much from what happened and then was repressed, but from not knowing precisely what happened” (50). We must remember that the twins were only seven at the time of these horrific events, and they were never told the complete story. Roy repeatedly reminds us that we are dealing with children who do not necessarily understand the entire picture of events. For instance, she describes Estha as “Not wholly cognizant of his situation” (216), and as she depicts Velutha’s beating, she describes the twins as “mesmerized by something that they sensed but didn’t understand.” She continues, “The twins were too young to know that these were only history’s henchmen” (292). Likewise,

What they had done would return to empty them. . . . At the time, there would only be incoherence. As though meaning had slunk out of things and left them fragmented. Disconnected. . . . Isolated things that didn’t mean anything. As though the intelligence that decodes life’s hidden patterns—that connects reflections to images, glints to light, weaves to fabrics, needles to tread, walls to rooms, love to fear, anger to remorse—was suddenly lost. (215)

At the time of the events, the twins were simply too young to understand what had occurred, that Velutha—an untouchable—was being murdered for his relationship with
their touchable mother. At the time, they also viewed their mother through the eyes of children, without the ability to understand her “Unsafe Edge,” her “air of unpredictability.” They were unable to empathize with what “she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber” (44). Instead, they simply found that sometimes she was “the most beautiful woman” they had ever seen and “sometimes she wasn’t” (44). It is only with time and their own maturity that they can begin to understand their mother’s complexity and her involvement in the events that occurred, which were driven by her taboo relationship with the Untouchable Velutha. Indeed, “it took the twins years to understand Ammu’s part in what had happened” (307), partially because they were not included in many of the events that drove the final terrors of the book. For instance, when Ammu first dreams of the God of Small Things, who we discover is a symbol for Velutha, “She waited, under the skin of her dream, not wanting to let her children in” (207). Thus, Balvannanadhan notes, “it takes twenty-three years for the missing parts to be added to the story when it is narrated once again through a different voice and point of view,” and “With adult hindsight, Rahel’s perception of past events uncovers the real stories behind the official ones” (97, 99). It is not until years later, sitting on a train, that Rahel begins to ask pertinent questions about the past: “That hard marble look in Ammu’s eyes. The glisten of perspiration on her upper lip. And the chill of that sudden, hurt silence. What had it all meant?” (69). Likewise, when Rahel considers Velutha, she notes, “It is only now, these years later, that Rahel with adult hindsight recognized the sweetness of that
gesture” (181, my emphasis). At the time, Estha and Rahel took their relationship and their mother’s relationship with Velutha for granted, not realizing the boundaries that should have separated them. Thus, as time passes and the twins “replay this scene in their heads. As children. As teenagers. As adults” (302), they are finally able, as adults, to re-understand the past, bringing new knowledge and new perspective to both the horror they’ve endured and to the love they’ve encountered in their lives. As readers, we see this process occurring throughout Roy’s novel which clearly evolves out of Rahel and Estha’s meeting as adults. It is evident that Rahel has been more apt to ask questions about her past all along, for she has not “pickled, sealed, and put away” her memories like her twin (183). Still, it is upon her return to India that she begins to fill in the missing “plot” and “narrative” (182) of her family’s life, and her ability to engage in memory in a way that leads to understanding becomes more prominent as the novel progresses. Ultimately, after the Kathakali performance, as Rahel and Estha reclaim their identity as connected twins, Estha, too, is also better able to confront the stories and memories of their shared past. It is this newly reconnected interpersonal identity that leads to one of the most contested and always analyzed incidents in the novel, the incest scene.

Newly re-joined, newly knowledgeable, and more mature, Estha and Rahel play out their mother’s history of breaking the love laws with untouchable Velutha through

---

51 Anurandha Dingwaney Needham provides an interesting perspective here: “[T]he perspective in this novel is, primarily, that of Rahel’s as a child—a particular kind of child who becomes a particular kind of adult, who in the novel’s ‘real’ present recalls what she saw and experienced when she was a child” (381). Thus, as a narrator, child Rahel reflects some of adult Rahel’s perspective and Rahel’s adult perspective is formed by her childhood outlook and memories.
their own coupling. Many readers understand Rahel and Estha’s lovemaking as a sign of
their damaged psyches and note the further trauma that can come of the incest, and they
are right to do so. Indeed, we can and should ask what their memories will be of their
incestuous encounter. Still, readers must observe the transformation that occurs during
this scene to fully grasp the implications of the incestuous act. At once, Rahel and Estha
return to their child selves, while at the same time, they embody the selves of their
parental figures, Ammu and Velutha. This transformation is particularly clear in
descriptions of Rahel: “Rahel was lying on Estha’s bed. She looked thinner lying down.
Younger. Smaller” (283). Here, she has returned to a version of the child she once was,
but at the same time, Estha sees his sister as Ammu: Rahel has grown “into their
mother’s skin. . . . Their beautiful mother’s mouth, Estha thought. Ammu’s mouth” (283-
4). It is at this point, embodying the children they once were and the adult figures that
they once loved, that the twins recall, together, the most damaging events in the novel—
Estha’s abandonment at the train station and their terror as they watched Velutha fall at
the hands of brutal policemen. Finally, in the company of each other, their own,
previously silenced history is told, laid out in the open, which allows them to begin to
heal.52 Indeed, the incest scene occurs as Rahel “whispers” and Estha reaches out “To
touch the words it makes. To keep the whisper” (310). And healing comes as they feel

52 Patchay states that “Rahel’s retelling of the family’s stories and the absences in the novel seek to ‘flesh
out the twenty minute cameos’ that their lives have become, so that the unofficial version of their stories
may be told and heard” (150). Likewise, she argues, “Rahel’s return, therefore, allows what lies buried
beneath History House . . . to be excavated, and allows the unspeakable finally to be spoken. The God of
Small Things uses the technique of rememory to disrupt the intelligible lie that History has created and to
expose the unintelligible truths that fester beneath” (148). Rahel’s role, however, is not only to fill in the
official record, but to remember the lives of those she loved.
and face the grief they have distanced themselves from, and also finally begin to understand elements of the events from the past, including their mother’s affair with Velutha, that were previously missing from their understanding. Thus, just as the child-twins represented “the mediating figures—participants in and enablers of Ammu and Velutha’s love for each other” (Needham 385), as adults they provide a conduit for Ammu and Velutha’s love scene to be told through their own love scene. Following the model of the Great Storyteller, the Kathakali player who “strives not to enter a part but to escape it,” and who finds that “this is what he cannot do” (220), Rahel and Estha have no choice but to enter the roles of their mother and her lover. Thus, Rahel “sat up and put her arms around him [Estha]. Drew him down beside her. They lay like that for a long time. Awake in the dark. Quietness and Emptiness” (310). As Mohini Khot argues, “There is a kind of inevitability about the end. Where else could the twins have gone, who could they have turned to except each other? It is as though two halves of a whole have come together at last, finally to rest” (222). It is inevitable that they come together to express their grief and share their storied memory. Moreover, like the Kathakali man who is “the most beautiful” of men, because “his body is his soul” (219), Estha and Rahel express the complete reconnection of their souls through their bodies in their incestuous act.53 And like the Kathakali man, who “in his abject defeat lies his supreme triumph,”

---

53 As can be expected, there have been many different interpretations of the incest scene. Laura G. Eldred, for instance, argues “[A]s far as Estha’s incestuous desire goes, they have nothing to do with achieving oneness with Rahel. Instead, his descriptions of Rahel prior to and during their incestuous union reveal his need to recapture his mother . . . Ultimately Rahel and Estha are not the same person, and Rahel is not his mother; the groping toward comfort and loss-of-self implied in their sexual union is a failure, an attempt at rebellion that produces no effects. . . . They merely repeat and re-engage the family and history, participating in incestuous acts already suggested by Chacko and Mammachi, invoking the sexual
the twins come together to begin to purge their souls of the horrors they have faced through their expression of “not happiness, but hideous grief” (220, 311). By “once again” breaking “The Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (311), they repeat Ammu and Velutha’s past, and return to the story of Ammu and Velutha’s love and life, rather than continue to focus on their betrayal and death. As Rahel expunges some of her great grief, she finds room for a memory of Ammu’s love. Rahel recalls a night when her mother put her to bed and Rahel realized, “A little more her mother loved her” (312, Roy’s emphasis). Rahel begins, here, to remember joy and to embrace her mother’s love and life, rather than focus on her betrayal and death.

It is also through their incestuous act that Rahel and Estha finally have the ability to fill in the rest of Ammu and Velutha’s love story. At the end of her happy memory, Rahel says to Ammu, “We be of one blood, Thou and I” (312, Roy’s emphasis). Because they are one, their final acts of breaking the love laws are also intimately connected, indicated by the repeated phrase, “[I]t was a little cold. A little wet. But very quiet. The Air” (310). As Ammu and Velutha’s love story is told in the final pages of the book, we see an interesting connection with the twin’s own coupling. Just as Rahel pulled Estha to her, Ammu “guided him [Velutha] into her” (318). Likewise there is a blurring between Ammu’s roles of mother and lover, which her twins had been too young to understand:

perversion already inherent in the origins of the History House” (75). On the other hand, mirroring my own reading is Maria-Sabina Alexandru, who says, “Estha’s and Rahel’s encounter in the dark re-establishes their union in their mother’s womb. This fulfills them in a way that the world denies them” (178).
“she caught a passing glimpse of his youth, his youngness, the wonder in his eyes at the secret he had unearthed and she smiled down at him as though he was her child” (318). It is only as adults that the twins can finally understand the tension Ammu felt between her role as a mother and her role as a desirous woman and thus express her story. Finally, repeated from Estha and Rahel’s scene, Ammu and Velutha sense that “It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air” (320). Thus, as Ng argues, “The twins’ incestuous act is also one of reconciliation, not just between the two of them, but between past and present, the living and the dead.” He continues, “Intertwined in life, the four lives continue to bear each other in death, with the twins housing the specters of their mother and somewhat surrogate father so that, twenty-three years later, they may all be reunited once again” (53, 56). The twins have successfully brought Ammu and Velutha’s history to life, they have revised the oppressive official history by sharing their mother’s silenced love story, and through this shared memory of Ammu and Velutha’s life, they can begin to heal.

Although, as readers, we know Ammu and Velutha’s stories end poorly—they both die horrible deaths—there is hope at the end of The God of Small Things. Rahel and her brother now embody their mother’s memory, and, through them—in particular, through the way they story the memory—they can focus on great love rather than great sorrow. And so, as Benoit observes, the final chapter “closes The God of Small Things on a note of perfect harmony, absent from the rest of the book” (104). It is only after the twins come together, and remember together, that they can express their grief in order to
refocus their memory and their healing story on life, hope and “Tomorrow,” which becomes the final word of the book (312). Roy, herself, has said “[T]he novel ends in the middle of the story, and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word ‘tomorrow.’ And though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible, the fact that the book ends there is to say that even though it’s terrible, it’s wonderful that it happened at all” (qtd. in Benoit 104). Roy’s placement of this ending scene, then, provides the hope and the healing the twins so desperately need. During Ammu and Velutha’s love scene, Ammu is depicted as the “secret he [Velutha] had unearthed” (318). In recalling this scene, the twins have also finally uncovered the secret of their mother, which allows them to focus on their memories of love rather than on their memories of horror. Additionally, recalling Ammu and Velutha’s great love scene at the end allows Roy to demonstrate her hope that basic human rights—rights that would allow such a love story—should and will extend to all people.

Thus, Roy, like Kingsolver, demonstrates the power of shared storied memories to provide a space for healing, hope, forgiveness, and “tomorrow,” while also resisting dominant systems of oppression. Relying on the social function of memory, Rahel and Estha, like Orleanna, Leah, and Adah, come to find peace and forgiveness that is only located in their interpersonal relationships, their connectedness to others, and their act of relational remembering that provides counter-memories and new ways of understanding the past. As Roy speaks for the oppressed, providing a revision of a patriarchal, caste-

---

54 Many other critics have commented on the hope the end of the novel instills. For instance, see Ng, Chanda, and Needham.
based history, she demonstrates autobiographical memory’s ability to create intimacy and enhance empathy. Her characters reclaim their ability to move into the future, but they can only achieve this together, relying on shared storied memory.
CHAPTER FIVE
COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AND COMMUNAL IDENTITY IN
NAYLOR’S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE AND MORRISON’S PARADISE

“Time’s passage through the memory is like molten glass that can be opaque or crystallize at any given moment at will: a thousand days are melted into one conversation, one glance, one hurt, and one hurt can be shattered and sprinkled over a thousand days. It is silent and elusive, refusing to be dammed and dripped out day by day; it swirls through the mind while an entire lifetime can ride like foam on the deceptive, transparent waves and get sprayed onto the consciousness at ragged, unexpected intervals.”
—Naylor, The Women of Brewster Place 35

“The twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not.”
—Morrison, Paradise 13

As Kingsolver and Roy illustrate in The Poisonwood Bible and The God of Small Things, the social function of autobiographical memory plays a large role in our individual lives. Relational remembering allows for a person to feel empathy, while also enhancing the intimacy felt between those who share storied memories. This, in addition to the inherent possibility of voicing counter-memories in the act of relational remembering, can lead to emotional healing and resistance to oppression. The social aspects of autobiographical remembering, however, are not limited to the memory of the individual, but also exist in the memories of the group. In fact, group memory, or collective memory, has recently become a focus in the psychological study of memory,
and although the workings of collective memory and remembering often parallel that of individual autobiographical memory, there are some distinct differences in both the approach and the understanding of these two related forms of memory. The power of collective memories on both the individual and on the group is clear in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*. In each novel, the authors explore how communities of people rely on collective memories to shape and reshape both their individual and group identities, especially when dealing with memories of personal and collective trauma and oppression. As Naylor demonstrates, the expression of the individual histories and memories of the women who live in Brewster Place, a low-income housing development that has been walled off from the larger community and neglected by the politicians, creates a collective memory of the development, a memory that resists trauma caused by racist and patriarchal oppression. On the other hand, Morrison explores how the collective memories of a group who call themselves the 8-rock are shaped and reshaped in ways that benefit the group’s identity after the experience of a collective trauma. Likewise, she demonstrates how a group identity fostered by the shared individual memories of a group of damaged women can create a cohesive, collective identity that proves beneficial to the individuals within the group.

Unlike the study of individual memory, the study of collective memory is relatively new to the field of psychological memory studies. Although Maurice Halbwachs is generally credited with founding the study of collective memory in the
1920s, collective memory has traditionally been under the purview of sociology and history. Thus, as psychologists Amanda J. Barnier and John Sutton observe, in most modern contemporary memory literature, “Nowhere is there any real sign that human beings are often together when they engage in the activities of remembering” (181). At the same time, as William Hirst and David Manier explain, “A significant portion of the social science literature on collective memory proceeds in a manner that seems unaware of the role that individuals, and their psychology, may play in the formation and maintenance of collective memories” (184). Thus, psychologists have begun to engage the study of collective memory by arguing that although “collective memory may be a group phenomenon, it can be appropriately studied using the methods of psychologists, since ‘it only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals’” (Harris, Paterson, and Kemp 213).

