

TRAUMA, NARRATIVE, AND THE MARGINAL SELF IN SELECTED  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVELS

By

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This dissertation examines trauma from a psychosocial perspective, with a specific focus on the issues of social oppression, disempowerment, and disenfranchisement of the minority subject in America. Trauma describes the disenfranchised pain and grief that cannot be integrated into a person's general meaning structure and belief system. The unspoken grief of minority subjects and their social abjection remain outside the realm of the social symbolic. This study analyzes the traumas of minority subjects portrayed in selected contemporary American novels and examines the narrative functions of healing and defiance.

Chapter 1 contextualizes some of the fundamental issues of this dissertation and examines the relationship between trauma, identity, and narrative. It discusses the constitutive role narrative plays in the development of identity and explores the possible role narrative can play in altering the social symbolic for designated victims of society.

Chapter 2 examines the impact of racism on African-Americans by analyzing the deformation of love in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, with a focus on the intergenerational transferral of racial self-loathing, the backdrop of layered traumas Morrison depicts. I use the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's concept of selfobject and explain the psychological impact of racism on the marginalized group in terms of the lack of idealizing and mirroring selfobjects.

Chapter 3 deals with the Holocaust and its survivors, with a focus on Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies, A Love Story*. By examining various symptoms of trauma and the uncanny haunting by the past catastrophe Singer portrays in his characters, I read the Holocaust allegorically as an open wound of history not worked through.

Chapter 4 discusses the issues of immigration and cross-cultural passage by analyzing the interstitial plight of Asian-Americans portrayed in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. By reading the dynamics of the immigrant family in terms of an inverted oedipal drama, I examine how the precarious subject position of Asian-Americans as inside-outsiders triggers a distorted assimilative desire.

Chapter 5 examines questions of interpretation and the politics of mourning, and concludes by exploring the performative, healing function of trauma literature.

CHAPTER 1  
THE MARGINAL SELF AND TRAUMA: THE STRANDED SUBJECT IN THE  
PERFIDIOUSLY CONSTRUCTED HISTORY

Trauma: an event in the subject life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization.

J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis

**Trauma, the Quandary of the Marginal Self**

Trauma is a liminal experience of radical deracination and calamity that brings about a violent rupture of the order on both the personal and the social level. It annihilates the sense of continuity in our lives and our self-narratives, bringing to the fore the contingency of our lives. It destroys the “fundamental assumptions” or “the bedrock of our conceptual system,” which helps us to conveniently manage and confidently transform a myriad of random experiences into a certain view of our reality.<sup>1</sup> Not feeling like oneself due to a sudden, violent change is the “hallmark of being traumatized,” according to Charles Edward Robins, who treated many survivors of the tragedy of September 11, 2001, including those who were at the World Trade Center when the tragedy happened.<sup>2</sup> As *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term, trauma was originally a medical term used to refer to “a wound or an external bodily injury,” or “a psychic injury, especially one caused by emotional shock the memory of which is repressed and remains unhealed” or “the state or condition so caused.” But it has also

become a word widely circulated in a more general and figurative use. Common to both the medical and the contemporary common use of the term, as well as to Freud's definition of trauma as a "breach" in the "protective barrier"<sup>3</sup> are the elements of shock and rupture.

It has become a truism to say that we live in an age of trauma and testimony. The bombarding news of war and genocide in different parts of the world and the abiding presence of terrorist threats within the borders of the United States have become part of people's daily lives as they find themselves just a few sound bites away from the site of violence when they watch the evening news. Particularly after the tragedy of September, 11, 2001 struck the nation, which plunged the threshold of people's general sense of safety and security, it is no longer possible to envision a world immune from the pain of others and the immediacy of danger that can ravage one's life without warning. The repercussions of catastrophic events cannot be safely contained within regional and temporal borders and travel rapidly these days. In this vein, Kirby Farrell, as if uncannily predicting the devastating disaster that would shake the entire nation just a few years later, analyzed the dominant cultural narratives of the nineties and called ours a "Post-traumatic Culture."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's argument that testimony is a "crucial mode of our relation to events of our times"<sup>5</sup> is even more relevant nowadays when we find ourselves surrounded by inundating, instantaneous media coverage and reports about almost every kind of human catastrophe.

We now live in a culture that is immersed in the permeating atmosphere of unpredictable but imminent hazard and crisis, for the advanced technologies of information processing expose them to an instantaneous reliving of cataclysmic incidents.

One of the striking characteristics of trauma is the salient visual aspect of its “episodic” memory, which, unlike the general “semantic” memory, is highly emotionally charged and stays in an activated, “primed” state without being integrated with other memories.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that those who have watched the instantaneous and repeatedly played out scenes of violence or atrocity, like the attack on and collapse of World Trade Center, cannot shake the “indelible” memories. Yet there can be possible negative consequences ensuing from the hypervisual and hypersignified presence of trauma in our society.

The increasing circulation of images and the incessant influx of cataclysmic incidents covered by the media can lead to two opposite ways of relating to others’ pain: desensitization to and objection of others and their tragedies or a secondhand victimization or traumatization. A pervasive cultural atmosphere saturated by images and narratives of violence may desensitize people to what they see and hear, making it just another mundane part of their daily lives. As Michael W. Smith warns by invoking Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern theory of simulacra and simulation, in “the postmodern world lacking distance or interiority, where everything occurs instantaneously and is explicitly visible,” the “fatal” collapse and erasure of the distinction between appearance and reality can occur.<sup>7</sup> In an even worse case, the observer of others’ trauma, as Patricia Yaeger cautions us about the increasing trend in the academic world to talk and publish about the dead, atrocities, and haunting, can sometimes turn into a “consumer” of the “pornography of violence” who ends up “merely circulating” the signs and discourse of trauma, which is already dissociated from the lived history of the victims, and objectifying or revictimizing others who already suffered enough.<sup>8</sup>

A different kind of danger can also arise from being heavily exposed to the signs and narratives of trauma. If people do manage to maintain an empathic stance toward the victims of trauma and their tragedies without falling into the trap of postmodern simulation, or into the lure of objectifying others' pain by propagating purely intellectual discourses about them, they still face another hazard: the risk of suffering vicariously from the excruciating pains and violence they indirectly witness. A prolonged exposure to others' calamities can influence, change, and even traumatize those who interact with them. In addition, the impact of the post-traumatic condition is not confined only to one generation. As many testimonies of Holocaust survivors and their children show, the persistent, pernicious power of trauma, which is intergenerationally transferred, does not fade and haunts the children of trauma survivors. A daughter of a Holocaust survivor expresses the ominous presence of her parents' war time ordeal and memories: “*Shoah* . . . , it's my shadow, like footsteps walking up behind me.”<sup>9</sup>

If not worked through properly, trauma and its ominous, fatal aura of doom can influence others “as through a kind of wordless osmosis.”<sup>10</sup> Unless translated into a meaningful narrative and placed in a proper context, strengthened by communal support and the willingness of both survivors and bystanders to engage attentively in the arduous process of undoing the injury, traumatic events and the memories of the events will remain either disparate, fragmented bits of information and empty noises, or the toxic remains of the past people want to avoid and turn their backs on.

Then how can we work through trauma to stop its vicious cycle of devastation without falling victims to it? How can we maintain proper respect and optimum distance when we regard and discuss the pain and trauma of others? What aspects of trauma make

it particularly difficult to work through and mourn for the past catastrophe? What alternative mode of community or sense of community should we forge, if, as Susan Sontag maintains in her discussion of the role of photographs portraying the distressing agony and violence inflicted upon others, “no ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain”?<sup>11</sup> What kind of role does narrative play in the process of working through trauma and undoing trauma victims’ “entrapment” in their catastrophic past by “re-externalizing the event” that has “gone inside without [the self’s] mediation”?<sup>12</sup> These are the key questions that address issues of trauma, testimony, and working through from an ethical perspective.

Yet it is important to differentiate between being exposed to the real-life trauma such as the tragedy of 9/11 or the Holocaust and being exposed to the trauma of fictional characters. The depiction of the traumatized takes on a different implication and plays a different role in the literary, fictional world than in the real-life situation. Since the trauma of fictional characters takes place in a highly controlled, artistic way in the literary world, the impact of fictional characters’ trauma on the reader is much more mediated and controlled. In addition, the narrative function of healing and defiance, which the author produces by his or her sustained empathic stance toward victims of trauma, critiques the traumatogenic forces in society that bring about the real-life trauma and helps to create an alternative vision of society that is not founded upon the subjugation of selected designated victims or minorities.

In my dissertation, I approach trauma mainly from a psychosocial perspective with a specific focus on the issues of social oppression, disempowerment, and disenfranchisement of the minority subject in America. As Robert Jay Lifton argues, in

every society there is a group of “designated victims,” whom people create to “live off” both economically and psychologically.<sup>13</sup> These designated victims meet the society’s need for pariahs and people to look down upon in order to shore up its ideal ego. In America, people of color and ethnic subjects, discriminated and often exploited because of their race or their ethnic backgrounds different from those of white Americans, are the dark shadow of the American dream and the founding egalitarian principle of the nation.

If trauma is fundamentally about the radically devastating experience of having one’s world irreparably fractured by an intrusive force that is beyond one’s control, then minority subjects, who are discriminated and denigrated by society, bear all the time the overwhelming weight of such intrusive force. Hence, their traumas, which are the result of constant stress and a prolonged exposure to the ever-present threat of oppression and humiliation, are different from those resulting from one distressing incident. As Laura S. Brown, in her analysis of the invisible psychic scar of the socially underprivileged, points out by drawing on Maria P. P. Root’s concept of “insidious trauma,” there are “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit.”<sup>14</sup>

I call the self of the traumatized “marginal” for several different reasons. First, by the term “marginal” I refer to a feeling of disorganization and helplessness that traumatic incidents induce in their victims. Traumatic catastrophes or conditions of life put people’s world off-kilter, producing a subjective sense of being alienated from the center of their being. In addition, I also use the term “marginal” in the sense that the victims of trauma are marginalized and occupy a degraded position in society as a result of their harrowing

experiences. Going through traumatizing events, researchers maintain, creates a “contaminated identity” for victims, which breaks their spirit and makes them shunned by others.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, trauma robs its victims of the means to process whatever upheaval they go through and pushes them to the abysmal periphery of the society. Consequently, the peripheral zone, to which the traumatized are driven, is an asymbolic zone of chaos, utter aloneness, and shame-inducing marginality. Finally, the term “marginal” also refers to the position of degradation and exclusion a certain group of people are forced to occupy because of their race, gender, or ethnicity. When the victims of trauma are already “peripheral,” disempowered members of community, the traumatic experiences they endure constitute an additional assault on their integrity and safety. The catastrophic site of trauma is a site of the unacknowledged or unfathomable loss and pain of the marginal self, and their loss and pain need to be placed in the context of communal support and attentive, empathic listening. In order to do so, a new way of perceiving the relationship between the self and the other is necessary.

### **The Other as the Uncanny Shadow of the Self**

One of the ethical and political thrusts of trauma studies lies in the fact that traumatic incidents, as Jenny Edkins points out, are “overwhelming but they are also a revelation.”<sup>16</sup> That trauma is so painful and hard to cope with has to do with the fact it shatters the harmoniously synchronized illusions that support our self-centered view of the world and gloss over the gaps and fissures of our social fabric. “Trauma,” as Edkins argues, “is what happens when [what is] normally hidden by the social reality in which we live our daily lives, is suddenly revealed.”<sup>17</sup> Although referring to the different context of immigration, not directly related to trauma, Julia Kristeva also astutely remarks, “The ear is receptive to conflicts only if the body loses its footing. A certain

imbalance is necessary, a swaying over some abyss, for a conflict to be heard.”<sup>18</sup>

Traumatic events forcefully make us confront the fact that there exists something that elides or surpasses our neatly regulated and maintained paradigm of the world. Slavoj Žižek in this respect compares trauma to the Lacanian Real, which “is a shock of a contingent encounter which disrupts the automatic circulation of the symbolic mechanism” and is comparable to “a grain of sand preventing [the symbolic mechanism’s] smooth functioning,” for it “ruins the balance of the symbolic universe of the subject.”<sup>19</sup>

Through the fissures that the violent intrusion of the Real creates, we sometimes glimpse certain anxiety- and guilt-provoking constitutive elements of our society that we repudiate and relegate to the realm of the personal or social unconscious, because they are not congruent with the system of meanings that supports and safely ensconces our existences in the world we comfortably inhabit. The historical trauma of slavery and racism in America that served to shore up the white hegemonic self and the national ideal of freedom and equality, for example, are the revelatory symptoms of the repressed and unclaimed experiences that ultimately underpin and anchor the unfounded grounding of the seemingly “perfect” and seamlessly unified society.

The known but unacknowledged presence of devalued, denigrated others is, to borrow Toni Morrison’s term, one of the “unspeakable things unspoken,”<sup>20</sup> because it buttresses and maintains the social status quo by subjugating minority groups to the arbitrary rule of the hegemonic group for the political and economic gains of the latter at the expense of the former. And the perpetuation of the structural injustice of society is made possible by the “lethal discourses of exclusion blocking access to cognition for both

the excluder and the excluded.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, the lethal discourses of exclusion create a distorted relationship between the self and the other, in which the discriminated, subordinate minority subject, via a series of psychic mechanisms of internalization and identification dictated by the dominant rules of society, is reborn as the dark and uncanny shadow of the hegemonic self.

In explaining the devalued and discriminated minority subject as the dark, uncanny shadow of the hegemonic self, I invoke the phrase “dark continent,” a term Freud used to describe female sexuality, which is a symptomatic nodal point of simultaneous fascination, degradation, and dread.<sup>22</sup> I also draw on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and her view of the intimate relationship between the self and the other. “Abject,” Kristeva argues, “is something rejected from which one does not part,” and “abjection” “disturbs identity, system, order” for it is the “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>23</sup>

The self on the margin is the self, to use Kristeva’s term, that suffers from abjection by society, which fails to realize that the other it persecutes and expels to the limit of its territory is none other than the projected shadow of itself, just as the uncanny is actually the familiar and known that has been made into the strange and alien by repression.<sup>24</sup> Since the protective wall between the self and the denigrated other is set up to prevent the return of the repressed and to ensure social stability, the other provokes anxiety, fear, and at the same time, forbidden fascination. The other, trapped within the wall of the inverted, hegemonic logic of abjection, becomes the dark shadow of the privileged member of the mainstream society. As Franz Fanon discusses in his well-known episode about the shock and terror he felt at being labeled “Nigger” by a frightened white boy,<sup>25</sup> confronting the

fact that one has been reduced to the dark shadow of the other, and that one's existence can be reified into a despised object by the other's judging gaze brings about dire, traumatic psychic consequences.

Erik H. Erikson provides an effective example of the psychic toll social abjection exacts from an early age in life from a member of minority group. In one of his developmental case studies examining children's development of identity and social consciousness, through their pattern of play, Erikson gives a poignant but chilling example illustrating how the detrimental social stance toward minorities infiltrates the mind of the most innocent member of society at a tender age, warping his self-concept and eroding his self-esteem.<sup>26</sup> In his study of about one hundred fifty young children aged ten, eleven, and twelve, conducted for over a year and a half, Erikson set up a play table and asked them to play with toys they randomly selected in order to create a movie scene. The case that deserves our attention concerns a boy whom Erikson identifies as "one of the colored" and "the smallest" of them. He built his toy scene "*under* the table." The black boy's seemingly innocent action reveals that he has already internalized the racist ideology, which assigns to people of color negatively prescribed, debased subject positions in its social hierarchy. Since the basic tenet of Erikson's experiment is that "seemingly arbitrary themes tend to appear which on closer study prove to be intimately related to the dynamics of the person's life story," he notices the peculiarity manifested in the boy's creative play as a "chilling evidence of the meaning of his smiling meekness: he 'knows' his place."<sup>27</sup> The ominous implication of the black boy's "knowing his place" at such an early age is obvious.

To be the cultural, racial, or ethnic other who exists on the margins of society and to have others' definition of oneself thrust upon one is traumatic. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes, the concept and state of marginality work by the "principle of identification through separation."<sup>28</sup> The other is an ideational construct, or the dark shadow of the self, which the self-centered, tendentious logic of hegemony creates by various mechanisms of identification through separation, such as splitting, projection, and displacement. Emphasizing the imaginary nature of identification, Judith Butler explains how the social symbolic compels its subjects into performative acts, which take place in relation to societal demands, prohibitions, and fear: "[Identifications] are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation; they unsettle the 'I'; they are the sedimentation of the 'we' in the constitution of any 'I.' . . . they are that which is constantly marshaled, consolidated, retrenched, contested. . . ." <sup>29</sup> A sad truth is that for the minority subject, the "sedimentation of the 'we'" in his or her "constitution of the 'I'" involves elements of abjection, denigration, and disempowerment. Consequently, if he or she internalizes the self-denigrating rhetoric of the dominant society long enough, he or she becomes a stranded subject in the long perfidious history, which is constructed and engineered by the self-serving hegemonic ideology.

