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Storied Truths: Contemporary Canadian and Indigenous Childhood Trauma Narratives

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Graduate Program in English
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of
Philosophy
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**STORIED TRUTHS: CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN AND INDIGENOUS
CHILDHOOD TRAUMA NARRATIVES**

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Michelle Coupal

Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
Western University
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This dissertation reconceptualizes generic distinctions between fiction and testimony in accounts of childhood trauma. Scholars such as Leigh Gilmore have argued that while writers of trauma stories are burdened by legalistic definitions of evidence and anxieties about truth-telling, they nonetheless push at the limits of autobiography, often scuffing the border between fact and fiction, in their effort to bring their traumatic stories into language. There has not, however, been a sustained effort to understand and legitimize the place of *fiction* in testimony, particularly in cases of adult narrations of recovered memories of childhood traumas. My research addresses this lacuna by querying the dynamic relationship between fiction and testimony in both autobiographical and fictional accounts of childhood trauma. This work is motivated by my desire to open up a scripto-therapeutic space for trauma survivors to incorporate stories and use their imaginations to narrate *traumatic truths* rather than strictly evidentiary truths.

In Chapter Two of my dissertation, I explore Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House* (1987), a pioneering memoir of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. I consider this controversial work as a case history of testimony caught between fact and fiction. Chapter Three extends my discussion of the controversy over the truth-status of Fraser's traumatic memoir to an analysis of the ways in which three Canadian novels similarly challenge conventional boundaries of genre and representation in their fictional articulation of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse: Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), and Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996). In Chapter Four, I argue that Indigenous writers specifically employ fiction and storytelling as forms of testimony outside of sanctioned Western discursive arenas such as courtrooms and the media. This chapter explores three residential school narratives: Vera Manuel's play, *Strength of Indian Women* (1998), and two novels, James Bartleman's *As Long as the Rivers Flow* (2011) and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* (2002).

Keywords

Contemporary Canadian literature; Indigenous literatures in Canada; life writing; residential school narratives; child sexual abuse; trauma theory; theories of memory; Sylvia Fraser; Ann-Marie MacDonald; Shani Mootoo; Gail Anderson-Dargatz; Vera Manuel; James Bartleman; Robert Arthur Alexie

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Manina Jones, for her tireless support of me through every stage of the Ph.D.. Thanks, Manina, for your commitment to my project, your brilliant critique of my work, and your wise professional guidance. I am also grateful to my co-supervisor, Joel Faflak, for his astute suggestions, dazzling commentary, and compassionate approach to my subject. Manina and Joel—you have been a dream team. Thank you.

I want to thank Sylvia Fraser for generously agreeing to talk to me about her life and work. Sylvia—thank you for your unflinching courage, your grace under fire, and your commitment to telling your harrowing story. I am also grateful to you for your comments about my work.

Thanks to my thesis examining committee—Jo-Ann Episkenew, Nandi Bhatia, Julia Emberley, and Kim Verwaayen—for reading my work and for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

I am deeply grateful to Deanna Reder. Deanna—without my asking, you mentored me throughout my Ph.D.. Thanks for your intellectual and professional guidance.

I was lucky enough to be Joe Zezulka's Teaching Assistant for two courses in Canadian literature. Thanks, Joe, for everything you taught me about Canadian literature and literary history. I appreciate your collegiality and our many lively discussions.

Thanks to all of my CALA colleagues for their community and support. I am especially grateful to Joseph Gold and Hoi Cheu for their mentorship.

I am grateful to Mandy Bragg, Candace Brunette, Naomi Mishibinijima, Kelly Nicholas, and all of my students for making Indigenous Services my home over the last three years. Chi Meegwetch Mandy, Candace, Naomi, Kelly, Shelby, Genevieve, Shyra, Xnia, Janie, Stephanie, Lana, Ursula, Adrean, Zeeta, Kylie, Erica, Dakota, Kyrie, Jasmine, Jaela, Kara, Alyssa, Hailey, Cassie, Sara, Elena, and Gord.

Thanks to Allison Hargreaves, Elan Paulson, Karis Shearer, and Patti Luedecke for their many years of friendship.

My thanks to Liz Effinger for her companionship, robust intellect, and riotous sense of humour.

Thank you to my life-long friends for their love and friendship: Abby Nakhaie, Alessandra Pioreschi, Tracey Hare Connell, Monika McKinley, Mark Willms, and Jamie Roberts.

I could not have finished this dissertation without the support of my father. Thanks, Dad, for believing in me and for your unconditional love.

Thanks to the love of my life, my son, for his intelligence, sensitivity, and droll humour. I love you, Max.

Dedication

For the children,

For the adult survivors,

For my mother and her brother—

I remember.

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Chapter 1

1 Narrative Matters: Talking and Not Talking About Child Sexual Abuse

1.1 Overview

This project is motivated both by my interest in the particular ways in which child sexual traumas put pressure on narrative structures and genres and by my frustration with the limited ways in which child sexual abuse narratives are discussed by literary scholars. I perceive a disjuncture between the highly imaginative fictional forms that writers of child sexual traumas adopt and create on the one hand, and the confining ways in which critics discuss these narratives on the other hand. When scholars do discuss incest or child sexual abuse, they tend to articulate their analysis either in therapeutic and scripto-therapeutic terms or by way of poststructuralist trauma theory. The therapeutic view of putting one's trauma into words through a story to promote healing is important, as are the many insights regarding trauma's unspeakability and unrepresentability which can be drawn from more recent theories of trauma and memory. I draw upon these discourses, yet I want to advocate an approach that encompasses both therapy and theory, while at the same time attends to what the trauma narratives themselves can teach readers: that is, the necessity of stories and the imagination to any telling, autobiographical or fictional, of childhood trauma.

The place of fantasy and the imagination in narrations of sexual abuse typically function as disavowals of the trauma. My reading of the texts examined in this project reveals the opposite: both trauma and healing are profoundly imaginative acts. While it is relatively easy to see the connection between healing and the imagination, it is much harder to allow a space for the imagination in traumatic experiences. Indeed, as I will show in the case of Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House* (1987), narrating recovered memories of childhood abuse is particularly vexed for life-writers upon whom a burden of proof is placed by both critics and the reading public. By employing literary techniques to tell her story, Fraser is in a double bind: she relies on narrative structures and devices in her memoir which necessarily add artifice to her tale, while at the same

time insisting that she is telling nothing but the truth. I will argue that any narrative reconstruction of past traumatic memories is at some level narrative (re)creation.

In choosing to focus on Canadian and Indigenous texts, I do not want to suggest that there is anything particularly Canadian or particularly Indigenous about child sexual abuse. The choice is much more about my area of expertise—Canadian and Indigenous literatures—than it is with these narratives reflecting national Canadian or Indigenous issues. I wanted to examine both autobiographical and fictional forms because I wondered if there were connections to be made between genres. I realized early in my research that the traditional separation of fiction from life-writing in literary scholarship might bracket off genres when clearly narratives were blurring them. I initially worried about discussing Indigenous narratives, specifically residential school fictions, in the broader context of Canadian fiction and life-writing, for the same reasons that I was reticent to bring fiction together with life-writing: different genres generate different theories and ways of discussing them. I decided that I was not going to produce new knowledge or even interesting knowledge if I did not have the courage to follow my instincts and pursue the ways in which three very different literary genres approach the same problem: how to articulate child sexual abuse traumas which confound both memory and narrative.

In Chapter Two of my dissertation, I contend that fiction and the imagination are necessary tools in articulating trauma stories. I explore Fraser's *My Father's House*, a pioneering memoir of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse that continues to garner international critical attention from scholars who question the reliability of Fraser's account of her childhood. I consider this work as a case history of testimony caught between fact and fiction, in which Fraser's employment of what she calls "novelistic techniques" adds to the controversy. I explore and elucidate the ways in which Fraser's memoir of extreme traumatic wounding becomes a generic limit-case symptomatic of the controversies swirling around writers of child sexual abuse narratives, and a representative example of the risks of public disclosure of childhood sexual traumas. Moreover, the critical response to Fraser's memoir reveals anxieties about what constitutes legitimate generic modes of discourse when it comes to allegations of child abuse. At issue is the troubling intersection of fictional techniques with the

autobiographical form, a form which in the case of child abuse allegations takes on testimonial properties with all of testimony's expectations of legal facts and juridical truths. Fraser's critics often fail to take into account the imaginative ways in which survivors must engage with narrative models to make sense of their stories.

Chapter Three extends my discussion of the controversy over the truth-status of Fraser's traumatic memoir to an analysis of the ways in which three Canadian novels similarly challenge conventional boundaries of genre and representation in their fictional articulation of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), and Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996), I argue, *fictionalize* traumas and rely upon border genres such as the Gothic and magic realism to blur distinctions between the real and the imagined. These novels all represent childhood traumas as mediated sensory experiences that seem to require, like Fraser's memoir, imaginative and hybridized forms to recount stories whose access to the truth is never straightforward. *Fall on Your Knees* employs the visual arts and music aesthetically to represent and negotiate the novel's many traumas. Mootoo's magic realist novel develops a therapeutic imaginary through an aesthetic, sensual engagement with a natural world that is at once real and fantastic. In *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, I demonstrate—even as I trouble—the ways in which traumas are arbitrated through and find expression in the shifting discourses and figures of the text, specifically the scrapbook and, most problematically, the Native figure of Coyote.

My final chapter comes full circle and argues that Indigenous writers specifically employ fiction and storytelling as forms of testimony outside of sanctioned Western discursive arenas such as courtrooms and the media. These writers *use* fiction as a pedagogical tool and as a form of activism. In this portion of the project, I explore three residential school narratives: Vera Manuel's play, *Strength of Indian Women* (1998), and two novels, James Bartleman's *As Long as the Rivers Flow* (2011) and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* (2002). I contend that these works complicate their generic status as fiction by functioning as didactic forms of testimony to residential school traumas broadly and, more specifically, to child sexual abuse at the schools. They do so, in part, through the primacy these writers place on the centrality of stories to

individual lives, to the circulation of stories in their communities, and to the transformational power that stories have to teach audiences about the children who suffered multiple forms of abuse in government legislated, church-run residential schools. I explore these texts as creative forms of testimony that exist outside of Western epistemologies and standard historicizing methods. I attend to the ways in which storytelling strategies are employed to implicate readers as witnesses and to circulate and create new knowledges and understandings of the legacies of residential schooling in Canada.

My choice of texts is not meant to be exhaustive, but is rather a representative sampling of available child sexual abuse narratives in Canada. That said, I chose my texts for the particular ways they manipulate genre to represent traumatic experiences. My most basic criterion for selection was that the narrative had to be primarily focussed on child sexual abuse, which narrowed the field significantly, and made my choices for Chapters Three and Four relatively easy. Chapter Two, which examines autobiography, was more difficult because I had numerous choices aside from Sylvia Fraser's famous memoir, notably Janice Williamson's *Crybaby!* (1998) and Elly Danica's *Don't: A Woman's Word* (1988). The scholarly controversy over generic issues in Fraser's memoir is the principal reason for my choice to focus exclusively on her. More specifically, I am interested in what the controversy reveals about the place of fiction in autobiographical tellings of trauma. The veracity of Fraser's memoir has been widely questioned by scholars because of her use of novelistic techniques and a broader skepticism about adult recoveries of memories of childhood sexual abuse, an incredulity that stems from the birth of the idea of "False Memory Syndrome" in the 1990s and the ensuing "memory wars." Also troubling for critics is the coherence with which Fraser recounts her story, and her lack of self-reflexive doubt regarding her recovered memories.

In *Crybaby!*, Janice Williamson's memoir of recovered memories of child sexual abuse, memories are presented as shifting, uncertain recollections of possible traumas that exist "somewhere between imagination and history" (*Crybaby!* 11). Williamson's memoir has not been censured as Fraser's has because Williamson self-consciously writes in fragments and recognizes her memories to be narrative reconstructions. The very fact that she is filled with doubt about the reliability of her memories makes her

story more believable to critics. Williamson's creative blurring of fiction and testimony make her memoir an obvious and perhaps easy choice for this dissertation. I do discuss *Crybaby!* in relation to Fraser's work, but I chose to keep Fraser as my principal focus because, while there has been a considerable body of work criticizing *My Father's House*, far less has been done to explore the ways in which the memoir brings to the fore the vexed nature of narrating child sexual abuse in any form. *My Father's House* becomes a grounding case study for this entire project. The other pioneering Canadian memoir of child sexual abuse is, of course, Elly Danica's *Don't: A Woman's Word*. Again, I draw upon this memoir in relation to Fraser, but I do not specifically examine it. Danica's memoir, like Williamson's, is written in fragments, which means that it corresponds to contemporary models of traumatic memory which privilege fragments as essentially truer forms of memory. Fraser writes her past into a coherent story with the inevitable outcome that it reads *as* a story, not a fact-based testimony and not a tentative set of fragments of memory. Chapter Two of this dissertation thus explores the fascinating case of *My Father's House* as a limit case of fiction and testimony.

In Chapter Three, I focus on three novels written in 1996: Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. In addition to their coincidental year of publication, the novels share gothic and magical realist elements. What interests me, however, is the ways in which the three novels represent traumas *imaginatively*. In MacDonald's novel, traumas are registered sensually by the characters as visual art and also music. In Mootoo's novel, the traumas are depicted largely in the mode of realism; however, healing from the traumas is represented entirely through the imagination as Mala rewrites her past traumas through her own magical, therapeutic imaginary world. In Anderson-Dargatz's novel, the Native figure of Coyote is employed to represent Beth's sexual traumas visually, so that she sees the mythical animal rather than her father in moments of trauma. Beth's mother, by contrast, uses her scrapbook to encrypt sexual traumas—both Beth's and her own—to symbolically represent otherwise unspeakable horrors. In all cases, then, child sexual abuse is represented as a trauma that invites the imagination into its articulation. Taken together, these novels provoked my own investigation into why a fictionalizing mind seemed essential to apprehending and

recovering from trauma when there is so much at stake in the opposite, that is, in providing factual evidence for the traumatic event.

My textual choices for Chapter Four were in many ways less complicated than was my decision to write about child sexual abuse in Indian residential school fictions. In an upcoming section, I chronicle the reasons why the discourse pertaining to child sexual abuse in the schools became problematic and why I nonetheless focus on it here. In choosing Vera Manuel's *Strength of Indian Women*, James Bartleman's *As Long as the Rivers Flow*, and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*, I am putting together three fictional accounts of childhood sexual abuse at residential schools in which the authors set out to use the fictional form to educate their readers about the schools and, more importantly to these authors, legacies of residential school abuse. My other reason for the choices is that there is little existing scholarship on these works. Manuel's play has sadly gone out of print, which has limited its circulation and scholarship. Similarly, Alexie's novel went out of print by virtue of its first publisher, Stoddart, going into receivership days following its release. Theytus republished the 2002 novel in 2009. There has been increasing scholarly attention to this work since its republication, and I expect there will be more to come. Bartleman wrote his novel for the general public. He intended it to be didactic rather than literary, which may be why there has not yet been any scholarly work addressing it.

The most obvious choice of fictions is ironically the one I ultimately decided not to foreground, although I do discuss it: Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998). After outlining an entire section devoted to this novel, I realized that I had nothing new to say that had not already been said in the existing (voluminous) scholarship on *Kiss*, particularly by Sam McKegney in *Magic Weapons*. McKegney clearly parses the testimonial impulse and capacity of Highway's novel. Rather than rehearse his important insights, I decided instead to use Highway's novel, especially Fagan's theorization of what she terms "Aboriginal trauma theory" through *Kiss*, to ground my discussion of the other works. Richard Wagamese's new novel, *Indian Horse* (2012), was a late consideration. Wagamese's lifelong work of blending fiction and autobiography made the novel a candidate, but, in the end, child sexual abuse did not figure as prominently as in the other works I examine. In Chapter Four, then, I will argue that Manuel, Bartleman,

and Alexie all employ fiction as a form of testimony to the traumas and legacies of residential schooling in Canada. Together, all of the narratives I explore in this project suggest that fiction is a necessary tool in the narration of childhood sexual traumas, whether the genre is autobiographical or fictional.

I turn now to the broader issues surrounding child sexual abuse discourse in literary discursive practices. In the following section, I provide a short history of child sexual abuse as a concept, while also discussing the ways in which trauma has been theorized in relation to sexual abuse. This contextual background, particularly the ambivalences between trauma theory and therapeutic discourse, underpin my argument that the child sexual abuse narratives I examine not only blur generic lines but offer alternative understandings to how childhood traumas are articulated and represented.

1.2 A Brief History of Talking About Incest and Child Sexual Abuse

Talking publically about incest and child sexual abuse is a relatively recent phenomena. Second-wave feminism made child abuse a public issue and, in so doing, marked the advent of contemporary notions of child abuse. The middle to late nineteenth century also raised awareness of issues relating to children, but it was framed differently, as cruelty against children. Ian Hacking, in “The Making and Molding of Child Abuse,” emphasizes the historical malleability and mobility of the concept of child abuse:

Child abuse is [. . .] not one fixed thing. We have had something like our concept of child abuse for less than thirty years, during each of which it has been the focus of intense concern, especially in the United States. Prior to that we had a number of ideas that were kept quite distinct, ranging from cruelty to children to child molestation. Yet aside from occasional scandalous court cases, the public had little interest in such matters during the preceding years, 1912-1962. Since 1962 the class of acts falling under “child abuse” has changed every few years, so that people who have not kept up to date are astonished to be told that the present primary connotation of child abuse is sexual abuse. (259)

I will briefly unpack these dates. In the late Victorian period, societies for the prevention of cruelty to children marked the only other time in history when child abuse was a major issue. Victorian child-saving movements, while heightening awareness of sexual abuse, displaced this concern with a focus on juvenile delinquency and separating children from their caretakers. Social work was unknown before 1900, but by 1910, there were numerous schools of social work. This led to the formation in the United States of the federal Children's Bureau in 1912 (Hacking 266). The hiatus in "public interest" that Hacking notes following this period is due, according to Anne McGillivray, to the "new social work" that "rejected the criminal focus of late-nineteenth-century reformers. The sex offender became the mythical stranger, not the father he so often turned out to be. [. . .] Sexual abuse was pushed back into secrecy" (133).

Hacking makes a convincing case for marking 1962 as the origin of contemporary notions of child abuse. It was then that a group of Denver physicians, led by C. Henry Kempe, published "The Battered-Child Syndrome" (266). Hacking argues that their rhetoric medicalized the issue as a problem of "sick" adults and, in combination with the view that incidences of battered children were on the rise, entrenched child abuse in the public imagination (267).¹ The "Battered-Child Syndrome" was quickly appropriated by feminists as the "Battered-Wife Syndrome" in the effort to raise consciousness about the untold violence women experienced in the private sphere of the home. The women's liberation movement of the 1970s began to foreground sexual violence, specifically rape, as a major site of subordination and political control. In fact, without the feminist movement, it is unlikely that the notion of child abuse would have so quickly expanded to include child sexual abuse. Roger Luckhurst points to the 1977 *Ms. Magazine* article

¹ According to Hacking, this paper also "put in place one of the most wide-spread beliefs about child abuse: battering parents were battered children, or, more generally, child abusers were abused when they were children. At first one read only 'often parents may be repeating the type of child care practiced on them in their childhood.' That statement is cautious enough, but it has been elevated into a generalization" (268).

entitled “Incest: Sexual Abuse Begins at Home” as instrumental in the category of rape being incorporated more broadly to include sexual abuse (72).²

Feminist consciousness-raising, then, encouraged victims to disclose their traumas, as Judith Lewis Herman says, to break the silence despite the fact that “[t]o speak about experiences in sexual or domestic life was to invite public humiliation, ridicule, and disbelief. Women were silenced by fear and shame, and the silence of women gave license to every form of sexual and domestic exploitation” (*Trauma and Recovery* 28). According to Elizabeth A. Wilson,

[t]hrough CR [consciousness-raising], a form of personal testimony, women began to compare their experiences of sexual violence and to see these experiences as related to the political oppression of women rather than as idiosyncratic occurrences provoked by “seductive behavior.” Although child sexual abuse was not initially the main focus of radical feminist attention, its relation to rape was quickly grasped and its affinity with personal testimony was established from the beginning. Indeed, over the years, no other form of domestic violence has lent itself to confessional storytelling like child sexual abuse. (82)

Moreover, Wilson suggests that prior to feminism, child sexual abuse was thought of as so rare an occurrence that it did not warrant discussion (82).³ The inception of contemporary notions of child abuse is thus in the 1960s. The 1970s and 1980s would escalate the circulation of stories of child sexual abuse and change how sexual abuse is theorized.

With the rise of child abuse as a concept, came the rise in its theorization as more and more survivors narrated their traumas. At the time of Judith Lewis Herman’s

² While the opening claim of the article would provoke little more than a sigh of recognition today, the remark was groundbreaking at the time: “One girl out of every four in the United States will be sexually abused in some way before she reaches the age of eighteen” (qtd. in Luckhurst 72).

³ Hacking affirms that “[i]t is nevertheless the case that no one had any glimmering, in 1960, of what was going to count as child abuse in 1990” (257). Indeed, child abuse is often taken to mean child sexual abuse. The term has travelled from being conceived as a rare occurrence perpetrated by “sick” individuals, usually strangers, always men, to a ubiquitous phenomena perpetrated mostly by men that victims know—fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and trusted family friends.

landmark feminist study in the mid-1970s, the results of which were later published in *Father-Daughter Incest* (1981), there was virtually no scholarship on the psychological impact of incest and sexual abuse on children. Herman's study located the problem of incest firmly in patriarchy and female oppression, and, in this, is a relic of a time before the dissociative model of trauma took hold in the 1980s. Herman's next book, however, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), is important, according to Roger Luckhurst, because it brings together feminist and psychological scholarship with PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and the dissociative model. Herman reworks her earlier study on father-daughter incest and makes the trauma model the centre of her new text. Of particular importance is that she connects the dissociative symptoms of PTSD to childhood sexual abuse. Luckhurst claims that her "insistence that sexual abuse was the primary aetiology [in symptoms of PTSD] prompted a challenge to the diagnostic definition of PTSD" (72).

Herman was able to challenge the definition by arguing that there were, over the last century, three times that a form of psychological trauma emerged in concert with a political movement: first, hysteria, the study of which "grew out of the republican, anticlerical political movement of the late nineteenth century in France" (9); second, shell shock or combat neurosis beginning in the First World War; and third, sexual and domestic violence in the context of European and American feminism (9).⁴ Herman contends that the post 1970s legitimization of PTSD by Vietnam war veterans paved the way for PTSD to be similarly applied to other traumas such as sexual violence. Moreover, she makes this radical claim: "[i]t is now apparent [. . .] that the traumas of one are the traumas of the other. The hysteria of women and the combat neurosis of men are one" (32). The medicalization of trauma allows for its universalization by clinicians like Herman who insist, above all, on the commonalities between trauma survivors: between rape survivors, combat veterans, battered women, political prisoners, concentration camp survivors, and "by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of

⁴ It is worth noting that Hacking agrees with Herman's linkages: "What underlies all three of these is memory, memory of trauma, although the relationship to remembered trauma is different in each case. Freud famously came to the opinion that hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Post-traumatic stress disorder has been entirely incorporated into the science of memory" (*Rewriting the Soul* 212).

small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes” (*Trauma and Recovery* 3). Herman insists that “[p]eople who have endured horrible events suffer predictable psychological harm” (3). Janice Haaken, however, in “The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire” wonders, “what are the implications of combining survivors of child abuse, war, political terrorism, religious cults, and the Holocaust under a single psychiatric category?” (1079). She sees a progressive dimension, a democratizing impulse, in the search for a universal basis to human suffering, but she cautions that “[a]t the same time, the diagnostic embrace of various trauma survivors under the PTSD label obscures the specificity of survivors’ experiences and the complexity and variability of victim/perpetrator relationships” (1079). In collapsing the many distinctions between traumas suffered by various groups and individuals, the dissociative model has the potential to elide the dynamics of trauma and the subjectivities of its victims.⁵

The symptoms of PTSD that all victims ostensibly share include repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, and thoughts that revive the trauma, at the same time that there is an impulse towards numbing and avoiding the recall of the event. Herman calls this oscillation the “dialectic of trauma”:

[t]he dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness, which George Orwell, one of the committed truth-tellers of our century, called “doublethink,” and which mental health professionals, searching for a calm, precise language, call “dissociation.” It results in the protean, dramatic, and often bizarre symptoms of hysteria which Freud recognized a century ago as disguised communications about sexual abuse in childhood. (*Trauma and Recovery* 1-2)

The notion that a dual consciousness can arise from extreme childhood trauma was initially advanced by Pierre Janet in the late nineteenth century and by Freud’s early theory of hysteria which suggested “the presence of a ‘double consciousness,’

⁵ In fact, Roger Luckhurst argues that childhood abuse is particularly prone to universalizing tendencies: “crucially, this is trauma no longer bounded by the specific experience of war combat or camp imprisonment: adult survivorship of unremembered childhood abuse holds out the greatest possibility of universal ascription” (74).

conceptualized as the coexistence of internally coherent, yet separate and autonomous, operations within the ego” (Haaken, “The Recovery of Memory” 1075). However, according to Haaken,

[t]he dissociation model asserts that traumatic memory is preserved in split-off ego formations and emerges over time in a fragmentary experiencing of the trauma, often through self-hypnotic trance states, flashbacks, or fluctuating identity states. [. . .] In contrast to the repression model, dissociation implies a more orderly, “rational” unconscious, guided by structured rules with closer access to consciousness. [. . .] The psyche assigns various “parts” of the self to the preservation of traumatic memories, and these parts retain the integrity of the original experience. (1076)

The mind’s apparent capacity to preserve a coherent representation of the traumatic event is at the heart of the dissociative model and underlies the therapeutic notion that recovered memories are not only possible but necessary to healing traumatic wounds.

A memory preserved is a memory that can be recalled, spoken, and narrated. Traumatic memory, unlike “normal” memory, which Janet described as “the action of telling a story,” is, according to Herman, “wordless and static” (37, 175): “[t]he traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (37). Traumatic memory, says Herman, is intrusive and repetitive, “not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story” (37). Without a verbal, narrative context, traumatic memory becomes encoded in the form of “vivid sensations and images” (38). Traumatic memory, then, is not linguistic but rather iconic and sensory, much like the memories of young children according to Herman (38).

Cathy Caruth, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, connects this pathology of traumatic memory to the belatedness with which it is experienced: “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Through Freud, Caruth emphasizes both the return of the traumatic

dream and its literality: “[i]t is this literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points toward its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event” (5). In Caruth’s theorization, which is based upon testimonies of Holocaust survivors, the traumatic experience is quintessentially marked by,

the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the *event* fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself. Central to the very immediacy of this experience, that is, is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory. The force of this experience would appear to arise precisely, in other words, in the collapse of its understanding. (7)

This aporia is thus insistent in both its repetition of images and its simultaneous amnesia regarding what constitutes these wordless, iconic memories resulting in an incomprehensibility of the very occurrence of the trauma itself.

As Geoffrey Hartman observes, traumatic knowledge seems to be a contradiction in terms (537), yet, at the same time, therapeutic discourse suggests that narrative is the only cure for survivors. The nexus of poststructuralist theories of trauma is the collapse of knowledge into a spectral gap of an inaccessible yet persistent form of memory that eludes as it intrudes and renders impossible any form of narrative. Roger Luckhurst in *The Trauma Question* describes the process as a “haunting absent presence of another time in our time. This is then given an ethical turn by Lyotard: any attempt to lay this ghostly traumatic trace is a form of tyranny or totalization” (81). In this view, trauma can only exist in narrative as an untouchable aporia: “Severe trauma can only be conveyed by the catastrophic rupture of narrative possibility” (Luckhurst 81). The problem that this theorization creates for victims of trauma has not gone unnoticed by critics. In *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore summarizes the issue:

[s]omething of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency. Yet, at the same time

language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma. Thus language bears a heavy burden in the theorization of trauma. (6)

Caruth acknowledges that trauma “requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one’s own, and others’, knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall” (153). And “beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of *its affront to understanding*. [. . .] The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand but in that it understands too much” (154). Gilmore calls the contradiction between asserting language as the only means of recuperating from trauma and theorizing language as that which fails in the face of trauma a “constitutive ambivalence” (7). In my view, trauma theory collapses on itself in Caruth’s influential theorization of it as not only beyond knowledge and language but also, and crucially, that it must be preserved as such, that it is somehow a bad thing if understanding the trauma means that it loses its force. To view trauma as too precious to touch, to understand, without essentially corrupting it, is to freeze the traumatic memory forever precisely as an unassimilated trauma that is free to wreak havoc upon one’s psychological well-being. The power of speech, rather than its “danger,” is that it can make the trauma understandable so that it loses its force, which, I realize, is exactly the opposite of what Caruth says.

Like Gilmore, Luckhurst similarly observes the contradiction between poststructuralist trauma theory and therapeutic discourse focussed on narrative healing:

[t]here seems to be a flat contradiction between cultural theory that regards narrative as betraying traumatic singularity and various therapeutic discourses that see narrative as a means of productive transformation or even final resolution of trauma. This of course reflects different disciplinary imperatives: aesthetic mediations that sustain irresolution and explore narrative disjuncture are not written under the rubrics and aims of

therapeutic work with traumatized people. One should not be judged by the other. (82)

For me, the contradiction between trauma theory and therapeutic practice suggests a need for further theorization to encompass the ambivalences that seem inherent in discussions of trauma. The narratives discussed in this dissertation seek imaginative ways to represent and articulate unspeakable traumas. In doing so, the narratives straddle both trauma theory and therapeutic discourse while at the same time suggesting broader ways to understand trauma outside of the limits of any one paradigm. I examine how writers use narrative, with the hope of extending my own theorization of trauma by attending to the particular stories writers tell and what these stories can teach about trauma. What I have found is that traumatic memory finds its expression in the dialogic relationship between the trauma and the story of the trauma.

1.3 Talking About Child Sexual Abuse in Residential Schools

The vexed nature of discourses on trauma's theories and trauma's therapies make talking about traumas such as child sexual abuse difficult and discursively limited. Talking about child sexual abuse in residential schools presents another set of problems altogether. The reluctance on the part of literary scholars to isolate sexual abuse in residential schools for Native children as a singular trauma apart from the multiple abuses suffered in the schools and their culturally genocidal policies comes from a well-founded concern that focussing exclusively on one trauma can result in an effacement of the root of the problem—the assimilative colonial policies of the government of Canada. In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, famously affirmed to a Parliamentary committee that he wanted ““to get rid of the Indian problem””: ““Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department”” (qtd. in Milloy 46). This barbaric policy to whitewash Natives by obliterating their languages, cultural traditions, and spiritual beliefs by separating Native children from their families and “schooling” them in Christian, English culture, ripped

apart Aboriginal community and family structures, the legacies of which continue to this day.

The issue that brought the horrendous abuses of the residential school system into the Canadian national discursive arena and public consciousness was, in fact, child sexual abuse. According to John Milloy, author of the seminal historical study, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986*, “What finally broke the seal on the residential school system affixed by Duncan Campbell Scott and others and made public the story of neglect, and physical and cultural abuse was, ironically, the deepest secret of all—the pervasive sexual abuse of the children. The official files efface the issue almost completely” (296). While child sexual abuse thus has the dubious distinction of raising public awareness about the many abuses suffered at the schools, one of the problems of privileging this issue above others is that it became a rhetorical strategy for the Canadian government to put blame for their violent legislation elsewhere.

According to Milloy, none of the major reports, even the critical ones, dealt with the issue of sexual abuse in the schools, which meant that individual Aboriginal people had to come forward if there was to be any light shed on the issue (297). Making allegations of child sexual abuse is never easy. The widespread reporting, however, of child sexual abuse at orphanages such as Mount Cashel in Newfoundland in the late 1980s raised public awareness and set the stage for other disclosures of abuse. As Milloy observes, “Beginning in 1989-90, abusers, including former residential school staff members, were exposed, taken into court in British Columbia and in the Yukon, and convicted in each case of multiple counts of gross indecency and sexual assault. This set off a chain reaction of police investigations and further prosecutions” (297). One of the most high-profile disclosures was Phil Fontaine’s in 1990.⁶ The rhetorically self-serving response of the Canadian government was to shine a light upon individual cases of sexual abuse as the primary evil of residential schools, while keeping the larger issues of the government’s responsibility for architecting and legislating the system in the first place in

⁶ Fontaine was, at the time, Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, and was later National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

the shadows. McKegney argues that the Canadian government's move to point the finger at individual perpetrators in the schools essentially protected their own narrative of colonial benevolence:

As is widely recognized, the residential school issue entered the domain of contestable public knowledge only after the disclosure by Aboriginal victims in the 1980s of sexual abuse suffered at the hands of staff and administrators. Reacting to the displacement of residential school discourse from obscure academic and political spheres into the public arena, the federal government initially sought to maintain discursive focus on these specific instances of abuse, which, in effect, pre-empted systemic analysis of how the conditions of residential schools not only fostered the likelihood of such abuse, but were abusive themselves. Isolating the source of the problem in distinct violations of the Criminal Code [. . .] the government effectively ensured that the negative effects of residential school remained the responsibility of anomalous sadists and perverts who slipped through the cracks of an otherwise altruistic system. (146)

The first strategy, then, employed by the Canadian government to shirk responsibility for the abuses at residential schools was to isolate blame in individual "caregivers" at the school and to keep the public discourse focussed on issues as those of the *past*. Milloy describes the pernicious government strategy in the early 1990s as a willful decimating of the history of the schools. The government was, according to Milloy, "determined to kill the past" by attempting to "efface the history of the system" as something that happened back "then" (302). Milloy argues that the churches were ahead of the government in their willingness to admit culpability for the criminal perversions of their priests and ministers; however, and perhaps as their own strategy to deflect blame away from themselves, they argued that the government should share blame for the larger issues facing Indigenous communities as a result of the assimilative policies of the schools:

By 1992, most of the churches had apologized, and they continued to do so in various forums, regretting in the words of one of the Catholic texts, "the pain, suffering, and alienation that so many had experienced."

However, as the churches told the minister in a joint communication through the Aboriginal Rights Coalition in August 1992, they wanted it recognized that they “share[d] responsibility with government for the consequences of residential schools,” which included not only “individual cases of physical and sexual abuse” but also “the broader issues of cultural impacts: [. . .] the loss of language through forced English speaking, the loss of traditional ways of being on the land, the loss of parenting skills through the absence of four or five generations of children from Native communities, and the learned behaviour of despising Native identity.” (299)

The church apologies sparked the second rhetorical tactic of the Canadian government to avoid responsibility. Their ploy was to focus attention on the need for Aboriginal healing. The 1992 response of DIAND (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development) to the church apologies was not to admit blame or open a public inquiry, but to work with individuals and communities to help them heal from past abuses. Unlike the churches, there were no apologies and no plans for compensation. The government strategy at the time was to put the problem back to Aboriginal communities to develop programs according to their needs, rather than focus public attention on the system of acculturative violence itself (Milloy 301). Milloy regards the government’s strategies as yet another form of colonial violence: “Along with the refusal to apologize or to institute a special public inquiry came a focus on the ‘now’ of the problem: Aboriginal people now ‘sick,’ not savage, in need of psychological, rather than theological, salvation” (302). This colonial view of the wounded Aboriginal in need of healing has persisted to the present day; however, Jo-Ann Episkenew insists upon adopting the reverse view: “‘Healing’ does not imply that Indigenous people are sick [. . .]. Colonialism is sick; under its auspices and supported by its mythology, the colonizers have inflicted heinous wounds on the Indigenous population that they set out to civilize” (*Taking Back Our Spirits* 11).

The Canadian government’s strategy to deflect attention away from their own culturally genocidal policies by arguing that the issues are the result of the actions of past sexually predacious individuals and that, in the present, “sick” Aboriginals must be

healed is at the heart of the reluctance of literary scholars to pluck out child sexual abuse in residential schools as a topic in and of itself. My view is that there is a difference between government strategies to *use* child sexual abuse to deflect blame away from their policies and scholarly work that examines Indigenous narratives focussed on this particular abuse. The Indigenous narratives that I analyze in the project make the legacies of child sexual abuse at residential schools a primary concern. Both Manuel and Alexie are survivors of child sexual abuse and their narratives function as semi-autobiographical testimonies to their experiences. Bartleman is not a residential school survivor; however, his novel uses child sexual abuse in the schools as a teaching tool for his audience, both Native and non-Native Canadians. My view is that scholars can take their cue from writers. If writers are grappling with the issue, there is no reason why scholars should avoid it. After all, avoidance is a government tactic *par excellence* to persist in colonial practices that are often much more insidious now than in the past because they are being implemented in the context of apology and reconciliation. Milloy argues that the initial strategies of the government have shifted again in contemporary times:

Soon after 1986, the schools were moved into the light of public scrutiny by media reports and court cases focussing on the deepest secret of the system's course through the lives of children and communities: persistent, widespread sexual abuse. In the face of this revelation and as a result of intense work by Aboriginal people themselves, the government moved from effacement to "apology." (xvii)

Apology is arguably the most recent government tactic to put the issue of residential schooling in Canada in the past. What many Canadians do not know or remember is that the first apology was not Stephen Harper's in 2008, but Minister of Indian Affairs, Jane Stewart's, in 1998, under the Crétien Liberal government. The narrative of the Harper apology has written over the past, so that he and his government will be memorialized as *the* apologizers for the schools. As I discuss in Chapter Four, the Harper government has followed their apology with a series of effacements of devastating colonial policies, and they are currently working to erode Aboriginal treaty and land rights by way of Bill C-45. It has yet to be seen what the full impact of the ongoing assimilative strategies of the Canadian government will be, and the extent to

which Indigenous resistive strategies, such as those of the current Idle No More protest, will change the course of the Harper government's insidious policies on Canada's first peoples.

1.4 Child Sexual Abuse and the Issue of "Critical Embarrassment"

I thought indeed that there was a sacred horror in my tale that rendered it unfit for utterance.

Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*

Child sexual abuse is not only a topic that scholars avoid in connection to residential school narratives, but is also, and more broadly speaking, infrequently examined by literature scholars of any ilk. It is not that literature does not take the issue up. Since Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* (c. 420 BC), incest and sexual abuse have been recurring themes in fiction, sharing particular affinities with the Gothic, where incest has become a stock trope. Despite this, there is an academic uneasiness with incest as a primary topic of examination. The emotional discomfort (or perhaps "cringe factor") that comes from having to think about a vulnerable child being sexually abused by an adult plays a role in what seems to be a scholarly preference to avoid the issue by examining what is perceived to be more literary aspects of novels. This uneasiness with the subject matter is not new. When William Godwin read the manuscript of *Mathilda*, written by his daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley in 1819, he viewed its subject matter—incest—as "disgusting and detestable" (qtd. in Nitchie 10). The semi-autobiographical novella chronicles the incestuous desires of a father for his daughter. There is no evidence beyond the novella itself that Godwin had an incestuous relationship with Shelley. That said, and as Elizabeth Nitchie insists, "The biographical elements are clear: *Mathilda* is certainly Mary herself; *Mathilda*'s father is Godwin; Woodville is an idealized [Percy Bysshe] Shelley" (12). As Rosaria Champagne observes, publication of the novella was suppressed by Godwin throughout his life, following which it was "dismissed by conservative critical standards," until Nitchie resurrected and published it in 1959 (54). The 140-year burial of *Mathilda* is reflective of anxieties about incest that continue to this day.

In the early stages of my work on this project, I presented a conference paper on the controversy over Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House*. The paper generated numerous questions from audience members and sparked an engaging group discussion about the provocative intermingling of fact with literary techniques in a memoir alleging child sexual abuse. Following the paper, a well-known English professor expressed interest in my work and gave me some friendly advice: "Focus your dissertation on generic issues rather than the sexual abuse itself." Indeed, genre is a central concern of my project and, in this sense, the advice was sage and, most certainly, well-meaning. I wondered, though, why it was that English scholars, many of whom analyze traumas of all kinds—war traumas, including the Holocaust, diasporic issues of exile and belonging, colonial violence, and so on—seemed to be particularly uncomfortable talking about child sexual abuse. Janice Williamson, for example, recounts being asked by a professor at a large university what the title of her conference paper was. When Williamson "replied with a title which spelled out the subject of child sexual abuse in Canada, the scholar suggested a more 'succinct' title might be 'Canadian Women Writers: Some Reflections'" ("Writing Aversion" 199). Rather than "succinct," the title suggested to Williamson by the professor removes any subject clarity, perhaps, again, as friendly advice.

I experienced a less friendly reception to what I had to say about child sexual abuse in a graduate seminar on Robert Arthur Alexie's novel, *Porcupines and China Dolls*, a novel which I examine in this dissertation. Knowing my interest in Alexie's text, the professor of the course invited me to sit in on the seminar. I listened as students passionately discussed the horrors of the residential school system in Canada, without mentioning the sexual traumas which are at the heart of the novel. When I spoke about the testimonial aspects of the novel, including the novel's imperative to disclose the sexual abuse, and its ultimate performative staging of this disclosure at the healing workshop, I was quickly silenced. I was told that to single out sexual abuse was to essentially elide the much larger issues of colonial violence created by the schools such as language loss, culture loss, and the breakdown of family structures. I was told that "there is no originary trauma. The traumas are multiple." I was told that, "not all children were sexually abused at the schools." I listened as the class moved on to discuss what they perceived to be the misogynist aspects of Alexie's text, along with the ways in

which the novel dangerously replays white stereotypes of Natives, such as “the drunken Indian.” The silencing impulse of the class on what is unambiguously a major issue, and arguably *the* major issue, of the novel—the after-effects of child sexual abuse—is, in fact, representative of a widespread discomfort with the topic and perhaps the lack of critical vocabulary to address it.

To borrow a term from Lynette Hunter, “critical embarrassment” might best generously describe the apparent ambivalence to the issue of child sexual abuse as a legitimate enterprise of literary criticism (qtd. in Jones 51).⁷ In the works I examine here, there is a spectrum of critically embarrassed responses ranging from avoidance of the subject altogether to an earnest albeit minor broaching of the theme to outright hostility. Indeed, the harshest criticisms of Fraser’s incest memoir, *My Father’s House*, have come from literature professors who vigorously question the reliability and veracity of her narrative. While their intense engagement with her text would seem to suggest direct involvement with issues of child abuse, what becomes clear in my analysis is that they are much more interested in theories of memory, and with pressing forth their own arguments about the ways in which Fraser’s memoir fails to correspond to their understandings of trauma. The result is a radical failure to respond to and analyze the creative ways in which Fraser pioneers a strategy to write a memoir of her story for which there were no available narrative frameworks with which she could work.

The novels I discuss in the sections which follow my work on Fraser are all primarily focussed on incest or sexual abuse, yet very few critics make the issue their principal topic of inquiry. Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees* has generated numerous scholarly articles addressing such topics as her employment of the Gothic, cinema and sexuality, gender and ethnicity, miscegenation, magic realism, and literary representations of girlhood. While incest traumas are discussed, particularly by critics concerned with the connection between trauma and the Gothic, for example, Joel Baetz’s “Tales from the Canadian Crypt: Canadian Ghosts, the Cultural Uncanny, and the Necessity of Haunting in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*” and Atef

⁷ My thanks to Manina Jones for this insight and term to describe it.

Laouyene's "Canadian Gothic and the Work of Ghosting in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*," the spotlight always seems to be on issues other than incest. The scholarship on Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* is similarly rich and voluminous, but it is almost entirely focussed on postcolonial issues. Jeanie E. Warnock argues that the critical emphasis on the novel's place within postcolonial literature in Canada inadvertently elides

the incestuous sexual violation that lies at the center of the novel. To characterize the abuse euphemistically, as "an expression of the unspeakable excess of the border-crossing that victimized Mala" (Hoving 158), or to treat it briefly as a consequence of "the psychological legacy of colonialism" (Howells 154), unintentionally reinforces the silence and discomfort surrounding disclosures of incestuous abuse. (270-71)

Warnock's frustration with the criticism is a valid intervention into the scholarly reticence to engage meaningfully with incest as a sanctioned subject of literary criticism. There is a clear pattern of critical avoidance of the issue. Emily Hazlett, for example, in her work on Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*, suggests that sexual abuse is a "redress trope"—a metaphor rather than a lived experience—that fails adequately to address the havoc wreaked on Aboriginal families by the residential school system: "Redress tropes such as victimization, historical trauma, imprisonment, and sexual abuse allow Aboriginal claimants to petition the government for redress. [. . .] At the same time, I have argued that these common redress tropes are inadequate in addressing the way Aboriginal families experienced the state's genocidal policies" (68). Through her article, Hazlett takes the emphasis away from sexual abuse and focuses her readers on Alexie's opening chapters where broader issues of colonialism are emphasized. In the context of residential school narratives, focussing on child sexual abuse to the exclusion of the many traumas suffered by the children and articulated by writers is clearly problematic; however, when writers make child sexual abuse their focus, avoiding the issue is similarly problematic. I want to suggest, however, that child sexual abuse narratives disrupt borders between fiction and testimony in provocative and analyzable ways that can, in fact, produce new ways of understanding trauma narratives more broadly.

1.5 Fiction and Testimony: Which Story Do You Prefer?

In her foreword to her short story collection, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), Alice Munro, while emphasizing that “These are *stories*,” calls the enmeshing of fiction and autobiography in the collection two streams that flow in one channel:

You could say that such stories pay more attention to the truth of a life than fiction usually does. But not enough to swear on. And the part of this book that might be called family history has expanded into fiction, but always within the outline of a true narrative. With these developments the two streams came close enough together that they seemed to me meant to flow in one channel, as they do in this book. (n. pag.)

Munro’s confession that her story collection straddles fiction and autobiography is straightforward. She admits the truth of the collection is unreliable, at least “not enough to swear on.” The twining of fiction and autobiography in works devoted to child sexual abuse is much more problematic because of the risk of falsely accusing someone of a serious criminal offence. It is thus crucial that for fiction to be granted a place in testimony, the traumatic event must have occurred. What is important to me is that the truth of the event can be told using storytelling strategies that include the imagination to tell what Roger Luckhurst calls “*traumatic truth*” (137; emphasis added). For Luckhurst, because traumatic memory is shifting and mobile, it is particularly open to fiction and may, in fact, be resistant to straightforward, evidentiary truth telling. This dissertation will argue that the inherent difficulties of articulating and representing severe trauma can be made productive by allowing fiction and autobiography to work in tandem to tell the trauma story.

In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Jacques Derrida theorizes the entwining of fiction and testimony in his reading of Maurice Blanchot’s literary fiction, *The Instant of My Death*. Blanchot does not claim in his short text that the traumatic experience he describes is a true one, yet Derrida reveals that at the end of World War II, Blanchot was placed in front of a firing squad and escaped, just as the story he writes recounts. For Derrida, in its promise to tell the truth, “testimony always goes hand in hand with at least the *possibility* of fiction, perjury, and lie. Were this possibility to be eliminated, no testimony would be possible any longer” (27). In other words, testimony requires of itself

the establishment of truth or facts that would not be apparent without the testimony. Thus Derrida argues that “[. . .] if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the *possibility*, at least, of literature” (29-30; original emphasis). What makes fiction parasitical to testimony is the legal requirement for testimonies to be true, as Derrida suggests: “the classical concept of attestation, like that of autobiography, seems by law to exclude both fiction and art, as soon as the truth, all the truth and nothing but the truth, is owing. By law, a testimony must not be a work of art or a fiction” (43). At the same time that the law precludes the possibility of fiction in testimony, Derrida nonetheless insists on its presence: “without the *possibility* of this fiction, without the spectral virtuality of this simulacrum and as a result of this lie or this fragmentation of the true, no truthful testimony would be possible. Consequently, the possibility of literary fiction haunts so-called truthful, responsible, serious, real testimony as its proper possibility” (72). For Derrida, then, the “disturbing complicity between fiction and testimony” means that the two cannot be separated (43). As Munro perceived, there are times when fiction and autobiography are “meant to flow in one channel.”

The flow of fiction and autobiography is not confined to fiction. Indeed, Sigmund Freud was an early theorizer of the place of fiction in the writing of his case studies. In his discussion of the case of Fräulein Elisabeth von R., Freud ponders the storied aspects of his writing:

[. . .] it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own. The fact is that local diagnosis and electrical reactions lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of that affection. Case histories of this kind are intended to be

judged like psychiatric ones; they have, however, one advantage over the latter, namely an intimate connection between the story of the patient's sufferings and the symptoms of his illness. (231)

When Freud observes the "intimate connection between the story of the patient's sufferings and the symptoms of his illness" he is, in effect, perceiving a correspondence between the illness and the story of the illness or the trauma and the story of the trauma. There is the fact of the trauma and then the story that is woven to articulate the trauma. Whether a traumatic narrative is generically fiction or autobiography, fact and story will partner precisely to make account of the traumatic event as a narrative.

Perhaps the best way to explain the storying strategies used by the writers I examine is by way of a novel, one that I do not discuss, and one that has nothing to do with child sexual abuse, although it is very much a traumatic narrative. Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) chronicles the harrowing survival story of Pi Patel. The story is recounted by Pi as an adult, making the bulk of the narrative an act of memory and storytelling. Pi loses his entire family when the ship they are on sinks in a storm. Pi survives on a lifeboat with an adult Bengal tiger, Richard Parker, for 227 days. When the lifeboat begins its journey, there are other animals aboard: an injured zebra, a hyena, and an orangutan. The hyena kills the zebra and the orangutan before succumbing to death himself by the tiger, Richard Parker. At the end of the story, Pi is asked to recount his survival tale to Japanese maritime officials investigating the sinking of the ship. Pi tells them the story of his survival with Richard Parker, which is the same story readers of the novel have just finished. The Japanese investigators compliment Pi on his story, but tell him that they do not believe him, so Pi tells them another story. This one is in the mode of traumatic realism rather than the magical story he has previously woven. In this story, there are no animals. There is an injured sailor, a cook, and Pi's mother. The heinous cook butchers and cannibalizes the sailor and ultimately kills Pi's mother. Pi kills the cook and survives his many days at sea in solitude. To this story, the Japanese investigators cry, "What a horrible story" (345).

The two stories are, of course, one. The cook is the hyena; the sailor is the zebra; Pi's mother is the orangutan; and Pi is the tiger who ultimately kills the cook/hyena. Pi stories his unspeakable traumas into a narrative that is at once heart-wrenching and

magical. The magical realist story is the one the investigators do not believe. Pi tells the investigators that he has told them two stories, neither of which they can prove true or false. They must take him for his word. Pi argues that what can be proven is that “[i]n both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer” (352). The investigators agree that these are facts. Pi asks, “So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can’t prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?” (352). The investigators say they prefer the story with the animals and incorporate that one into their report.

The magical story is the better story for both the writer and the listener/reader because it does not require the same commitment to verisimilitude and its horrors. The imaginative telling of horrific events is a way to articulate unspeakable experiences in terms of an ameliorating story, rather than in the mode of traumatic realism, which can be gratuitously sensational and traumatizing for witnesses or readers. Pi seems to suggest that the preferred story is therefore the one that blends the real and the imagined, fiction and testimony. Just as Pi tells his story through imaginative reconstruction as a means of surviving his trauma, so too do the novels I explore in Chapter Three. Recourse to the imagination is directly linked to the representation of childhood traumas in MacDonald’s, Mootoo’s, and Anderson-Dartgatz’s stories.

Eugene L. Arva, in *The Traumatic Imagination*, posits the term “traumatic imagination” to describe the connection between trauma and magical realism within which writers and readers “act out and/or work through trauma by means of magical realist images” (5). For Arva,

the traumatic imagination is responsible for the production of many literary texts that struggle to *re-present* the unrepresentable and, ultimately, to reconstruct events whose forgetting has proved just as unbearable as their remembering. The *traumatic imagination is also the essential consciousness of survival to which the psyche resorts* when confronted with the impossibility of remembering limit events and with the resulting compulsive repetition of images of violence and loss. (5; emphasis added)

I want to extend Arva's theorization of the traumatic imagination as a necessary part of psychic registry and recovery in magical realist fiction to the work of this dissertation as a whole. I argue that creativity and the imagination are necessary components of the trauma story, whether that story is fictional or factual. Fictional forms provide the freedom to incorporate magical elements into the representation of trauma, as Chapter Three of this project will show. Fiction can also provide a safe space for the telling of childhood traumas. The Indigenous writers I discuss in Chapter Four all choose fiction to tell their stories creatively in their effort to reach as wide an audience as possible. Like Pi, these writers suggest that readers/listeners will prefer a storied telling over a strictly realistic one. Chapter Two argues that Fraser's memoir, while fraught by accusations of False Memory Syndrome and outright fabrication, is in fact a grounding case for the argument that the traumatic imagination is inseparable from the fact of the trauma. Hers is a storied truth. Like Pi's story, the story of the trauma and the trauma are inextricably linked.

Chapter 2

2 Fiction, Testimony, and Child Sexual Abuse: The Case of Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House*

2.1 Introduction

I begin this project by opening Pandora's box. Published in 1987, *My Father's House*, Sylvia Fraser's landmark memoir of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse, continues to garner international critical attention from scholars who question the reliability of Fraser's account of her childhood on three grounds: her use of what she calls "novelistic techniques" in a factual autobiography about child sexual abuse; her claim that the abuse she suffered resulted in Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), whereby she created an "alter" personality to suffer the abuse for her; and the apparent coherence and fullness of recall with which she narrates traumatic memories of this dissociated personality, memories which eluded her consciousness until she recovered them as an adult in her late forties. While the vitriolic rhetoric of the debate over False Memory Syndrome has cooled since the apogee of the "memory wars" in the 1990s, doubts linger about the reliability and even the possibility of recovered memories.⁸ In my view, Fraser's use of literary techniques and her skill as a writer to put her tragedy into a *story* that makes sense of her memories and experiences is not only a necessary part of her therapeutic process, but also an earnest attempt to recount the truth of her abuse and accompanying amnesia. That said, Fraser's critics ask a valid question: how can she be so sure of the truthfulness of memories of a long forgotten, disconnected alter personality whose existence and experiences were ostensibly barred from her conscious knowledge?

⁸ I discuss the recovered memory debate further on in this chapter. There are many articles and anthologies devoted to the topic, most of which are polemical, taking a for or against position towards the so-called "False Memory Syndrome." For a particularly helpful collection of research articles in the 1990s devoted to the articulation of both sides of the debate see Appelbaum, Paul S., Lisa A. Uyebara, and Mark R. Elin; Gartner, Richard; and Baker, Robert A.. Full bibliographical information is contained in my works cited.

As Roger Luckhurst observes, “Fraser [. . .] gives us the first instance where the trauma memoir provokes a form of readerly trial, judgement and punishment” (124).

