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Remembrances Reconsidered: Site-Specific Affective Retellings

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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In “Et In Arcadia Ego,” chapter V of Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, twenty-year-old Clare Savage moves to London to begin her “life-alone” upon the recent death of her mother. Clare is in an exploratory yet lonely state of mind in this new place, in her “mother-country” (109). One morning, Clare awakes from a dream and thinks, “If the dead speak to you in a dream it means you will soon be amongst them. Was this her grandmother’s wisdom? Her mother was standing next to the bed, looking down at her daughter. Making as if to speak. Then drawing her hand across her mouth as if to wipe away her words” (116). Through this dream, Clare connects with generations of women in her family as she tries to fully remember her grandmother’s past wisdom and experiences her mother’s inability to communicate something to her. I am interested in this moment because it illustrates an experience that is tinged with the unconscious mind’s engagement with a deep, affective experience: anyone who has dreamed of a lost loved one knows this phenomenon has the power to bring up significant feelings. Thus, this experience is rendered both commonplace and special, simultaneously. Clare is in a heightened emotional point at this time as she finds herself in a new place, mediating feelings of deep personal loss and spatial displacement. I will begin to examine the question of how place and space factor in to the significance of stories we tell about personal and collective historical experiences, and what kinds of language characteristics are deployed in doing so.

There are formal and contextual patterns that develop between texts that engage in forms of storytelling that are driven by considering the ways in which affective experiences relate to particular places. The language patterns that emerge in these often-emotionally charged narratives are especially influenced by social and political conversations in the world around them. These stories feature characters, and in the case of some memoirs, the writers themselves,
experiencing affective responses to personal or collective traumas, and are in touch with the ways their environments influence the recollection of memories surrounding these experiences. This project will examine diverse forms of storytelling to shine a light on narratives written by marginalized people, who engage in accounts of both everyday life and historical experiences. In these kinds of stories, there is a connection between authors who pay attention to affective responses associated with revisiting a particular place, and the language one uses to describe these responses, which either the writers themselves or their characters experience. This thesis will explore how we talk and write about significant feelings relating to traumatic events, as they connect to place and space, and the language used to tell these stories, as well as the declarative nature of their retellings. For as we will see, when writing about themes that are filled with deep emotion, it is often not enough to simply write or speak about them; rather, the writer tends to declare an urgent intent to do so. Writers often discuss in the text themselves the need to, or benefits of, writing or speaking. This project seeks to celebrate the diverse array of voices that speak from highly charged events and engage with new ways of inciting affect among people through the varying hybrid forms of essay, manifesto, cookbook, fiction, auto-theoretical and graphic memoir, theory, etc., as a way to combat static, traditional forms of recording histories and gaining knowledges.

This thesis is an examination of the forms of storytelling that result in being specially attuned to the deep feelings attached to certain spaces and places, and the language we use to tell these stories. I will be looking at questions such as, what kinds of stories are shared as a result of a deep affective experience? Why do we feel compelled to share these stories? Why do we feel such strong affective responses after being in a certain place or space? How do these experiences
generate certain kinds of linguistic and narrative practices? How do these stories also engage in acknowledging collective or personal traumatic histories in potentially liberating or limiting ways? Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, writes extensively on the concept of *la facultad*, which is the framework I will be using in this essay to describe what I mean by a special attunement to the forces that surround us as we share these deeply personal stories. Anzaldúa writes,

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world. (60)

This kind of unique engagement with the self, one another, and the world focuses on a heightened sense of awareness or aliveness, sometimes to an “excruciating” degree. It invokes different forms of inward or outward movement in this vividness, a sensation that is felt throughout Anzaldúa’s passage in her discussion of hyper-aware “sensing,” unconscious “perceiving,” and deep communicating: there is an alteration in the state of things, a movement in the air.

The capacity for communication and heightened states of living that involves movement is similarly manifested in Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa” when she writes on the power of the language of women: “Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible…” (347). We explicitly see here the fluid connection between language, motion (“carries”), and possibility. Cixous continues to note that, when speaking from the unconscious, women connect with one another and enter into an ambiguous state of being that is
“alive because of transformation” (emphasis added). Maintaining the convergence of the transformative and the vital, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga continually assert in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* that, “The very act of writing then, conjuring, coming to ‘see,’ what has yet to be recorded in history is to bring into consciousness what only the body knows to be true” (xxiv). Invoking and respecting our corporeal selves in the process of writing encapsulates a call to a more wakeful consciousness in our lives and in the lives of those around us, as connectedness is a powerful mainstay of the anthology through the metaphor of the bridge itself: “*This Bridge* can get us there. Can coax us into the habit of listening to each other and learning each other’s ways of seeing and being” (xxxi). I think it is important to prioritize experiences that bring us into this mind frame of a connected wakefulness not only for the benefit and potential healing of the story-sharer, but also for the larger cultural, social community, who will benefit from a more diverse, more complete concept of a conversation. This call to be awake and attentive invites us to move into richer dimensions of our lives; thus we must “fearlessly work toward more potent meshings.” This prioritization of deep connectivity and awareness coalesces with a consistent language pattern that is present in texts that formally and contextually represent movement and transformation: the usage of words containing the prefix “re.” I argue that this prefix has the capacity for this movement into deeper understandings of the world around us. In paying attention to the words used to tell certain kinds of stories, we can open the lid on a new dimension of understanding.

This prefix is inextricably linked to change and movement as it visibly and definitionally changes a word through its addition. Regarding historical storytelling, the prefix “re” is a

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1 Emphasis added. All quoted bolded words containing the prefix “re” are my added emphasis, unless otherwise noted.
2 Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* p. xxx
necessary linguistic feature in discussions of history, because we invariably return to experiences that have occurred in the past during any retelling or recording of experiences. The interesting element of the prefix “re” in this regard is that while we are indeed recounting a moment in history through writing or speaking, we do so each time in a completely new way. This newness that is generated through the prefix “re” is especially exciting in narratives written by people in historically marginalized groups because of the opportunity for generating necessary autonomous perspectival reparations in an understanding of a historical event. The prefix “re” formally mirrors this paradoxically repetitive return to an old event and the newness of the present retelling. In Merriam Webster’s online dictionary, “re” as a prefix has the following two definitions:

1 : again : anew
2 : back : backward

The two definitions of the prefix “re” contains meanings in multitudes, which are in line with some of Raymond Williams’ study of the complexities of words and their surrounding worlds in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. In considering the word “reform” Williams notes, “In most of its early uses it is very difficult to distinguish between two latent senses: (i) to restore to its original form; (ii) to make into a new form” (262). Much like the definition of the prefix itself, this similarly conflicting, multi-part definition of “reform” invites the possibility for two routes: something can be new, and/or something can be examined again in a process of backward-looking and restoration. One will note, however, the vast spectrum of connotations that encapsulate the freshness of the word “anew” especially when placed alongside the utter

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3 [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/re](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/re)
stagnancy of the word “backward.” One may also note the cyclical, repetitive connotations of the word “again” and the narrow-seeming path connoting the word “back.” How can all of these words and their myriad connotations define the prefix “re”? No matter which definition one chooses to home in on, it is clear that there is the consistent presence of a word and idea that is already there, being affected by the prefix. I am interested in the point where an idea is “formed” and, for various cultural, social, political, personal reasons, is incited to become “reformed.”

Williams aptly confirms, “The original meanings of words are always interesting. But what is often most interesting is the subsequent variation” (20-21). Changes and fluctuations in definitional meanings occur over time, as needs arise and voids are filled. Williams writes, “It is a central aim of this book to show that some important social and historical processes occur within language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and of relationships really are” (22), which makes me realize that the seemingly problematic conflict of a word having the capacity to be both “anew” and “backwards” at the same time is, in fact, of the utmost interest, alerting us to the “historical processes” occurring here. He insists that these “problems” or conflicts within language are “integral” and vital to the relationships in a culture. I would argue that conflicts in language can be especially generative in considerations, such as this one, of narratives that are socially reparative.