### **Identity and the Narrative Function of Healing and Defiance**

Victims of trauma, like the victims of other kinds of calamities and social injustice, are, Homi Bhabha asserts, the ones who are "signified upon," and thus in order to be free from the debilitating grip of helplessness, it is necessary for them to "unspeak."<sup>30</sup> Those studying the close relationship between identity and narrative agree on the constitutive role narrative plays in the development and maintenance of identity. "Identity essentially

is a narrative matter,” and narratives communicate “what is significant” and how “things matter” to people.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is integral for those who have what Hilde Lindeman Nelson calls socially “damaged” identities as a result of their continuous exposure to and internalization of the insidiously colonizing, denigrating rhetoric of the hegemonic group, to construct a “counterstory” that can unsettle the cumulative history of subjugation and help them to extricate themselves from the trap of victimization.<sup>32</sup>

It is true that, as psychoanalysis shows, people live in a subjectively constructed world, and hence, how they construct their worlds differs from person to person. Although for minority subjects, this process of narrative and identity construction is likely to unwittingly include a component of self-denigration, not all minority subjects respond to their marginalization in the same, passive way. Therefore, it is possible to “talk back,” or “write back” to alter the social symbolic that inflicts a detrimental psychic wound on the designated victims of society.

It is my contention that the question of trauma, especially that of social trauma, which is essentially a matter of radical violence and violation inflicted on the helpless, can be boiled down to an issue of a symbolic “tear” in the victim’s self-narrative, as well as in the social fabric of unity. When the otherness or alienation caused by trauma is too much to bear, it erupts as a violent acting out or an impassive deadening of the self or dissociation. The narrative mediation and symbolization of the past, harrowing experiences that the victims of trauma had to go through, are missing in both cases. The repeated re-enactment of traumatic conditions or experiences by the traumatized testifies to the persistent and pernicious force of trauma, the devastating effects of which are not tamed by narrative. If the traumatized do not put their past cataclysmic experiences into

perspective by narrative in order to integrate and accept them as part of their lives, they will remain in the “black hole” of trauma that saps the life out of them by fixating them on trauma.<sup>33</sup> Hence, they will engage themselves in the perpetual and hopeless effort of regaining their foothold on the solid social ground that has already crumbled under their feet.

Trauma is often called an “action schema,” in which victims partially remember and repeat their traumatogenic pasts without cognitively and emotionally recognizing their meanings.<sup>34</sup> Saying something about trauma changes it, for as Charles Edward Robins argues, narrative as a “symbolic work. . . lays a net over it.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than seeing the general feeling of disintegration and loss that pervades our culture as an entirely new phenomenon, we need to see it along the line of our continuously increasing awareness of the potentially destructive forces of civilization, or, what Horkeimer and Adorno several decades ago called, the haunting historical “wound in civilization.”<sup>36</sup>

The imbalance, which catastrophic incidents people usually call traumatic precipitates, foregrounds the actually porous nature of the boundary between the self and other, which, under normal circumstances, is made into a thick wall of discrimination and segregation, which is carefully guarded, policed, and maintained by the dominant group. Yet what the collective trauma of marginal groups, such as the Holocaust, the slavery and racism inflicted upon African-American, and ethnic genocides, reveals is the inextricably bound, complex circuit of recognition between the self and the other, which usually travels on an uneven road in only a unilateral direction.

In order to revisit the scenes of uneven recognition and desubjectification of the marginal self, I analyze, in the following chapters, different ethnic subjects’ traumas

within the context of their collective history within the United States. In chapter 2, I explore the devastating impact of racism on African-Americans with a focus on Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. I borrow the concept of "insidious trauma" from the ethnographer Maria P. P. Root and use it in order to explain the detrimental effects of racism, particularly, racial self-loathing, which is the backdrop of the layered traumas of the Breedlove family Morrison portrays.

In chapter 3, I turn my attention to the tragic collective fate of the European Jews who had to endure a massive trauma of incomparable magnitude both in terms of its severity and the number of its casualties. In analyzing Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies, A Love Story*, which deals with the lives of some Holocaust survivors in post-war New York, I interpret the protagonist Herman Broder's continuous imaginative reliving of his war-time ordeal as the symptom of trauma not worked through. Of particular interest is the irony that the coping mechanisms Herman adopted to survive the Nazi persecution, such as deception and disguise, bring about his ultimate downfall after the war. I also note that his former wife, who was presumed to be dead for years, returns after escaping from the massive open grave of the Jews. I interpret her resurrection rather symbolically as the symptomatic kernel of the conjoined personal and communal trauma, which, not worked through properly, is hard to escape from.

In chapter 4, I explore the issue of immigration, cross-cultural passage, and loss portrayed in the Korean-American novelist Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. The novel depicts Asian Americans' difficult struggle for survival as what I call "interstitial ethnic subjects" who exist as "inside-outsiders" positioned between the whites and the blacks. I read the trope of "spying," presented by Henry Parks' profession as an ethnic spy, as the

plight of the interstitial ethnic subject. Additionally, I also interpret Henry's difficult relationship with his father as an inverted Oedipal drama, in which the immigrant father becomes a fallen, deposed patriarch who inadvertently provokes and intensifies his son's assimilative desire. Finally, I approach the death of Henry's biracial child, as well as the ultimate downfall of Kwang, a Korean American politician Henry is assigned to spy on, in terms of their symbolic social implications that hint at the ethnic future of America.

In my final chapter, I examine questions of interpretation and the politics of mourning concerning traumatic events. The need to contain, tame, and control any threat to the social order compels the social politics of mourning. The politics of mourning deflects attention from the traumatogenic forces within society, which disenfranchise and inflict psychic wounds upon certain selected groups. Arguing that the deliberate restaging of trauma in a controlled, empathic environment helps to counteract both the pernicious, ever-lasting effects of trauma and the controlling social politics of mourning, I explore the performative, healing dimension of trauma literature that portrays and resignifies cataclysmic events and their victims in order to expose, critique, or deconstruct the wounding forces that cause trauma and unspoken grief.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *The Shattered Assumptions: Toward a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Edward Robins, *New York Voices: The Trauma of 9/11* (Madison: Psychosocial Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE 18 (1920), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Kirby Farrell, *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Kent D. Harber and James W. Pennebaker, "Overcoming Traumatic Memories," *The Handbook of Emotional Memory*, ed. Sven-Ake Christianson (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992), 377-379; Regina Palley, *The Mind-Brain Relationship* (New York: Karnac Books, 2000), 56; Lenore Terr, *Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories, Lost and Found* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 49-51, 13; Julia A. Golier, Rachel Yehuda, and Steven Southwick, "Memory and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Trauma and Memory: Clinical and Legal Controversies*, eds. Paul Appelbaum, Lisa Uyehara, and Mark R. Elin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 236-237.

<sup>7</sup> Micahel W. Smith, *Reading Simulacra: Fatal Theories for Postmodernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Yaeger, "Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002), 41. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Alan L. Berger, "Ashes and Hope: The Holocaust in Second Generation American Literature," *Reflections of the Holocaust in Art and literature*, ed. Randolph L. Braham (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1979), 137; quoted in Alan L. Berger, "Ashes and Hope," 106.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," Felman and Laub eds., *Testimony*, 69-70; Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," *Trauma and Self*, eds. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, "Interview" with Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. ed. Cath Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 139.

<sup>14</sup> Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," Caruth ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 93-94.

- <sup>16</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003), 5.
- <sup>17</sup> Edkins, 214.
- <sup>18</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 17.
- <sup>19</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 171.
- <sup>20</sup> Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publisher, 1990)
- <sup>21</sup> Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture 1993,” *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approach*, ed. Nancy J. Peterson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 270.
- <sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis: Conversations with an Impartial Person,” *SE* 20 (1926), 212.
- <sup>23</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 183; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 4.
- <sup>24</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 183-186.
- <sup>25</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 111-113.
- <sup>26</sup> I thank Professor Norman N. Holland for pointing out this case and directing my attention to it.
- <sup>27</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963 [1950]), 99.
- <sup>28</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993), 55.
- <sup>29</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 105.
- <sup>30</sup> Homi Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 454.

<sup>31</sup> Linda C. Garro and Cheryl Mattingly, "Narrative as Construct and Construction," *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing*, eds. Cheryl Mattingly and Linda C. Garro (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2000), 9. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Hilde Lindeman Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001). For more ideas about the functions of "counterstory," see her chapter 5.

<sup>33</sup> Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane, "The Black Hole of Trauma," *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, eds. Bessel A. van der Kolk et al. (New York: Guildford, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Robert M. Galatzer-Levy, "Psychoanalysis, Memory, and Trauma," *Trauma and Memory: Clinical and Legal Controversies*, eds. Paul S. Appelbaum, Lisa Uyehara, and Mark R. Elin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 147.

<sup>35</sup> Robins, *New York Voices*, 128.

<sup>36</sup> Marx Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1987[1944]), 216. Quoted in Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 19.

CHAPTER 2  
TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE: THE BROKEN CONNECTION OF THE SELF IN  
TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

We are all the time constructing narratives about our past and our future and . . . the core of our identity is really a narrative thread that gives meaning to our life, provided . . . that it is never broken.

Donald P. Spence. "Narrative Persuasion"

The essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences.

Bessel A. van der Kolk. "The Separation Cry and the Trauma Response"

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back" that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice.

bell hooks. "Talking Back"

**"Insidious" Trauma: Suppressed Histories and the Foreclosed Self**

The generally accepted clinical definition of trauma pertains to experiences where an individual witnesses or faces "an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" and it typically causes responses of "intense fear, helplessness, or horror."<sup>37</sup> As Laplanche and Pontalis point out, trauma is mainly characterized "by its intensity, by the subject's

incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychological organization.”<sup>38</sup>

Since the inception of its discussion, trauma has been associated with an image of a single devastating “blow” or an acute “stab” that breaks the protective shield of an individual and thus causes deadly and irreparable bodily and psychic damages. In his *Studies on Hysteria* with Josef Breuer, Freud first approached trauma in terms of “quantities of excitation too large to deal with in the normal way” and argued that in hysteria “a considerable part of this ‘sum of excitation’ of trauma is transformed into purely somatic symptoms.”<sup>39</sup> Since he gave up his “seduction theory” in 1897 and worked on building his metapsychology, his research moved away from his initial interest in trauma with the result, that, in the feminist psychotherapist Elizabeth A. Waites’s words, “the role of trauma in psychological development and psychopathology has remained in the background of psychoanalytic theory and treatment.”<sup>40</sup> When he returned to the topic of trauma more than two decades later in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” however, he again asserted, “It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection . . . with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli”<sup>41</sup> and explained the repetition compulsion in terms of the individual’s active attempts at mastering of a passively experienced, overwhelming incident.

Yet recent studies of the socio-political dimension of trauma have proved that trauma can result not only from a single devastating event but also from the accumulated effects of a series of events or chronic life conditions.<sup>42</sup> Thus, especially in connection with issues of social oppression and power dynamics, trauma studies recently has begun to pay increasing attention to the factors of duration and accumulation of traumatic

experiences to properly understand the history of violence and abuse committed by a dominant society against groups of disenfranchised and disempowered people and to examine the full psychological impact of trauma on these people's lives. When a society singles out and persecutes groups, the "designated victims" (Robert Jay Lifton) or "targeted groups" (Kali Tal) become the psychological capital upon which the dominant group lives.<sup>43</sup> As Lifton maintains in reference to Jews in Nazi Germany and Blacks in America, these victims are the "people off whom we live not only economically . . . but psychologically" because "we reassert our own vitality and symbolic immortality by denying them their right to live and by identifying them with the death taint, by designating them as victims."<sup>44</sup>

The long-term effects of oppression and its psychological impact can be understood in terms of the feminist psychotherapist Maria P. P. Root's concept of "insidious trauma." Root explains the specific traumatogenic effects of oppression and broadens the limited concept of trauma as individual distress to include the communal experiences of women, children, and minority groups who have been neglected in the development of theory. This concept of insidious trauma is helpful in understanding the psychological plight of the socially disempowered. As Root explains, insidious trauma is "usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power" and illustrates how this kind of experience indirectly but insidiously becomes a "distinct threat to psychological safety, security, or survival."<sup>45</sup> For many victims of social injustice, trauma is a communal problem that plagues them insidiously, and its relationship to social oppression is undeniable. As Kai Erikson notes, trauma precipitates "a constellation of

life experiences,” and a prolonged exposure to dangers and threats creates a community whose members, in their “spiritual kinship,” share the same pain and burden, and suffer from a gradual process of “psychic erosion.”<sup>46</sup>

Frantz Fanon provides a classic example of the psychic erosion a particular minority group experiences due to systematic oppression and discrimination by citing his own traumatic experience of encountering racial fear in a white child. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon narrates his encounter with a child’s terrified look of racial phobia and recounts how, under white eyes, his being became fixated by the “racial epidermal schema.”<sup>47</sup> At the moment of his public humiliation, which he compares to that of bodily amputation and psychic splitting, he reflects upon the psychic toll this hostile confrontation takes on his selfhood. His analysis also shows how a sustained and persistent exposure to disempowerment and denial of their autonomy makes socially oppressed subaltern groups develop and internalize a uniquely pernicious psychological system of self-loathing and insecurity.

To use Fanon’s terms, subalterns are compelled to wear the “mask” of the dominant Other, and in relation to this Other each of them comes into being as an “abject” subject. As David Marriott points out in his study of trauma and racial phobia in “Bonding over Phobia,” the subjectivity of the oppressed is always mediated by desire and abjection, and at the interstices of cultural fantasy and anxiety the oppressed and the oppressor bond through defensive antagonism and mutual “misrecognition.”<sup>48</sup>

Speaking of an Antillean whose security and self-worth are constantly challenged, Fanon observes that his subjectivity is woven out of “a galaxy of erosive stereotypes” based upon white men’s myths, anecdotes, and stories. In a phrase highly reminiscent of

W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness," Fanon observes that "Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit, arises" and that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man."<sup>49</sup> In a world that Fanon defines as determined by the Manichean struggle between the conqueror and the native, the colonized lives with a fractured psyche and a sense of existential nonbeing.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Fanon's example, as Marriott points out, illustrates the "sick bond of phobia whose trauma remains with the black subject."<sup>51</sup>

As concepts such as Root's "insidious trauma" and Erikson's "psychic erosion," as well as Fanon's and Marriott's examples illustrate, the forces that control and conspire against the socially oppressed work surreptitiously but detrimentally. Once internalized, the adverse effects of subjugation become a traumatic pathology plaguing the inner world of the socially devalued. Like imprisoned captives, the victims lose their sense of autonomy under the coercive and systematic control that instills helplessness and fear, and destroys their fundamental sense of self. These "broken" victims with what Judith Herman calls a "contaminated identity,"<sup>52</sup> have difficulty in imagining themselves as capable of initiatives and choices. Furthermore, the internalized negative self-images and the disciplinary power exercised through public discourses even make them participate in perpetuating the very system that oppresses them. The need for intervention in the complex distress of the oppressed comes from the awareness of the corrosive outside forces gone inside without the self's critical mediation.<sup>53</sup>

What trauma is and how it is perceived, however, are inseparable from who defines it. Although psychoanalysis mainly stemmed from Freud's initial studies of female hysteric patients suffering from traumatic life experiences, trauma as a research topic

remained in the background of his theory as he moved toward a more abstract metapsychological formulation. When the issue of trauma resurfaced in Freud's writing, it was in response to World War I and "combat neurosis." In other words, "although 'trauma' is crucial to psychoanalytic theory," Juliet Mitchell points out, "trauma in itself is not really the focus of its analysis" and for this reason, "what emerges as a motif in the many retheorizings of psychoanalysis time and again, as another 'bedrock' is trauma."<sup>54</sup> One way of retheorizing the psychoanalytic approach to trauma is to reexamine and bring to the fore the blind spots in the very definition of trauma itself.

It is in this context that the clinical psychiatrist Laura S. Brown has taken the ideological and political approach to trauma studies one step further and challenged the mainstream, androcentric definition of trauma by exposing its biased ideological underpinning in her article "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma." From a feminist perspective, she specifically took issue with American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM III-R) that defined trauma as "an event outside the range of human experience." Brown criticized this canonical definition, because according to this definition, the "range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class: white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men."<sup>55</sup> Although the controversy around the definition of trauma finally led to a revision in DSM - IV in 1994, the cumulative social dimension of trauma has not been sufficiently addressed. The limited view of trauma leaves out the constant humiliation and threats of "assault on the integrity and safety" of oppressed groups, whose lived experiences of subjection have become "a continuing background noise rather than an unusual event."<sup>56</sup> In order to

perceive this “continuing background noise,” the listener must develop a new way of empathic listening, which requires that the listener bracket prior assumptions and expectations to notice the blind spots or suppressed histories within the master narrative of society.

In this chapter, I will explore the impact of psychological trauma on selfhood by focusing specifically on the issues of social oppression and power dynamics portrayed in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. A few literary critics have paid attention to the concept of Root’s “insidious trauma” or Kai Erikson’s “psychic erosion” and the prolonged effects of abuse in their analysis of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.<sup>57</sup> In examining the psychological impact of social oppression on minority groups in terms of “insidious trauma,” I will expand on their analyses, but my focus will be more on exploring how trauma affects the narrative-generating function of the self. In the process, I will investigate the ways in which the pernicious power of racism determines the form of intergenerationally transmitted trauma, as well as how race, in its relation with other social factors, such as gender, class, and age, produces synergistic effects of multiple marginalization.