My aim in this chapter is to explore and elucidate the ways in which Fraser’s memoir of extreme traumatic wounding becomes a generic limit-case symptomatic of the controversies swirling around writers of child sexual abuse narratives and a representative example of the risks of public disclosure of childhood sexual traumas. Moreover, the critical response to Fraser’s memoir reveals anxieties about what constitutes sanctioned generic modes of discourse when it comes to child sexual abuse. At issue is the troubling intersection of fictional techniques with the autobiographical form, a form which in the case of child abuse allegations takes on testimonial properties with all of its expectations of legal facts and juridical truths. Fraser’s use of “novelistic techniques” complicates a genre broadly committed to telling the truth of one’s life; however, the incorporation of fictional techniques—which I take in Fraser’s case to mean the skills and practices of a literary story-teller such as plotting, character development, and the use of symbolism to weave a narrative—is a necessary complexity when one is faced with the challenge of putting past traumatic memories into words through the act of narrative reconstruction. The limits of autobiography, which is to say, the limits of truth-telling conventions when narrating the facts of a life, are too narrow for writers of child sexual abuse narratives. Leigh Gilmore reflects upon the limits of autobiography in writing trauma stories:

Telling the story of one’s life suggests a conversion of trauma’s morbid contents into speech, and thereby, the prospect of working through trauma’s hold on the subject. Yet, autobiography’s impediments to such working through consist of its almost legalistic definition of truth-telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable, even in the presence of some ambivalence about those criteria.

Conventions about truth-telling, salutary as they are, can be inimical to the ways in which some writers bring trauma stories into language. The portals are too narrow, and the demands too restrictive. (“Limit-Cases” 129)

Fraser's memoir reveals that an engagement with literary and storytelling practices to narrate child sexual abuse is a creative and pioneering strategy to articulate traumas that Fraser experienced as incomprehensible as a child. *My Father's House* was published one year before Elly Danica's *Don't: A Woman's Word* (1988). While both memoirs were ground-breaking in their unflinching narration of childhood incest at a time when speaking publically about the subject was still taboo, Fraser's memoir is contentious, in part, because it is written both from the perspective of the adult Fraser *and* her childhood "split personality." There are essentially two autobiographical "I's" in Fraser's account. Like Fraser, Danica also experienced a fracturing of her identity at the time of the abuse. Danica describes her experience of dissociation or psychic splitting in the moment of trauma: "I peel myself out of my own skin. I am no longer myself. I am someone else" (53). However, in *Don't*, there is one narrative voice telling her story, albeit in fragments, throughout her memoir. In *My Father's House*, the two narrative "I's" are distinguished by Fraser's employment of italics to indicate "thoughts, feelings and experiences pieced together from recently recovered memories" (Author's Note). As Fraser describes in *My Father's House*, these recovered memories are those of her split self, her "secret accomplice":

When the conflict caused by my sexual relationship with my father became too acute to bear, I created a secret accomplice for my daddy by splitting my personality in two. Thus, somewhere around the age of seven, I acquired another self with memories and experiences separate from mine, whose existence was unknown to me. My loss of memory was retroactive. I did not remember my daddy ever having touched me sexually. I did not remember ever seeing my daddy naked. I did not remember my daddy ever seeing me naked. In future, whenever my daddy approached me sexually I turned into my other self, and afterwards I did not remember anything that had happened. (15)

Fraser represses her abuse for more than forty years of her life. Born in March of 1935, Fraser remembers the existence of her other self "in a blaze of discovery" in April 1983 at the age of forty-eight (*MFH* 218). This radical forgetting of abuse that continued into her teenage years complicates the writing of her memories once she recovers them.

Autobiographies are always already narrative reconstructions of memories that create the story of a life; however, in Fraser's case, her amnesia informs the narrative as much as her recovered memories. As she says in the memoir, "My life was structured on the uncovering of a mystery. As a child, I survived by forgetting. Later, the amnesia became a problem as large as the one it was meant to conceal" (252).

Amnesia is certainly a problem for her critics. Kathryn Robson, for example, argues that Fraser's text, as testimony, seeks "to convince the reader" of her commitment to tell the truth (146), yet the memoir "also implicitly raises the question of how Fraser can be so sure of memories that were by her own admission unknown to her until shortly before she began to write the memoir, that is, how she can 'truthfully' represent a past that she was previously barred from accessing, and thus how the reader can assess the 'truth' of her account" (147). Conversely, for other critics, Fraser's memoir of forgetting and remembering is a credible, therapeutic act of recovery through narrative. Suzette Henke, for example, says that her memoir "proves so vivid and convincing that we, as readers, do indeed believe her" (122). Whereas Robson, in her suggestion that Fraser can never be certain of the truth of her experiences, seems unconvinced of the story, Henke finds truth in the very fact that Fraser narrates her experiences vividly and convincingly. I am uncomfortable with the idea that the truth of Fraser's story lies in its ability to persuade readers. For me, the issue is less a rhetorical one than a generic one having to do with the limits of the autobiographical form. Notions of what counts as truth—beyond what is plausible or implausible, convincing or unconvincing—need to be extended to include the vital connection between memory and the narrative imagination as crucial parts of the truth-telling process in cases of childhood trauma.

While Fraser's memoir has been criticized because of the implausibility that her narration of long-buried memories is accurate, I argue that story, memory, and testimony necessarily entwine in the discursive act of narrative therapy. I view healing from childhood sexual abuse as a profoundly imaginative act where the survivor needs to create a story of events that are either forgotten or impossible to remember accurately. The story, however, needs to be created and it needs to *feel* true to the survivor. To insist upon accuracy is to miss the point of Fraser's writing goal, which was to heal through the construction of a coherent life narrative. To write a coherent story of one's life is to write

a healing story which ameliorates the fractures to identity created by trauma. As the subtitle makes clear, *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing* was written as part of Fraser's therapeutic journey. Suzette Henke suggests that such narratives are "artistic" endeavours as much as they are testimonial ones: "Through the artistic replication of a coherent subject-position, the life-writing project generates a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency" (xvi). As a limit-case, Fraser's memoir of healing offers up the opportunity to examine what the departures from the demands of testimonial facts and autobiographical form can reveal about the place of creativity and story in the therapeutic recovery from childhood sexual abuse.

The analysis and arguments that follow aim to more fully unpack the issues that have emerged from the debate over the truth-status of Fraser's memoir. Before turning to an in-depth analysis of these issues, I provide a broad summary of the stakes in writing an ostensibly factual memoir that incorporates "novelistic techniques" and takes recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse as its risky subject matter. Following this, I address the central questions of how and why some children forget their sexual abuse and recover their memories only as adults. To this end, I analyze the difference between traumatic memories of the Holocaust versus those of child sexual abuse to underscore the logic of Fraser's traumatic amnesia. I offer a brief analysis of Fraser's autobiographical first novel, *Pandora* (1972), to argue that Fraser uncannily and cryptically encodes her sexual abuse by way of fiction years before she recovers her memories. In the case of *Pandora*, fiction reveals facts, while (strangely) *My Father's House* seems to function in the opposite way—as an autobiography that has been largely criticized as fictional. I historicize the recovered memory debate and explore why recovered memories of abuse continue to be contentious.

Finally, I turn to an exploration of how these issues are specifically played out in the scholarly controversy over Fraser's memoir. In doing so, I take a closer look at the intersection of the autobiographical genre with Fraser's fictional techniques by exploring what Philippe Lejeune coined "the autobiographical pact" as a way of examining Fraser's pact with her reader, which she describes in her Author's Note. Indeed, Fraser's Author's Note has become a springboard for many of the criticisms of the memoir as a whole.

Summarizing the key points made by scholars of Fraser's memoir, I argue that the criticism itself reveals much more about anxieties regarding how childhood sexual traumas are narrated than with Fraser's project in writing her story, which becomes lost in arguments about memory and the status of truth. At the heart of the controversy is a profound incredulity about recovered memories, particularly when they are narrated, as Fraser's are, as part of a coherent story; however, a coherent story is precisely what Fraser intended to write. Fraser's text requires a reading that opens the question of truth to include the place of story and creativity in its articulation because of the limits placed upon "truth" by the nature of trauma and narrative.

2.2 Genre, Recovered Memory, and Truth

Janice Doane and Devon Hodges assert that incest narratives are a "border genre" that "exist on a boundary between fact and story" (113). To recover memories of child sexual abuse and then to write about those memories is both to speak the truth that abuse occurred *and* create a story of the trauma, which may correspond more to the memory of the event than to the event itself. Because memory is, in part, a narrative act, memories are never entirely accurate, yet Fraser's particular employment of fact and story has riled her critics. With the exception of Elaine Showalter, none of Fraser's critics flatly deny the allegations of incest made in her memoir. By questioning almost every aspect of the story she tells of her life, and suggesting that she has likely recovered false memories, they effectively refute her claims, but they do fall short of saying that she was not sexually abused by her father. Mark Freeman's comments are illustrative of the general tenor of the critics on Fraser. While he acknowledges that although it seems likely that "something must indeed have been going on," he is "uncomfortable" with "the specific account Fraser has elected to offer" (162). The heart of the problem, then, is the way that Fraser tells her story.

If Fraser is guilty of anything, it is not acknowledging that her memoir is on the edge of genre—a limit-case—ascribing to what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call "the myth of autobiography": "The myth of autobiography is that the story is singularly formative, that the gesture is coherent and monologic, that the subject is articulate and the story articulable, and that the narrative lies there waiting to be spoken" (9). The lure of a

coherent, narratable life story to Fraser is profoundly related and in direct proportion to the extent of her traumatic dissociation and amnesia. Critics question her narrative on account of its coherence, and yet I cannot imagine anything more necessary to Fraser's healing than finally not only to narrate but wallow in a life that makes sense. Laurence J. Kirmayer insists that the very existence of trauma gives rise to this effort:

Traumatic experience is not a story but a cascade of experiences, eruptions, crevasses, a sliding of tectonic plates that undergird the self. These disruptions then give rise to an effort to interpret and so to smooth, stabilize, and recalibrate. The effect of these processes is to create a specific narrative landscape. This landscape must fit with (and so is governed by) folk models of memory. Reconstructions of traumatic memory involve the building up of a landscape of local coherence to better manage or contain it, to present it convincingly to others and, finally, to have done with it. (181-82)

This, then, is the achievement of Fraser's memoir: the reconstruction of a story of "local coherence" as a way to manage her surfacing traumatic memories so that she might move on with her life; however, the intermingling of autobiography with traumatic forgetting is capable of fuelling and re-fuelling endless criticism because of its inherent epistemological quandary of coherently narrating what can never be fully known because of the fallibility of traumatic memories. Poststructuralist trauma theory suggests that traumatic events are not experienced directly, but rather belatedly (through flashbacks, recurrent dreams) and that this unknowable gap in experience precludes direct knowledge of the event. Representation of trauma, then, is vexed by fragmentary or ruptured understandings that often defy language itself.⁹ In the case of child sexual abuse, where memories are sometimes recovered much later in life, the articulation of the past is fraught with difficulties. If recovered childhood memories are analeptically re-visioned by a remembering adult consciousness, how is the real and the true defined? Can the event ever really be fully comprehended, understood, and accurately represented?

⁹ For a representative sampling of this view of trauma, see Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*.

Questions such as these plague the reception of Fraser's text, because she articulates her traumas so well and so completely that her process seems to be antithetical to what is known and thought about traumatic memory. Janice Haaken and Paula Reavey, for example, insist that memory needs to be understood as dynamic: "memory and other aspects of mental life are fluid and dynamic. Further, the 'truth' of a memory is continually open to negotiation, questioning and reconstruction" (6).

Psychoanalysis has similarly asserted the radically unassimilable nature of trauma, or, in Jacques Lacan's theorization, that the encounter with the traumatic event is "real" only "in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter" (55). In the contemporary debates over recovered memory, epistemological questions of what is real and what is imagined emerge, yet from a psychoanalytical perspective, the task of separating the real and the imagined is an impossible one. As Judith Butler puts it, "trauma is, by definition, not capturable through representation or, indeed, recollection; it is precisely that which renders all memory false, we might say, and which is known through the gap that disrupts all efforts at narrative reconstruction" (153). Thus, when one considers trauma from a psychoanalytic perspective, Fraser's memoir is a defiant paradox of narrative reconstruction that makes truth-claims as it writes over "the gap" in her memory.

Contrary to the assertions of psychoanalysis, memories are frequently portrayed in popular culture as realistic representations of the event, akin to a photograph or live digital recording; for example, in the film, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore has a collection of glass vials, each storing one of Voldemort's memories. He then uses his Pensieve to review, with Harry, these memories, which are presented as exact representations of the event. Scientific research contradicts this view of memory. As Kirmayer describes it,

Memory is anything but a photographic record of experience; it is a roadway full of potholes, badly in need of repair, worked on day and night by revisionist crews. What is registered is highly selective and thoroughly transformed by interpretation and semantic encoding at the moment of experience. What can be veridically recalled is limited and routinely reconstructed to fit models of what might have—*must* have—happened. When encouraged to flesh it out, we readily engage in imaginative

elaboration and confabulation and, once we have done this, the bare bones memory is lost forever within the animated story we have constructed.

(176)

If all memory is prone to confabulation, then narrating dissociated childhood traumas, which are even more difficult to retrieve and recall, seems to me to be a profoundly imaginative act, one that Fraser nonetheless insists has truth value. As she says in her “Author’s Note” to *My Father’s House*, “I have used many of the techniques of the novelist. [. . .] However, to my knowledge, I have not exaggerated or distorted or misrepresented the truth as I now understand it.” Sophy Levy defends the creative approach Fraser takes to representation:

The voice of trauma necessarily uses a language that borders the artistic and the actual, as trauma has blurred the two when the abused child is convinced that her experiences are false. The displaced manifestations of sexual violence in Fraser’s earlier work, criticized as hyperbolic by many contemporary reviewers, are rehearsals for a memoir that retains its right to use “many of the techniques of the novelist” (*My Father’s House*, x).

The trauma narrative disrupts our understandings of genre as epistemology; form is no longer the key to evaluating truth-content. (877)

Levy’s observation that trauma narratives undo the connection between autobiography and truth raises the question of what constitutes truth in these cases. If not form, then what? Substance is not the answer, because, in Fraser’s case, her story relies upon recovered memories. What happens to truth in the case of Sylvia Fraser? For her critics, it largely goes missing. Bolstered by scientific and psychoanalytic research on memory suggesting its imprecision, potential for distortion, and reconstructive nature, literature professors such as Elaine Showalter, Nicola King, and Kathryn Robson argue for the impossibility of Fraser’s memories as she presents them, that is, as pristinely uncontaminated memoro-facts of the past.¹⁰ By contrast, a memoir such as Janice

¹⁰ According to Daniel L. Schacter, cognitive psychologists increasingly became interested in memory reconstruction and distortion in the 1970s (12). It was also in the 1970s that Elizabeth Loftus and her colleagues “demonstrated both that leading questions can systematically alter memory reports [. . .] and that

Williamson's *Crybaby!* (1998), while it is less known than Fraser's, has been comparatively better received by scholars, because it self-consciously acknowledges her murky relationship with past events. For Williamson, "[s]tories are gathered from memory and told in images and words that leave tracks somewhere between imagination and history" (*Crybaby!* 11).

Williamson's tentative approach to her memories is in some ways shared by Fraser who acknowledges in the memoir that "[t]he memories of my other self are difficult to recapture because they are so fragmentary" (218). However, Fraser's conceptualization of memory differs from Williamson's understanding of memory as a space of "imagination and history." By contrast, Fraser takes an archeological view of memory in *My Father's House*: "For more than forty years the memories of my other self lay deeply buried in jagged pieces inside me—smashed hieroglyphic tablets from another time and another place. When finally I began the excavation, I brought these pieces to the surface in random order, to be fitted into patterns and dated" (218). Like a broken plate that can be glued together and returned to its original form, the shards of Fraser's memory, she suggests, can be similarly pasted together to form the original pattern of events. Fraser's critics are troubled by the notion that memories can be unearthed as pristine artifacts of the past which can then be narrated without compromising their condition. As King insists of Fraser's memoir, "the 'truth' about the preserved and rediscovered past only emerges as an effect of narrative itself," and "the structure she has produced is so highly and tightly *constructed*, and the recovery and representation of memory so apparently complete, that doubts arise about the truth status of the events she

post-event misinformation can alter memory for an original event" (13). These experiments were important in that they heightened interest in suggestibility and eyewitness testimony. (See Loftus, E. F. and J.C. Palmer. "Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction: An Example of the Interaction between Language and Memory." *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 13 (1974): 585-589; and Loftus, E.F., D. G. Miller, and H.J. Burns. "Semantic Integration of Verbal Information into a Visual Memory." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, 4 (1978): 19-31.) This emphasis continued in the 1980s with psychoanalysts, such as Donald Spence, emphasizing the reconstructive nature of the past in the analytic situation, and that the retrieval situation contributes to the subjective act of remembering (16-17). Says Schacter, "The 1980s and 1990s also produced a good deal of research concerning the relation between emotion and memory distortion" (18).

reconstructs and the appropriateness of [. . .] novelistic techniques for this material” (62; original emphasis).

Fraser’s critics are in line with poststructuralist autobiographical theories which trouble the notion of a coherent, stable self, and understand identity as constructed and shifting. Contemporary theorizations of autobiography have moved away from fixed, coherent notions of a narrating subject with direct access to a knowable past, to more flexible notions of subjectivity that acknowledge the constructive aspects of memory and identity and allow for shifts and transformations of the self.¹¹ The idea of a self-storying subject constantly constructing and reconstructing her life story based on available narratives, whether the scripts are personal or cultural, marks an important shift in understanding the key role that narrative plays in the articulation of lived experience. As Paul Ricoeur observes, life is a “story in its nascent state [. . .] an *activity and a passion in search of a narrative*” (29; original emphasis). In Ricoeur’s sense, Fraser searches for a narrative to tell the story of her life; however, multiple or dissociated personalities complicate autobiography as a genre ostensibly committed to narrating a singular life through accessible memories. In choosing a traditional genre to narrate a life fractured by trauma, Fraser disrupts expectations of form. Fraser’s critics do not sanction traditional autobiographical discourse as a legitimating genre for her story; indeed, employing such a form appears to raise questions about its status as testimony.

My Father’s House needs to be understood in the historical and cultural context in which it was written—that is, in 1987, on the heels of second wave feminism when “speaking out” about rape represented a new form of empowerment and activism against misogynist views of women—as well as in the context of Fraser’s work as a whole. Much of the existing criticism analyzes the memoir in isolation. In fact, *My Father’s House* is not nearly as coherent and complete as critics suggest; rather, placed in the context of Fraser’s corpus as a whole, it is but one of Fraser’s several textual attempts, and not the first, to narrate her abuse. Her 1972 novel, *Pandora*, a gothic fiction of child abuse, is the first, although its autobiographical component is submerged. Written over ten years

¹¹ See, for example, Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*.

before she recovered her memories, the novel is, as Fraser says, a “minefield of incestuous codes” (*Book of Strange* 133). Her novels that follow are filled with violent sexuality, which Fraser only understands retrospectively as emanating from her own abuse. At the time, she did not understand why she was choosing to write, for example, about tyrannical patriarchs raping young virgins, as she did in the historical novel, *The Emperor’s Virgin* (1980). When she finally wrote *My Father’s House*, she worked with what she thought were completely recovered memories; however, when I interviewed her, she revealed that her process of recovering memories has been ongoing since the publication of the memoir:

The gap in *My Father’s House* is what happened in my high school years. I got the externals right in terms of my sense of guilt and shame and being a sexual figure in a way that I both asked for and didn’t want. I realized that I filled in the gap as if nothing had happened. I just thought that the abuse had stopped. It hadn’t stopped; it had just got worse, that’s all.¹²

In 2005, Fraser published an article in *Toronto Life*, “Lies My Father Told Me,” which recounts horrific memories that surfaced, many years after the publication of the memoir, of being taken to a child brothel by her father. These memories are more fragmentary than the ones she records in the memoir. She remembers being photographed in a house, but she is not sure whether or not she was raped there. Some details, however, like the house in which these crimes occurred, are remarkable in the specificity of her recall. Clearly, the memories of sexual trauma are more difficult for her to access. There is, thus, a pattern of traumatic re-visiting in Fraser’s work that begins in the novels she wrote prior to the publication of her memoir and continues to this day. Taken together,

¹² I interviewed Sylvia Fraser on 28 February 2010 in her sunny downtown Toronto condo. I wanted to better understand her view of the controversy swirling around her memoir. What struck me when I met Fraser, aside from her beauty and elegance, was that her entire condo was decorated with white furnishings and white or transparent accessories. Clarity and transparency—seeing what lies beneath the surface—are crucial to Fraser’s work as a writer and are reflected in her condo which is really a metaphor for transparency. I have included Fraser’s comments to me throughout this chapter for two reasons: to clarify her views on the controversy and her reasoning behind her decision to incorporate novelistic techniques into the memoir; and to give her a voice alongside those of her critics.

these narratives constitute a discontinuous, generically heterogeneous, subjectively multivalent, multilaterally compromised series of attempts to narrativize trauma.

When I spoke to Fraser, she told me that she has written another memoir (not yet published) that again revisits her abuse and attempts to fill in the gaps of the original memoir. *My Father's House* may have the appearance of a totalizing narrative, but Fraser's other work belies this. Significant traumatic memories of the abuse that continued well into her teenage years are the subject of her new memoir. *My Father's House* elides these memories, not in any deliberate attempt to cover them up, but because they remained inaccessible to Fraser's consciousness. As she explained it to me, memories seem to return when she is able to cope with them. When she wrote her first memoir, "that was about all I could handle at that time. It would have been too much. It took another nine months before I had another wham-bam that indicated to me that the abuse had carried on a lot longer than I had thought" (Personal Interview). Repetition and recursion are hallmarks of trauma. This continual re-working and re-writing of her childhood abuse reveals the extent to which her memories continue to evade her, the persistence (rather than the absence) of gaps in her memory, and the dynamic and productive aspects of trauma in constituting her memories recursively through narrative.¹³ If Fraser is fabricating her abuse, as so many of her critics suggest, then her life's work of writing and re-writing her childhood is surely one of the most elaborate and least self-serving lies in the history of life-writing.

The question undergirding all acts of testimony, literary or legal, is always is she lying? Oprah Winfrey's condemnation of James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), is illustrative of the contempt of the reading public for fallacious memoirs, and a reminder that the stakes are high for both writers of traumatic pasts and their readers. Frey's "memoir," initially endorsed by Winfrey as one of her Book Club selections in

¹³ American author Kathryn Harrison's body of work is another example of the recursive nature of trauma. She first fictionalized her incestuous relationship with her father in her debut novel, *Thicker Than Water* (1991). She followed this with a memoir, *The Kiss* (1997), that not only shares resonances with the novel, but actually repeats lines verbatim. Two memoirs follow this one, both taking up issues of her childhood and her fraught relationship with not just her father, but also her mother: *Seeking Rapture* (2003) and *The Mother Knot* (2004).

September 2005, sold millions of copies.¹⁴ Unlike Frey, who concedes in his 2006 note to the reader that he “embellished many details about [. . .] past experiences, and altered others in order to serve [. . .] the greater purpose of the book,” Fraser insists that she recorded her memories of incest without exaggeration. Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, is another representative example of what can go wrong in the attempt to narrate childhood trauma. Wilkomirski maintains that his memoir is true, even though historian, Stefan Maechler, has proved it to be false.¹⁵ What is fascinating in Wilkomirski’s case is that the story he fabricates about being a Holocaust survivor in German-occupied Poland in many ways mirrors his real childhood in Switzerland. He appears to have reframed his trauma. In his case, what is historically false may well be psychologically true. Fraser’s case is different, because while she is frequently accused of over-determined plots and even invention, the critics have never proven her memoir to be historically false; rather, they question the reliability of memories reconstructed and then represented as a coherent life narrative.¹⁶

While it is legitimate to question the veracity of any document claiming to be non-fiction, it may not be possible to articulate traumatic memories, particularly those of childhood, without recourse to fictive narrative structures and devices. Memoirs such as Fraser’s are more constructively viewed as acts of fallible memory rather than acts of incontrovertible fact. The fact that memory is fallible does not mean that Fraser’s memoir should be discredited. Translating memories into a story that makes sense to the survivor is, as Peter Brooks demonstrates, a defining quality of mental health: “*Mens sana in fabula sana*: mental health is a coherent life story, neurosis is a faulty narrative” (49).

¹⁴ Roger Luckhurst discusses the memoir boom and the privileging of memoirs over novels by publishers, and, by implication, readers. In the case of Frey, he “revealed that the book had been rejected as a novel by seventeen publishers but was accepted the instant it was reclassified a memoir” (135). The desire of the reading public for memoirs of suffering seems to me to be a type of voyeurism or trauma tourism.

¹⁵ See Maechler, Stefan. *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*. Trans. John E. Woods. New York: Schocken, 2001.

¹⁶ A related example of this is Susanna Egan’s questioning of the distinction between narrative and reality in Rudy Wiebe’s collaboration with Yvonne Johnson in *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*. She argues that Wiebe’s novelistic and protective intervention into Johnson’s story elides the “discrepancy between messy experience and deliberate narrative experience” (24).

This chapter makes a case for moving beyond legal definitions of truth beyond a reasonable doubt in memoirs of child abuse and beyond the binary, true or false rhetoric of the recovered memory debate to allow for both contemporary theorizations of memory's fallibility *and* memoirs like Fraser's that negotiate traumatic memories through creative narrative strategies to produce a coherent life story. The demands of trauma on narrative and empirical reality necessitate readings that extend debates about memory and its articulation to questions that explore what counts as truth in limit-cases such as Fraser's.

2.3 How Could She Forget? MPD, Adaptive Forgetting, Repression, and Dissociation

2.3.1 MPD

When it comes to allegations of incest, the truth matters: legally, politically, personally, and, importantly, to readers, who function as witnesses to the narrative testimony. Familial, social, and intellectual contexts inscribe boundaries upon and legitimate discourse for the rehearsal of life stories. As Kirmayer suggests, "Trauma narratives are rhetorical forms that emerge from the effort to anneal or bridge sundered parts of the self. Traumatic memories are imaginatively reconstructed along narrative lines guided by bodily experience and cultural models of memory and self" (191-92). Fraser's pioneering trauma narrative emerged as a rhetorical form of remembering in her effort creatively to bridge what she began to perceive as radically separate parts of herself. Trauma memoirs such as Fraser's exist on the border between legal testimonies, which focus on the facts and evidence of the case, and literary memoirs, which are culturally informed, often sanctioned modes of self-expression which work with available cultural narratives that readers will recognize and perhaps relate to.

As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe, "In telling their stories, narrators take up models of identity that are culturally available. And by adopting ready-made narrative templates to structure experiential history, they take up culturally designated subjectivities" (9). The ready-made identity model taken up by Fraser in the memoir to give structure to her experience is Multiple Personality Disorder. For Fraser, the form of her forgetting in some ways responded to cultural contexts for theorizing the effects of

child sexual abuse. Fraser calls her dissociative strategies for survival Multiple Personality Disorder in her memoir, as that was the current and available psychological terminology that best expressed her experience; however, and paradoxically, while Fraser works with culturally available scripts to disclose her abuse, it is precisely her use of certain cultural models available to her—particularly, MPD—that opens up questions about the reliability of her narrative.

In *Remembering Trauma*, Richard J. McNally notes that MPD was introduced into the third Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980 and “was defined by at least two distinct, complex, and integrated personalities within the same person, each of which assumed control over the person’s behavior at different times” (11). MPD was classified as a severe dissociative disorder which fractured consciousness and identity. MPD was believed to begin in childhood as the result of overwhelming sexual, physical, or emotional trauma (McNally 11). McNally suggests that the “belief that severe childhood trauma causes MPD became popular only after the appearance of the best-selling book [by Flora Rheta Schreiber in 1973] and film about Sybil, a woman who had developed 16 personalities after having been brutalized throughout her childhood by her mother” (11). In the early 1980s, child sexual abuse and MPD were thus emerging discourses in public consciousness.

Fraser notes the rise of official cases of MPD in the United States in the 1980s, along with the continuing skepticism about its existence and connection to child sexual abuse (BS 127-28). Ian Hacking has traced the trajectory of MPD: “In 1972 multiple personalities were almost invisible. Ten years later they were noticeable enough for there to be talk of an epidemic. [. . .] In 1992 they are a thoroughly visible minority, particularly in North America” (“MPD and its Hosts” 3). Indeed, the 1994 DSM-IV renamed MPD Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) to reflect current models of memory and trauma. McNally describes the shift in thinking that changed MPD to DID: “The notion of dozens of distinct personalities inhabiting the same body was abandoned in favor of the view that the real problem was that these patients lacked even a single coherent identity” (13). Despite the change in name, DID continued to be theorized as a coping strategy to prevent traumatic childhood memories from entering into consciousness

In *The Book of Strange* (1992), a non-fiction volume published five years after *My Father's House*, Fraser provides the cultural context for her self-diagnosis of MPD, noting that she had seen the 1957 movie, “The Three Faces of Eve,” starring Joanne Woodward dramatically switching between three completely separate personalities: Eve White, Eve Black, and Jane. Rather than the histrionic switching performed in the film, Fraser’s corresponds much more closely to dissociative states of consciousness, whereby she psychically removed herself from situations of abuse. At the time, however, there was no other language for this than the discourse of MPD.¹⁷ Fraser elaborates that, “As nearly as I can determine, my personality divided into two about the time I was five as the result of my father’s oral rape of me. From then on, it was ‘my’ job to take on the world while my Other Self did scary and repellent things in my father’s bedroom” (BS 128; original emphasis).¹⁸ Fraser has the insight, after writing *My Father's House*, that this “Other Self” or the “Child Who Knows” is, in fact, herself, her birth personality, making the “Child who Doesn’t Know” the constructed self she presented to the world:

The Child Who Knows is not a phantom of my dreams; I am a figment of hers. [. . .] It’s as if I have spent a lifetime building an elaborate house, choosing the wallpaper and furniture with care, landscaping to taste, only to discover that I do not have title to the land it occupies. My birth property is off somewhere in the forest, a brambly piece of unmarked

¹⁷ Fraser had also consulted her 1974 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which, as she says, did “little to dispel the sinister melodrama” (BS 123) that clung to her and to the phenomenon of MPD as she tried to understand her strange behavior and feelings. From the encyclopedia, she learned that MPD is “an extreme form of dissociation in which traumatic experiences, cut off from conscious awareness, develop into one or more separate identities. In all the world’s history, the Britannica claims only 100 cases have ever been found. Only one hundred? Can I be one hundred and one?” (BS 123; original emphasis). Fraser dates this reflection 5 December 1984, before the publication of *My Father's House*, and shortly after she first recovers memories of her abuse, indicating her early search for a language to diagnose her experiences in terms of available conceptual frameworks.

¹⁸ Note that an earlier quotation in this chapter has Fraser locating the splitting of her personality at around age seven. The earlier quotation is from *My Father's House*, which preceded the publication of *The Book of Strange*. The discrepancy is because as Fraser continued to recover her memories, she realized not only that the abuse lasted longer than the memoir contemplated, but also that it began earlier.

territory containing one child's untended grave. (BS 129; original emphasis)

While the passage reveals self-annihilation as a paradoxical strategy for survival, the connection between child sexual abuse and MPD that many researchers now take for granted, as Judith Lewis Herman does, has been challenged by Ian Hacking. Hacking suggests that survivors of child abuse, in an effort to put a coherent narrative to their experiences, adopt the language and structure of MPD or dissociation as a sort of metanarrative to explain their pasts:

The intimate relationship connecting recovery of traumatic memories of child abuse with multiple personality is no accident. For although I fall short of saying memory simply is narrative, I agree with [Gilbert] Ryle that one becomes good at recalling the critical part of one's past when one acquires the skill to cast it into a coherent narrative. That is precisely what is provided by the causal lore of multiple personality, for good stories use explanations. Dissociation is explained as a coping mechanism. The multiple comes to understand that she is as she is now because of the way she deployed coping mechanisms in the past. A narrative structure is available that can then be filled in with the appropriate scenes. (*Rewriting the Soul* 256)

For Hacking, then, MPD or DID are available narrative models that may or may not clinically exist for understanding adaptive mechanisms for coping with abuse. In viewing MPD as a cultural narrative, Hacking is on side with advocates of False Memory Syndrome, who argue along similar lines. Elaine Showalter, discussed in detail further on in this chapter, is one such supporter of this skeptical view of both MPD and recovered memory. For others, like Herman and Jennifer Freyd, recovered memories have truth value, and reflect complex strategies for dealing with abuse through dissociation, which they view as an adaptive form of forgetting. One can play chicken and egg with Hacking and ponder what came first, the dissociated condition or the available cultural narrative of dissociation. There is, however, a cogent logic to the arguments of Freyd and Herman who say dissociation is an adaptive response to ensure a child's survival in a family system upon which the child is wholly dependent.

2.3.2 Adaptive Forgetting

Fraser's extended period of amnesia and the subsequent recovery of her memories following years of sexual abuse are principal issues plaguing the critical response to her memoir. Not all child sexual abuse survivors forget their abuse. Danica, for example, has the opposite problem: "I don't want to remember. Memory pursues me" (12). How is it possible to forget repeated episodes of sexual abuse? In *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*, Freyd asks her readers to consider the pressure on a child suffering sexual abuse at the hands of a parent or trusted adult in a position of power and authority over the child. Young children do not have the emotional or cognitive capacities to integrate adult sexual violations of them into their experiences and understandings of the world. Depending on the severity of the abuse, some children may not recognize that they are being sexually imposed upon. Furthermore, perpetrators will deny that they have done anything to the child, and ask the child to remain silent and to forget, often under threat of extreme punishment.

As Freyd observes, "Sexual abuse perpetrated on a child by a trusted caregiver is a perfect opportunity for the victim to create information blockage. To know is to put oneself in danger. Not to know is to align oneself with the caregiver and ensure survival" (4). A family system of denial and silence will reinforce the child's inclination to block the event and preserve his or her attachments. In Fraser's case, and like many other victims, the death of her father was a condition of her remembering. As Fraser says, "When my father died, he came alive for me. A door had opened [. . .]. Before I could pass through it to wholeness and health, my other self would have to give up her secrets" (*MFH* 211). The opposite is also true: her attachment to her living father necessitated her forgetting. Freyd reinforces the point: "If betrayal by a trusted caregiver is the key to predicting amnesia for abuse, attachment is the key to understanding why amnesia is adaptive in instances of such betrayals" (69). For Freyd, forgetting the abuse is a way for the child to maintain the relationships upon which the child depends.

Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* similarly argues that childhood abuse requires a family climate of terror, domination, and fear in which healthy parent-child relationships are radically disrupted. Therefore, the child must find ways to adapt to situations of terror in which the child is absolutely helpless. Herman theorizes that because children

nonetheless deploy their immature systems of psychological defenses in abusive situations, they develop “extraordinary capacities” as a way to adapt to their circumstances (96). Herman suggests here that dissociated states of consciousness may occur in abused children to help them adapt:

All of the abused child’s psychological adaptations serve the fundamental purpose of preserving her primary attachment to her parents in the face of daily evidence of their malice, helplessness, or indifference. To accomplish this purpose, the child resorts to a wide array of psychological defenses. By virtue of these defenses, the abuse is either walled off from conscious awareness and memory, so that it did not really happen, or minimized, rationalized, and excused, so that whatever did happen was not really abuse. Unable to escape or alter the unbearable reality in fact, the child alters it in her mind. (102)

According to Herman, there is a connection between the severity of childhood abuse and the ability of children to dissociate themselves from that abuse through alterations in consciousness. As Fraser writes in her memoir, “Even now, I don’t know the full truth of that other little girl I created to do the things I was too frightened, too ashamed, too repelled to do, the things my father made me do, the things I did to please him but which paid off with a precocious and dangerous power” (15). Herman posits that in situations like this, “Dissociation [. . .] becomes not merely a defensive adaptation but the fundamental principle of personality organization” (102). Trauma radically disrupts normal psychological functioning in adults. Accordingly, says Herman, in children, repeated trauma will alter a personality that is in the process of forming (96). Fraser’s dissociated identities (which she calls MPD) were thus her creative form of adaptation to the traumas she experienced as a child.

2.3.3 Repression versus Dissociation

I have been using the broad term “amnesia” to describe Fraser’s memory loss, but I have also used the terms (or quoted people who have) “repression” and “dissociation” without clearly distinguishing their meanings. I view both terms as forms of adaptive forgetting. Distinguishing between the terms, however, sheds light upon the workings of

traumatic amnesia and helps to make sense of from a memory perspective Fraser's MPD. Suppression, repression, and dissociation are all forms of forgetting, which is perhaps why the terms have been frequently collapsed together or otherwise muddled in discussion of childhood abuse.¹⁹ For Laurence J. Kirmayer, the "distinction between forget, repress, ignore, and dissociate is not simply an arbitrary choice of metaphor. Each is a phenomenologically distinct form of not-remembering" (191). By "phenomenologically distinct" Kirmayer means that suppression is a *conscious* form of forgetting, a will to forget, if you like; repression is an *unconscious* form of forgetting motivated by fears and desires; and dissociation is a (conscious or unconscious) *splitting* of consciousness whereby memories are partitioned off and the trauma is not integrated into a stable identity (Kirmayer 179).

Janice Haaken, through Freud's early theory of hysteria, provides a helpful analogy for distinguishing between dissociation and repression. She understands dissociation as vertical splits in consciousness or "double consciousness" and repression as the horizontal splits of the repression model to which Freud eventually shifted ("The Recovery of Memory" 1075-76). In other words, dissociation is a dividing wall; repression is sub-flooring. Freyd sees both dissociation and repression more broadly as types of "knowledge isolation" (15). She perceives "a distinction [. . .] between a lack of awareness of the past (which may be called memory repression or traumatic amnesia) and a lack of awareness of the current situation (which may be called repression of affect or dissociative state of consciousness)" (15). Arguing that the work on trauma and psychological defenses often neglects to account for the difference between failure to recall a past event (or repression) and failure to access in the present information that would be normally available (or dissociation), she contends the primary confusion in the scholarship around traumatic amnesia is between *memory and consciousness*. Freyd's clarification is an important one: repression can be viewed as an issue of memory,

¹⁹ Indeed, the term "repression" has been particularly contested. Although not germane to the overall argument of my project, the debate needs to be acknowledged that how repression is defined, and even whether it exists at all, continues to be actively disputed, as a recent scientific journal devoted to debating the topic attests. See *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29.5 (2006).

dissociation as an issue of consciousness. All forms of forgetting or alterations in consciousness are adaptive and protective mechanisms for the child who suffers abuse.

According to Kirmayer, research suggests that trauma-related amnesia and dissociated memories likely have multiple explanations: altered registration of the event at the time of the trauma because of a narrowing of attention, emotional interference with information processing, and alterations in self-consciousness. Victims might avoid thinking about what happened or actively suppress their memories and deliberately not respond to cues that prompt their memory to think about the event. Says Kirmayer, “Traumatic memories may be isolated from other networks of association by interpreting them as dissonant or inconsistent with self-representation and personal history” (180). If individuals refuse to speak about what happened and actively deny events to themselves and others, then “such denials may undermine the processes of rehearsal and semantic bridge-building necessary for ready recall” (Kirmayer 180).

In her review of Freyd’s *Betrayal Trauma*, Sylvia Fraser draws upon neuroscience to argue why some survivors of childhood abuse forget, and, in so doing, describes her experience of dissociation: “the neurological determinant for either the fixing of memory, or its short-circuiting, is believed to be the stress hormone adrenaline: A surge stimulates neural receptors, but too much floods neural receptors, preventing normal processing and integration. The result is a person who both knows and doesn’t know at the same time” (“Abuse Wars”). What I find interesting about Fraser’s comment is less the accuracy of the science she relies upon or the impulse to find a rational explanation to her question of how she could possibly forget her many years of abuse, than the condition of her consciousness as simultaneously knowing and not knowing, which is to suggest the distinction between memory and consciousness that Freyd perceives. What memory stores is not always available to consciousness. As Fraser says, “Paradoxically, traumatic events seem to be both the *least* forgettable and the *most* forgettable of all experiences” (“Abuse Wars”). In this condition of both remembered and forgotten, traumatic memories partitioned off from consciousness through dissociation in some ways mirror the state of the uncanny.

Shoshana Felman’s reading of the uncanny through Freud in *What Does a Woman Want?* is illustrative of this doubleness: “Freud’s psychoanalytic definition of the

‘uncanny’ (*das Unheimliche*) as the anxiety provoked through the encounter with something that, paradoxically, is experienced as at once foreign and familiar, distant and close, totally estranged, unknown, and at the same time strangely recognizable and known” (56). Fraser similarly describes her experience in *My Father’s House* in her chapter entitled, “The Other.” Fraser’s description of the dissociation she experienced as a result of the abuse is, in one sense, radically complete: “Even now, I don’t know the full truth of that other little girl I created to do the things I was too frightened, too ashamed, too repelled to do” (15). Yet, the two selves are uncannily intertwined. As Fraser says, “She knew everything about me. I knew nothing about her, yet some connection always remained. Like estranged but fatal lovers, we were psychically attuned.” (15).

Felman suggests, following Freud, “that what is perhaps most uncanny about the uncanny is that it is not the opposite of what is canny but, rather, that which uncannily *subverts the opposition* between ‘canny’ and ‘uncanny,’ between ‘heimlich’ and ‘unheimlich’” (65). Thus, defying the clear opposition between the two, Fraser’s dissociated self seems to be not entirely other or opposite but rather a subversion of the very notion of multiple selves where her alter personality communicates with her in the slippage between the two: “She telegraphed messages to me through the dreams we shared. She leaked emotions to me through the body we shared” (*MFH* 15). Fraser’s dissociated or alter personality is not as contained as the concept of dissociation implies. As Kirmayer argues, “Dissociation is often depicted in the literature as a rigid walling off of memories in an all or none fashion, but this does not accord well with either clinical or experimental evidence. In clinical reality, as in the laboratory, dissociation is found in all degrees of intensity in the same individual and is characterized more by its fluidity than by its rigid constancy” (180). Fraser’s separate selves share a fluidity and even inhabit each other in a specular way: “Hers was the guilty face I sometimes glimpsed in my mirror” (*MFH* 15). Her uncanny encounter is with a self which is, through distortions of memory and consciousness, both known and unknown.

2.4 *Pandora*: Encountering Fraser’s Other Self

Fraser’s first novel, *Pandora*, might be the best textual evidence supporting Fraser’s claim of a dissociated “other self,” the one she uncannily catches sight of in her mirror.

Published in 1972, *Pandora* was written over a decade before Fraser recovered her memories of child sexual abuse. The autobiographical novel spans the first eight years of the life of Pandora Gothic. Fraser told me that she was initially worried that using “Gothic” as a family name was “over the top.” She realized, however, that hers “was a gothic childhood” (Personal Interview). The father in the novel, Lyle Gothic, is a butcher by trade and has a hooked arm. This, too, retrospectively embarrassed Fraser, as she says, from two perspectives: “one, because it was a phallic symbol, so obviously a phallic symbol [. . .] it would have been recognized as such, but also it was too close. I think that my discomfort was because this was too close to my own story, which could surface” (Personal Interview). For me, the Gothic family depicted in the novel uncannily reflects a broader textual haunting by the specter of Fraser’s “other self,” who might be understood as the novel’s protagonist, Pandora.

In *My Father’s House*, Fraser slips into italics, signifying recovered memories of her childhood split personality, and suggests that *Pandora* was in fact co-authored by her dissociated self: “*My other self has learned to type. She presses my keys, throwing up masses of defiant memories—stream-of-consciousness stuff without punctuation*” (149). The collaboration is an unconscious one: “whatever is hidden in the psyche will struggle to reveal itself. Through Pandora, my other self had acquired a voice” (*MFH* 153). Two scenes in particular capture Fraser’s repressed memories of abuse (those suffered by her “other self”) that were, as I will show, unconsciously surfacing in her writing of this novel. The first scene involves an incident of sexual abuse with “the breadman”; the second scene dramatically records a physical and emotional beating suffered by Pandora at the hands of her father. Not only a sublimated narration of child sexual abuse, this scene, I argue, features the appearance of Fraser’s other self in a mirror.

The only overt scene of sexual abuse in the novel occurs when Pandora is offered a ride on the breadman’s wagon. The breadman, with “pointy teeth, like the whale that swallowed Pinocchio,” tries to win Pandora’s affection with a chocolate éclair, and then tries to fondle her (68). Pandora fights back, only to be tricked into putting her hands in his pocket to search for promised coins. The breadman holds her hands inside his pants, saying “Pat the nice puppy. Play with the nice puppy. Does your father have a nice puppy? Take out the nice puppy” (71). As a metonym for the phallus, the puppy is not

just the breadman's. The question, "'Does your father have a nice puppy?'" suggests that the writer—Pandora and/or Fraser—is thinking about her father's "puppy" in the context of narrating a scene of sexual abuse with the breadman. The father, of course, is also the breadwinner. The slippage between the breadman and the breadwinner is again suggested when Pandora tries to escape the breadman, who proceeds to choke her: "Panic clogs Pandora's chest. It explodes through her throat. The breadman clamps his hand over her mouth. He jams the scream back into her body. She convulses" (71).

Pandora's choking and convulsions mimic Fraser's description in *My Father's House* of her physical response to her first substantial memory recovery of the abuse: "[. . .] my jaws open wider than possible and I start to gag and sob, unable to close my mouth—lockjaw in reverse. These spasms do not feel random. They are the convulsions of a child being raped through the mouth" (220). The emphasis, then, in the passage above in *Pandora* on the mouth, throat, and convulsions during a scene of sexual abuse is textual, *fictional* evidence of a repressed memory of Fraser's oral rape leaking into the narrative. When Pandora escapes the breadman, she becomes, as Fraser does as a child, incapable of articulating her experience: "Pandora is afraid, but she cannot name her fear. Pandora is ashamed, but she cannot name her shame. Fear and shame gorge like buzzards on her burden of guilty knowledge, leaving only a few twisted bones" (72). The twisted, bare bones of her story uncannily emerge through substitutions (breadman/breadwinner) and screened recollections of oral rape.

Perhaps even more striking for its dramatization of repressed memories of abuse is the scene in which Lyle is punishing Pandora for expressing anger that her beloved cat was euthanized by her parents without her knowledge. Lyle's punishment involves stripping Pandora of "her brattishness" by literally demanding that she remove all of her clothing (132). The scene is an extended one, with Pandora slowly taking off her clothing, as if it were a striptease. Pandora strips to her underpants, but her father insists, "'I said *everything*'" (133). Pandora's mother, Adelaide, and twin sisters, Adel and Ada, who have been quiet watchers of the scene, become collaborators in the removal of Pandora's underpants: "Adel pins down Pandora's shoulders. Ada uncoils her legs. Adelaide, with a look of supreme distaste, pulls down her pants. Pandora tries to squeeze them between her thighs. The cloth peels away like adhesive from new skin" (134). The

collaboration of family members in the abuse clearly suggests a broader pattern of collusiveness, particularly the mother's.²⁰ The names of the twins also suggest a replication of the mother figure, with Adel and Ada being very close to Adelaide. The forced stripping of Pandora screens a much more prolonged and violent pattern of sexual abuse, while it is at the same time a representative example of a form of sexual assault on a child, with family members implicated as collaborators.

The scene takes a revelatory turn when Lyle picks up the naked Pandora with his hooked arm and “hangs her, full-length, in front of the mirror” (134). Lyle’s hooked arm, as a metonym for the phallus, is here holding up Pandora to a naked view of herself in the mirror. It is as if Pandora’s existence depends upon the support of the phallus to make her real; without it, and without the abuse, there would be no need to create Pandora as a character or alter personality. Fascinatingly, Pandora’s subjectivity seems to collapse in the wake of her reflection. Or is it the writer, Fraser, who is coming undone at the sight of Pandora?: “Pandora gapes at herself in the mirror. She sees the mirror tremble, warp, then begin to melt. She feels herself tumble, backward, into the mirror . . . over and over and over and over into the liquid silver . . . she tries to catch hold of the mirror. She catches her own flesh. She reaches down, gently, to cover her wounds” (134; original ellipsis). It is as if Fraser, in writing this passage before remembering the abuse or knowing the split nature of her psyche, is psychologically dissipating at the sight of her other self in the mirror. She tries to catch hold of this self, and catches her body, specifically her genital area: “Lyle slaps her. ‘Filthy brat! How dare you “handle” yourself in front of me!’” (134). To this, Pandora “collapses in shame. *I thought it was the breadman, but it was YOU!*” (134; original emphasis). Fraser’s otherwise random use of italics in the novel seems unconsciously motivated here. There are no quotation marks around the line, “*I thought it was the breadman, but it was YOU!*” The italicized “I” is Fraser’s other “I,” who, chillingly, speaks directly and names her father as her sexual abuser. Quotation marks are unnecessary, because this is not speech that is being directly quoted. It is,

²⁰ Fraser, in fact, had only one sister, Irene. She likely used twins in the novel to avoid implicating Irene in the story.

rather, a part of Fraser's self ("Pandora") speaking to her father and to another part of herself (the adult, Sylvia).

Fraser, however, cannot seem to hear what her other self is saying or even understand that her other self is speaking. This collapse of understanding is reflected in the narrative, which slips into magic realism.²¹ The extended fantasy section is written in italics, signifying a possible slippage between Fraser and Pandora. Words also slip, as when a band can be heard playing, "*Pack Up Your Pussycat in Your Old Kit Bag and We'll Meet Again, Pussycat*" (134-35; original emphasis). Using "pussycat" to stand in for "troubles" seems to be an obvious sexual reference, and the suggestion that "we'll meet again" might be Pandora's uncanny foreshadowing of a future connection with the adult Fraser. Roman type indicates a brief moment of realism, where Lyle locks up Pandora in the cellar. What follows is a lengthy italicized section which is at once hallucinatory and dream-like: "*The door is bolted, and sealed. Black Hands push Pandora's head toward the toilet bowl. It is full of . . . No! it is full of flowers—red, gold, blue—floating in the sweet milk. Pandora sticks out her tongue. She dips it into the milk. It scalds. It shrivels. It falls off. It floats away on a heaving bosom of sour milk*" (135; original emphasis and ellipsis). This is one of the rare moments I wish I were a psychoanalyst. What I might venture to say is that the strange image reflects Pandora's (that is, Fraser's child personality's) loss of memory and speech to articulate it, symbolized by her dead tongue floating away in collusive maternal fluid, which sours and scalds. Nazi imagery follows, as "*Blue gas rises in a cloud from the flowers*" (135). Pandora is a pussycat clawing at "*the gas chamber with the bloody stumps of her paws. The poison riddles her white fur. Her guts pour through her skin, like tomatoes through a sieve. A cleat-boot stands beside her. 'Strip!'*" (135). The colour imagery of sexual red seeping out of white innocence in a Holocaust-like gas chamber with her father standing as a Nazi in a cleat-boot symbolically replays the sexual abuse, and, again, it does so through substitution: here the Holocaust for child sexual abuse.²²

²¹ In Chapter Three, I discuss at length the connection between magical realist images and the representation of trauma.

²² The passage shares resonances with Sylvia Plath's famous poem, "Daddy."

Looked upon with the full knowledge of Fraser's later memory recovery and her claim of Multiple Personality Disorder as the direct result of a prolonged period of child sexual abuse, *Pandora* reads like a thinly veiled, almost overly symbolic recollection of past sexual traumas. It seems *obvious* from reading *Pandora* that Fraser was sexually abused by her father. Fraser's alter personality, Pandora, makes it so. It is as if she is trying to shout out to the adult Fraser to remember her and her abuse. Fraser spoke to me about the difficulty she had writing *Pandora*: "Why *Pandora* was so hard to write was because the film between my other self and my self, the writer, was getting so thin that I was in great danger of remembering before I was ready." In other words, memories were bubbling below the surface, but Fraser was not yet ready to incorporate her tragedy into her identity. It was all there in the novel, the manuscript of which was over two thousand pages. As Fraser concedes in her memoir, *Pandora* was "written in the first person hysterical. It's like a gush of primordial pain from a part of me I never knew existed" (*MFH* 151). Hysteria is essentially a conversion disorder, where unassimilated psychological traumas are manifested or converted into physical symptoms, such as convulsions or pain. *Pandora* may be a representative example of an hysterical text—by which I mean a narrative which converts unremembered sexual traumas into a coded text. *Pandora* is then a symptom of Fraser's unacknowledged childhood abuse. As Suzette Henke observes of the novel, *Pandora*

functions as a waking dream, a frame for the reconstruction of a trauma narrative so dangerous that it can only be expressed in the veiled discourse of a fictional persona. Fraser's alter ego Pandora, curiously constructed by her dissociated "other self," reiterates repressed memories split from conscious recollection and buried in the secret chambers of a tormented psyche. A censored truth seeps out in fictional form, disguising and distorting the incest trauma that Sylvia is not yet ready to acknowledge. (138)

After I asked Fraser about the extended scene of abuse described above and even read parts of it to her from the novel, she said, "I don't even remember the scene." I postulate that she does not remember it because she did not write it; "Pandora" did. In an interview with Alan Twigg in 1978, before recovering her memories of sexual abuse,

Fraser said without irony, “The main thrust of all my work is an attempt to make the unconscious conscious” (99). When I asked Fraser about her statement, she said that when she heard the oft-quoted line by Carl Jung, “until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate,” she “seized” upon it, “without having any knowledge that, boy, was that ever going to be my story” (Personal Interview). At the time of her interview with Twigg (an interview which she only “vaguely” remembers) she had no idea of the truth of her statement. Perhaps Twigg was interviewing “Pandora,” which is why she similarly does not remember what she said. *Pandora* is a fictional, unconscious testimonial that needs to be considered as a companion text to *My Father’s House*, particularly in its disturbing enmeshing of fiction and testimony. Ironically, the fictional *Pandora* in many ways reads as a testimonial, while the non-fictional *My Father’s House* is read by many as a confabulation of the highest order. For Henke, “The fabulations of a novelist cannot, after all, be scrutinized in the light of historical accuracy. Fraser’s fictional protagonist Pandora is free to explore intriguing emotional puzzles that are never fully unraveled. Deliberately re-creating her troubled childhood in the guise of autobiographical fiction, the circumspect author can tell the truth aslant” (137-38). For me, Fraser’s text is much less conscious of itself than Henke suggests. Fraser does indeed “tell the truth aslant”; however, she does so unconsciously, or rather, her child alter, “Pandora,” does so, aslant.

2.5 Holocaust Memories Versus Child Sexual Abuse Memories

Fraser’s uncanny relationship with dissociated parts of her identity complicates poststructuralist trauma theories of memory which frequently emphasize a belated, recurring image of the event that defies language. I assert here, through the work of Kirmayer, that traumatic memories of the Holocaust are fundamentally different from those of child sexual abuse. While Herman conflates the pathological symptoms of Holocaust survivors and child sexual abuse survivors as “complex posttraumatic stress disorder,” Kirmayer distinguishes the two by examining the ways in which memory is shaped socially and culturally. Whereas memories of the Holocaust can be experienced communally, those of child sexual abuse are most frequently experienced privately in

shame and isolation. The distinction is critical to understanding recovered memories of childhood abuse, particularly in light of poststructuralist trauma theories, for example, the works of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, which have been largely focussed on the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, but which have been, nonetheless, frequently applied to other traumas, such as child sexual abuse.

