

Women Writing Trauma in Literature

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Edited by

Laura Alexander

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-8970-6

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8970-4

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Rachid Mimouni, entre hier et demain (edited by Patrick Voisin, Paris: Éditions Garnier, 2021, 443-462).

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INTRODUCTION

WRITING TO SURVIVE: WOMEN'S TRAUMATIC ENCOUNTERS AND LITERATURE

LAURA ALEXANDER

“The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life.”

Cathy Caruth, from *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*¹

As I write the introduction to this collection of essays, I am thinking about the Ukrainian women making Molotov cocktails to combat invading Russian soldiers. While some of these women take to the streets with little or no combat training to defend their homes, others are giving birth in bomb shelters in Kiev. In Moscow, thousands of Russian mothers frantically call the Ukrainian ministry for information about their captured teenage sons, soldiers now in a dangerous, potentially global war pitting Russia against the west. These women are caught up in a conflict, years in the making, waged during a continuing worldwide pandemic.

What stories will emerge from this war? This collection looks at literature and women's experience of trauma. It features essays that examine the ways literature helps to heal the wounded self, and it particularly concentrates attention on the way women employ language and literary form to interrogate the experiences of war, violence, and displacement. The stakes for narration could not be greater. As Cathy Caruth argues, a “potential erasure of history is at the heart of trauma,” for it is “not a form of representation but rather *a command to respond* that intervenes—historically—in the oscillation between death and survival.”² It is the

¹ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 7.

² Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 132.

psychoanalytic role of literature to help recover the voices buried by intense pain and suffering and to help those voices be heard. Literature brings the unconscious into being and focus, reconfiguring life through narration. Vera J. Camden recently writes that the entire project of psychoanalysis serves therapeutically to narrate one's darkest psychic experiences through the lens of storytelling.³ She reminds us that literature remains at the heart of psychoanalytic thought and that Sigmund Freud, who won the Goethe Prize for literature in 1930, wrote compelling narratives, developing his own narrative method and leaving to the world an artistic and psychological legacy for constructing stories out of traumatic experience.⁴ Though Freud rightfully drew many critics and detractors, he gave the world a process to help trauma survivors make meaning of what happened to them. It is this, perhaps, that helps us to cope psychologically in a fractured modern world. Indeed, as Jeremy Tambling argues, Freud was one of the most significant writers to bring the modern world into being.⁵

Freud was not alone, of course, in helping us to understand how literature could offer meaning to trauma survivors, but his ideas for understanding the unconscious reconstituted the way literature could help us study and express ourselves. Later theorists, practitioners, writers, and scholars negotiated the interplay between language, literature, and the psyche, and this collection looks at many of those thinkers to understand women writing about trauma. It is only through telling or writing what happens that we can make progress towards healing individually and collectively. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest that “psychoanalysis and literature have come both to contaminate and enrich each other,”⁶ the one interested in the speech acts of the survivor, the other in the written role of the unconscious in narrating through language the experience of the psyche. Both shape literary form. We cannot write or read literature without probing ourselves, and the study of literature remains tied to a long journey of self-discovery to develop a healing process, as most recent trauma theorists now argue.

³ Vera J. Camden. “Introduction—Reading to Recover: Literature and Psychoanalysis.” *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Vera J. Camden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1-3.

⁴ Camden, “Introduction—Reading to Recover: Literature and Psychoanalysis,” 4.

⁵ Jeremy Tambling, “Why Literature? Why Psychoanalysis?” *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Vera J. Camden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 239.

⁶ *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 15-16.

The essays in this collection address the ways in which trauma defines women writers' experiences, memories, perceptions, and psychic responsiveness in literature. Tambling writes that literature "interrogates the meaning of memory, conscious and unconscious."⁷ Though Tambling particularly focuses on modern literature, this collection will feature one essay that looks at a prison diary by the 3rd-century writer Saint Perpetua. How do we connect past and present? Saint Perpetua's words speak to incarcerated women today, some of them caught in repetition compulsion. Freud argues that "we may say that the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it."⁸ What becomes too painful to remember buries itself inside the survivor to be repeated through actions and behaviors.