The word “reconstitution” and the ideas it connotes are political in nature, as are words such as “revolution” or “reform.” This political dimension of words containing the prefix “re” is the dimension that incited my initial investigation. The prefix “re” is also seen in the dimension of oppression, as in the words “repression” or “reconquer” which allude to the maintenance of order and the way things currently are. Alternatively, there is the dimension of hope or change,
such as in the words “rebirth” or “renew” which suggest positivity. I am interested in these words and their prefix “re” because I am unceasingly amazed by how two letters can signify such large and complex concepts, as seen in the very definition of the word, both positively and negatively. The prefix “re” not only has the power to connote opposing concepts, such as oppression and liberation, notions both “backward” and “anew,” but it also has the capacity to expound upon the very nature of what any prefix has the power to do to an existing word, which is to change its meaning completely.

To “re-” anything is to consider a concept that already exists, invariably. Lesley Ferachó notes the prefix “re” as she writes on the contextual and linguistic movement involved in the navigation of the identities of women of color regionally in her book *Linking the Americas: Race, Hybrid Discourses, and the Reformulation of Feminine Identity* and explains, "The prefix re indicates that a self-definition is already present at the time the subject chooses to express herself in the written medium" (3). The addition of a prefix is fastened to the pre-existing word and visibly shows a transition of ideas from the root word to its reinvented form with the addition of a prefix. The kind of writing that consciously taps into pre-existing notions is a focus of this examination, as reconsiderations of the self and surrounding communities often greatly benefit from an acknowledgement of the surrounding deeper realities, as earlier explained by Anzaldúa. Part of the work in exploring deeper dimensions of the self is through engagements in memory with the self and with events in history.

Collective and personal memories are closely linked to engagements with deep attunement to feelings + spacial physicality. I have been honing in on the phenomenon of how we remember events keenly once we are back in a certain space. I experience this phenomenon
regularly, such as when I walk through the streets near my first apartment in Brooklyn, I suddenly recall phone conversations I previously had while walking in those same streets, years before, and what they were about (some rife with the deep emotions of adjusting to my new self in a new city). Another example of mine of a connection between memory and space is on the rare occasion that I drive past my dad’s old house in Ohio, I remember significant events that occurred there; memories that are not in my consciousness mind until I return to the place where they occurred. I will be tracing instances like these in my six primary texts because of their pervasive familiarity and relatability, as they invite us to re-experience or remember events and details of our pasts.

The memories that return to me with a pang of deep feeling when I am in a particular place all do so because they are memories connected to experiences with forms of trauma and with other strong, affective feelings. Neuroscientist Rodrigo Quian Quiroga, in explaining a learned memory tool, elucidates this connection between place, memory, and strong feelings: “The method of loci highlights the importance of associations, in this case, of places with people or objects. In general, when we go back to a place, we remember not only the place itself but also whatever we did there… the most memorable events are those that best capture our attention, using remarkable images that are ideally charged with emotional content.” My most significant experiences with this phenomenon of place and memory are indeed inextricably reliant upon the feelings having high emotional impact. Ann Cvetkovich’s discussion of trauma in An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures is central to my connection between trauma, history, and place, as she writes: “I treat trauma… as a social and cultural discourse that

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4 Rodrigo Quian Quiroga The Forgetting Machine: Memory, Perception, and the “Jennifer Aniston Neuron” pp. 73
emerges in response to the demands of grappling with the psychic consequences of historical events” (18). These traumas that carry residual effects can be personal traumas or more collective traumas, which are rooted in political, social, historical occurrences.

For example, Edwidge Danticat’s novel *The Farming of Bones* engages in both kinds of trauma mentioned here. The main character Amabelle carries with her the personal traumatic event of watching her parents drown in a river, while she also works through the collective trauma of the ongoing conflict between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Danticat explains in an interview⁵ that one method for engaging with residual historical trauma is through storytelling: “Amabelle’s story is meant to be a kind of testimonial. She gets to tell it to me and I get to tell it to you. As Senora Valencia says in the book, there are many stories” (322). Cvetkovich speaks to this when she writes, “individual testimony is trauma’s paradigmatic genre” and that we can use the “individual story to open up new vantage points on national and transnational experiences” (123). Danticat and other authors are doing something new with something that has been often previously explored; in this case, in writing about the conflict between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and resulting massacre of 1937, as storytelling inherently elicits new opportunities to open up commonly shared ideas in a new way.

This kind of revisitation of well-known ideas and events through storytelling occurs across genres, and writers and artists are consistently compelled to revisit certain standard narrative themes that are common in canonical literature, music, film, and art. One such often-explored theme is that of the “open road,” the frequency of which may be attributed to the sheer volume of possibilities in this common, egalitarian space. It is an in-between kind of space,

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on the way from one place to another; one that is accessible to many, and thus is rife with experiential narrative. This common space is, however, a mostly masculine space, and Mark Ford’s article on Joni Mitchell in *The New York Review of Books* titled “She Shampooed & Renewed Us” engages in the implications of women entering in this avenue predominantly occupied by men. Ford writes on Mitchell, “Up until *Hejira* America’s open road seemed invariably to have been the imaginative province of men… The courage required to reconfigure so boldly and brilliantly such a well-worn trope…” (59). Ford celebrates that Joni Mitchell reconfigures a common theme, in this case, of the “open road,” maintaining that it takes courage to engage in something that has already been talked about so frequently over the years by various, predominantly male, artists. There are a multitude of intents in genre / narrative retellings such as these, one being to experience a known theme from a new perspective, or from another person. In Mitchell’s reconfigurations of the open road, we can see via Ford’s choice of word that she is actively considering again, or anew, the vast array of experiences of her movement through her career. Ford notes that the song “‘Coyote’ also initiates Mitchell’s presentation of herself as a restless seeking wanderer on Hejira as a whole -- the album’s title, meaning ‘journey or flight,’ alludes to Muhammad’s departure from Mecca” (59). This theme of the traveler on the open road in the album, perhaps in the mode of departure, is omnipresent, and in Ford’s use of the word “reconfiguration,” we sense a re-exploration: Mitchell is actively shaping and reshaping her version of this familiar narrative, in her original way as a prolific artist and as a woman. I am interested in projects such as these which are prioritizing narrative voices, in my case, the voices of women, which are supplementing historical and canonical themes in a way that is vital and necessity to the formation of a full picture of any theme or idea. As Mitchell
“bravely reconfigures” the spatial realm of the “open road” in her career as a musician, so do a vast array of women writers and artists who are re-engaging with their material.