As many critics have noted, a central theme running through Morrison’s novel is “speaking the unspeakable”<sup>58</sup> and giving a voice to those whom Morrison calls “discredited people”<sup>59</sup> whose narratives have been silenced by both the weight of their unbearable traumatic experiences of loss and the systematic denial of those experiences by a white hegemonic society. “The traumatized,” Cathy Caruth notes, “carry an impossible history within them, or they becomes themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”<sup>60</sup>

Morrison bears witness to the unclaimed and suppressed history of African-Americans, whether it is the forgotten African ancestry in *Song of Solomon*, or early twentieth-century Harlem in *Jazz*, or slavery and an ex-slave's infanticide of her daughter in *Beloved*. By doing so, she breaks the silence and confronts the evasion and elision that have dominated the American literary scene in race matters. As she emphatically insists in *Playing in the Dark*, any literature that claims to be "race-free" runs the risk of "lobotomizing" that literature. In fact, American national literature, Morrison argues, was founded on responses to "a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" that produced what she refers to as "American Africanism."<sup>61</sup> The presence of enslaved blacks was an outright affront to the American national identity founded upon the ideal of freedom and equality. From the early history of America onward, American Africanism as a fabricated signifying system of racial otherness has been used to shore up the foundering ideal image of freedom and unity as a nation. Thus, the American Africanism filled with the "underscored omission, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts," Morrison notes, served as the "ways in which artists . . . transferred internal conflicts to a 'black darkness,' to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies."<sup>62</sup>

Race has been a blind spot not only in the American literary imagination but also in psychoanalytic theory. Despite its radical promise of unearthing "the repressed" and challenging social taboos, psychoanalysis, as a product of the social, political, and cultural *Zeitgeist* of its era, reflects the biases and constraints of its time. I argue that the seemingly innocent oversight in any theory can indicate a significant symptomatic point where hidden anxieties and desires meet. As Ann Pellegrini argues in her analysis of the mise-en-scene of psychoanalysis, from the moment its of inception, "psychoanalysis was

involved, through the person of Freud, in the question and the ‘problem’ of racial difference.”<sup>63</sup>

A close reading of Freud’s corpus, such as *Totem and Taboo*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “On Narcissism,” “Mourning and Melancholia,” and “Thoughts for the Time on War and Death,” among others, reveals the hidden bias Freud as a white European man has against non-Western cultures. Freud frequently invokes overly sexualized “primitive men” as “dark origins” who, he claims, have no social and sexual inhibitions and hence, no conscience and unconscious,<sup>64</sup> to explain the gradual developmental process of Western civilization and the malaise or what he calls “discontents” unavoidably caused by its highly advanced culture. Despite his ambitious and exhaustive attempts to reveal all the fissures and contradictions constituting the human subject and civilization, he cannot discern the fact that the assumed racial alterity of other cultures consolidates the very foundation upon which he builds his metapsychology. In this sense, Hortense J. Spillers is right in her assertion that “Freud could not see his own connection to the ‘race’ and culture orbit. Or could not theorize it, because the place of their elision marked the vantage from which he spoke.”<sup>65</sup> What lies behind the overemphasis on sexual differences in psychoanalytic discourses is racial difference that has been bracketed off from its theory due to its lack of wider social engagement. As Claudia Tate notes, psychoanalysis, with its focus on the Western nuclear family, “repressed race under the mask of gender in the family domain.”<sup>66</sup>

The symptomatic elision of race behind gender, initially set in motion by the founding narratives of psychoanalysis but often repeated even by contemporary psychoanalytic theories,<sup>67</sup> reflects the generally accepted, erroneous belief that “race”

has nothing to do with racial whiteness. It also ignores the fact that race affects human psychic development. Realizing the fact that “white people are ‘raced,’ just as men are ‘gendered’” and “naming whiteness as a cultural terrain,” as Ruth Frankenberg remarks in her study of the social construction of whiteness, is “a vital aspect of questioning and delimiting its authority.”<sup>68</sup>

The white subjectivity of the dominant discourse, founded and shored up on the fantasied racial alterity of subaltern cultures, interpellates minorities to accept the devalued “not-me” qualities and images that have been split off from it and projected onto them. Commenting on the hegemonic group’s self-instituting mechanisms of psychic splitting and projection, Sander Gilman notes:

The group is embodied with all the positive associations of the self. . . . The Other is therefore both ill and infectious, both damaged and damaging. . . the image of the dangerous Other serves both as the force for the projection of anxiety concerning the self and the means by which the other defines itself.<sup>69</sup>

Once internalized by racial others, the fantasied and tacitly accepted racial difference becomes a pernicious force that forecloses the possibility for them to develop their own self-narratives based upon their own meaning and value system. Specifically, for African-Americans in this country, whose legacy of slavery has subjected them to a rupture of continuity, humiliation, and shame, their color often becomes “the badge of degradation” that consumes them in “black rage.”<sup>70</sup> Or it becomes the constant source of internalized self-contempt, the detrimental effects of which are poignantly exemplified in Morrison’s characters in *The Bluest Eye* in the form of their broken self-narrative and stunted development of healthy narcissism.

*The Bluest Eye* is a story about an eleven-year-old black girl named Pecola Breedlove who prays for the bluest eyes, seeking acceptance and approval in a white supremacist society after repeated rejection and abuse by both her family members and society. Although all the minor incidents are intricately interwoven to culminate in the major tragedy of the novel, Pecola's incestuous rape by her father Cholly Breedlove, I suggest that the novel should be read against the backdrop of the insidious trauma which both her parents and she have to face in a racist society. However, my focus here is not on, to borrow Claudia Tate's expression, "the protocol of race,"<sup>71</sup> which privileges racial meanings and the explicit socio-historical paradigms surrounding the text and which has often been considered as the convention in black texts, despite many objections professed by critics against such a reductive reading.<sup>72</sup> Rather than approaching the novel as the verbal text merely reflecting the social text, however, I want to explore "the dialectical engagement of the material and the psychical"<sup>73</sup> by studying how each individual constructs personal meanings out of his or her own experiences that are always already filtered by many intersecting epistemic grids of race, gender, class, and age.

In using psychoanalysis to analyze the psychological effects of the "insidious" trauma of racism and other types of oppression portrayed in *The Bluest Eye*, I must emphasize that analyzing the traumatic effects of racism does not pathologize African-Americans or deprive them of any sense of agency to rebel against and change the system that oppresses them. Actually, most works done on trauma highlight the fact that trauma studies depathologize trauma survivors and restore humanity to them by showing that their behaviors are normal reactions to abnormally cruel or devastating life experiences.

Another concern in my psychoanalyzing Morrison's novel involves the caveat that Barbara Christian once offered in her article "Race for Theory" about a hasty and never ideologically innocent application of Western hegemonic theories to works by African-American authors or to Third World literatures.<sup>74</sup> I admit that a critical engagement of not only psychoanalysis but also any theory needs seriously to reexamine, in Pellegrinni's phrase, the "historical pressures operating on and through a given text and its author."<sup>75</sup> But at the same time, we have to acknowledge that psychoanalysis, as Pellegrinni argues, has already become a powerful cultural narrative that we use to order and make sense of our life experiences and that it can offer an insightful explanation about human behaviors and motivations. Thus, what is more desirable and productive, I believe, is the "engagement of psychoanalysis on very altered terms" rather than a total abandonment of psychoanalytic theory as an analytic tool.<sup>76</sup>

In *The Bluest Eye*, the intergenerationally transmitted traumas of rejection and racial self-loathing, the condemning omnipresent white gaze internalized by many members of the black community, and the community's final scapegoating of its most innocent and weakest member testify to the psychic erosion permeating the world depicted in the novel. The barren or "unyielding" soil<sup>77</sup> Morrison mentions at the beginning of the novel refers not only to a racist society and its bigotry that cannot embrace and nurture its racial others but also hints at the outcome of prolonged oppression, the psychic barrenness of a community whose vitality and resourcefulness have been sapped by the constant pressure and stress of a hostile environment. Thus, many characteristics of traumatic living, such as intrusion, constriction, repetition, and dissociation, symptomatically overdetermine the major characters' course of actions in

the novel. Especially for Pecola's parents, the defensive splitting and dissociation of the self, which originally help them cope with painful and frustrating life experiences, later make them "fated," in Christopher Bollas's term, to lead a highly reactive life, preventing them from actualizing their unique potentials, or what Bollas calls "idioms," through conscious choices and uses of objects.<sup>78</sup>

Pecola's prayer for blue eyes is the epitome of internalized racial self-loathing. But I also interpret it as her desperate reparative attempt to forge a new self untouched by trauma and to rescript her traumatic, incomprehensible experience so that she can make sense of it and maintain faltering object relationships with her significant others by taking the blame upon herself for their unforgivable acts. Her prayer for blue eyes and her final retreat into schizophrenia are caused by the incestuous rape by her father Cholly and the cruel abandonment by her physically and emotionally abusive mother Pauline, who fails to provide her with the badly needed protection that is vital for some measure of restitution of her shattered self after the awful incident. Pecola responds to these traumatizing betrayals by completely withdrawing into her self-centered, subjective reality and forsaking reality testing to avoid overwhelming painful disintegration anxiety. Her fractured, schizophrenic psyche, expressed in a deranged dialogue with her imaginary friend, exemplifies the common defense mechanisms of splitting and dissociation often found in trauma victims. A more detailed examination and an additional contextualization of her self-experiences within her familial and societal setting, however, are needed in order to understand her trauma and dissociation.

### **The Failure of Selfobjects and Deformation of Love**

If the self, as Stephen Mitchell and contemporary relational psychoanalysts argue, is defined "not as a conglomeration of physically based urges but as being shaped by and

inevitably embedded within a matrix of relations with other people,”<sup>79</sup> the undoing of the self in trauma involves both the destruction of a continuing sense of self and a frightening disconnection from others. As Judith Herman notes, “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others” and thus, “traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community.”<sup>80</sup>

Heinz Kohut’s key concept “selfobject” foregrounds the inseparable connection between the self and its surrounding environment throughout people’s life span, and the traumatic effects of catastrophic life experiences can be explained by the failure of selfobjects to empathically provide sufficient “mirroring” and “idealizing” self experiences necessary to develop a cohesive self. Kohut defines selfobjects as those persons or objects that are experienced as part of the self and used in the service of the self.<sup>81</sup> Emphasizing values, ideals, and ambitions acquired in the self’s interaction with responsive selfobjects, Kohut’s self psychology promotes the value of healthy narcissism in its theorization of human psychological development. Unlike Freud who conceptualizes narcissism as an intermediary stage of libidinal development from autoeroticism to mature object love,<sup>82</sup> Kohut asserts in *The Analysis of the Self* and *The Restoration of the Self* that narcissism continues throughout life and that a fragile self lacking mirroring from selfobjects is prone to fragment and lose its cohesiveness. Kohut’s self psychology formulates the basic psychic configuration of the self, or what he calls the “bipolar self,” around the tension arc between two constituents: the “grandiose self,” or healthy assertiveness arising from the mirroring selfobject, and “the idealized

parental image,” or healthy admiration for the powerful selfobject.<sup>83</sup> Thus, for Kohut, it is “the pursuit of values, ideals, and ambitions and the self-esteem accruing from those activities rather than the establishment of satisfying object relations,” Morris N. Eagle notes, that endows life with worthwhile meanings.<sup>84</sup>

If the post-traumatic legacies of oppression are self-doubt and internalized feelings of inferiority that ultimately lead to feelings of nonexistence, Kohut’s self-psychology, then with its emphasis on the narcissistic values of ideals and ambitions and the cohesiveness of the self, can shed light on the ways in which a severe lack of social mirroring can lead to a serious pathology of self.

In *The Bluest Eye* the traumatized victim Pecola’s self falls apart completely in the end because of the series of mounting victimizations and shaming she endures as the weakest and most vulnerable member of the society. The unrelenting domestic and social aggression against Pecola and her family testifies to the familial and societal failure to provide an empathic selfobject milieu for its members. As Barbara Johnson argues in her attempt to extend Kohut’s narrow theoretical focus on the nuclear family, it is important to note that “what is a narcissistic structure for the individual person is also a social, economic, and political structure in the world” and that race, for instance, can serve as a selfobject that can indeed “set up an artificially inflated or deflated narcissistic climate.”<sup>85</sup> In *The Bluest Eye*, which Morrison admits she wrote to “hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt,”<sup>86</sup> the deflated racial self and repeated racial trauma poignantly exemplify Kohut’s message that “man can no more survive psychologically in a psychological milieu that does not respond empathically to him, than he can survive physically in an atmosphere that contains no oxygen.”<sup>87</sup>

Disconnection and isolation characterize the dysfunctional Breedlove family. Pecola's family is far from providing mirroring and idealizing selfobject functionings for its members. Nor does it, in Winnicott's phrase, "hold" and protect its members from outer environmental impingement to make them develop their own sense of "continuity of being."<sup>88</sup> To the contrary, their faltering integrity as a family unit and the consequently precarious psychic state each member is compelled to live in are symbolized symptomatically, especially by the family's physical surroundings. When the family is first introduced in the novel, each member has been put "outdoors" and seems to have already undergone considerable psychic damage. After having burned down his house and put his family "outdoors" and himself in jail, Cholly is described as one who "catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration" (18). When Pecola first appears to live with the narrator Claudia MacTeer's family, she is introduced to the child Claudia and her sister Frieda as "a 'case' . . . a girl who had no place to go"(16). Claudia comments on the Breedloves' plight of being put outdoors, relating it to "the real terror of life."

There is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition. (17)

Occupying the lowest position in the social order due to their race, class, and Cholly's despicable behavior, Pecola's family indeed has "no place to go." Unlike the struggling but loving MacTeers, whose integrity as a family is intact despite economic hardships, the Breedloves, dispersed all over the town, are "broken" and show all the symptomatic signs of disintegration. Thus, the literal "outdooriness" of their life

symbolizes their forlorn status as social pariahs and their jaded psychic state caused by that status.

As with the reference to the family's "outdooriness," the Breedloves' dwelling place after their reunion, a storefront, implies the lack of intimacy, privacy, and protection from hostile forces. After the temporary dispersal, the Breedloves get reunited and resume their family life in a dilapidated, "abandoned" storefront house, but the lack of attachment among them is obvious because "festering together in the debris of a realtor's whim," each lives "in his own cell of consciousness" (35). The dingy storefront house foregrounds the family's "sustained exposure" to the greater outside power beyond their control, such as a realtor's whim, which renders them helpless and "beaten," depriving them of the "internal locus of control."<sup>89</sup>

This depiction of Pecola's family invokes Kai Erikson's notion of "psychic erosion," discussed above in relation to insidious trauma. As Erikson points out, trauma can ensue from "a sustained battle" against overwhelming adverse forces and "a chronic life conditions that erodes the spirit . . . gradually," creating an odd spiritual "kinship" among them.<sup>90</sup> The image of the family huddled together in the abandoned, unprotected place also illustrates the bimodal interpersonal movements often found in traumatized people. Trauma, Erikson notes, makes people move according to both centripetal and centrifugal tendencies: "It draws one away from the center of group space while at the same time drawing one back . . . estrangement becomes the basis for communality, as if persons without homes or citizenship or any other niche in the larger order of things were invited to gather in a quarter set aside for the disfranchised, a ghetto for the

unattached.”<sup>91</sup> For the Breedloves, it is each member’s insecurity and fear, not the bonds of love, that holds the family together, creating an odd “kinship.”

Pecola’s family is anything but the happy family depicted in the Dick-and-Jane primer that in epigraph form serves as the narrative frame for each chapter. Morrison’s use of the primer highlights the inadequacy of the white voice to prescribe and dictate the African-American life. As many critics assert, Morrison’s use of the Dick-and-Jane primer invokes the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary convention whereby white writers or slave owners authenticated black writers’ authorship.<sup>92</sup> In incorporating the white primer into her black text, Morrison destabilizes the culturally codified language in the double-voiced signifying fashion that, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., characterizes black artistic forms. As Gates maintains, “repetition and revision or repetition with a signal difference” characterizes black artistic forms.<sup>93</sup> Morrison presents three different modifications of the Dick-and-Jane primer so that the final version with no spacing or punctuation seems to describe the collapsed Breedlove family that lives in a squalid, cramped space with constant denigrations and threats from its surroundings. Thus, Morrison turns the recurring intertextual references to the dominant discourse into a critical commentary on its constrictive power through a series of repetitions with modifications.

Another critic, J. Brooks Bouson, observes that the Breedlove family is described in a way reminiscent of the stereotypical view of the black underclass broken family of the 1965 Moynihan Report. This “racially and class-inflected-and culturally sedimented-representation,” Bouson argues, points to the sinister power of culturally prevalent stereotypes and ideology.<sup>94</sup> Juxtaposed with the ideal white family in the Dick-and-Jane

primer, the Breedlove family really seems the essence of pathological urban poverty and dysfunctional black underclass family life Moynihan inveighs against. The Dick-and-Jane primer and the Moynihan report, both white dominant discourses, put the Breedloves outside the norm of the standard American family life and again push them “outdoors,” making them social deviants. Pitting the Breedlove family’s story against these culturally powerful narratives, Morrison seems to highlight the unbridgeable gap between the socially validated reality of white families and the grim denigrated reality of black families neglected by society. By doing so, Morrison shows how the family as a basic social unit suffers most from the psychic erosion caused by a prolonged period of hardships and humiliation, and how its suffering manifests itself in such forms of disrupted attachment and deformed love.