While several essays in this collection look at writers' struggles to find language for articulating trauma, others consider survivors' repetitive utterances and actions in the process of recovery, often from physical violence. This volume pays particular attention to rape and assault against women and the ways that women writers' responses to violence influence both literary form and the evolving concepts of feminism today. In some cases, these chapters look to acts of writing to find healing. Others seek to articulate a feminist voice for affirmation, validation, or community. Teresa De Lauretis reminds us that feminism is "a developing theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously sex and gender, but also race, class, and any other significant sociocultural divisions and representations; a developing theory of the female-embodied social subject that is based on its specific, emergent, and conflictual history."⁹ We might qualify this definition to include trauma, which has historically defined women's lives and continues to shape their social and political roles globally.

⁷ Jeremy Tambling, "Why Literature? Why Psychoanalysis?" *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Vera J. Camden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 240.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" (1914), *SE* 12: 150.

⁹ Teresa De Lauretis. "Upping the Anti (Sic) in Feminist Theory." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 337.

While together the essays form a collective whole for understanding feminist perspectives on trauma in literature, each chapter may be read as an independent essay.

In Lindsay M. Vreeland's chapter, "'Lord, I hate a nasty woman': Gendered Violence and Black Communities in Toni Morrison's *Home* and *Paradise*," examines Toni Morrison's presentation of women in all-Black communities in two of her novels, *Home* (2012) and *Paradise* (1993). Black feminist scholars such as Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks have demonstrated how Black male dominance of Black women stems from a history of Black trauma connected to slavery, war, loss of identity and family on national, community, and individual scales. Vreeland argues that these novels demonstrate how, under a patriarchal system, such as a town or family structure, it is difficult for women to heal. Inside and outside patriarchal communities, women create their own spaces to thrive, teach, and heal. They are the most successful when men do not perceive them to be a threat to the community's power structure. Some women's trauma and healing are ignored or dismissed entirely by men, allowing them free reign to explore their healing options. Comparing *Home* and *Paradise*, and the healing work which takes place in both novels, this chapter explores how woman-centered spaces enable women to address gendered trauma and to heal communally. Healing in patriarchy-accommodating communities, such as *Home*, is limiting. Women are still subject to the gender ideals of a sexist power structure. Women's healing from trauma is not always successful—as seen in Toni Morrison's *Home*—nor is it always straight-forward healing and development of women—as depicted in Morrison's *Paradise*. Patriarchal spaces prevent women from creating healing spaces away from misogynist institutions and individuals.

Emel Zorluoğlu Akbey's chapter, "War Phobia and the Aesthetics of Trauma Writing in Hilda Doolittle," questions the relationship between war and women's aesthetics. Akbey reads Hilda Doolittle (or H.D.) and her obsessive writing about ambivalent feelings and her stillborn process, a consequence of traumas she suffered. Akbey charts a relationship between H.D.'s writings about war and childbirth-related trauma. Though H.D. could not write during her breakdowns and repeatedly omitted this time period from her written work, she alludes to that pain in most of her post-illness writing. To analyze how trauma presents itself as a writing strategy, she juxtaposes *Asphodel* (written 1922) with relevant passages from *Bid Me to Live* (1960). The plot of *Asphodel* not only provides a necessary context for understanding H.D.'s ambivalent feelings about motherhood but also explains why it will emerge as a powerful site of childbirth-related trauma formation. Instead of

writing explicitly about what make her traumatized, H.D. projects her feelings onto fictional and historical realities or makes them disappear into big gaps of silence. H.D. uses these strategies both to reveal and conceal her pain and anger and to write her body. Writing the traumatic events in an autobiographical form not only helps H.D. to mourn her losses but also helps her to control her aggressiveness. This enables her to fashion a new self out of the old one. H.D.'s view of 'trauma' helped to alter her writing style and shaped her as a writer.

Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh's chapter, "'This is a female text': Confronting Absence and Dispossession in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat*," considers the trauma of absence in Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *A Ghost in the Throat* (2021). The text reflects on the elisions and absences that characterize the experiences of Irish women, both in the present and historically. Struggling to maintain a coherent sense of her own identity under the weight of her fragile psychological health, as well as the almost overwhelming burdens of motherhood, breastfeeding, and the traumatic early delivery of her daughter, she takes refuge in another cry of female despair, the eighteenth-century *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoighre*, a traditional Irish language keen or lament composed by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill on the murder of her husband. Seeking resonances between her own trauma and that expressed so vividly in the poem, Ní Ghríofa embarks on an act of recovery, researching texts and visiting locations associated with Eibhlín Dubh, only to be confronted at every turn with absence and silence. Eibhlín Dubh exists only as a ghostly presence in texts dedicated to her male relatives, defined variously as a wife, a mother, a sister, without even an inscription on a gravestone to mark her unique identity. This chapter assesses Ní Ghríofa's use of the *Caoineadh*, one of the few forms of public expression permitted to Irish women, as a conduit into the lost histories and traumas of Eibhlín Dubh and her female relatives. She finds in the fragmentary form of the *Caoineadh* a means of delving into the liminal spaces barely visible beneath male-authored texts and anthologies. Seeking in the lacunae, she uncovers the means to remember the many acts of dispossession that have robbed Irish women of their voice. Drawing on linguistic strategies developed by Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, Ní Ghríofa works to reinsert the female body into the historical narrative, suggesting a continuum of women bound together through their shared experiences of childbirth and breastmilk.

