

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

CUNY Graduate Center

6-2014

Provisional Fictions: Discontinuous Selves and the Making of Meaning

Tara Roeder

Graduate Center, City University of New York

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/275

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

PROVISIONAL FICTIONS:
DISCONTINUOUS SELVES AND THE MAKING OF MEANING

by

TARA ROEDER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014

© 2014

TARA ROEDER

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Meena Alexander

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Mario DiGangi

Date

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Meena Alexander

Sondra Perl

Joshua Wilner

Abstract

PROVISIONAL FICTIONS:
DISCONTINUOUS SELVES AND THE MAKING OF MEANING

by

Tara Roeder

Advisor: Meena Alexander

My project is an exploration of trauma-based meaning-making practices and reader response across a variety of sites. By teasing out some of the complex connections among trauma, narrative, and audience that may occur in spaces ranging from non-linear memoir to courtroom testimony to the writing classroom, I engage with the inherently dialogic nature of making meaning from trauma, and examine some of the ways in which women who engage in recursive, embodied rhetorical practices can productively disrupt conventional expectations of the function of trauma narratives. Chapter One examines the formal, linguistic, and philosophical choices made by women memoirists who challenge the parameters of traditional narrative structure in order to forge their own paths through contested issues of history, memory, and the body. Chapter Two focuses on the public discourses surrounding stories of sexual assault, using reader response theory to explore the possibilities available to witnesses who wish to resist the ways in which the rhetoric of the courtroom can circumscribe responses to sexual assault narratives in multiple forms, from memoir to testimony to mainstream media coverage. Chapter Three

explores the interpretive possibilities for readers of trauma based narrative offered by non-oedipal psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi, who meaningfully revised Freud's analytic approach to trauma victims by stressing the need for empathy and active witnessing on behalf of the analyst. Chapter Four delves into the realm of pedagogy, seeking to demonstrate through the use of narrative practice some of the ways in which assignment design and modes of response can aid in facilitating ethical and empathetic pedagogical interactions that may resonate both in and beyond the composition classroom. I am ultimately invested in illuminating the role that both genre and the body have in the construction of non-linear trauma narratives, as well as the role community plays in re-thinking the linear reading practices often privileged in response to such narratives in light of the work of innovative writers and theorists who challenge such practices in their own projects.

Contents

Introduction	1
1. <i>With Torn Ends Visible</i> : Narrative, Revision, and the Unconsumeable Memoir	7
2. <i>You Have to Confess</i> : Rape and The Politics of Storytelling	34
3. <i>My Words Would Have Murdered</i> : De-Oedipalizing Analysis	55
4. Reparative Reading in a College Composition Classroom	74
Conclusion	95
Works Cited	98

Introduction

1. *Poetry makes a dwelling for us, a tent of words.*
2. *The tent has holes for wind to blow through, holes pierced by gunfire, by arrows, by sharp stones.*
3. *It can be pitched on solid ground, or rolled up, borne through air, carried over water. It can be unfurled here or there.*
4. *Inside the shelter we turn from the violence of history, to the lyric measures of poetry, so that we can see again, eyes wiped free of blood; so that we can hear again, the voices that allow us to be human.*
5. *Poetry makes ground in a vertiginous world.*
6. *All of this is true, and necessary for our survival.*
7. *None of this is true.*

— “*Pitching a Tent*”
Meena Alexander

I have continually been intrigued by the paradox Meena Alexander describes above—the idea that transforming experience into language is necessary for survival, while at the same time realizing that this, like all of the stories we tell about ourselves—is a “fiction” in the classic sense of the term. The word “fiction” has, at its root, the Latin word “fictio”—the act of making, fashioning, or molding. A fiction is not necessarily a truth or a lie—it is a made thing, something fashioned by humans to make meaning of a world that may often seem to operate in ways that are antithetical to our desires, hopes, and sometimes our very existence.

Obviously, meaning can be produced in multiple ways: in a memoir; a performance; courtroom testimony; a psychoanalytic session; an essay for a mandatory college class; a poem. While translating lived experience into language is never a precise exercise, it becomes especially complex in the face of traumatic experience—what Cathy Caruth describes as “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses itself to us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth that is not otherwise available” (4). Registered initially by the body, trauma takes time to,

as Maxine Hong Kingston puts it in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, surface “up to the aware mind” (260). Speaking to a group of Viet Nam veterans at a writing workshop, Kingston says:

The journey from the traumatic thing to the transforming words takes twenty years. The conscious mind is waking up! You are now ready to gather the smithereens, and narrate them into story. We’ll put that war into words, and through language make sense, meaning, art of it, make something beautiful, something good. (260)

For Kingston, it is not enough for the hidden to emerge; it must be faced and transformed.

Kingston urges the veterans in her workshop to take these gaps in their lives and narrate them, make sense of them:

Each one of the veterans has had a moment when life blew apart [...] If he or she could write the explosion, its every smithereen, and narrate what led to it and came from it, the self and the world would become whole. They only need an ethos, a simple set of positive ethics as ground and base. (336)

Narrating one’s own story can be an empowering act, a way of contextualizing the otherwise senseless.

Yet making meaning from trauma does not necessarily follow a linear path. There is obviously a danger in uncritically talking about “the unified self” or a “coherent story”—such fictions ultimately betray the reality of experience, especially traumatic experience. My goal in this project is to explore the ways in which the very concept of storytelling, specifically in the face of trauma, can be viewed as provisional unity necessary for self-sustenance, rather than an attempt at closure or finality. My impetus for the title of this project comes from a perhaps unlikely source—modernist poet Wallace Stevens, who, in his poem “Of Modern Poetry”, writes about the search for “what will suffice” (239). In “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens posits a breaching of the gap between imagination and “reality,” the war of the poet and the war

of the soldier, instructing us in the creation of our own “fictions.” “Abstract, pleasing, and changing,” these fictions are our way of making sense of the world, of reconciling ourselves with our environments. The creation of art, like the creation of “self,” is indeed necessary if we are to make meaning out of a chaos that wounds and fragments. Yet it is important to explore this construct in a way that avoids dangerous totalizing tactics, and to instead view it as a means of consistently negotiating and re-negotiating one’s positions in time and space. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich equates the retelling of stories with women’s survival—a notion that complements as it complicates Stevens’s claim that it is through fictions that we are able to sustain ourselves.

Survivors of trauma may often find themselves constructing trauma narratives in private journals or therapy sessions as part of their recovery process. But trauma narratives also surface in public space in a variety of ways—through art and memoir; in our courtrooms and in our classrooms. This project is an exploration of some of the stories that surface in these settings, and the variety of responses they may provoke. Each chapter explores a particular site where trauma and narrative intersect, allowing for the construction of provisional fictions that make meaning of the otherwise senseless.

Chapter One examines the site of non-linear memoirs, in which traditional notions of plot and chronology are disrupted by trauma. Contemporary women writers like Meena Alexander, Susan Brison, Sophie Calle, Anne Carson, Teresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Maxine Hong Kingston complicate the genre of memoir, allowing themselves to construct malleable and multiple selves in their texts. As they inscribe both body and memory, the shape of their writing—fragmented; recursive; elliptical—underscores the provisional nature of both self and narrative. The readers

of such texts are called to inhabit a space of uncertainty, and invited to engage in meaning-making practices that veer away from expectations of cohesion and linearity.

Chapter Two examines the discourse of rape in contemporary culture, paying special attention to the courtroom setting, where rape victims are often required to tell cohesive, linear narratives that underscore their blamelessness if they hope to be believed. Because of deeply entrenched cultural myths about rape, the type of story often required for the successful prosecution of perpetrators may require rape victims to construct narratives that do not accurately reflect their lived experience. Writers such as Susan Brison, Patricia Weaver Francisco, and Alice Sebold engage with the complex politics of rape and its telling in their memoirs. While constructing stories that will suffice in the courtroom setting remains an important task for many rape victims, such stories may ultimately have to be relinquished and re-written in order to revise prevailing cultural perceptions of rape, its perpetrators and its victims. The memoirs of rape survivors thus come to function as a different—and necessary—type of public testimony.

Chapter Three considers the psychoanalytic setting, examining the significance of Sandor Ferenczi's work on trauma and its treatment both in and beyond the therapeutic environment. Ferenczi re-wrote the hierarchical analytic paradigm established by Freud, insisting on the role of the analyst as a compassionate partner rather than a detached authority. He also resisted Freud's position of disbelief in the face of childhood sexual assault narratives. Ferenczi's own narrative—largely buried for years by the psychoanalytic establishment—offers a powerful counter-history of abuse-related trauma and its treatment. Ferenczi's work has significance beyond the analytic setting as well. Scholars and teachers who employ Ferenczian approaches

may find new and productive ways of engaging with texts by moving beyond what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms a “paranoid” position.

Chapter Four offers a personal narrative of my experience in the college composition classroom, looking at some of the ways in which reparative pedagogical approaches have shaped the writing and response that takes place in my courses. In *Living the Narrative Life: Stories as a Tool for Meaning Making*, composition scholar Gian Pagnucci points out that “The battle to legitimate narrative continues [...] Despite a number of scholarly volumes now currently available on narrative theory, the value of narrative research is frequently challenged” (14). Yet Pagnucci, along with theorists such as Lad Tobin and Sondra Perl, has forcefully argued for the value of narrative knowledge in the field of Composition Studies, and in academia as a whole. Constructing this particular chapter in the first person allowed me to enact not only the kinds of practices I encourage in my own classroom (thus further narrowing the gap between my own writing/research practices and the writing/research practices of my students), but also to further illustrate the insights I have gleaned from many of the women whose work I address in other chapters—that the use of various genres and registers actively underscores the diverse and context-specific ways in which meaning can be made. In this chapter I explore some of the ways in which adopting a reparative reading approach has enabled me to better engage not only with trauma-based student texts, but also to facilitate a richer environments for all students by opening my perceptions of what constitutes an “appropriate” text for a writing class and by critically re-thinking assignment design and assessment practices.

Threading these chapters together is the concept of the dialogic. Reading—like therapy; like pedagogy—is ultimately a communal activity. I am deeply indebted to critical traditions that privilege each of these acts as a dynamic and ethical interaction between two (or more) fully

human subjects. From reader-response theory to Ferenczian psychoanalysis to expressivist pedagogy, I have attempted to ground my understanding of traumatic representation and its reception in a framework that recognizes both the irreducible singularity of the other, as well as the necessity of finding ways to forge empathetic connections with those whose experiences may differ dramatically from our own.

I focus on a variety of sites in this project—non-linear memoirs; the public discourse around the trauma of rape; the courtroom; the classroom; the psychoanalytic session. In doing so, I by no means wish to suggest a false equivalency between these arenas. What I do intend is explore some of the responsibilities entrusted to various audiences engaging with trauma-based narrative in multiple forms. Whether one is a casual reader, a member of a jury, a therapist, a teacher, or a scholar, it is valuable to have insight into the ways in which those who present trauma-based stories may call on us to actively engage with their narratives ethically and empathetically. I ultimately hope to offer here some modes of textual relation informed by a spirit of generosity and risk-taking, and engage in an exploration of the kinds of meaning that may be made between subjects invested in speaking difficult truths, and those who are willing to listen.

Chapter One

With Torn Ends Visible: Narrative, Revision, and the Unconsumeable Memoir

In her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision,” feminist poet and critic Adrienne Rich famously asserts that “re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival” (18). This insight—that the ability to radically re-see and radically re-write the stories that shape our experiences is crucial to our ability to situate ourselves in the world—is born out in the work of several twentieth century women memoirists who challenge traditional paradigms of storytelling. It also has significance for the audiences of such work, who must negotiate structures that refuse to conform to popular conceptions of the ultimate coherence of memory, body, and narrative.

The consumption of memoir, especially among women, has sky-rocketed in the U.S. since the 1990s. In “But Enough About Me,” Daniel Mendelsohn explores the reasons for the growing popularity of memoir, arguing that the confessional memoir has functionally replaced the novel for a public audience, writing that public “hunger for good stories at any price also suggests that the trauma-and-redemption memoir, with its strong narrative trajectory and straightforward themes, may be filling a gap created by the gradual displacement of the novel from its once central position in literary culture.” Linking what he sees as an at times dogmatic demand for veracity with the explosion of confessional Internet culture, Mendelsohn expresses concern that the function of memoir as “art” has largely been ignored.

There are more serious critiques of the popularity of memoir than its contribution to the supposed demise of *ars gratia artis*, however. While primarily arguing for the socially transformative power of personal narrative, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith also point out in

Human Rights and Narrated Lives the ways in which the commodification of life experiences is problematically connected to an insistence on particular types of narratives (what Mendelsohn calls “trauma-and-redemption” narratives), reproducing “a circuit of demand in which the powerful and relatively privileged retain the right to confer or refuse recognition” (232). In the words of David Shields in *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, “What if America isn’t really the sort of place where a street urchin can charm his way to the top through diligence and talent? What if instead it’s the sort of place where heartwarming stories about abused children who triumphed through adversity are made up and marketed?” (36).

Like Shields, I believe that “[m]emoir is a genre in need of an informed readership. It’s a mistake to read a memoir as though the writer owes the reader the same record of literal accuracy that is owed in newspaper reporting” (Shields 40). As critics like Jane Greer, Anne G. Bergin, and Rona Kaufman suggest in *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response*, however, it’s uncomfortably easy for academics to dismiss “trauma-and-redemption” memoirs and their (predominantly female) audiences (Schweickart and Flynn). I want to be clear that my purpose here does not include denigrating plot-driven memoirs or their audiences; instead I simply want to acknowledge that their popularity speaks, by contrast, to the role of memoir that does *not* follow traditional narrative patterns.

Memoirs of all sorts can provide both writer and reader with a means of situating themselves in a difficult world. But the idea of “situation” is a tricky one, laden with expectations. I think of a commercial for home ownership (put out by the National Association of Realtors) I’ve seen recently, that tells us that homeownership leads to stronger communities and higher self-esteem and academic performance for the children of homeowners. The circular logic of such claims notwithstanding, the commercial appeals to the American success story in

an obvious way—when we are “settled,” we are also “successful.” Memoirs can be “homes” of a sort—places where we (both writer and reader) lay our desires; our experiences; our very bodies. But, as Judith Halberstam points out in *The Queer Art of Failure*, narratives of success are not always the most constructive models for those whose own bodies and experiences have long born the mark of “failure” in a patriarchal culture. When particular narratives in which success is often linked with tropes such as triumph over adversity and the reconstitution of the “shattered self” (Glass) are consistently privileged, alternative desires (such as revenge, forgetting, or unbecoming) are marginalized.

My focus here, then, is on the “unconsumeable” memoir—the memoir that, through strategies of elision, recursivity, excess, repetition, substitution, and fragmentation, succeeds in disrupting expectations of accessibility, of finding an unproblematized place to lay down one’s head. Such strategies are particularly important for women memoirists, whose bodies are always already connected to temporality in specific ways, tethered to scripts of innocence/maturity, pre and post sexual intercourse (or rape), pre and post motherhood, etc. In such a linear context, we may benefit from an encounter with what Elizabeth Grosz terms the “volatile” body—the body that refuses to inscribe itself in static chronological terms¹. Poet Wallace Stevens, in “Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction,” writes: “From this the poem springs: that we live in a place/ That is not our own, and much more, not ourselves/ And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.” Memoir, I believe, springs from that same place. The writers I will be engaging with inhabit the space that is “not their own” with an intense awareness of the difficulty of such a task. Rather than settling into comforting and familiar patterns, they seek to find alternate modes of representation that reflect the precariousness of situation, constructing what I call “provisional fictions”—stories

¹ Although not all of the memoirs I will be exploring are explicitly trauma-based, many of them are; such strategies are intrinsically, I would argue, linked to the production (and re-vision) of traumatic knowledge.

that straddle spaces of knowing/not knowing; home/exile; memory/forgetting; stories that offer sustenance and consolation without closure and correctness.

Drawing on the work of James C. Scott, Judith Halberstam challenges the privileging of “legibility,” calling instead for forms that emphasize “mutuality, collectivity, plasticity, diversity, and adaptability” (10). “Illegibility may in fact be one way of escaping [...] political manipulation” (10.) I think here of the ways in which women’s experience (specifically, though not exclusively, traumatic experience), when codified in recognizable structures, can come to reify, rather than resist, the kinds of narrative pressure created by institutions like the judicial system (or Oprah’s Book Club). What might it mean to “un-write”? What might it mean to forget, rather than memorialize, Shield’s “vertiginous details”?

Halberstam urges us to “suspect memorialization,” advocating for “certain forms of erasure over memory precisely because memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories [...] Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls ‘a ritual of power’; it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions” (15). In this context, “forgetting” can become “a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription” (15). While never forgetting the potential power of remembering, I’m also drawn to Halberstam’s insight that, “[f]or women and queer people, forgetfulness can be a useful tool for jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary” (Halberstam 70).

The memoirs I will be exploring here cross boundaries; they unsettle tidy notions of truth and fiction, memorialization and erasure. The selves and stories constructed in the texts of women like Meena Alexander, Susan Brison, Sophie Calle, Anne Carson, Theresa Hak Kyung

Cha, and Maxine Hong Kingston are at once anchors in reality *and* malleable, revisable creations that refuse to conform to “trauma-and-redemption” plots. In essence, these women succeed in exploding the genre of “memoir” and unearthing its inherent potential to be subversive, to call into question our very ideas of what memory, the body, and truth telling can mean. What I am offering here is a question: when we begin to value the concept of mosaic—the notion of fractured experience reconfigured in a way that challenges static configurations of narrative and temporality—how might we come to unsettle a popular understanding of the boundaries between self and other; fiction and truth-telling; fragment and whole?

The Spaces in Between: Memoir as Collage

David Shields writes that:

In English, the term memoir comes directly from the French for *memory*, *mémoire*, a word that is derived from the Latin for the same, *memoria*. And yet more deeply rooted in the word *memoir* is a far less confident one. Embedded in Latin’s *memoria* is the ancient Greek *mérmeros*, an offshoot of the Avestic Persian *mer-mara*, itself a derivative of the Indo-European for that which we think about but cannot grasp: *mer-mer*, “to vividly wonder,” “to be anxious,” to “exhaustingly ponder.” In this darker light of human language, the term suggests a literary form that is much less confident than today’s novelistic memoir, with its effortlessly relayed experiences. (40-41)

If the trauma and redemption memoir, with its illusion of cohesiveness and wholeness, fails to evoke these more uncertain modes of relation, we do find them in the work of women like Anne Carson and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha—writers for whom “memoir” becomes a form of collage, an opaque attempt at collection that deliberately thwarts the desire for mastery or conclusion.

Carson’s *Nox* is a haunting example of the collage-memoir. A reproduction of the handmade book she constructed after the death of her brother (whom she hadn’t seen in years), the accordion style text, housed in a sturdy cardboard box, functions as an elegy. Comprised of

passages from historical texts; dictionary entries; letters; photos; paintings; transcribed dialogue; poetry; and scraps of memory, the text uses the historian Herodotus as a frame. Herodotus, Carson writes, teaches us that reading history is “a process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things humans do” (Carson).