Rather than serving as a protective and nurturing selfobject, a home for the Breedlove actually works more like “a ghetto for the unattached.” Interestingly, as if to reflect the emotional barrenness and a harrowing sense of disfranchisement of the family, even the furniture surrounding them has “no memories to be cherished” but stinks of “the joylessness . . . pervading everything” (36).

There is nothing more to say about the furnishings. They were anything but describable. . . . The furniture had aged without ever having become familiar. People had owned it, but never known it. . . . No one had lost a penny or a brooch under the cushions of either sofa and remembered the place and time of the loss or the finding. . . . No one had given birth in one of the beds. . . . No happy drunk - a friend of the family . . . had sat at the piano and played “You Are My Sunshine.” No young girl had stared at the tiny Christmas tree and remembered when she had decorated it or wondered if that blue ball was going to hold, or if HE would ever come back to see it. There were no memories among those pieces. (35-36)

Memories constitute who we are. Memories specifically associated with our home or family members work to anchor and secure our sense of self amid the ever-changing

world around us. The Breedloves' absence of any memorable moments lived and shared in their house indicates their estrangement from each other and the emotional barrenness of their lives.

Christopher Bollas asserts that we use objects to express our own unique self, and these "evocative" objects become part of our self-experiences because we use them "in our unique way to meet and to express the self that we are." "The object world," Bollas thus notes, is "a lexicon for self experience, to the extent that the selection of objects is often a type of self utterance."<sup>95</sup> Drawing on and extending Winnicott's term "subjective objects," Bollas argues that the objects of our choice and use are "a vital part of our investment in the world" and calls them "mnemic objects" in that they "contain a projectively identified self experience, and when we use it, something of that self state stored in it will arise."<sup>96</sup> Kai Erikson also analyzes people's emotional attachment to their belongings in his study of the victims of the Buffalo Creek disaster. After witnessing survivors' intense grief over the loss of their home, he draws the conclusion that the furniture or personal belongings are more than a reflection of one's style; they, according to him, are "a measure of one's substance as a person and as a provider, truly the furniture of self" or "the outer edge of one's personality, a part of the self itself."<sup>97</sup> As Bollas and Erickson theorize, endowing the object world with personal meanings and emotional values presupposes the intactness of self as a psychic structure and source of agency.

With a severely "eroded" self, the Breedloves cannot invest emotionally in their environment or organize their lives in a meaningful order. Nor can they express their unique idioms creatively through object choices and uses. Instead, they resign themselves

to their world of ugliness because they have internalized the contempt and loathing directed by the community and the white hegemonic culture toward them. As a result, the internalized self-loathing becomes the pivotal foundation of their self-concept.

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (39)

Fanon's analysis of the role of the dependency complex in the dynamics of oppression and subjugation sheds light on the Breedloves' damaging conviction of their ugliness. As Fanon observes, the colonized or the oppressed are denied inherent values or merits of their own and their existence is always already "contingent upon the presence of the Other." This Other works by closing the reciprocal circuit of recognition and making the oppressed seek from him the corroboration of their existence and reality.<sup>98</sup> In Morrison's text, the Other, the "mysterious all knowing master," is the one who controls "every billboard, every movie, every glance" by imposing his own version of reality and values. It is against and through this ever-present gaze of the Other that the Breedloves view and construct their selves. Black minorities living in a white supremacist society seldom find the opportunity for mirrored grandiosity or idealized merger, the key factors for a healthy self-development Kohut emphasizes. The constant exposure to the denigrating gaze of hegemonic culture often forecloses the opportunity for them to view themselves from a perspective not already sinisterly tainted by racial bigotry and bias.

Prolonged oppression causes negative self-appraisals for victims. The victims' internalized negative self-image and the disciplinary power exercised through public discourse even make them participate in perpetuating the very system that oppresses them. Pauline Breedlove in many ways illustrates the sinister power of internalized self-loathing and the long-term effects it can have on the victim's interpersonal relationships. Pauline is described as a character who was "never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty" (122) because of her blind endorsement of the white standard of physical beauty.

What Pauline has internalized and then exercises is a racially inflected cultural "surveillance" in Foucault's sense. Foucault theorizes surveillance working via the "uninterrupted play of calculated gaze" and wielding its "multiple, automatic and autonomous power."<sup>99</sup> Thus, Pauline's education in the movies is in a sense her disciplinary training in the white dominant discourse that works through surreptitious invisibility. Not surprisingly, what she sees in a dark theater removed from her harsh and lonely domestic life is "white men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean house with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet" (123). Although what she collects from her highly destructive hobby of movie going is only "self-contempt by the heap" (122), Pauline is drawn to the silver screen, unaware of its deleterious power, because disciplinary power, as Foucault notes, works through discreet invisibility and silence. "Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard"(123), Pauline admits, but she cannot make sense of the odd combination of pleasure and pain her moviegoing brings to her life.

The film critic Vicky Lebeau asserts that cinema is “the royal road to the cultural unconscious.”<sup>100</sup> Through her indulgence in the cinema, Pauline joins the cultural unconscious as a white-identified black woman who would rather live in a fantasied world to forget about her frustrating reality of being born black, poor, and ugly. As Lebeau maintains in her psychoanalysis of filmic fantasies, fantasy is not only conjured up to provide pleasure. It sometimes is used to protect a filmgoer from a troubling reality or to “contain the trauma, as well as the banality of our lives.”<sup>101</sup> Indeed, in *The Bluest Eye*, the movie theater lonely Pauline frequents becomes the only place of solace where she learns to manage many troubling aspects of her uprooted and painfully dull life. Born with a deformed foot and not loved by anyone previously, Pauline moves from the South to the North after her marriage to Cholly. But she again finds herself not accepted in her community in spite of all her attempts at fitting in by changing her looks and manners of speaking. For desperately lonely Pauline, in a faltering marriage, who “merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (118), movies offer a good opportunity to escape from her bleak reality and be someone else, glamorous and adored by others.

As the film critic Anne Friedberg notes, the film star is “an institutionally sanctioned fetish ” that encourages a warped identificatory looking relation and works as a commodity to circulate a certain overrated, overinvested image.<sup>102</sup> In “Fetishism,” Freud analyzes the genesis of fetishism and explains that it results from a boy’s shock at his discovery of women’s “castration” and his urgent need to defensively allay his anxiety about the possibility of his own castration by refusing to accept sexual difference.<sup>103</sup> The disavowal of sexual difference is the key element in Freud’s discussion of fetishism. Likewise, filmic fetishes seem to work precisely by disavowing the

difference between the film star and the audience and confusing the boundary between self and other. In the cinematic relationship between black audience and white film stars, the alluring images of white film stars often function to manage racial difference in such a way as to instill white supremacist ideologies into black viewers. Thus, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline, fascinated by the enticing looks of white cultural fetishes, learns to despise her own race and to identify with white images by viewing, taking in, and becoming them. Sitting alone in the dark with her hair done in Jean Harlow's style, Pauline cultivates her love for the white world. Pauline's fascination is no different from Pecola's obsession with blue eyes. Whereas Pecola tries to orally incorporate the ideal white beauty by drinking milk from the Shirley Temple cup or by eating Mary Jane candies, Pauline attempt to visually take in and be the white beauty by visiting the movies as often as she can or by emulating movie stars' looks.

Noteworthy to mention here is the fact that cultural fetishes or icons are not randomly chosen. Friedberg asserts in her theory of cinematic identification that "*any* body"(italics original) projected on the filmic screen becomes the object of "identificatory investment, a possible suit for the substitution/misrecognition of self."<sup>104</sup> But she is only partially right. The cinematic gaze is never ideologically neutral or innocent, so that *any* body can be the target object of identificatory investment. The unacknowledged cinematic "gaze"<sup>105</sup> is not only male-determined, as Laura Mulvey has argued in her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The carefully constructed cinematic gaze is also white-determined, and the viewer is "interpellated," in Louis Althusser's sense, to adopt a certain subject position in cinematic discourse.

In her moments of racial “misrecognition” or Lacanian “*méconnaissance*,” carefully prepared and staged by the dominant white culture, Pauline temporarily becomes the image she desires by identifying with white film stars. As the mirrored imago in Lacan’s mirror stage gathers the infants’ fragmented body image into an integrated form, providing an illusionary sense of autonomy and power,<sup>106</sup> so do the images of white stars on the silver screen transform Pauline’s black body with a deformed foot into a perfect personification of white beauty while she immerses herself in the movies and identifies herself with the image she sees. Consequently, as the subject emerges from the mirror stage with an alienating, illusionary identity, Pauline also ultimately emerges from her education in the movies with a fractured psyche and a confused racial identity. Examining frequent cultural phenomena of racial misrecognition whereby “an unconscious that seems to be ‘white’ has displaced a conscious black identity,” David Marriott asks, “If the act of identification produces a fractured doubling of self, how can we distinguish what is interposed from what is properly desired?”<sup>107</sup> Pauline is like those blacks in Marriott’s analysis who “cannot love themselves as black but are made to hate themselves as white.”<sup>108</sup> Pauline, in indulging in and desiring the glamour of the white world, cultivates self-loathing. So when her front tooth falls out, crushing her fantasy of emulating and thus becoming the white beauty, she also falls out of her illusionary world and leaves the theater with complete resignation: “Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly” (123).

For Pauline, her race fails to provide her with mirroring and idealizing selfobject functions and her affiliation with the white Fisher family offers a good opportunity to build substitute selfobject fantasies as another persona, “Polly,” the “ideal servant.” Her

existence is curiously compartmentalized between her life with the Fishers, where “she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (128), and her life in a dingy storefront with her family, which seems to her “like the afterthoughts” or “the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely” (127). Pauline revels in her life with the Fisher family, because her status of the ideal servant endows her with the power, admiration, and affection she craves but cannot have.

She reigned over cupboards . . . she was queen of canned vegetables bought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes. The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers. She refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man’s face if he sent it to the Fisher house. Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she had never had--a nickname--Polly. (127-128)

With a schizophrenic mindset highly reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois’s “double consciousness,”<sup>109</sup> Pauline views and judges her own world against the standard of whites. Terrorizing her own children by making them call her “Mrs. Breedlove” but cherishing her nickname “Polly” given by the Fishers as a token of “affection,” she is determined to guard her own world inside the white family from any intrusion. No wonder she brutally attacks her own daughter in front of Pecola’s friends Claudia and Frieda and consoles the Fisher’s “pink-and-yellow girl” when Pecola spills a blueberry pie on the impeccable white floor, which she repeatedly claims as hers: “Crazy fool . . . *my floor*, mess . . . look what you . . . *my floor, my floor . . . my floor*” (109, italics mine). Defensive possessiveness consumes Pauline when it comes to “her kitchen” (128) or her impeccable “white” floor in which she revels. So she scolds Pecola with “words . . . hotter and darker than the smoking berries” (109), because the “blackish” blueberries

splattered everywhere and her ugly black daughter are a threat to her idealized world she meticulously tries to keep “white” like the impeccable white floor.

Pauline uses her subservient role of the ideal servant to absorb and deflect the anger, loathing, and frustration that result from her unmet narcissistic needs. To Pauline, anyone who disturbs her perfect, carefully maintained world, even if it is her daughter, is to be punished. Pauline rejects her daughter in a similar way that Geraldine, another distant mother, kicks out Pecola, whom her son Junior lures into his house to abuse. Geraldine dotes on a black cat with blue eyes-- maybe another object of love indicative of racial self-loathing--instead of her own son Junior. For Geraldine, desperately struggling to keep the subtle but constantly blurring line between her world of “the colored” and “niggers,” Pecola is a synecdoche of the denigrated black world she tries to flee from. Pauline’s schizophrenic splitting and rigid maintenance of her two separate worlds is no different from Geraldine’s attempt to dissociate from “niggers” and protect her “inviolable world” (85).

In a sense, becoming an ideal servant to the powerful white family is Pauline’s vicarious, Horneyan “search for glory.”<sup>110</sup> Like the neurotics Karen Horney analyzes, Pauline, in her drive to actualize her ideal image, puts all her energies toward excelling at her work and aims at absolute perfection, regardless of the cost to her and her family. Her ruthless abuse of her daughter and callousness to her own family’s needs show the vindictiveness characteristic of those compulsively seeking indiscriminate supremacy in their search for “glory.” Pauline’s search for glory illustrates how race, class, and gender are interdependent and mutually determines the ways in which one’s most seemingly personal desire mirrors hegemonic power relations. The “glory” Pauline pursues is

defined in racial terms and associated with a particular class. Pauline interprets being black as being blocked from a certain luxury and glamour of life. By allying herself with the Fishers, she tries to glimpse the white world of comfort and luxury that she cannot be a part of otherwise. Additionally, her narcissistic pursuit also takes a form specifically related to the female gender role of taking care of others, and her role of a domestic servant also invokes the tradition of black “mammies.” Thus, race, class, and gender co-determine the specific ways in which Pauline materializes her search for narcissistic mirroring self-experiences.

Whereas the Fisher family provides Pauline with mirroring selfobject experiences, religion serves as a powerful idealized selfobject for her. This, however, additionally creates highly distorted object-relationships with her family members. As Kohut explains, the experience of merger with a powerful and strong figure is crucial for people’s psychological self-maintenance and self-enhancement. Experiencing herself merging with the omnipotent God is important for Pauline, since this moment of what Kohut would call “idealizing transference” enables her to feel subjectively the cohesiveness and integrity of her self, which is badly missing in her rigidly compartmentalized life between the Fishers and her own family.

More importantly, religion becomes Pauline’s means of controlling and using her family to boost her faltering self-esteem. Embracing the role of “martyr,” Pauline resorts to Christian beliefs to rationalize her neglect of her own family and to shore up her own ego: “Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (126-7). In her study of abused women, Elizabeth A. Waites notes that martyrdom in many persecuted women plays a significant part in

creating a victim identity for them, and that the martyrdom these women embrace in their “attempts to rescue self-esteem” helps them meet certain psychological needs, since it makes them “discharge aggression against other people by inducing guilt in them.”<sup>111</sup>

Like the victimized women in Waites’s study, Pauline builds up a compensatory meaning structure around her religion to rescue her self-esteem and keep her sense of self intact:

“She needed Cholly’s sin desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus” (42).

Cholly Breedlove also contributes his part to the distorted pattern of object relations within his family by cultivating a profoundly intense hatred toward Pauline. His hatred toward her enables him to meet several psychological needs. Pauline is an easy and fe target toward whom he can deflect “his inarticulate fury and aborted desires,” because she is “one of the few things . . . that he could touch and therefore hurt” (42). As a black man living in a white-dominant society, Cholly’s sense of helplessness is exacerbated by the fact that his race often aborts his attempts at successfully playing the culturally expected “masculine” role. His hatred toward Pauline has an intricate relationship to his sense of emasculation. Morrison introduces an early episode in Cholly’s life that clearly proves this point. He once had a hostile and deeply humiliating encounter with white armed men, which has caused a profound insecurity about his manhood. Having white hunters make fun of his virility in front of his partner, while, he, a naked black teenager suddenly exposed, had to “entertain” them at gunpoint was so painfully humiliating that only “a half-remembrance” of the incident is enough to disturb and “stir him into flights of depravity” (42-43).

Coerced obedience, lack of self-assertion, and suppressed anger often undermine the culturally defined and sanctioned notion of manhood. As he deflected his frustration and fury by directing them toward his partner, a helpless black girl, Cholly now strategically exercises his masculine assertiveness and aggression within the safe boundary of his home against the easiest target, his wife. By doing so, he manages to maintain his seriously jeopardized narcissistic ego and feel “manly,” at least temporarily within his home. Like Pauline, he uses his spouse, his denigrated selfobject, both to shore up his precarious, poorly mirrored self and to protect himself from his own rage that would otherwise consume and destroy him. As Morrison tersely sums up this complicated interpersonal dynamic, “Hating her, he could leave himself intact” (42).

Both Cholly and Pauline are locked in hatred of each other, perpetuating the vicious cycle of emotional wounding. In his analysis of intensely cathected “loving hate” relationships, Bollas argues that hatred may be the type of object relation formed in a situation where people feel convinced that love is not possible and that intense hatred, in that case, helps them preserve the connection with their objects. “Hate,” Bollas continues, “emerges not as a result of the destruction of internal objects but as a defense against emptiness.”<sup>112</sup> In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s depiction of the Breedloves and their pattern of distorted object relations poignantly foregrounds the desperation and desolation plaguing the dysfunctional family, since a semblance of connection with each other is barely maintained only through intense mutual hatred and the constant fights they engage in with a “darkly brutal formalism” (43).

### **Traumatic Encounters: Desymbolization and the Creation of the “Othered” Self**

The odd deformation of love in the Breedlove family takes a heavy toll on Pecola’s psychological development. Her exposure to a series of shaming incidents and the

condemning gaze from others create for her a unique vulnerability, causing her to live in an altered psychological state. Her constant victimization ultimately leads her to the realm of complete isolation and derangement after the traumatic violation by her father and the subsequent rejection by her mother and others in her community.