Michele Wucker writes on the necessity of these kinds of re-engagements or retellings of familiar events in Windows on Haiti saying that, “Right now, reviving the memory of the massacre may be exactly what is needed so its story can be re-told: not in the words of strongmen but in the words of the ones who for so long have been silent.” It is vital to turn the attention to a new array of voices, highlighting women writers and stories about women who are creatively reconfiguring the narratives and stories being told about their experiences with events that carry these high amounts of emotional valence, such as the massacre. To retell a story of an event requires engaging again with memories and prior knowledges about a sometimes traumatic event, such as the massacre of Haitian people on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic that Wucker references. The memories surrounding these experiences are intertwined with trauma, pain, loss, and deep feeling, which is part of what makes these retellings so significant: these stories are being re-engaged with by those who had been previously silent, and requires great courage and support. This Wucker passage exemplifies the aforementioned language characteristic of many stories of deep affect, in that they often are declarative in their telling. Writers come out and say, either in the introductions or in the body of the texts, that they need to share. I would argue that this declarative writing shows the sense of urgency driven by trauma in sharing these stories. Cvetkovich writes on “Storytelling as a mode of survival” (106), which depicts the sense of urgency felt in many of the texts in this essay. She writes on storytelling as being necessary to a life of one who is working towards engaging with their traumas in a creative, communicative way.
Storytelling of any sort is communicative and connective, and this project seeks to examine narratives offering new perspectives of historical and personal experiences through pairings of authors, side by side. David Salle comments on the power of pairing works of art in his book *How To See: Looking, Talking, and Thinking about Art*. He writes about the experience of placing paintings side by side and examining the deep connectivity in the subsequent relationship, explaining “We tried to dig deep into what I call the shared DNA of art -- a connection on an almost cellular level. The paintings were carefully paired, and in their proximity, some current or charge jumped from one to another and back again. It was almost as though we were making diptychs using one of his pictures and one of mine. It was a little uncanny, but it was palpable” (196). Similarly, looking at primary texts in unlikely duos opens them up for new ways of engagement: there are greater opportunities for an electric charge to spark between them, as Salle writes. This kind of proximal engagement between and among creators has a corporeal quality, in the palpable, electric connection, as we are looking at how they interact not only on their own, but also in relation to another artist who is engaging with similar themes. These authors each engage with certain levels of affective experiences as they relate to the story retellings of traumatic collective and personal histories, especially in relation to significant places and spaces. I will also be paying attention to the language employed by these authors, and the particular pervasiveness of the prefix “re.” Specifically, I will be placing Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* next to Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*; Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* next to Ntozake Shange’s *If I Can Cook, You Know God Can*; and Assia Djebar’s *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* next to Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*. 
Salle brings to our attention the almost electric current or charge rebounding from artist to artist in a motion that can be thought of as continuous, as electrical currents in power always are. This concept of continual connectivity is also crucial to an analysis of the prefix “re,” in that in addition to being innately transformative, it is also at times cyclical. We can reconsider here the two-part definition of the prefix “re” as combining the terms “again,” “renew,” “back,” and “backward.” It is cyclical, repeating “again” and in this repetition, necessarily looking “backward.” At the same time of this backward-looking repetition, it is also necessarily “anew,” because for an electrical current to keep running, it must be repeated continuously, and is a wholly new charge every time. Narratives that engage with the past, even often-explored narratives, events, and themes, (such as that of the “open road,”) are always made “anew” in each retelling. Consider the words “return,” “remove,” “recycle,” etc. To return to a conversation or event suggests considering a concept that is already in motion, or at play: “turn” is a cyclical motion, as is “cycle,” and to “re” “turn” or “cycle” a conversation is to both look “back” / “backward,” yet in a way that is “anew.” Thus, the task of discussing historical experiences in any creative form is innately recursive, yet undoubtedly new, at the same time.

That a linguistic feature can formally and contextually perform this kind of contradictory repetitive-newness is exciting and important because it has the potential to invite new considerations of meaning of what we seemingly already know. This idea may be in the same dimension as the reparative task of “rewriting history,” however I am more interested the idea of "continuously reconsidering history,” as it is does not suggest finality or completeness. History sharing and storytelling of deeply connective, affecting, at times traumatic nature is indeed cyclical: a person looks back on a personal or collective history and speaks about the
surrounding memories. And, like these “re” words, the meaning of the root experience changes and is changed by its retelling.

**Maggie Nelson and Edwidge Danticat:** “His creed was one of memory, how remembering -- though sometimes painful -- can make you strong.”

Collective histories manifest themselves in tangible and intangible ways, and language is only part of how they can be represented in a culture. In a 2013 article in *The New York Review of Books,* Jeremy Waldron reviews two books by Alan Ryan, reminding us that “Societies run on memories.” Memories in a society can be celebrated and commemorated, difficult or violent memories can be engaged with in healing ways, and memories surrounding institutions can be relied upon as references as a society grows and evolves. Waldron writes, “An institution, whether a parliament, a court, or a prison system, has a genealogy -- layers of significance that represent what it or something like it has meant to a hundred generations before our own. And those meanings continue to resonate or, to change the metaphor, they are continually unearthed in the archaeology of our thinking” (41). Institutions have the potential to carry traces of genealogical meaning and layers that maintain throughout time and across generations, which in turn become necessarily complemented by current political social climates and surrounding culture. Edwidge Danticat’s novel *The Farming of Bones* discusses public and natural landmarks that hold meaning for centuries to come, which are physical markers that garner connectivity in the collective histories of many people. Amabelle, the novel’s main character, has lived in the

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6 On Father Romain in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* pp. 73
Dominican Republic since her parents drowned when she was young, and connects deeply to her childhood home through landmarks that hold great significance for her: “I closed my eyes and imagined the giant citadel that loomed over my parents’ house in Haiti” (45-46). This citadel is at the forefront of Amabelle’s memories of Haiti throughout Danticat’s novel; it haunts her dreams and memories as a part of her past when she remembers her homeland. The citadel is a part of the collective remembrance of Haiti for others in her community, as well, and we see this landmark celebrated when Amabelle encounters her friend, Father Romain:

“It is Amabelle,” he said, handing the kite to one of the older boys to fly, “she who is from the same village of the world as me, Cap Haitien, the city of Henry I’s great citadel.” Father Romain always made much of our being from the same place, just as Sebastien did. Most people here did. It was a way of being joined to your old life through the presence of another person… It was their way of returning home, with you as a witness or as someone to bring them back to the present…” (73)

Specific places have the capacity to transcend perceived limits in time and space, and can forge connections between people and their relationships to historical and natural landmarks in places with affective weight. The dimensions of relating to a place and to another person are made fluid in a moment’s time. The passage above is also characterized by repeated declarations: Father Romain feels compelled to re-state, aloud, their shared homeland, even though Amabelle and most likely anyone around them would already know this fact. It would also, presumably, be a known fact that Henry I built the citadel in Cap Haitien, however this detail, too, is spoken aloud.

Father Romain announces these connections to Amabelle in a way that is reminiscent of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on periperformative utterances, or everyday phrases that have an active quality to them, surrounding the dimensions of the performative. As a priest and regular orator, Father Romain’s practice is one that is steeped in near-theatrical deliverances of religious
beliefs that are rooted in both physical and verbal traditions. He is therefore not unfamiliar with the power of words and connectivity, and practices them in and outside of the church, such as when he interacts with Amabelle and this connection to their shared homeland. Sedgwick combines performance, language, and space in her discussions of the periperformative: “the localness of the periperformative is lodged in a metaphorics of space. Periperformative utterances aren’t just about performative utterances in a referential sense: they cluster around them.”

This rootedness in the physicality of performance and its connection to “metaphorics of space” is expressed in the very reason for Father Romain and Amabelle’s interaction: their deep connection to Haiti is invoked through this periperformative, declarative utterance when they come together in town. Through pointed yet everyday speech that is based in deep feeling and commonality, they transcend space and essentially open up a dimension of language that is based in a more physical realm. This periperformative has the capacity to elevate the language of the everyday, as it relates to moments of heightened affective response initiated by multi-layered connectivity. Father Romain and Sebastien are compelled to share these facts aloud, as a story, because they know these stories will not otherwise be told, causing them to have to weather the burden of traumatic story sharing because it is urgent and necessary.

This capacity for familiar people and familiar places to incite deep affective, even performative, responses is centered around memories and knowledges that are attached to certain spaces, either in our present or our past. As Danticat illustrates the importance of place, memory, and shared cultures among her characters, architecture historian Diana Agrest similarly discusses the potent impact of historical spaces. She writes that, “Certain types of configurations, like

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9 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 68
public places (streets, plazas, cafes, airports) are ideal ‘fragments of readings,’ not only for their ‘semantic volume,’ but also for the complexity they reveal… multiple codes and physical matter are articulated, where design and non design overlap, and where history and the present are juxtaposed.”

Agrest notes the combination of physical placements and emotional traces that reside in public places and their capacity to transcend time. Configurations of historical places have the power to bridge the past and the present through shared space, as in Amabelle’s focus on the citadel, and in her and Father Romain’s connection through their home. In addition to connecting with members of one’s community through a shared homeland and past experiences commemorated with public landmarks, Danticat also explores the power of memory in Father Romain’s interaction with Amabelle. Danticat writes, “In his sermons to the Haitian congregants of the valley he often reminded everyone of common ties: language, foods, history, carnival, songs, tales, and prayers. His creed was one of memory, how remembering -- though sometimes painful -- can make you strong” (73). Through preaching to the community of his congregation, Father Romain engages in a form of storytelling when he Reminds people to remember home. He mentions specific “common ties” grounded in physical details of Haiti to encourage connectivity in his community.