The desire for a center is evoked but continually displaced throughout the text: “We want other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here’s why. It forms a lock against oblivion. Does it?” (Carson). Carson’s brother’s long absence from her life is punctuated only occasionally by letters; it is up to his widow to fill in (some) of the blanks in his narrative. Carson’s portrait of her brother, both an act of mourning and a reflection on the inevitable incompleteness of the act, lacks the kind of certainty typically associated with written history: “Autopsy is a term historians use of the ‘eyewitnessing’ of data or events by the historian himself, a mode of authorial power. To withhold this authorization is also powerful” (Carson). The very absence of her brother, the “center” of the text, speaks more powerfully than false attempts to re-create his presence: “I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother. It resists me. He refuses to be “cooked” [...] in my transactional order” (Carson). Instead, Carson’s project becomes one of inquiry:

History and elegy are akin [...] One who asks about things—about their dimensions, weight, location, moods, names, holiness, smell—is an historian. But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself. (Carson)

The thing that “carries itself” in this case becomes an artifact; *Nox* is at once a sturdy object—a weighty memorialization that requires physical engagement—and a record of the unrecordable, the ineffable:

When my parents died I chose not to eat but to burn them. Then buried the ashes under a stone cut with their names. For my brother I had no choice, I was a thousand miles away. His widow says he wanted to be cast in the sea, so she did this. There is no stone and as I say he changed his name. (Carson)

Elegy, like translation, is an imprecise act. Preoccupied with translating Catullus's elegy for his own brother, Carson comes to realize that such an attempt is ultimately enriching and consoling, and ever incomplete: "I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end" (Carson).

The configuration of translating as a room—not exactly "unknown", but one in which one has to grow comfortable in the dark without ever fully feeling closure—evokes the precariousness of situating one's self—an act that is necessary though ultimately impossible. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler writes: "I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must" (Butler 23). It is in the act of searching (and faltering) itself that Carson finds a home, both uncomfortable and open: "In one sense it is a room I can never leave, perhaps dreadful for that. At the same time, a place composed entirely of entries" (Carson). The dictionary entries she includes throughout the text in an attempt to make sense of loss are also entries into multiple modes of being and relating: "The law of mosaics: how to deal with parts in the absence of wholes" (Shields 113).

In the conclusion of his own collage-memoir that weaves the story of his mother's traumatic childhood with his idyllic one, writer Derek Owens intertwines their narratives against the backdrop of the history of upstate New York through the use of quotes, narrative, poetry,

documents, and photos. Owens, like Carson, troubles the notion of memoir as a genre of triumph and closure:

while I agree [...] with this understanding of memory as myth and as such inevitably the stuff of history, there are moments when I look back at all this and wonder, would it have been better simply to have not known. to have kept it all buried. would that her ancient selves, and the memories they dragged in, had remained deep inside. for the triumph of her account seems coupled too closely with a mourning that in the end mocks the label triumph. and yet [...] this dance of return and excavation reveals some larger ineluctable pull, that weird impulse to stretch the temporal like taffy, looking backwards with one eye while focusing ahead into a present with another. Like the eyes of a chameleon, each one rotating of its own accord, and magically, unnaturally, the two views re-assembled, conjoined within their hybrid narrative. (Owens 145)

By highlighting the inevitable connection between triumph and mourning, Owens complicates a facile understanding of the kind of “success story” more linear memoirs may veer towards. Yet I’m also drawn to his insight that a recognition of the tension between memory and forgetting, the whole and the part, does not preclude a possibility for hope, and for the construction of a sort of “hybrid” text that recognizes multiple impulses.

It’s significant that Owens, early in his own project, invokes a question from perhaps the most well-known contemporary collage-memoir, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*: “*Why resurrect it all now*” (qtd. in Owens 6). In *Dictee*, the use of mosaic becomes a means of attempting to answer this question while simultaneously resisting the linear structuring of memory and experience. Collage here becomes a powerful means of transcending binaries between subject and object; history and present. A pastiche with no central narrative voice, *Dictee* is composed of multiple voices, languages, and modes, and organized in relation to the nine Greek Muses. Weaving together narrative with film stills, French translation exercises, photos, letters, blank space, handwritten notes, and maps, Cha textually enacts the realization

that “[c]ollage is a demonstration of the many becoming the one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge upon it” (Shields 112).

Patricia Yaeger, in her essay “Toward a Female Sublime,” writes that, “as a literary genre or moment concerned with empowerment, transport, and the self’s strong sense of authority, the sublime is a genre the woman writer needs” (192). Exploring various modes of “female sublimity” achieved by writers from Eudora Welty to Elizabeth Bishop, Yaeger claims that the “discovery of the sublime as a mode allowing trespass and appropriation of ‘forbidden and illicit forces’ speaks to the woman writer at play—the woman writer who is looking for a genre permitting the exploration of alternative modes of female experience” (Yaeger 199). I’m especially intrigued by the ways in which *Dictée* enacts such “trespass”; the work of collage here goes beyond deconstruction or cutting and pasting; it instead becomes a vehicle for transcendence.

Theorized by psychoanalytic critics like Neil Hertz and Thomas Weiskel as a moment when “a burden (of the past, but not exclusively) is lifted and there is an influx of power,” (Weiskel 11), the “Romantic,” or oedipal, sublime is tied to classic distinctions between subject and object; self and other. The individual (traditionally a male poet) encounters an overwhelming power—something vast and “unknown”—that threatens to obliterate his ego. Faced with such a threat, the psyche can either shatter, or it can reaffirm itself by incorporation. The task of the Romantic poet is thus to find a language that is capable of “containing” the powerful object; he struggles to re-constitute it through language. In this way, the power of the sublime encounter transfers from the sublime object to the poet (and at times to his reader, whose own encounter with the text may replicate this structure). A moment of identification and brilliance follows a moment of incomprehension and blockage, subsuming difference in the process.

In her own collection *rootprints*, French theorist and author Hélène Cixous offers a language of transport that revisits and revises this oedipal notion of sublimity. She offers:

What interests me is what I do not know. And it leaves me first of all silent. It strikes me with surprise, with a certain silence. But at the same time, it strikes my body, it hurts me. I know that a search, or an exploration will unfold in this direction. It is always what is stronger than I am that interests me... Does this mean it is impossible for me to report it? No. Because we can always be stronger than ourselves; we move forward [...] [W]hen I first began writing [...] I went towards things that I did not know; I glimpsed dazzling scenes before me, where what I do not know, what I do not understand begins. All of a sudden, it revealed itself to me, absolutely, like in the Apocalypse. And then [...] obviously, I was jubilant—obscureness and thus weights in my life finally dissipated. As always in these cases, for everyone, this gave me additional strength. (Cixous 73)

In this description, which evokes the traditional configuration of the sublime experience, “interest” is provoked in the subject by an “other” which is “stronger.” The encounter is first painful, but after a moment of blockage comes a moment of joyful revelation, followed by an influx of power. *Dictée* begins with a similar evocation, where dissolution precedes utterance:

“*Inside her voids. It does not contain further. Rising from the empty below, pebble lumps of gas. Moisture. Begin to flood her. Dissolving her [...]* The delivery. She takes it. Slow. The invoking [...] The utter” (5).

However, in an interesting twist on Shelley’s query at the end of “Mont Blanc,” the classical locus of the Romantic sublime, “And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,/If to the human mind’s imaginings/Silence and solitude were vacancy?,” Cixous asserts that it is the *other* who gives the *subject* richness:

The other in all his or her forms gives me *I*. It is on the occasion of the other that *I* catch sight of *me*; or that *I* catch me at: reacting, choosing, refusing, accepting. It is the other who makes my portrait. Always. And luckily. The other of all sorts, is also of all diverse richness. The more the other is rich, the more I am rich... This is what people do not know, in general, and it’s too bad. They are scared of those they consider to be stronger or richer or bigger, without realizing that the richer, the bigger, the stronger person enriches us, makes us bigger, stronger.” (Cixous 13)

The locus of the sublime shifts from the subject, although it likewise resists resting solely in the object. Cixous instead locates the sublime experience in the moment of connection between object and subject, where a transfer takes place. This transfer “enriches” the subject, whose “portrait” is, in an ironic reversal of “Mont Blanc,” created by the “other” of the sublime encounter. Cixous revises the power balance of the traditional sublime in which the “I” eclipses all, asserting instead a flow of power that comes specifically from the subject’s recognition of the infinite *difference* of the other in the sublime encounter, rather than the subject’s identification *with* that object, which would minimize that difference.

Likewise, the fragmented structure of *Dictee* undoes the promise of stability inherent in the self/other dichotomy of the traditional sublime: “Collage precisely references the spaces in between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other” (Halberstam 136). The proliferation of selves in the text is a process of expenditure that “spills whatever power the sublime moment—in its structure of crisis, confrontation, and renewed domination—has promised to hoard” (Yaeger 202). *Dictee* is ripe with such moments. Cha’s catalogue of veils is one of the most marked:

Glass. Drape. Lace. Curtain. Blinds. Gauze. Veil. Voile. Voile de mariée. Voile de religieuse Shade shelter shield shadow mist covert screen screen door screen gate smoke screen concealment eye shade eye shield opaque silk gauze filter frost
(Cha 127)

In Josephine Nock-Hee Park’s “‘What of the Partition?’: *Dictee*’s Boundaries and the American Epic,” she writes: “The sheer excess of this list, with its dazzling permutations of screens shows us that the fragile border is in fact a site sturdy enough to withstand the complicated labor of Cha’s text” (Park 234). “Excess”; “dazzling”: Park’s vocabulary is that of the sublime, but the function of Cha’s “excess,” she suggests, is as a gesture of reassurance, and not dominance: the

liminal, the border, becomes a place not of the anxiety of dissolution and instability, but a “sturdy” site, capable of withstanding the work of the text and the immense weight of the unable-to-be-spoken.

Park, ruminating on the ending of the nine-day mediation of *Dictee*—a young girl on the verge of entering the house where her mother is waiting—asks: “Yet why does the ninth day end here, at the threshold?” (Park 213). Cixous writes that “mystery” and difference are often repressed, “and it’s *settled*. But if on the contrary one remains open and susceptible to all the phenomena of overflowing, beginning with natural phenomena, one discovers the immense landscape of the *trans-*, of the passage” (52). This notion of the “*trans-*,” so crucial to the sublime experience, is also crucial to the project undertaken in *Dictee*, a novel of boundary-blurring in which the author “allows others to occupy her” (Park 216). The language that Park uses to describe Cha’s work is telling: the self of the text finds “its existence in transit, in the fact of the flight and return” (Park 228); the text is marked by “confusion between subject and object” (218); it evokes a “liminal” experience (218). Cha “reverses the one lost and the one searching” (230). This language—of flight, transit, boundary confusion, reversal—reveals the way in which the text enacts sublimity. After the initial blockage of “bared noise, groans, bits torn from words” (Cha 3), *Dictee* goes on—often through gaps and silences—to enact what critic Robert Dainotto calls “that ephemeral brilliant moment of writing the impossibility of writing” (151).

“Loss and survival are two of the most remarkable traits of the sublime” (Dainatto 138), and both are central to *Dictee*—the loss of the mother tongue (both symbolic and literal) is followed by a dazzling series of connections and disruptions that leads to the writer’s realization that “*if she were able to write she could continue to live*” (Cha 141). This realization is

inextricably connected to the experiences of other women—Cha’s mother, revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, Jeanne D’Arc, Demeter and Persephone—including powerful mythic females. *Dictee* reaffirms the sacred, refusing to acknowledge the ostensible “used-up-ness” of the transcendent sublime, while re-negotiating the oedipal relationship(s) between self and other that mark the structure of Romantic sublimity.

Halberstam writes:

While the libido tends to ward off the death dive though a ‘will to power,’ a desire for mastery, and an externalization of erotic energy, sometimes libidinal energies are given over to destabilization, unbecoming, and unraveling. This is what Leo Bersani refers to as ‘self-shattering,’ a shadowy sexual impulse that most people would rather deny or sublimate. If taken seriously, unbecoming may have its political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency. (136)

Cha’s resistance to a central narrative structure allows her to enact such a sublime un-becoming. Like Carson’s evocative and multi-faceted elegy for her brother, Cha’s polyvocal exploration of memory, history, and loss hints at “the movement, the shimmering of the differing of a time and space not yet configured, numerated, mastered, or occupied” (Grosz 111).

Perhaps One Has to Give it Up: Re-vision as Resistance in the Trauma-Based Memoir

Recalling Adrienne Rich’s equation of re-vision with survival, I turn now to the memoirs of feminist women who textually enact the realization that “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes [...] is an act of survival.” In the works of Susan Brison, Meena Alexander, and Maxine Hong Kingston, recalling the past becomes synonymous with re-writing the past: in the words of Hélène Cixous in *Stigmata*, “Writing is the movement to return to where we haven’t been ‘in person’ but only in wounded flesh” (97). It is through writing that the authors give shape

to traumatic experience: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event [...] but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). A central question of the memoirs at hand seems to be: “How does one remake a self from the scattered shards of disrupted memory,” while at the same acknowledging “that the unitary self is an illusion and that we are all composed of a series of successive selves”? (Brison 49). Engaging with the buried and revisable histories of the memoirs here—texts that attempt to reconcile these impulses—the reader is called to transgress the problematic boundaries between “fiction” and “truth-telling” that haunt much contemporary discourse around narratives of trauma, while engaging with the embodied experience of the writers.

Susan Brison’s *Aftermath* offers multiple accounts of her rape and attempted murder. It is an act of sense and self-making as well as a philosophical inquiry into traumatic experience, which Brison ultimately configures as a “surd,” or “non-sensical entry into the series of events of one’s life, making it seem impossible to carry on with the series” (103). The book was composed over a ten year period, and the chapters are recursive; later chapters reference and offer different narratives than earlier chapters, though they all co-exist between the covers of the text, which Brison describes as:

a record of my thinking about trauma and recovery over the past ten years. The chronology of this period, however, is fractured in the telling. Time may be linear (who knows?) but the aftermath was not. There have been many periods of progress and of decline, victories and setbacks, both major and minor. I have changed during this time and so have my views, but, rather than revise my earlier writings in light of more recent understandings, I have tried to convey the trajectory of my ideas. (Brison xi)

Resisting the urge to impose a false unity on her experience, Brison allows the tension between “progress and decline, victories and setbacks” to play out throughout the memoir. In the words of

Marcel Proust in *The Fugitive* (another text in which mourning as a linear process is constantly disrupted by the physicality of memory): “As they recede, passing days gradually cover over those which went before and are themselves buried by those that come after. But each past day remains deposited within us as in some vast library where there are copies even of the oldest books” (Proust 509).

Brison has recourse to various discourses (philosophy, memoir), temporal perspectives, and affect registers as she explores the moment of the trauma itself and the subsequent processes it demands, both internal (recovery process) and external (legal process). She engages with the tension between the personal and the political functions of trauma narratives in an exceptionally nuanced and insightful way. It is by “constructing and telling a narrative of the trauma endured, and with the help of understanding listeners, [that] the survivor begins not only to integrate the traumatic episode into a life with a before and after, but also to gain control over the occurrence of intrusive memories” (71). However, clinging too tightly to one “correct” version of the trauma narrative (as is required by the legal process, for instance, which I will discuss in Chapter Two), may actually hinder recovery “by tethering the survivor to one rigid version of the past” (103). Brison thus argues that “[a]fter gaining enough control over the story to be able to tell it, perhaps one has to give it up, in order to retell it, without having to ‘get it right,’ without fear of betraying it, to be able to rewrite the past in different ways, leading up to an infinite variety of unforeseeable futures” (103). Brison enacts this discovery throughout the text, subverting closure by refusing to rest on “the story” of her trauma, instead offering multiple ways of “making sense” of the ultimately senseless.

Brison is told by those around her that she is “lucky”:

After I was rescued and taken to the Grenoble hospital, I was told repeatedly how “lucky” I was to be alive, and for a short while I even believed this myself. At the

time I did not yet know how trauma not only haunts the conscious and unconscious mind, but also remains in the body, in each of the senses, ready to resurface whenever something triggers a reliving of the traumatic event. I didn't know that the worst—the unimaginably painful aftermath of violence—was yet to come. (Brison x)

Brison is haunted by the realization that memory disrupts the sort of trauma and redemption memoir many writers (and audiences) may cling to: “The first few rape memoirs I read followed the expected plot—a kind of reverse-conversion narrative,” she writes, “A perfectly good, intact life was destroyed, then painstakingly pieced back together” (110). Her own narrative was, she says, “initially, remarkably—uncannily—similar to what seemed to be becoming the standard rape narrative. But it isn't ending up that way” (111). Instead, Brison's embodied experience after the rape becomes one of rupture, fracture, surprise: “after things got better, they got worse” (111). Joyful or traumatic events like the birth of her child; her brother's suicide; the murder of her friends cause the “graph of her recovery” to “oscillate” (112). Brison thus acknowledges that her self-narrative is “constantly being revised, and is permanently revisable” (111).

In the end, there is survival. Recovery may not “consist of picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative)”; instead, “it's facing the fact that there never was a coherent self (or story) there to begin with” (Brison 116). Yet such knowledge does not foreclose on the possibilities of either agency or solace. Because, as Brison reminds us at the conclusion of her book:

maybe recovery is reestablishing the illusory sense of the permanence of hope [...] resilience, the capacity to carry on, alive in the present, unbound by dread or regret. Not the hard, flinty brittleness of rock, but the supple tenacity of the wind-rocked bough that bends, the bursting desire of a new-mown field that can't wait to grow back, the will to say, whatever comes, *Let's see what happens next*” (116-117).

This promise of a provisional, tentative hope echoes Audre Lorde's realization at the closing of her own multi-faceted memoir *The Cancer Journals*: "I would never have chosen this path, but I am very glad to be who I am, here" (77). Rather than engaging in the kind of "celebratory" disintegration James Glass superficially associates with "postmodernism" in his (sometimes frustratingly conservative, sometimes illuminating) *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World*, these writers realize that the construction and situation of a self is both a necessary and ever-incomplete act. It is situated in a space where, in the words of Alice Sebold (whose memoir I will explore in my next chapter), "hope is really springing out of something that was—is—hard won, as opposed to purchased in the, you know, 'hope to cope' section at the local bookstore."

This uneasy reconciliation between the necessity and the precariousness of situation plays itself out in Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines*, which is, in the words of the writer, "writing in search of a homeland" (3). Like Cha, who states, "*if she were able to write she could continue to live*" (Cha 141), Alexander comes to the realization that "I must write if I am to go on living. There is no other way" (Alexander 237). Alexander's is a narrative that refuses to close in on itself, instead proliferating; multiple places ("the fragments of a broken geography"), stories, and languages become organized not through chronology and linearity, but around themes of departure and return. "In America you have to explain yourself, constantly" (193). The text is both an exploration of and a refusal to answer the questions: "Who are you? Where are you from? What do you do?" (193).

Through meditation, poetry, evocation, myth, history, and photo, Alexander explores desire and memory. Like *Dictée*, the text pushes the boundaries of genre, creating its own shape and logic. It also becomes a philosophical examination of what language can do: attempt to make

sense of violence; construct multiple and provisional identities and homelands; revise memory. It explores “[a] life embedded in a life, and that in another life, another and another. Rooms within rooms, each filled with its own scent: rosehips, neem leaves, dried hibiscus leaves that hold a cure, cow dung, human excrement, dried gobs of blood” (Alexander 29). The physicality of Alexander’s description speaks to a desire to inhabit space in a meaningful way, while at the same time recognizing that the space of memory is not a singular “home,” but a series: “rooms within rooms.” “What are you writing about?” a friend asks. “About being born in a female body; about the difficulty of living in space,” Alexander replies. (3).