Pecola grows up without what Winnicott calls “good enough mothering,” which facilitates growth and maturation of children by holding them securely and responding to their needs optimally.<sup>113</sup> As many object relation theories suggest, if the mother’s own image or self-perception mirrored in her child’s eye becomes the foundation of the child’s evolving self-concept, then Pauline bequeaths an ugly self-image to her daughter from the moment she lays eyes on her. Upon seeing Pecola for the first time right after giving birth to her, Pauline remarks, “I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.” (126). Winnicott’s object relations theory, Kohut’s self psychology, and other relationally oriented psychoanalytic theories show that the existence of self-validating or “mirroring” others becomes the source of life-long sustenance to overcome many obstacles in life. Yet from the moment of her birth, Pecola is surrounded by only a condemning and shaming gaze. Pecola’s prayer for blue eyes, like Pauline’s attraction to the movies and her attachment to the white Fisher family, stems from her desperate need to escape from her unmirrored, unloved self. Thus, a harrowing sense of inadequacy leads Pecola to wish for a token of love and happiness to fill, in Morrison’s phrase, “the void that is Pecola’s ‘unbeing.’”<sup>114</sup>

Jill Matus asserts that it is Pecola’s shame-prone tendency to absorb and internalize the blame placed on her that ultimately destroys her. “If anger helps to maintain distinctions between what belongs to the self and what must be kept outside it,” Matus

maintains, “shame disturbs those distinctions by distorting responsibility and encouraging self-blame.”<sup>115</sup> Unlike Claudia, who dares to question and even gives vent to her anger at the imposed biased value by dismembering the white doll given as a gift, Pecola meekly, shamefully takes in and internalizes all the negative views or emotions other people project. She even holds herself responsible for the endless violence between her parents and prays for blue eyes, with the logic that “if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look and at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes’” (46). Pecola’s shame-prone personality exacerbates the detrimental effects of her traumatizing life experiences, consolidating her victim status.

The feminist critic Marilyn Frye views anger as an “instrument of cartography” in “defining others’ concept of who and what one is.” “To be angry,” Frye notes, is “to claim a place, to assert a right to expression and to discourse.”<sup>116</sup> Another feminist psychiatrist, Jean Baker Miller, also emphasizes that anger as a “statement of oneself and to others” provides a chance to recognize one’s discomfort and elicit interactional responses that can lead to a change in the distressing circumstances. In contrast, Miller explains, repeated instances of suppressing anger and inaction can lead to lack of self-esteem and feelings of helplessness.<sup>117</sup> Although Frye and Miller examine anger from different feminist perspectives, their observations shed light on Pecola’s predicament of helplessness and powerlessness. Anger as a form of “resistance” can chart out and maintain the boundary between the self and the impinging or violating environmental forces. As a definite form of self-assertion, anger is a demand for a fair share of respect

for the self. Hence, expansion, externalization, and visibility characterize anger whereas constriction, withdrawal, and invisibility dominate shame.

A chronic exposure to traumatic life conditions induces in shame-prone individuals a debilitating sense of inadequacy that makes them dread to be seen in their helpless state. As Foucault's model of the panopticon illustrates, seeing is an act that essentially involves an exercise of power. Even in seeing motivated by innocent curiosity, the will to uncover the mystery of an object connotes some semblance of power or the will to master. Hence, being seen without any chance to complete the reciprocal cycle of seeing by staring back or being seen in a certain impassive way leads to a humiliated feeling of subjugation and powerlessness. bell hooks talks about how black slaves or servants were severely punished for merely looking and argues that white control of the black gaze pushes blacks into the realm of nonexistence as if their existence does not register in the white mind.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, Morrison in *Beloved* symbolizes the omnipresent white surveillance and its sinister power during slavery by referring to "whitefolks with the Look" or "the righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize along with his ma'am's tit."<sup>119</sup>

Patricia Williams also retells her experience of the white "impassive gaze" and comments on the disturbing implication of the seemingly indifferent gaze. "What was hardest was not just that white people saw me," Williams notes, "but that they looked through me, as if I were transparent."<sup>120</sup> Mr. Yacobowski, the owner of the candy store in *The Bluest Eye*, embodies the "impassive gaze" Williams critiques. When Pecola comes to his store to purchase her candies, she "looks up at him and sees the vacuum" and the "total absence of human recognition" (48). Mr. Yacobowski "does not see her,

because for him there is nothing to see” (48). After she is exposed to the impassive gaze of a white storekeeper and his unfriendly demeanor, Pecola feels the “inexplicable shame” (50), which makes her cry when she steps outside the store.

Overcoming and detoxifying a humiliating sense of nonexistence requires what hooks calls an “oppositional gaze” that can forge a sense of agency in its attempt to see through the structure of domination.<sup>121</sup> However, a prolonged exposure to domination and humiliation makes this kind of resistance extremely difficult to conceive and even more difficult to carry out.

Ironically, shame-prone people’s feeling of invisibility and inconsequence often feeds their wish for invisibility, bringing about a desubjectifying vicious cycle in which excessive overconcern with social evaluation, coupled with prior experiences of rejection, makes them seek and hide behind a protective shield of invisibility. When people cannot control others’ shaming gaze, they often try to escape from a painful situation by controlling themselves. “To look,” as Patricia Williams notes, is “to make myself vulnerable; yet not to look is to neutralize the part of myself that is vulnerable.”<sup>122</sup> For this reason, whenever she has to face hostile and threatening forces beyond her control, Pecola habitually engages herself in a self-hypnotic practice of “disappearance” by shutting her eyes tight, sucking in her breath, and tightening her stomach. Exposed to the constant domestic violence between her parents that has become a kind of ritual, Pecola prays to God, “Please God . . . make me disappear” (45) in her attempts to make her body disappear bit by bit. Later, when bullied and humiliated by a peer, she again tries to “fold into herself, like a pleated wing” (73).

“Disappearance,” as one patient in his psychotherapy states while reflecting on his childhood trauma and disappearance fantasy, “is about safety.”<sup>123</sup> Invisibility becomes a mask protecting the shamed person from further harm caused by the vicious and threatening gaze. Pecola’s repeated withdrawal into herself is her way of securing and retreating into the only safe place within her when her environment constricts and intimidates her with threatening force. Lacking what John Bowlby calls the “safe base” based upon the solid attachment between the child and the caretaker, which allows for the child’s normal emotional and cognitive development,<sup>124</sup> she cannot develop enough assertiveness to withstand crippling domestic and social aggression. As Adrienne Rich succinctly expresses the importance of the parental, especially maternal, love for a girl’s struggle in a hostile world, “in order to fight for herself, she needs first to have been both loved and fought for.”<sup>125</sup> Neither the distant and vindictive mother nor the violent and befuddled father can provide for Pecola a semblance of protection and nurturing as her “holding environment” in a Winnicottian sense. As Morrison describes her predicament within her family, “a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” is beaten into her by her mother, who is determined to make her daughter “bent to respectability”(128). Devoid of any secure sense of connection with others, she has nothing to lose by severing her ties with the outside world. Thus, she habitually engages herself in a self-hypnotic practice of “disappearing.”

The child psychotherapist Lenore Terr asserts in her study of childhood trauma that repeated terror and violence often lead children to develop an altered psychic state. Unlike the victims of a single traumatic event, Terr explains, repeatedly traumatized victims learn to “step aside” from themselves and a troubling and painful scene, and

“turn off” their psychological apparatus via practiced trance or dissociation. Thus, when they ultimately achieve “self-removal” by massive denial, numbing, and dissociation, they cannot recall the traumatic incidents or even if they can remember them; their memory tends to consist of fragmentary bits or spots rather than a complete whole.<sup>126</sup> In Morrison’s novel, Pecola’s frequent defensive mechanism of disappearance foreshadows the tragic lot that will befall her after the rape by her father. When she collapses later under the strain of unbearable shame, betrayal, and rejection, her defensively altered psychic state finally takes over her life, making her completely split and dissociate herself from the traumatic event and inducing a serious posttraumatic stress disorder that pushes her beyond the limit of sanity. After the rape, the area of her self that she can own and acknowledge without shame is diminished to such an extent that she finally, to borrow Terr’s expression, “steps aside” from her own self, entering into a state of nonbeing.

While Pecola responds to a series of excruciating shaming incidents by taking all the blame and hiding behind the mask of invisibility, Cholly reacts to the hostile forces that expose his inadequacy by “acting out.” Living in a chronic state of debasement and humiliated fury, he violently directs his frustration and sense of deprivation outward. Abandoned on a junk heap by his mother when he was only four days old, and rejected by his own father, who does not even recognize him, he becomes a social pariah or deviant. From the moment Cholly is first introduced in the novel, his violence portrays him in a subhuman, derogatory way, because he has already “catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration” and “joined the animals” as “an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger”(18). His ravaging, violent acts run the gamut from burning down his house and beating his wife to killing white men and even raping his own daughter. As if to

defensively preempt any possible accusation or attack, he aggressively lashes out at anyone that even slightly reminds him of his painful past or his helplessness. He thus clearly shows a poor tolerance for stress and arousal, which many clinical studies identify as one of the behavioral characteristics of traumatized people.<sup>127</sup>

Cholly's life-narrative is a completely broken one without any sequence or thematic thrust running throughout the various stages of his life. Morrison compares his fragmented and incoherent life, lived in a fury of aggression and lawless "freedom," to bits and pieces of jazz music.

The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. . . . Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he knew, that Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt - fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. . . . He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned, for he had already seen the furtiveness in the eyes of his jailer, free to say, "No suh," and smile, for he had already killed three white men. Free to take a woman's insults, for his body had already conquered hers. Free even to know her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms. Free to be gentle when she was sick, or mop her floor, for she knew what and where his maleness was. . . . He was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him. In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites. And they alone interested him. (159-160)

Cholly's life demonstrates the cumulative effects of insidious trauma caused by constant devaluation by the world, which breaks up Cholly's self narrative and makes it highly fragmented and incoherent. As the psychoanalyst Donald P. Spence argues in his discussion of the central role of the self, "the core of our identity is . . . a narrative thread that gives meaning to our life, provided - and this is the big if - that it is never broken."<sup>128</sup> According to Spence, the central mission of the self is turning happenings into meaning and bringing meaning out of confusion.<sup>129</sup>

Similarly, Robert Jay Lifton, after years of research on various historical trauma, such as the Holocaust, the Hiroshima bombing, and the Vietnam War, also emphatically asserts in his psychology of meaning or symbolization theory that “our central motivations, our central energies, come from actual or aspired-to meaning structures.” According to him, what brings about trauma is not an overwhelmingly intense experience per se, but a broken connection of meaning precipitated by it.<sup>130</sup> He thus explains traumatized people’s broken symbolic connectedness with their environment and the overruling elements of separation, disintegration, and stasis in their lives by the failure of the basic psychological processes, “centering” and “grounding.” Centering, Lifton explicates, refers to the ordering of different life experiences at various levels, temporally, spatially, and emotionally, for example, so that the self can feel at the center of its own world and in touch with itself, whereas grounding is a capacity that enables the self to establish a firm anchoring in its personal experiences and feel secure enough to face different life challenges and grow by the centering-decentering-recentering process without losing a sense of oneself.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, the trauma researcher Mardi Horowitz explains trauma in terms of the shattered inner schemata of the self and the world, and the repetitive intrusion of the experiences that cannot be assimilated to the schemata.<sup>132</sup> In fact, the devastating psychic consequence of trauma is often explained by its “shattering” nature and its effects on the survivor’s selfhood.<sup>133</sup>

Cholly’s befuddled mental state exemplifies the confusion and horror Spence observes in people whose meaning-generating and narrative-building function of self somehow collapses and fails to provide them with “an extended grammar” to “parse the world.”<sup>134</sup> His “freedom” actually is an abdication of his personal will and points to his

complete resignation and despair over the fact that he “has nothing more to lose.” His lack of grounding and centering, to borrow Lifton’s terms, explains the randomness and chaos of his life. His aggression is a product of the disintegration of his basic psychological configuration. When an enfeebled self, lacking in self-validating mirroring and confirmation of healthy self-assertion, encounters an overwhelmingly frustrating obstacle in life, it falls apart, and aggression often ensues.<sup>135</sup> According to Kohut’s theory, aggression is not an innate part of the basic human psychological configuration. Only after the disintegration of the basic psychological makeup, Kohut asserts, does nondestructive, unalloyed assertiveness turn into destructive rage. “Destructive rage,” as Kohut maintains, “is always motivated by an injury to the self.”<sup>136</sup> Indeed, Cholly’s “freedom” testifies to a seriously disturbed self, deprived of any kind of human attachment. His aggression symptomatically points to the ferocious narcissistic rage he feels due to a series of shaming incidents that cruelly crushed his manhood and self-esteem at the crucial turning points in his life.

As various theories discussed above suggest, the psycho-formative functions of narrative-building and meaning-generating are central to human experience, and the core concept of the self cannot be sustained without these functions. Disintegration of these psycho-formative functions means disintegration of the self. Hence desymbolization is a major symptomatic effect of trauma. Traumatized people cannot make sense of the experience they went through. “In trauma,” Cathy Caruth argues, “the outside has gone inside without any mediation.”<sup>137</sup> The lack of symbolic processing of the traumatic incident has a serious repercussion on the survivors’ sense of self, creating a hole in the

fabric of their life narrative that hitherto consisted of closely interconnected episodes endowed with personal meaning and ordered in a temporal sequence.

Traumatic events are the incomprehensible, unsymbolisable real that disrupts the personal narrative of self. Trauma as unassimilated, unsymbolized experiences haunts survivors like the specters of those who have not been properly buried. Since traumatized people cannot process their experiences cognitively, emotionally, and symbolically, their story of trauma becomes, to use Maurice Blanchot's term, the "un-story"<sup>138</sup> over which they have no conscious control. This brings to the fore a highly complicated issue of traumatic memory and its connection to other symptoms of trauma, such as dissociation, psychic numbing, and psychic splitting that explain the considerable constriction and diminution of the self in the wake of trauma. The psychiatrist Henry Krystal sums up this phenomenon as the "post-traumatic depletion of the consciously recognized spheres of selfhood" and explains it as the hallmark of post-traumatic stress disorder: "Thus, the post-traumatic state is characterized by an impoverishment of the areas of one's mind to which the 'I' feeling of self-sameness is extended, and a hypertrophy of the 'not-I' alienated areas."<sup>139</sup> All these issues converge and are vividly dramatized in one scene in *The Bluest Eye* that describes Cholly's rape of Pecola.

What triggers the inhuman depravity from Cholly is a series of painful incidents in his traumatic past that somehow get transposed to his present, blurring the boundaries between different time frames and the separate identities of others in his mind. Especially his encounter with armed white men during his first sexual adventure deeply humiliates him, and memories of the incident hauntingly return with a forceful power when he experiences toward Pecola similarly intermingled emotions he once felt toward another

poor helpless black girl, Darlene. While he was having his first sexual adventure, he was discovered and interrupted by white hunters. The humiliation of being forced to resume his performance in front of them, his sense of helplessness, and his guilt over failing to protect his partner leave a devastating psychic wound. Not knowing how to deal with the embarrassing situation, where the most intimate and private act was turned into a public mockery, he displaces his inarticulate fury onto his fellow victim Darlene: “Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess - that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke” (150-151). Not only his assertive attempt to establish his manhood for the first time ends in a total disaster. Due to its racially inflected, sexually charged character, the traumatic incident also teaches him what it means to be a black man in a white society and makes him personally associate sexuality with control, power, and degradation.

In the rape scene, the harrowing memories Cholly could not integrate into his life narrative and the entangled emotions attached to them return unsolicited. Numerous findings on traumatic memory show that unintegrated traumatic events become dissociated from the original context and return under circumstances that remind traumatized people of the previous incident. Memory disturbance is one hallmark of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Traumatic memory is often characterized by its intrusive nature and its non-narrative, somatosensory or iconic level organization. Traumatic memory, often termed “episodic” and “implicit” and differentiated from “semantic” or

“explicit” memory, revolves around a specific, lived experience and stays at the most concrete, lower level that does not involve any conscious processing or linguistic mediation in its coding. Additionally, episodic memory is “self-focused . . . and contains stories that feature the self” and is often emotionally charged, whereas semantic memory is “affectless” and deals with more abstract and general information in a verbal mode.<sup>140</sup>

Trauma simultaneously damages and enhances certain types of memory. Recent research in neurocognitive science by Joseph Ledoux, Bessel van der Kolk, and Douglas Bremner,<sup>141</sup> among others, shows that severe or prolonged stress causes serious damage in the hippocampus, which is believed to be essential to evaluating contextual information about events and placing them in an associative temporal and spacial representations. In contrast, stress, the research demonstrates, does not interfere with the functions of the amygdala that is responsible for the unconscious emotional memory often involved in conditioned fear responses. On the contrary, stress hormones often enhance activity in the amygdala system and render amygdala-related emotional memories “indelible.”<sup>142</sup> As a result, the stress-induced hippocampal dysfunction leads to dissociative amnesia that obliterates the normal contextual information for a specific memory whereas the implicit memory that has remained intact still triggers even stronger emotional unconscious recollections of the specific event. For this reason, traumatized people, under the spell of the reactivated traumatic memory, often react to their past painful event as if it is happening here and now. As Herman notes, the typical phenomena of hyperarousal and intrusion cause trauma survivors to lose authority over their memory.<sup>143</sup>

Survivors often defend against intrusive traumatic memory and the painful emotions attached to it by what Lifton calls “psychic numbing” or “psychic closing off.”