This kind of deliberate remembering is expounded upon greatly by Quiroga, who describes a series of results from the the psychologist Ebbinghaus’s 1885 “set of precise -- though unbearably tedious -- experiments on the capacity of human memory” asserting that the psychologist realized, as Father Romain clearly believed, “repetition and practice make memories last; the more he repeated the nonsensical words, the longer he could remember

10 Ibid.
them” (54). While this is true of scientific experiments, and can be applied to certain extents in the everyday, Quiroga adds that “The more we recall a memory, the firmer the etching… while repetition does indeed reinforce memory, the notion of static memories etched on our brains is very far removed from reality” (55). This kind of rote memorization tactic is indeed unrealistic because it is devoid of meaning ultimately. This consideration of tapping into the memories that are “etched” onto our brains is reminiscent of returning to historical experiences when participating in a narrative retelling. The stories we are compelled to share repeatedly depend on the affective strength of the etched memories, as we do not often perform, nor are we most interested in hearing, retellings of stories that are ultimately devoid of meaning. I would like to believe that Father Romain’s incitement to remembrance differs in that the frequent recollections would maintain their power because they are of meaningful memories of one’s prior life, not of a list of nonsensical words. Amabelle engages in a similar personal practice, noting that “When you have so few remembrances, you cling to them tightly and repeat them over and over in your mind so time will not erase them” (45). Amabelle has this anxiety of lost memories, even painful ones, as they are what tie her to her parents. We see Amabelle’s conscious awareness of her “remembrances” and this active need to “repeat” them overtly: this pointed task of the repetition of memories is cyclical in character, and we see the ways in which even words with the prefix “re” that do not have denotatively cyclical root words can still have this cyclical capacity. Amabelle finds a kind of solace in repetitive, cyclical remembering; it is urgent for her because it is all she has of her past. This notion of finding strength in painful memories is echoed in Maggie Nelson’s The Argonauts, where she writes:

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11 Quiroga, pp. 56
People say women forget about the pain of labor, due to some kind of God-given amnesia that keeps the species reproducing. But that isn’t quite right -- after all, what does it mean for pain to be “memorable”? You’re either in pain or you’re not. And it isn’t the pain that one forgets. It’s the touching death part. As the baby might say to its mother, we might say to death: I forget you, but you remember me. I wonder if I’ll recognize it, when I see it again. (134-135)

This combination of reproduction and death so closely aligned here is meaningful in how we see moments of active reproduction of a painful, death-related memory, with Amabelle, and in of active forgetting during the physical reproductive act of childbirth, with Nelson. Amabelle engages in “the touching death part” as her last memories of her parents, which she revisits continually, in that she escaped the river that took her parents. Amabelle holds on to this painful experience with death because it has become a part of her identity: she “reproduces” the memory repeatedly in order to remain close to her parents.

Nelson also describes the deliberate and non-deliberate revisiting of experiences when she writes “The pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one’s work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again -- not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life” (112). In paying attention to the words Nelson uses in this passage, we see, as we see in almost all previous passages, the frequent usage of the prefix “re” and the way she calls, and in fact declares the necessity of, repeatedly revisiting the sometimes difficult mental and emotional work in our lives. She insists that these “revisitations” are not tedious or indications of our inability to grasp something the first time around; instead, she explains that these very relearnings, returns, recognitions, realizations, and revisitations are in fact the very stuff of our lives. By defining these returns as life constituting, Nelson not only gives permission to spend
the time in the cyclical re-engagement with our past experiences; she seems to insist that it is necessary.

If we look at her words “return” and “revisitations,” they are similar in that the root words “turn” and “visit” already imply movement, of being elsewhere and turning to or visiting a place. The addition of the prefix “re” suggests a potentially infinite set of movements, enough to “constitute a life.” Danticat is working through similar ideas of “revisitation” and “return” in both Amabelle and Father Romain’s repeated revisitations of, what Nelson describes as “the same themes,” either verbally or in one’s mind. Revisiting and recognizing the experiences and memories that connect us indeed make up a large part of what constitutes any person’s life, not just for Amabelle and Father Romain: I am invited here, too, to recall my own repeated memory revisitations that I share with time and time again with friends and family in acts of both fond and difficult memory reminiscences, and recognize that these affective memories indeed “constitute a life,” or a large segment of our lives. Two other words in Nelson’s passage, “recognizing” and “relearn” similarly suggests the infinite, (the most exciting quality of the prefix “re” as opposed to how the prefix can suggest oppression or cycles,) yet instead of movement, as “turn” and “visit” suggest, the root words “cognize” and “learn” clearly denote knowledge acquisition. With the addition of the prefix “re,” these root words connote the potential for continual, fruitful, information gathering.

The unceasing quest for understanding and knowledge is at the center of Amabelle’s practiced memory work. She fixates on the memory of her parent’s death, which is set at the Dajabón River, also known as “Massacre River” at the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Amabelle’s repeated recollection of this scene is described as follows:
I thought that if I relived the moment often enough, the answer would become clear, that they had wanted either for us all to die together or for me to go on living, even if by myself. I also thought that if I came to the river on the right day, at the right hour, the surface of the water might provide the answer: a clearer sense of the moment, a stronger memory. But nature has no memory. And soon, perhaps, neither will I. (309)

Here Amabelle further rationalizes her memory replay, engaging more specifically on attunements to the environment. She considers precision of moment and place: “right day, at the right hour” in an near metaphysical way. As Danticat considers precise timing of these revisitations to the specific place of the river, another kind of deliberate precision regarding memory strengthening and remembrance is in her repetitive declarative naming in telling this story: “His name is Sebastien Onius and his spirit must be inside the waterfall cave at the source of the stream where the cane workers bathe, the grotto of we moss and chalk and luminous green fresco -- the dark green of wet papaya leaves” (282). In Amabelle’s ritualistic, deeply personal, pointed naming of Sebastien, and of “reliving” the moment of her parent’s death, she connects to nature. The river and the waterfall, generally continual, streaming sources of life and vegetation, seem to be endless sources of life for Amabelle, each time she returns to them in her meditative, cyclical way.

Similarly, Nelson discusses the power of naming in directly addressing her partner: “Then, after dropping out of college and moving to San Francisco, in a Judy Chicago-style rebirth, you renamed yourself Harriet Dodge” (137). This autonomous renaming that Harriet Dodge enacts connects to the renaming that Amabelle practices as she continuously re-names the name “Sebastien,” aloud, in a similarly deliberate, conscientious way. Nelson quotes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on this kind of tracing of movements and naming:

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive -- recurrent, eddying, troublant,” she wrote. “Keenly, it is relational, and strange.” She wanted the term
to be a perpetual excitement, a kind of placeholder -- a nominative, like *Argo*, willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip. That is what **reclaimed** terms do -- they **retain**, they insist on **retaining**, a sense of the fugitive.¹²

For Nelson, terminology has the ability to engage in movement and recurrence; specifically, reclaimed words. Reclaiming a word or a concept or a name has similar cyclical characteristics, innately, which calls for continual moments of quick movements, as Nelson notes on in her word “fugitive.” Danticat touches on this convergence of returns to place with storytelling when she writes, “I dream all the time of **returning** to give my testimony to the river, the waterfall, the justice of the peace, even to the Generalissimo himself” (264). Amabelle’s unconscious, sleeping mind revisits the river where she lost her parents and shares her perspective of the events. This is something she is yearning for repeatedly, in her dreams, in a way that depicts a sense of urgency or necessity in telling her story. This sensation of rectifying feelings via a return is centered on testimony: how a dream can organize actions so strongly. We can see Danticat’s prioritization of dreams as a central source of information and clarity for Amabelle, and they encourage her to share her stories, perhaps ambivalently.