Jane Evans's chapter, "Epistolary Healing from Trauma in Sedef Ecer's *Trésor National* (National Treasure)," considers the 2021 novel, *Trésor National*, and its Turkish narrator Hülya, who Latinizes her first name to

Julya. Julya recounts her childhood memories to her mother, Esra Zaman, a retired, well-known, beautiful, and dying actress. Julya, who has been living in Paris, France for more than 30 years, has married a Frenchman, raised a family, and been a successful film producer there. Originally asked by her mother to write the script for Esra's funeral extravaganza, the narrator details why she has been unable to satisfy her mother's final wish. Julya's writing turns into her memoir as she uncovers the answers to many questions from her past, especially those about her father, Ishak, who disappeared suddenly when she was six. Evans explores the depiction of Julya's childhood trauma over losing her father as it relates to her writing. Drawing on medical and literary studies about trauma, memory, and grief, such as those published by Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk and Cathy Caruth, this chapter makes the case for autobiographical content influencing narrative format and considers life-writing theories. Evans considers the grief process psychologically: specifically, the overlap between autobiography and therapeutic narrative as steps towards managing grief and letting go.

Laura Savu Walker's chapter, "Traces of Trauma and Trajectories of Transformation in Stories of Transnational Mobility," intervenes in the debates surrounding the publication of Jeanine Cummins's 2020 novel *American Dirt*. It shifts the focus from Cummins's representation of Mexico to her exploration of the psychic wounds that migration-related trauma inflicts upon women and children and the survival strategies and support systems that allow them to cope with the challenges of transnational mobility. This chapter looks at how *American Dirt* and Reyna Grande's novel *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006) illuminate the human side of the multifaceted migration story and its traumatic implications for Mexican and other Central American women who endure poverty, loss, separation, abandonment, and sexual violence.

Christa Jones's chapter, "Wahiba Khiari's *Our Silences*: Writing Trauma au féminin," considers the relationships between trauma, identity, and literary form in *Our Silences* (*Nos Silences*, 2009), winner of the 2010 Senghor award. Born in Algeria in 1969, Wahiba Khiari is an English teacher who left for Tunisia in 1997 during the Algerian civil war (1992-1999) before moving to Quebec in 2016. Set during Algeria's so-called dark decade, Khiari's *autofiction* alternates between two stories: the account of a woman who moved to Tunisia to escape from the Algerian civil war and the account of a girl who was kidnapped by Islamic fundamentalists and forced into temporary "marriages of pleasure"—a common war occurrence and a taboo subject. Kidnappings and gang rapes were "justified" by fundamentalists' archaic readings of the Qur'an. Trauma is doubly inflicted on the body and

the mind as the rape victims struggle to give voice to acts of unspeakable violence. The textualization of violence is a necessary exercise of empowerment and healing.

In Anastasia Logotheti's chapter, "A Suffocation of Blackness:" Trauma in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Pat Barker's *Regeneration*," she argues that two writers interrogate traumatic experience through a gendered lens that alters literary form. Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) explores trauma through Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, survivors of the Great War and the influenza pandemic. Clarissa and Septimus share not only a preoccupation with time and consciousness but also with disease, emotional sterility, and the repression of homoerotic desire. Pat Barker shares Woolf's preoccupation with trauma and recovery. In the award-winning *Regeneration* trilogy (1995), Barker pays intertextual homage to Woolf's novel through the relationship of W. H. R. Rivers and his patient, Billy Prior, problematizing masculinity and exposing cultural pathologies about gender. Both Woolf and Barker historicize neurosis and link individual trauma to social malaise. Personal failures in both works reflect failures in the public sphere related to nation and narration. In Barker, as in Woolf, disease relates to disrupted time and to fixating on the past. Both authors reject patriarchal notions of masculinity, denying that stoicism and bravery are possible in a crisis. Barker's historiographic metafiction employs a naturalistic narrative style which starkly conveys a disillusionment with so-called 'grand' narratives. Her anti-establishment critique, like Woolf's, destabilizes traditional cultural values. This chapter explores how Barker reinvigorates Woolf's modernism through self-reflexive historiography to underline the contemporary inability to confront loss and to recuperate.