In the words of Elizabeth Grosz in *Architecture From the Outside*, “[b]uilding is not only a movement of sedimentation and stabilization but also a way of opening space and living” (Grosz 6). Resisting the “idea of building as a fixed entity or given stable object,” Grosz advocates the notion of a building as “made up of other spaces within it that move and change, even if its own walls remain fixed” (6). In her collection *Poetics of Dislocation*, Alexander writes of a colleague who asks: “If you took the papers that you have all over your desk, [...], if you put them together and decided to make a house, what sort of house would it be?” (iv). “I wouldn’t make a house,” she responds, “I would make a boat [...] It would have to float [...] That’s essential. Though I could settle for a tent [...] A floating tent. A tent for a poet who finds it hard to be securely in place” (x). By configuring text as such a provisional structure—a place of residence, though an uncertain, floating one—Alexander is able, in *Fault Lines*, to ask and re-ask the questions: “Who are we? What selves can we construct to live by? How shall we mark out space? How shall we cross the street? How shall we live yet another day?” (Alexander 174).

“*Write in fragments, the fragments will save you*” (237). The “Book of Childhood,” written after September 11, 2001, and ten years after the initial publication of *Fault Lines*, forces

both writer and reader to complicate our relationship to the initial text. In light of the coda, which excavates a buried memory of sexual abuse, the shape of the earlier text changes. Alexander writes: “I had the gnawing feeling that under the story of multiple places, of a life lived between languages and cultures, there was something more. That actual dislocation and exile, though true as it was, had served me as an emotional counter for a darker truth, bitter exfoliation of self, something that as yet I had no words for” (238). In his essay “William Wordsworth and Sigmund Freud,” Patrick Hutton insightfully links Wordsworthian spots of time to Freudian screen memories: unable to reveal the past accurately in and of themselves, these sites simultaneously conceal the potentially shattering and act as “markers” by which we can access, through psychoanalysis, these traumas. Like Alexander’s memories of dislocation and exile, screen memories are real memories, although they conceal (and, sometimes, eventually reveal) deeper, hidden traumas.

The simultaneously protective and revelatory potential of screen memories is linked to the way in which the past can become present—an event necessary for the writer’s attempt to make provisional meaning from the traumatic. Alexander’s account of the physical and uncertain nature of traumatic memory is illuminating and intensely meaningful, both for the writer, who can finally “absorb this difficult truth” (242), and for the reader, who is forced to recognize the ultimate instability of both narrative and memory. The coda reveals but does not erase; the books co-exist, side by side. In *Suspiria de Profundis*, Thomas De Quincey writes about the human brain as a palimpsest, a “membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions” (165). On such a membrane, new scripts can be inscribed over the old, but what is effaced always leaves traces:

Such a palimpsest is my brain; such a palimpsest, O reader, is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each

succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished. (De Quincey 169)

Memory and forgetting are intertwined. The script of traumatic memory is “almost illegible” (Alexander 289). In her poem “Illiterate Heart,” (dedicated to Adrienne Rich), Alexander writes: “I cannot tease my writing hand around/ that burnt hole of sense, figure out the/ quickstep of syllables.” Yet ultimately, *Fault Lines* ends with the recognition that the “work of art” provides a “necessary translation”: “I think of it as a recasting that permits our lives to be given back to us, fragile, precarious” (Alexander 289.)

Such a recasting, however, does not come “fluid and whole” (Alexander 2): “I have written what I could through the rips and tears in the dress I once wore” (317). Resisting the pressure to conform to a recognizable plotline, *Fault Lines* is a “book with torn ends visible” (3). The reader, like the writer, of such a memoir must inhabit a space between certainty and doubt; narrative and fragment—in other words, “a floating tent.”

The reader of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* is also called upon to inhabit a precarious space, one where the necessity of narrative competes with the transgressive desires for multiplication and silence. *The Woman Warrior* is marked by the recognition that “resistance” can be a fierce act of survival; that splitting and hiding can be creative and constructive responses to trauma. The construction of an “alternate” self, for example, provides Kingston with a site to work through her other childhood narrative: “My American life has been such a disappointment” (45). Textually split, the stories in “White Tigers”—one of a Chinese-American girl, one of a Woman Warrior—are in dialogue with each other; two selves are constructed. Voice comes more easily to the imagined self of the Woman Warrior. Literally text—her parents carve “revenge” onto her back (34)—she also enacts the revenge of the

Chinese-American self. When “one of [her] parents or the emigrant villagers” would say, “Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds,” the childhood self “would thrash on the floor and scream so hard [she] couldn’t talk” (46). Lacking the means to name and speak her rage, this self invokes her other, the Woman Warrior. Showing her body-as-text to the baron who quotes her “the sayings [she] hated”—“Girls are maggots in the rice...It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters”—the Woman Warrior is able to claim, “You are responsible for this” (43). The creation of the Woman Warrior—“rooted to the earth” (23)—is an act of preservation. “I was a strange human being indeed—words carved on my back and the baby large in front” (40).

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth uses the image of “wound as voice” to underscore the crucial connections that exist among trauma, body, and text (Caruth 2). The Woman Warrior, voicing the memory of past trauma through her scars, embodies these links. She also embodies the naming and creative work of Kingston’s text as a whole, providing a space for the childhood self to construct a nourishing narrative that exists secretly, contemporaneous with her public silence. Rather than a “denial” of reality, the fiction of the Woman Warrior is a necessary action—a means of crafting a provisional “home”—for a girl attempting to situate herself in a hostile world.

In “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Kingston writes:

My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top. I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moments before the curtain parted or rose [...] I spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas. (165)

Like the construction of the Woman Warrior, the painting of these hidden pictures, “full of possibilities,” is a means of simultaneously creating and secretly safeguarding a self. School

officials interpret the works as signs of a troubled psyche (165), but the function of the paintings for the childhood self of *The Woman Warrior* is a protective one. In the words of Judith Halberstam, such opaque strategies can be useful in challenging “the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary” (Halberstam 70). The reader of the “illegible” is forced to engage with a discomfort that may ultimately prove rewarding for both artist and audience. As psychoanalyst Michael Balint, who recognized the potential richness “veiled” by silence in the psychoanalytic setting puts it in *The Basic Fault*: “Perhaps, if we can change our own approach from that of considering [...] silence as a symptom of resistance to studying it as a possible source of information, we may learn something” (Balint 27).

The possibilities of silence, however, exist alongside the liberating function of voice for Kingston. The “recollection”—and thus, the working through—of trauma requires an excavation of the hidden. Like the ghost of Kingston’s drowned aunt in “No Name Woman,” trauma can be put to rest through remembering: “the real punishment was [...] the family’s deliberately forgetting her” (16). In the blotting out, the erasure of existence, no transmission of knowledge can take place, and repetition becomes unavoidable. Kingston’s task here is to “name the unspeakable” (5). By “devoting pages of paper to her” (16), Kingston creates multiple identities for the aunt whose very existence has been denied. These fictions allow her “forgotten” aunt to survive in the pages of Kingston’s text. This act of fiction-making reflects the construction of self-identity in the work, but also underscores the crucial role of the reader as witness: “The reporting is the vengeance” (53).

Judith Butler writes:

Perhaps [...] one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation [...] the full result of which one cannot know in

advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. (Butler 21)

Brison, Alexander, and Kingston each enact such a transformation through the act of writing, in essence “speaking the unspeakable” while retaining a keen awareness that such a task, while crucial to survival, is also necessarily without an end. For Proust, “our past, and the physical lesions within whose lines it lies inscribed, determines our future” (Proust 471). Yet, as Brison reminds us, both past and future are necessarily plural; it is the both the challenge and the privilege of the memoirist “to be able to rewrite the past in different ways, leading up to an infinite variety of unforeseeable futures” (103).

I Decided To Continue Such Exchanges: Sophie Calle and the Collaborative Memoir

In the hands of French artist, photographer, and performer Sophie Calle, memoir becomes an explicitly dialogic endeavor. In texts such as *Exquisite Pain*, *Take Care of Yourself*, *Appointment With Sigmund Freud*, and *Suite vénitienne*, Calle’s own experiences intertwine with the experiences of others through image and text. Like some of her other well-known pieces (such as *The Sleepers* and *Double Game*), these “auto-fictions” (Macel 21) are dependent on the cooperation, conversation, and collaboration of others: “She turns onlookers into accomplices to her privacy, and leaves them no way out” (Pacquement 15).

At the center of both *Exquisite Pain* and *Take Care of Yourself* is a psychic wound resulting from the end of a love affair. Each text enacts a meticulous and obsessive dissection of the break-up, using multiple voices to “exhaust” the moment of rupture. *Exquisite Pain* is structured in two parts. The first, a countdown from the day that Calle leaves France for a 3 month trip to Japan to the day that her lover does not keep his promised meeting with her at a

New Delhi hotel, calls attention to the way that narrative and memory are created retrospectively; the “story” of a “break-up” is only available in hindsight. The second, constructed as ninety nine pairs of stories—ninety-nine versions of her own break-up side by side with the stories of suffering of ninety-nine friends and strangers—emphasizes the ways in which experiences come to mean in dialogue with the experiences of others. Calle writes: “I decided to continue such exchanges until I had got over my pain by comparing it with other people’s, or had worn out my own story through sheer repetition.” The 99th time Calle “tells” her story, the page is blank.

As Alfred Pacquement writes in his Preface to Calle’s collection *M’AS TU VUE*, “Sophie Calle has not simply exhibited herself [...] She is also fond of getting other people to do the talking” (15). Like *Exquisite Pain*, *Take Care of Yourself* begins with the end of a love affair: “I received an e-mail telling me it was over.” In response, Calle asks “one hundred and seven women [...] chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter. To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it. Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.” The responses—ranging from crossword puzzle to fable to psychological analysis to puppet show—comprise the text, exhaustively making sense of the letter in multiple—at times overlapping, at times divergent—ways. Meaning-making is a collaborative act; it is the task of other women to “make sense” of the letter to which Calle doesn’t “know how to respond.” “It was almost,” she writes, “as if it hadn’t been meant for me.” The letter ends “Take care of yourself.” By asking other women to “answer for her,” Calle attempts to do just that; the book becomes a space to work through the painful letter in the presence of not only sympathetic, but also active and interpretive, witnesses.

Both *Exquisite Pain* and *Take Care of Yourself* push the boundaries of “memoir” in provocative and compelling ways. Calle subverts a desire for linearity by insistently zeroing in

on the same moment dozens of times from dozens of angles while obsessively seeking closure. Each text is a dialogic performance, a way of making sense of pain through narrative excess, play, repetition, and the voices, expertise, and experience of others. The reader must approach the central moment of each text anew dozens of times; any expectation of a singular, cohesive narrative is disrupted as an array of other voices—all of which circle the central event of the memoir; none of which exhaust it—proliferate.

The physical presence of the other is central in Calle's oeuvre; in *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*, a collection of photographs in dialogue with sparse text, Calle records her 1998 installation in Freud's London home. By placing her own body and objects in dialogue with the objects of Freud, Calle forces an excavation not only of her own subconscious (the roots of the repetition complexes she explores through her installation), but of the submerged meanings behind Freud's own landscape of totems and books. Calle's play on the idea of an "appointment" with the father of psychoanalysis creates a forced (and gendered) intimacy between the two:

Sophie's collection of personal keepsakes are her memory triggers, and they seem naturally to cohabit Freud's essentially masculine domain. Presented with 30 concise narratives printed on feminine pink cards, they entered into an immediate dialogue with the psychoanalyst's powerful aura. (Putnam 155)

This play with gender reversal and intimacy also realizes itself in *Suite vénitienne*, an account of Calle's following a man to (and through) Venice and secretly photographing him while trailing him in disguise. Bound with Jean Baudrillard's *Please follow me*, a reflection on Calle's act of photographic "seduction," *Suite vénitienne* undoes the promise of plot fulfillment found in the more conventional memoir or photo essay: "I will not go farther. He moves away, I lose sight of him. *After these last thirteen days with him, our story comes to a close [...]* I stop following Henri B" (72). Baudrillard's post-script to Calle's text ends with the command, "Please follow

me” (86), a phrase which recursively circles back to the beginning of Calle’s own project, reaffirming the dialogic relationship between the texts.

As Halberstam writes, “We can [...] recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique” (Halberstam 88). In the work of Calle, the logic of “failure” and “success” collapses on itself. It is through a meticulous process of insistently following—and ultimately losing—the object at hand that Calle enacts her own brand of collaborative self-making, “stage directing herself through words and photographic imagery” (Paquement 15), yet always aware that, in the words of Cixous, “It is on the occasion of the other that *I* catch sight of *me*; or that *I* catch me at: reacting, choosing, refusing, accepting. It is the other who makes my portrait” (13).

*

In her introduction to the “memoir/anti-memoir” edition of literary journal *CHAIN*, guest editor Kerry Sherin reflects on her encounter with:

work that seemed to address the motives of memoir without bowing to its generic conventions or ideological assumptions [...] There were poets whose work was autobiographical yet defied confessionism’s ahistorical identifications, its solipsism. There were prose writers whose memoirs took as their subjects the constructedness of the selves. There were writers whose work addressed their own political and social minority and the ways that representing the self can both articulate and challenge one’s inscription into a marginal position. (Sherin)

My own impetus for this chapter was a similar interest in such texts; I am moved by the idea of “memoir as re-invention, as generic interplay, as a conversation among texts, as travel back and forth across times and states of mind” (Sherin). When grappling with memoirs that refuse to perform coherent subjectivity and linear plots, we as an audience are called to re-examine our own embodied reality; our relationships to memory and narrative structure, in productive and

unsettling ways. We are forced to confront “the political and psychic stakes involved in self-representation and the ongoing negotiations of subjects” (Sherin).

Perhaps this is especially true when the bodies and experiences inscribed are gendered female. By resisting patriarchal history, passive modes of being, and culturally accepted mottoes such as “whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” the women whose texts I engage with here remind us of alternative ways of organizing our experiences in a world that is often hostile to our agency, our desires, and our very lives. The memoirs surveyed here stand as a powerful reminder that, in the words of Grosz in *Architecture From The Outside*:

The production of alternative models, registers, alignments, interrelations, perspectives, and corporealities themselves, is what, among other things, is at stake in feminist theory and in the arts: how to produce and insist on the cultural and libidinal space for women’s bodies to take their place in a universal up to now dominated by men; how to produce new spaces as/for women; how to make knowledges and technologies work for women rather than simply reproduce themselves according to men’s representations of women. (Grosz 46)

Chapter Two

You Have to Confess: Rape and The Politics of Storytelling

*And so, when the time comes, you have to turn to him,
the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs,
your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess
to him, you are guilty of the crime
of having been forced.*

—Adrienne Rich

In her groundbreaking book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman establishes that the relationship between trauma and storytelling is rarely a linear one. She urges both trauma victims and those working with them of the danger of a “premature demand for certainty,” cautioning that “[z]ealous conviction can all too easily replace an open, inquiring attitude” (180). While being able to make sense of traumatic experience is crucial to the recovery process, the kind of pressure discussed by Susan Brison in *Aftermath* for rape survivors to tell one cohesive story can have detrimental effects. Rape victims who choose to make their stories public and/or seek redress from the justice system, however, will indeed find themselves under intense pressure to tell clear, concise, and coherent accounts of the violence they have undergone.

In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith point out some of the ways in which the single-minded demands of legal and political power structures may negatively impact trauma survivors struggling to have their complex stories be heard. In their effort to explore both the risks and the possibilities for transformation embodied in trauma narratives, Schaeffer and Smith track the multiple and overlapping purposes served by stories constructed around particular collective traumas (i.e., apartheid in South Africa; the forcible

removal of indigenous children from their parents in Australia; the forced sexual slavery of Korean women by the Japanese government during World War II; the unethical treatment of U.S. prisoners; and the experiences of victims and witnesses of the Tiananmen Square massacre in China.) They write: “Principally, this book is a testimony to the efficacy of stories: stories silenced by and emerging from fear, shame, trauma, and repression; stories enlivened by hope, connection, commitment, and affiliation; stories fed by calls for justice, fueled by empathy and an ethics of equality and human dignity” (223). While they cite such stories and the human rights campaigns that sustain and employ them to promote social change as “the most viable hope for extending democracy, social justice, and freedom” (234), they also critique the way these narratives may be re-purposed when put in the service of larger human rights campaigns. A significant example of this kind of rhetorical “altering” occurred at the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings in South Africa, in which many witnesses who testified saw their stories acting as a vehicle for social change even as they were flattened to fit into a pre-existing schema of victim forgiving oppressor. The multiplicity of other, more complex emotions and desires that might inspire and become embodied in trauma narratives (e.g., hatred; desire for revenge; despair; confusion) can be discouraged in a context in which the search for one cohesive narrative is privileged.

In this chapter, I look at rape as both a personal and a collective trauma, one in which the type of linear, cohesive narrative privileged by the legal system has particularly harmful effects on both victims of rape and culture as a whole. In light of Schaffer and Smith’s argument, Susan Brison’s claim that rape survivors may ultimately have to “give [their story] up, in order to retell it, without having to ‘get it right,’ without fear of betraying it, to be able to rewrite the past” (103), is compelling. The average rape victim “gives her account of the crime 57 times to various

officials before the case even lands in court” (Goldman). These accounts will be combed over for inconsistencies by police, lawyers, and often, if the stories become publicized, random members of the general public. Evidence that the victim’s narrative has been anything less than scrupulously consistent may lead to the outright dismissal of her claims. As Andrew E. Taslitz writes in *Rape and the Culture of the Courtroom*, his critical examination of the judicial system and the rhetoric of gender and rape, “With rape, the victim’s truthfulness is almost always challenged” (Taslitz 6).

Coming forward with a narrative of rape is never easy. The public response to recent cases such as the 2011 gang rape of an 11 year old girl by 20 men in Cleveland Texas attests to a recent resurgence of victim-blaming in even the most cut and dry cases. In this particular instance, for example, numerous reporters cited community members who insisted the rape was the fault of the girl, who “dressed older than her age” (McKinley). In the “court of public opinion,” as well as the actual legal system, the onus is often not on the rapist, but on the rape victim to maintain her “innocence” by rigidly adhering to gendered societal scripts about what constitutes appropriate appearance and behavior for women who aren’t “asking” for rape. In the words of Andrea Dworkin, when it comes to acts of gendered violence such as rape, all too often “[t]he tellers and the stories are ignored or ridiculed, threatened back into silence or destroyed, and the experience of female suffering is buried in cultural invisibility and contempt” (20). Women who wish to make their stories of violation and abuse public are often met with re-traumatizing reactions such as blame and doubt, rather than empathy and belief.

Alice Sebold, in *Lucky*, chronicles her own experience as a rape survivor. Violently attacked by a stranger while walking across her campus one night, she expresses frustration with the reactions of those around her, from her family and neighbors who cannot bring themselves to

use the word “rape” to the therapist who jokes, “Well, I guess this will make you less inhibited about sex now, huh?” (77). From the start, the knowledge that she is expected to perform in “acceptable” ways is incumbent on her. When she is encouraged to write about her experience by a poetry professor, her violent poem—in which she expresses a desire for revenge upon her rapist—is met with silence and dismay by her classmates. “You don’t really feel that way do you?” asks a male classmate (100). It becomes obvious that her narrative deviates in important ways from the scripts of guilt, silence, forgetting, and forgiveness often forced upon female victims of sexual violence.