At the same time that psychologists have begun to insert themselves into the study of collective memory, the lack of a clear definition of the term collective memory has plagued the field. As James V. Wertsch and Henry L. Roediger III remark, “Collective memory is a term widely used, yet poorly understood in contemporary academic discourse” (318). Indeed, this lack of understanding derives from the fact that “collective

---

1 Halbwachs paid close attention to the social dynamics of individual memories. For instance, he believed that “the memories of each individual are inscribed within ‘social frameworks’ which support them and give them meaning” (Jedlowski 31). Likewise, “Halbwachs spoke of the constant interplay between individual and collective memories: ‘One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories’” (Reese and Fivush, “Development” 202).

2 Interestingly, just as individual autobiographical memory is shaped in and by narrative and story, Paolo Jedlowski observes that “sociology has concentrated on memory,” and especially collective memory, “as manifested in narrative practices” (31).
memory resists clear definition” (Hirst and Manier 183). Always pertinent to the struggle to define collective memory and remembering is the debate regarding the individual’s role within the collective. Social scientists have tended to view collective memories “as being located ‘in the world,’” whereas psychologists, always interested in the individual, have tried to “locate collective memories ‘in the individual’” (Hirst and Manier 184). These two views, exhibiting the “two ends of a complex spectrum,” lead to very different definitions of collective memory (185). In the first understanding—that collective memory is ‘in the world’—the study of collective memory is a study of “society, not individuals,” where sociologists have examined how groups “form public representations of the past and . . . maintain these representations” to create a “socially articulated and socially maintained ‘reality of the past’” (Hirst and Manier 185).³ This is a “genuinely collectivist notion of memory as a property of groups, cultures, or societies beyond the individual” (Wessel and Moulds 289). Such “public representations” of collective memory available for study include textbooks, memorials, museums, commemorations, mass media, oral histories and narratives, individual storytelling, national holidays, rites, rituals, and religious festivals, as well as other “cultural artefacts” of the past “embodied in both historical evidence and commemorative symbolism” (Hirst and Manier, 191, 185; ²⁴⁶)

³ As Hirst and Manier remind us, “From this perspective, students of collective memory must avoid the temptation to ‘perceive and conceptualize collective memory exclusively in terms of the psychological and emotional dynamics of individual remembering.’ Collective memories may not always behave according to the rules that govern individual memory” (185).
The wall in *The Women of Brewster Place* and the oven and pageant in *Paradise* become symbols of commemoration that embody collective memory.

While sociologists have argued that collective memory should be studied by examining historical representations outside of the individual, many psychologists argue that collective memory is simply “shared individual memories” (Hirst and Manier 185). Stating that “it is people memorizing and remembering, not social resources or practice,” many psychologists demand that “one must locate collective memories not in the world, but in the minds of individuals,” and that it is shared individual memories that “bear on a collectivity’s identity” (Hirst and Manier 187). Some researchers even avoid the term collective memory, preferring *collected* or *shared* memory to indicate “the aggregated individual memories of members of a group,” for as Ineke Wessel and Michelle L. Moulds explain, “An important assumption of this notion is that each group member’s memory resides within the individual mind and that the act of remembering is a property of an individual” (289). Both the women who make up the community of Naylor’s Brewster Place and the Convent women in Morrison’s *Paradise* demonstrate how collective memory is often comprised of individual, powerful rememberers who share individual memories that form and ultimately maintain collective memories and identities.

---

4 For a discussion of how a ritual becomes a commemorative practice that serves a group’s collective memory and identity, see Connerton’s *How Societies Remember.*
Still, even within this individualistic understanding of collective memory, there is a difference between collective memory, proper, and what Paolo Jedlowski terms the “social aspects of individual memory,” aspects that I illustrated in the previous chapter on relational remembering (30). Indeed, as Celia B. Harris, Helen M. Paterson, and Richard I. Kemp explain, “collective memory is different from individual memory because collective memory can be reduced to a particular subset of memories that are shared by all members of a particular group or culture.” Additionally, collective memories “are not necessarily representations of one’s own personal experience, but they can be ‘memories’ for the experiences of the group throughout history” (214).\(^5\) Significantly, then, a person does not need to be present to experience and encode an event to have a collective memory of that event. Hirst and Manier further clarify what constitutes a collective memory: “If a memory is widely held by members of a community, but has little meaning for the community, then it [is] . . . not a collective memory” (184).\(^6\) This suggests that a collective memory must influence the way a group of people define or understand themselves and their history.

Thus, just as individual memory shapes and forms personal identity, collective memory is integral to the formation of group identities. As Harris, Paterson, and Kemp

\(^5\) Jedlowski emphasizes the idea that collective memories are not necessarily memories of personally experienced events. Indeed, collective memories “may concern events that took place during the lives of the current members of a social group or events relating to a more remote past, and may even incorporate the founding myths of the group itself” (34).

\(^6\) Hirst and Manier suggest that a memory many individuals share that is not integral to the identity of the community should be considered a “shared” or “collected memory.” In this, they use these terms in a different way than suggested above.
note, “Memories will only become shared and collective under circumstances or in
groups where it is functional for them to be so” (216). 7 Indeed, “a major function of
collective memory is to serve the needs of the group in the present. These needs include
the formation and maintenance of a sense of group identity, group cohesion, and group
continuity” (214). This point is reiterated by Wertsch and Roediger, who argue that
“collective remembering inevitably involves some identity project—remembering in the
service of constructing what kind of people we are” (320). Because collective memories
are so closely tied to the formation and maintenance of our group identities, they are
“resistant to change even in the face of contradictory evidence. In collective
remembering, the past is tied interpretatively to the present, and if necessary part of an
account of the past may be deleted or distorted in the service of present needs” (320). 8
Thus, collective memories typically reinforce an established group identity, just as
autobiographical memories tend to fit into a larger personal life narrative.

However, if we are to understand collective memory to be a collective identity
project, we must ask, as Harris, Paterson, and Kemp do, important questions regarding
who controls that group memory: Whose past is recorded and rehearsed? Who gets to
participate in the group memory and under what circumstances? Which aspects of the
past are remembered and which are excluded (215)? Because the power “to create and

7 As Jedlowski argues, “Undoubtedly, memory is related to identity, at both the individual and the
collective levels” (36). Wessel and Moulds also observe, “Collectivistic memories may be seen as core to
the development of group identity” (292).

8 Indeed, as Wessel and Moulds assert, “Collectives, then, may be conceived as having a conceptual self
(beliefs, values, norms) and control mechanisms (societal institutions such as the government, law
enforcement, the military) that dictate current goals” (295).
stabilize memory is in fact a general sign of power at all levels of social organization,” the determination of “the content of the collective memory is a conflictual process. The collective representations of the social past are designed to give legitimacy to the society’s beliefs and to inspire their projects, thus legitimizing the elites that represent them” (Jedlowski 34). And although collective memory can lead to a powerful group identity, it can also provide problems when individuals do not find their own autobiographical experiences articulated by the group memory. Developmental psychologists Elaine Reese and Robyn Fivush explain the importance of these questions to the individual psyche: “More highly collective memories may help establish shared identities and bring individuals into a sense of shared purpose, and this collaboration seems to be related to a higher sense of well-being” (“Development” 209). However, and important for both of the novels I examine here, it “may also lead to lower individual well-being if one’s own experience is discrepant from and therefore silenced by the collective memory” (209).

Reese and Fivush provide two specific examples demonstrating the danger of a collective memory that silences and contradicts individual memory. First, they observe that “adolescents who are part of cultures that have been silenced and have not been able to reclaim their cultural history show limited abilities to construct coherent narratives of their own experiences, and also show high levels of depression and suicidality” (“Development” 208). Moreover, if the family unit negates or disputes particular aspects of an experience, this can also lead to “a contested or silenced memory,” and such
silencing can lead to “a fragmented sense of self and, often, post-traumatic stress
symptoms” (208-9). Qi Wang also observes the tensions that can form between
individual and collective memory: the coexistence of individual and collective memory
may “generate tensions between cultural formations and individual agency.” However, he
suggests that individuals can “actively negotiate, resist, or even escape the limits of a
state (or community) imposed perception of the past” (Wang 306). Naylor and Morrison
both demonstrate the dangers of the individual memory being silenced by the collective,
but they also show the possibility for active negotiation and resistance both by
individuals and by groups.

In order to understand how the women characters in The Women of Brewster
Place and Paradise are able to negotiate and reframe collective memories, it is necessary
to understand how collective memories are formed. As Harris, Paterson, and Kemp
explain:

Certain types of groups may be more likely to form collective memories. These include groups that are cohesive, that agree more, and have a
history of remembering together, with an understanding of the
perspectives and expertise of each individual. Additionally, groups that
have a dominant narrator, or a member with perceived expertise in a
certain domain, are more likely to come to a shared rendering of that
event, although this shared memory will most closely resemble that of the
narrator or expert. (226)

Hirst and Manier further explain the importance of a dominant narrator as demonstrated in a
psychological study of collective memory: “What memories the group converged on, depended on the
presence or absence of a dominant Narrator (a person who talks a lot in the conversation). In the absence
of a dominant Narrator, the group recounted mainly shared pre-group recollections . . . and, as a
consequence, the post-group collective memory was essentially the same as the pre-group collective
memory. In the presence of a Narrator, however, the group recounting prompted the formation of a new
collective memory. . . . As a consequence, the post-group collective memory reflected the Narrator’s
distinctive rendering of the past rather than the pre-group consensus among group members” (196).
The notion of a dominant narrator shaping a group’s collective memory is particularly important in both Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and Morrison’s *Paradise*. Mattie Michael serves as a powerful force in Naylor’s novel, linking together the seemingly disparate lives and experiences narrated in the different stories that comprise the novel. In *Paradise*, the twins Deacon and Steward, and later Connie, fill this role and influence the group members’ collective memories and identities. And although it is clear in both novels that a dominant narrator can shape and change individual recall, it is also clear, as memory theorists have demonstrated, that “group remembering ‘may not always enhance actual recall’” (Reese and Fivush, “Development” 204). Perhaps this occurs because “people tend to remember more positive than negative incidents and actions by their group (Wang 307), something made especially clear in the collective memories of Morrison’s Ruby residents, who initially collectively remember the actions of their forefathers in idyllic terms. Likewise, collective memories shaped by a dominant narrator may be limited by a singular perspective or a limited version of history, delegitimizing other versions of that history, something that the women authors I consider here resist.

Still collective memory can and often does benefit a group, even if it is not more accurate than individual memory. As Wang shows us, collective memory can even “serve as a therapeutic practice for a community and its members, ‘a healing device and a tool for redemption.’” He continues:

10 Harris, Paterson, and Kemp reiterate this: “[W]hile collaborative groups were more confident in their correct responses than individuals, they were also more confident in their incorrect responses” (219).
It entails an active constructive process during which the members of a community participate in interpreting and further crystalising shared past experiences (particularly traumas) into eventual memory representations, often in such forms as narratives, dramatizations, art, ritual, and so on. This constructive and transcendent nature of collective memory allows the community and its members to make sense of the past and further create a shared story by symbolizing the trauma, thus providing opportunities for transforming the pain they experienced and for further healing. (309)

Just as telling the story of individual trauma can prove to be a healing force, so too, can the artifacts of collective memory be vital to healing communal trauma. The traumatic histories of Morrison’s 8-Rock members, who were turned away from an African American community because their skin was too dark, as well as the horrific extermination of the women who live in the Convent on the outskirts of town, are both managed and overcome by the group’s collective memories. Likewise, Naylor’s women at Brewster Place collectively destroy the wall that has come to represent murder, rejection, and trauma, and thus, they reject a collective memorial of their downtrodden identity.11 Ultimately, then, both Naylor and Morrison demonstrate the power of collective memory in the lives of both the individual and the group to resist racist and sexist oppression.

Walled Memories in Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place

Like so many of the women-authors I have previously discussed, Gloria Naylor wrote The Woman of Brewster Place, winner of a National Book Award, in response to a

11 Notably, this occurs in Mattie Michael’s dream. However, I will argue that this act still holds great meaning for the community, even when it only exhibited as one narrative possibility for the women.
silenced history. While reading traditionally canonical literature in her college courses, Naylor realized that “we were all working with this benign ignorance of what was out there in Black America. . . . And I realized that I had been deprived through benign ignorance of knowing about this literary history. I decided that, if I had one book in me, I wanted it to be all about me, and the me in this case was a multifaceted me. So that’s how *Brewster Place* began” (Naylor, “An Interview” [Rowell] 185-86). This “multifaceted me” comes to readers of the novel through the stories of seven black women who create the community in *Brewster Place*, a walled-in housing project defined by its seclusion and poverty, for, as Naylor explains:

> I knew that one character, one female protagonist could not even attempt to represent the richness or diversity of the black female experience. So, the women in that work you find consciously differ, beginning with something as simple as skin color, and they differ in their ages, their religious backgrounds, their personal backgrounds, their political affiliations, even their sexual preferences. And my whole thing with that work is to give a tiny microcosm of the black female experience. (“An Interview” [Bonetti] 53-54)\(^\text{12}\)

While the stories of *The Women of Brewster Place* emphasize the diversity of black women’s individual histories and experiences, stories that would otherwise be silenced, this collective of multifaceted characters also serves to celebrate their “common lives and common love” while confronting “what it mean[s] to be a black woman” as part of a community (Naylor, qtd. in Fowler 21). Thus, even as Naylor “refuses to portray one

\(^{12}\) There are a number of autobiographical references to Naylor’s “personal and familial” history “in the form of names, places, and even stories” (Fowler 22). For a chronicling of such details, see Virginia C. Fowler’s *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary*. 
uniform image of the black woman or the black family” (Fraser 74)—even in the first pages of the novel, Naylor tells of her characters who are “nutmeg . . . ebony . . . saffron” (4, Naylor’s italics), highlighting their differences—she demonstrates the connections developed and maintained through shared communal experience, specifically heightened through both interpersonal and collective storied memories. Prompted by their collective memories, these diverse women find new ways of understanding and overcoming the horrors of their own personal pasts, while also garnering the strength to resist the communal patriarchal and racist traumas that oppress them as a group.

As Naylor describes the women of Brewster Place, she emphasizes their similarities, bringing them together into a community of hard-working, damaged, wonderful women. Additionally, she immediately emphasizes the importance of sharing their storied memories:

> Their perspiration mingled with the steam from boiling pots of smoked pork and greens, and it curled on the edges of the aroma of vinegar douches and Evening in Paris cologne that drifted through the street where they stood together—hand-on-hips. Straight backed, round bellied, high-behinded women who threw their head back when they laughed and exposed strong teeth and dark gums. They cursed, badgered, worshiped, and shared their men . . . They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. They came, they went, they grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like any ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story. (4-5, Naylor’s italics)

The emphasis on story and memory—connected to resistance and survival in the image of the phoenix—is made particularly vital in the opening of the novel, as readers are

---

13 As Barbara Christian adds, Naylor “demonstrate[s] how individual personality is not the determining factor that brings [the women] to this street” (qtd. in Stanford 38).
given a short history of Brewster Place. Described as “the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company,” the housing units were simply “an afterthought.” Brewster Place’s “true parentage,” and thus its true story and true history “was hidden” (1, Naylor’s italics). From the first page, Naylor makes *The Women of Brewster Place* a novel about what stories are told and what stories are silenced and hidden by those in power. As Barbara Christian notes, “The origin of communities and their historical development are critical to the structure of Naylor’s novels” (108). Telling the women’s stories, and validating silenced histories, as well as coming together as a collective, therefore, become the key themes of the novel.