Zsuzsanna Lénárt-Muszka's chapter on "Trauma, Continuity, and Circularity in Kalisha Buckhanon's *Conception*" focuses on the depictions of multi- and intergenerational trauma in the novel *Conception* (2008) by African-American writer Kalisha Buckhanon. *Conception* utilizes a narrative structure that provides a timeframe from enslavement to the new millennium. The first-person account of fifteen-year-old Shivana, set in 1992 on the South Side of Chicago, is interspersed with a voice belonging to her as yet unborn child narrating the stories of its previous mothers. Separated by fifty years each, all of the mothers died under traumatic circumstances while pregnant. Every mother has a seemingly higher quality of life than the previous one, which suggests an optimistic, progressive narrative. However, systemic racism pervades the everyday experiences of each mother to a strikingly similar degree, evident in, among others, racial poverty, the disfigurement of Black girlhood, and reproductive inequality. The structure

of the novel thus blends notions of progression and circularity. While the narratives are future-oriented, Shivana's story is interwoven and co-present with the unborn child's voice, and the mothers all face racial and gendered trauma. Relying on Black feminist theory and Afro-pessimism, this chapter argues that the novel's structure reveals a unique continuity as well as circularity in the wake of enslavement. *Conception* operates with the tropes of impossibility and possibility: it reconfigures the afterlives of slavery by foregrounding the (after)lives of the unborn child. This generates new possibilities and hope in the face of trauma.

Taking a different turn, Eileen Harney and Dr. Sarah Stanley's chapter, "Visions from Inside: Perpetua's 3rd-Century Prison Diary," studies the coping strategies detailed by the imprisoned Saint Perpetua while she awaited death in Carthage in 202/203 CE. Perpetua's diary provides a firsthand account of a young Christian woman who endures separation from her child, familial rejection, and societal condemnation. The text also details her rationalizations for her actions, the visions that spiritually teach and sustain her, the shared activities with other members of her religious community, and her continued resilience. Through her writing, Perpetua emphasizes to us the importance of surviving. This chapter considers ways that Perpetua employs her visions as means of coping with her imprisonment and impending death as well as with her interpersonal distresses. Harney and Stanley focus on the portion of the diary attributed to Perpetua herself rather than attending to the familiar critique of her male editor. It focuses on the power of attending to the *inside*. The chapter offers a close textual analysis of approximately 175 lines of Latin prose, and Harney and Stanley apply this close reading to a contemporary carceral context. Present-day prisoners, deeply affected by the justice system, are encouraged to develop coping strategies from the self-help books filling the library shelves rather than in the daily practice of writing and mindful presence. Harney and Stanley are committed to this textual work because they understand it as a way to interrupt the neoliberal logic that surrounds women profoundly altered by the justice system in our communities.

Audrie Ford's chapter, "Trauma and Reader Reception in Rupi Kaur's "The Hurting," considers how the 2015 poetry collection *milk and honey* generated significant discourse around femininity, intergenerational trauma, and women's sexuality. Kaur's poetry explores traumatic themes, which inspired her readers. This chapter argues that the first chapter of *milk and honey*, titled "The Hurting" shows Kaur writing about her own experiences with physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and the broader, shared traumatic experiences with other women. Kaur's book resonated strongly

with young social media users. This chapter examines reception theory in order to understand the relationship between social media, Kaur's writing style, and the overwhelmingly positive response readers had. Ford studies consumer data around the sales of *milk and honey* in order to introduce broader claims about the ways in which online communities form around and process their trauma together.

