# Transformations of Trauma in Women's Writing

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Edited by

Laura Alexander

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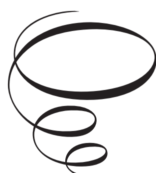

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This book explores themes around trauma and violence and contains information, examples and discussions which some readers may find difficult – discretion is advised.

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# INTRODUCTION

# TRANSFORMING THE SELF THROUGH LANGUAGE: IDENTITY, TRAUMA, AND LITERATURE

LAURA ALEXANDER

> "It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her—by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibrations musically, in order to be more than her self."
>
> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) [1]

This book looks at the transformative language of trauma in women's writing and articulations of self. In her most recent theoretical examination, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (2016), Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "a term for describing certain texts and modes of experience or manners of historical unfolding as they arise in the language of writers (theoretical and otherwise) and survivors."[2] Caruth provides an important lens for understanding trauma in women's writing, and this book includes chapters that consider the cultural contexts, historical, political, or social, that inform an understanding about women's traumatic experiences. Each of the chapters in this collection looks at texts that speak to horrific experiences whereby survivors are compelled to articulate their suffering to others to alleviate life-changing pain. They want to achieve some connection to others and express the grief that arises from their collective trauma. There are "close ties," Caruth argues, to "the language of trauma—and of the attempts to bear witness to it—to the language of literature."[3] But what is this language of trauma?

Sigmund Freud and later theorists, including Jacques Lacan, who believed that our unconscious had a structure akin to a language, argued for the

relationship between trauma, language, and literature, drawing on the vocabulary inherited from literary study to describe the psyche. Twentieth-century feminist thinkers, responding to Lacan, began to reassess the language of psychic dislocation and women's experiences of trauma. One critic of Lacan's name-of-the-father model of unconscious language, Julia Kristeva, proposed psychoanalytic theories on melancholy that offer one way of thinking about the relationship women writers have formed with language as a result of suffering. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1992), Kristeva asks us to encounter and confront loss before absorbing its effects, which can render the survivor speechless and often without a community. Women, as 'others,' enter language through loss and traumatic expression. As writers, they are, according to Kristeva, "foreigners to their maternal tongue,"[4] melancholy artists removed from their own language.[5] The emotion of experience, including excesses of affect, produce new languages for women.[6] Mood is language,[7] and signs become arbitrary because "language starts with the negation of loss."[8] Artistic production proceeds from the fractured psyche, and the bereft artist, beyond consolation, relies on poetic expression: "art of poetry asserts itself as the memory of a (posthumous harmony…)."[9] The self's doubling generates the lost thing, producing literary androgyny, a liminality of being.[10] The suffering becomes sensual, a power and torrent of passion, the 'hysterical' affect.[11] Art recuperates the self and helps the writer to form a new relationship to language.[12] Trauma produces the greatest loss in the approach to language. The recovery through memory and often through collective experience births a new self. It recuperates women's relationship to language.

Kristeva, among other French feminists, offers some of the first theoretical models for understanding women writers' abilities to heal through language and literature. Several essays in this collection draw on other theorists critiquing Freud as they turn to second-wave feminists and later queer theorists to describe traumatic experience for women. Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow, the earliest leading thinkers on object relation theory to reject Freud's psychoanalytical closure for women, reorient psychoanalysis by drawing on the personal and familial relationships women have with each other—not always positive. Dinnerstein and Chodorow examine the conditioning society gives to women, who can also replicate oppressive systems. Their work transforms our understanding of women's places in society and sense of self undergoing trauma.[13] French feminists revised Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic orders to make space for feminine writing, a maternal space for creation and exploration of identity.

Many of the chapters build on twentieth-century feminist thinkers to offer new orientations to language and identity within studies on trauma.[14] To write the body is to reclaim it, to take back an othered self. Like Cixous's Medusa figure, the power of writing renews women and transforms identity. Silenced victims can alter their world, becoming whole beings with voices capable of finding connection, even joy. For some of the essay writers, they consider the way women write the self in autobiography. Since 1856, when Harriet Martineau wrote her autobiography, women have turned to journals, diaries, and memoirs to write about their lives and experiences of domestic, national, or political abuses. Others find their voices in narrative or poetry. While some of the chapters look deeply at the individual experiences of rape, many of the chapters look to national traumas and the consequences of political abuses, including colonial subjugation and genocide for women.

Mallory Jones's chapter, "Intersectional Crossroads in *Dirty River*," considers Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's biomythography *Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home* (2015). The work includes intersections of identity, race, gender, class, and crossroads. It explores how a queer femme of color works through her trauma by advocating and organizing. A biomythography, it follows a particular writing style similar to that of Audre Lord's *Zami*, whose text influences Piepzna-Samarasinha. A biomythography blends nonfiction with myth while placing a personal narrative at the center. This genre interrogates the style of a memoir while also questioning the linearity of what a traditional memoir should look like. Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Dirty River* shares her story of her escape from the United States to Toronto, Canada in 1996 in order to escape her abusive past. She goes on a metaphorical and literal journey to find her own version of a family and create a new home for herself.

Mike Wilson's chapter, "'Impervious to her clawed words': Trauma and Resilience in Shirley Jackson's *The Bird's Nest* and *The Haunting of Hill House*," looks at trauma in the Gothic novel genre. More consistently than any American writer of her era, Shirley Jackson repeatedly links trauma in the lives of her female characters to its destabilizing effects on their social identities. Because the psychological injuries inflicted on Jackson's female characters directly damage and constrict their ability to maintain a functional identity, her fiction is the fullest American embodiment of this definition of Gothic trauma. In particular, Jackson depicts women who find themselves wounded by the traumas inflicted by the gender expectations of their era on their identities. Most of Jackson's female characters are irreparably hurt or destroyed by their traumas. In sharp contrast, however,

Jackson's female characters who survive and thrive are those who defy the era's gender ideals, like Aunt Morgen in 1954's *The Bird's Nest*, or Theodora in 1959's *The Haunting of Hill House*. This essay maps the effects of trauma and the strategies of resistance to find a plausible route to escape and healing.