Sebold’s encounter with police officials after her violent attack also underscores the fact that rape victims are expected to perform in particular ways if they wish to be believed. She offers a potent example of how the “truth/lie” binary that informs the scrutiny of women’s rape narratives operates in an investigative context. Discussing an encounter with the police officer with whom she filed her initial report, she writes:

“Listen,” he said. He began to fumble out an apology. He said he was sorry if he hadn’t seemed very nice back in May. “You get a lot of rape cases,” he said. most of them never get this far. I’m pulling for you.” [...] Fifteen years later, when doing research for this book, I would find sentences he had written in the original paperwork[...] “It is this writer’s opinion, after interview of the victim, that this case, as presented by the victim, is not completely factual [...] [I]t is suggested that this case be referred to the inactive file.” [...] For Lorenz, virgins were not a part of his world. He was skeptical of many of the things I said. Later, when the serology reports proved that what I had said was not a lie, that I had been a virgin, and that I was telling the truth, he could not respect me enough. (Sebold 144-145)

Lorenz’s initial response to the evidence of a college student who had just been brutally raped is skepticism. It is only when her “virginity” is “proven” that the officer is free to “respect” the young woman, who now inhabits the realm of “perfect victim.” Sebold’s own narrative tells the story of a woman who convinces those around her of the veracity of her experience by molding it

to the expectations of both the judicial system and a larger social insistence that only “good girls” make sympathetic rape victims².

Navigating such a hostile system effectively requires knowledge of its tropes. Sebold appears in court with the awareness that she “represented an eighteen year old virgin co-ed. I was dressed in red, white, and blue” (172). In order to be successful in court, the rape victim must embody her own powerlessness. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz writes that the term “body language is a not inappropriate description of the ways in which culturally specific grids of power, regulation, and force condition and provide techniques for the formation of particular bodies” (142). The bodies and comportment of rape victims are scrutinized in often unconscious ways by police officers and jurors. In Sebold’s case, she strives to balance the appearance and behavior she imagines conform to culturally sanctioned conceptions of femininity and virginity with the kind of certainty and assertiveness that tend to mark witnesses as “truthful” in the eyes of those who may not understand the ways that traumatic experience can affect normal storytelling habits.

Feminist scholar Jennifer Griffiths writes that testimony “offers a public enactment of memory, and clearly, the cultural context and content work collaboratively to shape testimony” (Griffiths 5). Sebold’s testimony is a virtuoso performance, one that springs from her certitude that any story that veers too far from cultural expectations of coherence and blamelessness will be perceived as suspect:

On television and in the movies, the lawyer often says to to the victim before they take the stand, ‘Just tell the truth.’ What it was left up to me to figure out was that if you do that and nothing else, you lose. So I told them I was stupid, that I shouldn’t have walked through the park. I said I intended to do something to warn girls at the university about the park. And I was so good, so willing to accept blame, that I hoped to be judged innocent by them. (Sebold 144)

² And this when the rape is a “violent” one at the hands of a stranger—as Brownmiller reminds us, “[d]ate rapes look especially bad for the victim in court, if they ever get to court, nor do they look good on paper” (257).

In the powerful words of Adrienne Rich, the rape victim is “guilty of the crime of having been forced.” To take the stand against one’s rapist is a difficult prospect; to be believed Sebold is compelled to parrot victim-blaming rhetoric, and is thus also forced to re-inscribe common myths about rape.

There is also intense pressure to present a cohesive tale where one may not exist: “[T]he story of a case must be told in such a way to satisfy a jury’s need for narrative coherence and fidelity” (Taslitz 15). The concept of “truth” in the courtroom setting is problematized for the rape victim because of “the intense linguistic trauma wrought by the present system and the immense failure of adversarial ‘truth-finding’ assumptions in rape cases” (Taslitz 120). Sebold writes about beginning her testimony: “It was a shaky start to the most important story I would ever tell. I began a sentence only to trail off and begin again. And this wasn’t because I was unaware exactly what happened in the tunnel. It was saying the words out loud, knowing that it was *how* I said them that could win or lose the case” (174). The nature of the legal system puts pressure on witnesses to perform perfectly, especially in the face of cross-examination. While the stereotypes that many people hold about rape and victims already put rape victims at a disadvantage during trial, Taslitz points out that “[p]atriarchal stories are not the whole problem [...] Another barrier stands in the way of a fair rape trial: the adversary system itself. That system is based on competition. It assumes that a battle between warring adversaries will yield truth” (Taslitz 9). The masculinist notion that truthful stories emerge from combative argument is a further impediment faced by rape victims who wish to be believed. In the context of an adversarial courtroom, victims lose control over the shape and presentation of their narratives. Sebold echoes this knowledge when she writes about the defense attorney in the case: “I

reentered the courtroom and took the stand. [...] In front of me was my enemy. He would do everything he could to make me look bad—stupid, confused, hysterical” (180). Indeed, “[a]we, intimidation, and adversariness; reliving rape trauma; and lawyer domination of language are a combination well designed to silence victim voices” (Taslitz 99). Sebold is understandably filled with relief when the court bailiff tells her after testifying that she is “the best rape witness I’ve ever seen on the stand” (198). This particular narrative performance was marked a “success” in the eyes of the legal system.

Yet Sebold’s desire, throughout her memoir, to place this story in a larger cultural context is marked. In the context of rape culture—signified for Sebold by a crude drawing in the elevator of her sister’s dormitory at Penn State of a fraternity gang-rape victim, as well as the later rape of her room-mate—Sebold’s story is one of many. In the interview published at the end of *Lucky*, she says that one of her motivations for writing the book was “the desire to just put it out there on the table, ‘This is what rape can look like.’ If people maybe know more about it, then the victim’s not as alienated” (5). Her particular narrative becomes not only a way for her to make sense of her own experience, but also to situate in a larger framework, and serve a larger goal. Memoirs of sexual assault become a different kind of evidence than courtroom testimony. They allow victims to regain control of their experience and explore the complex truths of rape without altering their narratives to fit seamlessly into culturally-sanctioned ones. Additionally, such texts shed light on the backdrop of sexual violence against which women live their lives, and serve as invitations to their audiences to begin to re-think rape and its effects simply by the act of listening. In the words of Susan Brison, “perhaps there is a psychological imperative, analogous to the legal imperative, to keep telling one’s story until it is heard” (110).

Brison's *Aftermath* also invites readers to grapple with the complexity of engaging with rape, both for the victim and those who hear her story. Like Sebold, Brison acknowledges the widespread pressure to be a "perfect" victim: "Since I was assaulted by a stranger, in a 'safe' place, and was so visibly injured when I encountered the police and medical personnel, I was [...] spared the insult, suffered by so many rape victims, of not being believed or of being said to have asked for the attack" (Brison 7). Yet she also points out that even in her case, her assailant claimed she had "provoked" the attack, and the police officer who took her report was quick to add the phrase "*Comme je suis sportive*" ("Since I am athletic") to explain why she was taking a walk on the morning of the rape (7). Simple physical desires such as the urge to exercise on a beautiful day must be appropriately subsumed into airtight narratives of acceptable female behavior in order to ensure the "innocence" of rape victims. Brison's injured body is further scrutinized by two male doctors: "For about an hour the two of them went over me like a piece of meat, calling out measurements of bruises and other assessments of damage, as if they were performing an autopsy" (8). Such dehumanizing treatment underscores the ways in which the very bodies of rape victims become public property, subject to analysis by those searching for evidence of the reality of the violent assault that victims are forced to describe multiple times to multiple audiences.

In her book *Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery*, Patricia Weaver Francisco intertwines the story of her own violent rape with fairy tales, the work of poets and trauma theorists, and other women's experiences with rape and anti-rape activism. Although her own experience with police investigators is largely positive, Francisco also explores the ways in which the legal and medical processes connected to rape cannot help but further de-humanize victims. She describes her own experience in the hospital after her assault: "[A] man comes in

with a camera, explaining that he needs to take photographs of my wounds for evidence. He is perfectly respectful and quiet about this, but it requires that he label each cut with a small white card lettered with my name and a number. As he props these cards next to my arm, neck, face, hand, and methodically photographs each, I feel myself disappearing” (44). Like Brison, her body literally becomes evidence as both it and her individual experience are subsumed into the larger “justice” system. She writes that “for soldiers returning from war, we have medals, monuments, and public ceremonies of memorial. With rape, the criminal justice system functions as the formal arena for recognition and restitution, and has largely failed at both” (58). Although the man who raped Francisco is never caught, she details her experience watching the trial of another serial rapist as a sort of proxy for the trial she never experiences herself. This particular trial, in which multiple victims were brutally attacked by a stranger while in their homes, leads to a “guilty” verdict.” Yet even when the legal system is successful in prosecuting rapists, Francisco implies, there may be other equally meaningful ways for victims to experience closure.

Like many other women who write about rape, Francisco explores the complex relationship between trauma and storytelling: “At first, I could not stop telling the story of the night a stranger raped me. I told it obsessively, sequentially, each detail rigidly in place” (10). While Brison focuses on the feeling of “unclenching” that comes after the “obsessive” story is told in a courtroom setting, Francisco also looks to the ways in which, absent of that particular context, victims of rape may relinquish the need for such rigid storytelling practices. Her own rape has multiple effects—it is ultimately responsible for her divorce, as well as her engagement with feminist critique of popular culture (117). Yet the realization that she finds most profound is that telling stories of rape can connect women in activist, as well as therapeutic, alliances. Francisco joins a feminist activist group in Minnesota who design an art project, entitled “Silent

Witnesses,” to draw attention to domestic violence. The project consists of “twenty-six life-size wooden figures representing the Minnesota women killed in domestic violence in 1990 [...] The genius of the Witnesses’ design is the fact that they take up space. It’s been said that this is art’s function, ‘to make the invisible visible’” (202). By using both their own bodies and the bodies of the women represented in the sculpture to purposefully occupy public space, the activists refuse to inhabit the realm of invisibility that has been designated for them. The presence of their bodies disrupts the notion that violence against women is something that can be repressed or hidden in the “private” sphere. Further, by connecting these figures with stories of the murdered women and participating in rallies for domestic violence legislation outside the state capital, Francisco and the activists she works with highlight the ways in which body, art, and community all play a role in enacting larger social change.

Such activism may, Francisco suggests, ultimately have an impact on what Brison calls the “widespread emotion illiteracy” (12) with regard to rape that compels people Brison is close with to either choose not to respond to her rape at all, or to offer clichés such as “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” As Brison points out in her introduction, “[t]he prevalent lack of empathy with trauma victims, which is reinforced by the cultural repression of memories of violence and victimization [...] results [...] not merely from ignorance or indifference, but also from an active fear of identifying with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own” (Brison x). This fear may partially explain the brutal doubts with which stories of rape are often countered. The “unthinkable” realization that any woman, at any time, might become the victim of a life-changing physical and psychological violation merely by virtue of being³ is a harder pill to swallow for some than the comforting notion that we

³ I focus on female rape victims here because, as Cahill points out, “[m]en’s and women’s bodies are accorded radically different social significance, subject to radically different discourses, and presented with radically different

can protect ourselves by behaving in a certain prescribed way—walking with a “buddy”; wearing less “revealing” clothes. The idea that we can never be fully in control of our bodies and destiny is a frightening prospect that may make many uncomfortable.

But it is precisely this discomfort we must inhabit if we are ever to make sense of the narratives of women who have been raped. Judith Butler’s query in *Precarious Lives*, “What is real? Whose lives are real? [...] What [...] is the relation between violence and those lives considered as ‘unreal’?” (Butler 33) is pivotal if we are to meaningfully challenge a paradigm in which the lived experience of many survivors is discounted because it does not fit a certain, culturally sanctioned narrative. Only by understanding our encounter with the story of *any* rape victim as an interaction between two subjects can we begin to undo the violence of questions such as “What was she wearing?” As Cathy Caruth reminds us, “[t]he problem of witnessing trauma [...] is learning the difficult task of speaking the trauma in the terms offered by the survivor” (Caruth 117). This is especially true when those terms do not fit our pre-existing schemas.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman focuses on the impact of trauma and the ways in which survivors can make sense of their experiences, putting special emphasis on the role of witness: “[T]he [rape] survivor needs the help of others who are willing to recognize that a traumatic event has occurred, to suspend their preconceived judgments, and simply bear witness to her tale” (Herman 68). While Herman focuses primarily on the psychotherapeutic relationship, many of her insights into the narrative and recovery processes following rape are instructive for multiple audiences, including the reader who wishes to ethically cultivate a relationship to a

demands [...] Class, race, sexual orientation: these axes also distinguish bodies and produce different bodily experiences; therefore, those axes produce differences in the experience of rape and the threat of rape. By understanding the role of the body in sexual and social politics, we will gain a clearer understanding of rape as a bodily assault that is a disproportionate threat to women” (48-49)

narrative born from the violation of an embodied subject. Although it would be both irresponsible and philosophically suspect to suggest any sort of one to one correspondence between reader and therapist (or, as I will discuss later, teacher), there is nonetheless a way in which the knowledges of these distinct but connected positions can inform each other. In contrast to the recurring character of the police investigator invoked by Sebold in *Lucky*, Herman cites that “the therapist has to remember that she is not a fact-finder and that the reconstruction of the trauma story is not a criminal investigation. Her role is to be an open-minded, compassionate witness, not a detective” (Herman 180). Adopting a similar position when we encounter rape narratives in the public sphere functions not only as an act of empathy, but an act with deep political resonance in a culture where, as I have indicated earlier, the blaming and doubt of rape victims has become something of a national pastime.

Did He Have a Gun?: L’Affaire DSK and Rape Discourse in the Public Sphere

On May 14, 2011, Nassifatou Diallo, a member of the housekeeping staff at Manhattan’s Sofitel Hotel, reported a sexual assault by International Monetary Fund head Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Almost immediately, her account was called into question in print by men such as prominent French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy and conservative economist Ben Stein, who wrote: “The prosecutors say that Mr. Strauss-Kahn ‘forced’ the complainant to have oral and other sex with him. How? Did he have a gun? Did he have a knife? [...] [I]f he was so intimidating, why did she immediately feel un-intimidated enough to alert the authorities as to her story?”

In her seminal text *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller asserts that there is “a provable bias by police and juries against the word of the female victim [...] particularly the word of a

black female victim” (Brownmiller 175). In the case of Diallo, this doubt was compounded by her position as an immigrant, the rumors of news outlets like the *New York Post* (which ran an unsubstantiated story calling Diallo a “hooker”), and the fact that her alleged assailant was a powerful man. After reports of Diallo’s immigration status and connection with an incarcerated man were released, there was a noticeable shift in the way the public received and consumed her story. Rather than being (if it ever was) a rape narrative, the alleged attack became a moving target for a variety of competing voices invested in exposing “class warfare” or a “broken immigration system”; a warning tale for powerful men about vindictive, economically disadvantaged women who will attempt to ruin their careers by crying sexual assault. Although, as Judith Herman points out in *Trauma and Recovery*, “[i]n the course of reconstruction, the story [of the survivor of rape] may change as missing pieces are recovered” (180), shifts in Diallo’s chronology of events are attributed not to trauma, but to the fact that she is a “liar.” (The fact that Strauss-Kahn’s own story had also morphed quite frequently did not seem to matter.)

We, the “public,” received Diallo’s account through a myriad of competing prisms as articles with titles such as “Strauss-Kahn's accuser: Schemer or immigrant survivor?” (Trotta) proliferated. While high profile rape cases like these may indeed speak to larger concerns about economic inequality or differences in judicial processes, what I found myself longing for amidst the swirl of metaphors and accusations were accounts of the irreducible singularity of the victim’s experience. Presented to us through various lenses fashioned by competing desires, Diallo is emptied of identity by both detractors and “supporters.” Although his intent was different than that of Lévy and Stein, for example, comedian Jon Stewart engaged in a similar rhetorical erasure of Diallo’s individuality by referring to Diallo as “an African” in his attempt to

link her interaction with Strauss-Kahn to the IMF's economic dealings in third world countries.

Only by putting overlapping narratives—the narrative of the victim against the larger backdrop of the climate in which such violation occurs—in dialogue with one another can we ever hope to come to an understanding of the complex politics surrounding rape and its telling. While there are multiple narratives for public consumption in this particular case—attractive stories of power, wealth, and truth-telling, for example—there are also the (non-metaphorical) narratives told by Diallo herself. The import of fostering widespread societal empathy for victims of sexual assault begins with the realization that their stories must be heard within the framework of individualized, embodied experience. In the words of Ann Cahill, we need to ask ourselves, “Who are the beings being raped?” (49).

Responding to Rape Narratives

In her book *Right Wing Woman*, Andrea Dworkin writes:

The accounts of rape [...] and the other commonplaces of female experience that are excavated from the past or given by contemporary survivors should leave the heart seared, the mind in anguish, the conscience in upheaval. But they do not. No matter how often these stories are told, with whatever clarity or eloquence, bitterness or sorrow, they might as well have been whispered in wind or written in sand: they disappear, as if they were nothing. (20)

We are daily bombarded with stories of rape, often told from the victim-doubting position I critique earlier. The prevalence of this position with regard to rape victims easily evidences the frustrating truth of Dworkin's realization: most narratives of rape indeed “disappear,” both from the minds of their readers and culture at large. I use Adrienne Rich's poem “Rape” every semester with my writing students to talk about poetry and politics. The poem—which puts the reader in the position of a rape victim, “the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs”—is a powerful testament to the experience of rape victims confronted by a hostile system. The police

officer in the poem “knows, or thinks he knows, how much you imagined;/ he knows, or thinks he knows, what you secretly wanted.” The poem ends with the haunting question: “if, in the sickening light of the precinct,/ your details sound like a portrait of your confessor,/ will you swallow, will you deny them, will you lie your way home?”

While many of my female students (and some male students) recognize that the poem is about the continued violation of female rape victims in a system that is automatically suspicious of their motives and doubtful of their narratives, I am consistently surprised by a small but angry minority of male students who are incredibly resistant to this reading. The first semester we read this poem in class, one student (after a vibrant discussion in which a student who had herself been raped connected the poem to her own experience) blurted out, “I wish women would just stop talking about rape already.” Just this past semester, a student dismissively commented that the speaker of the poem is “hysterical” and “hates all men.” Another very angrily defended the cop in the poem as “just doing his job.” Even after we then analyzed the specific language and imagery Rich uses to describe the cop, he maintained this position.