**Alison Bechdel and Ntozake Shange:** “*Then I started seeing how the transcendent would almost always creep into the everyday.*”¹³

As we have seen with Danticat’s Amabelle, dreams have great power in negotiating the space between our conscious and unconscious realities. Like the prefix “re,” dreams offer us a chance to look “back” into elements of our conscious life as we re-engage with them in our unconscious, in a way that is “anew.” In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria

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¹³ Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?* pp. 33
Anzaldúa speaks to this when she writes, “The other mode of consciousness facilitates images from the soul and the unconscious through dreams and the imagination” (59). This “other mode” of our consciousness invites us to be more attuned to the fullness of ourselves. Through revisiting past experiences through storytelling, often involving trauma or containing deep affective feelings, we can become more connected to ourselves and the world around us. Paying attention to glimpses of our unconscious can help us form these fuller pictures of ourselves.

I am particularly interested in how dreams can give us insight into our world around us in ways that can be directly applied to our conscious selves. Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* is a graphic text that weaves together the genres of memoir and psychoanalysis in a way that exemplifies this move to being awake to the bridging of our conscious and unconscious selves through deep affective experiences. Bechdel repeatedly illustrates a respect for the significance of dreams, and pays attention to the ways in which they can direct her waking self. Each chapter begins with a dream sequence which sets the tone of her present analysis; many times, the dream, or themes from the dream, are retold by Alison subsequently throughout the chapters. She sometimes tells her therapist, her partner, or her mother about the dream in various ways, as dreams continue to be a cause for examination for Alison throughout her life. Bechdel writes: “When she was exactly the age I am now, and I was in my early twenties, Mom responded to a letter I’d written to her about a dream I’d had” (31)

In the same panel, we see the letter, which states, “I have puzzled over your dream. I don’t know what it means. I dream about brain tumors and babies. I am staring out my dirty windows at the lilac buds. Now I am trying to analyze why I put those two things together. Why do you and I do

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14 Note: Because *Are You My Mother?* is a memoir, I will differentiate between Alison Bechdel as author and Alison Bechdel as character in the memoir by using her last name for the former and her first name for the latter.
that? Patterns are my existence. Everything has significance. Everything must fit. It’s enough to
drive you crazy” (31). This panel depicts Bechdel’s alertness to the converging detail that she is
the same age that her mom was when she was writing this. In this letter, the past and the present
converge through the document and details about her ages; Bechdel keenly connects the past to
the present through her alertness to this pattern. The time-spanning convergences, however, are
never fully aligned, as dreams indeed engage with the content of our conscious, but in a fractal,
even random way. As with the prefix “re,” we are engaging again with converging themes, in a
cyclical or repetitive or revisionary way, yet they are always innately “anew” even in their
patterned repetitions.

Anzaldúa writes on this alertness to the patterns of the everyday when she writes, “As we
plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the
soul, and we are thus carried into awareness -- an experiencing of soul (Self)... Confronting
anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us into a
less literal and more psychic sense of reality increases awareness and la facultad” (61). The
capacity of la facultad to awaken the self to greater depths of our everyday lives is alive in
Bechdel’s text, as she connects theory, psychology, relationships with women in her life, and her
own personal experiences into a cohesive understanding. Bechdel repeatedly engages in this state
of increased awareness that Anzaldúa explains, as seen here: “The emotion of the dream stuck
with me for days. I had gotten myself out of a dead place and plunged with blind trust into a
vital, sensuous one” (5). A keen alertness to the senses and how they affect each other is at the
center of the interconnectedness of Bechdel’s life, which she depicts in her form of storytelling: a
combination of written and precise pictorial articulations. This combination of media increases
the richness of Bechdel’s storytelling, as we can view the patterns of her experiences in form(s) that allows the reader to be in touch with more than one of his or her senses at a time.

Ann Cvetkovich elaborates on this notion of patterned convergences, particularly at the intersections of race, trauma, and sexuality, stating that this kind of thinking “require(s) a method that is alert to the idiosyncrasies of emotional life” (7). Like Anzaldúa’s concept of *la facultad*, Cvetkovich insists on a similar alertness to the deeper dimensions of the everyday that coalesce with various elements of our world, but in idiosyncratic, random or dream-like ways. Bechdel continues her meditation on her awakening, incited by the coalescence of her dreams and coinciding patterns in her daily life: “The idea that our unconscious possesses such sure aim excited me. I became more attuned to my own ‘erroneously carried out actions’” (47). Bechdel continues to detail in a series of panels an example of this alertness:

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15 *An Archive of Feelings*
16 Bechdel quoting Sigmund Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*
17 Note: These quotes are broken up line by line to represent Bechdel writing them each in separate text boxes.
I cinched the knot and hustled back to the driver's side.

Tonk!

The plank caught me right between my eyes.

Twice a day for a year I'd been taking herbal tablets from my acupuncturist called "brighten the eyes." Now when I looked at the bottle, I saw this:

Also, for a few days a pimple had been swelling between my eyebrows.

The "third eye," or brow chakra in Indian medicine, is where we look not out, but in.
Soon after being whacked in the face with this board, she takes an herbal supplement, noticing for the first time that it is called Between The Eyes, while also noticing a pimple that was forming between her eyes. All of this attention to the physical space on her face leads her to think about the concept of the “third eye” and of looking inward on to oneself. Bechdel writes on this multi-factored attunement: “Then I started seeing how the transcendent would almost always creep into the everyday” (33) regarding being alert to the affective patterns in her life. This kind of acute awareness of the patterns of the everyday, exemplified above in one of many converging moments in Bechdel’s text, shows a great connectivity of the senses.

Ntozake Shange speaks often of the way our senses relate to one another, if we stop and pay attention to them, in her hybrid genre text If I Can Cook, You Know God Can, which is part cookbook, part familial memoir, and part meditation on the relation between movement and place in the African diaspora. Shange writes in her recipe of “Okra, Tomatoes, Corn, and Onions” that, “Yes, this is one of my favorites. When I smell this cookin’ (even if I’m cookin’ it myself), tears well up in my eyes. Now I’m not going to condescend you every time we attempt some recipe by reminding you to wash the food and your hands…” (75). These little moments, described by Shange as she cooks with okra, are ubiquitous occurrences in life: sensations that cause affective responses, when we are alert to them. In her text, Shange frequently connects the senses through cooking and in her physically being in a kitchen, and in re-enacting the this recipe, she is able to connect the past and the present. Similarly, Bechdel takes meaning from them sensorial responses to specific places, and as the text moves, we see how significantly space and place affects her responses to things. In a therapy session, Alison recounts an evening she had with her partner:
“When we passed the catholic church, all these people were going in. So I said, ‘Let’s go to mass!’”

“Maybe this’ll snap us out of the fight” (42).

Alison’s immersion into the atmosphere of the church elicited a visceral emotional response in which her drawings aid significantly in the storytelling of moments like these. The precision with which Bechdel draws, in this panel as in many others, the difference of engagement between Alison and her partner Amy is vital to understanding Alison’s affective response to the scene.
We can see that Alison is glancing down, with raised eyebrows and a look of deep feeling mixed with surprise, as Amy is standing calmly looking ever so slightly to her left, away from Alison’s line of sight. Bechdel makes sure to direct Amy’s gaze slightly to the left so that there is no mistake in thinking that she too is having this affective experience: we know that the combination of elements in this scene is affecting Alison, alone, because they engage with traces of her past experiences, which are unique to Alison. Part of the reason for this strong response in Alison is that she has physically returned to a scene that is familiar to her, as she has many memories of being in church and participating in church plays from her youth. Returning to the physical space of the church elicits a traumatic response from Alison, as she is physically incapable of remaining in this space that is filled with memories and strong feelings of identification to the scene before her; she is uncomfortably transported to the past in a deeply affecting way.