By dulling their senses and feelings, survivors block the persistent return of traumatic memory and resist its pernicious effects. It is only through this ironic killing of part of themselves that they protect themselves from total disintegration and survive. As Lifton notes, “The survivor undergoes a radical but temporary diminution in his sense of actuality in order to avoid losing his sense completely and temporarily; he undergoes a reversible form of psychic death in order to avoid a permanent physical or psychic death.”<sup>144</sup> In Morrison’s novel, Cholly’s befuddled, disoriented state of mind and his habitual boozing seem inseparable from his attempts at numbing and shielding himself from any devastating thoughts or emotions that he cannot deal with. However, although it may originally help survivors go through difficult times, psychic numbing, over the long haul, hinders healing by preventing them from integrating their experiences into their lives. Moreover, despite their desperate efforts to keep the unsettling memories of the past at bay, their unassimilated past often breaks through the protective shield of numbing.

Thus, in the novel’s rape scene, when Cholly looks at Pecola’s abject image in his befuddled state of drunkenness, her helpless look and a hunched back suddenly provokes in him the uncannily familiar feelings of impotence, rage, and guilt that once plagued him. The implicit, emotional memory of his failing the powerless black girl Darlene, along with the accompanying feelings of humiliation, inadequacy, and guilt, returns and overwhelms him with an inexplicable powerful force. His daughter’s pathetic look connotes to him her broken spirit, and he takes it personally, as an accusation that he has again failed to protect another poor black girl, this time his daughter. As William Beers insightfully points out, a shame-prone individual who often bursts into narcissistic rage

has a tendency not to see others as separate entities existing in their own right and often interprets their innocent acts as “wounds to his self.”<sup>145</sup> Thus, Pecola’s pitiful look deals another unbearable blow to Cholly’s already enfeebled self, unleashing from him an indignant, narcissistic rage that he has barely been able to keep in check by numbing himself by heavy boozing and the occasional outbursts of violence against his wife in their ritualistic fights: “Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child . . . why wasn’t she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. . . . Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet” (161).

However, Cholly’s narcissistic rage alone cannot sufficiently explain his incestuous rape of Pecola. His lust with an encompassing “border of politeness” and his attempt to “fuck her--tenderly” (160-161) in an oxymoronic way belie the existence of a different type of emotion than purely defensive rage. While he is attentively watching Pecola, a particular visual stimulus brings up the image of young Pauline and the tender love he once felt for her, further complicating his perplexity at the sudden inundating deluge of past memories and feelings. The image of young Pauline overlaps with that of Pecola, for Pecola’s “timid, tuck-in look of the scratching toe--that was what Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky” (162). This tender love, coupled with the shameful fury and frustrated anger he felt toward Darlene, creates odd, context-free emotional reactions of “the hatred mixed with tenderness” (163). Again, not knowing how to deal with the overwhelming, perplexing situation, he projects the confounded emotions of anger, guilt, pity, and love onto his daughter, and then rapes her. His rape reflects his

typical behavioral pattern of channeling unbearable emotions into aggressive actions so that he can maintain some measure of control.

What the elaborately staged rape scene describes is the interesting phenomenon of repetition that illustrates the untamed powerful driving force of trauma. Unassimilated traumatic memories are bound to resurface in a situation that reminds traumatized people of the prior catastrophe, making them repeat the original behavior they employed to cope with it. As Freud has pointed out several times in his essays, such as “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-through,” “Inhibition, Symptoms, and Anxiety,” and “Fixation to Traumas--The Unconscious,” if one does not consciously remember, one is likely to act out. Acting out by repeating, Freud explains, is a pathological way of remembering,<sup>146</sup> but since it blocks the necessary process of consciously working through the danger situation, it only ends up increasing the sense of helplessness. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud focuses more specifically on the relationship between trauma and repetition, and elaborates on his view that traumatized people’s repetition is their unconscious effort to master painful experiences by turning passivity into activity and achieving a retroactive sense of control. With an example of the famous “fort-da” game by which his eighteen-month-old grandson stages the separation from and reunion with his mother, Freud argues that “an instinct for mastery” is more primordial and elementary than the general “pleasure principle” of avoiding unpleasurable experiences and seeking pleasurable experiences.<sup>147</sup> In his research on trauma and dissociation, Pierre Janet has also paid attention to the repetitive haunting of traumatic memories and emphasized the importance of “liquidating” them by transforming them into a form of

narrative memory and making them “placed in their proper context and reconstructed into neutral or meaningful narratives.”<sup>148</sup>

Once broken by a traumatic incident, the personal narrative of self is prone to further disintegration unless some remedial efforts are made to put the incident into a manageable perspective and counteract the repetition compulsion so that traumatized people can reinvest in their life and restore, to a certain degree, the basic value and belief system trauma has challenged. Moreover, as the self has been shaped in the relational context, the restoration of the self in the wake of trauma also requires supportive, empathic others who can sustain them through the difficult process of recovery and healing. Or the “holding environment” and its nurturing functions are even more important when the self disintegrates and its personal world shatters by traumatic violence. Especially since trauma, as the psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman argues, radically destroys people’s fundamental beliefs in the benevolence and meaningfulness of the world, and the worthiness of the self,<sup>149</sup> it is integral to have empathic others who can listen to survivors’ story to help them understand and come to terms with their experience through narrativizing activities that ultimately establish some distance from the event and make it less threatening to reflect upon. Narrative mediation is one major form of what Dori Laub calls the “re-externalization” and “historicization” of the traumatic incident, which is necessary for “undoing [survivors’] entrapment” in the troubling past.<sup>150</sup>

In *The Bluest Eye*, the lack of empathic listeners and their supports ultimately results in Pecola’s final descent into madness and her subsequent creation of a dissociated alter ego in the aftermath of her rape. The latter dramatically exemplifies the devastating effect of her ultimate social castration that exacerbates the harm already done by Cholly’s

rape. The girl, who was first introduced as a charity case who had no place to go, is again outcast so completely at the end of the novel that she goes mad and conjures up an imaginary friend, the only addressable other available for her, since neither her mother nor the community provides for her a protective environment safe from Cholly's further abuse. Even when she ventures out of her family in a desperate attempt to escape from her misery by magically obtaining blue eyes, Soaphead Church, a pedophilic charlatan, "grants" her wish by using her for his petty personal purpose and pushes her into madness. As a result, her wish for blue eyes comes true in an irreversible, Faustian bargain whereby she enters a delusional world of safety and love at the expense of her sanity. "Madness," as Shoshana Felman points out, "is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation."<sup>151</sup> Pecola's final derangement poignantly shows that as a poor young black girl already devalued, rejected, and abused both inside and outside her home, she finds the only safe place within herself. Thus the novel reveals the final outcome of insidious trauma by coupling it with another type of trauma, a more violent and noticeable one. The devastating effect, in the end, places her completely "outdoors" in a metaphorical sense. Judith Herman aptly explains this vicious cycle of multiple victimization: "When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take *place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable*" (italics mine).<sup>152</sup>

The unspeakable nature of Pecola's trauma is particularly important and contributes to her creation of an alter ego and a fantasy world in her madness. Her psychic splitting functions to keep at least part of her self intact from the fatal violation and defilement

forcefully thrust upon her by her own parent. In his research on the intergenerational transmission of trauma within the family, Steven Krugman asserts, “In sexual abuse, especially when the sexual contact is traumatic, the child protects its sense of self by means of a profound splitting of its inner world.”<sup>153</sup> For Pecola, the traumatic victimization by her own father alone is catastrophic enough to utterly break her self-narrative due to the profound sense of betrayal the incident causes. As Doris Brothers emphatically argues, betrayed trust is at the heart of trauma, and, according to her theory, “psychic trauma can only be fully understood *as the betrayal of trust in the selfobject relationships on which selfhood depends*” (her italics).<sup>154</sup> Although distant and not so supportive, Cholly as a parent has been a selfobject for Pecola. By violating her, he destroys the very relational matrix upon which her self is built. Additionally, the sexual nature of her traumatic experience at such a young age also makes it difficult for her to comprehend and to integrate the experience into her life. Actually, splitting does not seem to be such a difficult task for Pecola, who seems to have already started leaving her psychological body in the rape scene. As if to describe “the void that is Pecola’s ‘unbeing,’”<sup>155</sup> Morrison stages the rape scene without any kind of emotional response or protest on Pecola’s part, for “the only sound she made” was “a hollow suck of air,” which Morrison compares to “the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon.” (163). Pecola completely excises herself from the rape scene by dissociating herself mentally and emotionally. The self-hypnotic practice of dissociation that has helped her detach herself from the tension-fraught scenes of domestic violence finally pays off.

Like other trauma victims, children subjected to gruesome violence and betrayal often ask “Why me?” Pecola answers the question by blaming her ugliness and creating a

fantasy world in which she is no longer ugly or debased. In her own imaginary world, she endows herself with what she thinks is the most desirable and admirable image so that she can repair her broken self-narrative and violated self-image. In other words, she spins her own narrative of self to make sense of the incomprehensible traumatic victimization. Thus, she turns the townspeople's despising gaze and looks of horror into envious looks of jealousy at her bluest eye. Her fantasy also enables her to maintain some connection with her another abusive selfobject, her mother, by interpreting her mother's cruel and emotionally distant demeanor toward her simply as a sad, but reasonable reaction to Cholly's departure and loss of love. In creating a fantasy world and distorting the reality she cannot possibly accept and assimilate into her life, she resumes her life narrative in her own way and manages to maintain some measure of continuity in her life, although it completely isolates her from others and from reality and ultimately leads to her social and psychological demise.

The final image of Pecola reinforces the devastating cumulative effects of multiple victimization she has endured and reveals the futility of her attempt at survival by a serious distortion of reality: "Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach . . . but which filled the valleys of the mind" (204). Morrison again presents the stranded bird imagery often associated with Pecola and repeated throughout the novel to symbolically point to her entrapment in her trauma. Also, the "blue void" insinuates the empty, ungrounded nature of her desperate wish to have the bluest eye to compensate for the persecutions and rejections she silently has to endure.

The lack of testimony and support on the communal level at the end of the novel completes the traumatic undoing of Pecola's self. Morrison places the accountability for Pecola's psychic death also on the whole community that splits and projects its own fears and insecurity onto its most helpless member, who serves as a scapegoat figure. Completely ostracized and sacrificed by her community, Pecola becomes the dumping ground or despised object onto which the community defensively splits and projects its undesirable qualities as its "not-me" part.

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. All of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us--all who knew her--felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health . . . . And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (205)

Stigmatized and not seen or heard, Pecola remains a convenient scapegoat that safely contains all the disintegration products of her self, family, and community. She never tells her story to anyone and her story is never listened to in its entirety from her perspective. If trauma narratives, as Susan Brison argues, work like speech acts and if telling a story, due to its performative power, helps the victim to remake his or her self in a communal context,<sup>156</sup> then the silence imposed on Pecola is one of the most tragic aspects of her victimization portrayed in Morrison's novel. "To testify," Felman maintains in her discussion of Claude Lanzman's Holocaust documentary film *Shoah*, is "not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others."<sup>157</sup> In *The Bluest Eye*, no one actively testifies for Pecola and commits to addressing the injustice done to her. Although her friends Claudia and Frieda, at a distance, sympathetically observe her psychic disintegration, they are too young to articulate or to

analyze the cause of Pecola's plight at the time. To complement the young sisters' viewpoints, Morrison uses the adult Claudia as the primary narrator and makes other characters tell their versions of the story and speak for themselves, which help the novel to take on a more empathic tone. The collapse of testimony and witnessing at the end of the novel, however, makes Pecola's story of victimization remain difficult to work through.

Yet it is important to bear in mind that, on another textual level, Morrison *does* testify for Pecola. Jerome Bruner once commented that "To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stance."<sup>158</sup> To paraphrase Bruner, to tell a story in which testimony collapses is still to testify. By telling a story where memory fails, the self disintegrates, and witnessing collapses, Morrison seems to carry out her difficult mission of making language "speak the unspeakable" and capture "the uncapturability of the life it mourns"<sup>159</sup> by avoiding a comforting sense of closure. Thus, on behalf of traumatized victims, she performs the important narrative function of testimony and defiance, which is necessary to claim and reconstitute their selves. In her essay "Talking Back," bell hooks emphasizes the importance of claiming one's right to speak and explains how it is related to claiming one's subject position. "To speak then when one was not spoken to" hooks notes, is both "a courageous act--an act of risk and daring" and "a gesture of defiance that heals."<sup>160</sup> Thus arguing for the movement from silence to speech, from the object to subject position, she sums up the far-reaching implication of speech for minority writers: "For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power, it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such it is a courageous act;

as such it represents a threat.”<sup>161</sup> Via *The Bluest Eye* Morrison “talks back” to the oppressive, victimizing forces against and within African American communities. By doing so, she restores the denied dignity and respect to persecuted victims like Pecola and thus creates a possible narrative space for healing and restoration of the self.

### Notes

<sup>37</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV* (Washington, DC.: Author, 1994), 209.

<sup>38</sup> J. Laplanche and J-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1974), 465.

<sup>39</sup> Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953-74), vol. 2, xx, 86. Hereafter all references to Freud’s work will be cited as *SE*.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth A. Waites, *Trauma and Survival: Post-Traumatic and Dissociative Disorders in Women* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 6. For the controversy about Freud’s abandonment of the seduction theory and its impact on trauma studies, see Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson’s *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Penguin, 1984). Masson’s highly polemical view on Freud holds that he gave up his earlier position on trauma and seduction theory to gain acceptance in the existing medical circle, because his seduction hypothesis posed a great threat to the genteel Viennese society and upholding his position became such a great liability to him. Masson argues that by explaining “memories” of seduction and sexual violence as patients’ fantasies and a development of childhood sexuality, Freud built the foundation of psychoanalysis upon the neglect of sexual crimes and the suppression of truth. Some feminist psychoanalysts take a similar view on Freud’s recantation of the seduction theory. For instance, in her books *Father-Daughter Incest* and *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman criticizes Freud’s lack of empathy toward his female patients and his denial of their reality. So she sums up the development of psychoanalysis in this way: “Out of the ruins of the traumatic theory of hysteria, Freud created psychoanalysis. . . . The dominant psychological theory of the next century was founded in the denial of women’s reality. Sexuality remained the central focus of inquiry. But the exploitative social context in which sexual relations actually occur became utterly invisible. Psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience” (*Trauma and Recovery*, 14). *Father-Daughter*

*Incest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981). *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *SE 18* (1920), 29.

<sup>42</sup> See Kai Erikson's "Notes on Trauma and Community" and Laura S. Brown's "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 183-199 and 100-112 respectively. Also refer to *Ethnocultural Aspects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues, Research, and Clinical Applications*, Anthony J. Marsella et al. eds. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996) and Maria P. P. Root's "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality" in *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals*, eds. Laura S Brown and Mary Ballou. (New York: Guilford, 1992), 227-265.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, "An Interview" with Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 139; Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), 9.

<sup>44</sup> Lifton, "An Interview," 139.

<sup>45</sup> Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality," 240-241.

<sup>46</sup> Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," 185-86.

<sup>47</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112.

<sup>48</sup> David Marriott, "Bonding over Phobia," *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 418-420. After analyzing Fanon's experience of encountering a racial imago as his double, Marriott gives several examples to show how cultural fantasy blurs the division between identity and identification and dictates blacks to hate themselves as whites rather than love themselves as blacks. Along with the example of a four year old girl who stood fixated in front of the mirror and tried to scrub out her dark skin, he also cites Kenneth and Mamie Clark's experiments conducted on black children in 1940s that helped NAACP's legal battle against school segregation. The experiment used white and brown dolls to test children's racial self-identification and the result showed a noticeable preference for white dolls at the prompt "Give me the nice doll" and for brown dolls at "Give me the doll that looks bad." Marriott's examples illustrate the ways in which identity and identification are indivisibly connected and mediated by culture and unconscious fantasy, which interpellate the subject, both black and white, to see the black other as a threat to the white bodily integrity.

<sup>49</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 129, 211, 110.

- <sup>50</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1963), 41.
- <sup>51</sup> Marriott, "Bonding over Phobia," 423.
- <sup>52</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic, 1992), 94.
- <sup>53</sup> See Cathy Caruth's discussion of the lack of the self's mediating role in traumatic experiences and its relationship to the enigma of survival in "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," *Trauma and Self*, eds. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). Also for the ethical dimension of the self's belated experiencing of the traumatic incident and the moral obligation involved in survival, refer to "Traumatic Awakenings: Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory" in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).
- <sup>54</sup> Juliet Mitchell, "Trauma, Recognition, and the Place of Language," *Diacritics* 28 (Winter 1998), 121.
- <sup>55</sup> Brown, "Not Outside the Range," 100-1. In her caustic critique of the canonical definition of trauma by American Psychiatric Association, Brown emphatically argues that the interests of the dominant class determine the public discourse on trauma and she suggests an alternative feminist theoretical approach to expose the ideological underpinning of mainstream, androcentric psychology: "'Real' trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiologist of the trauma. The private, secret, insidious traumas to which a feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated" (102). For other challenge to this mainstream definition of trauma as experience "outside the range of usual human experience," see Elizabeth A. Waites, *Trauma and Survival: Post-Traumatic and Dissociative Disorders in Women*, 37-39.
- <sup>56</sup> Brown, "Not Outside the Range," 102-3
- <sup>57</sup> Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison* (New York: Manchester UP, 1998). Although Laurie Vickroy does not use Root's term of the "insidious trauma," she analyzes Morrison's novel and other contemporary fictions from a similar perspective. See Laurie Vickroy, "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," *Mosaic* 29. 2 (1996): 91-109, as well as her book *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2002).
- <sup>58</sup> J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novel of Toni Morrison* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), especially chapter 1, "'Speaking the Unspeakable': Shame, Trauma, and Morrison's Fiction"; "Contexts and Intertexts," in Jill

Matus's *Toni Morrison*; Barbara Hill Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 1991), 21.