I actually shouldn't be surprised by these reactions; they merely echo very popular cultural stereotypes about rape and its victims, and evidence an anxious desire on behalf of some men to defend their sex class against what they perceive as feminist “paranoia” about rape. The “Not all men are rapists!” defense is commonly used in response to systematic feminist analysis of patriarchy such as Brownmiller's or Dworkin's. As Schweickart and Flynn remind us, “the reader is a producer of meaning; what one reads out of a text is always a function of the prior experiences; ideological commitments; interpretive strategies; and cognitive, moral, psychological and political interests that one brings to the reading” (Schweickart and Flynn 2). Hence the wide spectrum of reactions, from empathetic recognition, to disbelief, to anger, to

venomous attack, with which rape narratives are met. However, while “[i]t may be true that readers can read in various ways, [...] are all these ways equally valid, valuable, or acceptable?” (Schweickart and Flynn 3). Few instances evidence more emphatically that the answer to this question must be an insistent “no” if we truly believe that reading practices have a shaping role in transforming culture. Violent readings that purport to judge whether a rape survivor has “lied” abdicate the reader of the responsibility to engage with the other as a subject bearing witness to her own experience. Schaffer and Smith quote Hesford and Kozol, who write that:

Personal testimony, understood and judged unproblematically as evidentiary, turns the speaker into a victim and molds his or her story into a case history, a piece of positivist evidence [...] [T]he reduction of testimony of remembered experience to evidence judged either as purely factual or mendacious, obscures the ways in which narratives of suffering offer bits of evidence that cannot easily be reduced to evidence. (37)

Although widely divergent in form and purpose, any account of rape—from literary memoirs to courtroom testimony—can be experienced as a “difficult” text, one in which gaps and elisions signify. As Herman notes, in “the course of reconstruction, the story [of the survivor of rape] may change as missing pieces are recovered. This is particularly true in situations where the patient has experienced significant gaps in memory. Thus, both patient and therapist must accept the fact that they do not have complete knowledge, and they must learn to live with ambiguity” (Herman 180). The willingness to read from and into a space that may constantly revise and re-write itself is a necessary challenge for those who seek to meaningfully engage with accounts of rape.

As Suzette Henke reminds us, “[i]t seems likely that marginalized individuals, both male and female, tend more frequently to invoke subversive and subvocal iterations to re-member the fragmented subject and regain an enabling sense of psychic coherence” (Henke xix). We may see

this insight evidenced more explicitly in memoir that addresses sexual assault—in Alexander’s *Fault Lines*, for instance, which interrogates the palimpsestic nature of knowledge and narrative with regard to repressed memories of sexual assault, and in Brison’s *Aftermath*, which deliberately thwarts any attempt at mastery. Yet it is not only such literary texts that may elicit valuable insights into cultural response to rape narratives—from student responses to peer-authored work to public comments on newspaper articles, reactions to accounts of rape vary as dramatically as the accounts themselves. Reader-response theory can offer us a valuable framework to begin to understand some of these divergent reactions: “By bringing their unique backgrounds and values to the words on the page, readers actualize the text into a meaningful work that in turn stimulates response. Meaning, therefore, should be attributed not to the text or reader but to the dynamic transaction between the two” (Schweickart and Flynn 4). All readings are products of the interactions between personal experience and larger cultural scripts. These readings may reinforce prevailing paradigms, or disrupt them. There is a constant loop in which individual readings of particular narratives and general cultural narratives feed into each other; each may be altered in response to such an exchange. My interest here is in how a multiplicity of ethical individual readings may have the potential to ultimately intervene in the mainstream response to rape, in which doubt and repression are the predominant mechanisms for dealing with such an “unspeakable” event.

By approaching a trauma-informed text from a standpoint of openness and reciprocity, and engaging with it on its own terms, we privilege practices that veer away from judicially-based reading models. “Personal narratives and witnessing spur critical awareness of cultural difference and initiate possibilities for intersubjective exchange beyond the certainties of a secure sense of selfhood” (Schaffer and Smith 233). And because “[t]he meaning of a text is not the

product of isolated readers but the collaborative product of a community of readers” (Schweickart and Flynn 6), it thus becomes possible to collectively re-write mainstream narratives of rape by encouraging reading practices—in our texts, in our classrooms, and in our courtrooms—that privilege ethical interaction with the experiences of another, no matter their form. Taslitz maintains that “the muting and distortion of women’s and minorities’ stories at trials work to support group subordination. The framing of narrative, therefore, carries profoundly political implications” (Taslitz 148). He thus puts an onus on the legal system “to unsettle cultural narratives” by educating jurors about the (often counter-intuitive) sociology of rape: “The goal would be to open jurors’ minds to plausible alternative tales to the dominant ones” (Taslitz 132). The presentation of counter-narratives that take into account the nature of trauma and the demographics of rape can lead audiences (here, the audience of the jury, whose response to rape narratives has immediate and immensely important consequences) to re-think their point of entry into stories of rape. “When a jury judges an act ‘consensual,’ it [...] creates an interpretive truth based on its notions of worthy, coherent narratives and its moral judgment about the gendered meaning to be ascribed to the man’s and woman’s social behavior” (Taslitz 141). Providing juries with alternate lenses to approach testimony that does not fit into the lenses they have already acquired may, Taslitz suggests, encourage more comprehensive and ethical readings.

As Sebold and Brison attest, however, while successful prosecution of rape is important, it is not enough to halt the traumatic aftermath experienced by victims of sexual assault. Many victims turn to either therapy or therapeutic writing in the wake of rape. While the act of piecing together a story of rape may be necessary, Judith Herman stresses that “[b]y itself, reconstructing the trauma does not address the social or relational dimension of the traumatic experience”

(Herman 183). In *I and Thou* Martin Buber delineates two kinds of relationships: *I-It* and *I-Thou*.

I-It relationships are relationships between subject and object, characterized by separateness. *I-*

Thou relationships are relationships between mutual subjects, characterized by reciprocity and recognition. The world of *It*:

move[s] man to look on the world of *It* as the world in which he has to live, and in which it is comfortable to live, as the world, indeed, which offers him all manner of incitements and excitements, activity and knowledge. In this chronicle of solid benefits the moments of the *Thou* appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-trying context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security (34).

Only when we inhabit this space of “shattered security” can we truly enter into a framework where recognition of the other, and her irreducible experience, becomes not only a possible act, but a necessary and desirable one. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry engages with the vocabularies and processes that surround acts of war, torture, and other moments (such as rape) where the human body is “unmade.” Scarry offers a framework that lends itself to the acts of reading/writing trauma:

To witness a moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself. (6)

In its present, pain is resistant to language (4). Yet when this pain is spoken, it may have transformative effects not only on the speaker, but on the listener, who is invited to share in the unimaginable made imaginable. For those who choose to tell their stories of violation even in the face of overwhelming hostility and doubt, the presence of an audience committed to engaging

with such utterances from a non-defensive position can be helpful in fostering the kind of relationship envisioned by Buber.

Suzette Henke argues that the act of writing itself can have beneficial effects for trauma survivors, who can simulate the relationship between writer/witness through the construction of an imagined, proxy audience: “The act of life-writing serves as its own testimony and, in so doing, carries through the work of reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies and of effective agency in the world” (Henke xix). Henke’s argument, which I will return to in my next chapter, is compelling, and I don’t mean to suggest that a survivor’s narrative gains its value solely from an empathetic reception. However, considering the fact that “[l]ife narratives have become salable properties in today’s markets” (Schaffer and Smith 23), and that stories of sexual violence continue proliferate, it seems more important than ever that there is an audience that is attuned to the particular demands of trauma-based text:

Personal narratives expand audiences of people around the globe educated about human rights abuses. As they reach larger and larger audiences, they can affect readers and prompt acts of engagement with persons having experienced rights abuses. Within the context of life narrating, claims take on a human dimension, calling for the listener/reader to become more self-reflexive more informed, more active [...] While such narrative acts and readings are not a sufficient ground for social change, they are a necessary ground. (Schaffer and Smith 226)

The transformation of rape culture is indeed deeply connected to narrative and reading practices, but, as Schaffer and Smith hint, “translating” the embodied experience of sexual assault into language does not, in and of itself, “solve” the complex and lasting results of such violence for an individual or a culture:

Sexual violence, for everything that it is, is definitely not a problem of psychological recovery, narrative transaction, social hierarchy, historical amnesia, patriarchal oppression, or cultural rhetoric. It is a problem of understanding the

lived relations among all of these complex horizons. Of course, sexual violence is also a problem of the relations between and among people, a problem customarily referred to as politics. That these relations are structured by a discourse, a way of speaking about and representing human horrors, passions, and abuses cannot be contested. But this can only be a start, since language—like culture—inevitably excludes and erases what does not fit. (Heller 348)

Heller's insight into the limits of language is a key realization, and one I will return to later, but I want to end here by insisting that the continued construction—and the ethical reception—of rape narratives is of overwhelming import. These acts can not only help victims of violence regain control of their own experience, but are valuable in expanding narrowly conceived social constructions of what rape victims “are like.” The relentless cultural transmission of all stories of sexual assault—partial, fragmented, “imperfect” as they may be—is one way to confront the reality of rape and shape our knowledge of its reality. Each story of rape varies in its particulars; there is no one narrative that can contain these explosive and singular moments of disruption. Yet, placed beside each other, these experiences come to meaning in a larger societal narrative in which rape has always been a shaping factor, and function as a reminder of the complex power associated with not only the telling, but the hearing, of such stories.

Chapter Three

My Words Would Have Murdered: De-Oedipalizing Analysis

[I]t would be a good thing to have a second method of arriving at the aetiology of hysteria, one in which we should feel less dependent on the assertions of the patients themselves.

—Sigmund Freud

In her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry writes that “whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). Precise language is not always an available vehicle for those who experience trauma. One of the key aspects of trauma is that it surfaces “not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom” (Herman 1). Yet as Meena Alexander writes in *Poetics of Dislocation*, “what is unspoken, even unspeakable must be born into language” (93). While “the challenge of finding language that is true to traumatic experience is [...] a daunting one” (Brison xi), it is also often a necessary step for the victim of trauma to regain control of her own body and experiences. In addition, making public the hidden stories of violation that can prop up damaging and fatalistic narratives about the psychology of women—narratives such as “the natural sexual passivity of women explains their being more inclined to hysteria” (Freud 96)—has the potential to productively disrupt such narratives and lead to cultural transformation on a larger scale.

In his *Clinical Diary*, Freud’s former pupil Sandor Ferenczi defines trauma as a “reaction to an ‘unbearable’ external or internal stimulus in an autoplasic manner (modifying the self) instead of an alloplastic manner (modifying the stimulus)” (181). The object of analysis is to reconstitute a self that “recalls” the traumatic event and thus ends its subconscious repetition

(182). Unlike Freud’s model of analysis, which stresses the objectivity of the analyst⁴, Ferenczi’s therapeutic model is insistently dialogic. The process of psychic reparation demands the joint arrival of analysand and analyst at the moment of trauma, and it is only through the active participation of the analyst as a caring witness that the psyche of the analysand can be “repaired” (182)

Although Ferenczi’s work offers multiple and rich insights for those interested in trauma theory and literature, his name has never had anywhere near the cachet of Freud or Lacan, seldom popping up in literary journals or anthologized collections. In his book *Sandor Ferenczi: The Psychotherapist of Tenderness and Passion*, Arnold Rachman states that “it is now a matter of record that Ferenczi’s clinical work and theoretical ideas were suppressed, censored, and removed from mainstream psychoanalysis” (xv), particularly by Freud and Jones. In recent years, a number of analysts, including Rachman, have excavated this history and brought to light the meaningful contributions Ferenczi has made to the field of psychoanalysis—particularly his privileging of the qualities of empathy and flexibility, as well as his significant insights into the causes, effects, and treatment of trauma. By repressing Ferenczi’s work on trauma, the psychoanalytic establishment also largely succeeded in repressing its own investment in keeping the widespread phenomenon of childhood sexual assault hidden. Revisiting the work of Ferenczi may thus be especially meaningful for scholars who wish to explore questions of trauma, textuality, and relationality in a larger cultural context of systematic violence without relying solely on oedipal paradigms that enact such repressive strategies.

⁴ In his “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis,” Freud writes: “I cannot advise my colleagues too urgently to model themselves during psycho-analytic treatment on the surgeon, who puts aside all his feelings, even his human sympathy, and concentrates his mental forces on the single aim of performing the operation as skillfully as possible” (359).

Additionally, while Ferenczi's work offers a compelling alternative to strictly Freudian ways of understanding, it also complicates the popular myth of some sort of one to one correspondence between "writing" and "healing." While the work of therapists and writers from Judith Herman to Maxine Hong Kingston indeed suggests powerful links between storytelling and psychological recovery, these links are more complex and nuanced than some of the simplified, mainstream discourse allows⁵. It becomes too easy to imagine the act of re-constituting a self unmade by trauma through the simple construction of a cohesive narrative. In mainstream narratives of trauma (as well as popular "self help" literature) we may often encounter a traditional oedipal paradigm that consists of: 1.) a state of unity; 2.) disruption through trauma; 3.) a triumphant reconstitution through language; 4.) a stronger being, made powerful by successfully overcoming the (potentially but not ultimately) destructive encounter. Such a script obviously calls to mind the "trauma and redemption" plot I question earlier. It can also lead to the kind of victim-blaming rhetoric popular in the "courtroom" approach that seeks to dismantle the narratives of women whose processes of disclosure/transformation do not take such a linear path. By choosing to depart from this model, both writers and readers of woman-authored work that eschews linear narrative—especially work centered on sexual or other trauma—can gain access to new and valuable insights into trauma and its re-construction.

Ferenczi's *Clinical Diary* connects the idea of re-vision with psychic survival in particularly interesting ways. In it, Ferenczi "justifies the importance he assigns to trauma and develops a theory of trauma—its effects and treatment" (Dupont xvii). He argues that "[A]n abreaction of quantities of the trauma is not enough; the situation must be different from the actual traumatic one in order to make possible a different, favorable outcome. The most essential

⁵ One of the first Google hits that comes up for "writing and healing", for example, is a for-profit on-line "course" entitled "Self Healing Expressions" that vaguely promises readers, "From the stresses of unemployment to cancer, studies reveal... writing heals."

aspect of the altered repetition is the relinquishing of one's own rigid authority and the hostility hidden in it" (Ferenczi 108). Like Susan Brison, Ferenczi insists on the necessity of essentially re-writing the moment of trauma in order to make sense of it. He also designates a special role for the witness of the traumatic event:

One would think that the perpetual repetition in analysis of the traumatic experience, stressing first one factor and then another, would in the end result in a mosaic-like reconstruction of the whole picture. This does in fact happen, but only with a feeling of speculative reconstruction and not with the firm conviction that the events were real. 'Something' more is required to transform the intellectual coherence of the possible or probable into a more solid cohesion of a necessary or even obvious reality. (Ferenczi 24)

That "something more," for Ferenczi, is the presence of a compassionate listener who can assure the victim of the reality of her experience.

My purpose in this chapter is to explore some of the possibilities that adopting a non-oedipal analytic mindset can have when engaging with trauma-based narrative. I examine the significant ways in which Ferenczi re-writes the Freudian analytic paradigm to introduce the importance of factors such as trust, compassion, and belief. I re-visit some of the texts I have engaged with earlier to posit that through the use of strategies such as fragmentation and absence, contemporary writers such as Meena Alexander, Theresa Cha, and Maxine Hong Kingston demand a reader who is invested in co-creating multiple selves and stories that make sense of trauma in diverse ways. By entering into dialogue with such work, we not only gain key insight into the nature of trauma and its inscription, but also take part in the kind of flexible, dialogic witnessing process called for by not only Ferenczi, but the authors of the texts themselves.

Sandor Ferenczi and Reparative Reading

[P]aranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known.

—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notices that the kinds of critical habits associated with a “hermeneutics of suspicion” have become “nearly synonymous with criticism itself” (124). She points out that “to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant” (126). She also reminds us that this codified paranoia is not inevitable—it is, as she states, merely “a possibility among other possibilities” (125).

Sedgwick’s own interest in “reparative reading practices”—practices that involve a “hermeneutics of recovery of meaning” (125); that “extract sustenance from the objects of a culture” (151)—is instructive. While she ironically notes Freud’s own admission that “the delusions of paranoiacs have an unpalatable, external similarity and internal kinship to the systems of our philosophers” (125), her commitment to opening spaces for pleasure and amelioration speak back to this stance, paving the way for reparative readings that nourish and sustain.

One of the hallmarks of Freudian analysis is its insistence on what Freud, in his “Autobiographical Study,” calls “candor” (25). Any reticence on the part of the analysand is viewed as “resistance.” In his notes on the “Rat Man,” for instance, he writes: “Violent struggle, bad day. Resistance, because I requested him yesterday to bring a photograph of the lady with him—i.e. to give up his reticence about her. Conflict as to whether he should abandon the treatment or surrender his secrets” (312). In his paper entitled “On Beginning the Treatment,” he advises fellow analysts that “one must mistrust all prospective patients who want to make a delay

before beginning their treatment” (365). In perhaps his most well-known skeptical stance, Freud, unable to cope with the sheer number of his patients who had been victims of childhood sexual assault, ultimately abandoned his seduction theory, positing instead that his patients’ hysteria had its roots in fantasy.

This move, in which (predominantly) women’s accounts of childhood sexual abuse were discounted, was famously contested by feminist research of the 1970s and 80s (Herman 30). However, it was also disputed much earlier, by one of Freud’s own pupils. In his essay “Ferenczi and Sexuality,” Rachman points out that “Ferenczi challenged the traditional notion, found both in Freudian psychoanalysis and in the attitudes of the lay public, that a report of sexual abuse is the fantasy of the child and therefore is unreliable” (90). In his *Clinical Diary*, Ferenczi notes that “such incidents [of sexual abuse] are much more frequent than one would imagine” (189). Ferenczi views the reality and frequency of such incidents as a basis for revising a Freudian understanding of infantile sexuality. He questions the inevitability of concepts such as the “Oedipus complex”, for example: “Experiences regarding the traumatic effect of genital attacks by adults on small children oblige me to modify the analytic view of infantile sexuality that has prevailed up to now [...] one has to ask oneself how much [...] of the Oedipus complex is really inherited and how much is passed on by tradition” (Ferenczi 79). Ferenczi’s awareness of the cultural origins of such complexes is hugely significant—unlike “heredity,” societal patterns such as the wide-scale abuse of children and the rape of women have the potential to be transformed through action that springs from an awareness of these (often hidden) stories⁶.

Ferenczi consistently adopted a stance of belief towards his patients, maintaining that he did “not exclude the possibility that delusional productions contain more objective reality than

⁶ In light of this insight, it’s interesting to note that the famous Anna O., “the mute hysteric who had invented the ‘talking cure’ found her voice, and her sanity” not through her therapy with Breuer and Freud, but in “the women’s liberation movement” (Herman 19).

we have assumed until now. From the very beginning I was inclined to think that the hallucinations of the insane [...] are not imaginings but real perceptions” (58). Skepticism, Freud’s *de facto* mode, is replaced by a willingness to recognize the possibility of truth in a patient’s narrative, especially with regard to childhood sexual violence. This act of listening is particularly important because:

In most cases of infantile trauma, the [...] usual cure is repression: ‘it’s nothing at all’; ‘nothing has happened’; ‘don’t think about it’ [...] Such things are simply hidden in a deadly silence; the child’s faint references are ignored or even rejected as incongruous, with the unanimous concurrence of those around him, and with such consistency that the child has to give up and cannot maintain his own judgment. (Ferenczi 25)

Ferenczi’s poignant realization of the traumatizing effects a response of silence and disbelief can have in the face of an abuse narrative prefigures the work of feminist therapists like Judith Herman in powerful ways. As Meena Alexander reminds us in “Silenced Writer,” a section of *The Poetics of Dislocation*, “Without silence the words we treasure, the words we measure our lives by, could not appear. But *silenced* is different” (95).