Anurati Dutta's chapter, "Listening to the Women Talk Trauma in Miriam Toews's *Women Talking*," examines the period between 2005 and 2009, when in a Mennonite Colony in Bolivia, young girls and women woke up from their sleep everyday bruised with pain and smeared in blood and semen. It was a mystery as to what happened to these women every night. Some blamed demons, and some said it is nothing but the 'wild female imagination' or simple adultery. Later it was discovered that eight men of their community would break into these houses every other night. Before raping these women, they would spray cow anesthetic on the house members. Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* is a novel about these Mennonite women, who are seen talking after discovering this horrendous act. Talking confers agency, and the women sit together and talk to form a collective decision regarding their future. This chapter examines the violence in the women's narratives and the way they develop a collective conscience. The body becomes the site of violence and resistance.

Jasa Rosseau's chapter, "Speechlessness: Speaking Through Trauma and Censorship in Ana María Matute's *Los mercaderes*," returns to a discussion of Ana Maria Matute's trilogy, *Los Mercaderes*. Most critics of Matute's work solely analyze her literary tropes; however, this chapter argues that some of her most brilliant stylistic effects are due to her traumatic experiences. While her trauma keeps her from describing the specific horrors she experienced, Matute finds her voice. Her novels express the disillusionment she feels with her own people, who turned on each other in Spanish society. She writes about her Catalan identity and the acute trauma she suffered due to the Spanish Civil War. In her writing, Matute overcomes her imposed speechlessness and depicts the effects of the war on the children who experienced it by writing the allegorical story of Matia. The trilogy features a trauma-reflective structure, replete with pervasive symbols to criticize Franco, her people, and the church in Spain.

Michaela Weiss's chapter, "Staging "the Post-Holocaust DNA": Eleanor Reissa's Exploration of Contemporary American Jewish Identity in *The Last Survivor*," discusses the forms and impact of the post-Holocaust trauma in the theatrical production of a current playwright, Yiddishist, singer, and director Eleanor Reissa. Her collection *The Last Survivor and*

*Other Modern Jewish Plays* (2015) offers an (auto)biographical representation of Holocaust survivors and their descendants. Reissa creates parallels between the Holocaust and post-Holocaust trauma of the immigrant survivors. The American-born generation grew up in trauma-affected families and/or communities. The chapter focuses on the complex representation of multiple layers of trauma on personal, communal, and national levels, addressing the negotiations of ethnic, national, and gender identities. It further explores the dramatic methods that convey immediacy and heighten the impact of traumatic utterances. Reissa's non-didactic and deeply personal approach in connection with the use of dramatic monologues demonstrates the topicality of the Holocaust-related trauma. She emphasizes the role of trauma in the identity-making process, which is both personal and universal. The chapter discusses the attempts at healing and the coping mechanisms, including breaking the silence and sharing of stories, that prevent the trauma from becoming the major determinant of one's identity.

Neta Kleine's chapter, "Body Un/bound: Mina Loy's Poetics of Pain," looks at Loy's poetry as foregrounding episodes of corporeal distress, a virtually neglected theme in her oeuvre. Loy translates pain into a shared, personal-poetic experience. In a state of material disorder, Loy feels her outlines shift uncontrollably, an unsettling—and at times empowering—internal change she manifests on the page. Once the body transgresses its familiar borders, so too do the boundaries between self and other, between poet, text, and reader, disintegrate. In the first poem, Loy transforms the physiologically and psychologically traumatic event of childbirth into a spectacle, wherein exclusively maternal suffering conjoins her with every mother of every species in the universe; and in the second, Loy's agonized, now mature body confuses—even haunts—herself and her audience. The two texts, composed decades apart, shape divergent, though collaborative, spaces where pain continues to live, to extend from Loy to those who touch her pages.

Arabella Adams's chapter, "The Weight of Her Words: Silencing and Abuse in Mercè Rodoreda's *The Time of the Doves*," looks at Mercè Rodoreda's *The Time of the Doves* and the extent to which victims of abuse have a voice. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, this chapter argues that women are not silent but that their speech suffers from a testimonial injustice. In particular, the chapter looks at the misogynistic perspective to understand the testimony of the abuse victim and what in their worldview limits that discourse from being taken both seriously and credibly. Rodoreda illustrates that the crux of the problem resides not in the inability to speak, but in the inability to "acquire"

legitimacy; hence, Rodoreda's Natalia can both speak against, and be understood by, the novel's abuser. The principal obstacle—in both Rodoreda and Fricker's accounts—is not that we must listen to women, but that we must overcome the non-linguistic strictures that delimit the authority of their speech.

Kera Turner's chapter, "A House and A School: Healing from Trauma Through Writing in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School*," explores the ways in which Hispanic and Latinx women have found their voice in their writing, forcefully taken from them. Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* discusses the trauma of domestic violence and sexual assault against women in Chicago. Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* discusses gender and sexual violence during the Dirty War (1976-1979) in Argentina. Despite the horrors of sexual assault and its consequent trauma, Cisneros and Partnoy show that hope, justice, and healing are made possible by victims speaking their truth.