The structure of the book—there are seven chapters, each named after and focused on a different Brewster Place resident—has led critics to approach *The Women of Brewster Place* as “a short story sequence, a contingent novel, a composite novel, short story composite, anthology novel, integrated short-story collection, a hybrid novel” (Nicosia 193). The way one reads the text is particularly important in judging how interconnected the stories are, and thus, how important community and the collective are to the book. Some critics have argued that the stories in the novel remain fragmentary, denying community and collective storytelling. In the view of Michael Awkward, for example, “Naylor’s novel . . . clearly recognizes the richness of its narrative

---

14 This is true for all but the last two chapters—one of which is titled “The Two” and focuses on lesbian couple Lorraine and Theresa, and the other, titled “The Block Party,” which tells of the women coming together as a collective unit.
fragmentation, a recognition that is exhibited in the intentional failure of its moment of
totalization” (60). Rocio Davis, too, argues that “the actual fact of the stories’
independence, their individual closure and completion, may suggest the incapacity to
form community” (9).¹⁵ Others, like Kimberly Rae Connor, have claimed that while
“each story stands out as a case study of a particular rite of passage . . . cumulatively the
stories add up to a social drama that has the potential to lead to communitas” (56).
Likewise, Carol Bender and Roseanne Hoefel assert, “The Women of Brewster Place . . .
is collective, communal and collaborative, rather than ‘individual’” (182).

Through her interconnected stories—what some critics like Karen Castellucci
Cox call a short story cycle¹⁶—Naylor emphasizes the individuality of the women
characters, while also demonstrating their interdependence and emphasizing collectivity.
As Cox explains,

> Where more conventional narratives emulate ‘real time’ experience in
> moving forward toward a conclusion, the fragmentary story cycle
> progresses erratically and nondirectionally, looping forward and
> backward, often omitting causal links between physical and psychological
> events. This irregular movement among episodes mirrors the associative
> patterns of human consciousness. (151)

¹⁵ Karen Castellucci Cox, too, suggests, “In this fractured urban world, community is seen as . . . something
not yet attained by the women who struggle through their daily lives” (161-2).

¹⁶ According to Rocio Davis, “The term ‘short story cycle’ implies, above all, a principle of organization, a
structural scheme for the working out of an idea, characters, or themes, even a circular disposition in which
the constituent narratives are simultaneously independent and interdependent. . . . The pivotal challenge of
each cycle is twofold: the collection must assert the individuality and independence of each of the
component parts while creating a necessary interdependence that emphasizes the wholeness and essential
unity of the work” (4). Further, Cox links the genre to “oral traditions and to the projects of retrieving
communal memory and building community” (151). The unity that Naylor achieves helps to enhance the
collective nature of the community while refusing to deny each woman’s individuality. For a full reading
of the novel as a short story cycle, see Cox’s “Magic and Memory in the Contemporary Short Story Cycle:
Gloria Naylor and Louise Erdrich.”
She adds, “Such storytelling patterns underscore the selective process of remembering and retelling where concrete events are sometimes occluded by the less tangible visions of diverse memories and imaginations (152). Thus, the short story cycle is a particularly appropriate form for Naylor to work with as she presents the seemingly individual stories and memories of the women, but also “submit[s] each story to the larger goal of characterizing unity or disruption of community” (Cox 155), inviting her readers to view them as a collective narrative. Cox also observes that the short story cycle is particularly “apt” for “projects of historical revision,” because the format “has already disrupted our tendency as readers to look for unity and chronology, confronting us instead with the unknowability of gaps between stories.” Cox therefore argues that Naylor points readers “to a larger truth about the women characters” by embracing once silenced histories.17 These newly voiced histories derive from “the stories the members share” which create a “communal identity, a reservoir of beliefs, memories, stories, and visions from which any member can recover a past” (Cox 157, 158, 160, 159). It is the combination of the personal autobiographical memories, then, shared through each story, that create the collective history of Brewster Place. And in The Women of Brewster Place, as Laura Nicosia argues, “the sum” of the individual stories becomes “greater than the individual, polyfocal parts” (186), allowing readers to see how individual storied memories become

---

17 As Cox further explains, “Because the story cycle breaks the chronological and univocal standards by which so many historical—and fictional—narratives are bound, the form offers to Naylor . . . an alternative way of remembering that does not categorize pieces of a story as ‘true’ or ‘false’ but opens up possibility to include the events that, regardless of their proof or probability, can best represent an imaginative consciousness that would otherwise go unnoted and ultimately unreported” (160).
part of a larger collective memory and understanding. Likewise, as the women’s stories become part of the larger collective history, they derive a sense of community support and greater individual well-being, which allows the possibility for greater resistance against oppressive, traumatic experiences.

In addition to the format of the novel, the setting of Brewster Place, itself, emphasizes the collective situation of the residents, primarily African American women, who live there. Brewster Place is walled off from the rest of the world, creating an isolated space in which the residents struggle to survive. As Christian reminds us, “Because women usually have little access to power in the larger society, it is not surprising that black women, doubly affected by their racial and gender status, are the central characters in poverty-stricken Brewster Place,” a place, she observes, that was “started by men for the purpose of consolidating power” (110, 109). As Naylor explains in an interview, the wall becomes, for the women, a symbol of their collective nature as well as their collective oppression. As she puts it, “there is a reason for the wall at the dead-end street: regardless of how diverse we may be, as black women we all share two things in this country—and that is racism and sexism. And so that’s what that wall represented for me, and in each of those stories that particular woman will somehow relate to that wall” (“An Interview” [Bonetti] 53-54). Indeed, the wall becomes a public representation of the women’s histories and storied memories and also a symbol of collective memory. As Charmaine N. Ijeoma asserts, “As long as these ‘walls’ are used as barriers of exclusion, each [woman] will continue to exist not only individually but
also collectively” (41). Moreover, Christian suggests that “the wall that separates Brewster Place from the outer world becomes their mark of community as well as their stigma” (111). The wall helps to both form the collective, while also symbolizing the residents’ past of oppression stemming from racism and patriarchy. For the women living in Brewster Place, then, the wall becomes representative of their collective identity, emphasizing their shared community, while constantly reminding them of their oppressed history and haunting memories of racism and sexism.

In response to the racism and sexism that defines their history, Christian says of Afro-American women, “How we negotiate the relationship between the past, as it has helped to form us, and the present, as we must experience it, is often a grave dilemma for us” (106), and it is this negotiation of personal past and shared present that moves *The Women of Brewster Place* from a focus on intra- and interpersonal memory to an examination of collective memories and histories. The women of Brewster Place must invent their personal selves and find personal, individual ways of sharing their individual storied memories, but they must also create a communal identity that allows them to overcome the negative restrictions placed upon them by the patriarchy, racism and

---

18 Davis agrees, suggesting that “for many of the women who live there, Brewster Place is an anchor as well as a burden: it is the social network that both sustains and entraps” (19).

19 In this description of the wall, I do not mean to lessen its power as a symbol for oppression, racism, and sexism. As Loretta G. Woodard argues, “*The Women of Brewster Place* is a scathing indictment of the discrimination and exploitation of women who have been deliberately and systematically excluded from society” (305), and such discrimination is embodied by the wall that separates and secludes them.

20 Davis makes a similar point: “The bleakness of the future and the possession of only a past are themes that weave together the seven stories of Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*” (18).
poverty that define Brewster Place. Such collective identity building is fostered by the first character introduced in the novel—Miss Mattie Michael. Mattie is the character who is most connected to memories of her personal past; most of the first chapter finds her, as she moves into Brewster Place after losing a home that she lived in and owned for years, contemplating the memories of her life that have led her to her move.\footnote{Interestingly, what prompts her to recall her past as she moves into Brewster Place is the smell of “freshly cut sugar cane” that brings back memories “that lay under the graves of thirty-one years that could only be opened again in the mind” (8), reminding us of the connection of memory and smell, while also suggesting that Mattie has some control over when and how she “opens” her storied memories.} She recalls herself pregnant at a young age, leaving her home in Tennessee after her father beat her for not sharing the name of the baby’s father. As she sits on the bus, leaving town, “She just wanted to lay her head on the cushioned seat and suspend time, pretend that she had been born that very moment on that very bus, and that this was all there was and ever would be” (25). From a very early age, then, Mattie comes to understand how the past can haunt an individual, and so she desires to forget, to hold it at bay. But as the baby moves, she comes to realize, “This child would tie her to that past and future as inextricably as it was now tied to her every heartbeat” (25). She cannot simply forget the past—there are too many traces of it that will surface in the present and the future. Thus, she chooses to remember the past—specifically her encounter with Butch Fuller, the baby’s father, in the sugar cane near a basil patch—in a positive, loving way: “When her mind would reach out behind, she forced herself to think only of the back road to the house, the feel of summer, the taste of sugar cane, and the smell of wild herbs” (25). She
chooses to frame her storied memories in ways that are hopeful and pleasant rather than damaging and oppressive.

After Mattie has her baby, a little boy named Basil, she struggles with poverty and lack of help, but ultimately finds an older woman, Miss Eva, who allows Mattie and her son to move into her home. Mattie develops a very close relationship with Miss Eva, and upon Eva’s death, Mattie has saved enough money to buy the house. However, after a grown Basil gets into trouble with the law—he kills a man in a bar fight—Mattie loses the house when she uses it to pay for bail and Basil skips town. She is forced to move to poverty-stricken Brewster Place, where all that remains are her memories of her home:

“Mattie was to die with the memory of the smell of lemon oil and the touch of cool, starched linen on her first night—of the thirty years of nights—she would spend in that house” (34). Likewise, all she has are tenuous memories of her past with Basil: “She tried to recapture the years and hold them up for inspection, so she could pinpoint the transformation, but they slipped through her fingers and slid down the dishes, hidden under the iridescent bubbles that broke with the slightest movement of her hand” (42).

22 From their very first meeting, they share their interpersonal storied memories and create a deep empathetic connection that such sharing can create: “The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable” (34). In a compelling argument, Wells maintains that “the narrative device Naylor uses to develop the idea of African American female consciousness is the voice of the mentor. The novel is told in seven parts, each from the perspective of one of the inhabitants of Brewster Place. Naylor creates a series of mentors, women whose voices reverberate throughout the novel, and each mentor carries the voices of past mentors who have healed her and bound her to the community through shared experiences. They teach each other and support each other in their misery” (44). Miss Eva, he says, is the first of these mentors, showing Mattie how to later mentor and support the rest of the women.

23 As Fowler explains this quotation, “Equating the past to the soap bubbles, which burst so easily and go down the drain, Mattie soon abandons any attempt to understand how past events—that is, her rearing of Basil—have led to the existence of ‘this stranger,’ of whom, significantly, she does not wish to claim any
It is Mattie, then, who most understands the power of memory, for she knows both how a person can frame a memory in a positive, useful way, and she has grasped, again and again, how hard that process of interpretation and memory framing can be. Thus, within the novel, as she becomes a long-time resident of Brewster Place, in the other women’s stories, she grows to be what critics have called, “the central connecting force in this text,” “the foundational matriarch,” “the primary agent of female coalescence,” “the moral agent in the novel,”24 and “the Earth Mother,”25 (Nicosia 180; 182; Davis 20; Wells 44; Fowler 30). Additionally, Mattie is the ultimate rememberer, and she comes to embody the role of narrator of their collective memories and histories.

Mattie’s role is most clearly demonstrated in the lives of her long time friend, Etta Mae, and in Miss Eva’s granddaughter, Ciel Turner.26 Mattie has known Etta Mae since they were girls, and their close bond demonstrating lasting female friendship is highlighted throughout the novel. As Connor notes, “In spite of the different roads they

---

24 As Wells explains, “The mature Mattie becomes the sage, the mentor, who is no longer passionately troubled or troublesome. She is the calm, unifying force, who suggests proper values through actions, rather than preaching or cajoling” (45).

25 Naylor, herself, has described Mattie as an “earth mother” (“An Interview” [Carabi ] 116). And Fowler further explains, “Mattie’s identification throughout the story with plants and vegetation is consistent with her role as a nurturer of life” (27).

26 I will not discuss Cora Lee or Kiswanna here, not because they are unimportant to the novel, but because their interactions with Mattie are less extensive.
have taken, Mattie and Etta Mae keep returning to one another” (59-60), and it is true that with Mattie, Etta Mae “had no choice but to be herself. The carefully erected decoys she was constantly shuffling and changing to fit the situation were of no use. . . . Etta and Mattie went way back, a singular term that claimed co-knowledge of all the important events in their lives and almost all the unimportant ones. And by rights of this possession, it tolerated no secrets” (58). It is their history together and their shared memories that help them to overcome any problems in their relationship. For instance, when Etta Mae speaks negatively to Mattie, Mattie turns to memories of their past to resist the impact of her friend’s words: “They shared at least a hundred memories that could belie those cruel words. Let them speak for her” (70). Mattie, here, is shown again to be connected to memories of the past, and she uses these memories to help her cope with present circumstances, an ability which extends to Etta Mae. And so, even after their fight, Etta Mae knows she has her friend to return to, and so “she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her” (74). In this way, Naylor demonstrates the power of female friendship and connection, depicting “the ennobling power of love as women sustain each other” (Wells 45).

However, this is not the only important component of their relationship. Mattie also takes Etta Mae to church, showing Etta Mae the power of collective community and shared ritual. In church, the congregation is taken beyond their personal histories and memories to something collective: “The words were as ancient as the origin of their misery, but the tempo had picked up threefold in its evolution from the cotton fields.
They were now sung with the frantic determination of a people who realized that the world was swiftly changing but for some mystic, complex reason their burden had not” (63). Members of the congregation are converted from individuals to one larger, communal body, for, “The song ended with a huge expulsion of air, and the congregation sat down as one body” (64). Although Etta Mae does not yet fully grasp the power of community put forth within the church—she spends much time focusing on the desirability of the minister, whom she later sleeps with—she does get a hint of what Mattie knows, that communal connection and collective memories of the past can be uplifting, healing, and even resistant to oppressive versions of that past. What Etta does learn is the power of shared community to help one contemplate and interpret one’s own storied past. As she sits with the rest of the church congregation, “the scenes of her life reeled out before her with the same aging script; but now hindsight sat as the omniscient director and had the young star of her epic recite different brilliant lines” (64). She begins to see how the power of a collective history can impact and even change her own personal history.

Just as Mattie provides Etta Mae with a collective space through which Etta Mae can reevaluate her storied memories, she does the same for Ciel, Miss Eva’s grown granddaughter who now lives in Brewster Place. In Ciel’s story, we learn that her desperate choices have led her to a point of utter despair. Ciel is involved with a man, Eugene, who is constantly abandoning her and then returning. When she shares the news that she is pregnant with a second child, Eugene tells her that there is no way he can
support another child and threatens to leave. In order to avoid this, she has an abortion, a
decision with which she is never comfortable. In response, she compartmentalizes the
events in order not to remember them: “All the activities of the past week of her life
were balled up and jammed on the right side of her brain, as if belonging to some other
woman. And when she endured this one last thing for her, she would push it up there,
too, and then one day give it all to her—Ciel wanted no part of it” (95). Unlike Mattie,
who frames her memories in a positive light and shares her memories with others, Ciel’s
inability to confront her past helps lead to the desperation and lack of utter well-being she
later endures. When, again, Eugene threatens to leave, she realizes she should tell him of
the emotional pain of her abortion, but “that would require that she uncurl that week of
her life, pushed safely up into her head, when she had done all those terrible things for
that other woman who had wanted an abortion. She and she alone would have to take
responsibility for them now” (100). As she searches “desperately for the right words”
(100) to story her memory, she fails. As she watches Eugene pack, from the other room
she hears a scream from her daughter, a toddler named Serena, who, attempting to follow
a roach, has stuck a fork into an electrical socket.