One way of thinking about Bechdel’s experience in this scene is that of the uncanny, precisely in that it is based in the familiar being made strange. Anthony Vidler writes on the power of affective responses when being in a particular place or space in *The Architectural Uncanny* explaining that,

> In his essay on the uncanny, published in 1919, Freud took as his own starting point for an enquiry into personal and aesthetic estrangement the complex significations of the German word for “uncanny,” *das Unheimliche*, literally the “unhomely”... For Freud, “unhomeliness” was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream. (6-7)

To have an uncanny experience is to experience something again, but in a new, strange way; definitionally similar to the prefix “re,” and re-experiencing something that is both influenced by what is “backwards” and also “anew.” Many of Alison’s strongest manifestations of somewhat
traumatic memories occur repeatedly in associations with physical locations, such as the church. Vidler elaborates on the connectivity of space and feeling: “the ‘uncanny’ is not a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation; it is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming” (11). Tying these sensations to dreams, Vidler further connects this “mental state” of keen mind and body awareness, explored at length in Bechdel’s text. What Alison experiences in the above scene is a combinatory response, to being in church and seeing the children in their theater costumes. In considering Vidler’s use of the word “representation,” above, when speaking of the type of “mental projection” occurring with the uncanny, we can think of it as a twofold experience for Alison: the familiar scene in the church is represented to her in her present moment, while simultaneously acting as a familiar-made-strange re-presentation of her past memories, experiencing this scene as a young person. This “aesthetic dimension” as Vidler puts it, which is a combination of Alison’s “mental state” of seeing the children, propels her into having what I would argue is an uncanny experience, for as we later learn, one element that caused Alison to react in this way was because she was reminded of an array of presumably uncomfortable feelings associated with the time in her life when she was a child in church plays, too. This is precisely how the uncanny works: it is an affective response that depends upon an experience being familiar in some way, only to become uncomfortably defamiliarized through some change in state, place, or time. I would argue, as Vidler expounds on, that specific places have the ability to propel us into uncanny experiences, because of the memories they hold in our psyches, released when we return again to the specific places.
As seen throughout Bechdel’s graphic novel, she engages repeatedly in a form of storytelling (among many that she engages in), of retelling events to her therapist. In this scene, the retelling of the church experience produces an affective response yet again for Alison: “Under Carol’s questioning, the impulse to cry returned. Again, I resisted it” (43). Bechdel retells this story to her therapist, and in this form of storytelling, being told to someone she cares about deeply and feels comfortable with about a topic that is filled with emotion, Alison had to reexperience the feelings connected to that event. To conclude with this particular church scene, there is a final moment in which Alison begins to plan her exit from the church. On the way out, she witnesses a man and a woman leaving just before them, prompted by the woman feeling ill and potentially getting sick. Bechdel writes, “We exited at the next opportunity, and to my great relief, the woman and any sign of her were gone” (44). In a moment of physical and emotional relief, Alison crosses the spatial threshold of the church as her emotions are temporarily alleviated, in moment that is almost physically bursting (with the woman nearly throwing up) with strong emotional and physical feelings. In this series of panels, we see how the significance of place evokes strong feelings in Alison, which she recounts later to another person, momentarily reliving the affective response. This specific phenomenon actually occurs, interestingly, to not only Alison, multiple times, but also to her mother and grandmother: there seems to be a historical recurrence of women in her family having strong affective, in their case, depressive, responses to being in a church. Her mother recounts to Alison the story of how she and her mother, Alison’s grandmother, have experienced this phenomenon:

I’d be standing in church with you on one side and Christian on the other, and just not know how I was going to make it through the day. It was hell.
My Mother was depressed once, too. She told me about it soon after I got married, when I was about your age….
She went into a depression for almost a year. Then one Sunday morning in church, she was looking at the hat of the lady in front of her. It was exquisitely trimmed, but the woman had left her needle and thread in it. Mama laughed out loud, and the depression was gone, just like that. (98)

Not only are there curious convergences in the fact that we see three generations of women being depressed in the same place, a church, but also we see another example of how the past and present connect through stories: we find out that Alison’s mother, in this retelling, was the same age as Alison is in the present. Of course each woman’s similar experience with site-specific affective responses are unique and specific to her own experience at that time, yet the similarity in place is significant. I find these coincidences to be striking because they show the possibility of how a physical place can aid in this kind of acute connection, if only in the moment of the story, of place and even time. In this scene we also see how “Mama’s” depression is relieved in a sudden burst of contradictory emotion: she notices something that elicits a strong, happy response in her, and she vocally breaks with her depressed status quo and moves into another mental state. Bechdel continues this consideration of her historical bouts of depression: “My depression at age twenty-six lasted only a few weeks. But as a child I used to experience occasional fleeting pangs of a terrible sadness. They almost always happened in church. As soon as I became conscious of the feeling, it would dissipate” (99). Bechdel overtly states this historical connection between her bouts of depression and her being in church, as her mother and grandmother also experienced. We can see this connection between the psychology of a specific space when Vidler writes that, “An early stage of psychology was as a result even prepared to identify space as a cause of the fear or estrangement hitherto a privilege of fiction; for an early generation of sociologists, ‘spatial estrangement’ was more than a figment of the imagination,
but represented precisely that mingling of mental projection and spatial characteristics associated with the uncanny” (11). This spatial significance does is not always negative, with Bechdel, or associated with events from her past that trouble her still, today.

This phenomenon is indeed frequently in church, but we see that the theater is another spatial realm that Bechdel often writes about, and which is a space that is generally associated with positive affect. The theater is a shared space of connectivity for her mom and herself, of creativity, writing, and storytelling, for each of them individually as well as collectively. We see instances in the text of Bechdel traveling great distances to come together in the theater, often to either watch her mother perform in a show or to see a beloved show together. We see the frequency of this experience: “Amy and I drove nine hours from Vermont, checked into a motel, the raced to the theater, late” (234) and again, “One weekend when I was fifteen, Mom and I took the bus to New York so she could see the 1976 revival of the play on Broadway” (235), to name a few. Alison and her mom manage to connect most fulfillingly when they have layers of narrative surrounding them, engaging with one another through the mediation of the storytelling surrounding them on stage and through the characters. In order to tap into this connectivity, it is a characteristic occurrence for both Bechdel and her mom to frequently traverse spaces to convene in the significant place of a theater.

We can see a similar engagement with spaces of familial connectivity through creativity in Shange’s text, too: “And so, for now, we are not virtual families, but sense memories of movement, aroma, accents, and tastes peculiar to the hands of our blood relations… Anyway, an amazing energy breaks out between the kitchen and the dining room in the midst of simmering stews, roasts, or fried anything” (82). I see a similar “energy” that “breaks out” between Bechdel
and her mother, one that surpasses any tension between them, when they are in the place of a theater, much like Shange’s experience to being in the space “between the kitchen and the dining room.” There are opportunities for great connectivity with those we love if we alert to the affective responses of our being in significant places and spaces. Through storytelling and sharing, we can begin to see the patterns of these experiences and develop a greater awareness of their happening.