Brittany Hirth's chapter, "Wounds and Writing in *Where the Crawdads Sing* and *American Dirt*," investigates the representation of trauma in American mainstream culture by examining the recent bestsellers, *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) by Delia Owens, and *American Dirt* (2020) by Jeanine Cummins. Drawing on recent theoretical arguments by Cathy Caruth, among others, she argues that these novels demonstrate how women can find healing through literature. In both novels, a woman experiences the loss of her family and cycles through traumatic aftereffects, as she struggles to claim a new sense of self after tragedy.

Yenisei Montes de Oca's chapter, "Memory Recovery from the Site of Trauma in Josefina Aldecoa's *Trilogía de la memoria*," considers Aldecoa's trilogy, commonly known as *Trilogía de la memoria* and comprised of *Historia de una maestra* (1990), *Mujeres de negro* (1994), and *La fuerza del destino* (1997). The trilogy reveals the experience of two generations of women who go through the Civil War, Francoism and the democratic transition in Spain. Drawing from Cathy Caruth's theory on how trauma intersects with history and narrative, this chapter looks at narrative written from the site of trauma and argues that narrative reveals the traumatic experience through its aesthetics. Trauma is best explained and understood through the silences and narrative pauses that emphasize the inability to narrativize the experience. In this sense, Aldecoa demonstrates the importance of remembrance through an aesthetic that emphasizes the return

to the past. Memory serves as an infallible instrument for national restoration.

Lynn Deboeck's chapter, "Between the Lines: Performing Trauma in Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*" looks at Nottage's play, set in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Ruined* (2008) is a play about the trauma carried by Congolese women caught in the middle of civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The three main characters are Mama Nadi, who runs a bar and brothel that serves the men in the area, Sophie, a young student who has been physically and mentally scarred by soldiers, and Salima, a frightened woman from a small village who threw her out of her home for the crime of being raped. Sophie and Salima are sold to Mama Nadi. Each character speaks to the communal trauma felt by a country and a land. The play looks at the women's horror but ultimately looks for strategies through narration that will heal their shared trauma.

Each chapter shows that language holds a transformative power to change us, to give us a great capacity for inner and outer dialogues and for healing and self-love through writing the self. Women have historically employed literary forms to free themselves and others; rather than seeing the limit of form, they reinvent the parameters to offer a new relationship with language. In this collection of essays, each chapter examines the way women's experiences of trauma alter genre, mode, or literary form and offer women new personal and social identities through narrative possibilities.

## Notes

[1] Hélène Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. from the French by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 349.
[2] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 176.
[3] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 117.
[4] Julia Kristeva. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 53.
[5] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 48.
[6] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 47.
[7] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 21.
[8] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 43.
[9] See her discussion, Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 147-150.
[10] Kristeva, *Black Sun*,167.
[11] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 177.

[12] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 187.
[13] Madelon Sprengnether. “Varieties of Psychoanalytic Experience.” *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Vera J. Camden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 30.
[14] Sprengnether, “Varieties of Psychoanalytic Experience,” 31.

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTERSECTIONAL CROSSROADS IN *DIRTY RIVER*

MALLORY JONES

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's transformative work, *Dirty River: A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home* (2015), incorporates crossroads of identity, gender, race, and class. Piepzna-Samarasinha describes herself as "a queer disabled autistic nonbinary femme writer, educator and disability/transformative justice worker," and through her writing, she advocates for those in the LGBTQ+ community and for social justice (brownstargirl.org). In *Dirty River*, Piepzna-Samarasinha advocates for those who do not fit into heteronormativity or heteropatriarchy[i]. *Dirty River* uses biomythography techniques to effectively express intersecting oppressions.

In Piepzna-Samarasinha's biomythography, the frequent motif of crossroads presented in each section of the text can be interpreted as metaphorical, but *Dirty River* also includes a literal border crossing. Likewise, the intersection of identity is at the forefront of Piepzna-Samarasinha's biomythography. *Dirty River* is categorized as a memoir, but I will argue that it is a biomythography throughout this article. Biomythography is a complicated genre, and a fairly new genre, since the release of Audre Lorde's *Zami* in 1982. Lorde was the first writer to introduce this genre into the mainstream consciousness. Lisa T. Bascomb distinguishes biomythography from memoir by stating, "Biomythography melds nonfiction and myth, while placing a personal narrative amidst the many communities that person exists within. It challenges the lines between fiction and non-fiction while also questioning the singularity of an autobiography" (2017, 1). There are moments in the text that blend fact and fiction, moments where the author herself questions whether something actually happened or not, and which read like a stream of consciousness.

Piepzna-Samarasinha even uses italics in some instances to signal a shift to a stream of consciousness-like writing. The clearest example that interrupts the narrative happens in the first chapter of the book when the author is leaving New York for Toronto on a Greyhound bus. Piepzna-Samarasinha has this conversation with herself with panicked thoughts about not trying to stand out because she is anxious about going through security to board the bus: "*Look eager. Look a little puzzled but compliant. Look like you've never done anything wrong in your life*" (2015, 25). After this moment of inner monologue, she remembers the time her boyfriend, Rafael, was stopped by a cop for not having a light on his bike or slowing at a stop sign. She is trembling with fear knowing that as a person of color, the threat of police violence is always a possibility. After she remembers Rafael's incident with the police, there is a small section written in italics: "*We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way. We could kill you and make it look like an accident. No one would know. No one would really care*" (2015, 27). The interaction Rafael had with the cop forces Piepzna-Samarasinha to question her every move and to make herself look like "an artsy, middle-class kid on vacation, careless, like I had plenty of money and credit cards in my army bag" in order to blend in and not call attention to herself.