Serena’s death, in addition to the abortion that Ciel never emotionally deals with,
leave her with no will to live. It is Mattie who helps bring her through her grief, leading
many to read their encounter as a prime example of the healing power of women’s
friendship. For instance, as Fowler suggests, “This story thus presents the pain of grief

27 As Stanford explains, “The abortion becomes a psychic splitting of one self from the other, a split that
radically alters Ciel’s experience of reality” (39).
and betrayal, including self-betrayal, as inescapable but bearable when women bond together” (44). But Mattie provides more than simple friendship or bonding, or even the sharing interpersonal memories of loss. In fact, this act of sharing interpersonal memories is proven ineffectual by the neighbor woman who tries to comfort Ciel:

A neighbor woman entered in studied certainty and stood in the middle of the room. “Child, I know how you feel, but don’t do this to yourself. I lost one, too. The Lord will . . .” And she choked, because the words were jammed down into her throat by the naked force of Ciel’s eyes. Ciel had opened them fully now to look at the woman, but raw fires had eaten them worse than lifeless—worse than death. The woman saw in that mute appeal for silence the ragings of a personal hell flowing through Ciel’s eyes. And just as she went to reach for the girl’s hand, she stopped as if a muscle spasm had overtaken her body and, cowardly, shrank back. Reminiscences of old, dried-over pains were no consolation in the face of this. They had the effect of cold beads of water on a hot iron—they danced and fizzled up while the room stank from their steam. (102)

Shared interpersonal memory is simply not enough to help Ciel overcome her suffering.

What Mattie does bring, in addition to friendship and women’s bonding, is a connection to a collective history—a history of women’s pain, suffering, and loss that has shaped women’s lives for longer than any of our individual lives. And so Mattie rocks Ciel:

into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother’s arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children’s entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on. She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it—a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled—and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to
them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (103-4)

This is, as Nicosia argues, an “act of maternal love” that is “one of the strongest and most successful expressions of female-bonding and kinship in the sequence” (184). But it is also more than this. What Mattie does is help Ciel connect with something larger than herself; she connects her to a collective memory and history of women’s oppression and loss. As Wells argues, “through human touch, Mattie rocks Ciel across history. She becomes not an individual mother who suffers the loss of her child, but one of the multitude of sufferers, collectively connected to mother suffering. . . . Mattie, in the images of mother and midwife, assists Ciel in rejoining the world by binding her to other victimized women who too had to find a way to exorcise the pain” (46). These women are no longer individuals for Mattie or Ciel, and though important, their individual stories would be as ineffectual for Ciel as the neighbor woman’s story. But as Mattie helps Ciel to experience this collective memory of loss, Ciel, like Etta, is able to face her own memories of loss which will allow her to heal.

---

28 In an interview, Naylor describes this scene in the following: “The laying on of hands and the healing . . . it had to be a woman doing the healing and the rocking. That was important to connect them up with other women throughout history who had their children torn away because of the machinations of the patriarchy—that’s the reference to the concentration camps and to the sacrifices. A man could not have done that” (“Gloria Naylor” 93-4).

29 Nicosia notes that Mattie’s “ability to relate to other women on emotional and spiritual levels makes her seem almost magical” (180). This is significant when one compares her to Morrison’s Connie, a character I will discuss later in this chapter.

30 Stanford describes the rocking scene in the following: “Mattie rocks Ciel from the larger unframed history of women’s brutalization and oppression into the specific frame of her own life” (40). It is appropriate that she uses the language of framing, as what Mattie helps Ciel do is to frame her memories of loss in a much larger narrative of women’s pain and suffering.
For Naylor, then, collective memory can provide oppressed characters with comfort, hope, and a sense of group connection and belonging. This need for community becomes even more clear when we consider what happens to Lorraine, a character who is denied her place in the community and must endure as her own life experiences and memories are rejected and silenced. Lesbians Lorraine and Theresa move to Brewster to get away from the discrimination they faced in a middle-class neighborhood. Although it is not important to Theresa,\footnote{Theresa acts as if the community’s rejection does not bother her. However, her conclusion that “They weren’t ever going to be accepted by these people, and there was no point in trying” may simply suggest that she has given up hope (163).} Lorraine desperately desires to be part of the fabric of Brewster Place: “No, it wasn’t her job she feared losing this time, but their approval. She wanted to stand out there and chat and trade makeup secrets and cake recipes. She wanted to be secretary of their block association and be asked to mind their kids while they ran to the store” (136). Likewise, Lorraine believes that “Black people were all in the same boat . . . and if they didn’t row together, they would sink together” (142).

Unfortunately, once rumors spread through the community that Lorraine and Theresa are lesbians, the other women reject them, denying any hope Lorraine has of acceptance and love.\footnote{At a community meeting, Mattie and Etta Mae discuss the general resistance to Lorraine and Theresa. Mattie ponders, “But I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man.” When Etta responds “It’s still different,” Mattie argues, “Maybe it’s not so different . . . Maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it, ’cause they know deep down it’s not so different after all” (141). Her support, however, is never directly extended to Lorraine, which could have helped prevent the tragedy that follows.}

The result of this rejection, this lack of support, is played out when Lorraine is attacked and gang-raped in an alley next to the wall. According to Naylor, Lorraine’s
rape results from her lack of communal support: “In the case of Lorraine there was no woman on that block willing to help her and she was in trouble. . . . And she had no one to go to. . . . It was her alienation from the other women that put her in that alley” (“A Talk” 5-6). None of the women are there to help Lorraine, but Mattie’s absence is most telling. Unlike Ciel, who has Mattie to rock her back to life and help her face her memories, Mattie, keeper of memory, is not there for Lorraine, and so it is Lorraine’s memory that is lost. As Lorraine is raped, her “screams tried to break through her corneas out into the air, but the tough rubbery flesh sent them vibrating back into her brain, first shaking lifeless the cells that nurtured her memory” (170-71). Additionally, Naylor reminds readers that even if Lorraine’s memories were preserved, even if she was able to share her storied memory of trauma, no one would believe her. When one of the rapists asks what will happen if Lorraine remembers it was them, the ringleader responds, “Man, how she gonna prove it? Your dick ain’t got no fingerprints” (171). Her story of trauma and her memories of the rape would be ignored by a racist, patriarchal system.

After the rapists have run away, Lorraine sees an innocent man, Ben, walking towards her. Confused and alone, she picks up a rock and beats him to death. Interestingly, Mattie sees Lorraine, but she is too late; she cannot get there quickly enough. As she arrives, she is unable to prevent further damage: “Mattie’s screams went ricocheting in

---

33 My train of thought here follows that of Fowler, who argues, “Just as Mattie’s love brings Ciel back from the death to which her pain is taking her, so the absence of that kind of caring and protective bond is, by implication, responsible for Lorraine’s vulnerability to C.C. Baker and his gang. . . . It is doubly significant, then, that Mattie, who has been a life-saving agent for Ciel, sees Lorraine crawling down the alley toward Ben but is unable to arrive in time to stop the murder” (53-4).
Lorraine’s head, and she joined them with her own as she brought the brick down again, splitting his forehead and crushing his temple, rendering his brains just a bit more useless than hers were now. Arms grabbed her around the waist” (173). Nicosia does observe an intimate connection made here between Mattie and Lorraine: “In what may be read as a melding of terrors, Mattie’s screams are not merely heard by Lorraine, but are absorbed and mingled with ‘her own.’ The women become unified in horror—Lorraine at her gruesome victimization and Mattie at witnessing a murder—through their shared acts of primal screaming” (185). But their connection comes too late to prevent tragedy. Mattie’s attempt to bring Lorraine to the collective fails because of its extremely delayed nature.

It is not only Mattie, however, who failed Lorraine. All of the women feel their complicity in and guilt for the horrific events that have transpired at the wall.34 At the same time, they finally come to understand their connection with Lorraine. Realizing that, like them, Lorraine was a victim of patriarchal oppression, they begin to see their own histories and memories through her traumatic experience.35 As Fowler argues, “what happens to Lorraine could happen to all of them and has indeed happened to many

34 Wardi argues that Lorraine’s “demise” is “collective” in nature, “as the horror of each woman’s life is grafted onto her body. The fact that seven perpetrators rape Lorraine, which corresponds to the number of female stories in Naylor’s collection, suggests a shared female experience. Her body is textualized as a site of misogyny and racism” (497).

35 As Deborah Holmes explains, Lorraine’s “search for acceptance among her community is no different from what the other women in Brewster Place are searching . . . for: love, peace, community, and a sense of belonging” (14). Likewise, as Maxine Sample adds, “Lorraine’s death brings reminders of collective victimization to the women” (n. pag.).
of them, albeit in milder forms” (54). Lorraine’s trauma, then, becomes a collective reminder of her oppression and victimization, as well as their own, and thus, as rain begins to fall on Brewster Place, every woman “dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress. She had come to them in the midst of the cold sweat of a nightmare, or had hung around the edges of fitful sleep. Little girls woke up screaming, unable to be comforted by bewildered mothers who knew, and yet didn’t know, the reason for their daughters’ stolen sleep. The women began to grow jumpy and morose” (176). Mattie’s dreams were also “troubling” (176). Even Ciel, who has left Brewster Place and never knew Lorraine, is connected to Lorraine and dreams of her:37 “Oh, I don’t know, one of those crazy things that get all mixed up in your head. Something about that wall and Ben. And there was a woman who was supposed to be me, I guess. She didn’t look exactly like me, but inside I felt it was me. . . . And something bad had happened to me by the wall—I mean her—something bad had happened to her” (179). Usha Bande suggests that Naylor demonstrates women’s “bonding through dreams” (5), and Fowler emphasizes that “Ciel’s identification with Lorraine is one of the most explicit statements the novel makes about the very real sisterhood that binds black women together” (56). But, the fact that they are dreaming of events that they weren’t present for suggests more than simple bonding—it suggests that they are sharing a collective memory. Thus, it is only after Lorraine’s tragedy that the

36 Fowler continues, “Similarly, Lorraine’s unwitting murder of Ben . . . provides a kind of poetic justice for all women who have been assaulted by men in the course of the novel” (54).

37 It is only fair to note that Ciel returns in Mattie’s dream of the block party, an issue that I will consider shortly.
women are finally connected, sharing collective memories of Lorraine’s trauma through their dreams.

Ultimately, the women of Brewster Place do not talk about their connection through dreams—“only a few admitted it” (175)—and it is Mattie who must bring them, as she brought Etta Mae and Ciel, to become active participants in the collective body of the community, where they can overcome not only the collective memories of Lorraine’s trauma but also their shared experiences of sexism and racism. Thus, Mattie, our narrator of collective memories, dreams the final chapter, “The Block Party,” and her dream demonstrates the guilt and complicity the women feel, but also their desire to resist the racist and sexist conditions that plague their collective lives. Thus, although the final chapter’s main focus remains on Mattie and her dream, the ending of The Women of Brewster Place becomes the collective story of all of the residents. Still, readers must consider that the final chapter is Mattie’s dream, and although “the reader initially assumes [Mattie’s dream is] part of the progressive narrative temporality,” and “many readers fail, in their first reading of the novel, to recognize it as a dream” (Matus 53; Fowler 54), once readers realize that it is simply a dream, it is easy to dismiss the power of community and collective memory demonstrated within it, as many critics have done. For instance, Nicosia suggests that the fact that the ending chapter is a dream may be Naylor’s punishment for the women’s “lack of faithfulness to the cause of black feminism, or for their deeply ingrained homophobia” (191-92). More significantly, Awkward argues that “Instead of serving to unite the text’s individual stories, Mattie’s
dream increases *The Women of Brewster Place*’s sense of disjunction. . . . Because its presentation of female community is not offered as an actual narrative event, Mattie’s dream is perhaps most profitably understood as an illusion that serves to perpetuate the text’s content and formal disjunctions” (62). However, because it is Mattie who dreams the final dream, and Mattie who has effectively brought women to collective memories for redemptive means, the dream cannot be dismissed as simply a failure of community.

As Mattie has been the collective leader, she must use her dream to know the collective possibility of the women, and as collective narrator, bring their collective resistance to fruition.

Thus, Mattie’s final dream is better understood as a “symbolic act” that “enact[s] the ‘communal memory’” that the women desperately need (Matus 54; Cox 151). As Cox argues, “these women all share the same consciousness” and therefore, Mattie’s dream becomes an “episode lying outside time and space in the collective consciousness

---

38 Still, others disagree, arguing that Mattie, “as the community’s best voice and sharpest eye . . . is well-qualified to express the unconscious urgings of the community and dream the collective dream” (Matus 52). Maxine Lavon Montgomery agrees: “‘The Block Party’ is essentially everybody’s story. . . . Since Mattie, the community’s larger-than-life central mother figure, has experienced first-hand the tragedies of life, it is entirely appropriate that she dream the women’s collective dream of freedom” (47-8).

39 Nicosia agrees: “Frankly, Mattie’s dream may seem even more vital to the readers who, after 176 pages of witnessing events that lead only to suffering and suppressed or transferred anger, finally witness the women in a victorious act. Whether these emotions are, or only seem to be purged for the women is moot; the narrative act and its reception are vehicles for community building” (192). Fowler agrees, arguing that “the sheer length of Mattie’s dream—nearly 12 of the 13-page story—prevents the reader from relinquishing its vision after Mattie awakens. The united effort of the women to destroy the wall is so consistent with readers’ desires that we may give our intellectual assent to its status as a dream, but not our emotional assent. The dream is one of Naylor’s most successful strategies in the novel, allowing her to provide a vision of what needs to happen while at the same time withholding it” (57).

40 Connor emphasizes that what is important in the dream “is that it exists at all and that it is a different dream from the nightmares that have haunted the residents since Lorraine’s death” (71). Mattie provides new possibility for the oppressed women.
of all the female characters.” She continues, the women “share a common terror and rage, and it is out of this aggregate memory that a fantasy of communal alliance finally emerges, where the women are galvanized into action by the blood-like stain of rain on the brick wall” (164). And this is exactly what happens. Moved by a collective consciousness enabled by Mattie in her dream, the women turn upon the wall that has become, over the years, an external representation of oppression, and in recent weeks, the site of Lorraine’s terror, and recognize that there is “Blood—there’s still blood on this wall. . . . Blood ain’t got no right still being here.” Led by Mattie, who calls, “We gonna need some help here,” the women of Brewster Place break down the wall, passing the bricks “hand to hand, table to table, until the brick[s] flew out of Brewster Place” (185, 186). In this act, as Connor observes, “Naylor demonstrate[s] that freedom from oppression is seldom an individual pursuit” (45). Instead, the women must come together and act, prompted by their collective memories of pain, oppression, grief, but also of solidarity and connection.41 Likewise, as Cox asserts, “The history of the women’s oppression is written nowhere, so they find its story in the blood—which-is-not-blood [it is rain]” (165). Then, by tearing down the wall, they actively change the story and rewrite the history, claiming their oppression and standing against it.42

41 Significantly, Lorraine’s partner Theresa is moving out of Brewster that day, and as she goes to leave, she, too, is included in the collective action of demolishing the wall, signifying her acceptance of and as part of the community.