<sup>59</sup> Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publisher, 1990).

<sup>60</sup> Caruth, "Introduction," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), 12, 5.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>63</sup> Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4. Pellegrini more specifically approaches Freud's question of racial differences by relating it to his Jewishness. Pointing out the ways in which Jews figured as emasculated "feminine" and were persecuted as abnormal, asocial being in Freud's era, she argues that Freud's theories of sexuality and sexual differences were his way of working out his own racial heritage in an increasing antisemitic climate. For a further discussion of the influence of Freud's Jewishness on his theorization and the oversight in psychoanalysis of the complex intersecting points of racial and sexual differences, see Sander Gilman's *Freud, Race, and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>64</sup> David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian-America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 8.

<sup>65</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother," *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helen Moglen (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1997), 139.

<sup>66</sup> Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 18.

<sup>67</sup> For a detailed discussion of the oversight of race issues in the founding narratives of feminism and works by female psychoanalysts such as Joan Riviere, Melanie Klein, and Margaret Mead, see Jean Walton, *Fair Sex, Savage Dreams: Race, Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001) and her article "Re-placing Race in (White) Psychoanalytic Discourse: Founding Narratives of Feminism," *Female Subjects in Black and White*, eds. Elizabeth Abel et al., 223-251.

<sup>68</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 3, 235.

- <sup>69</sup> Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 120-30.
- <sup>70</sup> William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 26.
- <sup>71</sup> Claudia Tate, "Introduction: Black Textuality and Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism," *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, 3-21.
- <sup>72</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, "Taking Positions and Changing Words," *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989), 9.
- <sup>73</sup> Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, 15.
- <sup>74</sup> Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism* ed. Linda Kauffman (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 225-237.
- <sup>75</sup> Pellegrini, 4.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid, 3. Barbara Christian also notes in "The Race for Theory" that what ultimately counts in doing literary criticism is "what orientation we take in our work, the language we use, the purpose for which it is intended" (235).
- <sup>77</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: A Plume Book, 1970), 5. All future references to this book will be parenthetically referenced in the text.
- <sup>78</sup> Christopher Bollas, *Forces of Destiny: Psychoanalysis and Human Idiom* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), 31-49.
- <sup>79</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988), 3.
- <sup>80</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133, 51.
- <sup>81</sup> Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International UP, 1971), xiv.
- <sup>82</sup> Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction." *SE*, 14:67-102.
- <sup>83</sup> Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self*, 32-56, 105-132; *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International UP, 1977), 171-191.
- <sup>84</sup> Morris N. Eagle, *Recent Developments in Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), 190.

<sup>85</sup> Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), 53, 55.

<sup>86</sup> Morrison, "Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, 211.

<sup>87</sup> Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, 253.

<sup>88</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), 37-55.

<sup>89</sup> The feeling of helplessness and the loss of an internal locus of control are the key factors in determining the onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (*SE* 20) Freud discusses the significance of the subjective feeling of "helplessness" in relation to psychic trauma. Unlike a danger-situation, Freud asserts, a traumatic situation involves "the subject's estimation of danger and in his admission of helplessness in the fact of it" (166). Contemporary psychologists and psychiatrist often explain this feeling of helpless by the loss of an internal locus of control in stressful or traumatic situations and relate it to a specific personality type or self-schema. See Suzanne C. Ouellette Kobasa, "Stress Responses and Personality," in *Gender and Stress*, eds. Rosalind C. Barnett, Lois Biener, and Grace K. Baruch (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 308-329; Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1984), 132-138. For the discussion of the close relationship between acute post-traumatic reactions and loss of self-control in combat trauma, see Zahava Solomon, Nathaniel Laror, and Alexander C. McFarlane, "Acute Posttraumatic Reactions in Soldiers and Civilians," *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, eds. Bassel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth (New York: Guilford, 1996), 102-114.

<sup>90</sup> Kai Erikson, "Trauma and Community," 185-186.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>92</sup> Linda Peach, *Toni Morrison*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 24; Donald B. Gibson, "Text and Countertext in *The Bluest Eye*," and Michael Awkward, "The Evil of Fulfillment," in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 161, 179-180.

<sup>93</sup> Henry Louis Gates. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), xxiv-xxvi.

<sup>94</sup> J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>95</sup> Bollas, *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self-Experience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 30, 36.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>97</sup> Kai Erickson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 176-177.

<sup>98</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 211, 213.

<sup>99</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: Vintage, 1977), 177, 176.

<sup>100</sup> Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>102</sup> Anne Friedberg, "A Denial of Difference: Theories of Cinematic Identification," *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 1990), 43.

<sup>103</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *SE* 21, 149-157.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>105</sup> Following E. Ann Kaplan's differentiation between "gaze" and "look," I use "gaze" here to connote the active structural element of power involved in the act of seeing an object. For Kaplan "look" connotes a process, a relation whereas "gaze" has more to do with a one-way subjective vision. Thus, the object of the gaze often stirs strong anxieties, fantasies, or desires of the viewer. For a more detailed discussion, see E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xvi-xix.

<sup>106</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror State as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). 1-7.

<sup>107</sup> Mariott, "Bonding over Trauma," 418.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>109</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989[1903]), 5.

<sup>110</sup> Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle toward Self-realization*, (New York: Norton, 1991[1950]), 17-40.

- <sup>111</sup> Elizabeth A. Waites, *Trauma and Survival: Post-traumatic and Dissociative Disorders in Women*, 53.
- <sup>112</sup> Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 130.
- <sup>113</sup> Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 56-63.
- <sup>114</sup> Morrison, "Afterword," 215.
- <sup>115</sup> Matus, *Toni Morrison*, 45.
- <sup>116</sup> Marilyn Frye. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983), 94.
- <sup>117</sup> Jean Baker Miller, "The Construction of Anger in Women and Men," *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center*, eds. Judith V. Jordan et al. (New York: Guilford, 1991), 189, 185.
- <sup>118</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 168-169.
- <sup>119</sup> Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 157.
- <sup>120</sup> Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991), 222.
- <sup>121</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.
- <sup>122</sup> Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 223.
- <sup>123</sup> Quoted in Benjamin Kilborne, *Disappearing Persons: Shame and Appearance* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 198.
- <sup>124</sup> John Bowlby, *Attachment*, volume 1 of *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1969) and *Separation: Anxiety and Anger*, volume 2 of *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- <sup>125</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), 244.
- <sup>126</sup> Leonore Terr, *Unclaimed Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories, Lost and Found* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 70-71, 88; Leonore Terr, "Childhood Traumas: An Outline and Overview," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 148:1 (1991, January), 14.

<sup>127</sup> Bessel A. van der Kolk and Mark S. Greenberg. "The Psychobiology of the Trauma Response: Hyperarousal, Constriction, and Addiction to Traumatic Reexposure," *Psychological Trauma*, ed. Bessel A. van der Kolk (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1987), 63-66.

<sup>128</sup> Donald P. Spence, "Narrative Persuasion," *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 6 (1983), 458.

<sup>129</sup> Spence, "Turning Happenings into Meaning: The Central Role of the Self," *The Book of the Self: Persons, Pretext, and Process*, eds. Polly Young-Eisendrath and James A Hall (New York: New York UP, 1987).

<sup>130</sup> Caruth, "Interview with Robert Jay Lifton," *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* ed. Cathy Caruth, 153. Also refer to Robert Jay Lifton's books, *The Life of the Self: Toward a New Psychology* (New York: Touchstone, 1976) and *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

<sup>131</sup> Lifton, *The Life of the Self: Toward a New Psychology*, 65-81.

<sup>132</sup> Mardi Horowitz, *Stress Response Syndromes* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1986), 147-153.

<sup>133</sup> For the discussion of the relationship between trauma and its psychological effects on the survivor's self, see collected essays in *Trauma and Self* eds. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996); Richard B. Bulman and Doris Brothers, *The Shattered Self: A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 1988); Robert Jay Lifton, *The Life of the Self: Toward a New Psychology* (New York: A Touch Stone Book, 1976); Susan J. Brison, "Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity," *Feminist Rethink the Self* ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997): 12-39; Susan J. Brison, "Traumatic Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* ed Mieke Bal et al. (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1999): 39-54. For a literary approach to the sexual/textual inscription of traumatic narratives and the possibility of reinventing or reconstructing the self through "scriptotherapy," see Suzette A. Henke's *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-writing* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998). Henke examines the twentieth century life-writing by women writers, such as Sidonie Gabrielle Colette, Anais Nin, and Sylvia Plath, to explore the healing and empowering function of autobiographical writing and suggests that the artistic creation of a subject position in writing enabled women writers to forge a sense of agency to rebel against a dominant patriarchal society.

<sup>134</sup> Spence, "Turning Happenings into Meaning," 145.

<sup>135</sup> Interesting findings about the gender differences in the defensive mechanism deployed for coping with trauma show that men often become more aggressive and act out their

frustration whereas women become more passive and direct aggression against themselves. Males' proclivity toward aggression and narcissistic rage seem to reflect the gender-specific social rearing and relational expectations that promote independence and self-assertion for males and overinvestment and overidentification with significant others for females. For a more detailed discussion of the impact of unbalanced gender-specific socialization on narcissistic development, refer to William Beers's *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992); Ilene Philipson, "Gender and Narcissism," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 9 (1985): 213-228; Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and Irene Hanson Frieze, "The Role Gender in Reactions to Criminal Victimization," *Gender and Stress*, eds. Rosalind C. Barnett, Lois Biener, and Grance K. Baruch (New York: Free Press, 1987).

<sup>136</sup> Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self*, 116. For his theory of aggression, refer to pp.111-131 of the same book.

<sup>137</sup> Carth, "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," 30.

<sup>138</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock. (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986), 28.

<sup>139</sup> Henry Krystal, "Trauma and Aging," *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 85.

<sup>140</sup> Kent D. Harber and James W. Pennebaker, "Overcoming Traumatic Memory," *The Handbook of Emotion and Memory*, ed. Sven-Ake Christianson (Hillsdale: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 1992), 377. Also see Spence, "Turning Happenings into Meaning," 139-148.

<sup>141</sup> Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1996); Bessel van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Scores: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1 (1994): 253-265; Bessel van der Kolk, "Traumatic Memories," *Trauma and Memory: Clinical and Legal Controversies*. eds. Paul S. Appelbaum, Lisa A. Uyeahara, and Mark R. Elin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997); Regina Pally, *The Mind-Body Relationship* (New York: Karnac Books, 2000); J. Douglas Bremner, "Traumatic Memories Lost and Found," *Trauma and Memory*. eds. Linda M. Williams and Victoria L. Banyard (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999); Wilma Bucci, "Dual Coding: A Cognitive Model for Psychoanalytic Research," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 33 (1985), 571-607.

<sup>142</sup> Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, 179-224; Joseph LeDoux, "Emotion as Memory: Anatomical Systems Underlying Indelible Neural Traces," *The Handbook of Emotion and Memory*, ed. Sven-Ake Christianson (Hillsdale: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 1992), 264-286.

- <sup>143</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33-42.
- <sup>144</sup> Lifton, *Ibid.*, 173.
- <sup>145</sup> William Beers, *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion*, 131.
- <sup>146</sup> Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through," *SE* 12(1914), 147-156.
- <sup>147</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *SE* 18 (1920), 14-23.
- <sup>148</sup> Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "Pierre Janet and the Breakdown of Adaptation in Psychological Trauma," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 146. 12 (December 1989), 1537.
- <sup>149</sup> See Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *The Shattered Assumptions: Toward a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992) and her "The Aftermath of Victimization: Rebuilding Shattered Assumptions," *Trauma and Its Wake: The Study and Treatment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* ed. Charles R. Figley (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985), 15-35. Janoff-Bulman draws on a psychologist C. M. Parkes's concept "assumptive world" to explain "a strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognizing, planning, and acting" and points out that these deepest and generalized assumptions are "the bedrock of our conceptual system . . . that we are least aware of and least likely to challenge" (*The Shattered Assumption*, 5). The far-reaching effects of trauma, according to Janoff-Bulman, can be explained by the shattering of positively biased overgeneralizations about the world and hence, the recovery from trauma necessarily involves rebuilding the survivor's inner world and assumptions by integrating the old world-view with a new appraisal and insight gained from the traumatic experience.
- <sup>150</sup> Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 68-70.
- <sup>151</sup> Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 21.
- <sup>152</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.
- <sup>153</sup> Steven Krugman, "Trauma in the Family: Perspectives on the Intergenerational Transmission of Violence," *Psychological Trauma*, ed. Bessel A. van der Kolk (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1987), 134.
- <sup>154</sup> Doris Brothers, *Falling Backwards: An Exploration of Trust and Self Experience* (New York: Norton, 1995), 55.

<sup>155</sup> Morrison, "Afterword," 215.

<sup>156</sup> Brison, "Trauma Narrative and the Remaking of the Self."

<sup>157</sup> Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah," *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, 204.

<sup>158</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), 51.

<sup>159</sup> Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994), 21.

<sup>160</sup> bell hooks, "Talking Back," *Discourse* 8 (1986-87), 123, 128.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

CHAPTER 3  
THE OPEN WOUND OF TRAUMA AND THE HOLOCAUST IN ISAAC BASHEVIS  
SINGER'S *ENEMIES, A LOVE STORY*

The nooses wound for our necks still dangle  
before us in the blue air –

.....  
We, the rescued,  
Beg you:  
Show us your sun, but gradually.  
Lead us from star to star, step by step.  
Be gentle when you teach us to live again.  
Lest the song of a bird,  
Or a pail being filled at the well,  
Let our badly sealed pain burst forth again  
and carry us away –

Nelly Sachs, "Chorus of the  
Rescued"

There [in Auschwitz] one touched on something which  
represents the deep layer of solidarity among all that wears  
a human face; notwithstanding all the usual acts of  
beastliness of human history, the integrity of this common  
layer has been taken for granted . . . Auschwitz has changed  
the basis for the continuity of the conditions of life within  
history.

Jürgen Habermas

My heart lost its hurt  
its reason for beating  
life was returned to me  
and I am here in front of life  
as though facing a dress  
I can no longer wear.

Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*

### **The Holocaust: The Site of the Annihilated Ontological Landscape of Selfhood**

For both survivors and others indirectly exposed to the Holocaust, the difficulty of mourning has been the central issue associated with the difficulty of representation. The Holocaust was an atrocious experience of such magnitude and cruelty that it surpassed any existing realm of possibility and left survivors unprepared for the daunting task of coming to terms with their losses and of integrating them into their lives. Emmanuel Levinas has aptly called the Holocaust the “paradigm of gratuitous suffering” which left a hole in both personal and collective history.<sup>162</sup> For the survivors who were subjected to and witnessed the dehumanizing and perverse practices of Nazi extermination, the Holocaust has brought to an end the illusion of “beautiful death,” which Jean-François Lyotard describes as “the exchange of the finite for the infinite, of the *eschaton* for *télos*.” For the victims of the Holocaust who died utterly dehumanized deaths, Lyotard explains, their dying was deprived of “the reason to die” in which people often find the comforting “bond of a we.” “One cannot give a life that one doesn’t have a right to have,” Lyotard continues to point out in reference to the desecration of the deportees’ life and death in Auschwitz, where “one’s death is legitimate because one’s life is illegitimate.”<sup>163</sup>

Despite its connotative religious meaning of sacrifice that comes from the biblical offering of animals to God, “Holocaust,” which literally means a whole burning, cannot anchor the lost lives of its victims in any meaningful religious or ethical system of purpose.<sup>164</sup> Nor can anyone endow them with a consolatory significance even retroactively. The dubious assertion that the Holocaust and its victims ultimately led to the establishment of a Jewish state, or even the Jewish mystical tradition and its philosophy of creation positing and emphasizing the final stage of *tikkun* or repair after the stage of disruption and chaos, sounds too contrived and loses its redemptive power

against the heavy silence engulfing victims and the survivors' unspeakable stories finally spoken often in a highly fragmented manner. Persistently haunting its survivors, yet characterized by the enigmatic collapse of its witnessing, the Holocaust is a "historically ungraspable *primal scene*," as Shoshana Felman notes in her discussion of Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah*.<sup>165</sup> In other words, the devastating impact of the event is such that it often creates a new identity for survivors, despite the fact that they may have a hard time acknowledging, recalling, and bearing witness to the catastrophe.

Like survivors of other types of trauma, survivors of the Holocaust feel that the event has shattered the basic assumptions and expectations of life, or in Habermas's words, "the integrity of this common layer . . . taken for granted" that accounts for "the continuity of the conditions of life within history."<sup>166</sup> Continuing Habermas's geo-spatial metaphor, I argue that common to all traumatic experiences is the destruction of what I call the basic foundational elements of the "psychological landscape."<sup>167</sup> The psychological landscape consists of the assumption of meaningfulness and value of life, the ability to trust others and oneself, the possibility of sustaining fulfilling human relationships, everlasting ties of solidarity with others, and the projection of one's future in the continuum of past, present, and future.