Caruth theorizes the pathology of Posttraumatic-Stress Disorder as that which lies in the structure of experience rather than in the event itself: “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Kirmayer agrees that Holocaust survivors are overwhelmed by their memories. As he says, “Their problem is not the limits of memory but of language—the inadequacy of ordinary words to express all they have witnessed” (175). He contrasts this to the experience of childhood sexual abuse survivors who, rather than being overtaken by intrusive memories, often have no memory of their abuse until they are adults. Caruth further argues that one of the paradoxes of trauma is “that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (6). Kirmayer argues along similar lines, but makes an important distinction between detachment and dissociation:

For the Holocaust survivor, the reaction is one of being overwhelmed and then responding by numbing, detachment, or suppression so that one’s story sits forever at the edges of consciousness to be worked around or told in fragments. For the survivor of childhood abuse, the response to overwhelming trauma is a form of mental escape by resolute partition of memory, self, and experience. There is no narrative of trauma then, no memory—only speaking in signs. (175)

Kirmayer continues his line of argument to suggest that Holocaust survivors have closer access to their memories than do child sexual abuse survivors. In a departure from Caruth’s oft-quoted theorization of trauma as “the collapse of its understanding” (7), Kirmayer makes a case for distinguishing the pathologies of traumas on precisely the grounds of the possibility of knowing. For him, Holocaust testimonies involve Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and are characterized by intrusive memories which provide a

pathway to knowledge of the trauma; on the other hand, child abuse testimonies are characterized by dissociative disorders and amnesiac gaps in memory without the same level of access to knowledge of the traumatic events (187). Whereas a Holocaust survivor can often provide testimony based on memory, albeit vexed by impartial recollections and the difficulties of narrativizing unspeakable events, child sexual abuse survivors, says Kirmayer, tend to show more gaps in memory and have trouble recalling events.²³

It may be easier to forget abuses when there is a prohibition against remembering, as there is with children who are sexually abused. Memories of the Holocaust, by contrast, can be experienced in more public ways, with families often conducting rituals of remembering and mourning. Accordingly, Kirmayer suggests that “While Holocaust stories involve bearing witness to what is widely, if not universally, recognized as a human catastrophe, personal stories of abuse are revelatory, shameful, and damaging to the individual and family. In the case of childhood abuse, it is precisely the distinctive qualities of the socially constructed relationship to the past that foster dissociation” (188). For Holocaust survivors, the narrative process of remembering, reconstructing, and telling the tragedy to other family and community members allows for memory rehearsal and helps to maintain recollections. Child sexual abuse occurs privately in an atmosphere of fear, helplessness, and denial. If family members are aware of the abuse, they sometimes themselves dissociate from it and encourage silence to preserve their family system and reputation.

In Sylvia Fraser’s case, she discovered after the publication of her memoir that her mother was indeed aware of the abuse. In *The Book of Strange*, Fraser reports a

²³ He goes over possibilities for the difference, arguing that Holocaust survivors should be displaying more rather than less dissociative symptoms given the severity of their experience. He posits that the age at which the traumas occur might have something to do with it, as most Holocaust testimonies are from survivors who were adolescents or adults at the time. He troubles his distinction between amnesia and intrusive memories, yet reasons that the difference may be in the social and cultural context for remembering: “Certainly, there are many—probably, the majority of—individuals who tell of their childhood abuse without dissociation. And there must be Holocaust survivors who have dissociated their experience and whose stories, therefore, have not been told. In fact, intrusions and amnesiac gaps often co-exist in the same individual. The distinction between prototypical narratives then, may not reflect actual differences in psychopathology but rather differing expectations for recollection and different contexts for retelling” (188).

conversation with her father's doctor at her mother's funeral. His doctor corroborates the abuse to Fraser by telling her that he and her father discussed the incest several times (64).²⁴ Her family preserved the secret until both parents had died. This collusive family system of silence is precisely the environment that fosters the type of forgetting that Kirmayer theorizes.²⁵ Fraser's response to abuse that she could not name was to dissociate her memories. As Kirmayer observes, "When the costs of recollection seem catastrophic for self or others, memory may be sequestered in a virtual (mental) space that is asocial, a space that closes in on itself through the conviction that no telling will ever be possible" (189). The difference, then, between Holocaust memories and childhood sexual abuse memories is the difference between a public space of mourning and memorial, and a private space of terror and shame; it is the difference between an acknowledged, public collective memory of an atrocity that needs to be told, and an unacknowledged, private memory that disappears from history in a story that cannot be told.

The logic of forgetting child sexual abuse seems compelling; however, the idea that someone could forget their abuse only to recover those memories later in life is highly contentious. I turn now to the recovered memory debate, as it is central to an understanding of the controversy over Fraser's pioneering memoir on the topic.

2.6 The Recovered Memory Debate

2.6.1 Freud and Janet: The Fathers of the Memory Debate

The stage for the contemporary debate over recovered memory was arguably set in the 1890s by Sigmund Freud, and also his contemporary, Pierre Janet. Indeed, over a

²⁴ Fraser told me that she did not record the entire conversation in this text: "The conversation went on. 'Your mother was such a gem. We never knew how she could stand your father.' And I said, 'Well, she didn't know.' And he said, 'Yes she did. I talked to her about it too.' He said, 'Such a wonderful Victorian woman. She didn't even blink an eye'" (Personal Interview).

²⁵ Fraser grew up in a parochial, insular community in the 1930s and 1940s. According to Fraser, her mother could not say the word "fun" without saying "good, clean fun." Even the word "divorce" could not be uttered aloud in her home. Fraser asks how the word "incest" could possibly be uttered or acknowledged in such an environment (Personal Interview).

century ago, Freud and Joseph Breuer in *Studies on Hysteria* developed an aetiology of therapeutically recovered memories that, it turns out, is remarkably prescient to current theories which, as I have discussed, locate dissociative disorders in the experience of childhood sexual abuse. Freud's "seduction theory" similarly found that the cause of hysteria in his female patients was repressed child sexual abuse. Freud ultimately renounced this theory, however, and concluded that his female hysterics had false memories. Herman opines,

By the first decade of the twentieth century, without ever offering any clinical documentation of false complaints, Freud had concluded that his hysterical patients' accounts of childhood sexual abuse were untrue: "I was at last obliged to recognize that these scenes of seduction had never taken place, and that they were only fantasies which my patients had made up." (14)²⁶

Freud's conclusion that the women "made up" stories of childhood sexual abuse is an early example of the distrust in women's stories of sexual trauma that continues to the present day.

In earlier stages of his work, however, Freud uncovered through his psychoanalytical practice the connection between hysteria and child sexual abuse. Freud and Breuer open their study with the observation that adult hysterical symptoms have their origin in events occurring much earlier; moreover, the precipitating event is frequently forgotten without the patient realizing the connection between past traumas and present symptoms. It is the job of the analyst to help the patient recover their memories: "As a rule it is necessary to hypnotize the patient and to arouse his memories under hypnosis of the time at which the symptom made its first appearance; when this has been done, it becomes possible to demonstrate the connection in the clearest and most convincing fashion" (*Studies on Hysteria* 53). For Freud and Breuer, memories had to be not only recovered, but also framed into a narrative as part of the hysteric's therapeutic journey. Freud and Breuer conceptualize memories of trauma in dissociative terms: a

²⁶ See Freud, Sigmund. "An Autobiographical Study." *Standard Edition*. Vol. 20. Trans. J. Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1959. 34.

traumatic memory “acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work” (56-57). Their insight led to an idea that continues to prevail in therapeutic practice: “*each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words*” (57; original emphasis). Here marks an early theorization of therapeutically recovered memories, abreaction, and the talking cure.²⁷ They conclude that in every case of hysteria “*the splitting of consciousness*” (62; original emphasis) or ““double conscience”” (63) is not only present but “*a tendency to such a dissociation [. . .] is the basic phenomenon of this neurosis*” (63; original emphasis).

Freud then departs from Breuer in his theorization of hysteria and publishes, under his own name, his conclusion for the cause: “I was obliged to recognize that, in so far as one can speak of determining causes which lead to the *acquisition* of neuroses, their aetiology is to be looked for in *sexual* factors” (339-40; original emphasis). Freud follows this generalized claim of “sexual factors” with his 1896 “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” where he triumphantly announces,

the thesis that at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are *one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience*, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood but which can be reproduced through the work of psycho-analysis in spite of the intervening decades. I believe that this is an important finding, the discovery of a *caput Nili* in neuropathology. (203; original emphasis)

²⁷ The term repression is also used for the first time in this study by Freud and Breuer as a motivated defence mechanism. In this sense, their early use of the term conforms much more to dissociation than to the way Freud would later theorize repression after his abandonment of the seduction theory. They view traumatic memory as partitioned off from normal consciousness: “*these experiences are completely absent from the patients’ memory when they are in a normal psychological state, or are only present in a highly summary form*. Not until they have been questioned under hypnosis do these memories emerge with the undiminished vividness of a recent event” (60; original emphasis). They further argue that “severely paralysing affects, such as fright” lead to dissociated, “abnormal psychological states such as the semi-hypnotic twilight state of day-dreaming,” making impossible any reaction to the event (61).

Within a year of publishing “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” Freud would renounce his view that sexual abuse was the cause of hysteria, a finding that he once thought equivalent to locating the source of the Nile. Freud famously abandons his seduction theory in his 21 September 1897 letter to Wilhelm Fliess. Freud writes of his disappointment at his lack of success and his surprise “that in all cases, the *father*, not excluding my own, had to be accused of being perverse” (264; original emphasis). Freud reasons the impossibility of such a high frequency of sexual abuse in Viennese families, including his own, and concludes that his patients must have imagined their abuse. Freud later clearly states in the 1933 “New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis” that,

In the period in which the main interest was directed to discovering infantile sexual traumas, almost all my women patients told me that they had been seduced by their father. I was driven to recognize in the end that these reports were untrue and so came to understand that hysterical symptoms are derived from phantasies and not from real occurrences. It was only later that I was able to recognize in this phantasy of being seduced by the father the expression of the typical Oedipus complex in women. (120)²⁸

In the same letter to Fliess Freud laments that his expectation of “eternal fame [. . .] certain wealth, complete independence” was now over because, “Everything depended upon whether or not hysteria would come out right” (266). For Freud, the stakes were high. He seemed, on the one hand, to be invested in the truth status of his seduction theory. On the other hand, it is hard to know for sure whether Freud earnestly believed in the logic of his retraction or if he was forced to give up his theory because it was not popular with his peers.²⁹ Either way, his theory connecting child sexual abuse to hysteria

²⁸ The feminist backlash to Freud’s repudiation is now well-worn ground. As Herman contends, “Out of the ruins of the traumatic theory of hysteria, Freud created psychoanalysis. The dominant psychological theory of the next century was founded in the denial of women’s reality. Sexuality remained the central focus of inquiry. But the exploitive social context in which sexual relations actually occur became utterly invisible. Psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience” (14).

²⁹ Freud had to contend with the vexed nature of recovered memories of child sexual abuse following his publications on the topic. Freud fulminates against his peers in a 26 April 1896 letter to Wilhelm Fliess, “A

was forsaken for years only to be more recently revived as an important early work on recovered memories of sexual abuse. As Herman observes, Freud's "The Aetiology of Hysteria" remains cogent today: "A century later, this paper still rivals contemporary clinical descriptions of the effects of childhood sexual abuse. It is a brilliant, compassionate, eloquently argued, closely reasoned document. Its triumphant title and exultant tone suggest that Freud viewed his contribution as the crowning achievement in the field" (13).

In constructing his aetiology of hysteria, including the therapeutic cure of unearthing the sexual trauma through hypnosis followed by abreacting the event, and then by publically repudiating the reality of his patients' experience of sexual abuse, Freud laid the ground work for both sides of the current recovered memory debate. Freud's substitution of fantasy for the lived experience of sexual abuse provided an early example of what is now called False Memory Syndrome. Ian Hacking regards Freud's work on hysteria—his seduction theory followed by his retraction—as fundamentally an earnest search for the truth. In this, Freud was the exact opposite of his contemporary, Pierre Janet, who often lied to his patients under hypnosis if he thought it would help them. In fact, Janet's method involved excising memories from his patients by convincing them under hypnosis that the trauma did not happen. To put it another way, Janet's method was to create false memories in his patients to help them heal. For him, it was not the truth that mattered, but the cure.

In many ways, then, Freud and Janet are the fathers of false memory. Hacking suggests that the memory debates recapitulate these "bygone battles": "In the matter of lost and recovered memories, we are the heirs of Freud and Janet. One lived for Truth, and quite possibly deluded himself a good deal of the time and even knew he was being deluded. The other, a far more honorable man, helped his patients by lying to them, and

lecture on the etiology of hysteria at the psychiatric society was given an icy reception by the asses" (184). On 4 May 1896 Freud laments, "Word was given out to abandon me, for a void is forming all around me. [. . .] Things are so difficult and trying that it requires, on the whole, a strong constitution to deal with them" (185).

did not fool himself that he was doing anything else” (197). Does it matter if Janet’s patients were cured by a lie? On the one hand, I am troubled by the ethical implications of the therapeutic manipulation of memory, whether it involves excising traumatic memories by lying, as Janet did, or creating false memories of trauma, which is precisely what concerns the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. On the other hand, while Janet’s method might be dubious, he not only has the best interests of his patients in mind, he also offers up the possibility of a cure for his patients by relieving them of the traumatic memories which have brought them to psychoanalysis in the first place.

2.6.2 False Memory Syndrome

The debate about false memories of child abuse is not about the fact that false memories exist or can be created. Indeed, the work of Freud and, in particular, Janet demonstrates the unsettling truth that false memories *can* be implanted into patients by therapists. This possibility, along with a significant body of research devoted to proving that memory always involves distortion, fuels the rhetoric of advocates of False Memory Syndrome. The term was coined in 1992 by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) in the United States. Fraser, who has clearly positioned herself in opposition to the FMSF, has called the term an unscientific, “invented malady” evidenced by that fact that it is not listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (“Freud’s Final Seduction”). Essentially a support and advocacy group for parents whose children claim to have recovered memories of past sexual abuse, the foundation was started by Pamela and Peter Freyd, and is still directed by Pamela Freyd. Her daughter, Psychology professor Jennifer Freyd, whose work I quoted earlier, accused her father of sexual abuse, which he denies.³⁰ In a political climate which encouraged survivors to speak out about child sexual abuse, and in light of clinical research that connected child sexual abuse to a

³⁰ I discussed Freyd’s betrayal theory earlier without acknowledging her personal story of recovered memories of child sexual abuse, and the ensuing public controversy with her parents and their foundation. While her own experiences may indeed have sparked her research interests, Freyd’s oft-cited theory stands on its own merits above the fray. Elizabeth Loftus, whose research supports the efforts of the FMSF, also recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse, although hers were spontaneous recoveries. In both cases, and out of respect for these scientists, my preference is to separate their research from their personal experiences.

whole host of psychological maladies from anorexia to depression, this group raised the question of whether all of the allegations could be true, and if it were possible that poorly trained or ideologically motivated therapists keen to find a cure for what ails their patients were leading them to the false conclusion that they had been sexually abused as children. Pamela Freyd perceived an epidemic of false accusations and lobbied, through her foundation, to discredit the story of her daughter and others who made similar claims.³¹

The foundation grounds the validity of its claims in scientific research on memory, for example, the work of American psychologist and expert on human memory, Elizabeth F. Loftus. In “Some People Recover Memories of Childhood Trauma That Never Really Happened,” Loftus and Ira E. Hyman, while acknowledging the possibility that events can be forgotten and subsequently remembered, contend that when memories are recovered in therapy, “Unfortunately, memory recovery techniques may result in the creation of false childhood memories” (4). They say it is impossible to distinguish between a true memory recovered in therapy and a false one without corroborating evidence. They argue that repression is a legacy of Freud, and question whether something can, in fact, be repressed and linger in one’s psyche, affecting behaviour without conscious knowledge of it. These researchers insist that there is a lack of evidence proving the existence of repression. Human memory, they say, is fallible, and suggestions of childhood sexual abuse can become accepted parts of one’s memory (5).

In one of her more famous studies, Loftus and her colleagues conducted an experiment to prove that, through suggestion, false memories could be implanted into the minds of participants. In this case, the false memories had to do with being lost in the mall as a child. While the study does prove, as Janet did, that false memories can be created through suggestion, the study has been criticized because a memory of being lost in the mall is very different from a memory of child sexual abuse. Many people have had the experience of being lost or feeling lost as children, which could make this memory a

³¹ The importance of this foundation surely lies in the help it provides those individuals wrongly accused of abusing their children. The problem, however, is that the opposite is also true: the foundation unwittingly provides support and advocacy for fathers who did sexually abuse their daughters as children.

particularly easy one to create falsely.³² Notwithstanding her critics, Loftus remains a well-respected scientist and influential supporter of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. Equally well-respected, and positioned on the opposite side of the debate, is the Freyd's daughter, cognitive scientist Jennifer Freyd. Even skeptics of recovered memory acknowledge the validity of Freyd's betrayal theory of traumatic memory. Karl Sabbagh, for example, devotes a book-length study to arguing against the possibility of recovered memory; however, in qualifying the terms of Freyd's arguments, he concedes their value: "Jennifer Freyd's betrayal trauma theory can only be an adequate explanation of memory repression if abuse by a caretaker is perceived as traumatic by the child at the time" (153). In other words, even though some children do not experience their abuse as traumatic, for those that do, memory repression, as Freyd suggests, is an adaptive response. In the case of recovered memories of sexual abuse, what science seems to reveal is its capacity to prove empirically both sides of the debate, which is the main reason why the controversy continues to this day.³³

³² Richard P. Kluft, for example, critiques Loftus's "lost in the mall" experiment, in part, by turning the tables and contending that some "retractors," those people who claim to have recovered false memories of abuse in therapy, "change their minds in the context of strong interpersonal pressures that have features in common with those exerted upon individuals in the lost-in-the-mall scenario and the child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome. Could it be that retractors rather than therapy patients demonstrate the forces the Dr. Loftus has studied?" (49). Kluft further argues that "Another aspect of the Loftus research that has received little attention is that only a small minority of the subjects who received misdirection cues took the indicated misdirections. Most did not. This research might be cited as evidence that most persons, even those subject to an intense campaign to distort their memories and induce confabulations, will reject such suggestions" (49). The "Child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome" to which Kluft makes reference is Roland Summit's theory and shares similarities with Freyd's betrayal trauma theory in emphasizing memory distortion to preserve an attachment. For more information about his theory see Conte, Jon R., ed. *Critical Issues in Child Sexual Abuse: Historical, Legal, and Psychological Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002.

³³ As recently as 26 January 2011, CBC Radio's, "The Current," with Anna Maria Tremonti, highlighted that the debate over recovered memory continues to this day. Tremonti's show featured, in part, the story of Hilary Stanton, whose many alter personalities were ostensibly the result of childhood trauma including sexual abuse. Stanton's Psychologist, Cheryl Malmo, argued that there is neuroscientific evidence that trauma is stored separately in the brain, and that when a trauma is occurring, parts of the brain shut off, suggesting empirical evidence for dissociation. On the other side of the debate is Psychiatry Professor, Joel Paris (McGill University) who argued that there is no such thing as MPD, and that memories of abuse recovered in therapy are false. He claims that there is absolutely no scientific evidence for dissociation.

Not just scientific research, but also the stories of “retractors” are used as evidence by the foundation that recovered memories are often false and lead to the destruction of innocent families.³⁴ The stories tend to follow a similar tragic trajectory of depressed, middle-class women in therapy being pedaled a child sexual abuse narrative by therapists, and then, after destroying their families, often in the courtroom, realizing that they have been duped into imagining heinous assaults that never happened. Indeed, the self-help handbook on coping with recovered memories of sexual abuse, *The Courage to Heal* (1988), by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, bears a heavy burden in inciting the backlash against the recovered memory movement. The main problem lies in their oft-quoted introduction, where they say, “If you think you were abused and your life shows the symptoms, then you were” (22).³⁵ The text problematically encourages a self-diagnosis of sexual abuse without the need to have any memories of abuse. In a section entitled, “But I Don’t Have Any Memories,” Bass and Davis say, “If you don’t remember your abuse, you are not alone. Many women don’t have memories and some never get

³⁴ The most recent published story of false memories of child sexual abuse typifies the pattern of events that lead the individual to the discovery that they have fabricated memories in therapy. Meredith Maran’s, *My Lie: A True Story of False Memory*, published in 2010, opens with two epigraphs: the first comes from Adolph Hitler, who says, “Make the lie big, make it simple, keep saying it, and eventually they will believe it”; the second comes from, wait for it, Homer Simpson: “Marge, it takes two to lie. One to lie and one to listen.” The quotation from Hitler invokes what False Memory Syndrome advocates see as Nazi-style feminist rhetoric and suggests that ostensibly recovered memories of child sexual abuse are a “lie,” a pervasive feminist-inspired epidemic among white, middle-class American women. A few short pages later, Maran quotes Richard Gardner, in the event the reader missed the first Nazi comparison: “We are currently living in dangerous times, similar to Nazi Germany. Sexual abuse hysteria is omnipresent” (5). Homer Simpson’s lines are meant to conjure the therapist’s office, where the unsuspecting patient confesses the “lie” to the listening and nodding therapist who has orchestrated it. What follows is Maran’s prologue describing a hike that she took with a friend, Joanne. Joanne asks if Maran has ever done anything terrible and regrettable. Maran replies that when she was in her thirties, she accused her father of molestation. After not speaking to him for eight years, and depriving him of contact with her children, she realized that he hadn’t molested her.

³⁵ The symptoms are as general as they are copious and include feeling “bad, dirty, or ashamed,” “powerless, like a victim,” “different from other people,” “disconnected, isolated, and alone,” “shame,” “confused,” “dead inside,” “afraid of people,” and also include finding it difficult to “identify their needs,” “recognize their feelings,” “differentiate between emotions,” “express feelings,” “calm down when they get upset,” “trust people,” “make close friends,” “create or maintain healthy relationships,” “give or receive nurturing,” and so on ad infinitum.

memories. This doesn't mean they weren't abused" (81).³⁶ As the stories of "retractors" continue to surface, the existence of false memories and accusations needs to be acknowledged, whether they are created by therapists or by reading a dodgy self-help book.

Similar debates began in Canada, where the FMSF quickly extended its reach. In Ontario, the debate was initially staged in *The Toronto Star*. The *Toronto Star* debate represents an early rehearsal of the terms of the debate that would continue in earnest throughout the 1990s. In May of 1992, journalist Bill Taylor wrote a series of three articles on recovered memory. In the first, "What if Sexual Abuse Memories are Wrong?", Taylor opens with a story of a father who claims his daughter falsely accused him of molestation. He enlists sympathy for the father by suggesting there is no presumption of innocence because of a popular logic, especially in regard to children's testimony, that says, "Why would she say it if it wasn't true?" (16 May 1992). He moves on to "the Browns" (not their real names) who, like other parents, "are alarmed that their children seemed to be living normal lives, usually with fulfilling and well-paid jobs, until

³⁶ Almost as problematic as the suggestion that vague feelings of unhappiness could signal past sexual abuse, is the apparent consumption of this edict as true by "survivors." According to Elizabeth A. Wilson, Rosanne Barr's mother, during a CNN call-in show on repressed memory featuring guest Ellen Bass, blamed *The Courage to Heal* in leading hundreds of daughters, including her own, to falsely accuse their parents (91). To imagine that women are gullible enough to accept a logic as flimsy as Bass's and Davis's seems unlikely, particularly given the ramifications to family members of false accusations. Yet, Roseanne Barr's mother turned out to be correct. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, aired on 14 February 2011, Barr says that accusing her father of incest was the worst thing she has ever done. She blames *The Courage to Heal*, and says that while her father was cruel, their relationship was not incestuous. Yet, Maran says that her false memory of being abused by her father had its inception in the editorial work she did for a pioneering feminist researcher, whose book she thinly disguises as *The Incest Secret*. In fact, Maran is acknowledged as providing invaluable editorial assistance by Diana E.H. Russell in *The Secret Trauma*, the 1986 landmark study of 930 randomly drawn women of whom 16 percent reported sexual abuse by a relative before the age of 18, and the more general finding that 38 percent, or just over one in three, reported at least one experience of child sexual abuse (xvii). As Maran describes it, "I didn't just hand out the Kool-Aid. I drank it. I didn't just write about recovered memories; I spent a decade trying to recover my own. Shortly after the 1988 publication of the Bible of the recovered-memory movement, *The Courage to Heal*, I joined the ranks of the self-identified incest survivors and accused my father of molesting me" (7). For Maran, her memories and subsequent retraction shifted with the changing political climate: "When the culture tilted toward disbelief, I leaned that way too. In 1996, I faced the truth that my accusation was false" (8).

they consulted a therapist about a minor problem, unrelated to sexual abuse. It is the therapists, the parents believe, who are inducing patients to recall ‘repressed memories’ of childhood abuse.”

He follows this now familiar rhetoric with the equally familiar move to ground the claims of false memory in science. He quotes a psychiatrist, Saul Levine, from Sunnybrook Health Science Centre, who says that memory is unreliable, and that because sexual abuse has become “trendy,” “Everybody wants to jump on the bandwagon.” Levine says, “The whole area attracts a lot of flakes” (qtd. in Taylor). Following a series of one-sided quotations from experts, including FMSF supporters Ralph Underwager, Elizabeth Loftus, and Roseanne Barr’s parents, Taylor resurrects the Browns, “both well-paid professionals—intelligent, articulate, comfortable in their roomy home,” whose story is typical: their once loving and perfect daughter becomes hostile and uncommunicative after recovering memories of abuse in therapy. Taylor ends his entirely sympathetic article on the plight of the falsely accused with the phone number of the FMSF.³⁷

To this astonishingly unbalanced piece of journalism, Sylvia Fraser weighs in with her passionate, albeit similarly polemical, response, “Desperately Wanting not to Believe,” also published in the *Toronto Star* (28 May 1992). Fraser begins with what has now become one of the main arguments in support of recovered memory. She argues that most incest survivors, contrary to the position of the FMSF, resist believing recovered memories as they arise: “Far from being the dupes of overzealous therapists, who

³⁷ The second article, with the tag-line, “True or False? The Psychiatric Community Knows Incest is Real, but Worries that when Over-eager Therapists Uncover Repressed Memories of Sexual Abuse that are False, Families can be Needlessly Torn Apart” (18 May 1992), continues along similar lines, although this time he opens with an alarmist quotation from FMSF director, Pamela Freyd: “Unfounded accusations of childhood sexual abuse are tearing apart families all over North America.” Again, Taylor follows with experts who all advocate against recovered memory, and ends with a critique of *The Courage to Heal*, with the FMSF phone number as his now familiar closing gesture. The final article introducing Torontonians to the issue, “Therapist Turned Patient’s World Upside Down” (19 May 1992), is devoted to the story of a recanter, whom Taylor interviews by phone. As she lives in Dallas, her name was likely given to him by the FMSF. Again, hers is a typical script: she goes to therapy, recovers false memories of abuse, then recants her story saying she is a victim of False Memory Syndrome. The article ends with the recanter, Lynn Gondolf, saying that therapists prefer middle-class women because they are able to pay their fees, making them perfect victims. The phone number of the FMSF beckons at the close of the article.

diagnose incest where it doesn't exist, apparent incest victims are more apt to cling irrationally to the hope that their memories will be proved wrong and that their parents will emerge blameless and worthy of love. To lose that hope is to be plunged into a lonely chaos of guilt and terror."³⁸ Fraser points out that surfacing memories of abuse need validation rather than repudiation. She takes up this topic again in her 1994 article for *Saturday Night*, "Freud's Final Seduction." Here she makes the case that the tactics of the FMSF follow the logic of Freud's repudiation of his seduction theory:

Just as Freud recoiled from "too many cases" of incest by deciding that all children, as a group, are guilty of harbouring sexual fantasies about their parents, so the FMS foundation plays on this same repugnance to protest that its members are innocent victims of their children's sexual fantasies. Like Freud with his Oedipus complex, the foundation with its false memory syndrome invalidates the personal experience of thousands of people, whose stories its members don't know, by providing society with a theory that denies their reality, while allowing the accused to bask in the comforts of group denial.³⁹

³⁸ She gives counter-examples: a woman she met who didn't want to believe her memories even though her father spent time in jail for molesting other children. When on her book tour in Britain, Fraser notes a controversy around Marietta Higgs, a pediatrician whom parents, politicians, police officers, and media judged as revealing too many cases of sexually abused children. Fraser points out that further investigations proved that over 75 percent of her diagnosed cases were true. Fraser insists, "Her story demonstrates the well-known human impulse to shoot the messenger bearing the bad news. It also shows our society's perverse tendency to rush to the protection of sex crime perpetrators instead of their victims." Not just victim-blaming, but the family system that allows abuse is taken up by Fraser: "The awesome power of denial in the psychology of an incest survivor is almost impossible for persons with a normal upbringing to understand. Often the incestuous pattern has been passed down through both sides of a family, generation upon generation, with victims unerringly marrying potential abusers so that their own children are molded from the cradle as sexual slaves."

³⁹ The first major critique of Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory came, of course, from Jeffrey Masson's controversial book, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*. The book was first published in 1985, well before the start of the debate over False Memory Syndrome. The third edition of the book, published in 1992, acknowledges Sylvia Fraser for her pioneering work on sexual abuse. Following the debate, Masson re-contextualizes his text in terms of the debate over false memory, in part, by changing his subtitle to "Freud and Child Sexual Abuse."

For Fraser, like many feminist researchers and scholars on the subject, the FMSF and its advocates use silencing tactics to deny women's lived experiences, thereby pushing sexual abuse back into its cloaked, nineteenth-century status of unspoken family secrets.⁴⁰

While the focus on both sides of the debate on the empirical validity of recovered memory has illuminated the complexity of the issue, the cultural and social aspects of both narrative and memory as determining forces in how stories are told and consumed is sometimes lost in the emphasis on the sciences of memory. Humans are cultural and social beings, not just biological ones, and the interactions between culture and the science of human memory complicate stories of abuse as they are reconstructed and retold for public consumption through life-writing or media or in the court rooms where allegations of sexual abuse are sometimes fought on the grounds of the validity of recovered memories. As a cultural artifact with remarkable staying power, Fraser's memoir continues to be consumed according to dominant popular and academic epistemologies, while simultaneously, and paradoxically, being criticized for precisely the ways in which it conforms to dominant narratives of recovered memory and healing, and for failing to account for the possibility of false memories or the fallible nature of reconstructed ones.

In discussions of Fraser's memoir, critics often use scientific research to press forth their arguments about memory, which have the secondary effect of discrediting

⁴⁰ The exchange between Taylor and Fraser caught the attention of Ian Hacking, who appears to have initially sided with the FMSF, only to remove himself from the debate by the mid-1990s, an indication that the debate was becoming too hot to touch. His 1994 article, "Memoro-politics, Trauma and the Soul," appears to be an early version of a chapter, "Truth in Memory" in his 1995 book-length study, *Rewriting the Soul*. Hacking, in the book, leaves out two key words from his description of the extent to which the *Toronto Star's* publication of articles on the FMSF increased their Ontario memberships. In the book, Hacking writes, "A Philadelphia phone number was given, and about four hundred readers of the *Star* called at once" (121). In the earlier article, he writes, "A Philadelphia phone number was given; about 400 readers of the *Star* called at once (*including me*), and 180 Torontonians thereupon subscribed to the Foundation" (30; emphasis added). There is a curious absence of any mention of this article in the book, even though many of the lines are exactly replicated, with no acknowledgement of parts being previously published, and no reference to it in his bibliography. It is probably not surprising that he decided to skip his apparent involvement with the FMSF in his longer book. The politics of such a position would almost certainly raise eyebrows.

Fraser's account of her traumas. As Freyd insists, when the recovered memory debate becomes its fiercest, the issue is not memory: "the real issue is whether the alleged abuse happened" ("Memory and Dimensions of Trauma" 144). Whether the abuse happened is often lost in the critical scholarship on Fraser because of its focus on memory models and her use of novelistic techniques. By analyzing the arguments of her main critics, I attempt to show the extent to which they are governed by the paradigms and zeitgeists of their times, as surely as Fraser was, to promote an understanding of Fraser's memoir as a culturally informed document upon which shifting, circulating understandings of recovered memories of child sexual abuse have played out as a controversy that has stood the test of time. The staying-power of the controversy over Fraser's memoir (which has been ongoing for twenty-five years) is an example of the capacity of limit narratives to unsettle established boundaries for thinking about vexing issues such as Fraser's profound amnesia following her abuse. Fraser's memoir, by both insisting upon and blurring the boundaries of truth in its articulation and representation of recovered memories, opens up new possibilities for understanding the place of creativity in narrating the story of child sexual abuse. And it does so controversially.

2.7 The Controversy over *My Father's House*

The initial criticism of Fraser's text coincided with the formation, in the United States, of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation and the ensuing "memory wars" of the 1990s. Elaine Showalter, in *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997), questioned Fraser's memories in terms of the recovered memory debate to argue that recovered memories of abuse are culturally specific, "hysterical epidemics" that have no more truth value than alien abductions. The second main critical impulse came after the debate over false memory had cooled, starting in 2000, with Nicola King's, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*. This line of argument contends that Fraser's memoir is too well plotted, too complete, and too coherent to be believed. The most recent article that takes up this line of attack against Fraser is a chapter by Robson in the 2010 edited collection, *Memory Matters: Contexts for Understanding Sexual Abuse Recollections*.

Both lines of argument—the first based on False Memory Syndrome, and the second grounded in a poststructuralist skepticism of Enlightenment-style autobiographies which narrate knowable, unified selves—share a distrust of totalizing metanarratives that aim to explain fragmentary, traumatically vexed childhood memories in terms of a coherent story that identifies a newly created and unitary adult subject healed by this very process of narration. While I grant Fraser's critics their argument that no past or self can possibly be as reliably remembered or knowable as Fraser's account describes, I will argue that both lines of argument reveal the limitations of viewing accounts of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse as necessarily false, while failing to take into account the imaginative ways in which survivors must engage with narrative models to make sense of their stories.

2.7.1 The Author's Note: Fraser's Controversial "Autobiographical Pact"

At the heart of the controversy, and representative of many points of criticism, is Fraser's Author's Note. Roger Luckhurst finds Fraser's note to the reader contradictory. He wryly calls Fraser's memoir one of the most "formative" of the era "since it presented an entirely new sense of the 'revisionist' feminist autobiography, encapsulated in the bewildering and apparently self-cancelling words of the Author's Note" (122). Luckhurst points to the "contradictions in the idea of an amnesiac autobiography" (124), and in the fact that novelistic techniques are used for a true story. Jane Kilby views the project as a "conceit," and an "incredible" one at that: "*My Father's House* is built on a perhaps more incredible, or at least distinctly more complex, conceit than that of attempting to establish the reality of incest for a potentially hostile audience, for she is writing of that which 'was unknown' to her for most of her life up to that point" (52). The question Kilby raises is one raised by most critics of Fraser: how does one write an autobiography of a divided personality, whereby a dissociated self, separated from the experiences and consciousness of a primary self, lives through abuse that for which, strictly speaking, the primary self was not present? As Kilby puts it, "How do you write your autobiography when strictly it is a biography, but not the biography of someone who may, indeed, seem very real, but of someone who is barely real to you, for, as Fraser puts it, not only was this other her

‘shadow-twin’, but at times also she passed like a figure in a dream?” (53). Psychology professor Mark Freeman similarly questions Fraser’s story, finding it “downright incredible [. . .] particularly her profound amnesia” (151). I quote here the full text of Fraser’s Author’s Note:

The story I have told in this book is autobiographical. As a result of amnesia, much of it was unknown to me until three years ago. For clarity, I have used italics to indicate thoughts, feelings and experiences pieced together from recently recovered memories, and to indicate dreams. It is important to keep this device in mind while reading this book.

To provide focus and structure, I have used many of the techniques of the novelist. I have also adopted fictional names and otherwise disguised persons who appear in the narrative. No attempt has been made to create full or balanced characterizations, only to portray such persons and myself as our lives relate to this difficult story. However, to my knowledge, I have not exaggerated or distorted or misrepresented the truth as I now understand it.

That my father did sexually abuse me has been corroborated by outside sources. Our family secret, it appears, was not such a secret after all.

This, then, is Fraser’s complex and variegated autobiographical pact with the reader: to tell the truth as she knows it, while protecting the identities of her friends and colleagues. Her use of fictional names, in disguising identities of living people, also helps to protect her legally. In an e-mail correspondence, Fraser clarified what she meant by her use of “novelistic techniques”: “the ‘novelistic’ techniques I referred to in my Author’s Note had only to do with the handling of my conscious memories, not my memories of the abuse” (“Re: question”). That Fraser isolates her use of novelistic techniques to record events that she always remembered while suggesting that no such fictionalizing was employed to narrate the abuse she forgot illustrates her sensitivity to a potentially incredulous audience and her awareness of the importance of truth in sexual abuse allegations. Fraser puts a legalistic requirement of absolute truth upon her recovered memories of abuse. At stake is that if she were to acknowledge that her recovered memories underwent some process of revision in the act of narration, her memoir could

be dismissed as false. Revisionist traumatic memories, however, are still traumatic memories that open a window to the truth even if that truth has been storied by the narrating memory of the subject. While acknowledging her use of story in narrating ongoing memories, Fraser's refusal to concede the place of fiction in the articulation of her recovered memories needs to be read as her profound commitment to truth-telling rather than as an implausibly complete or disingenuous recollection of identity-shattering traumatic events.

When I met with Fraser, she told me that she began writing *My Father's House* as a fiction about incest, employing the techniques she used in writing her earlier novels, including her autobiographical novel, *Pandora*. When she admitted to herself that she was actually writing a memoir, she realized how useful novelistic techniques were to her story. Fictional techniques were thus an essential tool for her to first narrate her story. Not just a novelist, Fraser is a journalist, and, indeed, worked for many years for the *Toronto Star* before writing *Pandora*. As a novelist *and* a journalist, Fraser is, at least generically speaking, comfortable straddling both fictional and factual discourse. In the memoir, her authorial narrative "I" employs fictional techniques while the "I" of her italicized "other self" insists upon facts and truth. I asked Fraser about whether she thought it were possible to narrate traumatic, recovered memories of abuse without some recourse to fiction or the imagination in the reconstruction of the past. She emphasized her discomfort with my suggestion that truth and fiction could intermingle in memories of trauma; however, she elucidated an important distinction between "photographic truth" and "emotional truth":

I don't like blurring. In terms of my life as a journalist, I say I served the facts. In terms of my life as a novelist, I say the facts served me. On the other hand, there's something that I call greater truth; that is, say you're a novelist, but you're telling a true story. The thing about relationships is not the big scene; the thing about relationships is the repetition: something happens over and over again, and then there's the trigger that explodes things. But that's boring to write about. That's a photographic truth. But if you take those ten arguments that somebody has and put it into one humdinger of an argument, then it tells the emotional truth of the ten, but

it does it in shorthand and it does it in a dramatic way. That to me is the novelist's art, whether it's something based on reality or whether it isn't. That's what drama is. It does contain the truth. In some ways, it's more truthful, but I hesitate to say that because while I did that in *My Father's House*—that's what I meant by using the novelist's techniques—[. . .] I did not [use novelistic techniques] in terms of the incest.

My contention is that if Fraser were to extend what she says here to grant the possibility that her recovered memories might also convey “in shorthand” the “emotional truth of ten” repeated events of abuse, rather than insisting upon them as “photographic truth[s],” her memoir would not be subject to the same level of skepticism.

In addition to her employment of “novelistic techniques,” Fraser's use of italics to record the incest experienced by her “other self” has bothered her critics. I view her use of italics as a creative strategy to narrate recovered memories. Fraser's critics view them as a problematic device that gives the pretense of a pristine version of newly remembered traumatic memories. In keeping with her view that the past cannot be anything but a shifting construction of an adult consciousness in the present, King, for example, objects to Fraser's use of italics as “narrative techniques which attempt to hold past and present apart, so that the past can be represented as if uncontaminated by the consciousness of the remembering subject” (63). King seems to be prescribing a method of narration that is entirely focussed on the process of remembering as *not* remembering rather than as an effort to recount a life as one does remember it. She says the text holds on to a philosophy of representation (faithful imitation) that postmodernism and the concept of belated memory has disrupted (63). King suggests that while Fraser, in reminding the reader to keep her use of italics as a device in mind, seems to acknowledge the reconstructive aspects of her process of remembering her story, that, in fact, the contrary is true: “I feel the reader is often being invited to assume just the opposite: that is, that the past, bracketed off in italics as it is, has been recovered ‘pure’ from the timeless dimension in which it waited until recovered by the subject” (66).⁴¹

⁴¹ Indeed, the italicized sections read as if they are true and complete memories. Narrated in the present tense, the italicized sections recording Fraser's abuse have a visceral quality which heightens the sense of

Fraser's use of italics to represent her divided personality was intimately connected to her process of accessing the part of her psyche fractured by traumas. Novelistic techniques became a crucial turning point in Fraser's process of both discovery and recovery. I want to emphasize again the publication date of her memoir. In 1987, there were few memoirs of this nature being read or discussed. Fraser pioneered a narrative method for articulating recovered memories of child sexual abuse and multiplicity. Without previous models to guide her, Fraser found a way to represent traumas vexed by fragmentary and ruptured understandings that can defy language. As Roger Luckhurst observes,

trauma is not necessarily a stable or straightforwardly evidential or narratable event, but might be mobile, subject to all kinds of transformation and revision. This might well be the defining element of a traumatic memory, and what makes it particularly amenable to fictional narrative instead. The new kinds of autofiction that scuff the boundaries of fictional and factual discourse work to confound the legal measure of true and false precisely in order to preserve, in a different way, an "alternative jurisdiction," a traumatic truth. (137)

I liken Luckhurst's use of the term "traumatic truth" with Fraser's "emotional truth": trauma needs flexible borders of truth to capture its blurring of reality. Fraser's autobiographical position is important, and, indeed, her Author's Note makes clear that she *is* a divided subject in the process of healing those divisions through acts of remembrance and reintegration. What is partly at issue with Fraser's critics is the idea

realism: "*My daddy plays with my belly button, my daddy plays with my toes as he did when I was little. [. . .] Now I lie on my daddy's bed, face buried in his feather pillow. I shiver, because the window is open, the lace curtains are blowing and I haven't any clothes on*" (8). While the careful attention to detail lends reliability to this memory, Fraser's apparent fullness of recall of recovered memories such as this trouble her critics who understand memory as much more fragmentary. I agree with Fraser's critics that her memories may be inexact recollections of events. However, I disagree with them that the unreliability of memories in general and Fraser's radical amnesia mean that she is disingenuous or that her story is not credible. The memory described in italics above has truth value even if it is not as precise as the narrative suggests.

that writing an autobiography requires a coherent subject, a notion that has been troubled by psychoanalysis and, more recently, poststructuralism. That said, and as Gilmore notes, autobiography as a Western tradition “is both a corollary to the Enlightenment and its legacy, and which features a representative ‘I’ at its center. This version has been displaced from within and without autobiography itself as critics argue that the tradition was never as coherent as it could be made to appear, its canonical texts formally unstable and decidedly multivoiced” (2). Despite the displacement of the representative “I” of the Enlightenment by a less coherent postmodern “I,” Fraser’s claim to having two separate “I’s” exists on the borderland of postmodern notions of subjectivity.

Fraser disrupts Enlightenment and postmodern traditions of autobiography precisely by both adopting an Enlightenment model of a knowing subject with a coherent, narratable life, while at the same time subverting that model with novelistic techniques and, more radically, a life that requires two coherent “I’s” to narrate it. Fraser’s Author’s Note encapsulates this contradiction and pledges to convey the truth of her story *as she understood it at the time*. Philippe Lejeune defines the autobiography as “*Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality*” (120; original emphasis). Lejeune’s use of the word “story” is purposeful. He could have used the word “fact,” but he instead emphasized the “autobiographical pact.” In his Foreword to Lejeune’s *On Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin writes that Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” was his answer to the problem of distinguishing factual from fictional discourses: “the autobiographical pact is a form of contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life” (ix). This is precisely what Fraser pledges in her Author’s Note.

Kilby, however, finds Fraser’s use of the word “story” in the first line of the Author’s Note—“The story I have told in this book is autobiographical”—“hesitant,” as if to suggest that Fraser is not sure of the text’s status as autobiography versus story (52). By Lejeune’s definition, an autobiography *is* a “story of [a] personality.” However, in Kilby’s view, Fraser’s memoir, “as a life story [. . .] is impossible to write” (53). Fraser

cannot win with the critics: she is figured as too coherent *and* too divided to be believed. Gilmore argues that,

The truthfulness of knowledge about the self and trauma as it arises in relation to self-representation immediately confronts the issue of judgment. The association of autobiography with representativeness, confession, and testimony suggests some of why this should be so. So does the history of identifying memory as a central and vulnerable location of identity, and trauma as a threat to the self due to how it injures memory. (144)

I agree with Gilmore that judgments come with any act of autobiography. As Lejeune observes, “Confronted with what looks like an autobiographical narrative, the reader often tends to think of himself as a detective, that is to say, to look for breaches of contract” (14). And, indeed, Luckhurst admires King’s detective work as she “expertly unravels” inconsistencies in Fraser’s use of roman and italics (124). As a limit-case, Fraser’s memoir pushes at the edges of credulity for readers keen to question what she admits are injuries to memory and identity. In Gilmore’s terms, “In the imagined encounter with such judgments, many writers seek grounds other than the explicitly testimonial for self-representation [. . .] swerving from the center of autobiography to its outer limits” (14). That she is *both* a coherent and divided subject puts Fraser on the margins of autobiography; however, her memoir is a testament to the possibility of such writing with Fraser presenting herself as a coherent subject perfectly capable of writing her fractured life story.

The following sections take up Fraser’s major critics as symptomatic of the scholarly failure to read *My Father’s House* as a legitimate trauma story. In responding to these writers, I want to highlight just how high the ethical stakes are in the scholarly analysis of abuse narratives. *My Father’s House*, in fact, self-reflexively anticipates the incredulity critics express about its trauma story. The memoir recounts an interview between Fraser and “Gerald Nash” about *Pandora*. Nash says, ““The realistic detail in your book astounds me. *How can you remember* so many things when I can barely remember the names of my teachers?”” (155 *MFH*; emphasis added). “Nash” might have been the first of Fraser’s long line of critics to question her memory and its apparent

concision. Nash goes on to read an extended section of *Pandora* which tells the story of a “breadman” who sexually abuses Fraser as a child. Nash confronts Fraser about the event and says, “I don’t believe that incident for one minute” (*MFH* 158). He concludes that *Pandora* “is typical of the kind of hysterical imaginings we’re seeing too much of these days” (*MFH* 158). The scene unwittingly foreshadows the critical response to the memoir itself, while it also reveals Fraser’s awareness of the potential skepticism of her readers.

Brooks notes that in the psychoanalytic scene transference creates a “dialogic relation of narrative production and interpretation” between the analyst and analysand (50). The relationship of the reader of a text to its writer parallels the transference that occurs in psychoanalysis: “if the story told has been effective [. . .] the act of transmission resembles the psychoanalytic transference, where the listener enters the story as an active participant in the creation of design and meaning, and the reader is then called upon himself to enter this transference space” (51). This transference space needs to be an ethical one, which is not to say that it should be uncritical. An ethical space is a dialogic one, with well-researched, open-minded, and fair analysis of the subject, a subject who is allowed to speak and so is part of the conversation. Fraser’s voice is either silenced by arguments that she is lying about her past or by the omission of key pieces of information.

2.7.2 “Hysterical Epidemics”: Recovered Memories and MPD

Elaine Showalter’s *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997) is representative of the highly problematic terms in which trauma narratives such as Fraser’s are read. Indeed, the bravado and inaccurate claims with which Showalter discredits Fraser’s story is unparalleled in the criticism of *My Father’s House*.⁴² That

⁴² Fraser was upset enough about Showalter’s claims to write a letter to her publisher, Columbia University Press. As she said to me in an e-mail, “After receiving a legal letter from me, Showalter and her publisher agreed to remove all mention of *My Father’s House* from reprints and to stop shipping this book into Canada. Unfortunately, since then, critics of similar ilk have continued to quote Showalter, and each other’s assumptions, instead of referring to the text of *My Father’s House*, building up layer upon layer of false information, that gained authority with repetition” (“Re: question”).

Showalter discredits Fraser's memoir and Fraser herself as a witness to her life is surprising coming, as it does, from the pioneer of "gynocriticism." In her groundbreaking essay, "Toward a Feminist Poetics" (1979), Showalter promotes the construction of "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories" (131). As she explains it, "Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture" (131). Despite being an important and crusading advocate of an unfettered women's literature grounded in their experiences, Showalter, in her later scholarship, invalidates Fraser's experiences. In fact, Showalter's scholarship collapses in its confrontation with *My Father's House* by systematically countering her earlier gynocritical theory with an inability to accommodate Fraser's story or even to *read* the memoir at the most basic level.

In *Hystories*, Showalter makes the broad argument that hysteria truly is the wandering womb, and has travelled to contemporary times: "Contemporary hysterical patients blame external sources—a virus, sexual molestation, chemical warfare, satanic conspiracy, alien infiltration—for psychic problems" (4). Showalter's circuitous rhetoric involves labeling valid syndromes, like Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Gulf War Syndrome, "hysterical epidemics," which, in her terms, are no different from alien abductions or paranoid conspiracy theories. She similarly discredits recovered memories of sexual abuse as fanciful and self-serving responses to circulating cultural narratives of hysteria. Showalter thus opens her monograph by juxtaposing a nurse with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome who commits suicide with the help of Jack Kevorkian, to a Gulf War veteran with psychological problems, to a daughter who, under the influence of hypnosis and the guidance of a therapist, recovers memories of childhood abuse and falsely accuses her father of a crime he did not commit, to a Harvard professor who claims that little grey aliens are sexually experimenting with US citizens, to Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh's claim that the government implanted a surveillance microchip in his buttocks during the Gulf War, to right-wing militias in Montana accusing the government of chemically altering the blood of Americans to create a New World Order. She follows

this contentious opening hook with her thesis statement: “These sensational cases exemplify individual hysterias connecting with modern social movements to produce psychological epidemics” (3).⁴³

All of this is related, according to Showalter, not to real traumas but to “millennial panic”: “The heroes and heroines of 1990s hysteria call themselves traumatists and ufologists, experiencers and abductees, survivors and survivalists. [. . .] As panic reaches epidemic proportions, hysteria seeks out scapegoats and enemies—from unsympathetic doctors, abusive fathers, and working mothers to devil-worshipping sadists, curious extraterrestrials, and evil governments” (5). For Showalter, there is no difference between a trauma theorist, like Cathy Caruth, and someone who studies aliens, no difference between an incest survivor, like Fraser, and a survivalist burying herself in a cave to await the apocalypse: all are mindless consumers and reproducers of headlining stories. Calling these “epidemics” of hysteria “hystories,” she insists that it is only because the stories share similarities in the way they are told, that doctors and researchers believe they are true (6). The stories share similarities, says Showalter, not because the trauma of being sexually abused might share common characteristics with other traumas, but because “patients learn about diseases from the media, unconsciously develop the symptoms, and then attract media attention in an endless cycle” (6). According to this bandwagon logic, recovered memories of abuse, UFOs, war traumas, and government conspiracies are all part of a new, hysterical American culture unable to understand its psychic distress except by feigning a contemporary malady.

In her discussion of recovered memories of sexual abuse, Showalter firmly places herself on side with advocates of false memory syndrome:⁴⁴

⁴³ Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, similarly connects the emergence of particular psychological traumas to political movements, but she does so to argue that “The systematic study of psychological trauma [. . .] depends on the support of a political movement” (9). For Herman, the absence of a supportive political climate to legitimate the study and discussion of sexual violence inevitably leads to “the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial” (9). In Showalter’s view, the fact that traumas emerge together at a particular period in history has nothing to do with a changing political climate that might allow such a discourse; rather, the trauma is voiced to parrot what is already a dominant cultural narrative created by individual, sensational cases of hysteria.

I deplore the credulous endorsements of recovered memory and satanic abuse that have become part of one wing of feminist thought. I try to ask feminist questions about the sources behind these syndromes, accusations, and conspiracy theories. What needs are women attempting to meet through these therapeutic investments, sickness lifestyles, and emotional hystories? (11)

Showalter conflates recovered memories of abuse with ritual satanic abuse in a rhetoric designed to discredit women without the appearance of doing so. “Trying to ask feminist questions” suggests a benevolent concern for women; however, embedded in her questions is the assumption that women are lying to meet their needs. She condescends as she concedes that while she has come “to doubt the validity of therapeutically recovered memories of sexual abuse [. . .] I do not wish to belittle those who believe in their memories. People do not generate these confabulations out of an intention to deceive. They may need to define an identity, to work out anger toward the accused, or to respond to cultural pressures” (147).

Her supposition of “confabulation” and her patronizing language extend to her discussion of MPD, where she devotes a section to Fraser, whom she discredits. Like Hacking, Showalter is distrustful of MPD as a diagnosis: “Guess what—it’s another case of multiple personality. Along with recovered memory, the diagnosis of multiple personality syndrome has become epidemic in the U.S. since the 1980s” (159).⁴⁵ Arguing

⁴⁴ In her discussion of recovered memories of abuse, Showalter paraphrases Loftus to suggest that memory is prone to decay and distortion (147). Through the work of Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters, she argues that recovered memory studies are “seriously flawed” (148). She cites Frederick Crews to argue that in a short time period, an epidemic has emerged of women who, suffering from a host of complaints, discover that repressed sexual abuse is the cause (146). See Ofshe, Richard, and Ethan Watters. *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria*. New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1994; Crews, Frederick. *The Memory Wars: Freud’s Legacy in Dispute*. New York: New York Review of Books, 1995; and also, Loftus, Elizabeth, and Katherine Ketcham. *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1994.

⁴⁵ Showalter’s condescending tone even extends to her treatment of Hacking, whom she carelessly refers to as a “rumpled professor” (160). I have to say that I find it shocking that a scholar of her caliber and reputation would take such a seemingly reckless approach to her colleagues and subject matter.

that MPD was invented by recovered memory advocates to explain why children forget sexual abuse, she contends that MPD would not exist except to justify the existence of recovered memory (159). After the briefest explanation of how multiple personalities spring into being to deal with the trauma, she says that “alters” can be contacted by therapists through an “Inner Self-Helper,” an alter personality that mediates between alters. The impression Showalter gives is that therapists are as flaky and prone to imagination as their gullible female patients, whom they have in a trance.

Following her arguments that recovered memories of sexual abuse by adult women are false and MPD is an invention to explain psychological problems, Showalter uses Fraser’s *My Father’s House* as a representative example of such cultural “hystorias.” Showalter begins, “One of the most frequently cited texts is Sylvia Fraser’s *My Father’s House: A Memoir of Incest and Healing* (1984), which describes a split personality created by Fraser’s sexual relationship with her father, an experience she had forgotten until adulthood, when she consulted a therapist in Toronto” (165). Fraser did not recover her memories in therapy, a crucial point upon which Showalter’s arguments against Fraser hinge. In fact, Fraser recovered her memories spontaneously and recounts this in the memoir. Fraser’s friends tell her that a mutual acquaintance, “Joker (Gerald) Nash,” has molested a child (219). Upon hearing the allegation against Nash himself, Fraser makes an association to her own childhood and remembers being orally raped by her father (220).⁴⁶

Showalter nonetheless forges ahead by essentially fabricating a story about Fraser to press forth her own argument:

⁴⁶ Not only does Fraser give clear evidence in the memoir that her memories returned unprompted by a therapist, but she has repeatedly restated this since the publication of *My Father’s House*. In her 1994 article, “Freud’s Final Seduction, Fraser emphasizes that “no therapist can be accused of misleading me, since none was involved in the initial recovery. I had read no books on incest, belonged to no survivor groups, and had no conscious interest in this subject, which had not yet become topical.” In fact, according to Fraser, “Ironically when the book was published, the fact that I was NOT under a therapist’s care to give authority to my memories, was perceived to be its weakness. After the FMSF gained public and media support, this was considered my memoir’s strength—a strength that the FMSF and its supporters had to do everything they could to destroy through distortion of the text” (“Re: question”).