42 Matus observes that “Tearing at the very bricks of Brewster’s walls is an act of resistance against the conditions that prevail within it. The more strongly each woman feels about her past in Brewster Place, the more determinedly the bricks are hurled” (54).
In an interview, when Naylor was asked if Mattie’s dream of collective resistance would ever become a reality, she responded, “This is going to depend on the reader.

When she [Mattie] wakes up, the party is going to take place, but the clouds are coming and you know it’s going to rain. Is this going to be a deferred dream? Well, I decided to let each reader decide. Will they tear down the wall? Or won’t they? . . . It’s an open ending” (“An Interview” [Carabi] 119-20). And although it is an open ending, as Mattie awakes and looks out the window, she sees Brewster Place “bathed in a deluge of sunlight” and perceives it to be “just like a miracle,” suggesting that miracles could occur that very day (188). Likewise, we must turn to a lesson Mattie learned from Butch Fuller, the father of her child, a lesson that Mattie returns to in memory. As Butch teaches Mattie to eat sugar cane, he instructs her to “spit it out while the wedge is still firm and that last bit of juice—the one that promises to be the sweetest of the whole mouthful—just escapes the tongue” (18). It seems that Mattie has passed this lesson on to Naylor, who leaves readers with the promise of something sweet that just escapes us.

Still, there is an epilogue to the novel, where Brewster Place, itself, has been closed, its residents evicted, and this epilogue demonstrates how far the residents have come. Naylor tells us, there is “no eulogy” when a street dies—no one is there to officially tell the story of its history and the people who lived there—and yet, what finally allows a street to die is “when the spirit is . . . fading in someone’s memory” (191). Thus, although Brewster is now abandoned and empty, it is not yet dead. It “still waits to die” because the women carry the memories and the stories of the place and of the community
they created there. Their storied memories help them to sustain themselves, but also help
them to not forget the collective history of their lives in Brewster Place, a history that
would otherwise be silenced.

Creating and Controlling History in Toni Morrison’s Paradise

Like Naylor, who, in The Women of Brewster Place, demonstrates a community
of women who must struggle to overcome an oppressive history by engaging their
personal and collective storied memories, Toni Morrison has consistently engaged issues
of memory, history, and narrative in her works.43 As Marni Gauthier notes, “Critics have
universally recognized Morrison for redressing the limited perspectives of mainstream
United States history by reclaiming the narratives of African American history,
particularly from a female point of view” (395). Similarly, as Channette Romero
observes, Morrison’s texts offer “an alternative to official American history,” creating “a
history that is more inclusive of remembered black experience” (420).44 Although
Morrison is quick to assert that her point “is not to soak in some warm bath of nostalgia

43 Referring to Morrison’s trilogy, Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise, Justine Tally argues, “the trilogy is
undergirded by a concern for the relationship of History, Memory, and Story, but that in each novel the
focus of this concern is altered: Beloved foregrounds the problem of memory, Jazz, the process of
storytelling, while Paradise deals with the ambiguities of history. In all, however, their relationship with
‘Truth,’ the author’s overriding theme in all of her work, is tenuous: memory is fickle, story is unreliable,
and history is subject to manipulation” (“Reality” 35).

44 In addition to other historical approaches, Paradise has been examined as a historical account that
“(re)covers a West that includes black homesteaders and their efforts to fulfill a black manifest destiny in a
region once hoped to be outside the black-white color line that would come to define the twentieth-century”
(Flint 590). It has also been approached as “the story of the inner life to events that have become larger
than life and have been subsumed under the names of heroes like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X”
(Schur 285).
about the good old days—*there were none!*” she does believe that she “can change the past. Insight and knowledge change the past. It is the past, not the future, which is infinite”” (qtd. in Romero 427; qtd. in Dalsgård 238). Thus, she does work to recover the stories, memories, and histories ignored by official, often patriarchal, racist, and sexist, versions of history as a way to acknowledge and validate the silenced voices of the past, while at the same time working to use the past in ways that benefit the future of both the individual and the collective.

Morrison consciously and consistently evokes issues of memory in her writing, which is demonstrated by the fragmented style of so many of her novels. As she explains, “I knew that I couldn’t be exclusively chronological. . . . I think that even though we live chronologically, our consciousness works quite differently. We constantly think about yesterday, or 20 years ago, or the future, as we go about the day. Our minds are always moving back and forth, planning, remembering, regretting” (Morrison, “This Side”). And while much of her work has been about individual memories, often focusing on how individuals deal with memories of personal trauma, her 1997 novel, *Paradise*, examines how communities form and reform collective memories, while also demonstrating the struggle between collective narratives of the past and contrasting individual accounts of that same history. Although *Paradise* is Morrison’s first novel that deals extensively with collective memory, it is clear that she is aware of the social and collective implications of memory in her early works, including *Beloved*. As Sethe describes *rememory* to her daughter, Denver, she explains that an individual can
“bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (36). Even here, Morrison articulates the likelihood for someone not even present at a particular moment of experience to encounter a memory, or as Chiji Akoma observes, “Rememory becomes a present thought of a past, solidified in an image kept alive by its capacity to be evoked or re-enacted by virtually any member of the community” (6). This ability to engage another’s experiences and memories is, Morrison argues, one of “the most obvious thing[s] about us [African Americans].” Specifically, Morrison says, it is the “connectedness, the history of family and personal relations, people’s attitudes toward one another based on anecdotes and legends about them that you may not have even known. And how all that pulls into and mixes and becomes a community. All their secrets. All their confrontations. All their reconciliations. The hierarchy within” (“Loose Magic” 166). Communal connectedness and collective memory thus become the focus of Paradise.

Set in 1976, Paradise tells the story of two communities: first, the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and second, a group of outsider-women who live in an old Convent seventeen miles outside of town. In each case, Morrison’s characters must overcome traumatic experiences—the residents of Ruby work to maintain their collective identity after their ancestors, who were ex-slaves, were turned away from an all-black town for having too-dark skin, an experience that comes to be known in town lore as the “Disallowing,” while each of the Convent women brings a memory of personal trauma and oppression with her upon her arrival. By juxtaposing these two communities,
Morrison highlights their distinctive natures, demonstrating both their similarities—both communities embrace dominant narrators for their histories, both use artifacts as outside embodiments of collective memory, and both include members whose personal remembrances are denied by the collective, public narrative of memory—as well as their extreme differences, the most important of which is the way they use their storied memories of the past to create a positive future. Peter Widdowson articulates this last goal in a slightly different way: “What is at issue,” he says, is “not forgetting one’s history” while, at the same time “not being imprisoned by it in a way that blocks the future” (327-28). Indeed, as Therese E. Higgins observes, the connection between past and present is an issue that has permeated all of Morrison’s writings: “Morrison believes that slavery is indeed the African American’s past, but the whole of her canon consists of characters who need to face the fact and move beyond it in a positive way” (128). Such a task can be achieved on both an individual and collective level by shifting the ways memories are storied. Unlike the town of Ruby, which successfully creates a collective history and identity but is unable to transcribe that history into a usable and sustaining collective future, the women at the Convent demonstrate a mode of engaging past memories that allows them to heal, grow, and gain new agency, ultimately suggesting the power and possibility embodied in their example of collective remembering.

To understand the community of Ruby, it is necessary to know its history. Originally the town of Haven was established in 1890 by “nine large intact families who made the original journey,” along with “fragments of other families: a sister and a
brother, four cousins . . . aunts and great-aunts shepherding the children of their dead sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews” (188). After their Disallowing by light-skinned blacks in Fairly, Oklahoma, who turn the group away because of their dark skin color, “the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them” (189). As Morrison explains, “Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or [later] Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many” (189). Becoming the “formative” dynamic of Haven’s “memory and group identity,” their history of Disallowing prompted them to refuse “each other nothing,” and to be “vigilant to any need or shortage” (Bouson, Quiet 196; Paradise 109). Moreover, the group celebrates their dark skin color, understanding it as a sign of racial purity. Ultimately, the journey to Haven becomes the primary subject of the town’s communal history. The children and grandchildren born to those original founders, particularly twins Deacon and Steward Morgan, born in 1924, grew up hearing the stories of their community: “Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill, and strength. Tales of luck and outrage” (161). For twenty years, the twins heard “what the previous forty had been like. They listened to, imagined and remembered every single thing because each detail was a jolt of pleasure, erotic as a dream, out-thrilling and more purposeful than even the war they had fought in” (16). And over time, “The strong words,
strange at first, becoming familiar, gaining weight and hypnotic beauty the more they heard them, and made them their own” (110-11). Thus, as adults, they, more than any of the other Ruby residents, become the experts of the town’s lore and the narrators of the town’s past. Being Morgans, who “haven’t forgotten a thing since 1755,” the twins are described as having “powerful memories” (278, 13). “Between them,” we are told, “they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they had not. . . . And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by the grandfather” (13).

The town patriarchs, Deacon and Steward Morgan, thus become the carriers of the town’s collective memories, turning into Haven’s and later Ruby’s “griot, transforming and fixing its history, becoming its institutional memory” (Fraile-Marcos 17). However, as Steward’s wife Dovey explains, the twins are not immune to the influence of nostalgia: “Back from the war, both men were hungry for down-home food, but dreaming of it for three years had raised their expectations, exaggerated the possibilities of lard making biscuits lighter than snow, the responsibility sharp cheese took in hominy” (81). Such raised expectations can also be seen in their treatment of their community’s history, which they idealize. In their collective memories and stories, Haven has been romanticized as a “dreamtown” (5). Thus, in 1948, after the twins return from the War to

45 Interestingly, upon his return, Deacon “hummed with pleasure as he sucked sweet marrow from hocks,” but “Steward remembered everything differently” (81), which demonstrates an early difference between the two men.

46 As Therese E. Higgins notes, the Morgans’ story “is mythic in content as it contains all of the elements of great ancient myths, African and otherwise: a mistreated and persecuted people on a journey out of slavery, traveling a road laden with misfortunes, only to be led to safety by a god or god-like figure” (121).
see their town falling into disarray, and they realize that it no longer lives up to their constructed image of what it once was—Haven was now “shriveled into tracery” (6)—they, with members of the original nine families, move farther west to establish Ruby. Realizing that the move “was nothing compared to what they had endured and what they might become if they did not begin anew,” the “new fathers” are determined not to be “less than the Old Fathers” (6). But, in deciding to start anew, they attempt to create an exact replica of the perfect town they believe their forefathers created, years before, making Ruby a town based on “longing and nostalgia” for the idealized, “original” Haven (Yoon 70). Never dealing with the pain associated with the Disallowing, the town patriarchs model the new town of Ruby on their communal pride—pride based on their dark skin which demonstrates the racial purity emphasized by the stories of their forefathers—and through the retelling of the community’s collective memories and their idealization of Haven, they heighten their own isolationist ideals in order to maintain racial purity. As it was for Haven, the Disallowing remains the dominant story within the Ruby community, leaving the lessons from the collective memory of the Disallowing to shape every aspect of the new Ruby.

Thus, the residents of Ruby, led by Deacon and Steward who see themselves as the “truer heirs, proof of which was Ruby itself,” create an exact replica of Haven in Ruby (113). In doing this, the twins share the stories of the Old Fathers, while, at the same time, adopting them as the only true history of their community, elevating their own memories to the level of “a master narrative” that is “official and monolithic, and hence
dangerous to the well-being of the community” (Kella 212; Peterson qtd. in Yoon 70).  

Their monolithic, totalizing collective memory silences alternate accounts of the past, while at the same time, it maintains the twin’s power and status as narrators of the town’s collective story and history. Through their storied collective memory, they maintain the collective identity of the town, an identity based on the racial purity of the nine-original families distinguished by their eight-rock status; named after “a deep, deep level in the coal mines,” the eight-rock people of Ruby are “Blue-black . . . tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them” (193). In order to maintain this racial purity, the town remains isolated from the greater world while, at the same time, the town patriarchs attempt to control the threat of any outside intrusion. Additionally, the town patriarchs attempt to control the lives of Ruby women, for “in the eyes” of the town patriarchs, “stringent surveillance, paternalist protection, even coercive action to ensure against the proliferation of unsavory ‘progeny’ that insufficiently resemble the purportedly pure original” is paramount (Robolin 310).  

Within Paradise, Morrison makes it clear that the outsider-women living at the Convent remain, at least in the minds of the Ruby patriarchs, the

---

47 Akoma agrees: “the Morgans’ position points to a harnessing of what is remembered into what is literally a master-narrative” (9).

48 As Ruby resident Patricia Best observes, “everything that worries them must come from women” (217), leading critic Linda Krumholz to argue, “women, as mothers and potential mothers, have a natural connection to birth (and all the dangers of difference and ‘tainted blood’ that reproduction brings) and death, and thus, women embody the threat of change to men” (26).

49 In an engaging essay, “Loose Memory in Toni Morrison’s Paradise and Zoë Wicomb’s David’s Story,” Stéphane Robolin goes on to connect the Ruby patriarchs’ control of female sexuality to their control of memory, allowing her to illustrate “the treatment of memory-as (-uncontrollable)-woman, or what we might call ‘loose memory’” (309).
embodiment of a threat to the Ruby community, and the men attack them, an issue I will address in detail later. Likewise, there are numerous examples in the text where Deacon and Steward ward off other light-skinned women who threaten the purity of the town blood-rule. For instance, when eight-Rock Roger Best marries a light-skinned woman, a woman he brings on the journey from Haven to Ruby, Steward comments, “He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind” (201). A similar incident occurs when Menus brings a “pretty redbone girl” to Ruby and the patriarchs tell him that she is “not good enough for him; said she was more like a fast woman than a bride” (278). Because of her skin color, Menus is “dissuaded . . . from marriage” (201). The patriarchal attitude towards women, however, is not limited to maintenance of a pure blood-line. Even towards their own wives the men exhibit condescension. For instance, when Soane tells Deacon, “I don’t understand,” he dismisses her, responding, “You don’t need to” (107). Likewise, at the meeting to consider the fate of K.D., Deacon and Steward’s nephew, and Arnette, a girl he has impregnated, the men conclude that Arnette’s mother will have to talk to her: “Women always the key. God bless ’em” (61). Still, in this important meeting, the women are excluded, as Morrison is quick to emphasize: the women “were nowhere in sight” (61). The men do not truly value the women’s thoughts or opinions, nor do they consider them important enough to attend the meeting. It is not surprising, then, that the town’s memorials to their history—namely the yearly Christmas pageant and the Oven—sustain the official master narrative reinforced by the town patriarchs, while also perpetuating sexist and racist ideals.
The town’s yearly school Christmas pageant features “the Nativity” and has a long communal history, as it involves “the whole town” and is “older” than the church programs, “having started before the churches were even built” (185). Everyone in Ruby is involved in the pageant, reinforcing their connection to this communal memorialization: “In staging the school’s Christmas play, the whole town helped or meddled: older men repaired the platform, assembled the crib; young ones fashioned new innkeepers and freshened the masks with paint. Women made doll babies, and children drew colored pictures of Christmas dinner food, mostly dessert” (185). The play itself, while loosely following the Christian story of the birth of Jesus, actually retells the story of the Disallowing. In the 1976 version, seven pairs of Ruby children with their doll-babies are turned away by a group of light-skinned individuals acting the part of those who disallowed their forefathers in Fairly. The families then follow the guidance of one Wiseman who will lead them to found Haven. In this creative reenactment of the town’s official collective memory, the townspeople cast their dark-skinned forefathers and themselves as “God’s chosen people,” emphasizing their racial purity and goodness

---

50 As Robolin asserts, “This literal production of the (abridged) historical record ultimately helps codify a ‘postmemory’ infused with prodigious purpose and divine right. Strategically melding the secular Disallowing with the sacred narrative of Jesus’s birth (the turning away of Mary and Joseph), the town scripts its own legitimating by crowning the perseverance of the community with powerful messianic purpose” (301-02).