In *Dirty River*, Piepzna-Samarasinha creates a biomythography by telling the story of her journey from the United States to Toronto, Canada in 1996 while dreaming of how she can create her own family and while trying to deal with her abusive past. In the preface, she writes:

> This book is something else. It's about running like fucking hell at twenty-one and living in an apartment with shit-gray wall-to-wall carpet, a weedy leaning tree out back, and a bunch of dandelions you eat for greens when you're broke, a yellow fluorescent light, a bathtub, and a half-busted door that doesn't completely fill the doorway but it still locks can feel like paradise. Can be paradise (2015, 15).

She runs away to her version of paradise, away from her parents, just to try to survive in a new country where she cannot take advantage of social programs put in place because of tricky immigration laws. Piepzna-Samarasinha's biomythography is a literal and metaphorical journey to her version of home and the obstacles she must overcome to get there.

The book begins with Piepzna-Samarasinha leaving the United States for Canada with nothing but a couple of bags and the clothes on her back. At this point, she had already graduated college and was trying to escape her past by moving to Toronto, in particular, because of the growing people of

color activist groups that were growing during the 90s. During this period in her life, she was trying to survive; her biomythography encompasses poverty, being an immigrant, living with a disability, and struggling with her identity because she is mixed-race. Her time in Toronto brings her to create her own family full of activists, queers, people of color, and other people with disabilities. In queer studies, the term "chosen family" is used when describing a person who replaces their biological family with their own version of what family means to them. Her biomythography is really about how she found not only her own people, but also her own voice after dealing with childhood trauma. It is difficult to give a clear summary of the book because of the nature of a biomythography. Different chapters or sections are written in different times and places, but they have been stitched together by referencing an earlier part of the book, and it feels fragmented at times.

In a biomythography, there is an element of fact and/or fiction. An issue with trying to incorporate sources about the biomythography genre is that most sources only write about Audre Lorde's *Zami* and do not specifically outline what the genre typically incorporates. The best definition that came forward from the research is from a *New York Times* article from 1982, when *Zami* was published. In the article, the author cites "the publisher's claim that in "Zami" Miss Lorde 'creates a new form, biomythography, combining elements of history, biography, and myth'" (Daniell). Both Lorde and Piepzna-Samarasinha incorporate elements of poetry as well, which is another element that distinguishes biomythography from fiction or memoir. *Dirty River* is written like lyric poetry, in its first-person expression of strong emotion. It also looks like how a poetry collection may be organized: the book is set up into three parts with chapters in each part, and some of the chapters having their own subheadings. The author also uses long narrative sentences, omits punctuation when given the choice, and uses poetic language.

Piepzna-Samarasinha is a survivor of incest and other abuse brought on by her parents. This is a difficult topic to write about, especially for a survivor, but she does it in such a way that it sounds poetic:

> But maybe incest was everywhere. In the tap water, in the air, in the mall. Every goddamn where. Every girl, you knew. Maybe some of the boys too. What would that mean if incest was everywhere? If every girl you knew told you shit in the basement of their house, whispering while you were watching *Children of the Corn* and eating Fritos, or if you knew by the way she turned her body in the locker room? But if you were their friend, you wouldn't tell

> anybody — not even the school counselor or your mom. All you could do was hold the secret close (2015, 70).

The passage above also illustrates other poetic elements not commonly found in Standard English. For example, using the word "but" to begin a sentence, incomplete sentences, not properly writing a list, which goes back to the concept of Standard English. The section above is written in a prose style and it follows a natural pattern of speaking compared to the rigid rules authors of a memoir would pay more attention to.

Furthermore, another element of biomythography is used when the author admits that her memory is a bit fuzzy. At one point, she even tells different alternative stories she only somewhat remembers. The difficulty with remembering also messes with the chronological timeline of the narrative. At one point in her narrative, the author returns home to America for Christmas with her parents, but the timeline is fuzzy because it seems like she is coming home for Christmas while she is in college because she mentions New York—where she attended before she dropped out. During this visit to her parents' home, Piepzna-Samarasinha discovers she has head lice. This happens in the chapter titled "The Last Time I Came Home for Christmas," which is perfectly named because it sounds like this visit home was traumatic. The author creates subheadings for each story with version one and version two. In version one, the author remembers having dreads at the time and calls herself out for having dreads before she understood that it was cultural appropriation: "In 1995, I hadn't yet read any of the articles about cultural appropriation and anti-Black racism and how white and POC's trying to 'dread' their hair was wrong, but I had common sense" (2015, 81). Ultimately, she decides just to cut off her dreads so she can get rid of the lice, too. The second version of the story stands out as more traumatic for the author. After discovering she has lice in the shower, she calls her mother into the bathroom to help, and her mother shaves her head in the sink. She writes, "My mother shoves my head in the sink like she did when I was a little kid fighting having my hair washed, like how she brushed my hair straight under the blow dryer every morning for years til my scalp ached raw, it always felt fucked-up, she always felt angry to me when she was doing it" (2015, 82). The moment she has her head in the sink transports her back to when she was a child—when her mom had no idea how to take care of her hair. Her solution was to use so much heat, her scalp ached and became raw. Even though the reader will never know which version is the truth, it ultimately does not matter. The event was so traumatic for the author that she never returned home for another Christmas again. She was forced

to relive that childhood experience she otherwise probably would not have to think about again.