Under hypnosis with a sympathetic therapist Fraser recovered memories of abuse, which explain to her satisfaction why she has never been completely happy and why she had an affair that ended her marriage to a decent, loving man. Since her therapist believed that child abuse often leads to multiple personality syndrome, he encouraged Fraser to locate her other self. (165)

None of this is true, but to be fair, part of the confusion comes from the memoir, where Fraser does indeed describe visiting a hypnotherapist in Toronto (225-27); however, she clearly does so only *after* she recovered her memories. The therapist's response is important: "Dr. Steven is cautionary: 'Are you sure you want to keep stirring up these old memories? Why not rest a bit? Maybe you've had enough'" (MFH 227). Far from implanting false memories, her hypnotherapist urges her to be prudent.

Fraser describes a series of visits to "Dr. Steven," but it is not entirely clear from the memoir how many times she sees him or if she recovers new memories while under hypnosis. For instance, she opens one paragraph by saying, "On subsequent visits to Dr. Steven's office I produce other childhood memories in which I express a growing sense of panic and wrongdoing, and then of abject helplessness. When I block, he suggests: 'Try moving the image of yourself away from your house to some imaginary place that's safer'" (226). What follows is a fascinating passage where Fraser possibly does confront her "other self," but not as Showalter suggests, for at no point does the hypnotherapist suggest such an alter or a reunion with one. Under hypnosis, Fraser sees "some kind of barrier. It feels shiny, like a mirror. Yes, it's a mirror. [. . .] I can't see what the child sees because now I seem to be the reflection in that mirror looking out at her [. . .] that is, at myself" (227). This can be read as a reflection of a dissociated part of herself that she is only starting to have access to. Agitation jolts her out of her hypnosis and she tells her therapist that the eleven- or twelve-year-old child she sees in the mirror is too old to be real, because, at this point, Fraser has only recovered memories of abuse as a small child,

and still has not recovered memories of abuse that continued throughout her years at school.⁴⁷

Showalter, however, emphasizes that women fabricate litigious stories as rubrics for understanding their psychological problems. In her effort to make this point, Showalter repeats her own fiction that Fraser is fabricating MPD to explain the breakup of her marriage: “Fraser does not have dramatic or even visible symptoms of either *grande* or *petite hystérie*. But she cannot accept responsibility for the affair that destroyed her marriage; she blames the affair on her other self” (165). That Fraser documents her classic symptom of hysteria—convulsions—in the memoir is ignored by Showalter, who rehashes her false claims about Fraser again and again in what becomes belittling rhetoric to discredit her: “In order to account for the adulterous affair, Fraser must posit an incestuous relationship with Daddy. Actually, she never quite remembers the incest, but she knows it happened. It must have, for otherwise why wouldn’t she be happy? Why wouldn’t she be faithful?” (166). Despite many scenes in the memoir of detailed, remembered incest, Showalter blithely and, really, confusingly makes the claim that Fraser “never quite remembers the incest.” I can find nothing in the published literature to support any of Showalter’s erroneous statements about Fraser.

2.7.3 Memory Models: Archeological versus *Nachträglichkeit*

Nicola King negotiates Fraser’s memoir as a limit case for memory models of testimony. She devotes a chapter of her monograph, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, to a comparison of *My Father’s House* to Margaret Atwood’s fictional autobiography, *Cat’s Eye*. King argues that both texts employ similar models of memory to “to enable its subject-narrator, who has [. . .] ‘forgotten’ a traumatic

⁴⁷ I asked Fraser about the hypnotherapist depicted in the memoir. She replied by e-mail saying that, “About eight months AFTER my memories had returned, and BEFORE writing *My Father’s House*, I made three trips at most to a hypnotherapist whose name I had seen on a door in a mall. In fact, I believe I went only twice, though I give the impression I went more often than that in *MFH*” (“Re: question”; original emphasis). The doctor was a GP who, for the most part, helped people quit smoking. As Fraser says, “Like most therapists of the time, he had no experience whatever with sexual abuse memories, and was a somewhat reluctant participant.” Rather than creating new memories, these sessions fleshed out memories she had already recovered.

childhood, to ‘see [her] life entire’” (8). In Atwood, the fictional character, Elaine, looks into her blue marble “cat’s eye” and remembers her “life entire” (*Cat’s Eye* 420), which, by comparison, and, indeed, King goes on to suggest, Fraser similarly fully recollects, all at once, her life entire. Whereas King accepts the novelistic convention that a first-person narrator has a more or less complete access to the past, she is less accepting of this model of remembering in autobiographies (64). She points to Fraser’s “sudden moment of revelation which is prepared for by means of an intricately plotted chain of events and coincidences. Over-determined or highly coincidental *fictional* plots may be unconvincing, but they obviously do not create the same kinds of doubt about the truth of the events being narrated as can arise in texts which claim autobiographical status” (64).

To make her argument that Fraser’s representation of memory recovery creates doubts about the veracity of those memories, King identifies two contrasting notions of memory in psychoanalytic theory, both developed to address traumatic memory: “[t]he first is suggested by Freud’s frequent use of the analogy between the recovery of the buried past and the excavation of an archaeological site; the second by his reference to the ‘retranscription’ of memories and the structural principle of *Nachträglichkeit*” (11). Used but not fully developed by Freud, the term *Nachträglichkeit* has been translated by Jean Laplanche as belatedness or afterwardness (11). King questions Fraser’s memories precisely because her recovery of them seems analogous to an archaeological unearthing of a knowable past, as in the first model of memory, rather than a belated retranslation of a forgotten, elusive past, as in the second model. Accordingly, King argues that the kind of self and narrative truth that Fraser constructs is flawed by her “archaeological metaphor” (62) of uncovering buried memories, which for King, is an outdated Freudian model “which has been thrown into question by recent work on the later Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit*,” which suggests reconstruction of the past rather than recovery (61). King insists that reconstruction changes the memory of the event, which changes its truth status: “[*Nachträglichkeit*] makes explicit the fact that memory, operating as it does in the present, must inevitably incorporate the awareness of ‘what wasn’t known then’” (12).

The quotations that King employs to make this point sometimes simplify Fraser’s process, making it sound as though her memories can be put neatly and simply together to form a whole. King argues, for example, that Fraser makes “explicit use of the

archaeological metaphor, comparing her resurrected memories of sexual abuse to ‘smashed hieroglyphic tablets,’ which, when she ‘finally began excavation’ had to be ‘fitted into patterns and dated’ (218)” (62). What she does not include is the passage in the memoir which precedes and complicates this one: “The memories of my other self are difficult to recapture because they are so *fragmentary*” (218; emphasis added). King slips over Fraser’s acknowledgement in the memoir that she has difficulty accessing many of her memories, yet she troubles Fraser’s understanding that her fragmented memories can be fitted together like a puzzle.

While I agree with King that memories are much more reconstructions than untarnished recoveries, her binary model of memory—that is, either repression *or* a more complicated form of re-writing past memories in the present—fails to account for the possibility of dissociated memories or altered states of consciousness, such as those of Fraser, that foreclose the possibility of retrieval. It is easy to understand from a psychoanalytic perspective that all memories are essentially false memories. There is, however, a fundamental difference between that claim and the claim that because all memories are false, they have no truth value whatsoever. Where this argument falls short is in its assumption that the fact of memory distortion means that Fraser’s abuse is open to question or did not occur. The process of remembering childhood traumas may indeed change those memories, which are always already corrupt versions of the real that can never be fully apprehended. The question becomes the extent to which the real encounter has been re-written and whether this re-writing necessarily corrupts its essential truth, that is, that sexual abuse occurred.

In her deployment of theories of narrative and memory to dissect the body of Fraser’s text, King brings to the fore the risks of autobiographical representation. In narrating their stories, survivors risk re-traumatization. As Leigh Gilmore says, autobiography “offers writers the opportunity to promote themselves as representative subjects, that is, as subjects who stand for others. It also threatens writers with unsympathetic scrutiny. [. . .] Public and private life are interwoven in such a way that either legitimation or shaming is always possible” (4). King’s analysis reinforces the divide between theories of memory and remembering subjects, discrediting, as Showalter does, Fraser as a witness to her own life. For King, “The text [. . .] demonstrates the

powerful appeal of the model of memory as total recovery of the past; even when the past is traumatic this model is nostalgic in its comforting assumption that nothing is lost and that wholeness and reintegration are possible” (64). By calling Fraser’s narrative impetus toward reintegration “nostalgic,” King asserts her scholarly authority over Fraser, marking her as gullible—entranced by an impossible vision of wholeness and healing. Like Showalter’s, King’s analysis cannot accommodate Fraser’s story.

While King is careful to say that her analysis “is not an attempt to disprove the facts of [Fraser’s] sexual abuse,” but rather to look at how her narrative constructs the “truth,” she proceeds, as Showalter did before her, to deconstruct Fraser’s narrative to establish precisely the questionable veracity of her memories. And, like Showalter, she does so, in part, by suggesting that Fraser’s claim to Multiple Personality Disorder is a construction, in this case, a narrative rather than hysterical one:

The repression of the memory of a few isolated incidents of infantile abuse is much easier to accept than the idea of the conscious and repeated repression of the knowledge and memory of a more or less continuous experience. The idea of a second self which “takes over” and even participates in the sexual relationship could be seen as a construction which overcomes this difficulty whilst also creating others in its place.
(76)

King questions that Fraser repressed abuses that continued into her adolescence and flatly says that “it becomes harder for the *reader* to accept” (85). King ignores a significant body of research that attests to a pattern of Dissociative Identity Disorder in adult survivors of child sexual abuse. While she does not go so far as to say that Fraser was not abused, King clearly expresses her incredulity towards Fraser’s story. The tenor of King’s criticism is thus representative of the breakdown in scholarship on Fraser: no one (except Showalter) wants to say that Fraser is lying, but many are skeptical of her story as she writes it.

Jane Kilby, for example, in *Violence and the Cultural Politics of Trauma* (2007), argues that despite Fraser’s insistence that she is telling a true story, “Fraser can do nothing to settle the questions that always come to haunt a claim to repressed sexual trauma: is it real? Is it really possible to forget that you were repeatedly abused and raped

throughout your childhood?” (48). Doubting but reluctant to completely disavow Fraser’s memories, Kilby concludes instead that by “borrowing the techniques of the novelist, Fraser has ended up telling a somewhat bad story, and one that trades structurally on the ‘thrill’ afforded a plot building towards a shocking denouncement” (64). Following King, Kilby sees Fraser’s plotting as sensational; however, there is nothing shocking about finding incest in a text carrying the subtitle, *A Memoir of Incest and Healing*. Kilby concludes that Fraser is a “second-rate novelist” and a “second-rate analyst” of her own life: “She reads her dreams too literally, while writing too obviously” (65). I have been reluctant to include Kilby’s evaluative comments about Fraser’s writing because they seem irrelevant to the larger issues raised by her memoir. On the other hand, Fraser’s “obvious” writing style, which is also to say something about the clarity of her prose, leaves critics nonplussed because of their preconceptions regarding the structure of trauma narratives as shifting, tentative, and fragmentary recordings of wounds too horrible to confront clearly and directly, as Fraser does.

In an interview with Janice Williamson about writing her memoir of incest, *Don’t: A Woman’s Word*, Elly Danica explains the technical difficulties she experienced in writing about her abusive childhood:

when I tried to write in what I thought were appropriate ways—how I’d been *taught* language—the writing was *awful*, almost sentimental, because when you try to put the story into “normal” narrative structure, the pain is not there. The language we are obliged to use works to obliterate or minimalize our pain. In patriarchal language we’re not supposed to tell the truth about our lives and our pain. (84; original emphasis)

Child sexual abuse, as Danica suggests, does not easily fit into prescribed patriarchal, humanist autobiographical traditions. If Fraser had used a more experimental form, would she have been subject to such criticism? Indeed, it is my contention that had Fraser called her memoir a novel, readers would have concluded that she had been sexually abused as a child. In using a conservative form to tell her radically other story, Fraser disrupts expectations created by the tradition upon which she draws. Sexual abuse narratives are necessarily limit cases: in their desire to know what really happened and

speaking the truth, they confront the limits of narrative models available to unravel that truth, and, in so doing, confront the limits of truth itself.

2.7.4 Narrative Coherence, Fragments, and Truth

Closely related to King's criticism that Fraser's memoir is unconvincing because of its insistence on memories as recoveries rather than reconstructions is the condemnation of Fraser's narrative as too coherent to be true. This line of argument, like King's, is compelling, particularly when one considers the structural aspects of most trauma narratives. Laurie Vickroy, in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), argues that traumatic narratives "internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures" (3). According to Vickroy, these narratives reflect the fragmentary and recursive aspects of traumatic experience: "Writers have created a number of narrative strategies to represent a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory, including textual gaps, [. . .] repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states" (29). Fraser's memoir seeks to compensate for her troubled relation to memory precisely through a narrative that recovers past traumas to make sense of them and to integrate them as a coherent part of her identity. Fraser carefully structures her narrative to make it comprehensible to herself and cogent for her readers. Rather than a series of fragments, as in Danica's memoir, Fraser begins her story with her childhood in a section called "Remembering," and then moves through her adolescence and adulthood until she recounts her memory recovery in "Revelation," and finally her healing process in "Resolution." Indeed, remembering, revelation, and resolution are part of Fraser's therapeutic process, which aims to reintegrate and make coherent what trauma severed in her childhood. Trauma narratives as a genre, however, tend to be more fragmentary and shifting than Fraser's clear and linear memoir.

Kathryn Robson, in "'Truth', Memory and Narrative in Memoirs of Child Sexual Abuse" (2010), takes up issues of coherence and form in traumatic autobiographies by comparing Fraser's memoir to Janice Williamson's, *Crybaby!* Published in 1998, *Crybaby!* is self-reflexively experimental, on the border between history and imagination, as Williamson tentatively narrates what she admits are sketchy, fragmentary recovered

memories of sexual abuse. The memoir is written in fragments which include photos, poems, captions, magazine excerpts, letters, prose sections, and reflections on scholarly quotations encompassing a range of theorists and philosophers, from French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray to the philosophers Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Bourdieu, and Roland Barthes to theorists of memory and trauma such as Shoshana Felman, Cathy Caruth, Judith Lewis Herman, Jennifer Freyd, and Ian Hacking. As an English professor, Williamson has written not only an erudite but a postmodern text that creates a dialectical relationship with and responds to contemporary theories of trauma and narrative. As such, the memoir marks a radical departure from the more traditional form of autobiography taken up by Fraser.

Whereas Fraser attempts to narrate a coherent story of her past, Williamson regards her past as elusive and its narration almost impossible. Writing in the gaps of her memory with full understanding of its fallibility, she asks, “is the fictive my only alternative to silence and repression?” (73). For Williamson, memory is always a reconstructive process, and therefore an imaginative act of narration. Robson compares Fraser’s memoir to Williamson’s to argue that narratives, like Fraser’s, in which a cohesive, meaningful self is articulated, are “bound up in cultural notions of ‘truth’ and integrity according to which ‘truth’ is somehow connected to coherence. Fraser judges her recovered memories to be ‘true’ because they make sense and cohere to her pre-constructed narrative models” (147). Clearly preferring Williamson’s incredulity towards memory and absolute truths, Robson insists that Williamson’s refusal to create a coherent, grand narrative of her life makes her story of abuse somehow truer than Fraser’s:

My reading of *Crybaby!* suggests that the “truth” of child sexual abuse lies in a fragmented, rather than coherent narrative, and that any attempt to establish a definitive “truth” or to construct a single narrative explanation works at the expense of other possible versions of the past. In the context of child sexual abuse, *Crybaby!* intimates, “truth” is itself fragmentary, located in the (crucially shifting) disjunction between different potential stories and subjects. The very attempt to measure and define “truth” is itself shaped by narrative; this does not mean abandoning the possibility of

establishing “what really happened”, but taking on board narrative discontinuities and gaps, exploring narrative’s capacity to invent and experiment, rather than reverting to a coherent and over-told story of villains and victims. (153)

I could not agree more with Robson insofar as she articulates a plea to admit experimental and creative elements into trauma stories. What I take issue with is the way she uses Fraser’s memoir to service her argument. Her suggestion that Fraser reverts to a “coherent and over-told story,” which is also to say a simple, clichéd story, while Williamson’s fragments complicate well-worn plots and ring true twists Williamson’s approach at the expense of Fraser’s. What Williamson is searching for is not a model that privileges fragments, but rather one that allows for their validity in the absence of more cohesive recollections. As Williamson says, “More work needs to be done in exploring how we can admit variations on stories, half-memories and imagined reveries into our understanding of child sexual abuse” (“Writing Aversion” 222). If memory is always suspect, what, then, is the point of putting one’s recollections into a narrative that makes sense of the past? The value of a coherent narrative, such as Fraser’s, lies in its therapeutic potential. To criticize, as Robson does, Fraser’s attempt to make sense of a life that eluded her for so many years by insisting that her effort to integrate fragments into a coherent narrative is disingenuous is to forestall her therapeutic process and foreclose alternate healthy plots in her life narrative.

2.8 The Achievement of *My Father’s House*

Brooks argues that patients enter psychoanalysis “because of the weakness of the narrative discourses that they present: the incoherence, inconsistency, and lack of explanatory force in the way they tell their lives” (47). The task of the psychoanalyst is to help the analysand integrate the fragments of past traumas into a story that makes sense of that past. The achievement of *My Father’s House* is precisely that it narrates a *coherent* life story. Psychology professor James Pennebaker researched the connection between translating past traumas from inchoate emotions into language. In *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, he argues that Multiple Personality Disorder, frequently linked to childhood sexual abuse, arises from extreme trauma that is

never discussed. The detachment of language-based experience from emotional experience creates the disorder; connecting the two can help to heal the individual sufferer: “Whereas the failure to translate powerful emotions into language appears to be psychologically unhealthy, linking the two systems is beneficial” (97). Active talk therapies are helpful treatments, says Pennebaker, but so too is writing, as it externalizes the event and preserves the memory (98). Pennebaker concludes by asserting the value of a coherent narrative to mental health:

People who benefit most from translating their experiences into language tend to write in a particular way. Just as we are drawn to good stories in literature or the movies, we need to construct coherent and meaningful stories for ourselves. Good narratives or stories, then, organize seemingly infinite facets of overwhelming events. Once organized, the events are often smaller and easier to deal with. Particularly important is that writing moves us to a resolution. Even if there is no meaning to an event, it becomes psychologically complete. (103)

I conclude, in part, with a paradox: Fraser is telling the truth about what traumas prevented her from encountering as real and registering as conscious events. What she could not know helped her adapt and survive. The truth of her story lies in her corroborating evidence, and in her life-long recursions into narrative. Like the Lady of Shalott, “weaving her endless tapestries from shadows in mirrors” (*MFH* 151), Fraser writes her story again and again. Her memoir, in the context of her autobiographical first novel, *Pandora*, her non-fiction, *The Book of Strange*, and her second, unpublished memoir, is more fruitfully viewed as but one of her repeated attempts to narrate her traumatic childhood. The truth of her famous memoir lies in these recurring acts of remembrance. Having said this, I turn to Judith Butler, who argues for the impossibility of truth in traumatic incest: “To avow the seriousness of the violation, which is ethically imperative, it is not necessary to compel the subject to prove the historical veracity of the ‘event.’ For it may be that the very sign of trauma is the loss of access to the terms that establish historical veracity, that is, where what is historical and what is true become unknowable or unthinkable” (156). Whereas most of Fraser’s critics put quotation marks around the word “truth,” Butler puts the “event” in quotation marks, signaling the

encounter as open to question rather than the truth. This is also to say that there is truth in traumatic missed encounters, “non-happenings” in Butler’s terms. Fraser’s story needs to be understood by what it cannot say, rather than simply by the discursive mode and genre in which she chooses to speak. Butler insists that a representation of traumatic incest,

must be read for what it indicates, but cannot say, or for the unsayable in what is said. What remains crucial is a form of reading that does not try to find the truth of what happened, but, rather, asks, what has this non-happening done to the question of truth? For part of the effect of that violation [. . .] is precisely to make the knowing of truth into an infinitely remote prospect; this is its epistemic violence. To insist, then, on verifying the truth is precisely to miss the effect of the violation in question, which is to put the knowability of truth into enduring crisis. (156-57)

Criticizing the veracity of Fraser’s memoir is, then, to miss that the repeated violations of Fraser as a child are precisely in the impossibly coherent adult representations of what could not be apprehended at the time. Fraser’s use of the autobiographic form brings to the fore the quandaries of representing traumas that have never been fully encountered but continue to haunt the victim. Occupying a site of contradiction and paradox, Fraser’s incest memoir reveals its truths through its crisis of truth. The fact that Fraser has written another memoir that revisits her many years of sexual abuse suggests that there are significant gaps in *My Father’s House*. I cannot say what those gaps are. What I can say is that if Fraser decides to publish her latest memoir, her critics will be forced to reexamine *My Father’s House* as a moment-in-time narration of her circumlocutory story. At the end of *My Father’s House*, Fraser writes, “Now I can close the coffin, truly close it” (242). Having said this, she returns to the coffin, and like Pandora, opens the lid again and again, as she continues to remember and weave the story of her past.

Chapter 3

3 (Re)Mediating Fictions: Representing Trauma in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*, Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning*

3.1 Introduction

This chapter extends my discussion of the limits of genre and the place of storytelling in writing traumatic memories, as Sylvia Fraser does in her memoir, *My Father's House*, to an analysis of the ways in which three Canadian novels similarly challenge conventional boundaries of genre and representation in their *fictional* articulation of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. I argued in my last chapter that because trauma troubles the border between what is real and what is imagined, creative writing techniques, such as Fraser's employment of italics and novelistic techniques, while controversial in autobiographies, are necessary in the narration and representation of encounters vexed not only by the distortions of time and memory, but also by the very nature of the traumatic encounter, which is often registered by the senses rather than through language. As Judith Lewis Herman argues through Pierre Janet,

Janet described normal memory as “the action of telling a story.”

Traumatic memory, by contrast, is wordless and static. [. . .] One observer describes the trauma story in its untransformed state as a “prenarrative.” It does not develop or progress in time, and it does not reveal the storyteller's feelings or interpretation of events. Another therapist describes the traumatic memory as a series of still snapshots or a silent movie; the role of therapy is to provide the music and words (175).

In the absence of a therapist to help give voice to unassimilated traumatic experiences, the characters in the novels I explore here perform the therapeutic work of giving account of their traumas by transforming traumatic memories into words, music, or pictures they can understand. Trauma, it seems, needs translation from experience to word, an act necessitating mediation through the imagination to make possible

interpretation. This chapter thus takes up three novels which all represent childhood traumas as arbitrated encounters, that is, as traumas that characters imaginatively recreate to mediate events too painful to apprehend directly: Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* employs the visual arts and music as principal aesthetic negotiators of the Piper family's many traumas; in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, it is the natural world of plants and animals through which Mala imaginatively expresses and heals from her abusive past; in Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, the fictional autobiography that Beth writes and the scrapbook that her mother "writes" encrypt traumatic memories and also carry a scripto-therapeutic purpose. Beth's and Maud's traumas are represented both through a coded form of writing and through the animal world, in particular, the Native figure of Coyote through which Beth imagines and stories her abuse.⁴⁸

These novels thus all represent childhood traumas as mediated sensory experiences that seem to require, like Fraser's memoir, imaginative and hybridized forms to recount stories whose access to the truth is never straightforward. And like Fraser, these authors transgress boundaries of form to tell stories that seem to defy linear narrative. As with Fraser's memoir, the novels I explore here find trauma's expression through flexible genres that incorporate both realism and acts of imagination. All employ conventions of the Gothic and magic realism to create hybridized forms that mix the fantastic with the real as a creative strategy in the narration of childhood traumas. The Gothic, however supernatural it can seem, serves to heighten an already gothic reality by capturing the horrors and uncanny hauntings that characterize the experience of child sexual abuse; similarly, magic realism, in its refusal to privilege the real over the unreal,

⁴⁸ It is perhaps telling that despite the horrific (and still sometimes elided) subject matter of these novels, they all share general popularity and critical acclaim. They were all short-listed for the Giller Prize (MacDonald and Anderson-Dargatz in 1996, and Mootoo in 1997), and also for the Amazon.ca First Novel Award in 1996. Indeed, Oprah Winfrey, for whom child sexual abuse was a frequent topic of discussion on her talk show, included MacDonald's novel as one of her Book Club selections in 2002. The public stage which MacDonald and her novel were given significantly increased its sales and, in my view, provided an important opportunity to engage the public with issues of childhood trauma.

provides these writers with a language to express traumas that are at once too real and too monstrous to comprehend.

It is important to note that all of the novels discussed in this chapter take up postcolonial issues, sharing a concern with colonial violence and racism. Interestingly, the novels were all published in 1996. Given that there are few examples in Canadian literature of sustained reflections upon childhood sexual abuse, I wonder if the publication date is more than a coincidence. It may be that by opening up a discourse to expose the many horrific legacies of colonialism, postcolonial studies collaterally provided a language for speaking about incest. In its discourse of exile, of retrieving repressed histories, and of what Homi Bhabha suggests is the “paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition”—that is, the “unhomely”—postcolonial theory provides a language which shares resonances with forms of domestic colonization such as child abuse (13). Bhabha insists that “To be unhomed is not to be homeless”: “The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow” (13). The home in all of these novels is “unhomely” for its haunted children.

The focus of this chapter, and what connects all three novels, is precisely the unhomely moment of abuse when the victim is psychologically undone in the shock of the trauma. These novels suggest that in this moment of trauma, the imagination takes over to ameliorate the event. Eugene L. Arva’s concept of the “traumatic imagination” is an essential component of what emerges from my reading of these three novels, that is, the therapeutically productive entwinement of trauma and the imagination. For Arva, the traumatic imagination is “the essential consciousness of survival to which the psyche resorts when confronted with the impossibility of remembering limit events” (*The Traumatic Imagination* 5). Arva suggests that the traumatic imagination is “an empathy-driven consciousness that enables authors and readers to act out and/or work through trauma by means of magical realist images” (5). He argues that the representation of the traumatic event is thus much more about the *experience* of the trauma than it is about the facts or reality of the event. The fictions I discuss here all work through their traumas by way of magical realist images that at once vex and offer up reparation for deeply disturbing events. Fiction allows writers and their characters the freedom to imaginatively encounter trauma by remediating its force by rewriting it.

3.2 “one thing can look like another”: Trauma and Representation in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*

Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees* has attracted considerable scholarly attention, in part, because of its gothic conventions and the renewed interest in understanding Canadian colonial history through the lens of the postcolonial gothic, and, in part, because of its foregrounding of what is implicit in Canada’s gothic, colonial past as it intersects with the postcolonial present: the rejoining of trauma and memory.⁴⁹ What the scholarship largely overlooks, however, is what I see as the novel’s chief insight into trauma and memory: that trauma is registered and remembered not through language but primarily through the senses as mediated representations of the event, that is, traumatic imaginings of the real event which simultaneously reveal and conceal their truths. Roger Luckhurst observes:

One of the central ways in which contemporary trauma has been conceived is around the symptom of the intrusive or recurrent image, the unbidden flashback that abolishes time and reimmerses you in the visual field of the inaugurating traumatic instant. There is a profound disjunction implied: the visual intrusion recurs because linguistic and memorial machineries completely fail to integrate or process the traumatic image. Perhaps, then, it is in the image that the psychic registration of trauma truly resides. (147)

Fall on Your Knees presents memories as visual images by employing film, painting, and pictures to arbitrate traumatic encounters. As Candida Rifkind insists, “As the characters struggle to represent to themselves mental pictures of traumatic

⁴⁹ Indeed, *Fall on Your Knees* is taken up by two authors in the recent edited collection of essays on Canadian literature and the Postcolonial Gothic. See Sugars, Cynthia, and Gerry Turcotte, eds. *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2009. See also Andrew Smith and William Hughes, *Empire and the Gothic* (2003) and Alison Rudd, *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (2010).

experiences, the visual comes to mediate between the subject's history and its representation in the present" (31). Music and performance are similarly advanced as languages of trauma through which characters register but never completely apprehend traumatic events. The novel seems to suggest that trauma always needs to be mediated through something, that it can never be experienced directly. In the moment of trauma, then, the novel's characters aestheticize the event, often literally as art, usually a painting, and then later recall the trauma in terms of abandoned art or dormant paintings partitioned off in their minds as too difficult to confront directly. The derivation of aesthetic is that it is both an aestheticization of the senses, a representation of sensual experience, and simultaneously an experience *of* the senses. As representation *and* experience, the aesthetic can both express the traumatic experience and re-materialize it all over again as a means of achieving psychological distance from it. What is at stake in this conception of trauma *as* representation is that trauma is always already a sensory composition, a re-presentation of the bewildering and horrific event, a restoration that can never achieve its pristine original state. Because of this, and as Frances learns in the novel, one thing looks like another, which suggests that while the traumatic encounter is a real event, it is experienced as less than real, more as a coded portraiture that returns and haunts the subject who encodes but cannot always access the trauma. The effect of this aesthetic distance, if you will, is to throw truth and knowability into constant crisis for not only the novel's characters, but also its readers.

The novel's opening frames questions of trauma, memory, and aesthetic perception through a series of "pictures" which invite the reader to apprehend the novel beyond language—to *see* its representations in sensory terms. The novel thus opens as a "Silent Picture" inaugurating its own haunting with the first line: "They're all dead now" (1). The narrator offers the reader "a picture of the town where they lived. New Waterford"(1). The reader is invited to look down at this picture, as if "from the height of a church steeple," ironically suggesting a moral high ground or perhaps a similarly ironic echoing of the long Canadian literary tradition of the poet on a height of land.⁵⁰ Either

⁵⁰ One thinks, for example, of Thomas Cary, Charles G.D. Roberts, and Duncan Campbell Scott to name a few.

way, the narrative seems to invite the reader to look down upon it, to take a bird's eye view and mentally frame it. Rather than a picturesque, bucolic landscape, the narrative gaze moves from the mining town—"Company houses. Company town"—over the "sighing" sea, to invite the reader to rest her eyes squarely upon a private, domestic scene of trauma: "a *picture* of their house as it was then" (1; emphasis added). The reader is asked to imagine the house without being given any indication of the impending traumas within its walls, which I understand as an early suggestion of the essential unreadability of the traumatic events of this novel.

The reader follows this unreadable picture to a "picture" of Materia's death, head in the oven à-la-Sylvia Plath. The narrative, however, obfuscates this scene of suicide by signalling a fairy tale instead: it's a "black and white picture," with her head "half in half out of the oven like the witch in Hansel and Gretel" (2). Not just a picture, there is a smell: rotten eggs. The picture registers the trauma through the visual and olfactory senses. This "picture" stands in as a metonym for traumatic memory, in this instance, of Materia's suicide, and like traumatic memory, it veils the truth by presenting it yet keeping it out of the range of what is fully known. Cathy Caruth theorizes the connection between literature and traumatic experience as that which is both known and unknown: "If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (3). The pictures MacDonald employs similarly lay at a point of knowing and not knowing. MacDonald employs the language of literature in sensory terms to represent the troubled intersection of fiction, truth, and traumatic encounters.

MacDonald's strategy of arbitrating traumatic encounters through aesthetic representations is on display, albeit cryptically, as the narrator continues to offer up a series of what are called "pictures," images that represent facts to the reader without revealing hidden truths. There is a "picture" of James asleep in the green wingback chair (2), which seems innocent enough, but further on in the novel, the reader learns that it is in this chair that James sexually abuses his daughter, Frances (375). There is a "picture" of Ambrose's empty crib. What the reader is not told is that Frances, in trying to baptize

Ambrose, inadvertently drowns him in the creek. Following a “picture” of Mercedes holding her rosary, finger on lips saying, ““Shshsh”” (2), as if to say, “these pictures are a secret,” comes a “moving picture” that “is also a silent one” (3) of Frances at the creek. The shift from still to moving pictures is marked by a series of questions which suggest the narrator’s/viewer’s lack of comprehension of the scene of Frances at the creek: “What is she doing in the middle of the creek, in the middle of the night? And what’s she hugging to her chest [. . .] ?” (3). The creek is a paradigmatic scene of trauma for Frances, but the reader is only given fragments of the horrors she has just witnessed and experienced. The central traumas of the novel are thus all represented as a series of pictures that the reader cannot possibly decipher until the novel’s conclusion. These pictures function as aestheticized traumatic memories that cannot be encoded into language. They represent facts but not the truth of what happened. As such, and as I argue, these pictures frame the novel’s concern with how trauma is imagined and recreated by its characters.

The pictures thus work to gesture towards traumas not yet revealed. Joel Baetz argues that the pictures in *Fall on Your Knees* are uncanny ones that have been “previously repressed or turned away and that, at a later moment, [return] to full view” (71). I want to suggest that these pictures also mimic the workings of traumatic memory, both through their sensory recordings of events, and in the narrative structure, which is based on the principal of belatedness whereby knowledge of the facts of the traumas are withheld.⁵¹ Caruth contends that belatedness is a grounding principal of traumatic experience: “Traumatic experience [. . .] suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (*Unclaimed Experience* 91-92). The shards of traumatic memory that are presented in this first creek scene cannot be understood by the reader or narrator as they require translation from the language of trauma to narrative. The “moving picture” asks the reader to “Imagine you can hear the creek trickling. Like a girl telling a secret in a language so much like our own” (3). The

⁵¹ Baetz similarly argues that “*Fall on Your Knees* is itself an uncanny narrative, both structurally and thematically” (74).

reader is asked to respond through the sense of hearing to the language of trauma which is “a secret language so much like our own,” but importantly not the same as our own. Yet traumatic language, in its own way, is a more faithful representation of the trauma itself. The narrator suggests that if Frances were asked what she was doing at the creek, “even if she were to answer, we wouldn’t know what she was saying, because, although this is a moving picture, it is also a silent one” (3). Wordless, the traumatic memory retains its force without yielding its knowledge. Like the scrapbook in *Cure for Death by Lightning*, these “Silent Pictures” record submerged memories that will surface throughout the course of the narrative.

This three-page opening chapter ends, importantly, with a reference to the only surviving picture of Kathleen. The picture is a significant and recurring marker of an array of traumatic memories central to the novel. A short chapter entitled “Moving Picture” recounts a photographer’s many attempts to secure a picture of his moving target, Kathleen, whose uncontrollable laughter, sparked by her lively exchanges with her father, James, precludes a good, still shot. The final picture that he manages to take memorializes the idyllic relationship between James and his daughter before the rape, while at the same time signaling the impending sexual abuse and its tragic consequences: pregnancy and the butchering of Kathleen by Materia as she performs an impromptu Caesarean section ostensibly to save the twins, who are, of course, a product of that rape: “James sneaks up behind the camera and pulls a cross-eyed face at Kathleen. She flops forward, hands on her knees, laughing into the camera, ‘Daddy!’—while at the same instant Materia appears in the window behind her and waves—*snap*. Through the lens, Materia’s hand fractures into light, framing Kathleen’s blur of hair. Materia must be holding something shiny” (80).

The reader learns on the next page that Materia is holding scissors. The “*snap*” of the camera then echoes the snap of the scissors which Materia uses to cut up her kidneys for her steak and kidney pies and which she ultimately uses to cut up Kathleen. The scissors also signal Materia’s suicide following Kathleen’s death, and it does so, again, through the senses. As Materia literally roasts in the oven, Frances and Mercedes smell kidneys and wonder without irony why Materia is baking in the middle of the night (168). This picture is indeed a moving one, and not simply because Kathleen cannot stay still.

Like trauma, the deployment of the pictures is symptomatic of a reality that cannot be captured. The traumas that the picture signifies are not static but shifting as layers of memory are added to the narrative in a succession of traumatic flashbacks. Encoded in the novel's opening chapter, this picture visually encapsulates the traumas yet to come without revealing them. In its constitutive ambiguity, the picture functions as traumatic memory itself, intruding upon the characters and narrative action throughout the novel. In an echoing of this understanding, and of Kathleen's bad case of the giggles, the traumatized Frances bursts into hysterical laughter at Matera's funeral, a laughter which James and Mercedes mistake for crying:

Frances learns something in this moment that will allow her to survive and function for the rest of her life. She finds out that *one thing can look like another*. That the facts of a situation don't necessarily indicate anything about the truth of a situation. In this moment, fact and truth become separated and commence to wander like twins in a fairy-tale, waiting to be reunited by that special someone who possesses the secret of telling them apart. (142; emphasis added)

What Frances learns is what trauma teaches: fact and truth are not interchangeable terms; one thing can look like another, and, moreover, one thing *does* look like another as traumatic memories are visually mediated and represented in the borderland of fact and fiction.

The following chapter, "Cave Paintings," extends the visual nature of the traumatic encounter to include its moment of registry. Upon pounding his way through the attic door to the scene of Kathleen's death, James perceives it as a painting: "When the attic door finally gave way, James saw this silent portrait: *Death and the Young Mother*. It's an overdone, tasteless, melodramatic painting. A folk painting from a hot culture. Naive. Grotesque. Authentic" (143).⁵² James achieves distance from the scene of

⁵² This is likely a reference to the 1861 etching by Rodolphe Bresdin called "Death and the Maiden." The novel is also replete with musical intertexts, recalling here Franz Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* and also Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman's 1990 *Death and the Maiden*, in which a woman is raped by her captors while Schubert's composition is played. Roman Polanski adapted the play to film in 1994.

horror by encoding and aestheticizing it as art. James's racism, which sparked his surprise trip to New York to collect Kathleen, and provoked his rape of her, contributes to the rendering of this portrait as primitive; however, the portrait as a "cave painting" gestures towards something more primal and originary as it connotes a pre-language of schematic drawing. Accordingly, the scene is "not a gauzy, Victorian death scene. No fetishized feminine pallor, no agnostic slant of celestial light, no decorously distraught husband. The portrait is in livid colour" (143). The "overdone" and "melodramatic" character of the portrait corresponds to the excess inherent in trauma: by definition, trauma overwhelms with its extravagant horror. As James looks upon Kathleen's "ravaged" body, the sheets "black with blood," "the Grandmother"—Materia—"looks straight out from the picture at the viewer," James (143).⁵³ James as "viewer" distances himself from the traumatic encounter and is more like a museum spectator than a participant. Bessel A. van der Kolk, psychiatry professor and clinician whose work focuses on trauma and posttraumatic stress, confirms that traumatic encounters are usually apprehended as sensory representations of the event:

Numerous commentators on trauma [. . .] keep noting that trauma is organized in memory on a perceptual level. [. . .] Clinical experience and our reading of a century of observations by clinicians dealing with a variety of traumatized populations have led us to postulate that memories of the trauma tend, at least initially, to be experienced as fragments of sensory components of the event: as visual images; olfactory, auditory, or kinaesthetic sensations; or intense waves of feelings that patients usually claim to be representations of elements of the original traumatic event. (287)

While perhaps less fragmentary than van der Kolk's clinical understanding of the traumatic encounter, James's graphic portraiture here reveals trauma to be not so much a crisis of representation beyond and outside of language as it is crisis *as* representation,

⁵³ Materia's status as grandmother to the babies is emphasized while James's status as the father is buried and supplanted by his role as "viewer."

and perhaps also representation *as* crisis, that is, the urgency to represent to make sense of things.

Cave paintings also recall Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in book 7 of *Republic*, where the cave is a kind of cinema in which prisoners, chained and able to look only to the cave's back wall, see reflections of the truth as dark shadows from the outside world, where the blinding firelight of Truth shines. In Plato's description, once a prisoner is unchained and free from the shadows, he walks out of the cave into the blinding light – which is blinding as well as illuminating. Being accustomed to dark shadows, it takes time to interpret the light. In both darkness and light, Plato suggests, the senses can be tricked. In MacDonald's reworking of it, traumatic memory is shown to reveal its truths both in vivid colour and by the light of the dark, by what cannot be seen. The narrative concedes that the painting, *Death and the Young Mother*, is not a literal one, "but a moment freeze-framed by James's eye" (144). Not simply an image or a snapshot, this is an aesthetic image, a painting that is both blinding and illuminating, blurring fact and truth. The aesthetic representation suggests that the scene is always already subject to the shaping imagination of the viewer, and that traumatic memory is always already to some extent an aesthetic process, which does not make it any less "authentic."

The narrator then asks, "What can you do with such a picture? You never want to see it again yet you can't bring yourself to burn it or slash it to dust. You have to keep it" (144). The hope chest which lies at the foot of the bed in the attic functions as a memory chest throughout the novel, as it does here for James. A voice in his head suggests a course of action for the picture: "*Put it in the hope chest, James,*" put the trauma aside, keep it as a picture rather than incorporate it into language and knowledge (144; original emphasis). The portrait lies like an heirloom in the chest in space but outside of time: "for a second James feels as though that's what he's looking at—an old portrait that he hid in the hope chest many years ago and just stumbled upon again. This temporary confusion is a premonition; it tells him that he will never get over this sight. That it will be as fresh fourteen years from now, the colours not quite dry, just as it is today" (144). James's premonition suggests that past and present collapse in the confrontation with the intrusive traumatic image. The fresh colours signify a fresh wound even as the portrait lies dormant. As Caruth insists, trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that

addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). As the narrative makes explicit, James loses access to the “reality or truth” of the trauma he has witnessed:

James goes out of the room, but not far. His legs give way and he collapses outside the fallen door, unconscious. He doesn’t hear the first cries of the babies inside. The involuntary part of his mind does, though. It is just not conveying the message. It is keeping it on a crumpled piece of paper on the floor of its cave. It is taking a break, admiring its cave painting by the light of the dark. (144).

The traumatic memory appears to be stowed in James’s unconscious as a repressed rather than dissociated memory. James still has access to the crumpled piece of paper, but he is “taking a break,” as his unconscious paradoxically admires the painting, which is to say his aestheticized traumatic memory, “by the light of the dark,” or by what is revealed by what he cannot see.

The metaphor of the cave painting is extended to what the narrator refers to as the “cave mind” or the unconscious. Little Frances, who is five “going on six” (140), witnesses the same scene as James, although she does so differently:

The difference between Frances and James is that, although she sees a version of the same horrible picture, Frances is young enough still to be under the greater influence of the cave mind. It will never forget. But it steals the picture from her voluntary mind—grand theft art—and stows it, canvas side to the cave wall. It has decided, “If we are to continue functioning, we can’t have this picture lying around.” So Frances sees her sister and, unlike her father, will forget almost immediately, but, like her father, will not get over it. (146)

Both James and Frances create their own representation or “version” of the same traumatic scene, but in the case of Frances, the traumatic memory is dissociated rather than repressed. Unlike James whose memory lies on the cave floor awaiting retrieval, Frances’s memory is stolen—“grand theft art”—and hidden from her conscious understanding, “canvas side to the cave wall.” References to art are repeatedly

emphasized in this passage foregrounding trauma as representation of the event while also asserting its capacity to slip away from the subject.

This figurative rendering of traumatic memory as a painting hanging in the mind, back side to the front so that it cannot be seen, shares the features of inaccessible, dissociated memories that can be recovered, as was the case with Sylvia Fraser, at a later time in life when the subject is psychologically able to assimilate them. Frances forgets “almost immediately,” but her unconscious “cave mind” does not: “By now she has already lost her conscious grip on the events of two nights ago, when the babies were born. She has shivered them away. The cave mind has entered into a creative collaboration with the voluntary mind, and soon the two of them will cocoon memory in a spinning wealth of dreams and yarns and finger-paintings. Fact and truth, fact and truth . . .” (150-51; original ellipsis). The weaving of fact and truth recalls Frances’s earlier epiphany that “one thing can look like another,” that facts do not represent truth. The distinction between fact and truth is much more subtle than the binary one expects with traumatic memory, that is, between fact and fiction, what is real versus what is not. MacDonald’s nuanced insight into traumatic memory as a tricky portraiture reveals that these memories are less about falsity or lies than they are about access to the truth, which is woven by “a spinning wealth of dreams and yarns,” as Frances’s traumatic imagination collaborates with the facts of the event.

Similarly, in unearthing her memory of Frances and James in the rocking chair, Mercedes, like James, represents the traumatic memory as a repressed, abandoned piece of art in her mind:

She has kept this memory on top of a pile of things at the back of her mind. Not buried. Right there where she can see it every time she passes the open door. But as long as she keeps it in the back room, she can believe that it belongs with the rest of the old junk. As long as she doesn’t talk about it, it can remain overlooked by amateurs and experts alike: the gilt frame covered with dust, the painting gummed over with neglect—who would guess what a piece of work lies dormant there. (374)

Like James’s crumpled piece of paper on the floor of the cave, accessible but not accessed, Mercedes’s memory is available to her if she chooses to look at it. This

passage—itself a beautiful representation of the workings of the unconscious and repressed memory—stages the visual and aesthetic aspects of traumatic memory. Mercedes decides to view her long-ignored painting: “It was here in the living-room. The painting from the junk pile is called *Daddy and Frances in the Rocking-Chair*. But there never was a rocking-chair, in this room or any other. Just the pale green wingback” (374). Fact and truth intersect as Mercedes continues to remember: “She’s sitting on Daddy’s lap, sideways, facing me. Rocking. He’s rocking her. But it’s not working, she’s wide awake” (375). The fact is that it is not a rocking chair; the truth is that it is a rocking chair.

This recursive scene was first narrated in an earlier chapter, a subsection of which is entitled “The Rocking Chair” (167). It is the night of Kathleen’s funeral. As Mercedes descends the stairs to the rocking-chair scene, she smells kidneys without understanding that she is smelling Materia in the oven. The scene of sexual molestation is similarly presented yet missed. None of the details of the sexual abuse which are fully narrated on pages 375-76 are detailed here. The clues, like the “puppy sounds” James is making, are given alternate explanations. The only real hint is when Frances tells Mercedes, ““It doesn’t hurt”” (168). My marginal notes from my first reading of the novel say, “What doesn’t hurt?” Suspicious but without sufficient grounds for coming to a conclusion, I could only pass over the scene as potential foreshadowing of what was to come. To put it another way, I could only read the scene as the characters in the novel read their traumatic memories: a cave painting facing the wall, a scrap of paper that is not looked at, a dusty old painting in a junk pile—there in front of my eyes as a fact without revealing its truth. It takes another two-hundred pages for the truth to be revealed. In its repetitive and belated structure, the narrative internalizes the process of traumatic experience. It furthermore attempts to represent the dynamics of traumatic experience in its recursive structure, in its reticence, and in its suggestion that there is an analogy for traumatic memory in the notion of storage and reclamation.

Like pictures and paintings, music is similarly employed to both provide aesthetic distance while at the same time providing a visceral, sensory re-presentation of the traumas. MacDonald uses music narratively, as a mediating language of trauma which articulates childhood abuse through performance. Trauma as performance is perhaps less

radical than it sounds. The traumatic imagination always already re-dramatizes the scene of trauma to make it manageable for its victim. Dina Georgis, in a sustained analysis of the workings of trauma, specifically through jazz music in the novel, argues that “Because music defies discursive representation, it functions as an effective location for the unrepresentable character of traumatic history” (215). Music is representation without image or as close to leaving image behind as possible. In this sense, music avoids the crisis of representation by doing away with representation itself, although music does have affective resonances, making it perhaps more visceral in this way.

In general terms, music shapes the novel and resonates throughout its pages.⁵⁴ One need only think of its title, a reference to the song, “Oh Holy Night,” itself the ironic title of the chapter in which Kathleen and Materia both melodramatically die. In the staging of this chapter, one can almost hear the song in the background, as Kathleen, a talented singer, is operatically butchered by her mother, who gouges a cross in her belly. More than simply thematic, however, music becomes a guiding structural principal for the organization of the text. Indeed, as MacDonald (a playwright as well as a novelist) attests, “when I was writing this book, I conceived of it as a musical. [. . .] Not just because I use music in it but because the whole thing should be and is musical. I wrote it in three movements, and there are leitmotifs that recur” (146). The recursive nature of the text thus not only mimes the symptoms of traumatic stress; it is also a musical structure, based upon repetitions and modulations of the same theme. Moreover, whereas the text links visual art with traumatic memory, music becomes explicitly linked to traumas of childhood abuse, predominantly in two ways: as an emotional trigger and, perhaps most interestingly, as a musical performance of traumatic experiences.

Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” is repeatedly figured as an emotional and sexual trigger for James.⁵⁵ Like the novel itself, the Sonata is structured in three parts. In its first

⁵⁴ Trish Salah, for example, analyzes the novel in terms of what she argues is its fugue structure: “If *Fall on Your Knees* is a fugue, it is uncannily so, a double fugue with counter-subject haunting subject”—by which she means trauma and desire (246).

⁵⁵ Beethoven dedicated the Moonlight Sonata to his seventeen-year-old student, Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, with whom he had been in love. Beethoven was thirty-one when he completed the composition in 1801. At the time, such a passion would have not have been considered child abuse; however, their gap

instantiation in the novel, the sonata is connected to James's childhood, his abusive father, and the subsequent loss of his mother. Before abandoning James and his mother, his father dismantles their beloved piano. The fifteen-year-old James spends the next six months putting it back together, but, by then, his mother has died, giving birth to another child. The first thing James plays on the reassembled piano is the opening four bars of the "Moonlight Sonata." Before torching the piano, James adjusts the C sharp. The "Moonlight Sonata" is written in C sharp minor, although the text does not make this explicit. Instead, in scenes that follow, the C sharp is used as a code to signal that James will be triggered emotionally and sexually.

The first instance occurs when James meets Materia, who is "twelve going on thirteen" (12). The child, Materia, sneaks up to the piano while James is tuning it and she strikes the C sharp: "Had she hit E flat things might never have progressed so far, but she hit C sharp" (12). E flat major is the key of Beethoven's "Eroica" symphony and is considered a heroic key. Here, the C sharp connects James to his lost mother, and triggers his unheroic sexual attraction to the child, Materia, whom he exoticizes as an evil enchantress (13). This scene undergoes a series of modulations as the novel progresses. It recurs when, again, James is tuning the piano. This time, Kathleen surprises him and "strikes a chord" (60). Thus triggered, and as if re-enacting his own childhood abuse, James strikes Kathleen. Immediately remorseful, James "finds the small of her back, crushes her to him" (60), following which "A life and a warmth enter his body that he hasn't felt since—that he has rarely felt" (61). The gap of the hyphen is the space of the original seduction of Materia. Now James preys upon his own child, "her breath so soft and fragrant, *milk and honey are beneath your tongue . . .*" (61; original emphasis and ellipsis). James appears to be shocked by his behaviour and stops himself from further abusing Kathleen.

in ages gestures towards this. The dramatic, haunting melody of the first movement is thematically well suited to the passions of James.

As the C sharp continues to accrue layers of meaning for James, sound intersects with sight as James listens to Mercedes play “Oh My Darlin’ Clementine” on the piano. When Mercedes is finished the song, James offers to fix the C sharp, which Mercedes concedes is “so annoying” (260).⁵⁶ James then sees the photograph on the piano, discussed earlier on, of the laughing Kathleen with Materia in the background. Past and present entwine for James in what seems like a traumatic flashback:

Now is the dim past. Then was the shining present. He hears her laugh. He hears the water trickling in the creek and flash goes Materia’s waving hand. [. . .] You think you’re safe. Until you see a picture like that. And then you know you’ll always be a slave to the present because the present is more powerful than the past, no matter how long ago the present happened. (260)

The enmeshing of past and present suggests the immediacy of the traumatic memory, which is sparked by both visual and auditory stimuli. As van der Kolk suggests, “the very nature of traumatic memory is to be dissociated, and to be stored initially as sensory fragments that have no linguistic components” (289). Likewise, James’s traumatic memories are stored as visual pictures and auditory sounds that appear to be disconnected from language and felt wholly through his senses.

The scene continues with James now fixed on his picture of the past: “The breath assaults James’s lungs and he comes out of the black and white picture back into the room of living colour” (260). As James tries to understand which of his daughters is responsible for displaying the picture of Kathleen, Frances, in her effort to deflect attention from the guilty Mercedes, provokes James with questions about Kathleen,

⁵⁶ I checked the sheet music for the song “Oh My Darlin’ Clementine” to ascertain the key in which it was written. There is one flat, which means that it is either in F major or D minor. If it were in D minor, the C would be raised, and there would be C sharps throughout. Strangely, however, the song appears to be in F major, without any C sharps in it. I am not sure what to make of this: it could be a textual error, although MacDonald’s strong knowledge of music makes this unlikely. My conjecture is that the song thematically connects James to his “darlin,” Kathleen, which is why the C sharp registers in his mind when he hears the song. There is a link through the lyrics as well: “in a cavern in a canyon, excavatin’ for a mine. . .”; and, of course, “you are lost and gone forever. . .” “dreadful sorry, Clementine”; and also and importantly, “How I missed my Clementine, / till I kissed her little sister.”

including this one: ““Was she a slut?”” (261). Although the text does not reveal James’s thoughts, Frances’s question would no doubt trigger memories of the day James found Kathleen with her lover, Rose, and his subsequent rape of Kathleen. James’s response is to take Frances out to the shed for a beating. This scene of abuse is articulated entirely in musical terms, as a sustained performance of traumatic violence:

In the shed the performance has begun. The upbeat grabs her neck till she’s on point, the downbeat thrusts her back against the wall, two eighth-notes of head on wood, knuckles clatter incidentally. In the half-note rest he lights up her pale face with the blue wicks of his eyes, and the lyrics kick in *con spirito*. [. . .] The next two bars are like the first, then we’re into the second movement, swing your partner from the wall into the workbench, which catches her in the small of the back, grace-note into stumble because she bounces, being young. *Staccato* across the face, then she expands her percussive range and becomes a silent tambourine. [. . .] We’ve gone all stately; it’s whole notes from here on in. She flies against another wall and he follows her trajectory, taking his time now because we’re working up to the finale. One more clash of timbers and tissues and it’s finally opera, “I’ll cut the tongue right out of your head.” She sticks her tongue out at him and tastes blood. Cue finale to the gut. Frances folds over till she’s on the floor. Modern dancer. (262-63)

As a language of trauma, music is used to mediate the violence without diminishing its force through a performance that is almost a therapeutic parody of violence while it also contains and frames the incident. In a way, Frances loses her humanity in the attack and becomes a “silent tambourine,” a dissociated instrument; however, she is not just a silent victim. She becomes an instrument through whom the violent “utterances” of her abuser are articulated. By articulating the beating of Frances as a performance with an operatic finale, MacDonald accentuates the theatricality of traumatic experience as if to suggest that trauma always plays itself out dramatically, here backed up by a full symphony of sound. This gestures towards trauma’s excess in that it is always, by definition, too much to comprehend and beyond straightforward representation; yet the musical performance *is* a representation. Like the visual

apprehensions of trauma expressed through the paintings, *Death and the Young Mother* and *Daddy and Frances in the Rocking-Chair*, the beating of Frances similarly foregrounds itself as a representation or performance of the event rather than the event itself, which can only ever be a reconstruction of that which is too horrific to comprehend. At the end, Frances collapses not straightforwardly as a terribly abused child; she falls into a tableau at the conclusion of the show: a “modern dancer” that stands in for Frances’s traumatized body.