51 This story reenacts the story passed down through collective memory: after being Disallowed, Zechariah Morgan, Deacon and Steward’s grandfather, follows a ghostly “walking man” to the land that will become Haven. The followers come to think of the walking man as a representative of God, thereby making them God’s chosen people. As Bouson argues, “Turning shame into pride, Zechariah Morgan’s master narrative of what happens after the Disallowing seeks to define the essential nature and collective destiny of the 8-rock people. Countering the racist ideology of the light-skinned people of Fairly, Zechariah’s controlling story represents the 8-rock as God’s chosen people” (Quiet 198).
(Bouson, *Quiet* 198). In this, they recast a history of slavery, racism, oppression, and trauma in a way that makes their experiences seem positive. During this pageant that celebrates Ruby history, the community takes part and is moved; the “frail voices are accompanied by stronger ones in the audience, and at that last note more than a few are wiping their eyes” (211). Each year, the pageant reinforces their communal history and bolsters their collective memory and identity, reminding each of his or her part in this collective ground and his or her personal connection to the collective memory.

At the same time, it becomes clear that the pageant has changed over the years—Reverend Misner, new to the town, asks Patricia Best, “Who put this together? I thought you told me there were nine original families. Where are the other two?” (211). Patricia Best, a lifetime Ruby resident, school teacher, and unofficial town historian, also observes these changes as she reflects on her own life: “It was some time later that she saw there were only eight. By the time she understood that the Cato line was cut, there was another erasure. Who?” (215).

Although Misner is new to the town, it is important to note, as Andrew Read does, that “none of these stories acknowledges the shame of the Disallowing; instead, like their forefathers, these men compulsively transform ‘outrage’ into evidence of positive, masculine qualities” (532). As the “shame of the Disallowing” is turned “into pride,” the descendants of the Old Fathers “inherit the same traumatized psychological state. Stories of the Disallowing . . . form a personal traumatic experience for every generation in this community, compulsively commemorated and repeated” (531). Thus, as Chiji Akoma adds, “The men of Ruby nurture and retain the memory of their humiliation. They give the incident a name of epic dimensions—the Disallowing—which they use as an instrument for silencing or ostracizing members of the community who are not as dark as those members of the founding families” (15).

In “Memory, Creation, Writing,” Morrison, herself, asserts that “memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was” (385). As related to the pageant, the question becomes who controls the “creation” of Ruby’s collective memory.

Patricia Best explains the reasoning behind the family exclusions. Her father married a light-skinned woman, an outsider, and thus, her family line has been omitted from the play.
Patricia is part of the Ruby community, and although she understands why families are cut from the communal reenactment—the commemorative Pageant is changed to omit the families who can no longer claim a pure blood-line—it is surprising that she does not know who has now been erased. By including such erasures, Morrison forces readers to ask who is controlling this collective memory, while at the same time, she emphasizes the silence of women’s voices in the official narrative. As Linda Krumholz argues, “[T]he play performs an historical erasure that reinforces the authority of the families currently in power while it masks its own revisionary processes” (29). Indeed, the majority of the townspeople do not question the revised narrative, for to do so would be to question both the founding memories of the town—memories that make up Ruby’s collective identity—and the ruling patriarchs, Deacon and Steward. If they do question it, the questioning is done behind closed doors, as is demonstrated by Patricia Best’s genealogies, for Ruby residents are dissuaded from resisting the dominant collective memory. As Stéphane Robolin emphasizes, Deacon and Steward’s “ideological stronghold” represses “unauthorized memories and re-presentations in a way that upholds the status quo. Holding to the myth of a pure past while invested in the ability to resignify it, the powerful feed themselves on the manna of their own privileged and normalized interpretations” (Robolin 304). Indeed, while the pageant celebrates Ruby’s history and people, it also punishes those who do not follow the blood rule, and it maintains the current power structure that is steeped in racist and sexist ideals. Additionally, the controlled collective memory put forth in the pageant silences the
stories of many, especially the women, to their dismay and detriment. For instance, Patricia Best, whose family line is not longer represented in the pageant, explains the hurt that occurs at the denial of her individual history and memory: “I of all people know exactly what it feels like. Not good enough to be represented by eight-year-olds on a stage” (216). Similar policing and silencing occurs at the site of Ruby’s other cultural artifact, the town’s Oven.

As the most contested symbol of Ruby’s collective memory, the Oven becomes an embodiment of the town’s racial purity, patriarchal control, and communal identity. Constructed in Haven as a communal kitchen where the women would gather to cook, which emphasizes it as a feminized space, it also becomes an embodiment of the community’s dark-skinned, eight-rock status. As Steward recalls, “none of their women had ever worked in a white-man’s kitchen or nursed a white child. . . . So they exchanged that danger for the relative safety of brutal work. It was that thinking that made a community ‘kitchen’ so agreeable” (99). Likewise, as Elizabeth Kella notes, “They symbolically en/gendered Ruby’s public space as female, and thus as requiring vigilant male control” (216). The men, then, value the Oven, just as they value their wives and daughters, but they also strive to control it, just as they attempt to control the women. Due to its representative status, the men break down the oven, brick by brick, to transport it to Ruby. As Deacon’s wife Soane recalls, “Oh, how the men loved putting it back together; how proud it had made them, how devoted” (103). Thus, like the Christmas pageant, the Oven remains a constant reminder of Ruby’s collective memory.
However, through the officially-silenced voices of the women characters, it becomes clear that the Oven, held in such high esteem by the town patriarchs, is a more contested object. As Soane contemplates, “Minus the baptisms the Oven had no real value. What was needed back in Haven’s early days had never been needed in Ruby” (103). All of the Ruby women have their own ovens now; there is no longer a practical use for the Oven, a fact that leads Soane to believe “it went too far. A utility became a shrine . . . and, like anything that offended Him, destroyed its own self” (239, 103-04). Likewise, although “the women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed, moved, and reassembled it,” they privately “resented the truck space given over to it—rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child’s crib. Resented also the hours spent putting it back together” (103).

55 Just as the women question the status of the Oven as a worthy artifact of Ruby’s history, although they never voice their concerns to their husbands, so too, do many of the next generation—the Ruby teenagers—who vocally question the inscription on the Oven’s lip.

Over time the once clear inscription carved onto an iron plate over the oven has been damaged and words that were once so valued are now missing. Now the motto reads “Furrow of His Brow” (93). When the younger generation begins to question the missing first word, Morrison portrays Deacon and Steward policing the boundaries of

---

55 As Read argues, “[T]he women resent the space given to the Oven on the wagons, and are far less concerned than the men with preserving the original motto when it becomes a matter of public debate. This gender gap is further evidence that the long-term psychological problems generated by the Disallowing are chiefly masculine ones” (532).
Ruby’s collective memory. 56 Deacon and Steward remember the motto as reading, “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” (86). When one of the teens says, “No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time” (84), Deacon’s response demonstrates his desire to control the collective storied memory of the past. “Quit calling him an ex-slave like that’s all he was,” Deacon responds. When the boy asks, “He was born in slavery times, sir; he was a slave, wasn’t he?” Deacon rejoins, “Everybody born in slavery time wasn’t a slave. Not the way you mean it” (84). As Deacon here attempts to rewrite the youngster’s conception of the past, he reacts quite negatively when the teens try to do the same, arguing that the Oven motto should read “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” a notion stemming from Black Power Movement that rejects the notion of slaves who were “scared all of the time” (87, 84). Deacon angrily retorts:

Nobody, I mean nobody, is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built. They made each and every brick one at a time with their own hands. . . . They dug the clay—not you. They carried the hod—not you. They made good strong brick for that oven when their own shelter was sticks and sod. You understand what I’m telling you? . . . Act short with me all you want, you in long trouble if you think you can disrespect a row you never hoed. (86)

56 In an inspired reading of Paradise, Elizabeth Yukins uses the concept of ‘postmemory’—“the constitutive memory of events that, in fact, were never experienced”—to better understand the position of the Ruby community (226). Articulating “the disorientation experienced by . . . Morrison’s characters—by persons who feel they cannot directly access the past that so powerfully bears upon their present, cannot refuse the responsibility of memory, and cannot ignore the resonating political effects of trauma in history and contemporary culture,” she argues that “The debates that rage between the older and younger generations articulate the ambivalence felt by those living with the socio-psychological dynamics” of the earlier generation’s trauma (226, 239).

57 Kathryn Nicol reminds us that Deacon and Steward were not present at the Disallowing or at the building of the original Oven, and thus, are also constructing an imagined history: “Their memories are memories of a story, not even an experience, and memories of an imagined history” (224). Indeed, one of the Ruby patriarchs thinks, “It is still not clear where the words came from. Something he had heard, invented, or something whispered to him while he slept curled over his tools in a wagon bed. His name was Morgan
When others in the community argue that the teens just “want to give it new life” (86), Deacon asserts, “They don’t want to give it nothing. They want to kill it, change it into something they made up,” even though this is exactly what the town patriarchs, Deacon included, have done (86). He continues, “That Oven already has a history. It doesn’t need you to fix it,” and his brother steps in with the last word: “If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake” (86, 87). Similar to the control the Morgans exert over the pageant, they here refuse any outside influences or outside interpretations to the meaning of the Oven and its words. Likewise, to honor another individual’s version of history and memory as the town’s collective narrative would be to throw their own status as leaders and remembers into questions. And clearly, as Steward’s words show, to preserve the ‘official’ version of the town’s collective memory, the twins’ version of history, the twins will resort to violent measures. This is emphasized when Steward later contemplates the younger generation. He thinks, “they had no notio

d that generation . . . would have to be sacrificed to get to the next one. The grand-and great-grandchildren who

and who knew if he invented or stole the half-dozen or so words he forged. Words that seemed at first to bless them; later to confound them; finally to announce that they had lost” (7).

58 It is important to note, as Dalsgård does, that “While Morrison shows the community’s young male lions to be involved in an ardent battle against the old patriarchs over the right to define the actual meaning of its ancestral inscription, they fully share their elders’ belief in the inscription as the community’s final signified” (239). The youngsters do value the history of the Oven and its inscription.
could be trained, honed as his own father and grandfather had done for Steward’s generation” (93, 94).

What prompts the younger generation to question the Oven’s inscription is, as Ana María Fraile-Marcos argues, the desire “to share in the creation of a new myth: the sacred mission of liberating not just their own tiny community but all African Americans, and with them, the whole country,” a desire fueled “by the historical events of the times,” like the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement (19). Unlike the patriarchs of Ruby who have tried to isolate their community from the outside world, the younger generation strives to be a part of it. This distinction between the younger and older generation’s approach to history and collective memory highlights something that is missing in the Ruby patriarchs’ collective narrative. As Reverend Misner observes, the patriarchs of Ruby have “no stories to tell of themselves. . . . About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by” (161). In an interview, Morrison, herself, articulates this position: “They have nothing themselves to pass on. And that is when you freeze history, and you simply pass it off as performed, already made, already understood, already furnished. And that kind of history is valuable, but it’s not porous. If it’s not porous, if it doesn’t translate, then it is a museum piece” (“Loose Magic” 164). To this, she adds:

You can romanticize [history] to such an extent that you cannot join the modern world. You can find it so overwhelming and so frightening and so wicked that you can’t separate yourself from its wickedness—say slavery, for example—so that you feel sullied and stained and incompetent and hurt all of your life. So there’s kind of a negotiation that has to take place
between one’s self and one’s national past, one’s cultural past, one’s personal past, and one’s racial past. (“Loose Magic” 164)\(^{59}\)

As critics have noted, “It is not that the older men do not have stories of themselves to tell; they have fought as American soldiers in foreign lands, and their courageous decision to move away from Haven to a new land could well translate to stories of heroism” (Akoma 12).\(^{60}\) However, the patriarchs of Ruby focus so much on the construction of the community’s past, on their collective memories, that they neglect the present and with this, the future of their community. Indeed, as Morrison is quick to demonstrate, the Ruby community is beginning to fail.

Although Ruby’s collective narrative and identity depicts beautiful, proud, strong individuals, individuals who believe that they have been chosen by God, the reality is that, like Haven, the town is falling apart from the inside. As Dalsgård observes, “a vast discrepancy has developed between the community’s perfect and stable self-image and its actual conditions and cultural practices” (233). While the collective memory and narrative of the town tells one story, the unofficial narratives of the women often indicate other, silenced histories that are in opposition to Deacon and Steward’s history. For

\(^{59}\)Morrison also makes a similar statement regarding Paradise in another interview: “[M]ythologizing can end up hurting more than helping. These people have an extraordinary history, and they were sound people, moral people, generous people. Yet when their earlier settlement collapsed, and they tried to repeat it in Ruby . . . well, the modern generation simply couldn’t sustain what the Old Fathers had created, because of the ways in which the world had changed. The Ruby elders couldn’t prevent certain anxieties about drugs, about politics. And their notions of women—particularly about controlling women—left them very vulnerable, precisely because they romanticized and mythologized their own history. It was frozen, in a sense” (Morrison, “This Side”).

\(^{60}\)Patricia McKee argues, “Here, nothing passes from people’s lives into their history, which, because they are shut up, passes them by, merely reproducing the past in the present and future. These people’s inner lives are thus emptied of consequence, as they are excluded from the historical record” (201). Additionally, Candice M. Jenkins asserts, “Already it is clear that a willful blindness to the realities of black American history is a part of the 8-rocks’ carefully maintained racial ‘purity’” (390).
instance, Patricia Best, who is creating a counter-genealogy of the town, notes the many town “secrets,” including women whose identities before marriage have been erased, “whose identity rested on the men they married” (187). Likewise, she realizes that “the small m period,” indicating marriage, “was a joke, a dream,” for often individuals were never legally married, and that recorded history and actual events did not necessarily coincide (187). As Elizabeth Yukins observes, Patricia’s “narrative [is] filled with evidence of illegitimate and transgressive historical testimony” (237). But more than this, the counter-narrative that Patricia and others provide help readers understand the actual state of the Ruby community, a community that cannot sustain itself. As Andrea O’Reilly describes:

> The well-being of a community may be measured, it is often argued, by the well-being of its children. The barrenness, abortions, miscarriages, sickly children, and dead babies, as well as the maternal abandonment and neglect, motherlessness, mother loss, mother-daughter estrangement described in Paradise represent Haven’s and later Ruby’s inability to sustain community. (139-40)

Observing the likelihood of Ruby’s demise, paired with their unwillingness “to deal with the changing times,” the patriarchs begin to see themselves at the brink of communal destruction (Morrison, “Conversation” 156). Their response, like Steward’s response to the “backtalk[ing]” Ruby teens, is violence.