Ferenczi’s ability to listen to, trust, and empathize with his patients was famous—and famously criticized by Freud. As Freud’s “Recommendations” make explicit, the traditional analytic paradigm calls for an “opaque” analyst who shows his patients “nothing but what is shown to him” (361). In his compassionate re-writing of this wisdom, Ferenczi stresses the role of analyst as witness as early as 1932, remarking on the re-traumatization that can occur when the victim of trauma is met with “stupid and boring analytical questions” rather than genuine empathy, from her analyst: “In therapy Ferenczi tried to revive the traumatic sequence, and find a new resolution by offering what had previously not been offered: a trustful atmosphere” (Haynal 65). There’s no telling the damage that Freud did to his patients by essentially

disbelieving their experiences. Ferenczi hypothesizes that the reason for this disbelief sprung from the fact that “[s]ince making this discovery [that “hysterics lie”] Freud no longer loves his patients. He has returned to the love of his well-ordered and cultivated superego [...] Since this shock, this disillusionment, there is much less talk of trauma, the constitution now begins to play the principal role. Of course this involves a certain amount of fatalism” (Ferenczi 93).

Traumatized by the (embarrassing) “betrayal” Freud experienced at the hands of his female patients, he sought refuge by adopting a stance of coldness and skepticism.

Ferenczi was unable to come to terms with the fact that so much of Freudian analysis was invested in replicating the sins of the father, thus repeating the trauma. He instead urged analysts to “take really seriously the role one assumes, of the benevolent and helpful observer, that is, actually to transport oneself with the patient into that period of the past (a practice Freud reproached me for, as being not permissible), with the result that we ourselves and the patient believe in its reality” (Ferenczi 24). When such transportation does not occur, “the patient prefers to doubt his own judgment rather than believe in our coldness, our lack of intelligence, or in simpler terms, our stupidity and nastiness” (Ferenczi 25). (This process is labeled by some contemporary feminists as “gaslighting.”) Ferenczi notes that “patients cannot believe that an event really took place [...] if the analyst, as the sole witness of events, persists in his cool, unemotional, and, as patients are fond of stating, purely intellectual attitude, while the events are of a kind that must evoke, in anyone present, emotions of revulsion, anxiety, terror, vengeance, grief, and urge to render immediate help” (Ferenczi 24). Precise interpretation is not enough. “My words would have murdered,” he realizes at one point; “I would have injected the irritating, exciting poison, I would have created the anticipation of an orgasm, and then I would obtain the

displacement of the love-object” (54). Analysis cannot be accomplished by “intellectual means alone” (54).

Both Ferenczi and his student Michael Balint attempted to create a sort of “holding environment” in the analytic setting, providing a space where they and their patients could work together to produce meaning. In *The Basic Fault*, Balint uses metaphors of the fetus in the womb and the fish in the sea to invoke the concept of a “harmonious mix-up” in which there are “no sharp boundaries”; “environment and individual penetrate into each other” (Balint 67). Balint conceptualizes the analytic setting as, ideally, this kind of pre-traumatic environment. Ferenczi’s metaphors are different, but his insistence on the dialogic nature of analysis—patient and analyst must work together in a non-hierarchical relationship—is continually striking. When a patient’s trauma is recalled in Ferenczian therapy, the analyst must offer “encouragement” and “a flood of healing compassion” (Ferenczi 15). Both Ferenczi and Balint write about the importance of face-to-face contact with the patient, and at times of holding a patient’s hand during therapy. The contact between analyst and analysand cannot be superficial if healing is to take place. For Ferenczi and Balint, witnessing is active work. As Elaine Scarry points out, “For the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that ‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as having certainty,’ while for the other person it is so elusive that ‘hearing about pain’ may exist as the primary model of what it is ‘to have doubt’” (Scarry 4). The work of Ferenczi evidences a powerful attempt to move beyond that space of doubt and into the reality of another’s pain.

Since “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (Herman 1), the work of writing (as well as reading) trauma is both difficult and necessary. The concept of the witness has become an integral one for writers, theorists, and scholars who work with

traumatic knowledge in any form. The work of contemporary women memoirists who challenge the traditional biases in Freudian ways of reading, knowing, and responding provide us with a particularly insightful window into some of the many possibilities that lie beyond the paradigm of linear narrative, doubt, and authoritative interpretation.

The Wound I Could Not Carry in Memory: Writing Trauma

In *Fault Lines*, Meena Alexander writes, “What I have learned to remember is the wound I could not carry in memory. I must write it out if I am to go on living [...] I turn to flashes of remembrance, bits and pieces of memory, backlit, given at high intensity, so I can piece my life together again” (237). While Judith Dupont writes that “[o]nly therapeutic intervention from the outside can [...] break the isolation” of the trauma victim (xix), Suzanne Henke makes a powerful case for the connection between the analytic setting and the act of self-writing, drawing a parallel between the object of psychoanalysis and that of “scriptotherapy”—both, she argues, transform the “frozen imagery” associated with trauma into a contextualized narrative. Henke maintains that life-writing can “effectively mimic the scene of psychoanalysis,” providing “a therapeutic alternative” for trauma survivors (xii). She questions the necessity of the literal presence of an analyst, using the work of Shoshana Felman to posit that “a surrogate transference process can take place through the scene of writing that allows its author to envisage a sympathetic audience” (xii).

As Ferenczi notes in his *Clinical Diary*, “a neoformation of the self is impossible without the previous destruction, either partial or total, or dissolution of the former self. A new ego cannot be formed directly from the previous ego, but from *fragments*” (181). It’s no coincidence that writers like Alexander and Cha stress the importance of the fragment in their work. In

Dictee, for example, Cha writes of “decapitated forms [...] Would-be said remnant, memory. But the remnant is the whole” (38). By re-establishing the links between the present and the past, Cha suggests, the past may *become* present. This significantly echoes the work of Ferenczi, who sought to re-call the moment of his patients’ traumas so that they might be re-experienced (and repaired) in the present. The fact that *Dictee* is presented to its audience in a fractured state also evokes the need of a witness who can sift through the fragments in order to produce a reading that makes meaning of the memories encoded in the text.

For Cha, “Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say” (3). Given this, we may wonder, “Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound” (33). Cha’s reasons for speaking evoke those of Ferenczi’s analysands, who wish to halt the subconscious repetition of their traumas. “To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion” (33). Remembering again becomes a necessary act, a re-construction of not only self, but of history. The hope of recollection is the end of repetition. Trauma, until it is named, exists in the present, cannot become memory. Trauma “is burned into your ever-present memory. Memory less. Because it is not in the past. It cannot be...It burns” (45).

If one accepts that the ultimate significance of the analytic process lies in the fact that it is a mutual endeavor, it begins to make sense that any (re)construction of self must be a dialogic act—whether literally, as in the case of Ferenczi’s patients, or figuratively, through the sort of imaginative process Henke envisions in her examination of women who use writing as “a different kind of therapeutic tool” (141). Cha herself speaks of textual creation as a process of formation requiring more than one: “You write. You write you speak voices hidden

masked...From one mouth to another, from one reading to the next the words are realized in their full meaning” (48). Through multiple, shared readings, words come to mean more fully; meaning halts pain, constructs beginnings. The invention of self that occurs within the text is, significantly, a process enacted when “you, as viewer and guest, enter the house. It is you who are entering to see her. Her portrait is seen through her things, that are hers” (Cha 100). The construction of self and text intertwine, and require the presence of a witness. In *Dictée*, pieced together from fragments of selves and the recollection of hidden memories, new and remembered identities emerge: “Dead words. Dead tongue. From disuse. Buried in Time’s memory. Unemployed. Unspoken. History. Past. Let the one who is disease...Restore memory” (133). In the recitation of the forgotten is the power to “restore” the memory that history has sought to erase.

In the coda to *Fault Lines*, entitled “Book of Childhood,” Meena Alexander explores the trauma hidden beneath the surface of her original memoir, reconstructing both self and narrative from memories that surface through the body: “It began with a New York summer when I could not breathe properly [...] In the hidden places of my body a cold sweat broke out” (238). Before the past may become present through language, it announces itself in altered form: “Pain afflicted my back. My torso was utterly numb. I had always believed in the truth of the body. What was my own body telling me now?” (240). While the atomization of self that occurs as the result of trauma serves, as Ferenczi points out, a protective function, it also calls into question a stable narrative where body, identity, and history cohere: “Such phantasmic violence is hard to put into words. It’s like watching a horror show in which the ‘I’ is an unwilling participant” (Alexander 238). The buried past surfaces in fragments: “What I saw came to me as if flashes of lightning were breaking into the darkness” (Alexander 239).

As memories of the sexual abuse Alexander suffered at the hands of her maternal grandfather resurge, they force her to revise the very foundation of her self-narrative: “I was tormented by the feeling that I had written a memoir that was not true” (241). The underlying structure of experience is disrupted by traumatic knowledge: “What foundations did my house stand on? What sort of architect was I if the lowest beams were shredded?” (Alexander 241). As both Alexander and Brison remind us, trauma does not merely interrupt a cohesive narrative; it compels us to recognize that “there was never a coherent self (or story) there to begin with” (Brison 116). Self-writing is inherently a provisional act. It is also necessary to survival. Ferenczi himself asks at one point: “Must I (if I can) create a new basis for my personality, if I have to abandon as false and untrustworthy the one I have had up to now? Is the choice here between dying and ‘rearranging’ myself?” (Ferenczi qtd in Dupont i). Alexander’s coda bears witness to both the necessity and the difficulty of the sort of “rearrangement” envisioned by Ferenczi, and to the construction of narratives that offer sustenance, but can also be continually revised.

Alexander writes that: “To be haunted by the illegible is the fate of those who have passed through fire and children who have been hurt beyond visible measure” (317). Ferenczi, exploring the lasting traumatic effects of childhood sexual abuse, hypothesizes that “[t]he traumatic aloneness, the father’s prohibition and his will to prohibit, the mother’s deafness and blindness, that is what really renders the attach traumatic, that is, causing the psyche to crack” (Ferenczi 193). This realization is echoed in Alexander’s coda: “My mother, it seemed to me as I read my book again, was constantly averting her eyes, looking elsewhere, not seeing, not able to see” (241). Both Ferenczi and Henke point to the re-constitutive power of the act of re-imagining and revising trauma in the presence of a (real or constructed) witness. Alexander writes: “My father was the one person I could have told. But by 1997, when bits and pieces of my childhood

were restored to me, my father [...] was really dying” (241). She thus imagines telling her father—“He would believe me instantly. He would feel the rage I still could not trust myself to feel [...] He would yell at my maternal grandfather. Appa would carry me away from that house, drag my mother away too, swear at Ilya, ‘We will never enter this house again’” (241). Alexander’s father becomes the witness who can halt the recurring story of violation and forgetting by believing and responding in an appropriate way.

The response to bodily violation may necessitate additional, somatic responses as well. “Once hearing the panic in my voice, [my therapist] asked me what had comforted me when I was a child. Holding on to trees, I told her” (Alexander 240). After her therapist urges her to do just that, Alexander finds a lilac tree in Fort Tryon Park: “I stood there, a grown woman, and held tight to the tree. I could feel my flesh again, clarified, sap and bark upholding me” (240). “Recovery” cannot be accomplished by “intellectual means alone” (Ferenczi 51). As Alexander powerfully reminds us: “There is an instinctual truth of the body all the laws of the world combined cannot legislate away” (Alexander 242). By embodying these traumatic experiences in text, Alexander calls attention to the complex relationships between flesh and language. As Rothschild remarks: “Language bridges the mind/body gap” (Rothschild 173). It is by acknowledging the hidden story surfacing in flashes beneath her original memoir that Alexander can begin to revise her self-narrative: “I kept starting over and over again. I touched the soil of my self, a field with its necessary knowledge, harsh, shining, buried in bits and pieces” (242). Through the act of “entering an old text from a new [...] direction” (Rich 629), “[t]he girl child and the woman flow together” (Alexander 243). The “Book of Childhood” is integrated into, but not absorbed by, the original narrative. The two exist side by side, bearing witness to a constant negotiation between past and present, body and memory.

Alexander's coda repeatedly interrogates this border between silence/speech:

Zone of radical illiteracy in which I write, translating myself through borders, recovering the chart of a give syntax, the palpable limits of place, to be rendered legible through poetry which fashions an immaterial dwelling yet leaves within itself traces of all that is nervous, stoic, edgy. The skin turned inside out. (260)

The relationship between the interior truth of the body and the need to translate this truth into language is at the heart of Alexander's project: "The interior of the house of language, fitful, flashing. And under the house of language, a fiery muteness, this zone of radical illiteracy Where we go when words cannot yet happen, where a terrible counter-memory wells up" (260). Alexander, through the act of writing, enables herself to situate the trauma that lies beneath the surface of her original memoir and "somatic memory becomes personal history" (Rothschild 173). Yet this act takes place with the full knowledge that there is no comfortable foundation on which to rest the language borne from the unspeakable, the traumatic. Such writing will always take place on a precipice; it will always be situated precariously.

In Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, themes of memory, body, and trauma also unfold in an interesting relation to Ferenczi's work. In perhaps one of his most intriguing configurations, Ferenczi theorizes that the psychic fragmentation of trauma (specifically in children) can produce a "fragment" he calls the "Orpha": "a singular being, for whom the preservation of life is of *coûte que coûte* significance. This fragment plays the role of the guardian angel; it produces wish-fulfilling hallucinations, consolation fantasies" (9). The Orpha, split off from bodily consciousness, functions as a protector. The creation of the Orpha is, often at a literal level, an act of psychic survival. The Orpha becomes indispensable to children who undergo repeated trauma: "It anesthetizes the consciousness and sensitivity against sensations as they become unbearable" (Ferenczi 9). The figure of the "woman warrior"—the swordswoman who can enact violence and offer protection—becomes a powerful guardian, producing fantasies that allow

Kingston to imagine a different future from the one of “wife and slave” that has been inscribed for her: “I would have to grow up to be a warrior woman” (20).

I want to end by returning to a different sort of moment in Kingston’s work here, however—the moment where her childhood silence becomes concretely represented by the paintings she covered in black paint (165). “It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery” (166). Like fragmentation, silence can perform a valuable protective function. While my main focus here is on the particular importance of language/narrative, it’s important to remember the fact that neither Ferenczi nor Balint were afraid to move beyond language with their patients. Both experimented with physical touch and refused to flatly equate silence with resistance. A source of censure from the traditional psychoanalytic establishment, Ferenczi’s awareness of a world beyond linguistic interpretation made possible not only Balint’s amazing work with borderline patients, but also the work of contemporary therapists like Rothschild who focus, with immense results, on the importance of somatic techniques with regard to bodily memory. In *Telling*, Patricia Weaver Francisco writes about the disassociation she feels during her rape using familiar metaphors: “I remember this moment from a spot up near the ceiling, through a consciousness separated from the bodies below [...] Only years later, when I learned to retrieve a bodily memory of the night, did I finally experience some of the details” (28). After a painful labor that reignites her bodily memory of rape, Francisco begins to get massages, and ultimately to engage in somatic therapy. Like Alexander’s description of holding tight to a tree, Francisco’s work bears witness to the power of the body in recovering from violent trauma.

As Sedgwick suggests in *Touching Feeling*, performative strategies are still too often ignored by contemporary theory in its privileging of the verbal, although having access to them opens a rich landscape of textured meaning that exists beside the written and spoken narratives

most often associated with traumatic knowledge. In *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*, for example, Calle enacts a powerful inquiry into psychoanalytic scripts largely through the technique of image juxtaposition. Her other work, examined earlier, also relies heavily on image-based modes of sense-making, and serves as a reminder that there are indeed limitations to language. Rothschild is careful to point out that, for analysts working with trauma patients, “[b]ridging the gap between the verbal psychotherapies and the body psychotherapies means taking the best resources from both, rather than choosing one over the other” (xiii). For anyone who is invested in the exploration of trauma and its many iterations, it also makes sense to remain attuned to the diverse array of performances—textual, bodily, and visual—by which victims of trauma may transform their memory into art, and the variety of witnessing practices such work may call for.

***Listening to Another’s Wound: Readerly Responsibility
and Trauma-based Narrative***

Henke reminds us that the term “narrative recovery” evokes “both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject” (xxii). The transformation of trauma into art allows the artist to reconstruct the moment of trauma in narrative form in the presence of an imagined and/or real audience who serves as witness. But, as Alexander asks, “How can these violent versions of the real that cut into memory be translated into art? Art in a time of trauma, a necessary translation, ‘fragments of a vessel,’ writes Walter Benjamin, ‘to be glued together.’ But what if the paste shows, the seams, the fractures?” (289). The shape of the trauma-based narrative pieced together from

fragments and flashes may bear witness to its own process of assemblage, allowing the reader to enter through the fissures:

It seems to me that in its rhythms the poem, the artwork, can incorporate scansion of the actual, the broken steps, the pauses, the brutal silences, the brutal explosions. So that what is pieced together is a work that exists as an object in the world but also, in its fearful consonance, its shimmering stretch, allows the world entry. I think of it as a recasting that permits our lives to be given back to us, fragile, precarious. (Alexander 289)

Such work bears testament to both the fragility and the resilience of self. Ferenczi conceptualized memory as a “collection of scars of shocks in the ego” (Ferenczi 111). The work of memoirists like Cha and Alexander resists the kind of glossy unity presupposed by more facile notions of “writing as healing,” instead making visible the scars.

In her essay “Creating Redemptive Imagery: A Challenge of Resistance and Creativity,” Sandra Campbell speaks of the need for women to “create images, sounds, and stories that articulate difference, that illuminate paths towards alternatives, indeed that describe the unfamiliar” in response to the daily cultural onslaught of narratives that promote “domination and violation” (141). She suggests that when alternate narratives proliferate, cultural attitudes can shift. The reader who chooses to meaningfully engage with work that disrupts popular notions about trauma, violence, and the nature of narrative itself can also choose to take on a responsibility not to replicate the sort of violent interpretation that would re-inscribe widespread impulses to doubt and/or bury difficult truths about sexual violence and childhood trauma. “The responsible reader must follow the text’s meandering movements, attend to its heterogeneous meanings, restrain the impulse to assimilate these into one point of view, [and] acknowledge the partiality and contingency of all interpretations” (Shweikart and Flynn 17). The reader of trauma-based texts is called to be a witness to the complex, difficult, and fragmented truths of the other

who is violated as well as the culture in which such violation takes place. To fully engage with the pain of another is itself a painful act. Being forced to recognize one's own complicity in such traumatic experience is also painful. It may be tempting to refuse to enter such a fraught space—to, as Freud did, facilitate instead an emotional coldness and turn a blind eye to unbearable realizations.

Yet, as Scarry remarks, “the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain” (9). And the act of listening to such expressions is equally important. Both Ferenczi and Herman speak poignantly about the devastating effects experienced by trauma survivors whose narratives are met with silence and disbelief. Such acts implicitly signify that we are choosing to “identify with the perpetrators rather than with the victim” (Herman 244). In the words of Ferenczi: “[W]hat is the use of [repeating] the trauma word for word, to have the same disillusionment with the whole world and the whole of humanity?” (55).

As I mention in my last chapter, embedded in the reading model(s) with which we approach trauma narratives are ethical and political choices—choices to believe or disbelieve; choices to take a reparative or paranoid stance; choices to “listen” to silences or to impose our own interpretations on them. By responding with generosity, rather than skepticism, to texts in which bodily memory is encoded, we may enter into the kind of compassionate dialogue that marked Ferenczi's practice and ultimately led to his falling out with Freud. Simply by approaching traumatic texts from a position of empathy, rather than doubt, we as readers make an ethical choice with positive consequences. After all, as Cathy Caruth reminds us, “trauma may lead [...] to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound” (8).