Music and dance become Frances’s creative languages to articulate traumas that she cannot otherwise speak aloud. While the narrative withholds its truths about James’s incestuous abuse of Frances until near its conclusion, Frances nonetheless cries out, most radically in her provocative song and dance performances at Jameel’s speakeasy. Frances’s body becomes an uneasy site of ambiguity in the performance of her “Baby Burlesque.” In a mockery of what it means to be a good girl, Frances wears her Girl Guide uniform to the make-shift bar whereupon she attempts to entertain the men with “a solo second-hand foxtrot” and her “spindly kewpie-doll voice” with little success (288). She quickly downs three drinks and “cranks the player-piano. The mechanical thumping of a hobnail army renders ‘Coming thru’ the Rye’ and Frances wriggles out of her uniform and down to her skivvies via the highland fling cum cancan. They start watching” (288). The stripping of the Girl Guide uniform troubles notions of childhood innocence as Frances acts out sexually beyond her years.⁵⁷ In fact, her rebellious striptease is one of the main clues offered by the text that Frances was sexually abused as a child. Readers are not yet privy to the fact that James has been molesting her since the night of Kathleen’s funeral. Like a traumatized subject, the reader can only understand what Frances is performing belatedly; and like traumatic memory itself, Frances’s song and dance routines re-enact her traumatic wounds while obfuscating the full truth of that abuse. As Frances begins to prostitute herself to Jameel’s customers for extra money, her

⁵⁷ One representative example occurs when Frances decides that she wants to be expelled from school. She callously accomplishes this by sexually abusing a boy who wants to become a priest (290-91). That Frances is capable of such actions can be understood in terms of her own abuse; however, this is one of many scenes that complicates Frances’s status as a victim. As James recognizes, “She’s as beat as she’ll ever be” (291).

performances at “the speak” become more and more elaborate. The choice of the burlesque is an interesting one. The style is flamboyant, exaggerated, theatrical, and parodic. Indeed, she seems to parody her own sexual abuse for the amusement of the crowd:

Frances is a bizarre delta diva one night, warbling in her thin soprano, “Moonshine Blues” and “Shave ’em Dry.” Declaring, an octave above the norm, “I can strut my pudding, spread my grease with ease, ’cause I know my onions, that’s why I always please.” The following Saturday will see her stripped from the waist up, wearing James’s old horsehair war sporran as a wig, singing, “I’m Just Wild about Harry” in pidgin Arabic. She turns the freckle on her nose to an exclamation mark with a stroke of eyeliner, rouges her cheeks, paints on a cupid’s-bow mouth and dances naked behind a home-made fan of seagull feathers, “I wish I could shimmy like my sister, Kate.” (292)

Frances’s burlesque performance brings to the fore the spectacle of trauma in which the victim re-engages to remember and relive the experience indirectly yet theatrically. Frances seems to be replaying, night after night, masked versions of her traumas in what Caruth calls trauma’s “repetitive seeing” (*Unclaimed Experience* 92). Frances has not yet remembered her childhood traumas, but as Caruth argues, “The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight—thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known” (92). Frances’s musical versions of her abuse express and expose what she cannot otherwise articulate: “just in case any one’s in danger of getting more horny than amused, there’s always a surprise to wilt the wicked and stimulate the unsuspecting. For example, she may strip down to a diaper, then stick her thumb in her mouth. ““Yes my heart belongs to Daddy, so I simply couldn’t be ba-ad. . .”” (293; original ellipsis). Frances here foregrounds the absurdity of child sexual abuse. She seems to be saying that she could just as easily be a sexualized baby as a sexualized child. She seems to ask if there is any material difference. This example shows, however, that there is, because the baby costume prevents titillation whereas the child dressed as a Girl Guide seems able to produce it. Candida Rifkind similarly

observes that Frances's burlesque "blurs distinctions between adult and childhood sexuality to both titillate and deflate her admirers" (40). Rifkind further argues that the body Frances "exposes to the audience is a series of masks that transgress social categories and moral boundaries separating genders, nations, adult sexuality and childhood innocence, domesticity and public performance" (40). I would add to this that Frances's transgressive performances and costumes also function as traumatic masks that operate like the pictures and portraits discussed earlier, that is, as ersatz versions of traumatic memories that mediate the real traumatic event.

Indeed, traumatic memories are explicitly linked to masks in a scene following Frances's series of childhood traumas, which begins with her inadvertently drowning Ambrose in the creek following her witnessing of the dead Kathleen's ravaged body, and culminates in the death of her mother, which also marks the onset of James's sexual molestations of her. Little Frances, who is five "going on six" (140), processes memories of this terrible series of events as cloaked representations of what actually happened: "It's a good thing Mumma's gone,' Frances would say to herself, going over and over in her mind all the terrible things she couldn't quite recall—weaving the threads together into an *ingenious cloak of motley*. 'Because if Mumma were here, she would know what a bad girl I've been'" (174; emphasis added). Like many abused children, Frances internalizes the traumatic events as the fault of her own, and she does so vis-à-vis strands of memory that she shapes into an "ingenious cloak of motley." Connecting traumatic memory to the motley of a court jester or harlequin makes Frances somewhat of a "trickster" figure or, perhaps more accurately, the Fool of the novel. Like the wise Fools of Shakespeare's plays, Frances speaks truths that are not known or understood by other characters. Leo Taylor observes Frances in her Girl Guide uniform leaving the speak wearing her performance make-up and jewellery: "A lot of those men in there, and the women too who laugh along, they see her as their clown. The whore part is bad enough, but who ever heard of a whore clown?" (350). As whore clown, Frances not only amuses and even titillates the crowd; her performance is also both a traumatic return to and a scathing parody of her childhood sexual abuse. As a metaphor for the workings of traumatic memory, the cloak of motley shields Frances from memories of the night at the creek that she will not fully recover until near the novel's conclusion and with the help of

James; however, the cloak of motley has a performative function as it also dramatizes the traumas through the whore-clown burlesque performances. Rifkind argues that “Frances’s burlesque dancing and prostitution reveal her apprehension of the body as a site of a reality that is always an illusion” (40). I want to suggest that by acting as both a site (and sight) of reality and illusion *at the same time*, Frances’s body performs the work of traumatic memory for the delectation of her customers.

The novel sustains its emphasis on the murky truth-status of representations of trauma through to its conclusion. The third to last chapter is called “Armistice Day,” which is the day James went to New York, found Kathleen with her lover, Rose, and then raped her. That Remembrance Day is the day that James rapes Kathleen is significant. The event, ironically, has been lost to memory, except perhaps for James, and yet it is the trauma that is the source of so many of the traumas that follow: the day becomes a memorial day for what cannot be fully remembered. Like traumatic memory, this chapter is offered belatedly at the end of the book. This latency is complicated by the fact that “Armistice Day” recalls an earlier moment in the text where Lily marches in the Armistice Day parade. Music, pageantry, and costume are connected to memory and time as the future (child of James and Kathleen, Lily) is presented in the text before the past (Kathleen). The effect is to suggest a powerful connection between and intermingling of the past, present, and future through permeable traumatic memories. Because the text is structured upon a series of traumatic memories that change as they are re-written and re-presented over time, the reader can never be sure of the reliability of the narrative. In fact, in this Remembrance Day chapter, which will ostensibly finally reveal the memory that Kathleen was indeed raped by James, truth is thrown into question from the start by its epigraph from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “*Of wicked and most cursèd things to speak I now commence. / Ye daughters and ye parents, all go, get you far from hence; / Or if ye minded be to hear my tale, believe me nought / In this behalf, nor think that such a thing was ever wrought*” (548). The narrative seems to say, “remember but believe me not.” To put it another way, and as the narrator concedes, “Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable” (270).

Through visual media, music, and performance, *Fall on Your Knees* offers up a series traumatic memories as always and only representations of the original encounter,

curtained dramatizations that participate in the creation of what is known without revealing full understanding of the event. Caruth posits that in the

bewildering encounter with trauma [. . .] we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference).

Through the notion of trauma [. . .] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not. (*Unclaimed Experience* 11; original emphasis)

Fall on Your Knees seems to suggest that what allows history to arise is precisely the performative and aesthetic aspects of traumatic memory.

3.3 “The scent of the cereus with its two edges”: Traumatic and Magic Realism in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Whereas *Fall on Your Knees* aestheticizes trauma through visual media, music, and performance, *Cereus Blooms at Night* blends realist accounts of trauma with a magical realist healing aesthetic as a creative strategy to represent a therapeutic vision of transformation for its protagonist, Mala Ramchandin. Magic realist fiction, argues Anne C. Hegerfeldt, “insists that the concept of reality cannot be confined to the empirically perceivable. Rather, people’s multiple ways of perceiving and constructing their world must be acknowledged as real” (3). I argue that Mala constructs what I want to call a “therapeutic imaginary” to re-construct her life history of abuse at the hands of her father into an imagined space of healing. I suggest that the intersection of *real* traumatic events with what Arva has termed the “traumatic imagination” is necessary in order to capture the lived experience of traumatic encounters, which can never exist purely in the realm of the real. In the novel, magic realism becomes the language of therapeutic recovery from trauma.

Not simply a straightforward narration of witness and testimony, then, Mootoo’s hybrid form is accomplished through Nurse Tyler’s narration of Mala’s story as he acts as *creative witness* to her *imaginative testimony*. Arva argues that for Caribbean writers,

“landscape, history, and ethnic, social, and political identities could be discovered only through writing, and through a language capable of presenting the unrepresentable; documenting a reality either too beautiful or too terrifying (or mysteriously both) to be reflected in a traditional, ‘realistic’ type of narrative” (“Language of Exile” 153). For these writers, he postulates a “hybrid writing style perceived as a nexus of magical realism, testimonial narrative, and traumatic realism—provisionally called *language of exile*” (154; original emphasis).

I want to extend Arva’s theorization of Caribbean writers and his notion of the “traumatic imagination” to *Cereus Blooms at Night* to argue that Mootoo creates a narrative of healing precisely through her enmeshment of traumatic testimony (through Tyler’s witness) and magic realism. As the narrative shifts back and forth between Mala’s past abuses as a child, nicknamed “Pohpoh,” and her present condition at the nursing home, The Paradise Alms House, it does so through the novel’s central circulating images, all taken from nature: the garden at Hill Side, the cereus, snails, and birds. Acting as sensory mediators of memory between past and present, the natural world and Mala’s/Pohpoh’s imagination conspire to *perform* her freedom and heal her traumatic wounds. The novel thus shares with *Fall on Your Knees* an emphasis on the aesthetic and performative aspects of trauma. What I hope to add to the existing dialogue about the novel is an understanding of the text as a formative example of the central place of creativity and the imagination in not just representations of traumatic narratives, but also, and importantly, in healing from trauma, which Mootoo seems to suggest is a highly creative act.

Much of the scholarship on *Cereus Blooms at Night* takes up issues of postcolonialism raised by the novel’s enactment of Indian indentured labour in the Caribbean and its legacy through the Ramchandin’s, who came to the island as cheap labour following the abolition of slavery, and the Thoroughly’s, white missionaries connected to a fictionalized version of imperial Britain, “The Shivering Northern Wetlands.” Gayatri Gopinath specifically locates the nexus of the novel’s parsing of colonial violence in the practice of indentured labour: “Indeed the novel can be read as both a response to and repudiation of its various legacies, and it forces a consideration of indentureship as central to processes of racial, gender, and sexual subjectification in the

Caribbean” (179). Broader approaches to the novel focus on hegemonic regulatory systems of colonialism, race, gender, sexuality and class in terms of the extent to which, as Proma Tagore puts it, the text “creates new pathways for bringing into being silenced or invisibilized subjectivities that revise and disrupt the fixities of these regulatory regimes” (50). Still others focus on the novel’s reclamation of a queer space that rejoins multiple forms of exiled bodies. By connecting disparate identities and histories, Mootoo, according to Vivian M. May, “examines questions of representation, knowledge, and power not only to clarify the violence at the heart of practices of knowledge, faith, and love but also to claim queer space within the Caribbean and South Asian diasporas” (101).⁵⁸ There is thus a scholarly consensus that the novel brings to the fore the intersections of multiple forms of colonial, racial, gendered, and sexual violence. The link, for example, between the legacy of colonial violence and the years of sexual abuse suffered by Mala and her sister, Asha, is frequently a point of discussion by scholars. As Coral Ann Howells says, “this novel translates the historical traumas of colonial inheritance into domestic terms of dysfunctional families and damaged individual lives” (149).

What has not yet been theorized in the scholarship on the novel is the connection between telling the trauma story and Arva’s notion of the “traumatic imagination.” Magic realism implicitly questions the binary between what is real and what is not. As Herfeldt defines it, magic realism has the dual aim of “exploring the possibilities of knowledge while simultaneously showing up its limitations” (7). Traumatic memory shares with magic realism the possibility and coincident impossibility of knowledge of the event. The profound intersection between the structure of traumatic memory and the magic realist mode allows magic realism to function as a primary language in the articulation of and healing from traumatic events. As I will show, Mootoo repeatedly

⁵⁸ For a related and fascinating discussion of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and sexuality through the language of natural history see Kyungwon Hong, Grace. “‘A Shared Queerness’: Colonialism Transnationalism, and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*.” *Meridians: Feminism, Race Transnationalism* 7.1 (2006): 73-103. Web. *Humanities International Complete*. 4 October 2011.

connects Mala's horrific memories to her imaginative and fantastic visions of transformation and freedom.

Like the silent pictures that encode the core traumas in the introduction of *Fall on Your Knees*, Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* similarly opens with a veiled representation of one of the central traumas of the text: the sexual abuse of Mala Ramchandin by her father, Chandin. The narrator, Tyler, arrives in the town of Paradise on the island of Lantanacamara to find the townspeople preoccupied by "the scandal on Hill Side" and the town itself enveloped by a persistent "menacing cloud" that keeps them in darkness (6). What the text obfuscates is that the dark cloud is composed of the remains of Mala's burned down house and its contents, which include Chandin's long-dead corpse. The cloud literalizes Mala's traumatic memories of Chandin's body as a floating shroud over the town while denying the reader full access to its meaning. The floating particles that remain of the incestuous house and Chandin's body leave the town and the reader literally and figuratively in the dark. *Cereus Blooms at Night* thus shares an interest with *Fall on Your Knees* in the extent to which traumatic memories can be fully known. Moreover, both novels understand traumatic memory as residing primarily in the senses.

Whereas the traumas of *Fall on Your Knees* are mediated visually through portraiture and silent movies and aurally through music and performance, the traumas of *Cereus Blooms at Night* are mediated through smell and the natural world. As in *Fall on Your Knees*, language fails in the confrontation with trauma. Mala abandons language altogether as she retreats from her father's house and the patriarchal symbolic order into the natural, feminized world of the garden through her senses to create a space of transformation and healing. Mala's therapeutic and imaginative course of freedom following her sexual enslavement is rendered both through recovered memories of past traumas and magical escapes from them. The "suffocating cloud" (7) which deprives Paradise of its sun for three weeks lifts the day Judge Bissey rules that Mala will not be tried for the murder of her father: "It is said, incidentally, that on the day of Judge Bissey's ruling, the life-robbing cloud began to break up and shift south over the ocean, letting light shine in Paradise once again" (8). The recovery and freedom of Mala is here closely linked to light and the life-giving properties of the sun. While from the outset of

the novel mystery and darkness surround the events at Hill Side, what becomes clear is that Mala's freedom is connected to the dissipation of the remnants of her father, and is encompassed by her final imaginative vision of herself as the child, Pohpoh, flying through a clear blue sky. The cloud and its lifting gesture backwards and forwards through time, as the narrative structure of the text will, and functions as the first of a series of metaphors taken from nature to inscribe both the effects of past traumas and a form of magical, therapeutic recovery from them.

The narrative is framed by the search for Mala's missing sister, Asha, and with Tyler firmly establishing that his discourse is testimonial: "*By setting this story down, I, Tyler [. . .] am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people. It is my ardent hope that Asha Ramchandin [. . .] will chance upon this book*" (3; original emphasis). The promise of this search, however, is never fulfilled. The novel similarly ends with the search for missing women now extended to Sarah and Lavinia. Neither Asha, Sarah, nor Lavinia are ever found. Not just open-ended, the novel also signals through its narrator, Tyler, that its status as testimony may be insecure. Tyler follows his plea for Asha to respond by qualifying his role as narrator: "*Might I add that my own intention, as the relater of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my own plight. However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present*" (3). Despite the fact that Tyler will struggle to keep his own subjectivity out of his recounting of Mala's story throughout the narrative, he nonetheless begins in documentary style.

Following the description of the "menacing cloud" (6) over Paradise that keeps it in darkness, Tyler relates details of the court proceedings regarding Mala's case: "Mala Ramchandin was never tried in court. Judge Walter Bissey had dismissed the case in minutes. Several times he asked the prosecution, 'I'm sorry. I can't seem to follow your logic. Tell me again, what is the evidence? What is the charge?'" (7). The emphasis on testimony and the legal process, including naming the judge, makes the narrative seem documentary, yet with no evidence and no apparent charge, what remains mysterious is also foregrounded. The "mystery of an unsolved death" for which a Constable saw the evidence is noted without revealing that it is Mala's father whose body has been discovered (8). Within the context of the cloud of darkness, the murkiness surrounding

the crime, and the claim that Mala is “a crazy lady” (8), Tyler nonetheless starts making truth-claims: “I am the only one who ended up knowing the truth, the whole truth, every significant *and* insignificant bit of it. And I am the one who is putting it all to good use by recording it here in the hope that any existing relatives of Mala Ramchandin [. . .] might come forward and pay the old lady a visit” (7). However, Tyler’s claim that he is the only reliable witness to Mala’s story, and that he has furthermore uncovered “the whole truth” about Mala’s traumatic past, is both asserted and denied by the text as it hovers on the border between the real and the imagined.

The fuzzy, disorienting mood created in the novel’s opening is mirrored by Mala’s psychological condition when Tyler first meets her at the home in which she is placed by Judge Bissey. In what seems to approach a parody of the scene of psychoanalysis, Nurse Tyler gathers the newly-admitted Mala’s testimony by literally spoon-feeding her until she begins to “talk.” Her animal sounds eventually become speech that Tyler can understand: “I began to recognize in her mutterings elements of the legendary rumours [. . .] and I started to jot down everything she said, no matter how erratic her train of thought appeared to be. [. . .] I soon got the impression that she actually began to whisper in my direction, that I had become her witness” (107). Mala’s “testimony” is stream-of-consciousness and, like trauma, repetitive: she speaks “with great urgency,” “repeating herself sometimes for hours,” and “without punctuation marks or subject breaks” (107). Tyler begins to perceive a purpose to her ramblings and to his own “listening, and to sifting, cutting and sewing the lot” (107). As the weaver of what becomes a magical realist narrative, Tyler is a co-conspirator with Mala in a hybrid narrative construction that reflects Mala’s traumatic experiences.

There are, however, moments in the text when Tyler’s reliability as a narrator/witness is thrown into question. Part of the story that Tyler recounts is the childhood experiences of Mala’s father, Chandin. The details he provides about Chandin are not gleaned from Mala’s mutterings but from his own childhood memory of a conversation he had with his “Smoking Nana.” Smoking Nana’s dialogue with the young Tyler slides from her voice—“I’ll tell you more. You see, the Reverend set up a seminary right here in Lantanacamara, right there in Paradise, and it’s there he went . . . ”—directly into what seems to be a third-person, omniscient narration (31; original

ellipsis). The quotations marking her dialogue and her colloquial style of speech disappear, as the narrator recounts details of Chandin's childhood life at home with the Thoroughlys, his inner thoughts, and what seem to be verbatim conversations between Chandin and Reverend Thoroughly that Tyler's Smoking Nana could not possibly know (31-50). Indeed, many parts of this extended section that Tyler ostensibly reports from his conversation with Smoking Nana read like indirect interior monologue, raising questions about who is narrating, or as Howells asks, "Whose voice tells these histories?" (150). Howells similarly observes that "Tyler could not possibly have known" the dialogues he reports between other characters (151): "Though he assumes the story-teller's authority to offer his narrative in the hope that Asha will answer, there are so many voices haunting the present that Tyler seems to be caught in a space between traumatic narratives of the past and more optimistic as yet unrealized narratives for the future" (151). The space that Howells postulates is arguably, and perhaps more accurately, the intersection of traumatic testimony and magic realism, the discursive modes in which Tyler narrates Mala's past traumas.

Through its claims to truth and its corresponding undercutting of objectivity, the text thus invites readers to question the reliability of Tyler as a narrator. I want to suggest, however, that Tyler's reliability may not depend, as it traditionally does, on his ability to be impartial or to distance himself from the narrative enough to provide an objective account. In fact, it may be precisely his closeness to Mala that allows him to relay the truth of her story in the only way that can make sense of it, that is, through recourse to the imagination and the fantastic. Interestingly, it is through Smoking Nana, not Mala, that Tyler first hears of Chandin's incestuous relationship with Mala (50). Hearsay and gossip are part of Tyler's witness. The story was a formative one for Tyler, who says, "I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. Chandin Ramchandin played a part in confusing me about these roles, for it was a long time before I could differentiate between his perversion and what others called mine" (51). Tyler comes to understand that his sense of alterity is shared with Mala, not Chandin, and that this informs his capacity to narrate her story: "I fancy the affiliation blossoming between Miss Ramchandin and me to be a clue to these musings" (51). Tyler offers two justifications for his reliability as a narrator: "I wonder what Nana would think

if she knew the positions I was in that enabled me to gain the full story. For there were two: one, a shared queerness with Miss Ramchandin, which gave rise to the other, my proximity to the very Ramchandin Nana herself had known of" (52). Tyler's "shared queerness" and his closeness to Mala, rather than impartiality and distance, are what make his narration possible. This suggests that the traumatic events of Mala's childhood require a different kind of witness and a more flexible narration to recount them.

The narrative is structured in five parts, although the first two parts take up approximately seventy-five percent of the narrative as a whole. I will focus primarily on these first two parts, which shift back and forth between Mala's current and recent present, and her childhood past. The third part is devoted to Mala's romantic relationship with Ambrose (Boyie), the tragic scene of rape and abuse when Chandin discovers the lovers, and culminates in the murder of Chandin by Mala. Parts IV and V are very short sections which add final details to the plot and bring the reader back to the beginning with Tyler pleading for Asha, Sarah, and Lavinia to make contact should they read this account. Parts III and IV are told as if through a third-person narrator, seemingly without the influence of Mala's remembering consciousness or Tyler's self-conscious interjections. Part III in particular seems to suggest that the shift in narrative voice is linked to Mala's present-day preoccupation with imaginatively reworking her childhood to facilitate her therapeutic recovery. Tyler's narrative voice seems to shift to third-person omniscient when he needs to provide information outside of Mala's consciousness, which is entirely focussed on healing. Mala's therapeutic impulse is not clear, however, until further on in the narrative when the reader is able to decipher what first appear to be visions of a madwoman.

Unlike the first two larger sections which shift between traumatic testimony and magic realism, Part III is written in the mode of realism with no traces of magic or the therapeutic. Indeed, it is in this section that Mala is uncomfortable with Ambrose calling her by her childhood nickname, because "Pohpoh was what her father had lovingly called her since she was a baby" (217). Despising the way that Chandin "whispered, 'Pohpoh, my little Pohpoh'" as he abused her, Mala, as a young adult falling in love with Ambrose, wants to shed the humiliating past that could threaten her new relationship (217). She thus abandons her psychologically dissociated inner child, Pohpoh, in what becomes a

thwarted attempt to move on with her life. The narrative is not linear, with Part III detailing events that occurred prior to Part II; however, what eventually becomes apparent is that following the events in Part III, Mala slips into an altered existence and consciousness where she reclaims and rescues her discarded, sexually abused child self, Pohpoh, through the imaginative remembering and rewriting her experiences with nature as her guide. The narrative performs the blending of identities and mirrors the work of psychoanalysis itself, which is compulsively repetitive at first, obsessing always backwardly about past details, but also projecting this backward movement into a future that at once produces new material to work on (which is always to delay dealing with the “real” experience of trauma), but in this new material indicates the possibility of creative remembering and thus reparation. The narrative structure thus reflects the documentary and imaginative strands that make up Mala’s recuperation of her traumatic past.

From the outset of the novel, Mala appears as a quirky, mentally unstable older woman who seems to occupy a parallel world in nature, a separate sphere that Tyler will need to understand and translate. It takes until the end of Part II to fully understand that what appears to be madness is actually a practical response to trauma and an effort to heal from it. Tyler quickly detects in Mala what he thinks are “symptoms of trauma” (14). He also deduces that she is a vegetarian. Indeed, Mala is closely connected to nature from the start. She has a “curiously natural smell,” “resembling rich vegetable compost” (12). A source of nutrient-providing organic decay, compost becomes one of the central metaphors of the text, part of Mala’s garden in which life and decay thrive in equal proportion. The “rare night-blooming cereus,” similarly introduced early on, is a gift to Mala from two visitors, whom the reader later understands are Ambrose and Otoh (23). Like compost, the cereus becomes a symbol of transformation, a “succulent whose leaves and trunk were ragged and unsightly until they bloomed” (58). Aside from “crying, moaning, wailing, and sighing,” Mala does not speak, but she does appear to communicate with the animals in perfect imitations of birds, crickets, and frogs (25). Tyler hears Mala utter her first words since her arrival at the Alms House when she meows to a cat. The cat runs into her hands and, clutching it to her chest, she says, ““Pohpoh. Pohpoh”” (50). Tyler becomes concerned when he realizes that “when she had pressed her cheek against the cat’s body and called the name Pohpoh, it was not a cat that

she was calling” (50). What looks like madness is rather an enactment of protection and healing. The narrative has not yet revealed (as it is not yet apparent to Tyler) that Pohpoh is Mala’s childhood nickname. The reader is suspended, as Mala seems to be, in a space where the real and imagined are entwined. In fact, it is in this creative space that Mala is performing therapy upon herself, imaginatively cradling the child, Pohpoh, who was so radically unloved in the past.

As the narrative slips back into Mala’s childhood, the centrality of the natural world to her present and past ways of understanding and coping with her traumas is repeatedly emphasized, beginning with the original garden at Hill Side. The garden is created by Mala’s mother, Sarah, with help from her Aunt Lavinia, who “loved the freedom and wildness in Sarah’s garden, so unlike her mother’s well-ordered, colour-coordinated beds” (57). The contrast between the gardens highlights that Sarah’s is an anti-colonial space of freedom that includes sexual freedom for the two women. Lavinia brings clippings and plants from her mother’s English garden to Sarah’s paradisaical one, and for Pohpoh and Asha, she brings each a cactus plant, telling them that they will bloom once a year, at night. When Pohpoh wants the shell of a snail attached to the plant, Lavinia encourages her to wait for the shell until the snail dies naturally. She tells Pohpoh a “secret”: “Protect a living snail and when it dies, it doesn’t forget. Snails, like most things in nature, have long memories” (58). The soul of the snail, says Lavinia, will return to its home, bigger and stronger than before. The snail will offer Pohpoh protection, providing that she protects it first. She encourages Pohpoh to display the snail shells in the garden so that their souls might easily find their homes, telling her that if she does, “you, my sweet Pohpoh, and your Mama and Asha, and everyone whom you love will be ensured the fullest protection of the benevolent forces in the universe” (58). Both the transformational cactus and the protecting snail shells are formative in shaping Mala’s anthropomorphic view of the natural world in which she will ultimately find refuge.

While the garden is established as a magical place of freedom and safety for the women and girls, the house becomes its opposite: a patriarchal and violent site of

vulnerability and abuse.⁵⁹ Chandin begins to sexually abuse both Pohpoh and Asha almost immediately following the botched attempt by Lavinia and Sarah to flee with the girls. Without Sarah and Lavinia to protect them, Pohpoh and Asha become Chandin's nightly victims.⁶⁰ The narrative's pairing of the protective garden with the unsafe house marks the domestic space as an uncanny one where home is unhomey in both Freud's sense and Homi Bhabha's.⁶¹ While in a "fitful" sleep, Chandin "mistakes" Pohpoh for Sarah and begins to touch her. He wakes up fully, however, and "Glaring and breathing heavily like a mad dog, he pinned her hands to the bed and forced her legs apart" (70). The shift from traumatic to magic realism follows as Pohpoh's traumatic imagination makes a therapeutic intervention: "Soft-edged shadows danced on the wall: a dog with drooping ears but no sound to accompany its opening and closing mouth, a rabbit with long ears, a butterfly gracefully beating the wall with its wings as it ascended and then transformed into a giraffe's head on a long neck" (71). As Asha and Pohpoh huddle together in bed waiting for a drunk Chandin to call out for one of them to service him sexually, Pohpoh, "with arms that were magical and elegant" makes "creatures dance and transform gracefully" to comfort Asha and herself (71). When Chandin calls out for Asha, Pohpoh takes the abuse for her, "As if it were nothing at all" (72). Pohpoh is a

⁵⁹ I respectfully disagree with Sarah Phillips Casteel who views the garden as an unhealthy space of abuse: "Instead of bringing about renewal, in Mootoo the garden is the site of father-daughter incest and obstruction of a healthy sexual relationship between Mala and Ambrose" (21). It is the house, not the garden, where the abuse occurs, and it is in the garden that Mala will find refuge following the death of her father.

⁶⁰ Although outside of my focus here, Gopinath persuasively argues that through Chandin's family and personal history, the novel seeks to connect the traumas of incest to those of indentureship. She understands incest to represent "the implosion of the heterosexual nuclear family as legislated under the colonial regime of indentureship. It also echoes earlier histories of gendered violence on which the heterosexual family unit under colonialism is predicated. This 'other' home space, then, shadows the sanitized missionary home and lays bare all that colonialism both produces and seeks to disavow" (183).

⁶¹ As Howells suggests, "Mala is left alone with her father in a house that could only be described as 'unhomey,' as Ramchandin recreates in his distorted domestic relations a Caribbean history of enslavement and where the psychological legacy of colonialism is refigured as sexual violence in the family" (154).

figure of protection and transformation for Asha, but without the ability to protect herself, she becomes trapped in her father's house as his sexual and domestic slave.

Thus, whereas scenes of trauma are filtered through the mediating forces of visual memories in *Fall on Your Knees*, in *Cereus Blooms at Night* they are represented directly in the mode of realism; healing, however, is mediated through the imagination in the mode of magic realism. The other mediating force in the novel is Tyler, who mediates the entire narrative, with Mala as a silent witness. This suggests that representation of trauma is always a mediated one. In *Cereus*, the mediated testimonial realism of the scenes of sexual violence are later *remediated* through nature and the senses, often in the mode of magic realism as the adult Mala retreats into her garden and her memories.

Mala's childhood understanding of nature as protective through her mother's garden and Lavinia's story of the snails is narrated alongside stories of her finding affinities with traumatized animals. The interconnections between the human and natural world that Pohpoh perceives as a child make her adult retreat into the garden appear to be a natural regression and a logical response to the traumas she has suffered. The narrative, however, unsettles this straightforward connection through its lack of linearity and suspension of clarity as the reader is left to decode Mala's life through the shifting narrative. As Mala, seemingly crazy, wanders the grounds of the Alms House lost in a world of her own, Tyler presents details of Pohpoh's childhood without making it entirely clear that Mala and Pohpoh are the same person. Nature is what ultimately yields the connection between the adult Mala and the child, Pohpoh.

The gardener at the Alms House, Hector, suggests to Tyler that gardening might be good for Mala. He offers up a clipping for her, but Tyler has come to understand that Mala "does not like things in nature to be hurt" (74). As a child, she learns from Boyie that "plants respond to gentleness" and "could show signs of trauma" (97). Pohpoh understands that animals, too, can be traumatized. In a restaging of her own abuse and isolation, Pohpoh separates an ant from a line of marching ants by encircling it with chalk. The other ants momentarily stop but then form a new path by going around the line of chalk together: "The ant in the circle stood completely still. Pohpoh and Asha watched in silence" (95). The inaction and silence of Pohpoh and Asha mirror the behaviour of the

townspeople, who seem to acknowledge but do nothing to stop Chandin's abuse of the girls who are as enclosed and frozen as the ant.

A similar scene is enacted when boys at school are experimenting with the idea that nature can be traumatized by torturing a praying mantis with a candle flame: "The instant the flame touched a back leg, the mantis' movements stopped abruptly. It became as rigid as if it had disappeared. Pohpoh bit her lower lip. She stood perfectly still" (98). In the frozen moment of entrapment and terror, the ant, the mantis, and Pohpoh share the same traumatic response. Following this, Pohpoh insists that Boyie help her collect all of the snails from the playground to put them out of reach of the bullying boys. This act of protection is counterpointed by the fact that the vulnerable Pohpoh must return home to her father's house. Pohpoh turns to nature and her imagination to comfort herself as she rushes home:

Sometimes Pohpoh imagined that if she could gather up enough speed, she would be able to take off, flying above all the walls and gardens, above the topmost branches of the tallest trees around and even farther—a frigate bird soaring with other frigates until her town below was swallowed up, consumed in an unidentifiable fleck of island adrift like a speck of dust in a vast turquoise seascape. (103-104)

Mala's abiding image of escape and freedom, "The Bird" (117) also becomes the derogatory name Ambrose's wife, Elsie, calls her because she thinks "She is as mad as a brainless bird. Crazy" (115). Through the image of the bird, however, the reader can now begin to understand the significance of the adult Mala's earlier words at the Alms House: "A bird flew overhead. She laughed and waved. 'Poh poh pohpoh,' she called softly" (80). Far from being crazy, Mala is in fact healing by imagining herself as the child, Pohpoh, flying above the daily abuse she suffered.

The straightforwardness with which Mala's abuse is documented makes it easy to understand that when she retreats entirely into her garden that she is suffering symptoms of severe trauma; however, the connection between what seems like magical thinking and the therapeutic impulse of Mala's isolation takes more time as Tyler continues to weave Mala's story into narrative form. As Tyler shifts from Mala's childhood to her experience living what looks to be the life of a mentally ill recluse, he reminds the reader that his

function as witness to Mala's testimony is to fill in the gaps of her memories, much like a survivor with traumatic amnesia would. Not just a witness to Mala, Tyler is also a reporter who relies on the testimony of others, such as Otoh and Ambrose: "From both him and his father I was able to fill in gaps and make sense of things she mumbled" (110). Tyler sees through Mala's unusual behaviour and propensity to imitate animals rather than speak: "To everyone else, Miss Ramchandin appeared to have a limited vocabulary or at least to have become too simple-minded to do more than imitate. However, I knew for a fact she was able to speak and had volumes of tales and thoughts in her head" (106). As if "*fashioning a single garment out of myriad parts . . .*" Tyler makes sense of the traumatic fragments of Mala's life through the weave of his narrative, "fashioning" into prose both Mala's incomprehensible speech and equally unfathomable life in her wild and mouldering garden (113; original emphasis and ellipsis).

Indeed, because of the appearance of Mala's garden, she becomes the subject of gossip and cautionary tales told by parents to scare their children into obedience (122). What seems to be neglect and madness in the "impenetrable sea of brambles and stinging nettles that barred a view of her house," is rather Mala's radical reconstruction of her world as a therapeutic response to her past traumas. Accordingly, her yard is "overrun with periwinkle snails, glossy mucous trails crisscrossing the milky brown clay" (123). She has snail shells pressed in neat lines "three rows deep" as a protective barricade to her property (122). There is even a snail cemetery where they go to die (123). Calling it a "sheltered feminine space," the garden, according to Howells, is "constructed as a space of imagination where the natural world offers a radical alternative to the dark enclosed house of patriarchal tyranny and incestuous abuse" (155). Mala's garden is in many ways an argument for safety and freedom. Part of the rhetoric of her garden is a non-interventionary approach to nature: "She did not intervene in nature's business" (137). Moreover, the garden encroaches upon the house, slowly transforming it to make it part of the natural world: "a grapefruit tree and several pepper plants had sprouted in the dirt and rust of the roof" (124). The roots of Mala's many cactus plants also become part of the house as they "like desperate grasping fingers, had bored through the damp wood of the back wall of the house. It was no longer the wall that supported the succulent but rather the other way around" (124). The narrative reveals further on that this wall is one

of the walls enclosing Chandin's rotting corpse. As nature thus both intrudes upon and supports the house, it also offers protection (as the snails do) to Mala from Chandin's body.

Mala's many years of sexual abuse and domestic confinement have made her practiced in using the natural world not only as protection, but also as an alternative epistemological framework for understanding herself. Mala's capacity to alter her consciousness is in line with what Herman, through her research and clinical observations, has perceived in survivors of childhood sexual abuse, that is, remarkably flexible imaginative capacities as they attempt to cope with their traumas: "The pathological environment of childhood abuse forces the development of extraordinary capacities, both creative and destructive. It fosters the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relations of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no longer hold" (96). Mala does indeed develop "extraordinary capacities" and alters her state of consciousness to become like an animal, in the first instance by liberating herself from language. Her process is described as almost a traumatic break where images fill in the gaps of abandoned language:

In the phase just before Mala stopped using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there. The cracks would be filled with images. Soon the inverse happened. A sentence would be constructed primarily of images punctuated by only one or two verbalizations: a noun tentatively uttered in recognition, a descriptive word confirming a feeling or observation. (136)

Ridding herself of words, Mala becomes an embodied creature of the senses, in touch with her surroundings and herself in ways that her previous need to detach from her abuse made impossible. The flapping wings of a gull "titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands, deep inside her womb, her vagina, lungs, stomach and heart. Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings—every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance" (136). May observes that in condemning "the violent, eroticized domination of both incest and colonialism as twinned sites of penetration and conquest," Mootoo, through Mala's garden, "crafts a vision of a deeply

embodied, non-hierarchical relation between plant, animal, land, and human” (106). Mala abandons the symbolic order of language in a radical renunciation of her identity to find, as Howells puts it, “release from traumatic memory through her communion with nature” (156).

Intimately connected, then, to Mala’s past traumas is her disavowal of all things human, which extends to her domestic activities, personal habits, hygiene, and the house itself. Her repudiation of all the trappings of domesticity seems to afford her a new sense of power. She sleeps when she is tired, regardless of whether it is day or night. She eats when she is hungry, and “voided when and where the impulse knocked. She manoeuvred her half-acre world intuitively, withdrawing, smiling, laughing, fighting, crying, sulking” (137). Similarly left to its own devices, Mala’s unkempt house becomes an anti-domestic space of refuge and refuse. She builds a partition “several feet thick,” a “network of armchairs, rockers, side tables, dining table and high-back chairs,” which functions as a blockade between the kitchen and the rest of the house, at the centre of which is Chandin’s long-dead corpse (138).⁶² Mala’s interior design emphasizes psychic safety and her commitment to a philosophy of non-interference: “The whole thing smelled of time and dirt” (138).

Even decay and death become emblematic of Mala’s healing and transformation. As the narration dips deeper into the recesses of Mala’s house, what could be seen as a gothic nightmare is overlaid with connotations of healing and metamorphosis as trauma and magic realism continue to intersect in a joint rehearsal of and departure from her traumas. Mala collects from her garden the corpses of many varieties of dead insects in a bucket which she brings through the protective barricade and into the room where, although not yet revealed to the reader, the corpse of Chandin lays: “She paid no attention to the odour rising out of the bucket. The scent of decay was not offensive to her. It was

⁶² The pile of furniture helps to clarify Mala’s intention in the nursing home earlier on in the narrative when she replicates the barricade of furniture in her room. As Gopinath observes, “Signaling her refusal of the institutional strictures of the nursing home, Mala builds and rebuilds a wall in her room with its sparse furniture. What looks like the mind-numbing behavior of senility is of course a continuation of her life’s work: the invention of new architectures of being and the erection of a counterdomestic space in the very heart of the home and nation” (186).

the aroma of life refusing to end. It was the *aroma of transformation*” (138; emphasis added). The smell of dead insects is also the smell of Chandin’s decaying body, through which Mala’s senses transform the smell of death into life. This insight, however, is only possible on a second reading of the text, when one knows what lies buried at the heart of the house. Alongside the corpse is a wall of dead insects pinned down by Mala to feed the living. As she negotiates the wall with her new store of carcasses, insects that have fallen off crunch beneath her feet: “They were fodder for a vibrating carpet of moths, centipedes, millipedes, cockroaches and unnamed insects that found refuge in Mala’s surroundings. Death feeding life” (139). Mala leaves the room, enjoying “the smell of rotting, water-logged wood” as her house has decayed to the point where rain falls in over the stairs. Like a green bin, Mala’s house has become a compost heap of transformational decay with Chandin’s mouldering corpse feeding Mala’s psychological rebirth.

Despite Mala’s attempt to reframe her traumatic story by revising her personal space, the house preserves its past which surfaces as intrusive traumatic memories for Mala. In the scene which follows Mala’s descent into the basement to Chandin’s remains with her bucket of corpses, nature and architecture conspire to create a “perfect imitation of another moment, long ago, just after a heavy rainfall” (141). The combination of rain and sun catching on the iron roof produces a “beam of silver light” (141) exactly as it did the day that Mala’s mother, Sarah, and her Aunt Lavinia run away leaving the girls with Chandin. On that day, Pohpoh turns away from her fleeing mother and sees that “the sun had caught on the jagged edge of the porch’s iron roof and the spot dazzled like a blinding star” (68). Pohpoh then hears only the sound of yelling, Asha calling for her, and the buggy as it leaves with Sarah and Lavinia. Pohpoh registers the trauma entirely through her senses, as she will as an adult when the traumatic memories return when she is triggered by rainfall and light.

As the adult Mala repeatedly sees the same silver beam of light at around the same time in the morning, “Time would collapse. Every inhaled breath was a panicked tremble sustained and each exhale a heavy sob” (142). Breathless with a pounding heart, Mala seems to have panic attacks in the moment the traumatic memory returns. She uses her home-made, fiery hot pepper sauce as an antidote to her memory. As she screams aloud ““Doh leave me,”” she pours the sauce into her mouth without swallowing,

“keeping the fire on her tongue, by then so blistered that parts of the top layer had already disintegrated and other areas had curled back like rose petals dipped in acid” (143). This extended scene of self-torture culminates in Mala’s collapse and marks her wounded mouth as a principal site of trauma. She seems to be dramatically re-enacting her childhood abuse in a performance of pain and suffocation as she gasps for breath through her burning mouth and nostrils. Indeed, the whole section, beginning with Mala’s descent into the basement housing Chandin and culminating in this scene of horror can be read as a dramatization of her sexual abuse and her survival: “Her flesh had come undone. But every tingling blister and eruption in her mouth and lips was a welcome sign that she had survived. She was alive” (144). Mala, like Frances in *Fall on Your Knees*, performs her past traumas as intrusive memories return, while emphasizing her status as a survivor.

The graphic realism of the hot pepper sauce scene is immediately followed by a more magical scene of cereus blooming at night as the narrative entwines elements of realism and magic to depict Mala’s story of trauma and healing. The shifting emphasis between what is real and what is not real, on the one hand, keeps truth at bay, while on the other, marks the liminal space between the two as the territory of real trauma and its imaginative place of articulation. Thus, “one of the brightest moonlit nights Mala had ever witnessed” (144) coincides with the long-awaited blooming of her cereus plants, whose blossoms perfume the entire neighbourhood and intoxicate the townspeople who stroll on a lover’s walk to El Dorado park (146). Mala watches as sixty-two cereus buds open, “trembling as they unfolded against the wall, a choreography of petal and sepal opening together, sending dizzying scent high and wide into the air. The moonlight reflected off the blossoms’ pure whiteness and cast a glow over the yard. Mala basked” (144). The moon and the white blossoms both connote a pure, feminine transformational power at work in Mala’s garden, while the scent of the cereus exceeds its limits, becoming a potent symbol of sexuality. The scent of the cereus inspires lovers, as couples are “compelled to stop in front of Mala’s house to caress and steal probing kisses,” and attracts thousands of moths and “crazed bats” which arrive to “suckle the blossoms” (148).

A powerful symbol of transformation, the cereus and its scent represent Mala’s attempt to reframe her father and his house into something feminine and beautiful. At the

same time, however, the voracious moths are attacking the cereus blossoms violently enough to bruise them. Mala's past sexual abuse is further connoted by the descent of the moths upon the wall of cereus as they "[brush] their hairy bodies against the blossoms" (148). In the early hours of the morning, "every moth was thirstily lapping sweet nectar, bruising and yellowing its body against the large stamens that waved from the flowers" (148). The sexual imagery is as heavy as the smell of the blossoms that "drenched the air and flowed across town" (149). The scene ends in what seems to be a throw-away line: "The scent was indeed more pleasant than the stink that usually rose from behind the wall" (149). The narrative continues to conceal that the wall of cereus also walls Chandin's reeking body. Significantly, some of the moths emerge from the walls of Mala's house, which suggests they are coming from Chandin's body. Further on in the narrative, when Chandin's body is actually revealed, it is covered with moths: "Thousands of tiny white moths had so tightly packed themselves side by side that the tiny hooks on the edges of their wings had locked together, linking them to form a heavy sheet that was slowly devouring the corpse underneath" (198). Chandin's past as a devouring father is reworked as the moths now devour him in a repetition of the earlier encounter with his corpse where death feeds life.

The cereus is also closely connected to what I have been calling Mala's "therapeutic imaginary" through which her memories and imagination creatively join to heal the wounds of her past by rewriting her story to include the rescue of Pohpoh. As Mala continues to sit in her garden following the magical night of blossoms, she slips into her imagination and past to Pohpoh as an abused child and her dream of rescuing her: "Long into the morning Mala remained in the yard. The sun had warmed her arms and legs, chilled through the night. Every so often a breeze nudged her rocking chair. She kept her eyes closed. Fortified by the night's display she wove memories. She remembered a little and imagined a great deal . . ." (152; original ellipsis). The narrative acknowledges the untrustworthiness of Mala's memories by directly connecting memory to the imagination, while at the same time asserting the primacy of this type of remembering through Mala's garden, which becomes a safe space of creative commemoration. The blooming cereus plants with their heavy smell spark the succession

of memories which follow and help to make a clear connection between memory and the senses, particularly smell.

The memories that Mala begins to have are traumatic ones of a shivering Pohpoh longing for her mother, and trying to stay psychologically strong so that she might protect her sister, Asha: “It had become Pohpoh’s mission from the first day her father put his mouth on her little body to prevent Asha from experiencing the pain of his touch. For the most part she had succeeded. Her stone-blank eyes concentrated on the blackness of the night outside her window” (153). Echoing the previous scene with the hot pepper sauce scorching Mala’s mouth, the emphasis here is again on the mouth (Chandin’s) and the pain of his touch. Close to the word “moth,” “mouth” also gestures back to the devouring moths on the cereus blossoms. Both a traumatic and magical event, the moths descending upon the cereus seem to allow Mala imaginatively to return to more painful memories of abuse. As Mala creatively remembers, she imagines rescuing Pohpoh from Chandin’s house:

Mala wished that she could go back in time and be a friend to this Pohpoh. She would storm into the house and, with one flick of her wrist, banish the father into a pit of pain and suffering from which there would be no escape. With piercing eyes she would pull the walls of that house down, down, down, and she would gather the two children to her breast and hug them tightly, rock and quiet them, and kiss their faces until they giggled wildly. (153)

Much like Sylvia Fraser’s insight that she abandoned her original child personality in an “*untended grave*,” Mala calls her childhood self, “this Pohpoh”—her dissociated, abandoned child (BS 129). Mala’s imaginative reclaiming and rescuing of Pohpoh is fundamental to her healing process.

In this extended scene of remembrance, magic realism is at its height as Mala’s present and past begin to collapse when Otoh arrives looking just like his father, Mala’s former lover, wearing his clothes and carrying a gramophone so that he and Mala might dance. Mala believes she is seeing Ambrose as the narrative goes back and forth between this dream-like scene with Otoh, and Mala’s revisionist memories of Pohpoh’s escape and rescue. Mala’s present and past are suspended in a space that is neither fact nor

fiction but both at once. Mala remembers/imagines that Pohpoh escapes out of a window of her father's house to sneak into a "target" family home, "a happy family, a fairy-tale family in which the father was a benevolent king" (168). The house fuels Mala's (and Pohpoh's) therapeutic imaginary as Pohpoh envisions herself protecting the family baby: "Pohpoh imagined herself invisible, sitting there and thwarting monsters and demons who tried to lay a finger on the littler baby in whose room she found herself" (169).

Before arriving at the home of her ideal family, Pohpoh must go through her mother's (now Mala's) garden. The slippage between past and present is signaled in the "uncanny communion with the fruit trees" and in the cereus plant with "its large white and crimson flowers, gleaming like stars" (163). Mirroring Mala's magical evening the night before, the "cereus blossoms spewed heavy perfume in the air, luring the thousands of moths" (163). Mala's double consciousness in her present and past garden is literalized by the cereus: "The scent of the cereus with its two edges—one a vanilla-like sweetness, the other a curdling—so permeated the air that she could taste it on her tongue" (163-64). Sweetness and decay permeate Mala's house and garden, becoming emblematic smells that signify beyond Mala's personal sphere to the larger discursive mode of the narrative—the double edge of trauma and the imagination.

Pohpoh's fantasy of a happy family similarly mixes trauma with a transformational imaginary. As Pohpoh nears the front door to exit the house, the "triumph" she feels abates when she encounters her own image in a mirror. She sees a "tiny, ragged girl" (170). She loses confidence because of her sunken eyes: "Pohpoh wondered which was her true self—the timid, gaunt, unremarkable girl staring at her, or the one who dared to spend nights doing what no one else ever dared to do. The image of her father about to lower himself on her body charged at her suddenly, complete with smells and nauseating tastes" (170-71). An intrusive traumatic image appears at the moment of psychic splitting, and, again, the emphasis is on the senses: smell and taste. Pohpoh carries on, forgets the mirror, and leaves feeling triumphant and avenged (171). The narrative slides back to Mala in the present: "A smile of triumph lit up Mala's face. She had relived this scenario so often that even she did not remember how much of it actually took place—whether it took place in the day or night, whether she was accompanied by Asha, whether she actually entered a house, whether she was ever

caught” (171). Throwing the truth-status of this scene of remembrance into question suggests that the reality of the event is less important than the therapeutic reworking of it. For Mala, reality is connected to trauma and fantasy is connected to healing.

Following the scene where Mala leads Otoh (whom she believes to be Ambrose) to Chandin’s body, reality presses in upon her as a terrified Otoh runs away and makes public the secret of her father’s corpse. Feeling sad and desperate, Mala looks at her bottles of hot pepper sauce: “The pain of a teaspoon of the fiery sauce on her tongue would surely dull the despair that threatened to swallow her up. It all seemed so real” (185). Mala cannot bear what is real, so she retreats into her fantasy of saving Pohpoh: “She decided that if trouble was indeed on its way her first duty was to save and care for Pohpoh. Hardly anyone, in her estimation, ever cared for Pohpoh. Now that she was grown up, she herself would take care of little Pohpoh” (185). Tucked away in her memory garden, and camouflaged by her mudra tree, Mala hears the police arrive and closes her eyes: “Now where was she, she wondered, before Ambrose—it was Ambrose, wasn’t it?—entered her yard. Ah yes! Pohpoh had just exited the strangers’ house successfully and was out in the yard” (186). The police are tearing down Mala’s fence and trying to talk to her, but she ignores all the sounds and thinks of Pohpoh: “Mala will take care of you, Pohpoh. No one will ever touch you again like that. I will never let anyone put their terrible hands on you again. I, Mala Ramchandin, will set you, Pohpoh Ramchandin, free, free, free, like a bird” (186-87). In the very real context of the police about to discover Chandin’s remains, Mala wills herself to stay in her healing fantasy of freedom for Pohpoh.

The trauma of the present scene with the police collapses with the traumas of the past through Mala’s creative remembrance as it slides and slips into Pohpoh’s remembrance. In a lovely shifting between the two spheres, the narrative dances on a tightrope between past and present. As Mala’s awaits her imminent capture, she remembers Pohpoh on the evening of her escape, terrified that her father is about to catch her outside: “Fear was breaking her, was unprying her memory. She was reminded of what she usually ignored or commanded herself to forget: her legs being ripped apart, something entering her from down there, entering and then scooping her insides out. Her body remembered” (188). Immediately following this, “Mala remembered. She heard the

voices of the police. *She reconfigured what they said to match her story of how she saved Pohpoh that day*” (188; emphasis added). Mala’s therapeutic, revisionist consciousness then slides back: “Pohpoh, remembering her father’s invasion, put her hand over her mouth and nose to stifle her panic and the nauseating smell of fear that rumbled from her insides. Pressed against the bush, she bit the inside of her lip and willed herself to think” (188). And then back again to the present: “Mala bit the inside of her lip and willed herself to think” (188). The foregrounding of past traumas through their sensory apprehension gives them an urgency in the present that Mala reshapes as she re-enacts the horror of the past to include a dream of freedom.

The past completely collapses into the present as Mala imagines Pohpoh running to her. What appears to everyone to be Mala’s madness is rather her healing. She is caring for the abused child that no one protected or loved. When Pohpoh arrives at Mala’s fence, she “scaled it with magical speed. Instead of landing in the stinging nettles she was caught by a soothing mess of aloe vera” (189). Mala translates her own burned tongue to Pohpoh’s burned body, which she heals with aloe vera. Ironically, as the captured Mala leads police to Chandin’s long-hidden body, she continues to imaginatively protect and free Pohpoh. The traumas of this extended section are resolved magically and therapeutically with Mala encouraging Pohpoh to run away from the house and to fly: ““Yes, Pohpoh, you take off and fly child, fly!”” (200). Mala’s dream of protection is fully realized as Pohpoh does indeed take flight:

She did three more breast strokes and soared high before gliding again, basking in the cloudless sky. She practised making perfect, broad circles, like a frigate bird splayed out against the sky in an elegant V. Down below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea. (200-201)

Cereus Blooms at Night is in many ways an extended reflection upon the importance of creativity and the imagination to healing from the trauma of childhood sexual abuse. Whereas life writers such as Sylvia Fraser face critical scrutiny and skepticism regarding the truth-status of their pasts and are burdened with an imperative to tell the truth beyond a reasonable doubt, Mootoo seems to suggest that truth may be far less important than healing, and, perhaps more profoundly, that healing from severe

traumas may, in fact, require the imagination, fantasy, and even some magic. Quoting Jack Hodgins, Hegerfeldt connects lies to the truth through magic realism: “Ceaselessly drawing attention to its own constructedness without thereby invalidating itself, magic realist fiction self-consciously presents itself as ‘lies that tell the truth’” (7).⁶³ Pohpoh flying through the air like a frigate bird tells the truth of Mala’s therapeutic journey of transformation and healing. Trauma and magic realism are woven together, the novel implies, because they must be to tell the truth of what healing from trauma ultimately is: an act of the imagination.