---

61 McKee explains, “It appears that unless the women married by Ruby men also have come from the fifteen families who first came from Haven, their pasts are expunged from family histories. Such acts of erasure keep history cleared of outsiders, as do erasures of all violations of ‘the blood rule’ from the records of the past” (202).
For the men of Ruby, who have learned through their community’s collective memory and history to fear outsiders, the obvious place to turn is to the outsider—women who have created their own community at the Convent, seventeen miles away from Ruby. Unlike Ruby, where the town’s stories are engraved in the collective memory through ritual and artifact, at the Christ the King School for Native Girls, the Convent’s nuns once helped its students “to forget” (4). Now, years later, the nuns are gone, as are the students, and all that is left is Connie, an orphan brought to the Convent as a child, now in her fifties, and the four damaged women who straggle in over the course of several years. Like Naylor’s women of Brewster Place, the Convent women, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, and Pallas, embody difference—they differ in age, class, race, and personality—and they do not always get along, leading Kella to argue that “the group fails to function as more than a de facto community” (222). However, what ultimately bonds them together is their shared experience of trauma defined by abuse at the hands of absent parents, unsupportive, uncaring women, and domineering men. It is only after they share their “unspeakable trauma, which has literally rendered them almost speechless” (Tally, “The Nature” 83) in a communal rite under the guidance of a narrator of memories that they are able to work as a collective, and gain agency over the things that oppressed them.

62 Although Ruby and the Convent remain separated, there are still many interactions between the communities. There are a number of women (and several men) who journey to the Convent in times of need. Likewise, the Convent has a thriving garden, and townspeople often come to buy goods. As Geoffrey Bent argues, “The convent becomes the area’s true haven and, despite Ruby’s prosperity, the community’s vital center: for all the reverence shown the original oven, townspeople go to the nunnery for their bread” (146).
Like Deacon and Steward Morgan, Connie becomes the bearer of collective memory and vision for her community of women. However, unlike the twins who police Ruby’s collective storied memory, Connie turns to her own experience of pain and loss to discover what the other women need. At the beginning of Paradise, Connie’s mother figure, Mary Magna, dies. As the novel progresses, we discover that Connie has the healer’s ability to “step in” or “see in” to raise “the dead” (245, 247, 242), and although this ability contradicts everything she has been taught by Catholicism and Mary Magna—Connie believes her “pure sight” will “[damn] her if she use[s] it” (248)—Connie kept Mary Magna alive by using the magical power she believes is evil (242). Thus, after suffering the loss of Mary Magna, Connie begins drinking heavily, hardly emerging from the Convent basement. Likewise, she becomes disturbed by the women living in her home, who she sees as “broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying” (222). Like Naylor’s Mattie who has known suffering and loss, and who must learn to cope with it, so too, must Connie. As Tammy Clewell notes, Connie “knows from her own experience how the unacknowledged complexities of loss,” in addition to guilt, “can exert a stranglehold on the present,” shading the way an individual sees the world and those around her (138). Connie must ultimately learn to manage her memories of the past in the way that allows her to overcome the stagnation present in her life. It is after she is visited by a spirit-like man who looks like a younger, undamaged version of Connie, herself, with “Fresh, tea-colored hair . . . His eyes . . . as round and green as new apples” (252), that Connie begins to clean and wash, to cook and nurture herself and those around
Finding a way to reconnect with that undamaged version of herself and her past, and in doing so, reclaiming a more positive version of that past, she is able to flourish in the present. At the same time, she “determines to take an active role in the women’s healing, directing a mourning ritual that encourages the women to acknowledge loss and recreate themselves in light of their haunted lives” (Clewell 138). In other words, Connie prepares herself to become a facilitator of collective memories.

In the healing ritual that follows, Connie leads the women through a collective rite that begins by her modeling the possibilities of reclaiming the self and the past through community. Becoming a “spiritual healer,” a “performance artist of the soul,” a “rejuvenated wise woman, ‘a griot soothing restless children,’ and a Christ figure” (Kearly 13; Duvall 146; Fraile-Marcos 27-8), Connie first demonstrates how to reclaim the past by reclaiming her own name. She tells them, “I call myself Consolata Sosa.63 If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for” (262). Then, leading them to the cellar, “With Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother,” they each lie naked on the floor, and Consolata draws an outline around their bodies, creating a collection of templates of the self among others (265). “In the beginning the most important thing was the template” (263), for like Ruby’s Oven, it becomes an external symbol of their histories and

---

63 According to Read, “This insistence on her original full name suggests this process will involve the rediscovery of the true self, but this self is far from the static image of discrete, unified, rational ego that the men of Ruby perceive as authentic masculinity. Instead, through an intersubjective process, the Convent Women have to acknowledge and work through the traumatic experiences and feelings of shame and self-hatred that are ineluctably part of their deepest inner reality. They accept that the self is a fluid, mutable construct, made and remade by experiences and relationships that ultimately transcend all ideologically constructed binary oppositions” (538).
memories. Then, Consolata tells her own story of her kidnapping, and her relationship with Mary Magna (263). As she shares her storied memories, she finds a way to understand herself and her past that brings her Catholic spirit and belief into accordance with her ability to heal: “Never break them in two,” she tells the women. “Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve” (263). By emphasizing the connection between the physical body, as represented by Eve, and the spiritual self, as represented by Mary, Consolata reframes her understanding of Catholicism; she once thought that her faith denied the physical and only privileged the spiritual, but now she adopts a more inclusive understanding that responds to the needs of the physical body, while also emphasizing the possibility in the spiritual.

Connie’s ability to tell her personal storied memory in this communal setting, re-understanding it as a healing narrative and as a narrative that resists stultifying oppositions, prompts the others to begin their own memory-journeys. Thus, “the loud dreaming” begins (264). This shared activity is comprised of “the stories [that] rose in that place. Half-tales and the never dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles, shifting dust from crates and bottles” (264). Somewhat like Ruby’s pageant, each community member has a role and a small part. However, in the Convent women’s case, no one controls the narrative or the memory. Instead, “it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning” (264). What is important is that “they step easily into the dreamer’s tale” and they experience the shame,

---

64 She also tells of her adulterous relationship as a younger woman with Deacon Morgan, something he also claims when he shares his own memories with Reverend Misner at the close of the novel.
the burden, and the trauma and carry it as a group, each losing herself “in full identification with each other, in acts of total interpretation” (Page 642). Thus, they experience with Mavis the death of her infant-twins, left in the back of a car while she ran into the grocery store to get wieners for her husband’s supper. They experience the horror Grace felt in a race riot as she watched a nicely dressed young boy who had been shot collect his blood in his hands rather than get his dress shoes dirty. They experience a young Seneca’s abandonment by her sister/mother, as well as her later sexual relationship with a sadistic woman. And they experience Pallas’s shame when her mother stole her boyfriend, leading to her subsequent rape and pregnancy. As each woman dreams aloud, she shares her memories and speaks her history, sometimes for the first time, validating her personal past in this circle of understanding women. Moreover, as the memories become the shared-experiences of the others listening, their sharing ritual ultimately forming collective memories of pain and trauma, they are able to reframe those memories in a way that promotes healing for the group and the individual, while also creating new possibilities for a future defined by hope and agency. This collective transformation occurs, for instead of judging each memory, of framing Mavis as a bad mother or Seneca as a masochist, this newly-bonded community of women helps each other to see their traumatic histories in a larger context of patriarchal, racist oppression. For example, as

65 As Clewell observes, “The ritual dramatizes what Morrison in Beloved famously calls ‘rememory,’ a concept of memory that has a physical existence beyond the individual who remembers” (139). Thus, their memories move from individual, painful, traumatic stories into the community that helps to share the burden and provide understanding. Thus, she continues, “As they engage in this ritual work, the women piece together narratives about their loss, narratives that contain a sense of both the known and unknown about their suffering. This constructing and sharing of their suffering has the power to effect healing” (139).
Patricia McKee observes, “The women at the Convent who imaginatively take their places within Mavis’s absent mind validate her distraction as a location in which she was positioned, in response to the violence with which she lived.” Understanding Mavis’s abusive marital relationship and her fear for her own life in a patriarchal system, the women who “take Mavis’s place, [assert] that they could be in her position and do as she did. In this, her history becomes unavoidable as her abjection becomes avoidable” (McKee 217). Emphasizing the importance of reframing damaging memories and histories in ways that allow for understanding and survival, Morrison ultimately demonstrates the power of collective memories to act as a positive force in the lives of individual women, women who can make new and different choices about themselves and others, rather than become stagnated through memories of oppression and despair.

With a new context for understanding their personal memories, and a collective space that brings empathy, support, and understanding, the templates still draw them “like magnets” (264). Unlike the Oven which is to remain unsullied, Connie encourages the women to mark their silhouettes, and in doing so, externalize (and in a way, story) their pain. Moreover, the templates are changeable, mutable—they can represent the changes the women are experiencing now, in addition to reflecting their individual histories and memories. Unlike the artifacts of Ruby, then, the templates become mutable, fluid markers of the past, through which Morrison demonstrates a very different

---

66 Further, this attitude is in stark contrast to the attitude of the reporter who interviews Mavis at the beginning of the novel. As McKee observes, “the reporter shames and isolates her as a matter of public record. . . [S]he makes no effort to discover the void in which Mavis exists. Instead, she locates Mavis as a familiar fugitive: the bad mother” (215-16).
method of commemorating memories and histories. And through their participation in these collective rites, “the Convent women were no longer haunted” (266). Instead, by identifying their shared history of trauma and oppression, they are able to “resist and/or move beyond specific forms of injustices perpetrated by an exploitative racist and sexist American culture” (Michael 646), and in doing so, they are able to claim new versions of self as a part of a larger, supportive community.

Through their healing collective rituals, “victimhood is simultaneously claimed and left behind” (Kella 224). As the women heal, they gain collective strength, confidence, and agency. Much of this new sense of agency comes from their shared experience, for as Magali Cornier Michael asserts, “Caregiving becomes an active and activist response to the diverse social inequities the women have suffered” (653, my emphasis). As the women are able to extend beyond their own psyches, to care about and recognize the damage done to others, they gain power and agency. However, a group of powerful women surviving without men is ultimately a threat to patriarchal society, and it is the absence of men that first turns the patriarchs of Ruby against them. As Lone DuPres, a Ruby resident, watches a gathering of Ruby men at the Oven, plotting to attack the Convent, she realizes that what these men see in “women who chose themselves for company” is “not a convent but a coven” (276). Unwilling to see the failures of Ruby as signs of their own system of leadership, collective memories, and values, the men construct a version of the Convent women as evil, which allows them to scapegoat them: “Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was
knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year’s Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed” (11). These events become the fault of the “Bitches. More like witches” who “don’t need men” and “don’t need God” (276). In the men’s stories, each of the Convent women is presented as a danger to Ruby’s purity and future. Thus, bent on violence to protect “the one all-black town worth the pain,” the men “take aim. For Ruby” (5, 18).  

However, as they enter the Convent, instead of finding downtrodden, helpless women, they encounter women who have constructed “subject positions for themselves that include positions other than that of subjugation” (Michael 650). After their collective healing rituals, they have become powerful women who are unwilling to submit to the patriarchal position of the female-victim. And so the Convent women resist; they do not hide, “They are loose,” and they fight back, physically harming a number of the Ruby patriarchs (287). As Morrison observes in an interview, “If the men of Ruby had come after the convent women a year earlier, for instance, things wouldn’t have unfolded the same way. The women would have run, they wouldn’t have resisted and fought back” (“Interview” 197). And when the women do run, they run to save their

---

67 As Higgins observes, “The irony, of course, lies in the fact that while the men of Ruby (and their families) were once outcasts, they now make outcasts,” and victims, “of others” (131). Nada Elia, too, notes this turn: “We learn of victims becoming victimizers” (125).
lives that they now value: “The heads of two of them are thrown back as far as their
necks will allow; fists tight as their arms pump and stretch for distance. One has her
nappy head down, butting air and time wide open, one hand reaching for a winner’s wire
nowhere in her future. Their mouths are open, pulling in breath, giving up none. The
legs of all are off the ground, split wide above the clover” (18). Because of their
collective healing, they value themselves enough to resist their patriarchal oppressors in
an attempt to preserve themselves.

As critics have argued, even though the women resist, demonstrating their
collective agency, “The raid on the Convent serves as a graphic reminder that the
women’s individual and collective work of healing can do little to interrupt the
inexorable logic of social sacrifice, which predicates communal salvation on the
crucifixion of designated scapegoats” (M. Sweeney 61-62). In an interview Morrison,
too, comments on the attack, “It’s too bad they lost” (“Interview” 197). But, then in a
turn reminiscent of Naylor’s dream ending, Morrison asks, “But did they lose?”
(“Interview” 197), and the end does remain open for interpretation. Although the
residents of Ruby believe the Convent women to be dead, the women disappear from the
Convent, so no bodies are left behind. Billie Delia, a young Ruby woman who imagines
the fate of the women, “hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly
burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors—but out
there. Which was to say she hoped for a miracle” (308). Like Naylor, who wishes for a
miracle at the end of *The Women of Brewster Place*, Morrison’s Convent women do
reappear, and, “They appear as whole, healed women” (“Interview” 197) dressed in battle gear. Lucille P. Fultz argues that in staging the women’s miraculous escape, “Morrison posits a transcendent survivalist aesthetic that speaks to women’s ability to overcome male oppression by whatever means necessary” (98). Indeed, their continued existence suggests not only that they have been able to fight their patriarchal oppressors, but that they somehow have overcome the ultimate form of control—death. And their dress—army clothes, a gun, a sword—distinguish them and demonstrate their probable future where they will continue to resist patriarchal and racist oppression.

Moreover, even after the horrific act of patriarchal, isolationist hatred, the town of Ruby begins to show signs of hope and change. After the shootings, the twins, who have never disagreed publicly debate what occurred. Steward defends the massacre, telling the other Ruby residents: “The evil is in this house. . . . Go down in that cellar and see for yourself.” But Deacon not only contradicts him, he also takes responsibility for his actions: “My brother is lying. This is our doing. Ours alone. And we bear the responsibility” (291). As Morrison shows us with the Convent women, such instability and contradictory interpretations can be good for a community. Likewise, as Deacon later walks barefoot across town to Reverend Misner’s house, which is read by some critics as a form of “restitution” (Nicol 228), he demonstrates that his “total memory” may be different from the “powerful” memory still embodied by his twin (107). Deacon

---

68 As Carola Hilfrich argues, the ending of Paradise “asks us to expand our imagination of what this means for our reading of the Convent women if we do not wish to fully succumb to the nation’s use of the power of death as a form of social control” (332).
shares with Reverend Misner, a Ruby outsider, a story about his grandfather that had been previously omitted from the town lore, and he shares his own personal story about “a woman he had used,” and “his long remorse” is that he has become “what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different” (302). It becomes clear through Deacon’s new narrative, shared with an outsider, that he can provide a new model for the town’s community, a community based on multiple, non-nostalgic accounts of the past, one that is inclusive, “total,” and not racist, isolationist, or patriarchal.