Zachary Hayes's chapter, "When the Prize is Trauma: Paula Markovitch's *El premio* and the gendered pain of being a child of the Argentine dictatorship," discusses the 2011 film *El premio*. Argentine filmmaker Paula Markovitch draws on her experience as a child of the dictatorship to tell the story of Ceci, a young girl of seven who flees with her mother to a remote coastal town in Argentina following her father's capture by the authorities. Like many narratives coming from those of Markovitch's generation, Ceci is suddenly pressured to perform a high-wire act of not jeopardizing her family's tenuous escape from the military police. This tension reaches its apex when Ceci wins a military sponsored essay contest, placing her under direct scrutiny of the officials who visit her new school for the award ceremony. This chapter performs a close reading of the scenes leading up to this award ceremony and argues that Markovitch effectively represents how Ceci's own body becomes the site for a collective performance of passing when she is 'dolloed up' by the adults around her and taught to behave like a *proper* young girl. Each adult who imposes these norms on Ceci acts with abnormal urgency, which evidences an awareness of the perceived consequences of not pulling off a convincing performance for the authorities. It also results in putting Ceci into a dissociated, traumatized state, since by then she, too, is aware that similar missteps lead to the disappearance of her father. Markovitch, like other artists from her generation, revisits this history to highlight this and similar persistent painful memories that had yet to be widely examined in post-dictatorial literature.

Liubov Kartashova's chapter, "The Deconstruction of Patriarchal War Narratives in Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*," examines how the Soviet construction of womanhood along with the glorification of war resulted first in women's active participation in World War II and later in the silencing of their war experiences. Fabricating a reality in which women's efforts and trauma did not exist, Soviet officials changed history. This led women to doubt their subjectivity and the validity of their traumatic experiences. This essentially erased their belief in women's heroic contributions. In *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985), Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian Nobel Prize-winning author, acknowledges

the pervasiveness of such neglected experiences and traumas and creates a space in which the stories of female veterans have a right to exist. Alexievich's genre-breaking style merges fiction and journalism. The book breaks with the conventions of the official Soviet war narrative. Recounting and respecting the emotional rather than factual representation of lived war memories are the central objectives of Alexievich's work. The author addresses a number of crucial female soldiers' experiences, including menstruation, fear of infertility, rape, and after-war social stigma and condemnation. Examining each of these through the lens of feminist scholarship, the study concludes that by employing women's stories, the author expands the official narrative. Alexievich does not want to portray war as exclusively heroic but also as cruel, destructive, and unsparring. Discovering the feminine side of the grand narrative restores historical justice and provides post-Soviet societies with a necessary fresh take on the "victory" in WWII.

Yasuko Kase's chapter, "Over the Father's Corpse: Neo/colonial Trauma and the Daughter's Subversive Mimicry in *Dream Jungle* by Jessica Hagedorn," features the Filipina American writer Jessica Hagedorn's postmodern novel *Dream Jungle* (2003). It critically denotes how neo/colonial master narratives have repeatedly employed the figures of male sacrificial saviors to overcome neo/colonial perpetrator trauma. By installing mimicry characters, Hagedorn fictionalizes two real life events taken place in the Philippines during the Cold War -- amateur anthropologist Manuel Elizalde's "discovery" of the fake stone age tribe "Tasaday" in 1971 and Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film shooting of *Apocalypse Now*, a Vietnam war movie loosely based on Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel, *Heart of Darkness*. Hagedorn juxtaposes the fictionalized versions of those events with Italian explorer Antonio Pigafetta's historical document of Magellan's traumatic encounter with the natives' violent resistance in an archipelago, later named the Philippines. Hagedorn's literary mimicry reveals the resonance of these events, namely repetitious creation of the narcissistic white male master narratives about the neo/colonial "Father's" sacrifice for the neo/colonized "children." Furthermore, written around the time of 9/11 and U.S. military retaliation in the aftermath, Hagedorn's writing problematizes the continuous U.S. overseas intervention.

Ajanta Dutt's chapter, "Escaping Childhood Trauma in Narratives from Nigeria," looks at Chimamanda Adichie's debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). The novel focuses on childhood trauma and a modern family contending with intensive practices of Christian beliefs foisted upon the Africans in post-independent Nigeria. Adichie's novel displays the

disturbing silence of the girl child whose restricted expressions of feeling mirror the sentiments and confusion of the black Africans. Adichie posits the concept of freedom for the child, which primarily means escape from mental oppression, physical torture, and suppression of emotion.