*Dirty River* includes a few structural techniques in order to undermine the stability of memory and the chronology of Piepzna-Samarasinha's journey through the text. As a reader, the biomythography feels rather disjointed due to the fact that the text skips around in time. The beginning of the text begins in New York, with Piepzna-Samarasinha boarding a Greyhound bus set for Toronto—but by the fifth chapter, the reader is brought back to New York. In this chapter particularly, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about how she discovered her love for reading standing up in a bookstore aisle. She uncovered this newfound love because of how complicated the library system in New York was: how they were always under construction, or how the book she wanted was stolen. Instead, she turned to "bookstores that stayed open til midnight, and there were enough of them that I could circulate, reading standing up for hours a time until they closed without arousing too much suspicion" (2015, 49). While browsing bookstores throughout New York, she circles back to a book she is familiar with: *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass, which is categorized as a self-help book for female survivors of child sexual abuse. She remembers when she cut out the security tag from the library back home because she "didn't want to face the library checkout person with a big book about incest" (2015, 50). This chapter of the text includes some italics when referencing the book, and how because of this book, she is able to remember parts of her childhood that were otherwise blocked from her memory: "The pages would fall open to where the text was marked with a box or laid out in bullet points. *When you were a child, were you fondled, kissed or held to an adult's sexual pleasure? Were you touched genital while being bathed?* I don't remember. *It is common for children to cope with abuse by forgetting it ever happened*" (2015, 50). Finding *The Courage to Heal* in a bookstore would trigger those blacked out memories and, in this chapter, we are transported back to her childhood to remember the aftermath of the sexual abuse she endured. Piepzna-Samarasinha's writing is so raw, real, and terrifying when she reflects on her childhood.

Another section of the memoir that illuminates elements of biomythography is the second to last chapter, which is set up similarly to the section in the earlier paragraph. Piepzna-Samarasinha finishes the novel with a few reflections about her mother. The chapter, one of the last of the text, is titled "Mama Three Ways" and has three subheadings explaining her mother's various personality types and behaviors, which could change on any given day. The first version of her mother is what anyone would expect a mother

to be: a kind, loving mother who cares for her daughter. Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, “Mama driving us to Cambridge driving us to bookstores and poetry mama helping me allowing me to go to poetry camp to young writers camp” (2015, 217). This passage shows that her mother could be kind and caring while supporting Piepzna-Samarasinha’s passion for writing. The second version of her mother portrayed in this chapter is when Piepzna-Samarasinha arrives to New York as an eighteen-year-old. Her mother ultimately tells her she has one shot in New York, and if she comes home, she is a failure. Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, “It’ll be back home failure not let me out again you got one ticket to ride, kid, don’t blow it, the last thing I want is to be back in that house” (2015, 218). The final version of her mother showcases the emotionally vulnerable person her mother was. There are a few other examples throughout the text, but her mother freaked out if Piepzna-Samarasinha was ever late, told her where she could go for a walk, and where it was safe to do so. Her mother had this overwhelming anxiety that something bad would happen to her daughter. Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, “You telling me: you can’t go for a walk there, you’ll get raped you crying spasmodically, ‘You are killing me, you are killing me!’ because I walked down to the drugstore, because I walked downtown to the library” (2015, 219). She had sporadic emotional moments that signaled to the reader how unstable Piepzna-Samarasinha’s mother was on top of the continued sexual abuse. Piepzna-Samarasinha’s chance to flee to New York granted her freedom that otherwise would not be given if she stayed with her parents. There are other moments in the text that illustrate the constant surveillance she is under. She mentions throughout the book that she was never allowed to close her bedroom door, wash her own hair, or walk down to the end of the block. Her mother tried to control every aspect of her life that she could.

This chapter also reads more like poetry when read aloud as well. The author omits punctuation in section one, so it is one long sentence. Piepzna-Samarasinha paints a supportive and loving version of her mother in the first section, but that changes in the second section. The last version Piepzna-Samarasinha writes about is the most captivating. This version reflects on their relationship throughout the years and ends with how the author has broken the cycle. It is not stated outright, but the author hints at breaking the cycle with the last bit of text in this chapter: “Mama telling me I was crazy and they weren’t fighting, nothing was happening, we hadn’t had that discussion, I must be remembering it wrong. I know you were not a monster. I see you in my own face. Worst daughter. Best daughter. I changed this, for us mama. Rest” (2015, 220). Piepzna-Samarasinha is the one in the family who changed for the better. She breaks the cycle of harrowing abuse

and surveillance when she flees to New York and later Toronto. To further understand the difficulty of Piepzna-Samarasinha's journey, it is imperative to understand how our society is built to work against any individual that does not fit into white heteronormativity. *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice* (2017) explains how society is built against those who go against the norm. "In the chapter about oppression and power, Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo introduce the term "oppression": "a set of policies, practices, traditions, norms, definitions, and explanations (discourses) which function to systematically exploit one social group to the benefit of another social group" (2017, 61). Sensoy and DiAngelo further explain the group that benefits from the exploitation is the dominant group, while the group that suffers, as a result, is the minoritized group. "A crucial point they make at the end of this section is that 'oppression occurs when one group's prejudice is backed by legal authority and historical, social, and institutional power'" (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017, 61). We should note how dominant groups and minoritized groups are created due to the United States and Canada having laws that back up the dominant group's power over one another.

Alexis Shotwell writes extensively about normativity and what that means for the LGBTQ+ community. Her article "Open Normative, Gender, Disability, and Collective Political Change" walks the reader through what we know as gender-conforming norms created by society, and how those outside of the norm can rally for political change. Shotwell successfully "trace[s] a thread through current queer theory that equates normativity with oppression, patriarchy, racism, ablism" (2012, 990). Sensoy and DiAngelo extensively break down norms in their text and how norms work against not just those who go beyond the norm, but also those who follow norms. In Piepzna-Samarasinha's biomythography, she defies many norms outside of the regular binaries: she is a woman of color and identifies as nonbinary; she is bisexual and disabled. Society is already built in such a way to work against her. Shotwell uses the term "antinormativity," which just means a way of opposing or contrasting against norms. She states, "Antinormativity is not only rhetorically compelling, it is situated in a context in which oppression does indeed often take the form of forcing people to comply with norms of heterosexuality, whiteness, owning-class practices, and able-bodiedness" (2012, 992). In other words, a form of oppression is simply pushing the dominant group's norm. Oftentimes, the dominant group includes heterosexual white people, that is what is portrayed in the media. Piepzna-Samarasinha reveals she only moved to Toronto because there were queer women of color there: "There was this place where people were talking, out loud, about a queer/woman of color feminism, culture, and

community" (2015, 54). The women of color in Toronto were brave enough to start speaking out against heteronormativity.