This new ideal for community seems to be mirrored in the new graffiti on the hood of the Oven— “We Are the Furrow of his Brow” (298)—which suggests that the residents of Ruby are engaging each other in a way that embraces change, mutability, and tolerance of multiple voices, both in the acceptance of the graffiti and in the message it imparts. As Kella argues, the message is a “marker of plurality” where the “imagined ‘we’ is larger than either the citizenry or the patriarch of the town. The communal ‘we’ reaches out from the geographical and temporal limits of Ruby to share in the political activism of African Americans through the nation” (233). Yet, for all the hope embodied in this new motto and by Deacon’s seeming conversion, as Bouson reminds us, “Paradise . . . refuses to punish the attackers and even erases the physical evidence that a massacre has occurred” (Quiet 211). It seems as if Morrison is somehow forgiving the town patriarchs’ horrific act, a very problematic notion, indeed. However, even though as the story of the shootings is being retold and “people were changing it to make themselves
look good,”—“Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them, enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation”—the fact that it is being retold suggests that it is becoming part of the town’s collective memory, and that it has not “been sanitized out of existence” (297, 298). Additionally, as Philip Page argues, “Although this interpretive exercise is clearly self-serving for most of the characters, it is a good thing because it humanizes them, immersing them in the participatory process” (640). Stéphane Robolin concurs: “It is the proliferation of narratives . . . that prevents a full-scale reduction to a single strand” (313). Rather than reducing the memory of the event to a limited, controlling narrative, the people of Ruby lend their voices to the construction, once again suggesting the possibility for hope and change.

The very ending of Paradise depicts Consolata watching a ship “heading to port,” its “crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time” (318). As Morrison explains in an interview, this ship “hints at a vessel on which there is no hierarchy, no exclusion” (“Interview” 198). Moreover, the passengers and crew “rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise” (318). Perhaps these people are the residents of Ruby who must begin anew, working towards a new, more inclusive vision and a new way of engaging the past to construct a new Haven, a new collective memory that provides agency and hope for the future, a new Ruby-paradise.
Ultimately, both Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison depict the potential for collective resistance prompted by collective remembering. In each novel, women find hope for their personal futures as they join with a group that allows them to validate their own experiences in the context of collective experience and memories. Moreover, a collective, validating space prompts them to act and to exhibit their newfound agency as they fight against their racist and sexist oppressors. Ultimately, then, Morrison and Naylor both demonstrate the potential of *storied* collective memories to change and better the lives of their women characters. At the same time, Morrison, especially, reminds readers of the danger of a collective memory that becomes too limiting, too monolithic, or too resistant to the impact of new, alternate experiences. Thus, she, like so many of the authors discussed in this dissertation, attempts to give voice to the many possible accounts of history, memory, and personal experience—accounts that would otherwise fall silent, damaging both the individual and the community at large.
CHAPTER SIX

IN CONCLUSION

In a collection of short prose, Margaret Atwood declares, “I’m working on my own life story. I don’t mean I’m putting it together; no, I’m taking it apart. It’s mostly a question of editing” (The Tent 4). The act of editing the way we tell our stories of the past is crucial, for as we edit our personal recollections and the historical narratives that help give shape to our lives, we, in the process, can discover the power we have to revise the stories we tell about our lives. As memory theorist Daniel Schacter explains, “Memory is a central part of the brain’s attempt to make sense of experience, and to tell coherent stories about it. These tales are all we have of our pasts, and so they are potent determinants of how we view ourselves and what we do” (Searching 308). Because our memory-narratives shape our personal and collective identities so fully, it becomes a vital endeavor to understand the ways memories are formed and reformed in the narratives of those who have been traditionally silenced and oppressed, and, as we have seen in this study, women’s literature—especially women’s literature that directly engages the workings of memory thematically—is an obvious location for such an endeavor to occur. We have seen that by applying the new scientific studies on memory to literary works, we can gain valuable insights into the storied memories that remain the driving force behind many contemporary women’s narratives. The women authors I have discussed in Storied Memories allow us to see how memory-narratives work not only to present new, more
useful ways of understanding the past, but also to shape and reshape the present and future.

All of the authors considered in this study focus on some form of oppression—such as patriarchal, classist, and/or racist—as they narrate stories in which their characters must deal with memories of the past if they are to survive and resist oppression in the future. For example, in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, the Convent women must learn to story their memories of trauma so that they can resist the Ruby men who come to massacre them; in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone must face her memories of childhood physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather in order to survive as an adult; in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred must cling to her memories of her feminist past to resist the power of the totalitarian, patriarchal Gileadean government that attempts to define her as a “breeder” woman whose sole purpose is to bear children; in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie must confront her memories of virginity testing at the hands of her mother in order to break the cycle of violence so that she will not abuse her daughter; in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, Leah, Adah, and Orleanna must learn to share their memories of the past to resist the domineering nature of their tyrannical family patriarch who has always defined and limited their existence; and in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, Ciel must overcome the horrific loss of her daughter by connecting with the collective history of women’s oppression, and it is only by adopting the memories of mothers whose children were killed in rites of human sacrifice, and during slavery and
the Holocaust, that Ciel is able to understand and thus rise above her own personal, tragic loss. Women authors like Morrison, Allison, Atwood, Danticat, Kingsolver, and Naylor thus represent the power of memory-narratives to revision women’s lives and histories through their storied accounts. As we consider the storied memories of characters like Bone, Offred, Sophie, and Ciel, then, we can see how their narrative reconstructions of the past allow them to gain agency and shape their identities in positive ways. We not only see how the act of constructing stories may “mend” those who are “broken” and “heal” those who are “sick” but also how this act can move those who have been oppressed “toward psychological fulfillment and maturity” (McAdams 31). And we also see how these characters can gain power over their oppressors by telling the stories of their pasts, sharing those stories with others, and finding ways to validate their histories in order to place themselves in newfound positions of agency.

By using current memory theory to read contemporary literature by women authors, then, we have seen not only how these authors engage the concept of memory in productive ways, but also, how in their works, the act of storying memory is a valuable mode of resistance when confronting the oppression of horrific pasts and diminished futures. The application of memory theory to literature also helps us to better understand the particular narrative structures common in literary works that engage memory. Specifically, memory theory helps us navigate the open-endedness, the multiple voices, and the sometimes-contradictory historical accounts that find their way into so many memory narratives. Understanding, for instance, that autobiographical memory can,
itself, be “messy” will help us “accept that in our modern times, history is no longer impersonal but made of singular experiences,” and when these experiences are put together to form a larger historical narrative, the resulting narrative can also seem “messy” (Ender 231). Since literary memory narratives also often demonstrate the existence of multiple, sometimes divergent interpretations of the past, it is not surprising that literature which narrates the history of a life may often seem contradictory. Authors like Maso, Morrison, and Naylor illustrate this inherent messiness of history. From the many interpretations of Caroline’s mother’s life in *The Art Lover*, to the divergent accounts of the Ruby Oven in *Paradise*, to the conflicted historical accounts of the Brewster Place housing development in *The Women of Brewster Place*, it is clear that singular historical accounts are often limited and lacking. Instead, these authors embrace multiple, often contradictory understandings of the past as more apt and convincing historical narratives.

Ultimately, the women authors of literary memory narratives, like the ones considered in *Storied Memories*, demonstrate the need for new stories and new plot possibilities for women. They demand that we give women who have been silenced a space to speak so that they can narrate their histories of everyday experiences and, also, their memories of trauma, loss, and oppression. In so doing, they not only emphasize the legitimacy and import of women’s experiences, but they also reveal how vital it is that remembering-characters share their stories and memories with others, and at the same time, they show the impact that listeners have on the way a character’s life stories are
narrated. Listeners shape not only the form and content of memories, but, often, in these literary memory narratives, they add alternative versions and understandings of historical experiences, which further shape characters’ storied memories. For example, as Kingsolver’s characters share their stories in *The Poisonwood Bible*, a history of the Price family is constructed that incorporates individual fragmented and limited perceptions into a larger whole, and it is through this experience, and their interactions with each other, that the Price women can come to terms with the loss of their youngest sister, Ruth May. Likewise, in Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, twins Rahel and Estha must come together as adults to revise the official historical narrative surrounding their family’s past, while also confronting their own guilt and complicity in the horrific events of their lives.

Literary memory narratives also demonstrate the power of communal memories to uplift characters, even as they emphasize the immeasurable damage that is done when collective memory narratives exclude personal recollections of history. Morrison shows this as she considers the collective memories of the Ruby residents in *Paradise*. While she demonstrates the power of collective memory to heal the Convent women and benefit many of the Ruby townspeople by reinforcing their positive collective identity, she also depicts the hurt experienced by those whose histories are excluded from the collective account, especially in her characterization of town historian, Patricia Best, whose family line has been omitted from the collective narrative. Likewise, Naylor demonstrates the power of collective memories in the lives of her characters, especially Mattie, Ciel, and Etta Mae. At the same time, she demonstrates how the women of Brewster Place exclude
Lorraine from their collective experience, which leads to Lorraine’s traumatic demise. Thus, in each of these narratives, readers observe the power of storied memories to shape and reshape the lives of the characters.

While feminist critics like Rita Felski, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Gayle Greene have long called for new stories to help shape women’s lives and articulate their personal experiences, contemporary women authors have been providing readers with new possibilities and models for self-construction and historical understanding, even as they provide new ways to narrate women’s own storied memories. As contemporary women authors return to the past to share previously silenced memories and histories through their acts of cultural recovery and their articulation of the silenced memories and histories of women, they not only claim that women’s personal remembrances are legitimate, valid, and worth sharing with others but they also help us see the potential for resistance in the ways their women characters story their memories. And the authors we have investigated in *Storied Memories* also insist that these newly voiced stories can make a difference in the way readers live their lives. For example, in its most extreme form, Danticat’s focus on the patriarchal practice of virginity testing on young Haitian women prompts an open dialogue about an otherwise hidden practice, and provides a different model for the ideal mother/daughter relationship. Not only does Danticat expose this damaging historical practice, she also exemplifies a precept of memory theory put forth by psychologist Dan McAdams:

> Society has a stake in the stories we make. Not only does the social world contribute material for the construction of our personal myths, but the
social world is also the beneficiary and the victim of the myths we live. From the standpoint of society and, indeed, the earth at large, each of us has a responsibility to live a myth that enhances the world we live in. (268-9)

Just as the storied memories—including those found in women’s fiction—make a difference in the lives and in the storied memories of readers, so, as psychologists tell us, the stories we hear can change us by encouraging us to consider new and different narrative possibilities that we can incorporate into our own life-narratives. In doing so, we learn, grow, and change.

It is not surprising, then, that all of the authors I have investigated in Storied Memories are very conscious of their relationship with their readers, for they are aware that they must not only avoid overwhelming the reader with stories of oppression, but they also are responsible for the narrative-lessons they impart. Toni Morrison, for example, has said that she desires to “‘hold’ her readers ‘in a comfortable place,’ . . . so that when it [a moment of violence or trauma] happens they ‘won’t be shattered’” (qtd. in Bouson, Quiet 50). Likewise, Arundhati Roy makes specific language choices in order to reassure “the reader that he or she is in good hands.” She further explains, “Repeated words and phrases have a rocking feeling, like a lullaby. They help take away the shock of the plot” (qtd. in Mullaney 60). Margaret Atwood is equally aware of her reader. She explains that writing is “always for somebody. It’s putting your voice on the page and somebody else—you may not even know who—will hear your voice” (qtd. in Keller 12). Similarly, acknowledging an awareness of her readers, Dorothy Allison notes the impact of the reader on writers: “I like the impact of the reading audience on the writer. It just
makes better books (Birnbaum). Likewise, Barbara Kingsolver highlights her own “commitment to accessibility” (Meillon), while also emphasizing her understanding of the power authors have in the lives of readers. As she explains, “What a fiction writer or a poet or an essay writer can do is re-engage people with their own humanity” (“Bill Moyers”). By sharing their characters’ stories, these authors are not only sharing a good story and providing readers a pleasurable (through sometimes disturbing) reading experience, but they are also sharing a fictional life-narrative. And since, as Ulrich Neisser reminds us, “Life narratives are significant because they are one way of defining the self” (1), hearing another’s life-narrative can also be significant, as it presents readers with new narrative possibilities for the self. Through reading the shared storied memories of others, we can learn new models for memory and identity and embrace new understandings of history. Most importantly, we can discover ways to gain agency through the ways we story our own memories.

As we begin to better understand the workings of memory in the lives of literary characters, we, as readers, are often able to translate many of these lessons about memory to our personal lives. For instance, as we observe in the literary memory narratives the constant struggle between contradictory historical recollections, we are reminded that when we review our memories and construct our life stories, as Dan McAdams remarks, “we come to see that we are many things, and that some of these things may contradict each other” (112). As literature demonstrates our lived memory-experiences, and in doing so, “interrupts linear, conventional narratives in order to make room for multiple
voices” (Singh, Skerrett, and Hogan 18), it also allows us to see how these storied accounts of the past can help us to become active agents in the creation of our own futures. Indeed, as McAdams explains,

> History is much more than a chronological listing of names, dates, and places. It is a story about how the past came to be and how, ultimately, it gave birth to the present. It is a truism that the historian’s understanding of the present colors the story he or she will tell about the past. When the present changes, the good historian may rewrite the past—not to distort or conceal the truth but to find one that better reflects the past in light of what is known in the present and what can be reasonably anticipated about the future. (102)

This notion that we can, and will, rewrite the past to fit the present and future, which remains a basic tenet of memory theory, presents a constant reminder of the mutability we can come to expect in autobiographical and literary accounts that invoke memory and history. Psychologist Dan McAdams argues that as we move into the last years of our lives, we are likely to “suspend” the creation of our personal stories, and instead “adopt the role of literary critic, and offer the definitive analysis and review of the identity each of us has labored to write and live” (14-15). Just as Atwood describes the process of editing her own life, we, too, ultimately find ourselves evaluating, reevaluating, writing, and then rewriting our life stories based on our memories.

Thus, just as memory theory can help us become better readers of literature and autobiographical works, so it has resonance for our daily lives. As memory theorist Mark Freeman states, our understanding of the workings of memory “both as lived and as told—opens the way toward an enlarged understanding of self and world” (Rewriting 231). Moreover, as James Olney asserts, “Memory and narrative, together and alike, are
the two major epiphenomena of consciousness, the dual defining conditions of our being human and not something else” (417). To fully understand our lives, then, we must accept and embrace the interplay between our stories, histories, and memories.

Ultimately, our memories are central not only to our identities but also to our humanity. As Neisser eloquently puts it, “To be human, I think, means also to know that we have a past and a future” (“Self-Narratives” 16). Indeed, as we begin to share our storied memories of the past with others and begin to articulate our memories in useful narrative forms, “we are involved,” as Ender argues, “in a linguistic sense-making activity that defines the very conditions of our existence” (242). Throughout this process of creating our identities, we are engaged in the continual task of revising and editing our life-histories and stories to give our lives meaning. In so doing, we, like the characters described here, can learn to build new, more positive futures out of the materials we have at hand: our stories and our memories.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Awkward, Michael. “Authorial Dreams of Wholeness: (Dis)Unity, (Literary) Parentage, and *The Women of Brewster Place*.” *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past*


Haden, Catherine. “Joint Encoding and Joint Reminiscing: Implications for Young Children’s Understanding and Remembering of Personal Experiences.”


Miner, Madonne. “‘Trust Me’: Reading the Romance Plot in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale.*” *Twentieth Century Literature* 37.2 (1991): 148-68. Print.


VITA

Sarah Foust Vinson was born and raised in Champaign, Illinois. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, she attended Illinois Wesleyan University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and Psychology, in 1999. From 1999 to 2001, she also attended Illinois State University, where she received a Master of Arts in English.

While working on her Ph.D., Sarah has taught literature and composition courses at Loyola University in Chicago, Lake City Community College in Lake City, Florida, and the University of St. Francis in Joliet, Illinois.

Currently, Sarah is a lecturer at the University of Illinois, Chicago. She lives in Chicago with her husband and two daughters.