Lisa Wenger Bro's essay, "Control, Compliancy, Subservience: Biopolitics and the Regulation of Women's Bodies in *Black Box*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Orphan Black*," examines the way society devalues women, who lose control over their bodies. Transformed from person into object, women are valued solely for their sexual and reproductive capacities, leaving them without individual identities. Each work provides both a grim commentary and a harsh warning about the biopolitical fight to regulate women's bodies and the practical consequences of such control, which we are currently debating since the historic overturning in the United States in 2022 of the 1973 Supreme Court ruling for women's reproductive freedom in *Roe v. Wade*.

Andriana Hamivka's chapter, "Trauma and the fragmentation of the Self in Toni Morrison," returns to a discussion about Morrison's *oeuvre*. Employing trauma theory by Cathy Caruth, Hamivka argues that traumatic experience is the force that moves many women in Toni Morrison's books. Looking at *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Home* and *Beloved* (1987), Hamivka suggests that each work demonstrates the traumatic dangers of a complete internalization of dominant societal beliefs, as well as the need for the community to act, participate, and recall traumatic experiences. Morrison's novels contribute to the issue of trauma recovery by portraying community as a crucial and powerful factor in healing.

Each of these chapters reaches into the language of traumatic experience, whether felt personally or experienced communally, and tests the boundaries of aesthetic form to probe the deepest psychic tensions driving human action and behavior. This literature can be as healing for readers as for writers. In *On Psychoanalysis*, Paul Ricouer argues that the "sense and reference of the story well up from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader," allowing for "the reconfiguration of life through narrative."¹⁰ And perhaps that is the true function and meaning of literature, to heal a wounded world and to heal ourselves.

¹⁰ Paul Ricouer, *On Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 193.

CHAPTER ONE

“LORD, I HATE A NASTY WOMAN”: GENDERED VIOLENCE AND BLACK COMMUNITIES IN TONI MORRISON’S *HOME AND PARADISE*

LINDSAY M. VREELAND

Toni Morrison’s recent novels *Home* (2012)¹ and *Paradise* (1997)² confront the thorny issue of gendered violence within Black communities, concerns that, while fictionalized by Morrison, spring from a longstanding reckoning Black feminist scholars and writers have engaged in at least since Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 character Janie Crawford. She explains, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world.”³ However, as Morrison explores in *Home* and *Paradise*, healing is not guaranteed in communities of Color. Black feminist scholars, such as Alice Walker, have demonstrated that Black male dominance of Black women, while connected to white supremacy, is not a simple replication of white patriarchal structures.⁴ Instead, this expression of male dominance, and the violence associated with it, stems from a history of Black trauma connected to slavery, war, and loss of identity and family on national, community, and individual scales. While Black men continue to recover from the horrors of slavery and its aftereffects, Black women face an additional burden of oppression from Black society due to the institutionalization of patriarchal hierarchies within their communities. Like Hurston’s Janie Crawford and Morrison’s characters after her, Patricia Hill Collins reasons that Black women are dehu-

¹ Toni Morrison, *Home* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

² Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Perennial, 1990), 16.

⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004), 330.

manized, which makes them more easily exploited.⁵ Likewise, Audre Lorde insists Black men are taught that Black women are the enemy and must be controlled.⁶ Morrison's novels demonstrate that patriarchal Black communities, subjected to the rules and ethics of men who want to establish, demonstrate, and reinforce their power as Founding Fathers, Christians, and town saviors, can be especially difficult spaces for women as "outsiders." Embracing anti-patriarchal non-European traditions, People of Color may find freedom from the ongoing legacies of historical trauma that continue to oppress and disadvantage Black women even within their own communities.⁷ Comparing the healing work of *Home* and *Paradise*, this chapter demonstrates how woman-centered spaces enable women to address gendered trauma and heal communally. Healing in patriarchal-accommodating communities, such as *Home*, however, limits women, still subject to the gender ideals of a sexist power structure.

Alice Walker illustrates the point about the limit of healing for Black women. She explains that the Black Southern experience is complex—with both love and hate for their situations and themselves—and should not be erased or romanticized.⁸ Black women writers responded to the intersectional experience of racism and misogyny with written public protests, even as they also turned inward to explore Black women's subjectivity.⁹ Tracing specifically Black women's literary tradition, Barbara Christian argues that Black women adopted the language of white women and Black men in order to try to communicate; but, in doing so, Black women realized they were referencing the traditions of others. To find their own traditions of writing and language, Black women had to refuse the language, politics, and stories of the dominant cultures: "In the space created for us by our foremothers, by our sisters in the streets, the houses, the factories, the schools, we were now able to speak and to listen to each other, to hear our own language, to refine and critique it across time and space,

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 51, 56.