Chapter Four

Reparative Reading in a College Composition Classroom

My first semester teaching composition at my current institution was also the first semester one of the writers in my class handed in a rape narrative.

An impenetrable piece, elegantly crafted, it told the story of a boy who attacked her at the age of 14 in powerful, tightly crafted language. It was accompanied by a process letter in which she included research on the therapeutic effects of writing trauma, as well as revealed the fact that this was the first time she had ever spoken about being raped.

The following semester, another student chose to write about her rape as well. Her piece was composed in fragments—short staccato bursts of guttural language interspersed with violent imagery and angry reflections on male violence. Her process letter didn't talk much about her piece itself, but about the additional trauma of coming out as a lesbian in a small Midwestern town after the rape. We spent hours in my office that semester, talking and ranting and crying—about composition, and how we compose our lives, but also about patriarchy, violence, and heteronormativity.

Given the fact that one in four college-aged women have been the victim of rape or attempted rape, it's not at all surprising that every semester at least one of the writers in my class will explicitly write about her own experience with sexual assault. As Michael Blitz and Claude Mark Hurlbert remind us in *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age*, “[w]riting and living and teaching are not separable [...] our students' lives are in their compositions” (2).

This is not to suggest that most or even many of the students in my classes choose to write about trauma—simply that, nestled in among the beautiful portraits of foreign cities; the manifestos on the power of graffiti; and the research blogs about everything from the charms of particular dog breeds to how to win at poker, there are always darker stories, attempts to make sense of struggles with bulimia, the murder of a friend, or hidden abuse at the hands of a beloved grandparent. I want my composition classroom to be a place that welcomes and meaningfully responds to each of these diverse pieces and writers on their own terms.

My goal in this chapter is to explore, in narrative form, some of the ways in which my students and I seek to critically engage with acts of composition and response as dialogic, open-ended, risk-taking practices. I'm very lucky to work at an institution that privileges both teacher and student autonomy in the writing classroom, and to have had mentors, chairs, and colleagues who are committed to acknowledging our students' complex experiences, and proactively challenging the sometimes violent expectations of an increasingly corporatized educational system. Working within such a context, I have come to believe that while students who choose to write about trauma indeed benefit from a reparative classroom experience, such an environment benefits many other students (and myself, as a teacher), as well.

*

In the summer of 2008, I and a colleague co-taught a summer class through a partnership our University entered into with the Department of Homeless Services here in New York City. There were 10 writers in the class, all of whom were parents, and all of whom were currently living in city shelters.

We had no idea what to expect on our first day, and no idea what the expectations of the class participants would be. We opened by telling stories—who we were, what had brought us

there. Then we hammered out a rough plan for the course—participants were intrigued by the idea of memoir, crafting and preserving their own stories in their own terms, rather than the ones dictated to them by the institutions on which they depended for survival. There was a lot of anger in the room, anger at a system that many felt infantilized them and micro-managed their lives. My colleague and I introduced the idea of a manifesto, which was unanimously met with excitement. One of the participants suggested that we spend time focusing on resumés, since one of the goals of the program was job preparation, and that idea was adopted quickly as well.

When lunch arrived, we lost our momentum for a bit, dismayed by the soggy bologna sandwiches, child-sized juice drinks, and stale cookies provided by the DHS. One of the men there talked about his struggle with diabetes, and a woman about how she was trying to be a vegetarian, which was next to impossible at the shelter. Our final (also unanimous) decision that day was that my colleague and I would bring in healthy, varied, and age-appropriate food for the group.

That summer, the twelve of us grew close as we wrote and talked and thought and laughed and ate together. Yet our grand plans for all the pieces we would compose never quite came to fruition. The only time some of the participants had to actually compose was in-class—something my colleague and I hadn't really thought about. Sometimes we would become so engrossed in conversation that we'd be shocked to realize our time together was over before we'd workshopped a single piece. People had to miss class because of emergencies. It was rarely a smooth or linear process. My colleague and I confessed our anxiety to each other—the writing that we received sometimes seemed all over the place, scraps and sentences and fragments that didn't always end up coming together. We took home and responded to short bursts of traumatic memories; lists of employment history; and the beginnings of angry manifestos.

On the last day of the course, however, when one of the participants read a stunning poem she had written about her experience with homelessness that left us all simultaneously crying and applauding, I realized (as cliché as this sounds) that nothing had ever taught me more about teaching than this particular workshop. Of course, there were no grades, and this wasn't a required course. There was also no expectation at the end that anyone would know how to cite parenthetically or be able to write a psychology paper with no comma splices. Yet the participants of the workshop had forced me to be flexible; to respond to what was given to me on its own terms; and to give each person I was working with what they needed, whether that be proofreading a letter, a cup of coffee, or a moment of shared anger over an injustice at the shelter. The participants in this workshop also bore witness to the fact that meaningful writing projects don't stop just because a course does. Five years later, one of the women in the group is still writing her memoir, and we chat about it from time to time. Another ended up copyrighting her poem, and another used some of the material from our workshop to apply to community college a few years ago.

That fall, I returned to teaching my composition courses with a renewed determination to value my students' ability to make meaningful choices for themselves, as well as an increasing sense of frustration with the rhetoric of the many writing handbooks that had been shipped to my office that summer—unasked for and free of charge—in the hopes that I would adopt them in my course.

*

My first semester teaching writing was as an adjunct at a large public university. I was a first year Ph.D. student, and, like many first-time composition teachers, I was given little instruction on how to approach the class beyond being handed a short list of textbooks and

handbooks from which I had to choose to use in my classroom. I had taken only one course in Composition/Rhetoric at the Master's level, and it was taught by a progressive educator whose own work was radically opposed to the kind of mode-based, thesis-driven writing that still seems to dominate some composition classrooms.

The department encouraged us to assign a brief “diagnostic” in-class writing assignment the first day of class. I asked my students—all freshmen—to write about their college experience so far. I was delighted to read descriptions of the interesting people they'd encountered on their bus rides; snarky commentary about biology class; funny tales of getting lost on campus; and proud stories about being the first of a family to attend college. A few weeks into the course, however, we all found ourselves floundering amongst the largely male, mostly white, authors who had penned the essays in our anthology. I assigned a “compare and contrast” essay, the majority of which fell flat. I found myself writing the letter “C” a lot, and wondering why I had been so excited to teach composition in the first place.

When I think back on this my experience teaching writing, I'm unpleasantly reminded of the work of anonymous adjunct instructor “Professor X,” whose award-winning 2008 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* and subsequent 2012 book share the title “In the Basement of the Ivory Tower.” X's thesis is basically that college isn't for everyone, and his supporting examples are the students who, in his words, “routinely fail his classes” because their compare and contrast essays on “Araby” and “Barn Burning” lack the kind of “clarity” he expects from “college-level” writers.

Luckily for me, I didn't end up having to fail any of my students that semester. After talking over my uncomfortable experience with some colleagues from other institutions, I approached my class with some questions about the direction they wanted the course to go in

from thereon in. Although I've never quite gotten over my guilt at making them spend fifty dollars on a textbook we ultimately resigned to the rubbish bin a few weeks into the semester, I've also never gotten over my gratitude at the idea that they proposed. Why not, one student suggested, have them all bring in a variety of pieces for us to select from for future readings? The class unanimously voted that this would make more sense for them as writers. We collaboratively designed our next assignment—each student would create a piece in a genre of their choice, and then another student would analyze the piece. Then the initial writer would use both their piece and their partner's analysis to craft a meta-narrative about their writing/reading process.

I've continued to use a version of this assignment unit every semester since then, and by far it is one of the most well-received assignments in any of my courses. This doesn't surprise me; nor does it surprise me that an impoverished assignment such as the "compare and contrast paper" I first assigned led to the construction of disconnected, half-hearted texts. Knoblauch and Brannon point out that the "sterile repetitiveness and historical naïveté of [rhetoric textbooks] create the impression that rhetoric is a monolith, that nothing has changed between Cicero and Kenneth Burke, that the ideas they reproduce so unreflectively [...] about outlines, topic sentences, comparison/contrast essays, and the like, are as serviceable today as they might have seemed centuries ago" (3-4). Moving beyond such limited notions of what student writing can be opened possibilities for my students to make critical connections among their experiences, the larger social contexts in which these experiences take place, and important questions of style and form.

I've shared this particular narrative with colleagues at various conferences over the years, specifically at panels questioning the wide-scale programmatic adoption of often expensive,

often formulaic textbooks and handbooks in the writing classroom. Though certain presuppositions about what “academic” writing can and “should” be remain codified in such texts for “beginning writers,” I continue to be drawn to the kind of questions put forth by scholars like Lad Tobin, who queries, “[W]hy [...] don’t we ask literature students to respond to the short stories they are reading with stories of their own? Why couldn’t a dissertation be a novel or an academic book be a collage?” (Tobin X). I’m especially interested, though in the ways my own students speak back to some of the ideas promoted by the hugely profitable handbook industry—ideas that “academic” writing involves “moves” such as “[employing] a serious, academic tone and avoid using the first or second person,” or the notion that “your credibility will be enhanced if you use the third person, which is more objective and gives you some distance from your topic” (McWhorter). In their blogs, performances, documentaries, poems, memoirs, and essays, many of my students connect their subject positions and lived experiences with larger theoretical and critical questions. Issues as varied as the politics of hair, suburban boredom, and some of the nuanced ways international students adapt to life in America while retaining their own culture are approached through the lens of personal experience, and deepened through dialogue with the perspectives of others.

Many of my students come to the course taking for granted that “one” doesn’t use first-person in academic writing, or that contractions constitute “slang.” In order to explore where these myths come from, I sometimes bring some of the handbooks that have piled up in my office to class for students to deconstruct. By openly interrogating the myths about writing that are perpetuated in many texts for beginning writers, students are able to meaningfully speak back to a discourse that seeks to control their composition practices in often prescriptive and limited ways. Some students find the idea that “academic” writing can be a much more malleable and

open-ended endeavor than they had previously been taught liberating; others are (quite understandably) frustrated or annoyed by receiving such conflicting messages. Some students continue to work in more traditional forms and use conventions that they have grown comfortable with (and which may have led them to experience academic success in the past), while others throw themselves into creating hybrid texts and pushing the boundaries between the “critical” and the “creative” in innovative ways. Whether students employ experimental forms or not, the recognition that they are the ones in control of their writing and are making deliberate choices with regard to form/content/usage is an important part of what I hope they take away from our course.

*

In my office, there is a cardboard sculpture of the “Cube” at St. Mark’s Place. It opens up to reveal a hidden stack of photos the student who designed it has carefully placed inside of her first and subsequent trips to the area when she arrived in New York City from Korea. There is also a leather-bound, illustrated book of original, hand-lettered fairytales; a gripping graphic novel about the Holocaust; and a poster with cartoon versions of major figures in Composition having a heated debate about “Standard English.”

These particular artifacts from former students provide a brief glimpse into a few of the ways they have chosen to compose during their time in my course. We begin each semester with a unit that explores some of the many ways in which composition scholars have conceptualized the teaching of writing, the result of which is a self-authored “language statement” by each student (which are revised at the end of the semester), as well as collaboratively designed posters that are presented to the class. We then move to a “self-portrait” unit, in which we read excerpts from a variety of texts that construct self in multiple ways (beginning with collage-based texts by

Joe Brainard, Adrienne Kennedy, and Sophie Calle), and which culminates in each student crafting a narrative of an aspect of her own experience in a form she feels is appropriate.

Following that is a research unit in which we discuss subject position and critical lenses as each student chooses a topic and corresponding form in dialogue with the class. The last major unit of the semester continues to be the project my first group of students designed—the creation of a work of art (fiction; poetry; sculpture etc.) that will be analyzed by a classmate. The compositions that my students have constructed over the years serve as a constant reminder to me that critical, meaningful work can take place across a variety of forms.

In her discussion of multigenre assignments in “The Ins, Outs, and In-Betweens of Multigenre Writing,” Nancy Mack remarks that “[a]s students generated multiple pieces for their projects, conflicts arose among differing perspectives of the same event that would not have occurred had I assigned a more traditional, monogenre format. Multigenre writing has the potential to make use of the dialogic quality of language.” In his book *Resisting Writings (and the Boundaries of Composition)*, Derek Owens asks us to envision the writing classroom as “a highly performative, interdisciplinary exchange of dialects and art forms” (200). He challenges the production of “pseudo-literature” in the composition classroom, arguing that when “we enforce genres so dogmatically [...] the spontaneity and excitement that can come from mixing, blurring, overlapping, and dissolving boundaries is lost on the student (not to mention most teachers)” (21). As an alternative, he proposes valuing the production of literature in a variety of genres and dialects: “I want writing to be exciting, risky, strange; dull, safe, conventional texts put me and my students to sleep” (Owens 17). Similarly, several authors in the collection *Alt Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy* make the case that “alternative forms enable kinds of intellectual work that cannot be accomplished in traditional academic discourse” (x).

In the years I've been teaching composition, I've seen interesting, critical work take place across a variety of genres. My own students have composed: memoirs; comic strips; pamphlets; blogs; lists; haikus; essays; recipes; graphic novels; case studies; collages; fiction; business proposals; documentaries; political theory; investigative journalism; spoken word poetry; manifestos; fairy tales; song lyrics/music; scripts; photo essays; children's literature; fan fiction; annotated bibliographies; advice; one-act plays; and letters. By inviting and warmly receiving assignments that transgress the bounds of the "traditional" academic paper, I've found that my students' offerings not only follow their own logics, but also determine the terms of my response, since it becomes more difficult to enter into inherently surprising territory with a predetermined notion of what I might find, and what it should look like.

*

I used to assign a more traditional "research paper." One semester several years ago, a student handed in a dossier of materials about the Bermuda Triangle, which he was fascinated with. I was intrigued by the assembled materials—pictures, accounts of missing ships going back hundreds of years, summaries of various theories, and the student's own questions, all pasted on pieces of corrugated cardboard. I loved engaging with the piece, but wasn't sure how it fit the assignment guidelines, which included having a "claim" that was backed up with "evidence." When I discussed my concern with the student, he responded, "Well, no one really knows. That's the point." He wanted readers to engage with the materials he had presented and come to their own conclusions if they wished. If such a cool project didn't fit my assignment guidelines, the answer was clear to me—I needed to revise the guidelines to make room for more open-ended, collage-like research practices.

I want to return here to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's intriguing essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading (Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You)." Addressing the kinds of reading practices associated with "the hermeneutics of suspicion," Sedgwick calls attention to the kind of "faith in exposure" that dominates much contemporary critical theory, arguing that such practices act as though "to make something visible as a problem were [...] a mere hop, skip and jump away from getting it solved" (139). Such "paranoid" reading practices look to police a text, exposing the places where "error" (here used in a broad sense) can be "exposed."

Although most scholarship on "error" in student writing focuses on what might be called "surface error," a reader may also perceive "error" in writing that might seem "too informal" or "too confessional," writing that does not give credit where credit is due, writing that is "clichéd" or "sentimental," writing that might defy, in any way, implicit expectations of what a "college level" or "academic" or "scholarly" paper should sound like. Sedgwick calls us "to recognize in paranoia a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise" (146). In contrast, I have tried to respond to moments of textual ambiguity in the work of my students from a position informed by what Sedgwick calls "reparative" reading practices—practices that "succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture" (150). Such practices are generous, meeting texts on their own terms, nourishing and sustaining both reader and writer.

Responding to texts in such non-prescriptive ways seems especially important when my students choose to write about trauma. I began this chapter by mentioning two very different rape narratives composed by former students. The first offered what might be considered a "trauma and redemption" plot. It sought to make sense of a theretofore unspoken trauma through the use

of classical narrative strategies such as beginning *in media res*, character development through dialogue, the use of specific imagery, and a reflective conclusion. The writer invited me to respond to both the structure of her piece, as well as the research she had done on writing as a therapeutic tool. I responded to her text according to her instructions, as well as putting her in touch with the university's counseling center after she informed me that she had shared her text with her mother, and they had agreed that she might benefit from a psycho-therapeutic relationship.

In contrast, the second rape narrative I received (from a young woman who had been in and out of therapy for years, and had told this story many times) was not the kind of text that sought any sort of closure. The writer of this particular text had given herself permission to recreate her experience in a fragmented form that allowed both her and her audience (in this case, myself and two peers) to grapple with the unsettling reality of the way this violent moment (what Susan Brison aptly termed a “surd”) had challenged her ability to conceive of her story as a linear narrative.

There is obviously no “correct” way to write trauma. Some of the writers in my class who engage with memories of violence and violation indeed produce “trauma and redemption” narratives in order to make sense of the trauma they've undergone. I will always respond to these texts according to the wishes of my students, making sure to connect them to outside resources if they wish. Some students do not wish to share such stories with the entire class, a choice which I will always respect. Yet some of the most powerful moments in my classes have occurred when students do choose to share such narratives in full-class workshops. This past semester, I was struck by the sophisticated conversation about the cohesiveness (or lack thereof) of self, and the relationship between the body, lived experience, and narrative, that arose when a student

presented her “trauma and redemption” narrative to the class. The response to the content of the story—which detailed the writer’s memories of child abuse in blunt and unapologetic terms—was overwhelmingly empathetic. However I was also impressed when other students picked up on something that had been troubling me personally—the jarring note between the searing content of the piece and the “happily ever after” conclusion. One student began by hesitantly offering the comment, “When you transitioned from your narrative into you conclusion, it started to sound more like an essay?” Another said, “The violence in the rest of your piece sticks with me more than your finishing statement that you’re grateful that you’re a stronger person now.” The student who wrote the piece responded that she “thought that’s what conclusions were supposed to do.” The lingering idea that stories should have happy endings is one of the concepts I hope my students can—when they wish—push back against in productive ways. When this particular student chose to re-write her piece with an ending she labeled “more authentic,” I didn’t cringe at the word authentic, because I knew exactly what she meant.

While the genre of the “personal essay” or “personal narrative” may indeed be helpful for students attempting to make sense of their experiences, it has also been important for me to remember that “traumatic memories [...] are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story” (Herman 37). Linear narrative may not always be an appropriate form for students who attempt to make meaning of their traumatic experiences; privileging the coherent “essay” can reify the idea that every story of trauma must follow the prescriptive guidelines of the classic “trauma and redemption tale,” despite the fact that such trauma might be unresolved. By becoming attuned to the ways in which trauma-based texts may present themselves through techniques of fragmentation, elision, and disruption, and by valuing the use of forms that do not demand closure, “correctness,” or finality,

I have been able to veer away from expecting a particular sort of “conclusion” from my students’ narratives, and hopefully encouraged my students to critique the larger cultural purposes served by “happy ending” tropes, particularly with regard to sexual assault and violence against children.

*

“But how do you grade?”

This is a legitimate question. (It is also often the only question that some people have after hearing about the kinds of classrooms some of my colleagues and I teach in, and the heterogeneous work produced by our students.) I’m always been struck by Pat Belanoff’s characterization of grading as “that dirty thing we do in the privacy of our own offices”—so much so that I’ve become invested in doing everything I possibly can to make sure that the looming specter of “grading” never interferes with my students’ ability to take risks (that may or may not pay off), or to retain control over their pieces and processes.