The author of *Dirty River* is nonbinary and uses she/they pronouns. Piepzna-Samarasinha immediately questions the authority of the gender binary by being a nonbinary individual. Judith Butler writes in her essay "Critically Queer" that "the political deconstruction of 'queer' ought to not paralyze the use of such terms, but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought" (2013, 21). Butler is stating that by using the term "queer" (and other related terms), they are going against the norms and challenging the power the dominant group has. Avory Faucette also writes about this concept in their article "Fucking the Binary for Social Change: Our Radically Queer Agenda," but specifically focuses on nonbinary activism and what that looks like. In a way, just going against heteronormative ideas is a way of activism against the gender binary. Faucette is really getting at the power that language can have over dominant groups. Faucette states:

> Non-binary activism brings something valuable to the table not because it destroys or eliminates gender, but because it questions the logic behind rigid gender norms, hierarchies, and the state's use of gender as an unnecessary control mechanism. This questioning benefits people of all genders, not only non-binary people (2014, 75).

Faucette raises an interesting question: why do most people blindly follow gender norms and not question them and the power they hold? The answer to this question is rather simple: society feeds everyone the same dominant group narrative of heteronormativity.

In the first chapter in *Dirty River,* "How I Ran Away from America: New York 1997," Piepzna-Samarasinha recalls the encounter with a border patrol agent that could have easily gone another way. There is a clear power dynamic at play while they are trying to get across the border. In the back of her mind, she already seems to know the border patrol guard will question her more than the other people trying to board the Greyhound bus. Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, "It was always a trick, trying to rearrange my face while I was standing in line, trying to make my bedhead and crusty eyes look respectable. It was all about rearranging my face to look like an artsy middle-class kid on vacation, careless, like I had plenty of money and credit cards in my army bag" (2015, 23). She tries to take on this seemingly-innocent persona of a "normal" middle-class young woman so she does not seem suspicious. The conversation with the border patrol agent (a male)

goes as expected with typical questions: Why are you visiting? Who are you visiting? How long are you visiting? Those questions are followed up with a bag search, and the author must make up a realistic story to explain the dildo in the bottom of her backpack. Piepzna-Samarasinha makes up a story about how her friend is getting married and they brought this as a gag gift. The sight of the dildo at the bottom of the bag almost immediately shuts him down and he lets her get back on the bus. During this encounter, she keeps her sexuality a secret out of fear. There is already power over her because of this male/female dynamic, but once she steps out of the sexuality and gender norms, another complicated layer of power appears. This one border patrol agent has the power to drastically change the course of her life: whether she can get into Canada, or whether she will have to go back home to her abusive parents. The end of the chapter finishes with a positive prospect of a new life: "my parents, America, and everything bad thousands of miles away" (2015, 29).

Once she arrives in Toronto, Piepzna-Samarasinha gets involved with various activist groups in the area. In these groups, she finds her own family who helps her through her past and her tumultuous relationship with Rafael, her boyfriend. About halfway through the biomythography, the author has a fight with Rafael that ends with him hitting her. She immediately leaves her home and tries to find somewhere to go. Intersections of class and status start to play a role at this point in the text. Piepzna-Samarasinha calls a local shelter to see if she can get a spot: "I told her my partner had hit me and she made me go over it again a couple of times. 'What? He did what exactly? What's your social insurance number?' That's when I lost it. 'I don't have one,' I told the voice on the other end of the phone. 'Well, then we can't process you into the system'" (2015, 106). It is inherently classist that she cannot go to shelter just because she is not yet a citizen of Canada. The reader learns by the end of this chapter that Rafael has been used to gain citizenship. He promises her that he will still marry her even if they are not together so she can gain status: "Abruptly, he said, 'I'll still marry you, you know. I feel like I have a duty, a responsibility, to help you get across the border'" (2015, 115). Unfortunately, the shelter seemed to be her only possibility when her friends do not pick up their phones. She is left out on the street with barely $20 in her pocket trying to figure out what her next move is. Eventually, a few friends do help her once she is able to get ahold of them. She couch surfs for a few days before finally deciding to talk to Rafael.

Piepzna-Samarasinha demands that she should be the one who gets to stay in their rental home because he is the one who hit her and caused the pain.

Surprisingly, he agrees and says he will move out and find a place to live. This moment of growth for the author seems to be a turning point for her. For the first time in her life, she can live in a house by herself without the threat of anyone else. After Rafael moves out and she returns to the house, she writes, "Going through all the rooms, checking everything out, I let out a deep breath. I was alone, and the door was locked, and only I had the key" (2015, 116). She finally feels safe once she is alone from those who have abused her in the past. Toward the end of the novel, she acknowledges this turning point:

> There was this period. After I broke up with Rafael, after I got the ability to work, after I landed immigrant status, and an OHIP and SIN cards, after I got a bank account, and two jobs for $9.25 an hour, then one for $17. After I'd not been late on rent for a while, after I'd started fucking again, with some success, after nobody had been hitting or screaming at me, there had been no encounters with the law. There had been no thin beige yellow letters from Immigration (2015, 196).

Everything was finally okay for a while. She was able to get her social insurance number (SIN) and the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). The ability to obtain the SIN and OHIP cards elevates the author's status into a comfortable position. After fighting for necessities for years, she can have what she needs to survive.