⁶ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: The Crossing P, 1984), 46.

⁷ Lorde, 37, 51.

⁸ Walker, *In Search*, 21.

⁹ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson. "Speaking in Tongues," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990) 119.

through the written word.”¹⁰ Doing so meant being honest and critical about experiences of gendered violence inside Black communities. As Morrison and other critics demonstrate, hard-won Black feminist spaces, often viewed culturally as a threat, are inscribed by patriarchal men with conservative and harmful views of women.¹¹

Loorde asserts that connections between women foster power, agency, and nurturing relationships within patriarchal cultures.¹² Morrison tests the possibilities and limitations of such connection by presenting readers with two modes for effecting women's healing within patriarchal communities: the patriarchy-accommodating women-specific space in *Home* (2012) and the resistant woman-centered community in *Paradise* (1997). In *Home*, Ycidra “Cee” Money suffers from racialized gender violence as the result of a white doctor's medical experimentation on her body. Cee returns to her all-Black hometown, relying on the women there to restore her body and spirit to the best of their abilities. Cee's healing methods reinforce traditional gender roles, resituating Cee within an unchallenged Black patriarchy.

Paradise, on the other hand, presents a female-centered community of resistant women who directly challenge the power and aims of patriarchy in the nearby Black town of Ruby. If *Paradise*'s authentic, woman-centered community known as the Convent poses a more radical threat to patriarchy, it also makes it more susceptible to patriarchal mob violence. Morrison's seventh novel opens during the late 1960s to early 1970s with the men of Ruby hunting down members of the Convent, with the intention to kill them. Set in two locations, the town of Ruby and the multi-ethnic woman-centered Convent, the novel explores how an all-Black town founded as a literal “Haven” from white supremacy becomes a site of violence and oppression against Black and other non-conforming “outsider” women.

In *Home* Morrison clearly critiques white supremacist ideologies that render Black bodies inherently less valuable and less human. Set in the early 1950s during the Korean War, *Home* features siblings Cee and Frank

¹⁰ Barbara Christian, “The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism,” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 48.

¹¹ Herman Beavers, *Geography and the Political Imaginary in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 2-3; Murray, “The Long Strut,” 123.

¹² Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 111.

Money, who both leave the town of Lotus, Georgia. Raised by her step-grandmother, Miss Lenore, Cee has been taught to believe she is sinful because she was born on a road instead of the ideal, natural location of home. This belief instills resentment in Cee towards both the town and her family.¹³ Cee, the younger sibling, leaves Lotus—regardless of the warnings of her step-grandmother Miss Lenore—upon her marriage to Principal, who promises her love and a better life. When Principal abandons her, Cee searches for her own opportunities. She finds a job as an assistant to Dr. Beauregard Scott, a white doctor who performs gynecological and reproductive experiments on Black women. These medical experiments are not only performed without the prior consent of Cee—who is drugged before the experiments—they also leave her with trauma, caused by physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Frank returns Cee to Lotus, and through the help of the town’s women, Cee learns she is capable of healing—although the experiments leave her incapable of pregnancy. However, when Cee returns to Lotus she must work within the Black patriarchal community she once rejected in order to find a healing space.

Home focuses on continuing trauma despite the community of families’ attempts to end the cycle.¹⁴ Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber argues that the trauma in *Home* is racial, not intersectional, but notes Morrison’s work is important in trauma studies.¹⁵ Herman Beavers asserts that in *Home* “no matter where the characters are, a site they associated with trauma accompanies them.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, the trauma which Morrison’s characters experience is based in reality. The violence against women, the racism Black men experience, and the intersectional oppression which the Black women experience in a patriarchal community are all true experiences, regardless of whether Morrison is writing within the time period in which her story takes place or not.

Cee’s healing remains limited in that it is local and individual, resituating her within the patriarchal community she sought to leave. Moreover, in the process she is surrounded with people who discredit her decisions and describe her mistakes as if they define her: “The women handled sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping. They didn’t waste their time or the patient’s with sympathy and

¹³ Morrison, *Home*, 44, 47.

¹⁴ Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 2.

¹⁵ Schreiber, 1-2.