3.4 Stockings and Stalkings: Representing Trauma in Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure for Death by Lightning*

I have been arguing in this dissertation that the narration of traumatic experience presses up against the boundaries of genre in the effort to find a way to articulate memories of childhood sexual abuse beyond the limits of straightforwardly factual testimony or fictional realism. In this chapter, I have suggested that both *Fall on Your Knees* and *Cereus Blooms at Night* employ magical realist representations of traumatic events as creative means by which characters negotiate traumatic memories. In Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, trauma similarly finds expression through what Arva has termed the “traumatic imagination.” It does so, I argue, in two principal ways: first, through the scrapbook which Beth’s mother, Maud, writes; and second, through Beth’s traumatic imagination through which she mediates her sexual abuse. In what follows, then, I will demonstrate, as I trouble, the ways in which sexual traumas are arbitrated through and find expression in the scrapbook, animals in general, and the Native mythological figure of Coyote in particular. I further argue that the text weaves together not one, but two stories of sexual abuse. My reading will show that it is not just Beth who is a victim of incest but also her mother, an important line of argument for understanding Maud’s scrapbook and one that has not been given sustained

⁶³ See Geoff Hancock, “An Interview with Jack Hodgins,” *Canadian Fiction Magazine* XXXII/XXXIII (1979): 62.

consideration by other scholars.⁶⁴ The scrapbook and the autobiography which Beth writes as an adult inscribe a family history of sexual abuse and function as principal methods of healing for both mother and daughter. I will also explore Beth's lightning arm and the field of flax as magical metaphors of protection and healing not unlike the cereus plant in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Both the scrapbook and the figure of Coyote obfuscate and simultaneously perform sexual traumas. The scrapbook both inscribes and represses memory while the Coyote represents the horrific return of the repressed. Indeed, it is primarily in the Coyote figure that the magical and traumatic meet.

The novel opens in the autobiographical mode and with the scrapbook—a generically feminine form of writing—on the page that contains the cure for death by lightning, the recipe for Beth's father's favourite oatcakes, and the tortoiseshell butterfly with the torn wing. The focus seems to be on healing remedies, nurturing food, and a straightforwardly innocuous metaphor of triumph over adversity. As Beth's mother tells her, the butterfly can still fly: “It's a reminder to keep going” (1). Despite its presentation as a seemingly safe, feminine form of writing, the scrapbook exceeds its generic boundaries in its encryption of repressed family traumas metaphorized, in part, by the butterfly with the torn wing. Beth says that her mother “didn't keep the book as a diary. [. . .] But she wrote brief thoughts along the margins or at the bottom of a page, as footnotes to the recipes and remedies, the cartoons and clippings—footnotes to the events of the day” (2). Beth's mother is now dead, and Beth is using her scrapbook to help her write her own story, set during the Second World War, when she was fifteen, and “the world fell apart and began to come together again. Much of it will be hard to believe, I know. But the evidence for everything I'm about to tell you is there, in the pages of my mother's scrapbook” (2). By emphasizing the scrapbook's status as evidence, Beth hints at the sexual crimes that her story will document and suggests that her mother was aware of them. This is an important early signal that the scrapbook needs to be read beyond its

⁶⁴ Some scholars do not comment at all on the textual suggestions that Maud has been sexually abused by her own father; however, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson does perceive that both “mother and daughter have been victims of familial sexual abuse” (93), as does Anca Raluca Radu, who similarly acknowledges the implication that Maud “had been raped by her own father” (130).

literal presentation of recipes and news clippings. As Beth insists, “The scrapbook was my mother’s way of setting down the days so they wouldn’t be forgotten. This story is my way. No one can tell me these events didn’t happen, or that it was all a girl’s fantasy. The reminders are there, in that scrapbook, and I remember them all” (2).

In a conference paper entitled “Scrapbooking: The Artifice of Memory in the Fiction of Gail Anderson-Dargatz,” Cynthia Sugars argues that the scrapbook “is in fact a barrier to communication in the novel.” When alive, Beth’s mother does not give Beth access to the book. Furthermore, Sugars troubles Beth’s claim to truth-telling in the previously quoted passage: “The slippage here from *reminders* to *remembering of reminders* is important, as if to say that Beth ‘remembers the reminders’ and not the memories themselves” (original emphasis). Beth’s emphasis on evidence, truth, and the reliability of her memory are early clues that her autobiography will, in fact, be a sexual abuse survivor story, as is her insistence that there is no fantasy involved in her recollections. Beth participates in a survivor discourse similar to Fraser’s which testifies that, “this is the truth as I remember it.” Yet, as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that there is nothing straightforward about the story Beth remembers and tells.

That the scrapbook reminds Beth of the truth also suggests what I will go on to prove, which is that Beth’s mother knew about her abuse and encrypted it into the scrapbook as evidence of her knowledge. The cure for death by lightning and the butterfly are connected further on in the narrative to both Maud’s and Beth’s traumas and therapeutic journeys. Their sexual abuse is thus embedded on the first page of the autobiography, but it will be some time before it is revealed. For Coral Ann Howells, the scrapbook rests in the tradition of domestic pioneer narratives, such as Catharine Parr Traill’s *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), where women’s gossip, recipes, farm work, and family events are recorded: “Her mother’s account conforms to the conventional limits of the feminine role, so that it is full of gaps and silences following a conscious strategy of editing out a great many unspeakable things that happen very close to home” (171). I will argue that, in fact, Maud’s account *edits in* the unspeakable traumas of the text.

The colour of the scrapbook is significant: “The cover was red, one of the few bits of red my father allowed in the house” (2).⁶⁵ The reader is not told why Beth’s father allows the red cover, but the concession underscores John’s underestimation of the scrapbook’s power. The red cover connotes the sexual and dangerous aspects of the scrapbook that go unnoticed by John, and marks it as an object of desire. Red is also clearly associated with Beth, who, like Little Red Riding Hood, becomes a figure of both sexual awakening and victimization. Indeed, it appears that Beth is being stalked from the outset of the first chapter, which opens firmly in the gothic mode: “When it came looking for me I was in the hollow stump by Turtle Creek” (3). Beth listens “to the sound of it rushing, crashing through the bush, coming for me” (3). The threat of violence is juxtaposed with the “illicit treasures” which Beth hides at her secret spot and which reflect her coming of age as a woman. She stores, along with lipstick, perfume, and nail polish, a scrap of red velvet that Bertha Moses gave her at her stump by the creek (3). These items of femininity and sexuality are all prohibited by her father. She hears the rushing sound, and then pulls out her piece of red velvet, rubbing “it down the inside of [her] bare leg. [She] imagined [she] was touched that way, by a city man—no farmer’s hands were like velvet—a man who worked in an office with clean papers, whose polished heels clicked along the pavement, and whose hands never dug into manure” (4).

Beth’s reference to “farmer’s hands” is an example of what a reflecting memory can do. Beth’s father is a farmer with “farmer’s hands”; although he has not yet touched her sexually with them, Beth writes in this inference to foreshadow future events. Her present knowledge of events influences how she writes her past. This is one of Nicola King’s chief criticisms of Sylvia Fraser’s memoir. Here, Anderson-Dargatz fictionalizes this very process through her repeated use of foreshadowing and literary devices to

⁶⁵ Convicted of sexually assaulting two underage girls, Warren Jeffs similarly banned red from his polygamous compound in Utah. (My thanks to Professor Joseph Zezulka for pointing out this connection to me.) In both the real-life case of Warren Jeffs and the fictional case of John Weeks, the erasure of a potent symbol of sexuality marks their victims as untouched symbols of purity and functions as a method of controlling their potential sexual attraction to others.

symbolize both traumas and Beth's experience of them.⁶⁶ Beth leans against the stump with her dress hiked up "like a whore" and wishes for nylons and red shoes. The reliability of this memory is similarly questionable because nylons will later become emblematic of her father's molestation of her and also of her mother's own abuse. This opening chapter is a carefully crafted set of metaphors of Beth's upcoming abuse by her father, who is significantly repeatedly linked to the Coyote and the rushing sound that Beth hears. Like the scrapbook on the opening page prefacing this chapter, traumatic memories are cryptically encoded in Beth's narrative account but unrevealed to the reader.

Beth's mother's awareness of and culpability in the traumas Beth endures is registered in her scrapbook, which acts as a silent witness to what becomes a series of traumas for Beth. When Beth enters the house, she finds her mother "sitting at the kitchen table, writing on one of the pages of her scrapbook, mumbling to [Beth's] dead grandmother" (86). Maud closes the scrapbook as soon as Beth walks in. What could be a mediating vehicle or even a springboard to communication, the scrapbook instead walls off Beth from the female community of her mother and the spectre of her grandmother. The scrapbook functions as a repository for Maud's traumatic memories, but Beth is not given access to what she has added. Maud appears to find consolation in her scrapbook and in conversations with her dead mother in moments of trauma. As Beth's mother, Maud's job is ostensibly to protect her, yet she repeatedly fails in this capacity. As wretched as John's behaviour is, Maud's behaviour seems on the surface to be almost equally heinous; however, one can find in the gaps and what is not spoken the possible reason for Maud's complicity.

Maud is herself a traumatized subject, in clear evidence in scenes where, unable to cope with Beth's traumas, she disconnects from reality into her own world of her scrapbook and imagined conversations with her dead mother: "My mother was no help,

⁶⁶ While there is generally much more tolerance for the use of literary devices and the presence of a reflecting consciousness influencing past memories in fiction, such as this one, there is far less understanding for it when it comes to writing memoirs. This dissertation suggests that an opening is made to allow for creativity, literary devices, and memory's fallibility in the writing of traumatic autobiographies. Fictions such as Anderson-Dargatz's and Mootoo's make the case for it.

no help at all. She sat in her rocking chair, rocking and rocking, hanging on to her scrapbook, staring off at nothing” (206). As Beth perceives early on in the novel, “My father looked like a hunkered monster; my mother’s face was that of a ghost” (34). The main clue to what is haunting Maud is represented significantly as an image—a photograph of her with her parents which Beth describes:

My grandmother was dressed in dark and lacy Victorian garb and looked very old and tired, but my grandfather, an engineer, looked quite dapper. He was smiling and had his hand around my mother’s waist. Neither my grandmother nor my mother was smiling. About the time my mother became a woman, my grandmother took sick with an unexplained series of niggling illnesses, stomach complaints and headaches, weakness and malaise. My mother became the woman of the house then, making the meals and tending her mother and looking after her two younger sisters. As my grandmother became increasingly bedridden, my mother also became her father’s escort to plays and concerts. She became his favourite of the three daughters. *He bought her silk stockings*, boxes of candy, and called her dear. (17; emphasis added)

At this early stage in the narrative, the picture is circumstantial rather than clear evidence of an incestuous relationship between Maud and her father. In the context of the rest of the novel, however, the photograph stands as a compelling argument for a family legacy of sexual abuse, particularly when one considers the significance of the silk stockings, a key piece of evidence, which Maud eventually edits into her scrapbook. I want to suggest that the scrapbook is thus a hysterical text, by which I mean a text that represses its traumas while it also converts them into expression, here of both Maud’s and Beth’s sexual abuse. Maud uses her scrapbook to encode and hide what I argue is a cycle of incestuous abuse. The scrapbook provides a series of enigmatic clues or objects that must be read in relation to each other and to the violence in the novel in order to understand their significance. The scrapbook suggests that in order to “hear” stories of sexual abuse, one must attend to different kinds of testimony and different kinds of evidence.

On the morning following the extended scene of trauma for Beth, Maud awakes Beth with a “butterfly kiss” (87). Recalling the first page of the scrapbook and the opening of this novel, the butterfly is further reproduced by Maud in the form of a gift to Beth. She produces a butterfly from behind her back: “It was made from petals of scarlet flax and my mother’s fingers breathed life into it. This was a child’s game; it made me angry” (87). Here, the butterfly with the torn wing from the scrapbook becomes a red one, given life by Maud herself. The red is a subtle suggestion of Maud’s understanding of Beth’s traumas. Furthermore, that she performs a “child’s game” links this scene to the one where she makes Beth child’s food (bread, cream, and sugar) after John rips off Beth’s dress. When Beth is describing the photograph of Maud and her parents, she says that it was “about the time that my mother became a woman” that her grandmother became bedridden and she became the woman of the house. By comforting Beth with child’s food and a child’s game, Maud may be trying to keep her as a child so that she does not have to become a woman and “her father’s escort” as she herself was. The butterfly with the torn wing that continues to fly in the scrapbook and in the gift symbolizes, in the first instance, Maud’s hidden traumas and her dream of healing. While she ultimately fails to protect Beth from John, Maud does reveal her understanding of Beth’s traumas, along with what seems to be her own guilt for being, like her scrapbook, a silent witness to them.

The only times that Maud appears to speak about her traumas is in her unintelligible mutterings to her dead mother, whom she seems to be haunted by, and whose ghost appears to be manifest in the text, as when Beth says, “My dead grandmother had taken over the rocker; it went on rocking all through dinner” (224). Indeed, Beth’s grandmother’s spectral presence is one of the most telling clues to suggest that Maud herself was sexually abused by her father. Following John’s rape of Beth, she leaves her room, and although still in a dissociative state, she sees her grandmother’s ghost: “I followed my body, because I couldn’t do otherwise, through the parlor and past my father, who slept in his chair by the gramophone as if he’d never entered my room. Over him, her face reflecting the dim light from my bedroom window, my grandmother watched him grimly” (184-85). Her silent spectre points to a family legacy of silent witness of sexual abuse.

Furthermore, the fact that Beth finds her mother at her bedroom door implies that Maud was awake through the assault. Mother and grandmother are thus both implicated as present but wordless witnesses in what can only be understood as a long history of similar silences. It is important to acknowledge that the text does not make clear the truth about Maud's witness to the rape of her daughter; it rather weaves Maud's and her own mother's presences into the scene as a possibility, reflecting Beth's understanding that she must have known, just as Maud's own mother must have known. Maud does, however, record a memento of the day into her scrapbook. Beth has given her some blue flax flowers to placate her anger at Beth for ignoring her chores the next day. Maud presses these symbols of healing (which I discuss in an upcoming section) into her book as "Something to remember the day by, though Lord knows why I want to remember it" (195). Blue flax represents Beth's refuge from trauma, whereas Maud's incorporation of this therapeutic symbol into her scrapbook memorializes it.

Maud's scrapbook performs the same work of writing (albeit a wordless form) and healing from trauma as the novel does for Beth. Perhaps the clearest encryption of the family history of sexual abuse is symbolized by the nylons which Beth's father buys her following his rape of her and which Maud ultimately adds to her scrapbook. The reader learns early in the novel that John will not allow Maud to buy herself nylons (27). Maud becomes furious when she learns that John has bought them for a "delighted and mortified" Beth (198). Maud begins muttering to her dead mother while clutching her scrapbook and rocking in her chair (199). The scrapbook is always foregrounded in moments of distress for Maud, who remains traumatized for some time after learning about the nylons, "rocking and rocking, hanging on to her scrapbook, staring off at nothing" (206). Beth tries to console her with a cup of coffee, "But [her] mother looked through [her], like a stubborn child punishing the parent that punished her" (206). Maud, not Beth, is acting the part of the traumatized child, which suggests that the nylons and Beth's trauma have re-traumatized Maud to the extent that she is re-enacting scenes of her past.

Maud finally confesses to Beth: "My father gave me stockings too—silk stockings—while my mother went without" (207). A symbolic gesture rather than spoken words expresses a shared traumatic experience of incestuous abuse, which Beth

ultimately registers as betrayal: “At first I wasn’t sure what she meant, and then I didn’t want to think about it, because if she meant what I thought she meant then she knew” (207). That Beth does not want “to think about it” harkens back to her mother not wanting to talk about it, which might explain why Beth belatedly reveals the entry of the nylons into her mother’s scrapbook. When she finally discloses the entry, she does so almost as an aside by incorporating it into the end of a much broader list of “reminders of the bad days” that she is quickly flipping past:

a newspaper story about a child who had gone missing on the reserve, the widow Roddy’s death notice, and a little square cut from a pair of nylons and glued to a page. I stopped on the photograph of Ginger Rogers, and on the space between the cure for death by lightning and the butterfly with its wing torn away, where my mother had written my name and the date lightning had left my arm something close to useless. (219)

By stopping on the photograph of Ginger Rogers, Beth is essentially asking the reader to put her focus here rather than on the square cut from the precious nylons which represent Maud’s understanding of Beth’s abuse and her own shared history of it. The gap in the scrapbook that Beth admits belatedly and miscellaneously is the traumatic gap of a family legacy of child sexual abuse. The proximity of Beth’s acknowledgement of the nylons to what she here privileges—the butterfly and lightning arm symbolizing transformation and healing—suggests that the novel she is writing is chiefly concerned with her therapeutic journey and her desire to leave her traumas in the margins of her mother’s scrapbook. Billy reminds Beth that her mother’s scrapbook is her “private place” and, more importantly, he suggests its purpose: “Everybody needs a place to sort things out (fuck). You’ve got to know (shit) nobody’s going to snoop around in it” (220). Maud’s scrapbook is her therapeutic place to externalize and thus contain her traumatic experiences; the novel is Beth’s.

Whereas the butterfly on the first page of the scrapbook is connected to Maud and her healing, the cure for death by lightning that occupies the same page reflects Beth’s therapeutic journey. Moreover, like *Cereus Blooms at Night*, traumatic and magic realism intersect in Beth’s lightning arm as a means of both articulating and healing Beth’s traumas. In fact, Beth’s lightning arm becomes magically associated with trauma and

protection, performing similar work to the scrapbook for Maud as both silent witness and a form of defense. On the heels of Maud's ineffective attempts to comfort Beth from her night of trauma, Beth is again violated as the narrative sustains its recounting of the relentless sexual victimization of her. This time, a group of Beth's classmates, led by Robert Parker, taunt her with names like "Dirty Beth," and call her mother a witch and her father crazy (89). As they do so, Beth's lightning arm suddenly goes dead, a silent marker of the escalating trauma. The children carry Beth to an abandoned house and strip her of her clothing, calling her a "Slut, slut, slut!" (90). When they finally let her go, Beth runs home feeling, as always, mysteriously stalked: "The thing that had followed me that morning hopped up onto the road. I heard it first, scuffing behind me, and when I turned I saw its footprints, a man's footprints" (90). Seemingly without refuge, Beth retreats to her bedroom and her imagination:

it seemed if I were to stay very still everything would stop. I lay down and held myself rigid on the bed and closed my eyes. After some time like that, the hand on my lightning arm began to expand, spread out like a balloon, take on proportions much too big for my arm, big enough to hit back. I opened my eyes and looked down my arm and was surprised to see just an ordinary hand. I stared up at the blue forget-me-nots on the headboard of my bed and put myself there, in a stream full of them. (91)

Along with the soothing blue flowers in which Beth finds solace, her lightning arm imaginatively expands to protect her from her assaulters, much like the adult Mala magically rescues the abused child, Pohpoh, in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Unlike Mala, who manages to stay in her inventively transformed world, Beth's comfort is short-lived as her mother imposes upon her for details of what happened to her: "She called my name and shook me, but I stared through her at the headboard. She called my name louder and slapped my face. She said, 'Oh God,' and left my room" (91). Beth finds "a new peace" in not responding to her ineffectual mother, whose "Oh God" connotes both an awareness that something terrible has happened and a refusal to speak what that might be aloud. The fact that Maud has registered something about Beth's traumatized condition is further evidenced by her scrapbook, upon which Beth finds a pair of scissors, indicating that her mother had added to it (92).

Beth is nearly catatonic, “staring at the scrapbook, petting the black kitten, stuffing bread in [her] mouth” when her father yells at her: ““What the hell’s the matter with you?”” (92). Repeatedly forced out of the refuge of her dissociation, Beth runs out of the house into the field of violet flax, the flower of which looks very much like the forget-me-nots which adorn her headboard. Again, Beth’s attempt at solace is thwarted by a tumultuous storm which sends her running back to the house. When all of Beth’s real attempts to comfort herself fail, the narrative takes a magical turn and literally transforms her world to violet flax:

I pressed my face against the window and saw a rain begin to fall, so gently the raindrops seemed to float. Then I saw they weren’t raindrops, they were flowers, violet flax, fluttering to the ground. In no time at all the rain covered the earth in flowers. I opened my window and crawled out onto the purple carpet, took my shoes off and paddled around in pools of flax. The fragrance was intoxicating. The clouds moved on, and still the violet flax drifted down from a blue sky. (92-93)

Hegerfeldt suggests that “literalization is behind much of magic realism’s magic, for many of the apparently fantastic events are based on a making-real of figures of speech, mental concepts, or psychological mechanisms” (56). Here, Beth’s psychological defense mechanism of dissociating into the flowers of her headboard and field of flax is literalized into a therapeutic imaginary of healing pools of flax in a transformed world of blue. Connoting healing and relaxation, the “intoxicating” scent of the flax perfumes the air just as the cereus blossoms do in Mootoo’s novel. And, like the cereus blossoms, the flax metamorphoses Beth’s world to one that is beautiful and far removed from the pain she feels: “With blue flax in my cupped hands, blue flax on my hair, my face, my dress, I looked over a world that was blue and as strange as a dream. The shame of nakedness in front of the kids at school seemed so far from this blue world” (94).

Even John’s rusty truck becomes a symbol of renewal: “Petals littered the window of the truck, covered over the rust, and gave the Ford a moment of new life” (94). As Beth watches Filthy Billy surveying the damage, she, like Mala, imagines that she can fly: “It occurred to me that if I ran down that hill, I could fly. I spread my arms and it felt like that: the air carried me” (95). Like Mala’s, Beth’s healing is an act of the

imagination. Moreover, the animals themselves are transformed from victims of abuse (as they have been throughout the novel) to symbols of metamorphosis and healing. Covered in flax, the sheep are now blue: “They were a strange sight, sheep out of dreams. The blue flax had clung to their coats along with everything else. I sunk my hands into their blue wool and rubbed next to their skin, where the lanolin lay, to smooth away the dryness of my hands” (100). However, unlike the world of *Cereus Blooms at Night* which asserts the transformative power of the imagination, this blue scene of healing stands alone and unrepeated in *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, and, given its relatively early placement in the narrative, suggests in this text a fleeting quality to the power of the therapeutic imagination to transform an otherwise traumatizing world. In Anderson-Dargatz, if there is a cure, it comes much more from the healing power of writing.

One of the primary means through which Beth imaginatively rewrites her traumas is through the many animals that populate the novel. The stalking of Beth is gothically doubled by the violent death of her classmate, Sarah Kemp, who was ostensibly attacked by a bear. Beth’s brother, Dan, describes the bear’s attack on Sarah Kemp in sexual terms. He says that she was “pulled apart from the crotch up” and that the tops of her legs and breasts were eaten off (24). Throughout the narrative, animals are connected to sex in graphic and disturbing ways. The old tom cat humping the heads of two little kittens acts as a precursor to the narration of the first trauma Beth describes, while it looks forward to future human acts of sexual abuse. Beth hides the new litter of kittens “from [her] father and the old white tom and his appetites,” thus connecting the sexually predatory old cat with her father (38). She is unsuccessful, however, and finds in her parents’ chamber pail “the dark bodies of the new litter of kittens [she had] played with that morning” (42). Beth’s father tells her to “Bury those cats, will you?” as if he didn’t know what he’d done, as if it were just another chore for [her] to do” (42). The first instance of traumatic dissociation is narrated as Beth looks at the bucket of dead kittens: “Then I removed myself and watched my hands take up a shovel, make a hole in the manure pile, and empty the foul water and the bodies of the dead kittens into it. Their bodies slid from the bucket like fish. I covered them over with manure, then followed myself to the barn, like a child following her mother” (43). Echoing the earlier sexualized passage of the farmer’s hands in manure, here Beth is the abject and traumatized subject

following a significantly invisible mother. The metaphors of this entire extended scene of trauma, beginning with the killing of the kittens and culminating in an act of sexual violence against Beth, are repeated in a sequence of events that include and surround the torture of Gertrude the cow, as John's sexual violence and sadism continue to escalate.⁶⁷

Beth's forced collusion into the brutalization of Gertrude the cow by her father can be read as an extended metaphorical displacement of Beth's own sexual abuse. Because Gertrude had not become pregnant, she could not be used as a milk cow and must be sold as beef. John reasons that if he were to remove her ovaries, she would gain weight and garner a higher sale price at market. The scene is so completely over-the-top in its gratuitous and graphic violence that I hesitate to quote from it. I do so only briefly and to make the point that sexual traumas are repeatedly foreshadowed by and imagined through animals in the novel.⁶⁸ The use of animals here perhaps simplistically links sexual assault to the animal or degenerative aspects of humans. The "operation" that John performs on Gertrude becomes an act of sexual violence. As Beth holds up the tethered cow's head, John carves into its hide without anesthetic: "His face shone and he sweated in excitement. The cow bawled and bawled" (84). At this early stage of the surgery, Beth's mother is still there to help; however, the scene is too much for her, and she goes back to the house, leaving Beth alone to help her father torture the cow.

What follows is a metaphorical rape. John has his entire arm inserted into the cavity he has carved into the struggling cow, searching for her ovaries in an agonizing

⁶⁷ Repetition is at once a hallmark of traumatic experience and a reminder that the story Beth is writing has the full benefit of retrospection, including the ability to repeat key symbols in the representation of what cannot be the truth that Beth claims on the first page, but can only be a storied and literary version of her childhood traumas. The eponymous cure for death by lightning that mysteriously opens the novel is thus again evoked, this time in connection to Beth's traumatic experience in the events leading up to Gertrude the cow's abuse. Beth's mother literally feels lightning in the air as she runs her hands through her son's shocked hair, yet she sends Beth out into what is sure to be a storm so that she might bring in the cows. The lightning "sparked bluish white, like a snake all knotted up, evolving and transforming," as Beth watches moments before she is struck (79). The lightning strikes Beth from the ground and comes up through her arm, leaving it numb. Her "lightning arm" hangs inert like a repressed memory for now; moreover, like a repressed memory, it will hysterically take on a life of its own in moments of trauma and even work to protect Beth.

⁶⁸ Indeed, it is scenes like this one that seem to argue against the healing discourse of the text. All of the scenes of abuse are traumatizing to read, but this one stands out as one of the worst.

process that takes the whole night to complete. When he finally finds the ovaries, he puts them into a bowl for Beth to look at and says, ““You have these. [. . .] This is what makes you female”” (85). The suggestion that Beth is defined only by her reproductive organs, and that John will have no more trouble taking from Beth what makes her female than he does literally taking the ovaries from a cow, reinforces the misogynistic and dehumanizing aspects of sexual assault. It also seems to suggest that Beth has more connection to the animal than does John. Further on in the novel, Beth discovers Dan having sexual intercourse with one of their cows (206). The repeated sexualization of animals alongside recurring scenes of sexual violence against Beth suggest a troubling affinity between women and animals, and render Beth, like Gertrude, as a form of meat to be consumed.

The evisceration of Gertrude is horrific to read, but there are larger issues with the ways in which the novel represents its traumatic imaginary, particularly in its use of the Native figure of Coyote. While Anderson-Dargatz’s novel shares with MacDonald’s and Mootoo’s novels a hybridized structural form that combines the Gothic⁶⁹ with magic realism to creatively write its traumas, it does so, in my view, much more problematically. Like the Native mythological figure of Coyote that the novel appropriates to displace Beth’s sexual traumas, the text itself is a shape-shifter: specifically, in the switching between the subtle, scripto-therapeutic healing narrative (the autobiographical novel which Beth writes, as well as her mother’s scrapbook) and the masculinised, grotesque, and traumatizing narrative of abuse (primarily represented

⁶⁹ Anderson-Dargatz employs a postmodern version of the traditional female gothic plot of patriarchal tyranny and female imprisonment. Ellen Moers coined the term “female gothic” in 1976 to describe what seemed to be an interest in the monstrous in literature written by women during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (See *Literary Women*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976.) The subtle feminism of the traditional female gothic and the restoration of the family, often through the discovery of a lost mother or by her intervention, are also installed in the novel by Anderson-Dargatz. While in some ways the novel can be viewed as Beth’s adult longing for her lost mother, whom she recovers through her scrapbook and through writing her own autobiography, her mother does not intervene to save her from her abusive father. The conclusion, moreover, is traditionally gothic and, according to Marlene Goldman, “familiar, conservative, and masochistic” (62). Goldman’s objection to the ending’s reinstatement of the heteronormative, patriarchal family system is germane to other criticisms of the novel from feminist and Native perspectives.

through the Coyote figure). The sexual traumas that Beth cannot speak and Maud refuses to hear nonetheless find written expression in the narrative through the scrapbook, in the case of Maud, and through Coyote as Beth writes her traumas onto this figure. On the one hand, the two competing narratives of graphic horror and healing recreate the experience of what it might be like to look back upon those traumas and write a narrative of healing and survival, but, on the other, the two strands of the novel are so completely at odds with each other that it sometimes feels like one is reading two novels: the gothic horror that Beth writes and the much more nuanced scrapbook compiled by Beth's mother, Maud, and re-written within the novel by Beth.

What I am most troubled by, however, is the novel's attribution of sexual abuse to the Native Coyote figure rather than to the perpetrator, Beth's father.⁷⁰ Animals are generally abused throughout the novel, and the Coyote is particularly abused in its housing of all of the evils of the text, especially sexual ones. Coyote functions as monolithically evil and even seems to sensationalize Native "trickster" stories by reducing them to a simplified, consumable form. Kristina Fagan suggests that "some depictions of the trickster are popular largely because they serve a certain critical fashion, one that emphasizes the constructedness and unknowability of the world. The trickster is read as a metaphor of postmodernism, challenging stable categories and forms" ("What's the Trouble with the Trickster?" 6). Anderson-Dargatz similarly employs the "trickster" figure to encapsulate the vexed access to knowledge that comes with trauma and, in so doing, displaces the Native roots of Coyote tales. In the misappropriation of Native legend to function as a trope for the horror of sexual abuse, Anderson-Dargatz's Coyote bears more resemblance to the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" or to "Killer Bob" as he possesses and monstrously transforms Leland Palmer in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* than to the much more ambiguous Native understandings of Coyote.

Magic realism depends on two ways of knowing the world; thus, as Anca Raluca Radu suggests, "the novel is very particular about presenting two versions of every

⁷⁰ See especially Linda Morra's article on the anti-trickster and the two articles I cite by Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson who queries Anderson-Dargatz's approach to the Coyote figure from the perspectives of both feminism and Native mythology.

violent event which occurs” (127). The official version usually involves real animals or people, such as the bear who is blamed for killing Sarah Kemp, while at the same time Bertha Moses’s pregnant daughter insists on the more fantastical view that, “That was a man that done the killing. Coyote come and took him over” (72) or the elusive, “bushed” figure of Coyote Jack, who ostensibly shape-shifts into a coyote and stalks Beth, but also functions as a real man, an almost pitiful outcast who takes his own life to rid himself of Coyote’s possession of him (274-75). The unofficial version of violent events seems to inevitably involve the invocation of the Native myth of the Coyote, although even with Coyote there is an official version. As Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson observes, “Coyote is both a shape-shifting spirit who controls damaged men’s behaviour, *and* a real animal who kills the helpless and the vulnerable, animal and human alike” (2005: 94). In its multiple ways of understanding the world, the discourse of magic realism thus functions to interrogate reality.

The discourse of trauma similarly disrupts a straightforward understanding of what is never a monolithic psychological reality. In this light, the novel’s appropriation of the Coyote figure to mediate the incestuous abuse of Beth by her father appears to be an imaginative and fitting way to represent what is otherwise silenced in the narrative. Hegerfeldt suggests that with magic realism, “In supernaturalizing cruel events, the texts express a stunned incredulity about the state of the world, implying that the idea of such things actually happening exceeds—or should exceed—the human imagination” (61). Accordingly, Howells observes that the “decorums of domestic realism” embodied by the scrapbook,

do not provide an adequate framework for Beth to speak about all the other dimensions of her emotional and imaginative experience, most specifically her sexual experience. [. . .] Beth has to turn to Bertha’s Aboriginal stories about Coyote to find a language for sexual trauma, where the Native Trickster figure becomes a metaphor for her recurring nightmare of incestuous abuse and panic fear of male violence. (170)

Indeed, if one were to read the novel uncritically and out of context of the scholarly debates surrounding both the appropriation of Native mythology by non-Native writers and what has become an almost vexed use of the “trickster” figure generally, one

might make a good argument for Anderson-Dargatz's use of the Coyote as a figure of the traumatic imagination—a means of articulating otherwise unspeakable sexual traumas that exceed the imagination. Like trauma, the truth about Coyote in the text is not fully known. As Macpherson says, “given his trickster nature, perhaps this lack of clarity is formally appropriate” (2004: 176). This unknowability is also related to the larger questions of truth in the text and to the ways in which trauma, (as represented through Coyote) obfuscates truth. The use of Coyote also has an internal narrative logic within the world of the novel, as Beth is steeped in tales of Coyote through her connection to Bertha Moses, who functions as a Native storyteller and also as a marginalized Indigenous woman with a clan of disturbingly freakish daughters, some of whom have webbed fingers and eyes that do not match in colour.

Bertha insists from the start of the narrative that John's unpredictable and violent behaviour is caused not by the wound he suffered during the First World War nor by his more recent scuffle with a bear but by what Bertha perceives as his possession (along with Coyote Jack's) by Coyote: “I think what's got hold of Coyote Jack's got hold of your John” (15). Further on in the narrative, Bertha explains the Coyote myth in Christian terms as demonic possession: “he slips off and goes walking until he finds somebody to have some fun with, eh? He takes that somebody over, see? Possesses him, like them demons in the Bible. Coyote has an awful thirst. Can't satisfy him nohow, that's what makes him so bad” (72). This mixing of Christian myths with Native ones reflects the cross-cultural aspects of the text as white settlers intermingle with the Salish Indigenous community. Linda Morra, however, troubles such an easy reading by arguing that while Diana Brydon makes a case for resisting notions of cultural authenticity or purity by way of “some cultural mixing,” “aesthetic depictions must at least be driven by an ethical imperative of accountability, by greater familiarity with Indigenous epistemologies,” and that “the use of tricksters in an unspecific context or in a manner that belies their original purpose contradicts the very resurgence and uses of culturally specific tricksters in the first place—the retelling of narratives meant to allow for the reassertion of agency and for the restoration of Indigenous national identities” (89).

Herein lies the heart of the problem with Anderson-Dargatz's employment of the Coyote to house all of the evils of Beth's sexual abuse: in her misappropriation of the

Coyote as a figure of traumatic possession out of tune with Indigenous narratives, she unwittingly chips away at both Indigenous agency and identities. Anderson-Dargatz's Coyote comes to represent an excuse for John's incestuous sexual abuse, thereby contaminating a Native figure with the heinous crimes of a white man. Not only troubling from the perspective of Native mythology, the Coyote possession, according to Macpherson, is even more troubling from a feminist one: "To explain repeated and prolonged sexual abuse away as Coyote possession is to reiterate the worst aspect of an anti-feminist stance: that men cannot control the 'beast' within. Thus, if it is difficult to square Anderson-Dargatz's construction of Coyote with First Nations stories, it is even more difficult to reconcile her exploration of sexual abuse with feminism" (2004: 180-81).

In the scenes leading up to John's rape of Beth, both real and mythical coyotes are repeatedly invoked. As Beth and Maud make their way home after a trip into town, "The wild dog watched us—I could see his eyes shining as we turned the democrat and headed out of town—with one paw slightly raised and his nose pointing at us, in the hunting stance of a coyote" (178). On the heels of this foreboding scene, and with Beth constantly under threat of sexual violence, a "bachelor" makes advances towards her at a community event (181). Beth flees for the "safety" of her home, but once there, she finds a bleeding sheep whose genitals have been eaten off by a coyote: "Coyotes go for the genitals and soft belly of a sick sheep" (182). The sexual assault by her father follows with the real coyotes that have foreshadowed the scene replaced by shadowy ones: "Though my mother must have been awake, he came into my room, came to my bed as a black faceless thing, with only the form of a man" (184). Beth tries to cope with the horror of this encounter by dissociating into the blue flowers on headboard: "I removed myself into the forget-me-knots [sic] painted on the headboard of my bed, and watched from there, leaving all the fear and anger in my body" (184). She also fights back with her lightning arm, which tries to protect her:

He was a big black thing moving over my body, flattening me down to nothing, making me no more than a blanket on the bed. I felt nothing. I wasn't there. He didn't do that thing to me. That wisp of a black blanket under him wasn't me. The lightning arm moved, that was all. It pushed at

the black shadow over it. My father took the lightning arm by the wrist and wrestled it down and made it part of the blanket he moved over, moved into. (184)

Further on in the novel, when Beth experiences a traumatic flashback to the scene in a dream, “coyotes put their claws over [her] mouth. They lifted [her] nightgown. They rubbed their wet tails between [her] legs. [. . .] When they had their fill, the shadows sighed deeply, came together, and took the form of [her] father. He lifted his weight from [her] body and left the room” (264). While John is clearly implicated in the abuse, as is Maud who “must have been awake,” coyotes stand in metonymically for John’s sexual assault. Bertha’s insistence that John is under Coyote’s possession links the animals here to the Coyote myth by blurring the connection between them. The connection between the real animal and the Native Coyote spirit is most clearly shown in the transformation of Coyote Jack: “His body flitted back and forth between man and coyote, then the coyote dropped on all fours and cowered away” (272). Following this, Beth sees Coyote Jack transformed back into a naked man. For Beth, coyotes and the Coyote of Native mythology have nothing to do with the restoration of agency and identity, Indigenous or otherwise; coyotes and the “trickster” Coyote function as uncomplicated symbols of horror and abjection.

Kristina Fagan in “What’s the Trouble with the Trickster?” suggests that scholars are increasingly distancing themselves from the term, “trickster”:

in as authoritative a source as *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (2005), the trickster is only very briefly mentioned, with the following sceptical commentary: “Whether such easy celebration [of the hybrid, postmodern, identity-shifting trickster] actually chimes with the lived reality or is more of a literary and utopian gesture has been a matter of some debate, as has the reason for its popularity with non-Indian readers. Does it allow connections to be made across cultures or is it just more easily consumable by white readers because it has lost its specificity and communal identity in a cosmopolitan and postmodern *mélange*?” (79). And, in 2007, Ojibway scholar Niigonwedom Sinclair actually called for a moratorium on studies of the trickster. (14)

While there is no easy answer to the question of whether Anderson-Dargatz's "trickster" is a hybridized, postmodern metaphor of trauma or a campy, sensational product for the delectation of non-Native readers, what does seem clear is that when non-Native writers incorporate Indigenous stories into their work, they should do so in ways that honour those stories. As Morra insists in her discussion of Anderson-Dargatz's Coyote, "instead of burdening that figure with other layers of meaning that are of our own invention, we might perhaps open ourselves up to and learn about what the figure means for an Indigenous community" (88).⁷¹

While Anderson-Dargatz's use of Indigenous stories of Coyote may be vexed by critical commentary outside the limited view of the novel as Beth writes it, for Beth, whose story this is, coyotes are her way to mediate and imagine otherwise unrepresentable traumas. The scrapbook functions in a similar way for Beth's mother and works as a wordless arbitrator for her traumas. In both cases, trauma is not spoken but rather imaginatively experienced or recreated symbolically in the scrapbook. Beth thus fittingly concludes her narrative by emphasizing healing and transformation through the scripto-therapeutic act of putting her story into words. The final section opens with the sudden onset of spring, a season of transformation and new life which is mirrored by personal renewals for both Beth and Billy: for Billy, "It was as if he'd been remade, as if that old Billy had been sloughed off and he'd grown a new skin"; and for Beth, "Then again, maybe it was I who had done the changing, like those lizards, got a fresh pair of eye skins to look through" (285).

Importantly, the constructedness of Beth's narrative is foregrounded in these self-reflexive concluding pages where Beth locates the source of her catharsis: "I had acquired an urge to write everything down, set it down so I wouldn't lose it" (287). Beth even makes her own paper so that she can put her thoughts into words. Beth's memory book would be different from her mother's: "It would be a book of words, my words"

⁷¹ Morra's plea is followed by a parenthetical address to those who might criticize her from the perspective of postmodern, Derridean theory which questions a singular, originary meaning: "(and, yes, I am aware that, in making this kind of assertion, I am flying in the face of the postmodern dismissal of 'originary meaning,' a dismissal that conveniently allows critics to side-step ethical commitments)" (88).

(287). But like her mother's scrapbook, this book will be her safe place to sort out her feelings. Beth now understands her mother's talking to her dead grandmother as a therapeutic act: "It was craziness, talking to a dead woman, but she spoke the words, got them out of her mouth, and that was what mattered. As Billy said, if you could only get things out of yourself—speak them, or write them down, or paste bits of them into a scrapbook—then you could sort things out" (287). Beth wants to put an end to her family's history of traumatic hauntings: "I was determined to put my words down on paper, so I would never gabble to a dead woman as my mother did" (287).

In overtly defining itself as scripto-therapeutic, the novel makes its final plea for a reading of it as a text of healing. Beth is transformed from a helpless victim to a self-empowered woman no longer afraid to stand up to her corrupt father: "'You never touch me again. [. . .] Keep your goddamned hands off me. You're my father, for Christ's sake'" (290). John, too, seems to undergo a transformation, and, as he does, the ending seems to take on a storybook or fairy tale quality. John begins to cry after Beth reproaches him. He cries for three days, following which Maud loses her temper, slaps him across the face, and tells him to stop acting like a child. He then goes silent for three days (291). The implausibility of the scene with its mythic invocation of the number three seems to deliberately call into question the reliability of its narration. The sudden transformations and acts of healing almost seem contrived to conform to an essentially comedic ending where order is restored and romance prevails as Beth and Billy hold hands and look forward to the future (292).

Anderson-Dargatz's concluding emphasis on the text as a storied construction serves as a reminder that the novel is, after all, an act of memory and its reconstruction. Whereas some critics have complained about the ending, such as Radu who calls it "sentimental," I read it as part of the larger project of the novel to offer new and creative ways to depict childhood trauma by experimenting with multiple genres in an effort to capture experiences that exceed the boundaries of any one genre. Indeed, the novel continues to hybridize in its final pages which consist of an index of recipes and remedies in what seems to be a tribute to the novel as part of the feminine, domestic genre of settler writing such as Susanna Moodie's and Catharine Parr Traill's (293-94). The scrapbook and the novel as a whole pay homage to a much broader autobiographical

tradition of women representing themselves. The novel has also, as I have shown, paired and fused traumatic encounters with magic realism merging, as Macpherson notes, “‘fact’ and ‘fiction’—and the reader cannot quite be sure which is which” (2005: 99-100). *The Cure for Death by Lightning* stands as a representative example of the textual imperative in child sexual abuse narratives to mix genres in the formation of a traumatic and therapeutic imaginary that is at once a lived experience that needs testimony, a gothic horror, a magical realist nightmare and escape fantasy, and a scripto-therapeutic act of healing.

Chapter 4

4 Fiction as Testimony: Telling Stories of Residential Schooling and its Legacies

4.1 Introduction

This chapter extends my exploration of the ways in which Canadian writers explore the aesthetic and performative aspects of the traumatic imaginary to an analysis of the ways in which three Native writers purposefully *use* fiction to tell and to teach both Native and non-Native audiences stories of residential school abuses and their legacies. Through a close examination of Vera Manuel's play, *Strength of Indian Women*, and two novels, James Bartleman's *As Long as the Rivers Flow* and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*, I contend that these works complicate their generic status as fiction by functioning as didactic forms of testimony to residential school traumas broadly and, more specifically, to child sexual abuse at the schools. They do so, in part, through the primacy these writers place on the centrality of stories to individual lives, to the circulation of stories in their communities, and to the transformational power that stories have to teach audiences about the children who suffered multiple forms of abuse in government legislated, church-run residential schools.⁷²

In "Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Storytelling, Humour, and Trauma in the Fiction of Richard Van Camp, Tomson Highway, and Eden Robinson," Kristina Fagan suggests that while PTSD is now considered to be what lies behind many of the social problems experienced in Aboriginal communities, Western conceptions of trauma do not necessarily apply cross-culturally and may not be adequate for understanding Aboriginal articulations of trauma (205). Fagan is influenced by Indigenous nationalist scholars who suggest that theories pertaining to Indigenous peoples should arise from their own

⁷² To date, these works have been largely unexamined by scholars, although there has been increased attention to Alexie's novel since its republication by Theytus in 2009. Much more widely studied is Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), to which I refer in my introductory analysis of the concept of trauma in the context of Aboriginal writing.

traditions and epistemologies.⁷³ She suggests that these theories can be found in Aboriginal traditions of storytelling: “Stories, told and retold over generations, contain complex teachings about Aboriginal history, science, ethics, spirituality, and methods of survival. [. . .S]tories can provide means of both articulating and understanding traumatic events” (206-207). In Fagan’s analysis, writers such as Tomson Highway in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* use “storytelling to create ‘Aboriginal trauma theory’” (205). “Aboriginal trauma theory,” as Fagan defines it, arises not from external sources which are then applied to fiction, but is produced by the fiction itself. As I will show, this mode of storytelling serves both therapeutic and socio-political functions. As Jo-Ann Episkew contends, “Contemporary Indigenous literature serves two transformative functions—healing Indigenous people and advancing social justice in settler society—both components in the process of decolonization” (*Taking Back Our Spirits* 15). In circulating stories of the experience of being a child in the residential school system, these narratives seek to implicate Indigenous and settler readers as witnesses to creative forms of testimony that participate in the project of social justice.

Rita Joe, in *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi’kmaq Poet*, writes that she “lost [her] talk” as a little girl at residential school: “You snatched it away; / I speak like you / I think like you / I create like you”; yet she searches for her “talk” so that she might use it to teach others: “So gently I offer my hand and ask, / Let me find my talk / So I can teach you about me” (55).⁷⁴ The pedagogical impulse identified by Joe is shared by all of the authors I discuss. Chippewa author James Bartleman chose to write his first novel, *As Long as the Rivers Flow*, about the multi-generational legacy of the residential school system, because of his belief that “fiction is much more powerful than non-fiction” (“Interview”). In an interview with Shelagh Rogers, Bartleman explains that the disproportionate number of suicides among Native youths in fly-in communities in

⁷³ See, for example, Warrior, Robert Allen, Jace Weaver, and Craig S. Womack. *American Indian Literary Nationalism*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2006.

⁷⁴ The “you” in Joe’s poem shifts from addressing the residential school system (“You snatched it away”) to a broader “you” that seems to address non-Native readers (“So I can teach you about me”).

Northern Ontario sparked his narrative and his desire to teach others about the legacies of residential schooling:

I wanted to explore the life of one woman from the time of her birth to 2002, to follow her, to get people to get to know her. [. . .] I wanted them to get to know the priest who abused her. I wanted them to get to know her daughter and her son, and to give people an idea about the real impact of the residential school system on individuals. And I also wanted to write a book which would be read by Native children as well, because it's a book with a positive ending—that you have to take control of your lives.

Secwepemc and Ktunaxa writer Vera Manuel's *Strength of Indian Women* similarly employs a fictional form, a play, to testify to both the traumas and legacies of residential schools. In her foreword, Manuel emphasizes the play's grounding in truth: "Stories about the abuse and helplessness of little children in residential school are true stories. Because of this, they are the most difficult to write. / I didn't make up the stories told in *Strength of Indian Women*. They came from pictures my mother painted for me with her words, words that helped me see her as a little girl for the first time" (n. pag.). Both Cree writer Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Teetl'it Gwich'in writer Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* are semi-autobiographical novels, at least partly based on these writers' personal experiences of residential schools and, like Bartleman and Manuel, share an impulse to testify to as broad an audience as possible, as Highway puts it, the "unforgivable, monstrous evil" of residential schools. Indeed, as Highway said in 1998, these stories "should be published as the headline of every newspaper every day for 10 years" (Posner, "Highway is Back"). And Alexie, in "An Author in Waiting" (2002) said that he had e-mailed, in addition to CBC television and radio, David Letterman, Oprah Winfrey, and Dr. Phil in attempts to broadcast his story to a mass audience.

This impulse to tell the story of residential school traumas—essentially, to use fictional forms to testify to them—is shared by Manuel, Bartleman, and Alexie in their effort to teach both Native and non-Natives about the after-effects that continue to be experienced in Native communities. As Bartleman insists, "We needed to have something which touched the hearts of Canadians and made them look at the impact of the

residential schools and the under-funding for education which Native communities have to cope with to humanize [them] and that's why I wrote this book" ("Interview"). Sam McKegney argues that creative forms of residential school narratives, "offer profound complications to the historical record as it stands, commenting not only on how residential schooling is remembered but also on how its legacy ought to be reacted to, its transgressions addressed, and its survivors (and their communities) empowered" (*Magic Weapons* 17). This chapter seeks to explore these texts as creative forms of testimony that exist outside of Western epistemologies and standard historicizing methods and attends to the ways in which story-telling strategies are employed to implicate readers as witnesses and to circulate and create new knowledge and understandings about the legacies of residential schooling in Canada.

Before turning to Fagan's conceptualization of the possibility of an "Aboriginal trauma theory," I want briefly to contextualize the works I examine within the church and government apologies for the residential school system and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) currently underway and set to conclude in July 2014. Church apologies in the early 1990s and high profile disclosures of sexual abuse suffered at residential school, for example, Phil Fontaine's in 1990, ultimately led to the 1998 apology by Indian Affairs Minister, Jane Stewart. It was, in fact, Stewart's 1998 apology which resulted in the creation of The Aboriginal Healing Foundation in the same year. Manuel's *Strength of Indian Women*, while published in 1998, was first staged in Vancouver in 1992, coterminous with the church apologies and on the heels of the public scrutiny in the late 1980s sparked by lawsuits by residential school survivors against the Canadian government and churches. Highway's 1998 novel comes in the same year as the first government apology. Alexie's 2002 novel follows this and precedes Stephen Harper's 2008 apology. Bartleman's 2011 novel follows the Harper apology and is the only work among those I consider to be published at the same time as the work of the TRC, and, as I discuss later on, may be a direct response to the present-day vacuum of national discourse on residential schools despite the efforts of the TRC. Bartleman's novel also follows Harper's 2009 statement to the media that Canada has no colonial

history (see Henderson and Wakeham 1).⁷⁵ Aboriginal leaders and scholars have commented upon the glibness of Harper's apology in light of his party's policies and his subsequent personal denial of Canada's colonial history. Episkenew, for example, quips:

Harper's 2008 apology was a momentous gift to the Aboriginal people of Canada, especially those who attended residential schools. By denying Canada's colonial past in 2009 and refusing to continue funding for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in 2010, the Prime Minister is, in effect, taking that gift back. I'm embarrassed to say that when I was a child, we labeled people who gave something and then took it back as "Indian givers"! ("Afterword" 193)

Harper not only gave with one hand and took away with the other; his apology completely overshadowed the earlier 1998 apology and stands as *the* apology that will be memorialized by the TRC's recommendation that it be prominently displayed in all schools in the country. While this act offers the opportunity for a national commemorative practice for the abuses suffered at residential schools, it is hard not to see Harper's apology as purely self-serving and self-memorializing, which is hurtful to the many Aboriginal people for whom the apology meant so much. In the context of all of the talk and apologizing about residential schools, Aboriginal writers, many of whom are themselves survivors of residential school, have sometimes chosen fictional forms over available discursive arenas such as courtrooms, the media, and, more recently, the TRC, to articulate individual and community wounds created by the Canadian government's assimilative strategy through residential schooling. This chapter explores what these writers add to the current discourse of reconciliation and healing produced by the story-telling initiative of the TRC. Keavy Martin cautions that it remains to be seen whether Canadians will give a genuine hearing to the TRC testimonies: "After all, it would have been easy to mistake the high-profile apology as the climax of this particular story. Continuing repercussions and further testimony make for a cumbersome denouement"

⁷⁵ Harper insisted that "We are one of the most stable regimes in history. There are very few countries that can say for nearly 150 years they've had the same political system without any social breakdown, political upheaval or invasion. We are unique in that regard. We also have no history of colonialism'" (qtd. in Henderson and Wakeham 1).

(51). Fiction, however, can provide an alternate space of teaching and healing unencumbered by standard testimonial practices.

4.1.1 “Aboriginal Trauma Theory”

This dissertation has been informed by Western conceptions of trauma that have arisen from the academy and culturally circulated through the memoirs and stories of Canadian writers. In the case of Aboriginal writers, however, Western academic conceptualizations of trauma applied to their narratives have the potential to whitewash Aboriginal understandings that might otherwise arise by boxing them into a foreign paradigm that understands trauma in culturally specific ways. Kimberly Blaeser argues that, “The insistence on reading Native literature by way of Western literary theory clearly violates its integrity and performs a new act of colonization and conquest” (55). I have struggled with my reluctance to apply Western trauma theories (with which I am most familiar) to Aboriginal texts on the one hand, and my lack of lived experience of Aboriginal culture, which in some ways limits my approach to the texts on the other.⁷⁶ One possible way out of the quandary is to take a hybridized approach to the texts, such as Deena Rymhs does in her discussion of Rudy Wiebe’s and Yvonne Johnson’s *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*. Rymhs notes the difference between testimony, as theorized by Felman and Laub, and accounts of racial, cultural, or class struggle in Latin American *testimonio*: “A crucial difference between the two is that while the latter bears witness to an event of the historic past, the *testimonio* typically engages a present, insurgent situation” (52). She views *Stolen Life* as a “convergence” of these forms of testimony which she situates in the dialogic exchange and collaboration between Wiebe, a non-Native, and Johnson, a Cree woman and descendant of Big Bear (52). While the activist impulse of *testimonio* as it intersects with the testimonial process of articulating and bearing witness to trauma provides a rubric for understanding *Stolen Life*, and,

⁷⁶ While my ancestry is Métis, I was raised in a family who considered themselves French, so all of my cultural traditions are French Canadian. My Native great-grandmother was shunned by her daughter-in-law, my French grandmother, who taught my mother to hate Aboriginals and to never admit to her own bloodline. My ancestry only became clear to me in the 1980s when, in an undergraduate course on Feminist Theory, I was required to research my matrilineal line for a project entitled “Unearthing Our Mothers.” I discovered my Native heritage in this way and called my project, “What my Mother Buried.”

indeed, could well be applied to all of the novels I examine in this chapter, the Western-Latin American hybrid theory posited by Rymhs still fails to take Aboriginal conceptions of testimony into account.