Oftentimes, the theatrical works that connect Bechdel and her mother are shows about writers, actors, or creators. Bechdel writes that, “I suppose it only makes sense that I feel closest to my mother with not just a play between us, but a play about acting. A self-reflexive mise-en-abime” (243). Bechdel’s attention to the repetitive instance of self-connection and identification on stage and with her mother is significant: their repeated reflection, bolstered by theater and connective narratives, is a kind of “re” experience. Recognizing the specifics of what connects us most is key to continuing to engage in these kinds of connective, meaningful experiences. Shange writes often on how certain recipes and circumstances can be overtly healing in traumatic times that continue in the present, as in the past. Shange recalls a memory set in Nicaragua of pointed healing as a result in connection in the midst of pain and physical reconstruction of her home. Shange writes:

That night in Managua we were able to cover the scars of war with poetry, music, and abandon ourselves to the impulses of our bodies in the night heat and each other’s arms. The volcano where Somoza dropped the bodies of anyone for any reason was covered with mist and clouds. I only thought once about the house I grew up in that had disappeared and been resurrected as a police station. The thought broke my heart, but the fact of all of us let me hold my head high. (22)

Shange talks about here how words and creativity and connectivity helped her through the realization of physical change in a place she once loved. We even see Shange exercise control
over her wandering memories, thinking back to her old house but pulling herself back into the
present, appreciating her current environment and being comforted by this moment’s
combination of senses. Shange writes in this passage of the ability that poetry and music have to
“cover the scars of war,” and we have seen other texts in this examination which showcase how
forms of storytelling and creative sharing not only connects people, but has the capacity to make
better traumatic histories. This phenomenon is certainly the case for Bechdel, which she grapples
with repeatedly throughout the text. To her therapist, about her mother: “The thing is, I can’t
write this book until I get her out of my head. But the only way to get her out of my head is by
writing the book! It’s a paradox.” (23)

As with the recursive connectivity of the theater, this paradoxical cyclical nature plagues Alison,
as she states many times her discomfort regarding the present state of her book, repeating “I have
to rewrite my book.” (28) and also, “I just need to tell a story” (28). In one of her characteristic
moments of relation and awareness to the convergences in her life or in her readings, she takes
comfort in writers who experience similar things, writing that “In her 1928 diary, Virginia Woolf
makes a second mention of how writing To the Lighthouse released her from her parents’
thrall”… (in an illustration of one of Woolf’s letters): “I used to think of him and mother daily:
but writing The Lighthouse, laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but
differently. (... writing of them was a necessary act.)” (152). Here Woolf concludes that in order
to become at peace with her parents, writing was in fact a necessity for her. Similarly, Bechdel
resolves near the end of the text: “My therapist had urged me not to ‘write’ during this trip, but to
simply be present with Mom” (241) “But I would argue that for both my mother and me, it’s by
writing… by stepping back a bit from the real thing to look at it, that we are most present” (242).
There is clear vitality for Bechdel and her mother in processing information from the everyday through writing or recording, and I think that this form of storytelling, even if it is kept private, is important to articulations of a personal or collective history, especially one that is laced with trauma. Gloria Anzaldúa has a similar relationship to her writing process, explaining,

When I don’t write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write. I can’t stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make ‘sense’ of them, and once they have ‘meaning’ they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy. (92)

We have seen that Bechdel’s powerful resigned embracing, or acknowledging, of writing for her is indeed the way in which she engages most deeply with her mother and with herself. She becomes consciously aware of her experiences through re-living them in her writing. The necessity for the creation and re-creation of narratives and images that both Anzaldúa and Bechdel prioritize is urgent and healing for them. As we can see in examining Anzaldúa’s use of the word “reconstruct” in relation to her re-engagements with traumas, we see the element of autonomy that is deployed. Shange re-engages with both warm and difficult memories from her past through re-creating familiar dishes in the kitchen. In their reconstructed narratives, these writers are indeed both looking “backward” at the sites of the trauma, but in their own way, one that is “anew.” Words containing the prefix “re” support this kind of autonomous capacity in narrative: writers and storytellers can reconsider their traumas in diverse ways that are on their terms, allowing them to reconnect with themselves, and with others, in a pointed way. This kind of declaration of expression is vital to the connectivity among relating to the women in her life.
Assia Djebar and Michelle Cliff: “they tell the (his)story of colonization, but tell it otherwise”

Similarly, Assia Djebar’s *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* engages with a deep call to physically articulate stories. While Bechdel insists specifically on *writing* as a way to connect with reality and others, the women in Djebar’s stories engage solely in verbal speaking, sharing, or storytelling as a way to connect (although Bechdel *does* also engage with verbal sharing regularly and meaningfully through her frequently depicted therapy sessions). Djebar introduces her text, a collection of stories, in the “Overture” explaining, “These stories, a few frames of reference on a journey of listening, from 1958 to 1978. Fragmented, remembered, reconstituted conversations … Fictitious accounts, faces and murmurings of a nearby imaginary, of a past-present that rebels against the intrusion of a new abstraction” (1). In the first sentence of the book, Djebar in the “Overture” describes her project as a “journey of listening” to bits of conversations that she is recrafting and recording, in her own way. She seeks to share stories of women that are not so far away; in the “past-present” who engage with one another, as there are very few men who are of central, or even minor, focus in these stories.

Near the end of the first and longest story, “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment” old friends Sarah and Anne take their time in listening to each other’s stories and feelings, speaking freely in a dark room. Sarah says,

> For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in all the women’s quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects. Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons!... The Woman as look and the Woman as voice,” she added somewhat obscurely… Sarah thought of those generations of women. She imagined having known them all, having accompanied them: her only and trembling certainty. (50)

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18 Assia Djebar, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* pp. 171
This final powerful line, one that moves me greatly, describes this strong urge for connection among generations of women who have shared these similar experiences of silence and restraint. Sarah sees talking as the only solution to decades of isolation and silence, and she excitedly proclaims that these words should transcend spatial boundaries. This insistence to speak is primarily spoken about here as a way to “unblock everything,” past and present, to engage more coherently in what is going on in their lives. But these women also note that speaking like this can be a connective method among women. During this same conversation between Sarah and Anne:

I see no other way out for us except through an encounter like this: a woman speaking in front of another one who’s watching; does the one who’s speaking tell the story of the other one with the devouring eyes, with the black memories, or is she describing her own dark night with words like torches and with candles whose wax melts too fast? She who watches, is it by means of listening, of listening and remembering that she ends up seeing herself, with her own eyes, unveiled at last. (47)

That an urgent “remembering” is offered as a solution to isolation is significant: remembering a history is not only healing to the person doing actively doing the speaking, the remembering, but it seems to get shared in an act of transference, through this very telling. By looking “backward” at her memories and reconstructing them in a way that is wholly “anew” via this retelling not only impacts herself, but also her listener. There is an urgency in this insistence to speak about memories, not only in that Sarah again explains that this is the only viable solution for “a way out” of their experiences, but also in the way in which her potent words must be spoken hurriedly, in a race with melting wax. Sarah says that in an exchange like the one they are having, women can see themselves through conversations and develop a sense of connectivity through this communion.
In an “Afterword” interview by Clarisse Zimra, Djebar divulges her inspiration for the story “Nostalgia of the Horde” when she writes, “I got the idea from my former mother-in-law, who was able to show me that a woman’s memory spans centuries -- just one woman. She would talk of an obscure, forgotten old woman she used to know who used to talk of the old days” (170-171). The passing of centuries of information through stories told from woman to woman is a powerful thought, one that harkens back to the character Sarah’s desire to know and accompany the generations of women from her community. Djebar continues, “This is precisely how Algerian women ‘relay’ the past: they tell the (his)story of colonization, but tell it otherwise” with the word “(his)story” containing the following footnote: “In French, histoire indiscriminately refers to both ‘story’ and ‘history.’” (170-171). Algerian history, French history, and the history of all countries have been written about, taught, and explored for centuries. I am interested in this history, and all histories, told otherwise. In this case, Djebar is engaging in the stories told among women during the French colonization in Algiers. In a footnote, Djebar explains that the inevitable influence of language mixing that history is not fixed, but rather, is a mass concept of ever-changing perspectives, as new voices and new stories add to it over time.

Throughout the short stories of this collection, Djebar continues to engage in the layers of history contribution that occurs through storytelling. In “Nostalgia of the Horde,” the story inspired by Djebar’s mother-in-law, as noted above, we see a traditional exchange between generations. “‘Little mother,’ Nfissa begged, snuggled up against the great-grandmother in the bed, ‘tell us about your husband…. Nobody but you knew him … not even father!’” (123). Information about the great-grandfather is held seemingly exclusively by the great-grandmother,
one sole person carries the information about another person’s existence. It is a gift and a burden to bear, as I consider in my own life exchanges that only I have had with another person; if I never share them with anyone else, or write them down, they run the risk of never being recorded or shared. This, of course, happens constantly, as two people can live for decades together without creating a written or an oral account of the little things that happen over time. This notion is the most liberating and the most impossible characteristic of history: there are endless perspectives that go un-contributed to a historical event, and there are endless perspectives that have yet to be added to our current comprehension of a time in history. Through storytelling, writing, and speaking, we have a bottomless opportunity for further, richer, and more inclusive understandings of times and places.