Peter Elbow’s notion of contract grading is one of many ways writing teachers can circumvent the conflation of meaningful assessment and grading. I’ve found that employing a participation based contract (that takes into account in-class and on-line participation, as well as a final portfolio) for course grades collectively frees me and my students from the notion that individual texts are constructed to be “graded” on a scale of A through F. Thus, these texts are free to function in ways that are student-designated. This past semester, for example, one student wrote a collection of poems that I and her family were the sole audience for. They fulfilled one of the assignment requirements, but the student chose other pieces to include in her final portfolio. Another student chose to photograph the poster he had designed with his group for his portfolio, while another included a paper he had written for a political science class that made

use of our class conversations about subject position and ethical argument. As long as students fulfill the basic requirements for assignments, they are free to choose which pieces they will revise and include in the final on-line portfolio for the class. Student portfolio themes may reflect content and/or process. One portfolio, entitled “A Girl and her Computer,” is a multimedia portfolio that organizes the student’s texts (including a hyperlinked photo essay about a specific on-line controversy she was involved in, a children’s book about technology, and links to the songs that served as inspiration for her self-portrait) around her relationship with digital technologies. Another, entitled “For the Mad Ones,” organizes pieces by genre (poetry; fiction; memoir) around the student’s relationship with the work of the Beat Generation. Students also designate the audience settings for their portfolios. Some students choose to make their e-portfolios “public” (which means they will show up in Google searches). Others make their portfolios private, giving only me access. One student last semester decided not to have an on-line presence at all due to the personal nature of her work, and instead handed me the final portfolio in book form. In choosing the form and audience of their portfolio, students make meaningful decisions about both content and design.

In addition, students collaboratively design rubrics that both they and I use to assess some of their pieces according to their designated terms, and they provide me and their peers with guided feedback questions to enable us to give meaningful, descriptive feedback of the pieces they share with the class in in-class and on-line workshops. When we talk about revision, one of the pieces we look at is Sophie Calle’s *Exquisite Pain*. Some students are entranced by her ability to re-tell a singular narrative ninety-nine times, while others are quick to point out that, while such constant revision may serve therapeutic or aesthetic goals, their own revision processes vary drastically. In my early years of teaching, I got caught up in the idea of “radical

revision” as a one size fits all pedagogical tool, consistently encouraging students to re-visit and re-write their pieces from different angles. One semester, a student adamantly refused to return to one of her earlier pieces, telling me she was “done.”

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam urges us to “[dismantle] the logics of success and failure with which we currently live. Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2-3). Failing “can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon ‘trying and trying again’” (3). This insight productively challenges one the traditional purposes of the composition classroom—the facilitation of increasingly “correct” prose. It also suggests that there is perhaps a significant limit to the “revision” process envisioned by many well-meaning teachers (my younger self included). Some of my students indeed return to earlier texts—breaking open spots that their classmates expressed confusion about, re-writing stale endings they felt compelled to tack on, or re-purposing their narrative for various audiences. One student this semester, though—intrigued by an idea I threw out in class one day of writing a series of introductions with no conclusions—decided to design his final portfolio around the idea of asking questions that would remain unanswered at this point.

Such flexible practices enable my students and me to engage with texts on their own terms, rather than measuring how they fall short of some imagined ideal. I’m mindful that none of these practices are new, but I’ve been pleased with the ways in which they’ve allowed me to meaningfully veer away from error-based reading/assessment models that deny students the right to their own language, content, and form.

In her essay “New Life in This Dormant Creature,” theorist and educator Carmen Kynard argues that when writing teachers continue to “enforce neo-formalist rules” with regard to student compositions, we are in essence trying to make “colonization and management” easier, saying to our students:

writing is the property that we stand at the door of. here’s what students gotta do before we let them come in: wipe the bottom of your shoes—dress up real nice—[...] don’t talk too loud—[...] press your suit and your hair...and then you can come in. this ain’t about writing, communication, language, literacy. this is about entrance requirements...and keeping some folks out. (34)

We begin each semester in my course by discussing the politics of “Standard English,” and read several pieces (including work by Kynard; Gloria Anzaldua; and Teresa Hak Kyung Cha) that bring together various dialects and languages. Students who incorporate dialogue in other languages into their self-portraits often come to class workshops with questions about whether or not they should include English translations of the passages. Last semester, a native English speaker in one such group answered this question (asked by a student who had included passages in Spanish) by saying, “I think it would disrupt the flow if you translated. We can look it up if we want to, but the context tells us too. Plus, it seems like your target audience might be bilingual.”

When designing a rubric for the piece with that same class, several of the students introduced the term “grammar” as a potential category. This is always a rich moment for us as a class, as we get to talk about what that word actually means in context. (If enough students are interested, we’ll look at passages from Hartwell’s essay the following class.) With this particular class, the debate became heated, with one group adamantly opposed to the inclusion of the term “grammar” on the rubric. This led to a conversation about the difference between “grammar” and “usage,” as well as the value proofreading for “typos” and the value of making deliberate, non-

“standard” linguistic choices. One student expressed concern that he had used “slang” and “contractions” in his piece. The class ended up voting on a final rubric category: “Makes deliberate linguistic choices that are appropriate for the writer’s purpose.” I agreed that this seemed like a much more meaningful category than the nebulous “grammar.”

The rubrics are helpful in making broad generalizations about what I and students see “working” in various pieces, but most of the feedback we give each other is descriptive or question-based. When I read and respond to student pieces, I am reading for meaning—I use a pencil to make margin comments about questions I have or passages that are particularly striking, and I finish with a letter to each student about what was working in the piece and my own reactions as a reader, in accordance with their feedback questions. If students have specific questions about usage, they will indicate that to me in their process letter, so I can read for that. Other students will ask me to read for “clarity,” or to tell them how the piece makes me feel. We also often meet one on one to further discuss their responses to my comments. A student recently pointed out something huge that I had missed—she seemed relieved when I admitted that the misreading was completely because I’d been distracted, and she asked if she could erase some of my comments.

For me, it’s become crucial to make sure that the response process is as dialogic and open-ended as possible. After several rounds of peer-review (including on-line responses, small group, and full-class workshops), students have often already revised their pieces substantially before they receive my written responses. The versions of the piece that are collected in the final portfolio are sometimes the result of a great deal of negotiation between readers/writer. Other times, they are not. While I want to make sure that every writer gets a variety of feedback in various forms (both written and verbal) on their work in process, it is ultimately up to the writer

to decide which version will be submitted at the end of the course, and to explain her choices in her final portfolio reflection.

*

Inspired by the incredible diversity of the final portfolios my colleague and I reflect on at our end of semester assessment seminars, I helped found a conference for first year writers at my institution in 2008. With the goal of furthering the voices of student writers and their teachers who believe the function of the composition classroom extends beyond the reproduction of “academic” forms sometimes aligned with racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic impulses, the conference aimed to offer alternate visions of the writing classroom: “enuf of these ventriloquist routines where i put the words in my students’ mouths with the joke being that it looks like it comes from them” (Kynard 36).

The first semester the conference was held, I was a bit anxious about what administrators and faculty in other departments might take away from my students’ panel. Aware that the rhetoric of composition as a “service discipline” is alive and well in many universities, I feared that my students’ spoken word poetry, “Twilight” parodies, and documentaries about sneaker-collecting might not seem to speak to their ability to transfer their impressive facility with genre, rhetoric, and form to other courses. Yet every semester it becomes increasingly apparent to me that my students are more than adept at presenting the connections between the critical and creative in their work to an outside audience.

At a recent panel I put together of seniors who had taken my course as freshmen, my students spoke eloquently and passionately about the work they had done in my course and the relationship it had to their later courses. One young man who had written a forty page fiction piece talked about how he’d realized his ability to write creatively was a strength for him, and

had led him to switch to a major in advertising, where he was doing very well at an internship he had. Another talked about how all the stress I had put him through about “showing not telling” had been worth it as he pursued a career in journalism. While I would continue to argue that the purpose of composition courses is not to “serve” other departments, I do find it noteworthy that by participating in a flexible, supportive writing community, some students are able to discover things about themselves as writers that they may not have had the opportunity to do otherwise.

*

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks writes: “Like desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries” (167). The idea of language as disruption is a valuable one for me. Too often, the tropes that dominate mainstream public discourse about writing classes seem to come from paranoia about “eroding standards.” My own students have shown me that by embracing a pluralistic and multimodal conception of literacy, we can come to create meaning in ways that reflect our diverse experiences as we critically interrogate the context in which this meaning is made.

As Jason Palmeri writes in *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*: “[I]f we seek to value the diverse embodied knowledges of *all* students and teachers in the field of composition, we must embrace a capacious vision of multimodal pedagogy that includes both digital and non-digital forms of communication: live oratory and digital audio documentary; quilting and video gaming; paper-based scrapbooking and digital storytelling; protest chanting and activist video making” (160). By broadening a more traditional understanding of “composition,” writing teachers can create spaces for our students to engage with the content of their lives in ways that make sense for *them*.

As my semester winds down, I look at text after text, never knowing exactly what it is I'm going to be engaging with. I'm excited to read *The Communist Manifesto* re-designed as a children's book; a blog about cruelty-free cosmetics; and a 20 page research narrative that connects a writer's life to her grandmother's life through recipes. Not every piece will achieve its goals or veer into uncharted territory, but each has been composed in a space constructed around the idea that "because there can be terrible surprises, there can also be good ones" (Sedgwick 146).

Conclusion

As we reveal ourselves in story, we become aware of the continuing core of our lives under the fragmented surface of our experience. We become aware of the multifaceted, multichaptered 'I' who is the storyteller. We can trace out the paradoxical and even contradictory versions of ourselves that we create for different occasions, different audiences [...] Most important, as we become aware of ourselves as storytellers, we realize that what we understand and imagine about ourselves is a story.

—Susan Wittig Albert

In her introduction to the collection *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, Maxine Hong Kingston writes: “We tell stories and we listen to stories in order to live. To stay conscious. To connect one with another. To understand consequences. To keep history. To rebuild civilization” (1). From published memoirs to courtroom testimony to college writing, the construction of stories has a special significance for women whose lives have been disrupted by trauma. While the connection between storytelling and survival is complex, the act of piecing together meaningful narratives in the presence of a (real or imagined) witness can facilitate personal, as well as cultural, transformation.

There’s obviously danger in uncritically embracing the idea of a cohesive, unified self, but the concept of an “integrated psyche” necessary for survival seems a fruitful one when considering the meaning-making process of trauma recovery. The work of trauma theorists from Sandor Ferenczi to Judith Herman has demonstrated that a viable construction of self provides an important basis for making sense of trauma. This is precisely why Ferenczi sought to provide the kind of environment in which his patients could “re-assemble” the fragments of their psyches into functional selves, creating narratives that could sustain them as they moved through their lives. The idea of narrating a story does not imply foreclosure on meaning, but rather a provisional unity necessary for self-sustenance.

While Ferenczi's intensely dialogic therapeutic model shows the ways in which the speaking/listening/responding process can lead to individual meaning-making, such a model also has a function beyond facilitating personal well-being, as evidenced by the work of writers and activists such as Kingston. The act of artistic creation can become an act of community-creating as well. Empathetic witnessing practices can challenge popular scripts about traumatic events such as rape and child abuse. As Cha reminds us in *Dictee*, part of the reason for speaking the past is "not to repeat history in oblivion" (33). Stories must be transmitted so that change can be enacted. The sharing of trauma can connect its victims and their witnesses in moments of meaningful transformation, as in the case of Kingston's workshop for veterans, where not only the writing of stories, but their sharing, is a significant part of the meaning-making process. As Judith Herman remarks:

Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others. [...] Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. [...] Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity. (214)

Ultimately, I hope this project illuminates some of the diverse avenues through which victims of trauma may regain control of their stories and their lives, as well as some of the ways in which we as witnesses can respond to narratives of trauma from spaces of openness, belief, and reciprocity. Those who make the choice to engage with the difficult, often painful truths embedded in the texts of women who break the silence of trauma are entrusted with a responsibility to respond in an ethical, empathetic way. In the words of Audre Lorde: "[W]here the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them [...] For we have been

socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (23).

Works Cited

- Alexander, Meena. *Fault Lines*. New York: Feminist Press, 2003. Print.
- . *Illiterate Heart*. Evanston IL: Triquarterly Books, 2002. Print.
- . *Poetics of Dislocation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009. Print.
- Anderson, Charles M. and Marian M. Maccurdy, Eds. *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*. Illinois: NCTE, 2000. Print.
- Balint, Michael. *The Basic Fault: Therapeutic Aspects of Regression*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1991. Print.
- . *The Doctor, His Patient and the Illness*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1957. Print.
- Blitz, Michael and C. Mark Hurlbert. *Letters for the Living: Teaching Writing in a Violent Age*. Illinois: NCTE, 1998. Print.
- Brisson, Susan. *Violence, Aftermath, and the Re-making of the Self*. New Jersey: Princeton, 2002. Print.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1975. Print
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. New York: Collier, 1958. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Cahill, Ann. *Re-thinking Rape*. Ithaca: Cornell, 2001. Print.
- Calle, Sophie. *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005. Print.
- . *Exquisite Pain*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003. Print.
- . *Suite venitiène*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983. Print.
- . *Take Care of Yourself*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2007. Print.
- Campbell, Sandra. "Creating Redemptive Imagery: A Challenge of Resistance and Creativity." *Transforming a Rape Culture*. Eds. Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth. Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1993. Print.
- Carson, Ann. *Nox*. New York: New Directions, 2010. Print.

- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996. Print.
- Cha, Theresa. *Dictée*. California: University of California Press, 2001. Print.
- Cixous, Hélène. *rootprints*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- . *Stigmata*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Dainotto, Roberto Maria. "The Excremental Sublime: The Postmodern Literature of Blockage and Release." *Essays in Postmodern Culture*. Eds. Eyal Amiran and John Unsworth. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.
- De Quincey, Thomas. *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings*. New York: Signet, 1963. Print.
- Dupont, Judith. "Introduction." *The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988. Print.
- Dworkin, Andrea. *Right-Wing Women*. New York: Perigee Books, 1983. Print.
- Ferenczi, Sandor. *The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988. Print.
- Francisco, Patricia Weaver. *Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999. Print.
- Frank, Adam and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eds. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "An Autobiographical Study." *The Freud Reader*. Peter Gay, Ed. New York: Norton, 1995. Print.
- . "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis ("Rat Man") And Process Notes for the Case History." *The Freud Reader*. Peter Gay, Ed. New York: Norton, 1995. Print.
- . "On Beginning the Treatment." *The Freud Reader*. Peter Gay, Ed. New York: Norton, 1995. Print.
- . "Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis." *The Freud Reader*. Peter Gay, Ed. New York: Norton, 1995. Print.
- . "The Aetiology of Hysteria." *The Freud Reader*. Peter Gay, Ed. New York: Norton, 1995. Print.
- Goldman, Abigail. "Rape Still A Crime Where Victim Can Share Blame." *Las Vegas Sun*. 17

August 2008. Web.

- Glass, James. *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993. Print.
- Griffiths, Jennifer. *Traumatic Possessions*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. Print.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Architecture From the Outside*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001. Print.
- . *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994. Print.
- Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham.: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.
- Haynal, André. *Disappearing and Reviving: Sandor Ferenczi in the History of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac, 2002. Print.
- Heller, Dana. "Anatomies of Rape." *American Literary History*. 16:2. Summer 2004: 329-349. Print.
- Henke, Suzette A. *Shattered Subjects*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. Print.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Hutton, Patrick H. "William Wordsworth and Sigmund Freud: The Search for the Self Historicized." *History as an Art of Memory*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993. Print.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Fifth Book of Peace*. New York: Vintage, 2004. Print.
- . *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*. Kihei: Koa Books, 2006. Print.
- . *The Woman Warrior*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Knoblauch, C.H. and Lil Brannon. *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1984. Print.
- Kynard, Carmen. "'New Life in This Dormant Creature': Notes on Social Consciousness, Language, and Learning in a College Classroom." *Alt Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. Eds. Christopher Schroeder, Helen Fox, and Patricia Bizzell. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook, 2002. Print.

- Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1980. Print.
- Macel, Christine. "The Author Issue in the Work of Sophie Calle." *M'AS TU VUE*. Munich: Prestel, 2003. Print.
- Mack, Nancy. "The *Ins*, *Outs*, and *In-Betweens* of *Multigenre Writing*." *English Journal*. 92: 2. 2002: 1-98. Web.
- McKinley, James. "Vicious Assault Shakes Texas Town." *The New York Times*. 8 March 2011. Web.
- McWhorter, Kathleen T. *Successful College Writing*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. Print.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel. "But Enough About Me." *The New Yorker*. 25 January 2010. Web.
- Owens, Derek. *Memory's Wake*. New York: Spuyten Duyvil, 2011. Print.
- . *Resisting Writings (and the Boundaries of Composition)*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994. Print.
- Pacquement, Alfred. "Preface." *M'AS TU VUE*. Munich: Prestel, 2003. Print.
- Palmeri, Jason. *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. Print.
- Park, Josephine Nock-Hee. "'What of the Partition?': *Dictée's* Boundaries and the American Epic." *Contemporary Literature*. XLVI: 2. 2005. Print.
- Professor X. "In the Basement of the Ivory Tower." *The Atlantic*. June 2008. Web.
- Proust, Marcel. *The Prisoner and The Fugitive*. London: Penguin, 2002. Print.
- Putnam, James. "Afterword." *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005. Print.
- Rachman, Arnold. "Ferenczi and Sexuality." *The Legacy of Sandor Ferenczi*. Eds. Lewis Aron and Adrienne Harris. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- . *Sandor Ferenczi: The Psychoanalyst of Tenderness and Passion*. Maryland: Jason Aronson, 1995. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Rape." *Diving Into the Wreck*. California: Bantam Books, 1973.
- . "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." *College English*, 34:1. Oct. 1972. pp. 18-30. Print.

- Rothschild, Babette. *The Body Remembers*. New York: Norton, 2000. Print.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford, 1985. Print.
- Schaffer, Kay and Sidonie Smith. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Schroeder, Christopher, Helen Fox, and Patricia Bizzell, Eds. *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2002. Print.
- Schweickart, Patrocínio P. and Elizabeth A. Flynn, Eds. *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response*. New York: MLA, 2004. Print.
- Sebold, Alice. *Lucky*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2002. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. U.S.: Duke, 2003. Print.
- Sherin, Kerry. "Guest Editor's Notes." *Chain 7 memoir/anti-memoir*. California: Small Press Distribution, 2000. Print.
- Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. New York: Vintage, 2011. Print.
- Stein, Ben. "Presumed Innocent, Anyone?" *The American Spectator*. 17 March 2011. Web.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage, 1982. Print.
- Taslitz, Andrew. *Rape and the Culture of the Courtroom*. New York: New York University Press, 1999. Print.
- Tobin, Lad. "Foreword." *Living the Narrative Life: Stories as Tools for Meaning Making*. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1987. Print.
- Trotta, Daniel. "Strauss-Kahn's Accuser: Schemer or Immigrant Survivor?" Reuters. 25 July 2011. Web.
- Weiskel, Thomas. "Approaching the Romantic Sublime." *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. Print.
- Yaegar, Patricia. "Toward a Female Sublime." *Gender and Theory*. Ed. Linda Kauffman. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. Print.