The intersectionality of class, gender, identity, race, and the various literal and metaphorical crossroads create a journey the author goes on to find her own family and create a better home for herself. From crossing the United States border into Canada as the literal border crossing to finding and defining her version of family, the use of biomythography techniques helps Piepzna-Samarasinha convey these ideas. The way in which our society is built to work against those who do not fit into social norms or heteronormativity and who are left on the outskirts of society due to the way oppression works. Piepzna-Samarasinha overcomes obstacles and defies social norms and oppression to dream her way home.

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# CHAPTER TWO

# 'IMPERVIOUS TO HER CLAWED WORDS': TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S *THE BIRD'S NEST* AND *THE HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE*

MICHAEL T. WILSON

In Shirley Jackson's early story, 1949's "The Daemon Lover," the nameless and psychologically wounded female protagonist searches fruitlessly on her wedding day for Jamie, her absent fiancé who may or may not exist, and is further traumatized by a culture that mocks abandoned women such as her as she does so.[1] Likewise, in Jackson's late story, 1965's "The Bus," a travelling older woman finds herself even more literally abandoned on a country road by the bus driver, to "grins [and] amused comments" from other passengers, catches a ride with two young men who defend the bus driver rather than sympathizing with her, and takes refuge in a roadhouse, before finding herself returning to childhood toys taking nightmarish shapes and screaming vainly for "Mommy."[2] She awakens to find herself still on the bus and then abandoned once more – or for the first time – in exactly the same place where she was before. Female trauma, Jackson thus seems to argue over the complete course of her writing career, can become a cycle of injuries without escape, with both small and large wounds accumulating together. Jackson's fiction repeatedly revolves around the nature, experience, and effects of trauma experienced by women from a range of sources, or, in Tony M. Vinci's words, the "ethical impulse at the heart of her work that invites readers to become attentive to the realities of the traumatized subject."[3] Indeed, her emphasis on personal and "social" trauma arguably emerges as the most dominant theme in her work. At the same time, and crucially, Jackson also depicts women who are resilient in the face of traumatizing experiences, and implies how female resilience is gained.

Two of Jackson's more extensive explorations of women experiencing and inflicting trauma occur in her 1954 novel *The Bird's Nest* and 1958's *The Haunting of Hill House*. In both works, the ongoing effects of childhood and teenage trauma entangle and problematize the adult lives of the female protagonists, Elizabeth Richmond and Eleanor Vance respectively. In doing so, Jackson incorporates her own acute view of American culture at the time, as well as a mid-20th-century version of human psychology. Although scholars have analyzed both these characters in considerable depth and from an assortment of angles, relatively little attention has been paid to the two female characters who serve to foil Elizabeth and Eleanor, Aunt Morgen and Theodora, both of whom experience their own forms of trauma in the novels, or the seemingly comical figure of Mrs. Montague in *Hill House*. Strikingly, however, all three of these minor characters are able to process their trauma more successfully than the protagonists they foil, and in doing so suggest that Jackson was articulating a more complete and remarkably contemporary model of the nature of both female resilience and female trauma: the greater impact of childhood damage contrasted with the resilience imbued by healthier parenting, the cumulative traumatizing effects of gender ideals, the entangled cycle of perpetrator and victim trauma, and a fairly complete depiction of the social interactions that are now termed "micro-traumas."

Aunt Morgen's trauma in *The Bird's Nest* accumulates both from the past, as a woman who lost her love interest to her beautiful sister and who increasingly fell out of the era's gender ideals, and in the present, as her niece Elizabeth's personality fragments per a mid-20$^{th}$ century model of dissociative personality disorder and those personalities proceed to alternately torment and confuse the older woman. Morgen herself is a somewhat unique character in Jackson's fiction, an older woman who seems to embody many of Jackson's own characteristics but who has deliberately freed herself by the time the novel begins from the gender constraints of her era. Morgen has a keen interest in food, an easily roused temper, a willingness to disagree with male authority, an indifference to female fashion accompanied by a stout physique, and a declamatory conversational style. As such, she seems markedly resilient to the gender ideals and cultural micro-traumas common to women of the era. Initially supremely self-confident, Morgen finds the initial experience of guardianship to Elizabeth well within her capabilities, and feels that she is performing her role well. As Elizabeth's personality dissociates, Morgen finds herself increasingly struggling, however, and when "Bess," the most antagonistic of the personas, actively attempts to traumatize Morgen, the older woman finds herself increasingly affected by those attacks. Despite these interludes of

trauma, Morgen successfully comforts herself and continues to engage with each of the personas in turn. The complexity of this sequence – a child traumatized by her mother and her mother's male lover becomes a traumatized woman who then dissociates per a 1950s idea of schizophrenia into multiple personalities who are themselves victims or further perpetrators of violence, including violence inflicted by one of those personas against her aunt – serves to articulate Jackson's intense focus on the nature of female trauma, and problematizes a simplistic interpretation of its causes and effects.

By freeing herself from the gender constraints of her era, Morgen seemingly gains resilience to the cultural constrictions and injuries common to women. At the most basic level, Morgen confuses and transgresses gender ideals: “Although Aunt Morgen was the type of woman freely described as 'masculine,' if she had been a man she would have cut a very poor figure indeed [. . . ] middle-sized, weak-jawed, shifty-eyed, and clumsy.”[4] Thus defined as a “masculine” woman, but also a less than masculine hypothetical man, Morgen stands outside both gender norms in the 1950s, when, as Victoria Vantoch notes, “prominent sexologists considered straying from prescribed gender norms an indication of homosexuality and the mannish woman as a popular symbol of lesbianism.”[5] Significantly, given this cultural assumption, Jackson insulates Morgen from accusations of lesbianism by providing her with a failed heterosexual romance itself crucial to the story, with a man whom her sister married instead, and thus shifts the nature of her survived trauma to her failure of aesthetic ideals for women and willingness to violate “proper” female behaviors rather than a transgressive sexual orientation.