¹⁶ Beavers, *Geography and the Political*, 203.

they met the tears of suffering with resigned contempt."¹⁷ Cee's sickness is an affront, as it is the result of white civilization's devaluing of Black women's bodies, rather than her own fault. Cee's primary healer, Miss Ethel Fordham, keeps her isolated from the rest of the community, including Frank, for two months. When, despite recovering, she is unable to bear children, her 'broken' reproductive system symbolically reproduces the patriarchal logic of punishing women for bad (i.e. sexual) behavior. Cee's complicated relationship to home—from her birth on the road, to her youthful desire to escape the restrictions of Lotus—all of this must be managed, too, in her return and recovery. In order for the women of Lotus to heal her, Cee must accept her place within the town that attempts to control her body: "Surrounded by their comings and goings, listening to their talk, their songs, following their instructions, Cee had nothing to do but pay them attention. . . . Conversation was accompanied by tasks: ironing, peeling, shucking, sorting, sewing, mending, washing, or nursing."¹⁸ Cee is reduced to a womb by Dr. Scott, a white doctor she assists until he nearly kills her.¹⁹ In working for Dr. Scott, Cee hopes to rise above issues of race and take control of her body. Beavers maintains that Cee rescues her own body even though Jim Crow and gender limit the spaces Black women may inhabit outside Lotus.²⁰ While Cee mourns the loss of her ability to have children, she chooses to heal and defy the belief that she is *only* a womb.

The women make the town of Lotus hospitable and livable for Cee, taking turns with cures for her.²¹ The natural medicine used on Cee calls upon the traditions of Black people during slavery and the healing techniques from their pre-colonial African traditions. The herbal remedies are linked to the physical, psychological, and spiritual healing of bodies.²² Cee's process of healing in Lotus still takes place in an all-female space, but it is within a patriarchal town where the men directly impact her process and intrude in her space. When Cee is supposed to be "sun-smacked" by exposing her genitalia to the direct sunlight outside, she is wary of the healing method, fearing townsfolks' ability to see and, therefore, judge her.

¹⁷ Morrison, *Home*, 121.

¹⁸ Morrison, 122-3.

¹⁹ Jean Wyatt, *Love and Narrative Form in the Late Novels of Morrison* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2017), 157-9.

²⁰ Beavers, *Geography and the Political*, 208, 216.

²¹ Morrison, *Home*, 205.

²² Wyatt, *Love and Narrative Form*, 160.

“Please, Miss Ethel. I can’t do this no more.”

“Oh, be quiet, girl.” Ethel was losing patience. “So far as I can tell every other time you opened your legs you was tricked. You think sunlight going to betray you too?”²³

Cee still worries about objectification and feels limited when it comes to control of her own body during the healing process. Jean Wyatt believes the community of Lotus in *Home* is “supportive and nurturing” for Cee after her accident.²⁴ Likewise, Beavers believes Cee is encouraged to be independent and develop self-reliance to heal and return to living fully.²⁵ The healing process connects Cee to nature and her cultural heritage, which has been stripped from her by Dr. Scott.

When Cee’s brother, Frank, learns of her inability to have children, he attempts to control the situation by controlling Cee’s emotions: “Come on, girl. Don’t cry.”²⁶ Cee responds by owning her feelings and thoughts, “Why not? I can be miserable if I want to.”²⁷ Instead of feeling empowered by the healing process, she finds herself surrounded by men who do not understand it or the new power she finds in herself.

When Cee is healed, Ethel advises her to be free of men, but she first recognizes how Cee is disadvantaged as a young woman in a patriarchal society: “You young and a woman and there’s serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don’t let. . . some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That’s slavery.”²⁸ While being chained to gender roles and men’s rules may not actually be slavery, it is certainly not free. Nor is it a celebration of womanhood or women’s abilities. Furthermore, by calling Dr. Scott a “devil doctor,” Ethel clearly identifies some behaviors and medicinal care as not only inappropriate and dangerous, but evil. This danger, however, comes from a man attempting to control a woman’s body, not a woman’s control over her own body.

Cee’s restoration within her patriarchal home community is successful but also problematic. Black women in *Paradise* who create women-centered spaces are labeled witches and persecuted. Through her novel, Morrison

²³ Morrison, *Home*, 124.

²⁴ Wyatt, *Love and Narrative Form*, 159.

²⁵ Beavers, *Geography and the Political*, 206.

²⁶ Morrison, *Home*, 131.

²⁷ Morrison, 131.

²⁸ Morrison, 126.