Communal connectivity through communication and storytelling among women in Algeria was not always an easy phenomenon, as Sarah urgently engaged in with Anne in earlier passages. She exclaimed that talking and connecting, woman to woman, was the only solution for “unblocking” a blocked conception of their experiences. It can be seen throughout Djebar’s collection of stories that the conversations that happen among women are inextricably influenced by the specific spaces they inhabit at the time. One of the spatial mainstays in the historic culture of Algerian women is the baths, where woman travel to regularly to cleanse their bodies and souls. In the story “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment,” a small group of young women gather together in the baths:

The bather who was singing near the marble slab continued her somber threnody. “What is she singing?” Anne asked under her breath. “It’s just one word she keeps repeating… A lament she’s modulating,” Sonia said after a minute. “She’s improvising.” “It’s more that she’s consoling herself,” Baya added. “Many women can only go out to the baths… We’ll see her soon in the cooling room. We can talk to her then.” (30)
In this scene, Anne, Sonia, and Baya discuss the spatial limitations of some of the women in their community, and contribute to the array of sounds that are housed in the specific locale of the baths. This is a social opportunity for some women, and it is also an opportunity for a freer kind of solitude, in solo lamentations. The bather’s repeated lamentation is thought of to be an exercise in self-soothing, as Baya notes its consoling properties; as Quiroga expounded earlier on the importance of repetition in memory work, I could imagine here that the bather is perhaps using the melodious repetition to cement a concept or feeling through repetition, or to use the repetition to detach herself from other thoughts and experiences of her everyday life. The baths represent a coalescence of space and conversation, either between others or with the self; they are inextricably interwoven as many Algerian women would have the baths as a space for community.

The connection between place and communication is also a common phenomenon for people who have immigrated to a place with a wholly new culture. Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* traces the movements of multiple Jamaican families in a non-linear narrative. The Savage family moves to New York City from Jamaica, and Kitty Savage, the matriarch of the family, is trying to settle into her new neighborhood. She observes, “The Italian women called across the clotheslines and yards and fences to each other, their conversations sounding a constant background, embroidering the events of their days and nights, difficulties, celebrations, marriages, recipes, scandals, brand names, patterns, and the news of the movie stars -- their marriages and deaths. Why did they matter so?” (66). Kitty notices the way the external domestic thresholds of their homes, “clotheslines and yards and fences,” foster an incessant, wide-ranging space for conversation among the Italian women in her neighborhood. Much like
the Algerian baths, Kitty notices and explores new spaces in New York City that offer this kind of space for storytelling. While Kitty does not partake in the neighborhood conversations, she finds her own spaces of connectivity: “She soon learned to travel out of the neighborhood and, forsaking the salumerias close by and the bodegas some blocks away, found a passage into Bedford-Stuyvesant, where in between the high-priced ghetto-specific chain stores she discovered shops from home, as if they had been airlifted intact… they smelled so strongly of home” (64-65). A range of Kitty’s senses are activated in navigating this new place and in creating the narrative of her memories of home. Inviting Kitty via an array of sensory connections, these shops became her specific place of community and home. Cliff describes Kitty’s connection, “In these shops she broke her silence, here she felt most the loss of home, of voice, even as she brushed the loose dirt off the yam-skin, imagining its origin in the bush… In these places she was unto herself, speaking to the shopkeepers as if solitary” (65). In a greater exploration of her new surroundings, Kitty finds a neighborhood and specific places within it that allow for her to work through the silence she has been maintaining since moving from Jamaica. In an attunement to her sensorial connections and memories of home, Kitty seems to inhabit this newfound sanctuary with a sense of relief and comfort. Specific spaces that are especially charged with connective characteristics invite opportunities for engagement that are reserved solely for that place.

As Kitty is opened up by the sensorial connection to the shops of her home in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Djebar describes a similar sensation experienced by the women in the baths: “But, while she moves toward Anne and offers to untangle her wet hair for her, she listens to the unknown woman with the absent eyes; in the back, a brouhaha of interwoven voices. The
whispering about troubles continues once the pores of the skin are thoroughly open, and open too the shade of cold stone. Other women, mute, stare at each other across the steam” (32). There is an explicit connection between the physical opening that occurs while at the baths to the corresponding verbal opening that results among the women. This is a near-sacred space that offers an experience for sharing and storytelling that is found elsewhere for many of the women who populate the baths. At the end of this passage, however, as mentioned briefly in earlier passages, we see that not all women partake in the conversational communion taking place in the baths, as some are “mute” yet engage with each other still in looking at one another in this shared space. I think their silent presences are almost as telling about the nature of the baths because clearly this is a space that radiates connectivity in all forms, not just verbal forms. Djebar continues to describe moments of not-necessarily-communal, space-related expression when she details a repeated experience:

Sarah stared at a specific house, not far from the municipal theater, close to an arcaded street. An antiquated balcony, the only one without curtains and open. Every day at the same moment, around six in the afternoon, a woman in a long skirt, orange-petal bright, would appear, half lifting a four- or five-year-old child. Her arms sketch out a dance, the same one every day. She twirls around once, twice, then stands motionless, as if suspended, distant, half bent above the noisy square…. She drives through the hubbub, can’t manage to forget the unknown woman. (22)

Even though it is solitary and indirect, there is a connection between the two women in this repeated act. Sarah recognizes that this is a repeated ritual for the unknown woman, and while she does not know the precise personal significance of it for her, she connects this act on the balcony as one of deep meaning, partly because the woman’s windows are solitarily drawn shut, in comparison to her neighbors. In this quite solo moment, while it may have a speculative trace of fleeting, scopophilic liberation, this woman routinely engages with her child outside the
confines of their home; this is the place where they come every day for some unknown source of sustenance, but in its repetition, clearly maintains a significant momentary coalescence of space and deep feeling.

Through this examination, I have been considering the particular phenomenon of being alert to significant moments of deep feelings in our lives because of its capacity to open up a person and a community to greater dimensions of understanding. This openness is important and powerful because it invites us to consider our lived experiences and historical memories in a variety of ways, and from new perspectives. As mentioned earlier, Alison Bechdel powerfully notes that, “Then I started seeing how the transcendent would almost always creep into the everyday” (33). Bechdel’s line repeats in this essay, as I hope to repeatedly reconsider deeply affecting moments of our everyday lives, and see the ways in which it has the power to transcend the ordinary and into an examination of their deeper meanings. Looking at and celebrating moments that transcend our everyday knowledges and experiences is important when engaging with the non-concrete domains of memory, trauma, and story sharing that have been at the center of this thesis. These intangible realms are indeed significant, deeply affecting, and transcendent, yet they simultaneously are experienced by many. Through exploring multiplicitous manifestations of deep affect that is incited by one’s surroundings and physical place in the world, we can begin to see the ways in which the physical and psychological architecture of an environment is connected to us on an unconscious level. In my study of the prefix “re,” we can see how, in the very language being used in both the literary and theoretical texts, we are able to look both “back” into our histories, traumas, and experiences, and share them in a way that is “anew.” Revisiting our memories unconsciously through the physical connection of being in a
particular place that continues to hold a store of these memories and feelings is a phenomenon that I hope to continue to engage with in texts, written in particular by marginalized authors. The emotional energy of a familiar space invites us to reconsider the past, and reformulate those experiences into our present. Narratives that take the shape of memoir, graphic text, cookbook, essay, novel, and hybrid forms of these genres and more are exciting in the way that they each engage with these connections between memory, affect, space, and language in diverse yet familiar ways. The prefix “re” invites us to reconstitute our narratives and stories in an autonomous way that continually, cyclically encourages new arrays of voices that will be able to necessarily complicate existing narratives.
Works Cited