Morgen herself has shaped her subsequent adoption of a more masculinized personality with considerable care, minimizing its transgressive qualities. By her own self-definition, “she loved eating and drinking and said she loved men [. . .] and among her few friends she was regarded as fairly dashing because of her fondness for blunt truths and her comprehensive statistics about baseball.”[6] Her “not like the other girls” persona foils Elizabeth's own alternate personas as a sort of Freudian reaction formation: where “Bess” reacts to Elizabeth's past injuries by trying to traumatize Morgen in turn, Morgen reshapes herself in order to turn her culturally-determined flaws into virtues. The novel returns on multiple occasions to Morgen’s transgressive appearance, and the way that trauma has accumulated around that transgression and shaped her personality. Jackson’s depiction of that accumulation seems to anticipate Ghislaine Boulanger’s later definition of “micro-traumas” as “the accumulation of

these subtle let downs and put downs that lead [. . . .] to a chronic sense of demoralization and low self-esteem."[7] Morgen "had of necessity adopted from adolescence (with what grief, perhaps, and frantic railings against the iniquities of fate, which made her sister lovely) the personality of the gruff, loud-voiced woman so invariably described as 'masculine.'"[8] Morgen's "necessity" indicates the existence and impact of the cumulative micro-traumas themselves, but also the fact that she has actively moved to counteract those traumas.

Although Morgen inhabits that reshaped self with considerable vigor and success, she does so in ways that illustrate the ongoing power of those cultural micro-traumas for women who failed to find such strategies of resistance. Jackson's depiction of Morgen seems to anticipate at least some aspects of feminism's later struggle to revalue age in women. Morgen finds her past physical "flaws" no longer make her as relatively unattractive compared to her youthful peers, who in their own older ages now lack any of the compensating resilience strategies that she has embraced: "she had reached an age where sustaining this character was no longer quite such a strain as it might have been when she was, say, twenty, and had reached a position of comparative complacence, discovering how the pretty girls of her youth had by now become colorless and dismal, and sometimes blushed when she spoke."[9] Outside her own favorable self-assessment as colorful and non-dismal, Morgen is still being judged by the cultural standards for women, but, crucially, after having arrived at her resilience strategy from "necessity." Elizabeth's psychiatrist, Doctor Wright, a figure of male authority exercised in foolish and oblivious ways like *Hill House*'s Dr. Montague, deems her "a singularly unattractive woman, heavy-set and overbearing, with a loud laugh and a gaudy taste in clothes." In doing so, he reifies the youthful beauty standards she transgresses, and further notes that Morgen was "as much unlike the prettier aspects of her niece as could be conceived, although it must be admitted that Betsy bore a strong family resemblance to her aunt."[10]

Although thus dismissed as an unpleasant and unattractive old woman, Morgen is capable of manipulating male gender expectations with "her flattery, her brandy, [and] her stimulating intelligence" in Doctor Wright's view, emphasizing her more frequent choice to violate such gendered ideals - "'Your superior judgment . . . ' she murmured. 'More brandy?'" – and Wright responds by calling her "'my dear'" without thinking.[11] Her ability to switch between these modes of speech seems to reflect both past traumas and the ways that she has changed in order to minimize such wounds. Notable also is the way in which she refutes his rose-colored nostalgia for

the era of their youth in which he clearly was privileged, "'a kinder one as regards the small graceful ways of life.'" Morgen's quietly dry retort that "'I never found it so,' she said. 'Indeed, when I think back on my own youth -- '" is immediately interrupted by Doctor Wright, however, leaving the micro-traumas which she experienced as one who did not fit in emphasized by their very omission.[12]

Morgen's resilience in the face of the later trauma inflicted by her niece's mental illness and attacks on her seems clearly connected to her broader defense of herself and acceptance and indeed celebration of her own transgressive nature. Her self-acceptance is remarkably complete:

> She had not materially altered herself in more years than she cared to remember. Her manner of dress, of speech, of doing her hair, of spending her time, had not changed since it first became apparent to a younger Morgen that in all her life to come no one was, in all probability, going to care in the slightest how she looked, or what she did, and the minor wrench of leaving humanity behind was more than compensated for by her complacent freedom from a thousand small irritations.[13]

Morgen has gained resilience to trauma by "leaving humanity behind" and cultivating indifference to those cultural micro-traumas, or "small irritations" as she views them. Her defensive armor also extends to a ferocious counter-attack. Unaware of Wright's inner judgments, Morgen is often scornful of his pretensions to male authority, and responds to his assertions with a ferocious and flamboyant assertion of self, particularly after drinking:

> "[W]hen I choose to be heard, the lowest legions of hell may turn in vain to silence me and when I choose to speak not all the winds of earth can drown my voice for I speak truly and well and raise not your hand to me, sirrah, for I might strike you down as a reptile or a craven bellyful wanderer upon my green earth if you so much as whimper; I charge you, sirrah, look not on me."[14]

Morgen's assertion of her choice of when to be heard, implying that she often chooses to remain silent, is notable here in a culture that consistently devoiced women, and seems to reflect her rebellious but deflective position as a woman who refuses to meet gender ideals but simultaneously resists classification as a "man-hater" or lesbian. At the same time, Morgen's theatrical denunciation of the male Doctor Wright as a "reptile" combines anger against the sort of male authority that has power over the lives of women like her niece, with a clearly inaccurate assertion of her own power to destroy her "attacker," who in this instance is largely a bystander to