In “Trauma, Power and the Therapeutic: Speaking Psychotherapeutic Narratives in an era of Indigenous Human Rights,” Dian Million critiques the dominance of Western theories of trauma: “Humans have a range of responses to social violence, the complexities of which are flattened by the received trauma narrative, now a master narrative with scientific security and international social justice carte blanche. Thus, other experiences and responses to social violence, particularly non-Western ones, are more often silenced in trauma’s logic” (385). She grants, however, that Western forms of public testimony, such as those provided by social programs, the justice system, and the TRC, provide a stage for Indigenous articulations of trauma that would otherwise remain closeted from public attention. As Million says, only after the framing of Indigenous experience within these structures, “did their narratives become Indian narratives, their speech Indian speech. Not until they had gained access to discursive arenas, the media, texts, television, the internet, and music, articulating their own words to existing discourses and rising to create their own” (382). Million suggests that Indigenous peoples have worked within the parameters of existing discursive practices to create their own means of articulating traumas, yet she critiques Western conceptions of trauma, in part, by arguing that they are part of the colonial apparatus that continues to subjugate Aboriginal peoples.⁷⁷ Ironically, she locates the discursive power of Western individualistic notions of healing ironically in the language of justice and redress itself:

The description and logic of trauma is hegemonic but it also appears to be the language of justice and redress. How might we differentiate those Indigenous knowledges and customary practices that lie outside of an international trauma paradigm? Such a differentiation is essential, as

⁷⁷ Roland Chrisjohn and Sherri Young have similarly criticized the individualistic model of Western therapy which locates “the problem” within the individual rather than locating the problem within the larger context of colonialism and the rise of residential schooling (118). They suggest that it is not enough to examine the individual problems of an Indigenous person. The “legal, political, social and economic forces” that are at the root of the problem must also be critically examined (119).

Indigenous thought and practice may counter and interrupt the production of the biopolitical subject, the subject of trauma that is a continuation of the colonized subjectivities I have critiqued here. What, for instance, is the intersection between colonial medical and psychological interventions and our desire for justice and health framed by Indigenous cultural and spiritual beliefs? What is the nexus between the desire for self-determining community-based action and our own self-management in social welfare and criminal justice systems? How might the practice of Indigenous subjectivities (*to be* Cree, *to be* Anishinabe, *to be* Inuit, *to be* Stolo) offer ways to *not* be a therapeutic subject? (383; original emphasis)

The idea of *not* being a Western therapeutic subject opens up the possibility of being a nation-specific Indigenous subject empowered to tell a story of trauma in non-medicalized, non-Western terms. What might constitute a specifically Cree or Anishinabe or any other nation-specific Indigenous theory of trauma has not yet been fully explored by scholars and is well beyond the scope of this project. I would, however, like to pursue Fagan's broad notion of "Aboriginal trauma theory" to frame my own reading of the residential school narratives in a manner that seeks to respect the epistemologies they articulate.

Fagan puts quotation marks around "Aboriginal trauma theory" without providing a reference, which I take to mean that she is coining the phrase and possibly marking it as provisional. One of the problems of trying to isolate a definition of what might constitute a theory of trauma particular to Aboriginal peoples, one that is based upon the practices and traditions of their communities, is that the pervasive influence of Western culture and Western conceptions of trauma on Aboriginal communities may make this an impossible endeavor. Another issue is the problematic implication that an Aboriginal trauma theory might somehow offer a pure, authentic, and singular approach to painful events, as if it is tenable to say that there is one way, an "Aboriginal way," to understand the traumas of heterogeneous Indigenous communities with a multiplicity of belief systems. Theories, as Gerald Vizenor further contends, while often applied to Aboriginal texts, never fulfill their dream of affixing meaning to narratives that slip from their grasp: "Theories never anticipate visionary or innovative narratives, and never allow for the clever, artistic

variations of Native storiers. Native narratives are literary art, and theories are translations or uncertain interpretations of that tensive union of memory, tropisms, traces of convergence, tradition, culture and the tease and irony of storiers” (50). These objections are overcome in Fagan’s analysis through her crucial stricture that Aboriginal trauma theory is not a preconceived set of premises which are applied to texts but rather a shifting set of understandings that arise from the stories themselves.

I will first outline Fagan’s theorization of Aboriginal trauma theory, following which I will briefly incorporate one of her textual examples, Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, to elucidate the workings of her theory. In arguing that Western trauma theory’s focus on individual therapy is a culturally specific approach and thus not necessarily applicable to Indigenous communities, Fagan points to the work of social anthropologist, Michael Kenny, to suggest that understanding any one traumatic event is a culturally informed act and “psychological interpretation is a *creative act*” (206). Kenny, in “Trauma, Time, Illness, and Culture: an Anthropological Approach to Traumatic Memory,” locates the Western therapeutic process in the act of telling the traumatic story to free the victim from past damage (153). Following the work of Pierre Janet, Kenny summarizes the process as “the construction of a story or ‘narrative’—a return to the scene of the crime in which the formerly dissociated material now finds a place in consciousness. As Janet said, ‘memory is an action: essentially it is the action of telling a story’” (154). Fagan thus reasons,

When we consider that Aboriginal societies have their own distinct traditions of storytelling, it makes sense to consider that Aboriginal people may express the connections between past and present pain in ways that differ from Western therapeutic models. Aboriginal societies have evolved their own theories to explain the connection between past traumas and current misfortunes. (205-06)

Fagan suggests that these theories can be found in Aboriginal traditions of storytelling: “Stories, told and retold over generations, contain complex teachings about Aboriginal history, science, ethics, spirituality, and methods of survival. [. . .] [S]tories can provide means of both articulating and understanding traumatic events” (206-07). Aboriginal stories, moreover, are a means to express wisdom and knowledge indirectly.

Fagan refers to Kimberley Roppolo's use of the term "indirect discourse" to describe how stories transmit knowledge (207). According to Roppolo, a pattern of speech typical of Native Americans is to imply meaning, rather than make direct statements, and expect their listeners to deduce it for themselves.⁷⁸ Fagan therefore notes that "the direct communication encouraged by Western trauma theory often clashes with Aboriginal means of expression" (207). Direct testimony is thus likely to be a problematic endeavour for many Aboriginal people.

In fact, Aboriginal stories can function as an indirect way to express what might count as evidence to traumatic events. Kimberly Roppolo argues that Native American arguments differ from those of the mainstream in their appeals to ethos: "In Native culture, experience in general—whether the experiences of the culture encoded in story, the experiences of an authoritative elder, or the experiences of an individual who shares the same cultural values—is held as evidence. In fact, this is precisely what invests a person with 'authority' in Native cultures" (306-07). Roppolo says that a "rhetoric for Native American literary discourse would be tribally centered, with intertribal connections" (308). Ruppolo identifies "indirect discourse" as a "phenomena in Native speech" (316), one that is pervasive enough for her to call indirect discourse an "Indian rhetorical tradition" (320). She suggests that when "someone has done something wrong or foolish, when an error needs to be addressed, care is often taken, at least traditionally, that that person does not feel 'put on the spot,' that he or she can remedy his or her mistake without losing honor. Implication, rather than explication, is the usual means of conveying this message" (316). Ruppolo argues that an example of this form of communication is telling a story to convey a message (316).

I take from Fagan and Roppolo two guiding principles for conceptualizing what might constitute an Aboriginal trauma theory: first, that Indigenous knowledge and beliefs are embedded in stories, and one can look to the stories that Indigenous writers

⁷⁸ Roppolo's use of the term "indirect discourse" to denote a pattern of Native American speech should not be confused with the grammatical term, "free indirect discourse." See Kimberley Roppolo's "Samson Occom as Writing Instructor: The Search for an Intertribal Rhetoric." *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics' Collective*. Ed. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2008. 303-324.

tell to gain access to how trauma is understood; and second, that indirect discourse is the preferred method of communication for many Indigenous peoples' speech and narrative practices. What I found in my analysis of Manuel's, Bartleman's, and Alexie's texts is both a reluctance *and* an imperative to talk about past traumas, specifically in these texts, child sexual abuse suffered at residential school. Fagan underscores the fact that there is often the need for Indigenous peoples to publically testify to past traumas, whether that is in the courtroom or for the TRC. She identifies "two contradictory impulses at work for Aboriginal people when it comes to speaking about sexual abuse. There is often a need for them to speak about traumatic experiences in order to change what is happening. But there is also a strong cultural prohibition against making direct or angry accusations" (209-10). Indeed, this push and pull between telling and not telling is a tension at work in all of the narratives I examine. Fagan suggests that "Storytelling and humour offer responses to this dilemma, and can act as alternatives to witnessing" (210). I want to extend Fagan's theorization to argue that storytelling can also function as an alternative to testimony (not just witnessing) by providing writers with a means to express the traumas of residential schooling indirectly through the stories they tell in their fictions.

Tomson Highway's autobiographical novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, is a case in point. Like Alexie, who writes about his childhood sexual abuse for the first time in his novel, Highway similarly chooses the novel form to first disclose the abuses he and his brother, René, suffered at residential school. And, like Alexie, writing the novel serves a scripto-therapeutic purpose for Highway. For Highway, writing about his traumas was literally a matter of life and death. As he says to Judy Stoffman in an interview, "If I couldn't have written [*Kiss of the Fur Queen*], I would have killed myself—unless we confront the evil, it will kill you as it killed my brother."⁷⁹ Talking or writing about

⁷⁹ Highway's reference to René's death as somehow connected to not confronting "the evil" is troubling. René died of AIDS-related complications, as does Gabriel in the novel. Gabriel's promiscuous homosexual lifestyle following his abuse at residential school is contrasted in the novel to Jeremiah's ascetic, almost monastic heterosexual lifestyle. Is Highway suggesting that René would not have been gay or promiscuous enough to contract HIV had he confronted his past sexual abuse by the priest at the school? The potential connection between homosexuality, sexual abuse, and illness/death is but one of the reasons that scholars such as Daniel Heath Justice have suggested that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is a toxic text connoting a homosexuality which cannot be healed. I understand how such readings are plausible; however, a homosexual himself, Highway, in my view, unflinchingly explores the after-effects of sexual abuse on two brothers who respond differently to their past traumas. Jeremiah, modelled after Highway, is heterosexual

painful experiences is difficult, according to Fagan, given the cultural prohibition against communicating anger or sorrow directly, a sanction which she points out is played out in the novel when Jeremiah and Gabriel decide not to tell their parents about Father Lafleur's sexual predations. Fagan argues that the cultural preference for indirect communication is a principal reason why Highway wrote the novel. Just as Jeremiah expresses himself through writing, "In a similar way, it seems that, in order to finally find a way to tell his own story, Highway turned away from the public world of the theatre, where he had previously worked, and then away from the autobiographical form in which he originally tried to tell his story, and to the more private and distanced world of the novel" (Fagan, "Weesageechak" 215). Fictional autobiographies, says Fagan, allow "one to speak of one's painful experience while treating it as a fiction" (216).

Using the novel form also allows Highway to embed Cree mythological figures and stories throughout his fiction as a narrative strategy to tell his trauma story in Cree terms, outside of Western traditions of fictional autobiographies. Near the end of the novel when Gabriel is dying in a hospital, his father, Abraham, tells Gabriel and Jeremiah the Cree tale of the Son of Ayash, whose mother tells him, "'The world has become too evil. With these magic weapons, make a new world'" (227). Margery Fee notes the creative and transformational power evoked by the Cree story: "As Tomson Highway made clear in his *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, music, dance, theatre, writing, and the other

in the novel for a reason: Highway wanted to suggest that the child sexual abuse he and his brother experienced by the priest did not lead to their homosexuality. Jennifer Henderson acknowledges that the novel "[. . .] takes the risk of associating the brothers' sexuality—including Gabriel Okimasis's unambiguous homosexuality—with their experiences of sexual abuse in the school" (180). Henderson details what she understands to be "the real scandal of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which is its willingness to draw associations (which are non-totalizing and non-determinative, but associations all the same) between trauma and identity, between sexual abuse and queer sexuality, and between sexual abuse and a queerly assumed First Nations identity. These associations are prohibited in a Left-liberal discussion on progressive grounds and for good reasons. The mere suggestion of a link between traumatic experience and non-normative sexual practices, for instance, seems to produce a pathological taint that colours those practices as compulsive repetition. [. . . H]owever, without the kinds of associations that Highway insists on drawing, the subversive, productive possibilities of repetitions that allow differentiation and agency through their creative restaging of traumatic experience are unimaginable" (187-88). Still, Highway's suggestion that his brother's death could have been prevented vexes me. Child sexual abuse does not necessarily lead to promiscuity any more than it leads to homosexuality, and, even if René had not been promiscuous, he still could have contracted HIV, especially in the 1980s, when he was infected. Safe sex only became prominent in the late 1980s as a result of the "AIDS epidemic." René Highway died in 1990.

arts—based on traditional roots—were to be the magic weapons with which Indigenous people would make a new world” (62). For Sam McKegney, the image was important enough to title his monograph on residential school narratives, *Magic Weapons*. McKegney emphasizes the educative and political impulse of Indigenous artistic practices in the novel. Like Tomson and René Highway, Jeremiah and Gabriel “take to artistic expression—the former through piano and writing and the latter through dance—initially as a coping mechanism for past trauma and eventually as a means of combating the forces of oppression that have infected not only their own lives but those of thousands of Natives whom they endeavour to influence” (156). Highway’s novel champions the notion that literature can perform both personal and political functions: to heal and to instruct others about the legacies of residential school through a reclamation of the traditions and storytelling practices lost through colonial subjugation. The writers I discuss shortly—Manuel, Bartleman, and Alexie—share Highway’s emphasis on the pedagogical and political importance of telling the story of residential school abuses and legacies in specifically Indigenous ways.

As a form of testimony, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is able to explore the complexities of child sexual abuse within the system of residential schooling without the constraints imposed by standard testimonial forms requiring evidence, facts, and the truth “beyond a reasonable doubt.” Highway demonstrates the radical capacity of fiction to reveal its truths while insisting upon the troubled access to such truths. The central crisis of the novel is the rape of Gabriel by Father Lafleur, a story which is told from the perspective of both brothers. Jeremiah witnesses the scene and understands it, importantly, in terms of the Cree myth of the cannibalistic figure of the Weetigo: “Gabriel was not alone. A dark, hulking figure hovered over him, like a crow. Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honey-comb, or the Weetigo feasting on human flesh” (79). Gabriel’s perception of the scene of his abuse is coloured by his dream-like state as the priest has attacked him as he sleeps. What Jeremiah stories, Gabriel dreams; in both cases, perception blurs reality. The scene of his rape, according to McKegney, lacks straightforward reporting because of Gabriel’s altered state of consciousness, troubling “the division between lived experience and (anti-historical) subconscious interference” (157-58). Despite this, the fact that sexual abuse is occurring

is never in question. McKegney argues that this scene of Gabriel's rape functions to interrogate traditional forms of traumatic testimony:

Neither brother is shown to be in a position to indisputably detail Father Lafleur's assault on Gabriel.[. . .] Yet the audience is never left with any doubt that the abuse has occurred, which cuts to the heart of *Kiss of the Fur Queen's* implicit critique of standard historicizing tactics for the residential school legacy. When bound by Euro-Canadian legal definitions of "truth" and "fact," contingent on the improbable attainment of "evidence," the crucial cognitive endeavour of revisiting residential school trauma is limited in its capacity to influence people's understanding of the broader causes and implications of residential school transgressions. For this reason, Highway presents the novel's most crucial incident of abuse as factually uncertain, yet with enormous symbolic and evocative force. (158-59)

Implicit in Highway's novel, then, is a plea to permit fictional accounts of residential school traumas and legacies to stand in for conventional public forms of testimony. For McKegney, Highway's novel re-imagines what counts as testimony: "*Kiss of the Fur Queen* is an extraordinarily political novel, and all the more so because of its seductive avoidance of well-worn paths of testimonial discourse and non-fictional political argumentation" (173). Through Cree orature and traditions, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* offers up an Indigenous testimonial imaginary to the lived experience of the Highway brothers. Aboriginal trauma theory arises from the stories told in Highway's novel and by other Aboriginal writers who choose fiction to convey their knowledge or experience of residential school legacies. As Fagan insists, "Aboriginal stories and traditions are theory, and they can offer us fruitful ways to understand Aboriginal literature" (219).

4.2 Vera Manuel, *Strength of Indian Women*

All of you went through so much. Someone should write about it. They should make a movie about how you survived. I feel real proud sitting here among you. You're just like old warriors. (114)

Strength of Indian Women

First staged at the Firehall Theatre in Vancouver's downtown eastside in January of 1992, Vera Manuel's *Strength of Indian Women* was performed by a cast of Indigenous women in an area known for its poverty, crime, violence, drug use, and sex trade, but also and importantly for its activism. On the heels of the inaugural performance of Manuel's play came the second annual Women's Memorial March in the downtown eastside on Valentine's Day in 1992. Initiated by First Nations women, the march commemorates missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Manuel's play focuses on the disclosures and legacies of abuses suffered at residential school by a group of Native women. One of these elders, Agnes, recounts the night her friend and fellow residential school survivor, Annie, was murdered in Vancouver where the two worked as prostitutes. Agnes tells her story because, as she says, "It could just as easily have been me that got killed. Somebody has to talk about it. Somebody has to tell the truth about what happened to all those little girls" (102). As Manuel emphasizes in her foreword to the play, the stories she tells are true ones that need a public stage. The presence, then, of Indigenous women on stage telling what in fact are true stories of child abuse and the after-effects of residential schooling, which led Agnes and Annie to a risky life on the streets as prostitutes, alongside a real-life commemorative protest of missing and murdered Indigenous women pushes at the limits of the play's fictional form by staging its personal, public, and political import beyond the lives of the characters. The play functions as a form of public, staged testimony to residential school survival while it concomitantly implicates the audience as witnesses. For those audience members who are also survivors of residential school or have family members who are, the play enacts therapeutic disclosure of abuses followed by healing through the community of women who share their stories and through the reclamation of traditional Indigenous practices.

By emphasizing the play's grounding in lived reality and truth, Manuel invites her audience to apprehend the play as testimony to the stories told to her by her mother about residential school and to Manuel's own experiences as a child of residential school survivors. In response to Manuel's foreword, Episkenew observes, "Manuel's goal in writing and performing 'Strength of Indian Women' is to transform the current reality of Indigenous people by applying theatre to the problem of the intergenerational effects of residential schools" (*Taking Back Our Spirits* 166). According to Manuel, *Strength of Indian Women* came out of a short story she wrote called "The Abyss." Manuel did not attend residential school herself, but both of her parents did, as did her two younger sisters and two younger brothers. As Manuel says, the residential school experience affected her whole family: "*it visited us every day of our childhood through the replaying over and over of our parents' childhood trauma and grief which they never had the opportunity to resolve in their lifetimes*" ("The Abyss" 107; original emphasis). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada uses this quotation in its on-line publication, *They Came for the Children* (79). As such, Manuel's personal story has become part of the public testimonial process currently underway by the TRC. It is important to note, however, that Manuel's form of choice for her testimony was through storytelling practices. Manuel discloses in her foreword to "The Abyss" the child sexual abuse that she, all of her sisters, and at least one brother suffered. Before she died, Manuel's mother disclosed her own sexual abuse in residential school to Manuel and her sisters. Like Sousette in the play, Manuel's mother "*blamed herself for not being able to protect us and for not being able to help us when we were suffering*" ("The Abyss" 107). Manuel says that her father was physically, emotionally and possibly sexually abused, although he never disclosed the abuse. He was, according to Manuel, often violent, although she does not name her abuser (107). For Manuel, writing "The Abyss" "*helps to purge, and helps to heal my relationship with my mother*" (107). *Strength of Indian Women* was similarly, as Manuel says, "pure therapy" ("Letting Go of Trauma").

Not just therapy for herself, Manuel is very aware of the therapeutic potential of *Strength of Indian Women* for her audience and Indigenous communities. As a therapist, Manuel also understands the importance of creating an ethical and safe place with which

to exchange stories of trauma that always have the potential to re-traumatize listeners.⁸⁰ As she says in her foreword to the play,

A tremendous responsibility is attached to telling the unresolved grief stories of First Nations' people. Words have power; they cause us to feel the emotions of the story they are telling. [. . .] The responsibility we hold in passing on these stories is to role model a healthy lifestyle for our children, who are always watching us for direction. When we share our life stories, we must create a safe place for those who come to listen, in order not to hurt ourselves or others. (76)

In a public reading of the play on 17 May 2007 in Wisconsin, directed by Vera Manuel's sister, Arlene, Arlene Manuel recommended that counsellors and spiritual advisors be in attendance because of the potential issues that the play would arouse for Oneida tribal members in the audience (Benton). It seems likely (although I have not been able to find any specific information to confirm it) that Manuel's recommendation is based upon past experiences with audience members in the performance of the play. In Episkenew's analysis of Manuel's play, she suggests that "Many Indigenous people who either attended residential school themselves or are the children and grandchildren of those who did recognize these stories as truth" (*Taking Back Our Spirits* 164). That recognition by audience members represents an important moment of testimonial discursive exchange and connection through stories that also has the potential to open up past wounds for those listening to the stories told on stage.

The presence of Indigenous women on stage telling stories that Indigenous (and possibly non-Indigenous) audience members would recognize as true contributes to the real-life testimonial aesthetic of the play, particularly when one considers that Vera Manuel and her sister would sometimes participate as actors. In the published version of the play, two photographs appear below the title. One of those photographs is a 1998

⁸⁰ Vera Manuel began writing plays and poetry at the same time that she was also conducting group therapy workshops. She eventually brought writing and therapy together. As she says, "they were like two separate things I was doing and it kept me really busy, and then all of a sudden they both started coming together; it felt so natural, such a natural fit for me to start taking my poetry into the workshops. And I would get to see what a strong impact it had on people to get them to open up about their stories" (Interview).

production picture of Arlene Manuel playing Sousette with Vera Manuel as Lucy. Audience members who attended such a performance would have witnessed true stories of the Manuel's replayed by family members. For the Manuel sisters, performing their family stories for an audience would have the therapeutic potential that comes with testimony in the presence of witnesses, which is the potential for the traumas to be heard and acknowledged. Prior to writing the play, Vera Manuel and her sister attended therapy sessions together. As Manuel describes it, "I put myself in therapy, in group therapy, and worked with my younger sister Arlene. We worked a lot together on this stuff and then it just naturally led me into the work that I do today" (Interview). The play, then, becomes part of their therapeutic journey as a family, and it does so through the act of storytelling. As Manuel says, "our greatest learning is through our storytelling, when people sit around in the circle and start talking about their lives and other people learn from their experience, and it's very, very powerful" (Interview). Bringing her role as healer to the stage, Manuel creates what I would call a "theatre of group therapy."

The second photograph appears above and partially behind the picture of Vera and Arlene Manuel costumed as Lucy and Sousette. It is a historical photograph of children flanked by nuns standing in front of a residential school. Less obvious is the priest who stands beside the nuns near the right-hand corner of the photo. The notes to the play indicate that the "historic photo" was supplied by Vera Manuel (119). Both the play and the short story, "The Abyss," open with a mother and her daughter looking at a photograph of the mother as a child posing with all the other children in front of the residential school she attended. In both texts, the wording describing the picture is almost identical and in both the daughter describes the photo to the mother who is having trouble with her eyesight: "It's a bunch of little girls. Lots of them, standing in front of a big grey building. There's a priest and a nun standing there with them" (*Strength of Indian Women* 78).⁸¹ The almost exact repetition of the same scene and dialogue brings a verisimilitude to the exchange between mother and daughter and to the picture. In both the play and the story, however, the name of the residential school is fictionalized as St. Ignatius

⁸¹ In "The Abyss" the lines read as follows: "It's a bunch of girls. [. . .] lots of them standing in front of a big grey building. There's a priest standing there with them" (108).

Residential School in “The Abyss” and St. Eugene’s Residential School in *Strength of Indian Women*. In reality, Manuel’s siblings attended Port Alberni Residential School and it is possible that her parents attended the same school. Why would Manuel write and then re-write the same story as a play that she insists is true and then fictionalize the name of the residential school? Why provide an archival photograph of little girls, nuns, and a priest standing in front of a residential school without any indication of the date of the picture and without naming the school? After all, she does include the date along with production and photographic details of the other picture of her and her sister, Arlene.

The absence of factual detail is even more interesting when one considers the primacy of the photograph to the play. The play opens with Sousette looking for the picture, which she shows to her daughter, Eva. The photograph sparks Sousette’s memories of residential school and serves as a visual springboard for the ensuing discussion with Eva about her experiences at residential school and also the experiences of her friends, Lucy, Mariah, and Agnes. The first memory that Sousette shares with Eva is Lucy’s sexual abuse by the priest at the school. Lucy becomes pregnant but the baby dies. As Sousette says, “Not just Lucy, other girls had babies, too. Lots of babies buried behind the school, buried in the school yard” (81). As this first scene draws to a close, Sousette picks up the photograph again: “*As she speaks, the lights fade, and a slide of the picture of the girls in the school lights up on the back wall*” (82). In fact, the photograph lights up the back of the stage throughout the play.

In the absence of factual detail about the picture, it is easy to dismiss it as representative of any residential school with any group of Native students standing in front of it and any non-Native priest in the corner. Indeed, the name of the priest in the play is Father LeBlanc, a symbol of any white figure of corruption. I want to suggest, however, that the photograph supplied by Manuel likely comes from her own mother, Marceline Manuel, who was sexually abused by a priest at residential school. If it were a historical photo from another source, Manuel would be required to indicate its original publication or archival details. The play’s emphasis on testimony, which I discuss next, seems to me to lend credence to the argument that the play moves beyond the enactment of testimony to an indirect form of testimony through the “historic photo.” I contend that in all likelihood the audience is looking not only at a picture of Manuel’s mother but also

of the priest who abused her. If this is the case, then the play truly does function as an alternate form of testimony by providing a vehicle for Manuel to disclose a family legacy of abuses without having to endure the further trauma of filing a criminal complaint against the abusing priest and/or the residential school. Written well before the current TRC public testimonials, the play provided a stage for safe disclosure not otherwise available.

The play is structured by the testimonies of Sousette and the other elders within the context of Sousette's granddaughter, Suzie's, traditional coming-of-age celebration. Suzie is thirteen-years-old. The play takes place over the three days of preparation in advance of the feast for Suzie. While Suzie is at the lodge for her two days of fasting prior to the ceremony, the women tell their stories of abuse at residential school. Sousette explains to Eva that she has spoken with her friends about the importance of sharing their history: "I talked to the others. We decided that you need to know everything, about the school, and about us. You need to know because of Suzie. It's her history, too" (81). The upcoming ceremony anchors the play in hope and healing through the reclamation of the traditional Indigenous ceremony of becoming a woman through the next generation, represented by Suzie. Sousette and Eva look at a picture of Sousette wearing the buckskin dress that Suzie will wear for her ceremony. The dress was made for Sousette from skins from a deer hunted by her grandfather and subsequently sewn together by her grandmother with beads and shells. The dress is a potent symbol of traditional and healthy family legacies prior to the imposition of residential schooling. Eva's coming-of-age as a woman was not celebrated because of Sousette's training at the residential school. Celebrations of this sort stopped, as Sousette explains to Eva, because "People were afraid of Indian ways back then" (83). "Indian ways" come together with individual stories to form a collective story that is also a testimony and an act of healing.

In *Strength of Indian Women*, then, testimony to childhood trauma does not conform to the Western model of an individual recounting past horrors to a singular witness, the therapist; instead, there is a gathering of voices as the individual stories of the elders come together as a collective to convey their full history. The women both testify to and witness their stories, with the audience as a community of witnesses. Christy Stanlake argues that Manuel's play models the "reciprocal relationship between

the stories of a community and the story of an individual” (131). The relational aspect of traumatic testimony is an essential feature of Manuel’s approach to the trauma story and healing. The bulk of the remainder of the play is structured by the group of women elders telling their stories by taking centre stage under a spotlight. The light shining down on the speaker while the listeners sit on the couch and pay attention evokes a scene of testimony and witness within the comfort of Sousette’s home. For Stanlake, “The personal stories told by each woman adhere to a form of witnessing, in which the play’s conventions of realism break while each woman stands alone center stage to deliver her story directly to the audience” (112). The stage, then, brings the testimony out of the private sphere of the home to the public sphere of the community. For Sousette’s daughter, Eva, this represents the first time that she is witness to the history of her mother and Aunties, a history which is also her own. Sparked by the photograph of the elders as little girls at residential school, Eva wants to learn more about their experiences from her mother, Sousette, and from her friends; Lucy, however, is reluctant to speak: “There’s some things that I shouldn’t tell you” (90). Sousette intervenes by telling Lucy that Eva has a right to know their history, and she insists that Lucy tell Eva about the sexual abuse by the priest at the school. Sousette’s insistence upon the importance of Lucy’s childhood traumas to Sousette’s daughter’s understanding of the school system underscores the importance of community to residential school legacy discourse.

As a Gregorian chant begins to play, Lucy takes centre stage. The liturgical chant evokes connections to lugubrious priests—here ritualistically preying upon young Native girls. Under the spotlight, Lucy discloses a scene of molestation by the priest. Agnes finds her throwing up behind the stairs afterwards and the two (with some of their friends) decide to run away from the school. They are caught and brought back, as Lucy says, by her “own people” (92). For Lucy, this is an important betrayal, the disclosing of which exhausts her and shuts down her speech. Sousette takes centre stage for Lucy to finish her story, which emphasizes that it takes a community of women to tell the story. Sousette fills in the gap of Lucy’s story by discussing the beating she witnessed of Lucy and Agnes by the nuns when the girls were returned. This act of witnessing by Sousette provides Lucy with the strength and support she needs to continue with her story: “*Lucy stands to deliver the rest of her story with all the power she needs to conjure up the*

image and to destroy it" (93; original emphasis). Signalling an act of collective healing whereby the women tell their stories to release the pain of their past, this stage direction is intended for the cast members rather than the audience by suggesting a cathartic posture for the actor. Yet the monologues quickly diverge from individual testimony and healing to group testimony and witness. Lucy thus moves from her own abuses to testifying to those of Agnes, who was beaten more severely than the rest of them because she was the "ringleader." Just as Sousette witnessed Lucy's trauma, here Lucy bears witness to Agnes's. Following a relentless beating made worse because of Agnes's refusal to cry, Lucy feels "*broken herself in this moment*" and says, "They broke her that day" (93). The picture of the girls at residential school lights up again as Sousette rejoins their individual experiences into a collective one: "They broke her body, they broke her heart, but they never broke her spirit. Agnes' spirit lives inside each one of us" (93). Episkenew suggests that a characteristic of most Indigenous literature in Canada is that the community rather than the individual is the protagonist (*Taking Back Our Spirits* 166). In this play, all of the women reciprocally share and testify to each other's traumas. They do so as a group to the next generation, represented by Eva, for the generation following her, represented by Suzie, and for the present-day community of witnesses sitting in the audience.

Of all the elders, Mariah has the most fraught relationship with the act of testimony to past traumas. The last of the group of elders to arrive at Sousette's house for the ceremony, Mariah has had a history of silences, including being silenced by Lucy, who has retained her girlhood antagonism toward her because of her perceived privileges at residential school. Mariah's testimony to the group of women thus marks a significant break in her pattern of silence and represents the possibility for healing both Mariah and the friendships between the elders. Manuel believes that for healing to occur, one must acknowledge past traumas and grieve lost childhoods. This is hard work, which is why, as Manuel says, "people don't go there. They slam on the brakes when they are feeling vulnerable and the tears come, but I think that's really key in healing. Remembering things that have happened from the past and allowing ourselves to have those feelings, tears, anger, and grief about what happens, so that we can move past it and we can start changing those behaviours" (Interview).

Silent witnessing has been the hallmark of Mariah's traumas. Accordingly, she begins her testimony by saying that she has been afraid to speak her whole life. As a Métis woman, Mariah has been othered by both Native and non-Native communities. She has lived "on the edge of two worlds" fitting into neither the white nor Native communities easily (104). She was taunted by classmates as the "teacher's pet" at residential school and as a "Bill C-31 Indian."⁸² In the white world, she was taunted as a "squaw" and "Pocahontas" (105). Her light skin, however, gave her the advantage of appearing less Native than the other girls at school in the eyes of the priest and nuns. Mariah is granted special privileges both because she looks non-Native and because she remains silent; however, this comes at the cost of her identity. As Mariah says, "because I was so good at saying nothin' I became one of them" (106). Indeed, as she continues her testimonial monologue to the group of women, her refrain is "I said nothin'" (106). Mariah describes how she silently watched a nun throw a girl down two flights of cement steps for speaking her own language (105). Mariah says nothing as she hears girls being taken away by the priest at night. She silently witnesses a girl in the school delivering a baby and then watches that baby's burial in the school cemetery (106). Mariah's is a tragedy of silence. As she says, "My screams were silent and my agony all consumin'" (105). The community of women, particularly Lucy, are able to understand through Mariah's disclosure that silence itself is traumatic when one is burdened with the act of

⁸² Bill C-31 amended the *Indian Act* in 1985 partly in an attempt to address its discriminatory provisions against Native women (and their children) who lost their status because they married non-Natives. The amendment allows limited reinstatement of status with a two-generation cut-off rule. This sounds simpler than it is. Status is complicated because the *Indian Act* was in many ways a document designed to get rid of Indians altogether. In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King argues that Bill C-31 will effectively rid Canada of status Indians. As set out in the *Indian Act*, there are two categories of status Indians: six-ones and six-twos. As King explains, "Six-one Indians are status and, for legal purposes, are considered to be full-bloods even if they aren't, while six-two Indians are status and for legal purposes considered to be half-bloods even if they aren't" (142-43). As King understands it, Bill C-31 means that, "Six-ones who marry six-ones produce six-one children. Six-ones who marry six-twos produce six-one children. Six-ones who marry non-status produce six-two children. / And six-twos who marry six-twos, or who marry non-status, produce non-status children. And those children can never, ever be status. / Now that's a good trick" (143). Marrying out of status for two generations will produce non-status children. King claims that fifty-percent of status Indians are now marrying people without status. He estimates that "if this rate holds steady, in fifty to seventy-five years there will be no status Indians left in Canada" (144). Labeling Mariah a "Bill C-31 Indian" effectively defines her identity solely through a piece of legislation and highlights the divisiveness of the policy for Aboriginal peoples. As Episkew says, "only in Indigenous Canada would people instantly know the meaning and significance of that label" (21).

witnessing the pain of others. Mariah is importantly given a stage upon which to begin her own healing journey by way of talking for the first time about her life of silent witnessing. The ethics of responsible witnessing are foregrounded through Mariah's story, which circulates to the audience watching the drama unfold the burden that comes from being a spectator to trauma. Mariah's testimony to the trauma of silence has the potential to foment the audience out of silence and into action for Indigenous empowerment and justice.

At this point in the play, all of the elders have taken centre stage to disclose past traumas or, in Mariah's case, the trauma associated with being a silent witness. Together, their stories have accrued layers of meaning that exceed the limits of any one woman's story. The final testimonial disclosures complete the story of the women through the testimonies of Sousette and Eva to the intergenerational legacy of residential school abuses. The institutional, loveless environment of residential schools has produced generations of children deprived of healthy models of parenting and appropriate loving relationships. The spotlight first shines on Eva as she recounts her memory of a past conversation she had with her mother, Sousette, at a point in time when Sousette did not acknowledge her own traumas:

Do you remember how you used to beat me, Mom? Do you even remember the bruises? Do you remember the ugly things you used to call me, and all those times you left me alone. I wouldn't have cared, if only you would have loved me. Do you even know what that means, love? Every time I go to hug you, you stiffen up. Do you know that you do that, Mom? Do you know how that makes me feel? And now I'm doing the same thing to Suzie. I push her away, Mom. I call her stupid, and I hit her, and I don't want to. / Tell me again that residential school was good for you. (108)

Episkenew discusses the pattern of abuse that is passed along to Eva because of Sousette's lack of parenting skills: "Suzie, although two generations removed from the residential school experience, is still a victim of its violence and barbarity. Violence breeds shame, and shame breeds more violence. This is the despicable legacy of the colonial regime's policy of 'Indian' residential schools, and without healing that legacy

will be passed down from one generation of Indigenous people to the next” (*Taking Back Our Spirits* 168). The promise of healing through a change in patterns of behaviour is represented through the unfolding new relationship between Sousette and Eva. Sousette tells Eva that she loves her, something that she has been unable to do in the past. When Sousette stands up in the centre of the stage to testify, she tells her group of friends and her daughter, Eva, about the times when she and another girl were sexually abused by Father LeBlanc in the infirmary. The purpose of this disclosure is not to dwell on the sexual abuse itself, although its disclosure is important for Sousette’s own healing. The focus is on how this abuse was shared by many survivors of residential school, preventing Sousette from being a good parent to Eva, and before this, her own mother from being a good parent to her: “the other women began to speak up. Even my mother, before she died, said that same thing happened to her. And my Eva, I couldn’t protect her. I was too busy running away” (113). In a moment of mother-daughter reconciliation and healing, Sousette rocks Eva in her arms, tells her that she loves her, and asks for her forgiveness.

The enactment of healing familial relationships damaged by the assimilative regulatory technologies of colonialism represented in the play through one of its primary systems of control over Indigenous bodies, residential schools, marks a significant discursive strategy to promote wellness in Native communities. Crucial to this endeavour is the reclamation of Indigenous traditions and practices, represented in the play by Suzie’s coming-of-age ceremony. Christy Stanlake connects this ceremony to the transformational power of storytelling: “as Suzie undergoes a ceremonial transformation into womanhood, the audience observes a dramatic portrayal of how storytelling creates a transformation within the women’s community” (112). Thus, as Suzie fasts and cleanses herself in advance of her ceremony, the elders, in a parallel journey, tell their stories to similarly purge themselves as they, too, mark a transformation to healing which also gestures towards reconciliation as they move from shame and silence to a community of prideful voices. The chance of healing and reconciliation lies with Suzie. As Agnes says, “Suzie will turn the whole world right side up again, the way it was meant to be, and we will celebrate” (113). All of the women help Suzie into her ceremonial dress as Suzie describes her visions at the lodge. The deer that came to her great-grandfather when he

was hunting for her dress visited her and told her that she would have a long life and her own daughter would wear the dress (115). With the visionary promise of a new legacy of Indigenous values, customs, and empowerment for women, Sousette, Eva, Agnes, Lucy, Mariah, and Suzie all leave together for the ceremony as an honour song begins (117). Manuel honours the strength and endurance of the community of women, while she also directly honours her own mother. One of the gifts given to Suzie is a blanket from her great-grandmother, Marceline, the name of Manuel's own mother.

In the epigraph to this section, I quoted Eva, who says to her mother and Aunties, "All of you went through so much. Someone should write about it. They should make a movie about how you survived. I feel real proud sitting here among you. You're just like old warriors" (114). Eva's valorization of the strength of the women elders and her call to spread the word of their survival through media such as film mirrors the performative work of the play itself and Manuel's commemoration of her own family legacies and survival. As heart-wrenching as this play is, it is also and fundamentally a healing artistic enterprise that offers its writer, actors, and audience (including readers) the opportunity for therapeutic transformation through the powerful models for change represented by the three generations of women in this play. The "Aboriginal trauma theory" which emerges from *Strength of Indian Women* is one that thus emphasizes the communal and participatory elements of healing from trauma and the importance of telling one's story both individually and as a collective to family and community members.

4.3 James Bartleman, *As Long as the Rivers Flow*

My book is fiction, but everything in it is based on fact.

James Bartleman, "Canada's Forgotten Native Children"

When former Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario and member of Chippewas of Mnjikaning First Nation, James Bartleman, decided to write a novel about the legacies of residential schooling he did so, as he said to Shelagh Rogers, with a specific purpose in mind: to "educate, sensitize, and make Canadians a little more aware of what is going on in our own third World" ("Interview"). *As Long as the Rivers Flow* is a synthesis of Bartleman's many trips to remote First Nations communities in Northern Ontario where he was invited to attend treaty commemorations, participate in healing circles, and speak

to elders. In one such community, the Wunnumin Lake First Nation, Bartleman was invited by Stan Beardy, Grand Chief of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, to take part in a healing ceremony following the deaths of three teenagers who were part of a suicide pact⁸³ (Medley). Bartleman perceived what he called an “epidemic of suicide among children and youth, which no one was paying any attention to in this country” (“Interview”). Given the political power and connections afforded to Bartleman by his previous experience in the Canadian diplomatic service, he would certainly have been able to find opportunities for public speaking about Native issues such as this. He chose, however, fiction as his stage. The choice is even more interesting when one considers the current work of the TRC which aims, in part, to lay similar educative groundwork to Bartleman’s novel and that, at least in theory, aims to pave the way for reconciliation between Canada and Aboriginal peoples. What then does fiction offer that public discursive arenas such as the TRC cannot?

I would like to extend Bartleman’s statement regarding the lack of public attention to suicides among youth in remote, fly-in Native communities to suggest that the majority of non-Native Canadians are similarly not paying attention to the current work of the TRC, and to argue that Bartleman is responding to this discursive vacuum. Bartleman is hoping to instruct, as he says, both Native and non-Native readers about the history and legacies of the residential school system, not “to delight” as the Horatian platitude would have it, but to incite readers to new understandings of the consequences of the barbaric treatment of Natives in Canada.⁸⁴ That Bartleman wrote and published his novel concurrently with the mandated work of the TRC is likely not a coincidence.

⁸³ The Nishnawbe Aski Nation represents of forty-nine First Nation communities, “whose traditional lands make up more than sixty percent of the area of Ontario running from the height of land to the James and Hudson Bay coast and from the Manitoba to the Quebec borders” (*As Long as the Rivers Flow* 245-46).

⁸⁴ Bartleman is careful to point out that his intent is “not to be a spokesman for the native [sic] people” and “not to be a propagandist for native [sic] causes and to adopt a black-and-white position [. . .] but to try and come to some sort of understanding, and have the people who read the novel first of all look upon it as a novel, not as a pamphlet” (Medley). I agree with him that the novel should not be viewed as an attempt to indoctrinate the public into a particular view of Native issues; however, Bartleman’s novel does provide historical information that is clearly aimed at those readers unaware of Canada’s treatment of Natives, just as Joy Kogawa’s novel, *Obasan*, teaches readers about the Canadian government’s internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II. I would argue, in fact, that Bartleman’s novel, while perhaps falling short of the definition of propaganda, is unequivocally didactic, much more so than the intensely lyrical and literary novel of Kogagawa.

Outside of the forum of the TRC, fiction can provide a safe vehicle both for a public figure such as Bartleman to say what he wants about the legacies of residential school and for readers, particularly non-Native ones, to engage with Aboriginal issues through storytelling rather than testimonials or reports from the TRC, which despite being accessible on the TRC's website, seem to be ignored and/or not talked about by the general public. Because Bartleman is not a residential school survivor, and neither are his parents, his novel is not a fictional testimony to his own experiences, as was the case with Manuel. Rather, his novel performs the broader work of public testimony through the more accessible form of storytelling. What matters to this novel is that the history and legacies of residential schooling in Canada are circulated to as broad an audience as possible to promote the possibility of social justice and change.

As Long as the Rivers Flow presents an alternative to the public work of the TRC by offering readers a story that aims to teach the history and legacy of residential school traumas, yet one that seeks to move beyond what is always at risk with testimony, that is, a totalizing gaze on wounds. I argue that Bartleman's novel functions as didactic public testimony for socio-political purposes in three ways: first, by elaborating the complex historical, socio-political issues of colonial violence, including but not limited to the assimilative strategies of residential schooling, by connecting damaging colonial legislation of the past to present-day social and political issues plaguing many Aboriginal communities; second, by highlighting Indigenous mythologies, specifically, Anishinabe stories and belief systems as both ways of knowing the world and as coping mechanisms to deal with trauma, so that Indigenous storytelling becomes an alternative to Western, psychoanalytic practices of understanding and healing; and third, by emphasizing the importance of healing and moving forward from past traumas. Originally entitled *The Healing Circle*, the novel draws attention to community healing through acts of purgative disclosure that are not ends in themselves but lead to healing by way of moving forward with one's life and away from past injuries. Like Manuel's play, healing in this novel is a group rather than individual process. Ojibway author Richard Wagamese calls himself a victim rather than survivor of residential school because his parents and extended family attended those schools and passed on a legacy of pain and suffering to him (157).

Wagamese hopes that as the TRC makes its way across Canada, people hear stories other than testimonials focussed entirely on pain:

Both the commission and Canada need to hear stories of healing instead of a relentless retelling and re-experiencing of pain. They need to hear that, despite everything, every horror, it is possible to move forward and to learn how to leave hurt behind. Our neighbours in this country need to hear stories about our capacity for forgiveness, for self-examination, for compassion, and for our yearning for peace because they speak to our resiliency as a people. That is how reconciliation happens. (164-65)

Wagamese's emphasis on hearing stories of Aboriginal peoples' capacity to move forward from past traumas is echoed by Bartleman in his novel, as it is by Manuel through the healing conclusion to her play as Suzie is poised "to turn the whole world right side up again" (113). Of crucial importance is the notion that moving forward does not mean forgetting the past or dismissing its relevance to the contemporary Canadian nation. I frequently hear non-Natives in discussing Canada's colonial history say things like, "That was in the past," or "What my ancestors did is not my responsibility," or, as a university professor I know said to me, "Natives need to assimilate with everyone else." It is especially for these Canadians that a book such as Bartleman's holds promise. Hearing a TRC testimonial without the benefit of the parsing of issues that this novel provides risks re-inscribing the deleterious stereotypes of Natives as traumatized and in need of healing and rescue from benevolent white people. Bartleman's novel models fiction's utilitarian capacity to fill in the gaps of the colonial history many Canadians received and are receiving in our school systems as it seeks to model Native empowerment through self-determination and forging new life trajectories based on traditional Native epistemologies. However, I wonder what are the risks of this sort of didacticism? Does using fiction risk having readers not act because the form allows them to remain comfortably removed from the lived reality of Native communities today? Is non-Native guilt assuaged by acts of Native self-reliance and healing? Does the employment of Native literature to perform the work of teaching risk tainting its literary value?

Emma LaRocque cautions, “As constructive as ‘healing aesthetics’ may sound, we must be careful not to squeeze the life out of Native literature by making it serve, yet again, another utilitarian function. Poets, playwrights, and novelists, among others, must also write for the love of words. Healing is fast becoming the new cultural marker by which we define or judge Aboriginal literature” (168). Healing for Indigenous peoples has become, paradoxically, both necessary and vexed by monolithic perceptions that traumas singularly define a complex and variegated group of peoples. The “noble savage” famously depicted in Benjamin West’s 1770 painting, *The Death of General Wolfe*, has been supplanted in contemporary media by images of the wounded Aboriginal, traumatized, suffering, sometimes living on remote reserves in essentially third-world conditions, as in the recent Attawapiskat crisis where the Canadian government’s “benevolent” intervention took away the community’s right to self-management. Prominent national media coverage of the unacceptable conditions of many remote reserves is important for these communities and sadly reveals in the Canadian government’s treatment of Native peoples a persistent attitude of colonial supremacy. However, such coverage also problematically foregrounds images of wounded Natives. A novel such as Bartleman’s runs a similar risk of unwittingly reinforcing the negative stereotypes of wounding and healing, and also of supporting the erroneous view that Aboriginal literature is always already utilitarian rather than literary and artistic.

Bartleman’s choice to make child sexual abuse at residential school the central trauma of his narrative also carries risks. The sexual abuse of Native children in residential schools, as I discussed earlier, played a significant role in bringing public and government attention to the horrific experiences that many suffered at the church-run schools. And, as I also discussed, a singular focus on child sexual abuse without attention to the larger issues created by the devastating technologies of colonialism is dangerous because it has the potential to elide the multiplicity of violences inflicted by the Canadian government’s colonial laws and policies. A paradox of this dissertation is its thematic attention to child sexual abuse in the context here of the stricture of avoiding such a focus. At the same time, all of the works I discuss make child sexual abuse not only a prominent feature of their narrative, but also a significant and principal childhood trauma that needs to be reckoned with as a separate issue *in addition to* all of the other traumas

heaped on children forced into the schools. Yet, despite the focus on the damage created by the trauma of being sexually abused as a child, these writers also contextualize this trauma among others by also explicating the cultural decimation through, for example, loss of language, traditional practices, spiritual beliefs, and, importantly, the legacy of family dysfunction as a direct result of the government's assaultive policies of assimilation.

Before I move on to discuss three possible ways in which Bartleman's novel works as a form of didactic testimony to the legacies of residential schooling that, I think, complicate rather than replicate simplistic views of Indigenous communities as always and only traumatized, I want to trouble my own reading by pointing out a potential problem with Bartleman's prologue to the novel. Because of the risks involved in telling stories about residential school traumas, I worried when I started reading *As Long as the Rivers Flow* about its opening emphasis on the sexual abuse Martha suffered as a child by the priest, Father Antoine, at residential school. Because Bartleman is the only writer I discuss who is neither a residential school survivor nor comes from a family with parents or grandparents who were survivors, I was surprised that he chose as a prologue to his novel a scene with Martha, now an adult, having a nightmare about being sexually abused as a child by Father Antoine. Over three decades have passed and Martha has children of her own, but she remains "a prisoner of the priest who had whispered that he loved her as he violated her body" (xi). The scene moves from Martha's nightmare to her daughter Raven's vision of three ghosts. They are her friends who have recently committed suicide. Raven is part of a suicide pact with them. They were all supposed to kill themselves when they turned thirteen. Meanwhile, the priest who abused Martha, Father Antoine, is now an old man living peacefully in Quebec City: "He had done things to the little girls in his care that had not been proper, but that was in the past. He was certain God had forgiven him and that the incidents had been long forgotten by everyone concerned" (xii). The contrast is clear and direct: Martha and Raven are both still suffering the consequences of Martha's past abuses, while their abuser has comfortably moved on with his life. Like Suzie in Manuel's play, Raven is thirteen-years-old. Bartleman is well aware of the importance of this age as one of traditional passage into womanhood. Here, rather than a coming-of-age ceremony like Suzie's, the tradition is a

suicide pact, the product of the residential school legacy of the abuse her mother, Martha, suffered.

Strength of Indian Women retains a similar focus on inter-generational trauma and, indeed, on disclosing and healing from child sexual abuse. In *As Long as the Rivers Flow*, however, child sexual abuse suffered in residential school is directly linked to the rash of suicides among Native children and grandchildren of residential school survivors in remote communities by way of a single perpetrator from the past, Father Antoine, rather than also pointing the finger at the Canadian government's legislation that required Native children to attend the schools. Bartleman does the important work of contextualizing this history in scenes that follow, but his opening emphasis has the hazardous potential to lead readers to conclude that individual perpetrators, such as priests, are to blame for the traumas rather than the shared blame of the Canadian government. Furthermore, readers might surmise that the residential school survivors who were not sexually abused are not suffering the many legacies of the schools. Bartleman may be unintentionally rehashing the Canadian government's rhetoric of the early 1990s that said they cannot be held responsible for the actions of individual, sadistic priests by overplaying the significance of one type of abuse over others. Is sexual abuse somehow more sensational and is that why he chooses it? There seems to be a fundamental difference between what Manuel does with what is in her case lived experience of generations of sexual abuse and what Bartleman is doing. Bartleman's opening sequence of scenes has a sleight-of-hand quality where, in his rush to make the connection between present-day issues in Aboriginal communities and the residential school system, he chooses to juxtapose two horrors—child sexual abuse and teenage suicide—to instantly, and too quickly in my view, hammer home his point, which is actually worth waiting for.

To be fair, the potential risks of Bartleman's prologue are remedied by the historicizing and contextualizing work the novel performs in subsequent sections, to which I now turn in order to demonstrate the pedagogical strains of the novel which aim to promote understanding of present-day issues facing Native communities. Bartleman's epigraph makes clear the connection that he repeatedly emphasizes in interviews and in the novel: "*To the memory of the Native youth who have taken their lives as a result of*

the Indian residential school experiences of their parents and of the parents of their parents before them” (original emphasis). In the novel’s afterword, Bartleman gives the “staggering” suicide statistics: “From 1986 to 2010, almost five hundred people, including sixty children under the age of fourteen and one hundred and eighty youth aged fifteen to twenty, took their lives in the territory of the Nishinabe Aski Nation out of a total population of fewer than 30,000 men, women, and children” (246).⁸⁵ Bartleman’s voicing of the breakdown of family structures because of the residential school system is important not so much to scholars of Native issues who understand only too well the devastation caused by the assimilative project of the schools. His parsing of colonial history, however, is important to the Canadian public, many of whom have only ever been taught the colonial version of their country’s history.⁸⁶

A novel that Shelagh Rogers recommends, however, might have the potential to make its way into the homes and minds of Canadians. If it does, readers will encounter a narrative voice which sounds a lot like James Bartleman’s public voice when he discusses the book and its purpose. There are numerous examples in the novel of its narrator giving mini-lectures on First Nations’ issues. Early on in the novel, the narrator describes the many ways in which the heretofore remote community of Cat Lake is changed by the opening of a new road for a few months in the winter. The road allows for

⁸⁵ In his interview with Shelagh Rogers, Bartleman summarizes the project of his novel by way of a brief history lesson: “Starting in the late nineteenth century the Canadian government engaged in this massive social engineering experiment in which their idea was that you would turn Native people into brown-skinned white people by taking their children away from them at the age of six, putting them in residential schools, which were a type of orphanage, forbidding them from speaking their language, telling them their ancestors were burning in hell because they had not heard the word of the Lord, and using them as sexual toys, out of sight of any supervision. And this went on generation after generation, as a result of which the family structures of so many communities were destroyed. And then in the 1960s, the provincial governments moved into the child welfare area and they went into the communities and took away thousands and thousands of children and adopted them out across North America—[. . .] the “Sixties Scoop.” And so the communities just shattered. And so the families, they had never heard, in many cases, their parents and grandparents say they love them. And that is the major theme of the anti-suicide conferences that have been held in Northern Ontario that I have attended: “tell your children you love them.” There is an epidemic and a tragedy going on. The children are not at fault. What I wanted to do with this book is to give a voice to children who otherwise are never heard.”

⁸⁶ The TRC website contains a wealth of information that might help, for example, their informative, well-written, and easy to understand on-line publication on the history of residential schooling in Canada, *They Came for the Children*; yet this work does not seem to be making its way to the mainstream non-Native public, who, in light of the lack of media attention to the TRC, have likely forgotten that the process is underway.

new construction, the introduction of satellite television, and access to cities in the south (81). Fast food outlets, movies, and malls quickly follow (82). The narrator then leads readers to look beyond the changes brought by non-Native consumerism to the issue of suicide: “And just as matters seemed to be going their way, the young people began to kill themselves, and not just at Cat Lake First Nation” (82). What follows is a list of actual First Nations in Nishnawbe Aski Nation possibly as a form of commemoration to the youth of these communities but also perhaps to name the First Nations for non-Native readers who may not have heard of them before. The narrator describes families “shattered emotionally and communities [. . .] left deeply scarred and in a state of shock” (83). The narrator rhetorically asks, “Why? Why?” all the suicides (84), and then provides the answer:

Despite the signs of material progress, many of the communities were sick in their collective souls. In many families, the parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had spent their childhoods and much of their teenage years in residential schools where no one ever hugged them, unless it was to molest them. No one ever said, “I love you,” unless it was a prelude to sexual assault. Dysfunction had cascaded down through the generations with survivors neglecting their children as they had been neglected. Or worse, they sexually abused them as they had been abused. / But the main reason the young people were killing themselves, Martha suspected, was because they had lost their culture and had found nothing to replace it.

(84)

Bartleman stacks and packs together the influx of material “progress” with residential school abuses with loss of parenting skills and family structures with loss of culture to unpack for readers what he clearly sees as a chain of cause and effect events. This pedagogical strategy represents an important deviation away from a singular focus on abuses being inflicted upon Native children at residential schools or, alternately, a monocular focus on present-day “dysfunction” in Native communities. Bartleman also uses his novel to instruct readers about Native issues beyond the barbaric residential schools. He spends time historicizing, for example, the formation of treaties, the reserve system, and government Indian agents. Again, I want to emphasize the importance of this

work for the many Canadians who have no understanding of treaties or the reserve system. Before taking up the issue of Martha's childhood in residential schools, Bartleman puts together an easy-to-understand (tongue-in-cheek) description of the formation of treaties and reserves. An Indian agent arrives and announces,

Your great father, His Majesty King Edward VII [. . .] is concerned about the well-being of his Native children who reside here in the northern wilderness. As a sign of his immense compassion, he has asked us to come here to sign a treaty with you that will protect you for all time. In return for ceding your rights to this land, every man, woman and child will be immediately handed a cash payment and a reserve will be set aside for your exclusive use. (12)

The infantilizing of Natives as children is shown to be part of a rhetoric of benevolence. Commissioners promise yearly visits to provide more money to the community if they sign the treaty. The narrator-teacher explains that all of this was said to “people who did not know how to read and write and who had no concept of rights and land ownership as interpreted by the commissioners” (12). By signing the treaty, as the narrator elucidates, they “unknowingly authoriz[ed] outsiders to take the mineral and forest wealth of their lands and game wardens to enter their traditional territory to interfere with their trapping and hunting way of life. And every year that followed, the people of Cat Lake held a celebration to mark the anniversary of the treaty and the visit to their community of the Indian agent to pay the treaty money” (12). And, in case there is any confusion about the amount of treaty money they are paid, the Indian agent shows up and gives everyone in the band “four crisp, brand-new one-dollar bills” (16). In the years that follow, it becomes clear that the band Chief has a vastly different understanding of the treaty from what it is in reality. He believes the treaty is being ignored and wants Ottawa's help because mining and pulp companies are helping themselves to resources on traditional lands. The Indian agent replies, “you should read the fine print in this treaty before you start complaining. Maybe you'd see that you don't have as many rights as you think you have” (17). He goes on to give them all a lecture on “progress” and suggests that they will lose their reserves and all be assimilated into the nation like “the Italians, the Dutch and the Chinese” (17). There are many similar examples in the novel

where the narrator elaborates upon the many abuses created by colonial technologies of power and control. As these scenes do not move the plot forward, they are clearly meant to provide readers with the historical and political context they need to better understand Bartleman's main message, which is the terrible legacies of residential schools.

As Long as the Rivers Flow not only teaches, but it also emphasizes the importance of what and how Canadians are taught Native history in school. Following her years in residential school, Martha moves to Toronto and eventually starts taking university courses. In a Canadian literature course, she encounters the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott for the first time. For the professor of the course, Scott is a "man of deep artistic sensibility and humanity" (134), but Martha discovers through her research for an essay on Scott his view that "Indian should be assimilated, and the best way to do this was to send them to residential schools, to forbid them to speak their language, and to force-feed them the values of the white man" (136). Martha is shocked by the racism of Scott's poems, two of which Bartleman quotes at length, "Indian Place-Names" (134) and "The Onondaga Madonna" (135). Martha submits an essay on Scott's racism for which she receives a failing grade, and for which the whole class receives a lecture on the dangers of mixing "political considerations with literary criticism" (137). Bartleman emphasizes the importance of creating new understandings through his depiction of Martha's visit to the professor. She does not do so to contest her grade, but to explain to him that she is a survivor of the residential school system and "personally suffered a lot from the policy Duncan Campbell Scott did so much to put in place" (137), and to seek understanding of how her professor could "admire someone who did so much harm to my people" (137-38). The professor immediately exoticizes and sexualizes Martha in the same manner that Scott does the Onondaga Madonna, noting "she possessed a type of sensuality that was more appealing to him than the fresh-faced beauty of women much younger than he normally cultivated" (138).

While there is a moment of new understanding when the professor later confesses to Martha that he had "no idea such things were still going on during my lifetime in Canada" (138), the reconciliation sought by Martha is complicated when she becomes the professor's lover and is re-victimized, partly because she is flattered that someone with his prestige would take an interest in her, but mostly by the manipulations of the

lascivious professor who has “no idea” that he is performing another act of colonial violence. Professor Linden Marshall’s house, where Martha wakes up following her first night with him, is in the upper-class Toronto area of Forest Hill. The emphasis is on white privilege. Linden attended the elite Upper Canada College as a boy growing up in Toronto. He serves Martha a significantly “English breakfast.” Bartleman has Martha sleep with the enemy, so to speak, to facilitate his scathing critique of white intellectuals, in particular, English professors.

At a dinner party hosted by Linden, one of the invited professors inappropriately probes into Martha’s past sexual abuse at residential school and then tries to lighten up the conversation by suggesting she could make money by suing the church. He then suggests that she should read Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* because ““literary critics and professors of literature, like those of us around this table have long considered it to be a wonderful and moving love story”” (145). The implication that pedophilia and the rape of a child could be construed as love in the novel and compared to Martha’s child sexual abuse by a priest in residential school is offensive to Martha and another teaching moment for Bartleman to illustrate the persistence of white privilege and baffling insensitivity to Native issues. Through these scenes, Bartleman demonstrates the ways in which the education system takes part in the continued colonization of Aboriginal peoples and the importance of dialogue and resistance to colonial teachings while showing the ongoing entrenchment of destructive, racist views of Aboriginal women as sexually available. That Martha becomes complicit in this troubling dynamic also reflects Bartleman’s wish to put on full display the complexities of Native disempowerment in Canada.⁸⁷

As Long as the Rivers Flow not only makes connections between colonial history and present-day socio-political issues of Native peoples, it also works to privilege oral storytelling and Native belief systems as ways to articulate, understand, and heal from

⁸⁷ Bartleman completed his B.A. in History at Western University in 1963. Bartleman gave a public lecture at Western which I attended in March 2012. The talk was held in Conron Hall in University College. In his talk, he quoted Scott’s “The Onondaga Madonna” and pointed to a portrait of Brandon Conron hanging on the wall and said, “I took a course on Canadian literature from that man right there.” Brandon Conron (who retired from Western in 1975) is very likely the English professor upon whom Bartleman models his fictional character, “Linden Marshall.”

residential school traumas and their intergenerational legacies. Part One of the novel opens with the announcement, importantly in Anishinaabemowin, of Martha's birth. The emphasis is on tradition, ceremony, community, and cohesion. A recurring pattern in the structure of residential school narratives is to depict an idyllic family in close connection to the community and living a traditional Native lifestyle before their happiness is permanently ruptured by the requirement to place their young children into residential schools.⁸⁸ Before Martha is taken away to school, she grows up hearing her mother and Elders in her community tell stories of Nanabush (a trickster figure), Gitche Manitou (the Great Spirit), and the cannibalistic Wendigo. Bartleman thus emphasizes the importance of these sacred stories while he is careful to explain the Anishinabe belief in two parallel worlds: "the one we live in, and the Skyworld—the one we can't see, where Nanabush lives with the spirits of the dead" (8). Bartleman explains to the *National Post* that for his people, "there's a blur between dreams and reality, where dreams are reality. [. . .] There really is no differentiation between the supernatural and the natural. As a matter of fact, you would say there is no such thing as supernatural. We live in a world where there are spirits" (Medley). In the novel, the people who do not believe in spirits and traditional stories are the ones who spend too much time with missionaries and non-Natives (8). The imposition of Christianity by missionaries meant that their traditional healers, shamans, were driven away: "That's too bad, because they helped people. If you were sick in your body or in your head, they could travel to the other world and find ways to cure you" (9). Bartleman thus both inscribes Indigenous storytelling into the novel while he also demonstrates the consequences of losing their traditional beliefs: here, the suggestion is that the ability for the Cat Lake community to heal itself was also taken away by the missionaries. In her interview, Shelagh Rogers asks Bartleman why he chose to highlight Native spirits such as Gitche Manitou and the Wendigo in his novel. Bartleman explains,

These are Native archetypes, they are ones for which the hunter-gatherer people of the pre-Cambrian shield in Ontario and Manitoba, Quebec, have

⁸⁸ Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Robert Arthur Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* are two representative examples.

been the ones that perhaps going back thousands of years have been the mythical guardians of the people. And I think that to be healthy psychologically you have to have a sense of who you are and you have to have a sense of your own history and I wanted to reintroduce that or introduce that into the book for Native readers and to perhaps help non-Native readers understand the psychology of the people.

The connection between Native mythologies, epistemologies, and “the psychology of the people” is made clear from the moment Martha arrives at residential school and is greeted by a nun, whom she perceives to be either a Wendigo, the horrific half-human, half-beast or a frightening Bearwalker (28). Martha, convinced she is in the hands of an evil spirit, begins to scream and fight back, a response for which she is eventually beaten. One of her first traumas at residential school, then, is apprehended entirely in terms of Indigenous mythology and happens at the same time that, ironically, her traditional culture is being violently taken away from her. Her clothes are taken away; her hair is shorn and deloused; she is forbidden from speaking her language; and she is forced into a regimented, loveless existence of Christian indoctrination. The nuns have not yet changed the way she thinks about the world, however, which is through her own stories. To comfort herself at night, Martha recreates the storytelling sessions she listened to as a child. As she remembers the creation story, stories of Nanabush and Gitche Manitou, “She then discovered the joys of making up her own stories and creating her own imaginary friends” (33). Martha learns to nurture herself through stories that become her internal medicine at school. Indeed, Martha puts into practice her traditional understanding of the existence of a parallel universe to create her own parallel world of stories that she has running in her mind throughout her day at school to help her cope (34-35): “And after one imaginary adventure ran its course, Martha would embark on another, and another and another, blotting out as much as she could the dreary daytime life of the school until it was time to go to bed and she could escape to her nighttime world of fantasy” (36).

As a seminarian, Father Antoine created his own fantasy world of pre-pubescent girls, whom he eventually started to molest. The bishop covered up the scandals and sent him to the Indian residential school in northern Ontario, “where presumably he could do

no harm” (40): “The day came, almost inevitably,” the narrator tells us, “when he could no longer control himself and he molested a little girl. At first he was afraid because she fled his office in hysterics and told the nuns that he had hurt her. But no one believed her and he realized that he was free to do anything he wanted without fear of sanction” (44).⁸⁹ Martha quickly becomes one of Father Antoine’s chief targets for his sexual predations. He begins to abuse her and continues to for years until she grows into her body as a woman and he is no longer attracted to her. From the first night that the priest molests Martha, she loses her capacity to heal herself through stories: “try as she might, Martha was no longer able to use her imagination to escape the reality of life at the school” (48). Martha’s sexual abuse creates a traumatic rupture, a breakage in how she perceives the world, and it does so through the loss of an essential part of her culture and herself as a person, which is the ability to create and tell stories. This is a significant marker in the novel for the destructive changes this trauma creates in Martha as she moves into adulthood and out of the residential school system.

I would like to suggest that Martha’s sexual abuse carries with it the broader implications of what I want to call “*story abuse*”: the imposition of the colonial narrative upon Indigenous belief systems. As a child, Martha has nothing in her repertoire of Indigenous stories to understand the bewildering and horrific experience of being sexually abused by an adult man, a priest, whom all the children have been taught to revere. She has the story of the Wendigo to explain evil more broadly, but no story explains the violence perpetrated by the priest. The traumatic loss of her ability to story herself, to create a healthy life narrative by which she can live, strikes at the core of her identity. In this way, the novel seems to gesture towards the possibility of a culturally specific, Anishinabe trauma theory that posits traumatic wounds as breaks in personal narratives or what I am calling story abuse.⁹⁰ Martha returns to her community as an adult

⁸⁹ Episkew notes that the residential school environment actually attracted pedophiles: “Because they afforded staff unlimited access to children, absolute power over those children, and little scrutiny, residential schools attracted disproportionate numbers of pedophiles, who were free to wreak havoc on generations of Indian children” (50).

⁹⁰ I offer this reading as a possibility that exists within this novel, but I do not want to fossilize my reading as *the* one way that Anishinabe people understand trauma.

without her traditional language or way of life and without the ability to story a healthy personal identity.

Anishinabe mythologies do, however, offer a healing antidote to Martha's abuses through her dreams. In an extended dream sequence, Martha dreams of the elder who told her stories as a child about the Wendigo, whom he describes as a fearsome creature that can steal souls, and make its victims hate themselves and their culture: "The cycle will continue until a shaman arrives in the form of a raven to break the cycle" (62). The dream continues and Martha is attacked by a Wendigo who looks partly like Father Antoine. The Wendigo flies away with Martha, taking her to the residential school where nuns also appear as Wendigos. A raven swoops in and returns Martha to her family and friends (63). The narrator explains that to Martha and to most of her community on the reserve, "dreams were not the meaningless activity of cerebral neurons firing randomly during sleep but messages from the other world about the future" (63). Martha confides her sexual abuse to her friend, Joshua, who then helps her interpret her dream. Joshua explains to her that people used to believe that if you were bitten by a Wendigo, you would become one: "I think the Creator is telling you that Father Antoine is a Wendigo and he turned you into one as well by what he did to you. He's letting you know that the monster inside you will push you to kill yourself, if not now, at some other time in your life" (66-67). Joshua also says that Martha will lead someone else to suicide, but that the raven in her dream will rescue her. And here the reader is brought full circle to the beginning of the novel where Martha's daughter, Raven, is part of a suicide pact, and to the novel's conclusion, where the suicides of Raven's friends and Raven's own suicidal thoughts generate the healing circle which restores balance to the community. Anishinabe mythologies and beliefs thus shape Martha's understanding of her traumas and offer the promise of healing through what becomes a collective act of disclosure and reclamation of cultural identity.

The final emphasis in the novel is on healing and reparation through reconciliation both with past traumas suffered at residential school and, importantly, with family members who have suffered childhoods with parents damaged by their experiences at the schools. The residential school Wendigo, if you will, provides a means of understanding this painful legacy. As Bartleman explains,

I've sort of given it a modern twist in saying that the harm caused by the residential schools [. . .] has implanted the Wendigo within the survivors, that as a result of being damaged, they developed feelings of great anger, of great hatred as well, which has twisted their lives, and meant that they are not good parents, even though they might want to be. And you have to find some way of banishing that Wendigo within you.

For Martha, the “Wendigo within” has prevented her from being able to parent her two children, Spider and Raven. Spider was removed from her home as a young child because of Martha’s alcoholism and neglect, while Raven was raised by Martha’s mother so that Martha might find Spider and a life for herself in Toronto. When Martha’s mother dies, she returns to the reserve, but she is not able to function as a healthy parent: “Without realizing it, Martha began treating her daughter the same way the nuns had dealt with her when she was a girl” (200). The cycle of abuse is similarly played out in other homes with parents who, having been raised in a loveless institution, do not know how to love their own children. These children are now of greatest concern to Bartleman because they are killing themselves. Raven seeks out the advice of Joshua because of the suicide pact she has made. Joshua blames the residential school system for the problems young people are facing and suggests ““holding a healing circle and inviting the priest who molested the mothers of the kids who killed themselves”” (206). Joshua’s hope is that the priest will apologize and that his victims will forgive him so that they might start their own healing process (207).

What might seem to be an over-simplified healing process of apology and forgiveness assumes greater complexity and substance as the healing circle becomes a space to share and reclaim personal stories and thus a therapeutic site of group testimony. Bartleman explained to Shelagh Rogers the connection between telling stories and healing circles: “when people are in a circle they are in communion with each other. They form a community, and they are able to reinforce each other. And telling stories is the age-old way for people to communicate, to entertain, but also to resolve problems.” The healing circles that Bartleman attended used a talking stick. When someone has the stick, they can talk for as long as they want and they cannot be interrupted. In the novel, the talking stick is used to foster a respectful atmosphere as community members are face-to-

face with Father Antoine for the first time since residential school. The old priest takes the talking stick and restates the colonial narrative behind the implementation of residential schools: ““You were just children of six when you arrived, knowing only the ways of the bush, and when you left at the age of sixteen, you were civilized, baptized, educated and ready to found families of your own. I am so proud of you”” (227-28). The voice of the unrepentant priest is drowned out by “cries of outrage” as the community bands together to condemn the priest for his abuse of the children. Joshua intervenes to try to explain to Father Antoine that unless he admits blame and apologizes, he cannot expect a reconciliation with his former students. The priest insists, ““I gave them my love”” (228).

Despite the priest’s refusal to acknowledge his crimes, his former victims take turns with the talking stick to tell their stories of how their own children came to kill themselves because of their own failures as parents. The emphasis shifts from the painful experiences of the past to focus on how to improve their community in the present. As one father whose son took his life says, ““we gotta stop blaming all the bad things the white man did to us for all the bad things we do to our kids. The last residential school closed in this province almost thirty years ago. We got to move on”” (232). My view is that Bartleman is not trying to redirect blame for the legacies of residential school onto its victims; rather, he is trying to model a form of healing that requires letting go of the past. This becomes clear when Martha takes the talking stick and begins to rework standard conceptions of apology and forgiveness. She says of apology, ““I sure hope some good comes from all this suffering tonight. If it does, it won’t be because Father Antoine and the bishop showed any remorse. But I say, so what if they and people like them don’t say they’re sorry? Our pain is so great, we shouldn’t waste any more time on them. It looks like begging”” (237). Martha further suggests that while it is easy to offer up an insincere apology, the only way to move forward is through forgiveness, not for the benefit of the priest, but ““to be able to start healing ourselves and get on with our lives”” (237). Martha hugs and forgives the priest, as do the parents of the children who killed themselves. The novel ends with a story that Raven tells of meeting Nanabush in a dream (238-240). The importance of this story is in its teaching that Raven can choose life instead of death precisely through traditional belief systems represented by Anishinabe mythologies. For

the community members who hear her dream, “They now understood that the land they lived on was sacred, and by forgiving their enemies and connecting with their ancient culture, they could find strength to heal their wounds. And that night, before the people went to bed, they told their children that they loved them” (240).

While the concluding emphasis on forgiveness and healing may seem almost cliché, I want to suggest that the cringe-factor that comes with over-wrought notions of community harmony and healing may have more to do with the easy cynicism that comes from the comfort of white privilege and childhoods in homes with loving parents than it does from the lived reality of Native communities needing to heal and move on from past traumas. In the end, healing *is* a restored state of wellness, happiness, and healthy behaviour patterns. For Bartleman, Martha’s act of forgiveness becomes an act of truth and reconciliation: “it’s the only way to banish the hatred within her. [. . .] If you’re going to be a parent, a member of society, you have to banish the hate within you and move on. And so that’s my sort of interpretation I guess of truth and reconciliation. [. . .] We forgive and we move on, and that’s a major message for everyone, not just Natives faced with residential schools” (“Interview”). At the beginning of this section I asked what fiction could provide that the TRC could not. The message of *As Long as the Rivers Flow* seems to be that truth and reconciliation come from individual and community acts of forgiveness and letting go rather than from official acts of apology and commemoration.

4.4 Robert Arthur Alexie, *Porcupines and China Dolls*

Contained in *They Came for the Children*, one of the TRC’s educational publications on residential schooling in Canada, is an archival picture of children at the Stringer Hall dining hall in Inuvik in 1970 (62). In September 1970, Robert Arthur Alexie was sent to live at Stringer Hall, one of a number of church-operated, government-built residences or “hostels” constructed in the 1950s and 1960s to accommodate Aboriginal students from small communities in the Northwest Territories while they attended school. Stringer Hall was essentially, as Alexie says, “a residential school without the school” (“Robert Arthur Alexie”). The photograph shows boys sitting at rows of tables on one side of the room and girls on the other. The camera angle foregrounds the boys, some of

whom look straight at the photographer while others try to hide their faces. I found myself trying to recognize Alexie's face among the boys and I started to wonder: is it possible to posit a relationship between the circulation of the TRC educational document and the recent republication of Alexie's semi-autobiographical novel, *Porcupines and China Dolls*, in 2009?⁹¹ Can a semi-autobiographical fiction such as Alexie's offer up an alternative form of testimonial to residential school abuses and a creative act of instruction about its legacies, as a supplement to the work of the TRC? Can fiction function as a legitimate form of testimony? Having already read the novel when I saw the picture of the sombre, discomfited diners at Stringer Hall, I knew what the photograph could not possibly document but what the novel takes as its primary focus: the widespread sexual abuse of the children who stayed at Stringer Hall. While *They Came for the Children* chronicles in a broad way the many abuses suffered by children in residential schools, including sexual abuse, it is Alexie's novel that provides a testimonial to this particular abuse, although it does so outside of the TRC's forum and outside of the courtroom.

I will argue that in its semi-autobiographical staging of Alexie's alcoholism and suicidal thoughts following his stay at Stringer Hall, its initial reticence to consciously articulate the sexual abuse suffered at the hostel, followed by its exaggerated and repeated public disclosures of child sexual abuse by multiple adult characters in the novel, and its ambivalent relationship to healing, Alexie's novel was written as a means for him to testify to the complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions of his experiences and their legacies in an imaginative strategy to speak the truth in ways that the fact-based, adversarial court system would not permit. To my knowledge, *Porcupines and China Dolls* is the only public forum in which Alexie tells the story of sexual abuse at the

⁹¹ *Porcupines and China Dolls* was first published in 2002 by Stoddart. Stoddart went into receivership days after the release of the novel, which partially explains why it initially received so little attention. I am quoting from the Stoddart edition of the text. The 2009 Theytus edition contains, from what I can glean, minor editorial changes from the original edition. Note that the page numbers of the Stoddart edition differ from those of the Theytus edition.

hostel, and he does so indirectly through fiction.⁹² This recalls Fagan’s suggestion that “the direct communication encouraged by Western trauma theory often clashes with Aboriginal means of expression” (207). The fictional form of the novel grants Alexie a means of articulating traumas by way of an indirect discourse without compromising his entitlement to privacy. Furthermore, the novel form allows Alexie to tell his trauma story precisely as a story, by employing oral storytelling practices—repetition, exaggeration, and deliberate confabulation—as primary narrative techniques. The novel form also provides Alexie with a vehicle to open up a conversation with his community through story outside of more formalized practices such as healing circles or workshops. As Alexie says, “I’m not going to get five thousand Gwich’in to listen to me tell a story, so I give them my book. Maybe they won’t read it now, but they might in five or ten years. At least they’ll have the *chance* to read it, and that chance will be given to others as well” (Richler 119; original emphasis). *Porcupines and China Dolls* arguably stands in as a storied proxy to conventional testimonials and, through its circulation to both Native and non-Native readers, represents the *chance* for change.

Like Manuel and Bartleman, Alexie expressly and overtly aims to tell a story about the legacy of residential schools. As he says, “I wanted to tell a story about the effects of the residential school on the people who attended those mistakes in history, and their children, since the effects, I believe are multi-generational in that the emotions, whether we like it or not, are passed on from the parents to their children” (“Exercising [sic] your Demons”). The didactic impulse identified by Alexie is also reflected in the structure of the novel’s opening four chapters where Alexie first provides readers with a history lesson on the colonization of his fictional “Blue People,” including the arrival in 1789 of Alexander Mackenzie, followed by the fur traders and missionaries in the nineteenth century, the 1921 treaty for his People, and ultimately the arrival of boats to take children away to residential school. The removal of children from their homes and the suffering they experience once at the schools is painfully detailed in the novel. The children are taken away from parents who “look like statues” (10) and, once at the

⁹² Alexie has not publically indicated whether or not he personally suffered sexual abuse at Stringer Hall, so while the novel is “semi-autobiographical,” it is not clear that Alexie was sexually abused.

school, they are forbidden to speak their language. Their clothing is burned, their hair deloused and shorn, leaving the boys resembling porcupines and the girls china dolls. The porcupines and china dolls are deculturated others, young children living in a loveless institutional environment. Their cries at night are “heart-wrenching. It sounds awful. It sounds like a million porcupines crying in the dark” (12).

Alexie juxtaposes these introductory contextualizing chapters with the legacy of the residential school system in the present-day community. Accordingly, chapter five, “A Typical Night,” opens in the “saloon” with an adult survivor of residential school, James Nathan, drinking himself into oblivion, a pattern of behaviour which has become his lifestyle. The bartender asks, ““Usual?”” for the “millionth time,” and James answers, ““Why not?”” for the “millionth time” (35). The “usual” is two vodkas and a beer. The refrain throughout these scenes is ““Same ol’”” (41). The “same ol’” are repeated scenes of self-numbing through alcohol and sex where James becomes, according to his best friend Jake Noland, a zombie (43). James as a walking-dead adult recalls the earlier scene depicting statue-like parents watching their children being taken away to residential school. Not only culturally genocidal, the residential school system is shown to be homicidal in its life-draining, dehumanization of Aboriginal peoples. Broadly speaking, then, Alexie uses his novel to implicate past traumas of residential schooling in present-day dysfunctions in the community.

More specifically, the novel singles out childhood sexual abuse as the trauma most difficult for the characters to acknowledge and grapple with, while at the same time pressing forth an imperative to “disclose” the abuse. This push and pull between silence and public confession is at the heart of the novel’s blurring of reality as much as it is one of its core contradictions. A second principle dialectical pull is between healing, and imagining talking as a contributing form of therapy, and not healing despite this effort. I first examine the reluctance to confront sexual abuse as a grounding principal of Alexie’s indirect testimonial style. James (who is modelled after Alexie himself) represses but ultimately cannot contain his memories of childhood sexual abuse. Repeated disclosures of sexual abuse by James’s friends prompt his own disclosure as members of the community attempt to recover by sharing their stories of trauma with each other. Unlike Western-style talk therapy, however, the “talking cure” here is public, communal, and

story-based. The public disclosure at the two-day healing workshop literalizes through performance the therapeutic release of inner demons on public stage in a magical, masculinist spectacle in which the whole community takes part. I will suggest that this creative act of disclosure is a testimonial fantasy of what public accounts of abuse could be, that is, an act of empowerment rather than a ritual of shaming. Community and individual healing is radically disrupted, however, through a critique of the closure that healing implies. I will make the case that the novel is both testimony and therapeutic journey and a critique of testimony and the promise of healing.

Implied in my argument that *Porcupines and China Dolls* is an indirect testimony to abuses suffered by children at Stringer Hall is that it *is* a testimony rather than purely a fiction. There are many reasons not to testify publically to childhood sexual abuse, whether testimony is through the court system or through the safer but still public forum provided by the TRC: the shame that sexually abused children feel is often carried forward into adulthood, and the difficulties associated with speaking about violations in which victims often feel complicit are compounded by the fear of being disbelieved. Public disclosures can be especially fraught for men who have been abused as children by other men because the heteronormative imperative still at work in society can further contribute to the shame. In the novel, for example, when Jake Noland tells his girlfriend about his sexual abuse, “He hung his head to hide his shame” (97). Fiction can provide the distancing necessary to make an account of one’s traumas without having to directly face a potentially incredulous, homophobic, or otherwise critical public audience.

Alexie admits that he finds it easier to tell his story from a narrative distance. In an article written for *Indian Country Today* entitled, “Robert Arthur Alexie—An Author in Waiting,” Alexie writes about himself in the third person: “Robert graduated [from high school and Stringer Hall] in June 1974 and returned home to work and party and this he did with wild abandon.” Nonetheless, Alexie became Chief of the Teetl’it Gwich’in Band Council in 1989 in Fort McPherson where he lived with his common-law wife and three children: “And through it all, Robert continued drinking and was now becoming something he never planned on: an alcoholic and an abuser. He was sentenced, on two occasions, to time in jail.” In the early 1990s, “after years of abuse and abusing, Robert decided to seek treatment and went to Toronto. He’s not had a drink since, but the road to

recovery and healing was not easy. It's a daily struggle and he relapses into his old way of thinking every now and then." When reading the article it is easy to forget, as I did, that the author is Alexie himself. It is only in the final lines that Alexie confesses: "Robert is me, or I am Robert. And sometimes he finds it better to write in the third person." The third-person voice allows Alexie the narrative distance he seems to require to tell his story, whether he tells it in an article about himself or in his novel.

The third-person singular employed by Alexie in the article seems also to grant him the freedom to clearly state the semi-autobiographical form of his novel: "The fact that the main character is tall, dark and wears a black leather jacket should not surprise anyone. The story is semi-autobiographical and the character is not an easy person to like." When Noah Richler met Alexie he described him as "a handsome man with dark hair, evidently not prone to smiling [. . .] wearing black shades, black jeans, and a black leather vest over a khaki hunting shirt" (108). *Porcupines and China Dolls* opens with the following description of James Nathan: "He stood alone beside the highway in the Blue Mountains like he'd done so many times before. His tall, dark figure looked foreboding against the dark clouds. His black leather jacket glistened like blood-soaked armour from another time. His scowl told everyone and everything to keep their fucking distance. He looked like Death ready to go on a rampage" (1). The passage is an important signifier of Alexie's masculine testimonial style. James is an unsmiling, fearsome warrior whose public disclosure of his childhood sexual abuse will also be staged in terms of warrior and battle imagery, a topic to which I will return. Interestingly, while the third-person article makes the connection between Alexie and James unequivocal, with Alexie freely confessing his alcoholism and abusive behaviour, the article remains silent about whether or not Alexie suffered childhood sexual abuse at Stringer Hall.

The novel, however, directly links James's alcoholism to his recurring nightmares of sexual abuse. Of the three principal characters to disclose their sexual abuse, James is the last. James is haunted by his past in his dreams, but is unable to consciously articulate the traumas. The nightmares recur throughout the novel prior to James's admission of the abuse. The first one is narrated at the end of "A Typical Night" when James has passed out after an evening of drinking: "He was quiet on the outside, but on the inside some serious shit was starting to happen and he didn't want to be there. He wouldn't remember

it tomorrow” (46). The nightmares follow a similar pattern: they open in fog which clears to a view of the boys’ shower room in the hostel and a little boy’s “dead and empty” eyes (46) and a “Soft, warm, white and hairy” hand (46). When James wakes up the next morning, the first thing that he does is start drinking. He is “One lost soul seeking oblivion,” seeking to forget (81). He and Jake go to the bar and, in an echo of the regimentation of time at the residential school, count the hours to closing time. James is a purposeful alcoholic: “*Hey, an idea. Better get some booze up ’ere ’n kill ’at idea*” (54).⁹³ Like the mall in Highway’s novel, the saloon is a devouring, life-draining force. The pattern is repeated when James passes out mid-afternoon from drinking, and then wakes up from another nightmare of sexual abuse: “When he’d calmed down, he got another beer. [. . .] He checked the time—five-thirty. *Eight hours till closin’ time*. He thought about the dream. *Fuck it. Can’t remember it, can’t hurt you*” (62). Unlike survivors of child sexual abuse such as Fraser, James does not struggle to remember; he struggles to forget.

James’s willful repression of his sexual abuse by anesthetizing his thoughts with alcohol comes at a price. The novel opens and closes with a word-for-word repetition of the scene of James’s attempt at suicide: “All in one smooth motion he got down on one knee, put the barrel in his mouth, then pushed the trigger. He watched the hammer fall and closed his eyes. He tensed, waiting for the explosion. After a million years, he heard it: metal on metal. It was the loudest sound he’d ever heard” (2, 285). The question of whether James is alive or dead is only answered in the conclusion. The closing paragraphs of the novel add to this scene a healing ending with James alive and finding hope through his love for Louise; however, James remains suicidal throughout the novel, even after he publically discloses his abuse. While not talking is clearly associated with James’s alcoholism and suicidal thoughts, talking or disclosing the abuse is complicated

⁹³ Alexie employs Aboriginal patois, commonly referred to as “Red English” and sometimes “Rez English,” throughout the novel. Greg Young-Ing explains that “Aboriginal patois in its various forms is a cultural expression of how Aboriginal Peoples speak informally amongst themselves and communicate within their communities” (240). The Indigenization of English is but one way that Aboriginal peoples are reclaiming their power through words; as such, this variation of standard English should be granted legitimacy. As Young-Ing says, it should “receive a similar linguistic recognition/legitimacy recently being afforded to various forms of African American colloquial speech and the various forms of patois developed in the Caribbean and around the world” (240).

by the novel's suggestion that there is no straightforward path to healing and no closure, except through the possibility of a healthy, loving relationship. If there is healing, it is relational rather than individual, and it is also connected to story. Thomas King suggests that for James, "whether he lives or dies depends on which story he believes" (118). James seems to choose the story of love rather than the story of self-hatred imposed upon him by the residential school system. Alexie writes of himself, "Writing the story has been a healing experience for him. It hasn't been easy, but he's glad he wrote it" ("Robert Arthur Alexie"). Healing for Alexie comes through the scriptotherapeutic process of using storytelling as a form of indirect testimony, while at the same time the novel emphasizes the *process* of healing rather than its endpoint of being healed. In this, Alexie makes an important contribution to how healing from severe trauma can be understood, that is, as a never-ending journey that is perhaps best told indirectly. *Porcupines and China Dolls* both performs and critiques testimonial practices of telling the trauma story in order to heal.

I have been putting quotation marks around the word "disclose" because all of the characters in the novel use the broad term to refer specifically to the disclosure of sexual abuse, as when Chief David's wife says, "'You mean you're gonna disclose?'" (153). In the novel, "to disclose" means to disclose childhood sexual abuse. To speak about child sexual abuse by way of the infinitive, to disclose, encapsulates the contradictory therapeutic impulse in the novel by at once not explicitly naming the abuse yet implying that publicly disclosing that abuse is a requisite part of the healing process. Alexie insists that telling the story of abuse leads to catharsis: "That's what healing is all about: talking or writing about your inner demons and moving on" ("Exercising [sic] your Demons"). Alexie, however, also suggests that he "unknowingly" wrote about "healing and non-healing" in the novel ("Exercising [sic] your Demons"). And, in the novel, Jake adds a further variance: "'A few years ago I heard a Chief up north say that healin' was a journey 'n there is no end'" (170). Taken together, the three statements capture the contradictory, ambiguous healing practice of the novel as both healing and not healing.

While writing about "non-healing" may have been unconscious on Alexie's part, he consciously and repeatedly emphasizes the importance to the healing process of sharing the trauma story. As Bertha explains to Jake, "'Once you've disclosed you have

to follow through. Talk about it to anyone who'll listen 'n understand. It's getting' rid of it through talkin' 'n cryin' that's gonna help you. If you don't get rid of it, it'll kill you [. . .] like it's done to so many of our People'" (100). Bertha here refers to Michael Lazarus, a friend of both James and Jake, who killed himself and who was also sexually abused by Tom Kinney at the hostel. After Jake's "disclosure," catharsis immediately follows: "He felt exhausted and light. It was as if a million tons had been lifted from his soul" (100). What has been repressed for years erupts in a wave of disclosures. Jake talking about his abuse sparks Chief David to disclose his abuse and, eventually, James confesses to his own: "'Happen to me too'" (158). All of the disclosures are delivered in an earnest rhetoric of healing by talking that seems to work in the moment, but that the novel never fully grants. Alexie seems to believe in and yet struggles with the efficacy of community-talking therapy and healing that should come from that process.

James's acknowledgement of his abuse occurs at a time when he has been sober for nearly a week, yet, and importantly in my view, the catharsis and healing which should follow comes to James in an altered state of consciousness, in a dream. Indeed, the chapter in which James's dream of healing occurs, "Dream World," is dedicated to detailing a therapeutic journey by James, Jake, and Chief David as they return to the mountains and the traditional lands of their People, and discuss their abuse with Elders, who also disclose abuse and decry the loss of their traditional way of life. The "dream world" represents both this *dream* of a return to tradition and James's *dream* of healing. In James's dream, he sees his parents in the cabin in which he grew up. His mother touches his face and looks at him with tenderness and compassion while his smiling father puts his hand on his shoulder. His parents leave and James sees himself in the cabin as a little boy: "The little boy looked at him with no emotion. He held up his arms as if he expected to be picked up. James picked him up and became one with the dream. He closed his eyes and felt a peace he'd never felt in his life" (166). To embrace and heal one's "inner child" is a popular therapeutic construct and an essential part of recovery from addiction in the Twelve-Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Alexie may be combining the Western-style treatment that he received when he was in recovery with Indigenous forms of healing through the reclamation of traditional values, connection to one's family, and sharing stories of abuse. James's relational dream of healing anticipates

the healing moment at the end of the novel when he finds peace through his love for Louise. In the novel, the imperative to disclose is part of a process to recover from child sexual abuse; however, the recovery comes, ironically, as a dream in the first instance and as a quick resolution to a scene of suicide in the final one. There is at once a profound impulse to recover from child sexual abuse and a radical failure to achieve it. And, yet, there *is* something deeply healing in James's dream, suggesting that perhaps healing occurs in ways outside of standard therapeutic practices and understandings of what healing means. As in Shani Mootoo's novel, healing is an act of the imagination.

James's dream of healing *precedes* his public disclosure of child sexual abuse at the healing workshop. Moreover, the culmination of the therapeutic process represented by the cathartic promise of the healing workshop occurs not at the end of the novel, as with Bartleman's healing circle, but about two-thirds of the way through. One expects healing to occur following the workshop and the workshop itself to be a therapeutic endpoint; however, James remains suicidal to the novel's concluding pages. These deviations in standard processes of healing are even more interesting when one considers the fantastic elements of the public disclosure. Alexie seems to suggest that the public disclosure of trauma is as much an act of the imagination as healing and, more radically, perhaps he is suggesting that testimony should be a fantasy or can only be an act of the imagination. As I will show, Alexie's staging of public testimony is at once an extended metaphor for the therapeutic process of releasing one's inner demons to heal and a critique of the limitations of such an endeavour. In his discussion with Noah Richler, Alexie describes the underwhelming community response at a Gwich'in gathering when an Elder disclosed his sexual abuse. He was the first community member to do so and, as Alexie says, "It was like nothing had been said" (108). Alexie's frustration by his community's apathy and failure to engage with the traumas of the Elder before them is one possible reason why Alexie stages such a grand spectacle of disclosure in the novel:

"The anger that I felt in [*Porcupines and China Dolls*] was helpful because it allowed me almost to *scream* what I wanted to say. [. . .] I remember writing the part where the Chief gets up and discloses and the story almost goes into a kind of magical realism. It was a period in the community where everybody was going about their business as if it was

normal—normal to drink, normal to buy bootlegs, normal to be sexually abused. [. . .] It's so dysfunctional, it's *normal*." (Richler 113-14; original emphasis)

If *Porcupines and China Dolls* was meant to wake up his community to the abuses suffered at residential school, Alexie's over-the-top, theatrical staging of public disclosure holds out the possibility of doing so by reinvigorating an engagement with testimony in a way that avoids the pitfalls of public confession. Over one hundred community members arrive for the workshop looking like "they were there for some root canal work and wished it was over so they could get on to more important things like bingo or poker" and "few, if any, had a genuine interest in the healing process" (181). Alexie seems to suggest, however, that they do like to be entertained and they also enjoy a good story. By employing oral storytelling techniques with magical realist conventions, Alexie creates a spectacle of masculine empowerment as an antidote to the shame the characters have been feeling as they disclose their abuse to each other. I am calling the testimonial aesthetic that Alexie creates "masculinist" because of its emphasis on male power, super-human strength, and the story-line of warriors battling their inner demons rather than victims suffering through their confessions. Chief David is the first "warrior" to take the stage at the workshop. As with Bartleman's healing circle, a talking stick is used, except in Alexie, its power is literalized. The band's talking stick, which "gave them power and courage" has been ignored for years—"Gone like so many of our traditions"—but when Chief David picks it up, he grows ten feet tall (183). He begins by disclosing his abuse in a straightforward, testimonial style: "Thirty years ago I was sexually abused in the hostel" (184). The narrative tone which immediately follows the disclosure is not earnest or sympathetic as one would expect but rather funny and magical: "One hundred people did a double take. They looked around to see if others had heard. *What 'a hell did he say?* / The sound of so many empty heads reverberating in the community hall woke a million, trillion gazillion demons, dreams and nightmares from their slumber. They poked their ugly little heads out of the ceiling, walls and floor to see what the fuck was going on" (184). It is hard to imagine what a fresh take on the public disclosure of childhood sexual abuse might look like, and yet that is precisely what

Alexie provides, in my view, so that his readers awake from their somnolence to witness a legend-in-the-making that they will remember and talk about in the future.

Alexie's myth-making testimonial strategy is intended to draw in audience members (and readers) to the disclosure process and is deeply rooted in some of the hallmarks of oral storytelling: repetition, the number three, hyperbole, engagement with the audience, and, for Alexie, a tongue-in-cheek style humour. The Chief begins each of his disclosures with, "Thirty years ago" and, after each successive disclosure, the audience shouts, "Shit!" then "Holy shit!" and finally, "Holy fuckin' shit!" (184). "Chief David then grew twenty feet and held himself like a Warrior of Old" (184). Rather than testimony being a diminishing experience, it is empowering. The more Chief David discloses, the taller and fiercer he becomes. Again, note the use of repetitive syntactical formations governed by the number three: "Chief David grew thirty feet tall and spoke of suicides, killings and death. He spoke of anger, rage and terror. He spoke of hurt, shame and sorrow. He spoke of demons, dreams and nightmares, He spoke of the future, hope and healing" (185). This repetitive strategy is used, as it is with oral stories, to help the audience understand and incorporate the information into their working memories. The disclosure evolves from giving an account of suffering into an extended metaphor for conquering traumas by laying them bare: "Chief David then did something very few people have ever done. He reached deep down into the very depths of his tormented and fucked-up soul, pulled out the rage, anger, hate, sorrow and sadness by their roots and threw them on the floor for the world to see. He then proceeded to choke the little fuckers like they deserved it" (185). Despite the sparks which are now flying from the talking stick, the Chief ends his disclosure story in a realistic mode: "After a million years, he looked at his People like he'd just come from battle. [. . .] 'This is where it ends. [. . .] This is where we make the change for ourselves an' for our children'" (185). The Chief is storied as a returning warrior fomenting the rebirth of his community by way of his own process of healing.

It is in this mode of realistic testimonial discourse that Alexie reveals his always ambivalent relationship to testimony and healing. Whereas the audience responds with wonderment as they watch the Chief grow taller and taller, when the disclosure ends with their Chief-warrior looking tired, looking like a real-life human being, they respond with

skepticism: “*Is he tellin’ the truth? Is he lyin’? Is he doin’ this for sympathy? Is he nuts?*” (185). Questioning the veracity, motives, and sanity of those who publically disclose childhood sexual abuse is an all too common response both by the judicial system and the general public. The sustained attack on Sylvia Fraser’s credibility is but one of many examples of the prevalence of such skepticism. Questions such as those of the audience in the novel are one of the main reasons why victims of child sexual abuse do not publically confess their abuse. The potential for incredulous witnesses to straightforward testimonies may also be why Alexie chooses magic realism as his principal narrative mode to disclose sexual abuse. In this, the suggestion is that perhaps people are more likely to believe a story, even if that story is clearly fantastical.

Alexie builds up his story of public testimony to epic proportions as Chief David’s disclosure is followed by Jake’s and then, finally, James’s as the climax. The chapter title, “The Battle for Souls,” is an early marker of the therapeutic, masculinist aesthetic at work in the scene as one of mythic combat rather than gentle healing through cathartic talk. I do not think it is a coincidence that James’s public disclosure is the climax of the scene and also the height of Alexie’s employment of magic realism. Alexie not only writes an indirect testimony to abuse through the novel; his fictional engagement with public disclosure is also an act of fantasy, story, and the creation of a legend. When James discloses his abuse to the audience, which has now doubled in size because word of the spectacle has spread, it is a testimonial-action-thriller and blood-sport. James as the hero of this epic battle opens with his typical humour and ferocity: “He grinned that friggin’ Nathan grin, then let loose such a horrendous godawful battle cry of rage, hatred and vengeance that the roof of the community hall blew off and scattered to the four winds” (191). James’s “demons, dreams and nightmares shivered in their rubber boots” (191) with good reason: “James Nathan started laying demons out left, right and centre. Demon arms, legs and heads were flying everywhere. One head fell into the lap of Old Pierre. He picked it up, poked out his beady little eyes and threw it on the floor” (192). Rather than their previous distanced incredulity, the audience is now actively involved in James’s “therapy” as witnesses and co-slayers of inner demons. An italicized narrative voice periodically interjects lines seemingly aimed directly to the reader as a further

solicitation to engage with James's "testimony": "*He was a fucking sight to behold! I shit you not. You really had to be there!*" (192).

James is not ashamed, nor is his veracity in question: he is a one-hundred-foot tall warrior whom young girls dream of marrying and young boys dream of becoming (192). Alexie piles on cultural references to his warrior-hero of disclosure, James, in an excess of imagery aimed to entertain: "James Nathan was like a knight in shining armour. He was like Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*. He was like Crazy Horse charging into battle. He was like Geronimo at his best" (192). Jake and Chief David join James to kill more demons as the audience starts "singing some old Indian war song": "It sounded like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing *The Messiah* on acid. It sounded like a million Plains Indians all singing at once" (193). While completely over-the-top and replete with *non sequiturs*, the scene evokes stereotype after stereotype in its attempt to capture the scale of what is happening and to show the event as the work of healing, while retaining its sense of humour and its purposeful intent to wake up the community to the legacies of residential school: "The three Warriors heard this war song and it gave them strength and courage. There was such a fucking commotion what with blood, guts, arms, legs and heads flying every which way that no one breathed or blinked an eye lest they miss a thing" (193). In the end, "James, Jake and Chief David stood above slain demons and nightmares like great big fucking Warriors of Old covered with blood, sweat, guts, tears and pride" (193).

The spectacular disclosure scene represents what public testimonies should be but rarely are: empowering for the people giving the testimony and enlivening for their witnesses. Cool air blows through the community hall following the slaying of demons: "It smelled clean. It smelled like new beginnings" (194). The audience is filled with admiration for the three disclosure-warriors. They are not shame-filled victims but proud heroes literally standing tall. Furthermore, rather than being an emasculating process, the disclosure actually enhances the virility and desirability of the warriors (194-95). Alexie writes an idealized, very male fantasy of public disclosure, but then undercuts it by bringing the narrative back to the much starker reality of realistic testimony the following day: "What really happened at the community hall in Aberdeen that day? Despite all the blood and gore, it was all very simple: three men disclosed. They talked honestly about a

sexual abuse that occurred thirty years ago. They spoke of oral sex and sodomy. They spoke of the shame and the pain of being alone” (197). Alexie’s disclosure scene is a wonderfully magical remediation to what he goes on to show is the painful process of bearing witness to testimonies of childhood abuse.

The contrast is perhaps most striking in the courtroom scene at the preliminary trial of Tom Kinney, the man who abused Chief David, James, Jake, and many others. James sees Kinney “smirk” as he is led out of the courtroom (266). James loses his composure and threatens to kill the man. When a rookie RCMP officer suggests that he could lay charges against James should he attack Kinney, James lashes out at the officer: ““Where the fuck were you when that bastard stuck his cock up my ass!”” (266). There is a significant disparity between the empowering and magical disclosure scene and the traumatic reality of the courtroom where James is not growing taller in the confrontation with his demons but must be restrained lest he slay his real demon, Tom Kinney. The graphic language of James’s abuse, while typical of the horrific detail expected of victims in the courtroom, is precisely what witnesses or readers are most likely to tune out because it is too unsettling and explicit to hear and too difficult to discuss. Alexie’s magical disclosure scene accomplishes the task of confession without falling into the graphic testimonial discourse revealed in the court scene.

Porcupines and China Dolls performs and debunks testimony as surely as it enacts and deconstructs healing. For all of the demon-slaying dramatized at the healing workshop, the push and pull between healing and not healing is still in evidence. Jake, though forty-feet tall and having staked himself to the stage to battle his demons, is empowered but not healed. Following his disclosure he shouts his now familiar refrain: ““Healin’ is a journey—there is no end!”” to which James responds, ““Ain’t ’at ’a fuckin’ truth!”” (188). Keavy Martin observes that “Alexie flouts his readers’ expectations regarding the preordained progress of a healing journey” (49). Indeed, the morning following the workshop, when Brenda asks James what his plans for the day are, James thinks to himself, “*Maybe blow my brains out*” (205; original emphasis). As Daniel David Moses says in dialogue with Terry Goldie, “some people just cannot be healed. Their wounds—or at least the wounds in their community—are so deep and abiding” (ix).

The novel emphasizes that there is no straightforward path to healing and no closure. For the community members, the workshop sparks dialogue about the event and even reinstates an interest in their traditions. They gather as a community, bring out their ceremonial drums, and their Elders start speaking to each other in their own language (201-203). The reclamation of traditional Indigenous values and practices is a marker of healing in all of the texts under consideration here. And, yet, Alexie troubles this healing narrative: “People were calling their relatives in other parts of the territories and in other parts of Canada. In one week, Chief David, James and Jake would be known all over the NWT. In two weeks, they would be forgotten” (199). Alexie’s novel is not without hope; rather, it seeks to capture the complexities of the healing process precisely as a *process*, not an end in itself. As Chief David says, ““In the last few days, we’ve seen something happen in our community. We’ve seen People disclose an’ we’ve seen the drum return if only for one night. I wish I can tell you it’s going to be like this forever, but we all know it isn’t. Not unless we work together to keep it”” (222). For Martin, Alexie’s refusal to bring closure to the work of healing becomes a sort of meta-narrative for the potential of Canadian national reconciliation discourse to assuage non-Native guilt by bringing closure and thus forgetting to the issues:

The end points of healing, or of closure, here remain continually beyond the grasp of readers and characters alike, and denied this state of grace they are forced to continue to grapple with the challenges of the *process* of healing—or simply of continuation. Government rhetoricians and average Canadians alike have much to learn from this inconclusivity; as Alexie demonstrates, this push for closure is in many ways a longing for oblivion—for the luxury of forgetting and for the absolution of amnesia. (61)

The push for closure which Martin deftly perceives as part of a rhetoric in the service of public amnesia is, in the first instance, a critique of the healing promise of public testimonies to residential school traumas. *Porcupines and China Dolls* offers an imaginative rethinking of what public disclosure could be if fiction were a sanctioned mode of testimony. If Aboriginal trauma theory arises, as Fagan contends, from the stories Aboriginal peoples tell, then Alexie’s trauma theory radically subverts Western

conceptions of healing. His story and thereby his theory reclaims storytelling and the imaginative capacity to reshape experience by opening and closing sutures to wounds that can never fully heal, yet always have the capacity to transform: by imagining other ways of talking, by thinking of new ways to testify, and by inspiring a community of readers to think creatively about the legacies of residential school. Alexie's indirect and intensely imaginative approach to telling his story through fiction unravels Western conceptions of healing practices without ever succumbing to hopelessness.

4.5 The Chance for Change

Strength of Indian Women, As Long as the Rivers Flow, and Porcupines and China Dolls are all examples of writers employing fiction as a form of testimony to residential school abuses and their legacies in purposefully utilitarian artistic practices with clear pedagogical and therapeutic goals. In this sense, these works correspond to what Jace Weaver has coined “communitist literature,” that is, “a combination of the words ‘community’ and ‘activism.’ Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community” (xiii). Manuel, Bartleman, and Alexie all express their commitment to using literature to reach their communities to foment, as Alexie said, at the least the possibility for change. Episkenew asserts that the activist and educative capacity of Indigenous writing is often aimed at settler readers:

Indigenous narratives serve a socio-pedagogical function in that their objective is to change society by educating the settler readers about the Indigenous perspective of Canadian society. The narratives implicate settler readers by exposing the structures that sustain White privilege and by compelling them to examine their position of privilege and their complicity in the continued oppression of Indigenous people. (*Taking Back Our Spirits* 17)

My contention is that the fictions examined here are communitist in Weaver's sense and also socio-pedagogical in Episkenew's. I would add that the communities these writers aim to instruct and incite are both settler and Indigenous. Native and non-Native audiences are implicated as witnesses to testimonial storytelling and asked to understand the complexities of residential school legacies through the lens of fiction. I cannot say

that these fictions will change the hearts and minds of the Canadian reading public, but, as Alexie suggested, stories represent the *chance for change*.

Conclusion

5 Storied Truths

This dissertation makes a plea for understanding the place of story and the imagination in accounts of child sexual abuse trauma. I looked first at the work of Sylvia Fraser to explore the ways in which her factual memoir functions as a trauma story—one that has been misread and criticized by scholars—with consideration to the ways in which her first novel is an early subconscious testimonial to her abuse. Chapter Three examined fictions without pretense of testimony. Like the works discussed in the first and final chapters, the novels I analyzed reflect the same commitment to the incorporation of fictional strategies to represent traumas as aesthetically through the “traumatic imagination.” The residential school fictions I explored in the final chapter of this project reveal a deep writerly engagement with fiction as a tool for public testimony. Taken together, all of the works I discuss here suggest that generic distinctions between fiction and life-writing need to be reconceived in stories of childhood trauma to allow traumatic truths to surface unhinged from generic conventions and the demands of truth-telling. Child sexual abuse narratives demand a different kind of writing and a different kind of reading.

In his 2003 CBC Massey Lectures, Thomas King famously said, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are.” This foundational principal has guided my theorization that memories of child sexual traumas are fundamentally imaginative and performative acts of rewriting what can never be fully or accurately remembered without recourse to stories. The narrator in *Fall on Your Knees* says, “Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable” (270). If the “truth about stories is that’s all we are,” and if “Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable,” then we are nothing more—and nothing less—than a collection of unreliable stories in a constant state of revision. Neurologist Antonio R. Damasio suggests that “the endless reactivation of updated images about our identity (a combination of memories of the past and of the planned future) constitutes a sizable part of the state of self as I understand it” (239). He suggests that the story of who we are as human beings is constantly shifting:

At each moment the state of self is constructed, from the ground up. It is an evanescent reference state, so continuously and consistently *reconstructed* that the owner never knows it is being remade unless something goes wrong with the remaking. [. . .] Present continuously becomes past, and by the time we take stock of it we are in another present, consumed with planning the future, which we do on the stepping-stones of the past. The present is never here. We are hopelessly late for consciousness. (240; original emphasis)

Damasio not only argues that human consciousness is in a constant state of motion and flux; he also suggests that subjectivity emerges from the capacity of language to “engender verbal narratives out of nonverbal ones. [. . .] Language may not be the source of the self, but it certainly is the source of the ‘I’” (243). Who we are depends on how we story ourselves at any moment in time. What all of this suggests to me is that there needs to be a place for the storying imagination in any narrative account of the self, particularly in cases of trauma where identity stories are radically interrupted by the imposition of abuse. Childhood sexual abuse is also childhood identity abuse or, if you will, story abuse. Childhood sexual traumas leave victims with an imposed adult story that, while incomprehensible to the child, forever rewrites her personal narrative. Giving retrospective account of these traumas, whether through life-writing projects or fictional genres, necessitates *rewriting* the story by a present remembering consciousness which looks backward precisely in order to look forward to the future already being written.

What remains unanswered in this dissertation and what requires further study is the extent to which traumatic testimony can incorporate the revisionist story-telling capacity of the survivor into the narrative account of trauma. What would an allowance for the imagination mean for the judicial system? Is there any way for trauma survivors to tell their story *as a story* which is judged on if it successfully conveys its traumatic truths? Can the persistent question—“Is she lying?”—ever be dispelled if story and the imagination are granted legitimacy? I think there is a difference between lying, that is, the deliberate fabrication of events, and storying, which is putting the event into a narrative that makes sense without pretense to exact representation. Acknowledging the

impossibility of truth in trauma narratives opens up the possibility for new understandings of what counts as truth, that is, for *storied truths*.

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