A traumatic ordeal or shock destroys people's psychological landscape and deprives them of the psychological backdrop against which all their life events have taken place, make sense, and take on significance. This psychological landscape consists of basic beliefs, values, and expectations that coordinate and arrange seemingly random events or episodes into a meaningful and coherent sequence of personal narrative. Depending on one's personal history and cultural milieu or heritage, it may have different

elements and object relations that stay in the foreground or background. Overall, however, it serves as a protective wall, creating a safe space for the self to evolve relatively free from intrusive outside forces and buffering any shock or challenge with its comforting, supportive systems of ideas, and networks of internalized ties with others. It also provides a sense of projected temporal continuation that seems to promise another horizon to look forward to beyond whatever turbulence and difficulty one may have at the present moment. The self stripped of these fundamental elements of surrounding psychological makeup is not a self.

From a slightly different angle, the moral philosopher Charles Taylor also uses a spatial metaphor to explain and emphasize the significance of a certain orientation or framework for selfhood: “What I am as a self, my identity . . . essentially is defined by the way things have significance for me. . . .a person without a framework altogether would be outside our space of interlocution; he wouldn’t have a stand in the space where the rest of us are.”<sup>168</sup> Gradually formulated and modified, this psychological landscape or, in Taylor’s term, orientation or framework, creates a composite picture of who one is and eventually becomes an integral part of the self.

The accumulated history of one’s interaction with others that has been blended into one’s psychological landscape like a pattern in a fabric also helps one formulate and secure an ontological anchoring in a constantly shifting world. It enables one to organize and continue to articulate one’s personal narrative of self in a protective, nurturing environment. Thus, the collapse of this psychological landscape leads to a frighteningly chaotic inner state that radically alters one’s sense of self, throwing one into a murky realm of the unknown, severing ties with others, and making one feel utterly alone.

I argue that trauma is basically about losing one's ground in the familiar space of psychic and interpersonal history where one's most defining moments in life have taken place and where one's distinctive qualities as a person have been formulated in relationship with significant others or, to use Kohut's term, selfobjects. Not only catastrophic disasters or violent personal upheavals such as rape or a sudden loss of loved ones, for example, cause traumatic wounds. But a serious disturbance within, or damage to, this personalized inner space is traumatic in that it threatens to destroy the carefully built self-narrative and subjects one to doubt, shame, or uncertainty. Trauma is an experience of violation and violence that destroys this unique, carefully carved out personalized space. Once this protective space is violated due to a chronic assault to one's dignity and autonomy, one loses not only "the belief that one can be *oneself* in relation to others" but one "may lose the sense that [one] has any self at all."<sup>169</sup>

Dissociation, often diagnosed as the most common representative symptom of trauma, points to the surreal feeling of disorientation people feel toward themselves and the world after the fundamental psychological landscape crumbles under their feet. They are left clueless about how to cope with the hostile forces threatening to annihilate them at any minute. As a result, disparate sensory data become foregrounded and remain distinctive without any logical, meaningful connection between them, since overall psychological background serving as the integrating force of different elements of the self no longer exists.

As Doris Brothers, a Kohutian psychoanalyst specializing in treatment of trauma survivors, argues, in many traumatic incidents, "the psychic adhesive" integrating the self and selfobject fantasies dissolves, making survivors no longer able to be themselves or

trust and rely on themselves. “Trauma,” in other words, “loosens this glue, crippling psychological life” and leaves them “plunged into a nightmare world of self-fragmentation in which sanity, indeed the very continuity of existence, can no longer be taken for granted.”<sup>170</sup>

The Holocaust is a quintessential example of trauma that illustrates many detrimental effects of the prolonged attack on selfhood. Desubjectification is at the core of Holocaust experience and it is a type of what Robert Jay Lifton calls the “perversion of meaning” that affirms one’s sense of self by destroying others. The Nazis used the constant degradation and lack of autonomy in concentration camps as a means of annihilating the humanity of the Jews.<sup>171</sup> As Dominic LaCapra explains, Nazi ideology needed a demonized outsider group that could be perceived as a threatening Other and hence help stabilize the insecure inner solidarity in post-World War I Germany. The Jew conveniently served as the “projective carrier of anxieties” or a “phantasmatic cause of all evil.”<sup>172</sup>

Behind Nazi ideology and its obsession with a pure “racial hygiene” lies a complex and morbid group psychology that reflects a humiliated people’s narcissistic fury and a desperate need for an easy target for the pent-up aggression they could not give vent to due to post-World War I international sanctions. In other words, the Holocaust was the Nazis’ witch hunt by which they implemented their will and desire to start over and restore the old glory of the *Volk* at the expense of the innocent Jews. Lifton insightfully analyzes this intergroup dynamic: “You cannot kill large numbers of people except with a claim to virtue, so that killing on a large scale is always an attempt at affirming the life power of one’s own group.”<sup>173</sup> To achieve this purpose, the Nazis made the Jews

“vermin” that needed to be exterminated and subjected them to a systematic total degradation whereby the targets of their assault would lose their identity as human beings. By doing so, the Nazis could obviate or alleviate any feelings of guilt or revulsion against their atrocious crime. As Freud says in “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” not only positively shared emotional ties strengthen group solidarity. A shared hatred toward a particular group or entity functions in the same manner.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, anti-Semites could also rid themselves of negative or ambivalent feelings toward their ideal or leader and consolidate their ties to the group by unleashing their aggression against outsiders and sadistically destroying Jews’ integrity as human beings. Desubjectification was the key to their extermination policy that exacted a heavy toll on their victims.

Due to its desubjectifying nature, trauma for its victims is an irrevocable experience of violation and violence that strips the layers of the self integral for maintaining their identity as human beings. In the total ruins of their psychological landscape, those persecuted by the Nazis could not feel that they were the same people they used to be. Since they had to break ties with others and drift off from their ontological mooring in their arduous efforts for survival, a majority of Holocaust survivors were bound to feel that their identities were canceled. In his book *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, Primo Levi reflects on his life in Auschwitz and succinctly explains how the uprooted and degraded concentration camp inmates had to “lie on the bottom” and become “hollow” men:

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for

he who loses all often easily loses himself. . . . It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term ‘extermination camp,’ and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: ‘to lie on the bottom.’<sup>175</sup>

The “bottom” here functions to highlight metaphorically both the unfathomable depth of inmates’ despair and their sunken moral state after their demolition as men. Elsewhere, Levi refers to the dismally inhumane condition of concentration camps as “the gray zone” where people have to suspend any kind of moral judgement as irrelevant. In this gray zone, each individual is turned into “a thousand sealed off monads” and has to struggle to survive by all means without a communal sense of solidarity with others.<sup>176</sup> This desolate situation exemplifies what Judith Herman defines as the two core experiences common to all types of trauma: disempowerment and disconnection from others.<sup>177</sup> In the confines of Nazi camps, where “the struggle to survive is without respite,” Levi notes, “everyone is desperately and ferociously alone.”<sup>178</sup>

Under a traumatic circumstance, along with the shrunken, impoverished social and moral horizon, the temporal dimension constituting people’s ontological landscape undergoes a radical change. The Holocaust, in particular, is unique in that the accumulated effects of assault and persecution over a relatively long period of time produce a highly distorted perception of time in survivors. The Holocaust survivors often report how their traumatic ordeal during the war makes them feel as if their current lives do not belong to them, even after a long time has already elapsed. Often “fixated” on or “possessed” by the harrowing past, they find living in the present moment extremely difficult or almost impossible. For instance, Artur Sammler, Saul Bellow’s Jewish protagonist in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, who survives Nazi rule by hiding in a mausoleum, feels so misplaced in time and removed from the busy life around him in New York that

he thinks of himself “separated from the rest of his species” or simply “not a man of the times.” Sammler’s aloofness and disorientation is so excessive that Shula, his frustrated and concerned daughter, wishes “to implicate him and bring him back, to bind him and keep him in the world beside her.”<sup>179</sup>

Sometimes survivors take a completely opposite approach to life and immerse themselves in a morbidly excessive concern with the “here and now.” Their obsession with the “here and now” and their blind drive to live in the present, however, is just a convenient coverup or shield against the overwhelming emotions associated with their past. By focusing on the present moment, they try to block out the intrusion of past pains and memories. But this defense mechanism cannot be successful and often comes with a high price, making them emotionally flat or unable to enjoy any pleasure in life. Henry Krystal explains this “anhedonia” or “an impairment of the ability to experience gratification” as the common affective disorder found in trauma patients that often manifests itself in their masochistic tendencies.<sup>180</sup> One representative example is Sol Nazerman, another lonely Holocaust survivor in Edward Lewis Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker*, who, after the death of his entire family, alienated himself from the world and focused on money, in his opinion the only guarantee of security in life. “Next to the speed of light . . . second only to that I would rank money,” he claims. Thus, when his distressed mistress questions his claim that they survived the Nazi-imposed Hell and asks “Have *you* escaped?” he tersely dismisses her by replying, “You are a hysterical woman.” And then he shouts to her this advice reflecting his extremely myopic, present-based philosophy: “Grab what you need without mooning and sighing. Take, do, act!

Life is the here and now. Focus on what is before you. Bear down, push away whoever impedes you. Take what you need; money, relief, peace.”<sup>181</sup>

Survivors’ warped sense of time is one of the telling symptoms testifying to their broken narrative of the self. To explain the everlasting distortion of time that plagues their present life, survivors often recall their past and clarify why it is so difficult for them to adjust to the “normal” flow of time. In their reminiscences they often show how, with their past forgotten and the future uncertain under the Nazi rule, only the present moment used to consume them entirely. “Do you know how one says ‘never’ in camp slang?” Levi asks. And he answers, “tomorrow morning.”<sup>182</sup> It is highly ironic that these people, who were compelled to live in the present under constant threats of annihilation, now cannot let go of their painful past and live their life in the peaceful present.

When the only certainty in the provisional existence is “here and now” and the strenuous struggle for survival demands their entire energy, people in a threatening predicament often lose sight of what to live for or even what to fall back on as the reminder of their life before the catastrophe. In this respect, Viktor E. Frankl, another concentration camp survivor who later developed a unique, meaning-centered psychotherapeutic approach called “logotherapy,” explains the existence in the abominable camp setting as a “provisional existence of unknown limit.”<sup>183</sup> Driven to live in an existential vacuum of the eternally doomed present, these victims lose not only their identity but their humanity. Literature about Nazi concentration camp inmates abounds with the stories about “*Muselmänner*,” those “irreversibly exhausted, worn out prisoners close to death” who were no longer part of the living and often referred to as living corpses.<sup>184</sup> The emaciated bodies of *Muselmänner* were the derelict relics of the broken

self-narratives of those people who were now stuck in the meaningless present. Stasis and fragmentation dominate the traumatized and their constricting life condition, which has shriveled to unpredictable, fleeting moments. In contrast, movement and integration create, support, and maintain a healthy psychological landscape, enabling the self-narrative to progress along with the natural lapse of time.

Along with a static, distorted conception of time, another symptom of trauma that illustrates the severity of the hardships survivors had to go through is extreme somatization. It also determines their coping mechanisms even long after their survival. As in other traumatic experiences, the broken connections with others and other uprooting ordeals often produce a radically different self-perception in Holocaust survivors. This newly forged perception is often entirely body-based and highly fragmentary. Specifically, since a severe deprivation of basic necessity and the prolonged exposure to abuse usually leaves no margin for thought, their notion of the self, after a series of repeated assaults and severe deprivation, dwindles considerably, to such an extent that a mere part of their body often substitutes for their whole self-concept.

Holocaust testimonies are replete with people's testimony where survivors express their bewildering shock at finding themselves reduced to "a hungry stomach," "a burning throat" or "a pounding heart." Or as Delbo's remark illustrates, those in an extremely dire situation may perceive themselves in such a degraded way as to equate themselves to only "a sack which needs periodic refilling."<sup>185</sup> Additionally, after the catastrophe is over, somatization also becomes a psychological coping mechanism for many survivors of different types of trauma. Since the extremely powerful and overwhelming affective responses are not allowed or may jeopardize their chance of survival, they learn to make

it through the ordeal by, as Levi would phrase, “hollowing” themselves. In more clinical terms, Robert Jay Lifton explains this phenomenon as “psychic numbing” or “closing off.” According to Lifton, this “diminished capacity to feel” is “at the heart of the traumatic syndrome,” and survivors “undergo a reversible form of psychic death in order to avoid a permanent physical or psychic death.”<sup>186</sup> In the wake of trauma, only “the body keeps the score.”<sup>187</sup> Only the nonverbal, embodied memories testify to the near-death horror and remain as a symptom of the unacknowledged, unintegrated life experience and the precluded mourning for the loss and pain.

The incidents of extreme somatization all point to the process of unmaking of the self. “The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self,” maintains Jean Améry, former resistance member and ex-prisoner of a Nazi concentration camp, as he reflects on his experience of torture by the Gestapo. Our corporeality demarcates the outmost limit of our self. The violation of this boundary by torture, assault, or intentional affliction of severe deprivation, as Améry explains, is “like a rape.”<sup>188</sup> As one critic notes, unlike violence that does not imply any systemized locus of action and the designated target, violation is a carefully planned social act with a specific target and poses a fundamental existential dilemma for the violated, for the latter is “not merely invaded by another, but literally taken.”<sup>189</sup> Those perpetrating this boundary violation deconstruct the agency of victims and impose their own will. As Elaine Scarry also argues in her discussion of torture in her book *The Body in Pain*, “the physical pain is so incontestably real” that it is often maliciously used by those who want to convert this “quality of ‘incontestable reality’” into “the fiction of [their own] power” in the process of inflicting pain on others.<sup>190</sup>

At the root of any trauma is the violation of the fundamental boundary of the self whose intactness is mandatory for survival on both the physical and the psychological levels. To have one's identity canceled to such an extent that one's corporeality becomes the only tangible anchoring point of the self is a highly painful and excruciatingly degrading experience. Shame and guilt, the repressed aggression turned inward, accompany this "truncated self" or "the self . . . reduced to pure body, and thence to a certain blankness."<sup>191</sup> Hence, for the survivors of the Holocaust, their deeply humiliating and self-fragmenting experience is basically "a story of a dirty wound," as Lawrence Langer states in reference to former Auschwitz inmate Charlotte Delbo's wartime ordeal.<sup>192</sup> Or as Langer argues in his research on Holocaust testimonials, the Holocaust for survivors is inseparable from their own "anguished," "humiliated," or "tainted" memory that constantly haunts them.<sup>193</sup> Because of the deep, long-term repercussions of the life-threatening incident, survival of trauma comes with a high cost. Studies of numerous cases of post-traumatic stress disorder show that survival itself often depends on "a paradoxical killing of the self by the self in order to keep the self alive."<sup>194</sup> One survivor of the Holocaust survivor thus remarks, "I'm not alive. I died in Auschwitz but no one knows it."<sup>195</sup>

### **Trauma, Narrative, and Mourning in Holocaust Literature**

If the Holocaust is a traumatic experience of disconnection, fragmentation, and stasis that traps survivors in the repetitive reliving of their painful past and hinders them from resuming their suspended self-narratives, how can they overcome the gripping force of their trauma? What does it mean to struggle to survive this odd "survival" that often involves "a paradoxical killing of the self by the self"? In the ruins of the basic ontological landscape of selfhood, is it really possible for the survivors of the Holocaust

to start all over and rebuild their lives? If it is possible to a certain extent, what tasks and daunting risks are involved? These are the major questions that researchers studying Holocaust survivors repeatedly ask. Those doing literary studies of the Holocaust often pose these questions about the significant role narratives may play in the mourning and healing process.

Considering the imposed silence and secrecy the Nazi persecution enforced and perpetuated, it is small wonder that, for the survivors, narrative reclamation and restitution of the self is the prerequisite step for the recovery from their past trauma. Actually, in many Holocaust narratives such as Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* and Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl," the muteness of characters symbolically represents the radical rupture and disempowerment the Nazi brutality brings to its victims' lives. The literary critic Sara R. Horowitz defines muteness as a figure that illustrates the "essential . . . nature of the event [the Holocaust] itself." She thus asserts that muteness points to the "radical negativity of the Holocaust" that "ruptures the fabric of history and memory, emptying both narrative and life of meaning."<sup>196</sup> Hence, in many Holocaust novels such as *The Painted Bird*, the protagonists' regaining their voices often signals their transformed status from victims to survivors.

If desymbolization and fragmentation characterize the traumatized self, narratives can be a critical means through which the traumatized self comes to terms with its traumatic past and harrowing memory. In many ways, the traumatized person is comparable to the melancholic Freud analyzes in "Mourning and Melancholia," in that they both share an open wound that constantly drains their energy and hinders them from letting go of the past to move on with their present lives. As Freud writes, "The complex

of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathetic energies . . . from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished.”<sup>197</sup> The traumatized and melancholics are both fixated on the past, and their bleeding from the open wound does not stop with the passing of time. As Freud emphasizes, successful mourning of an object loss requires a certain level of detachment from, and giving up of, the loved object as something dead and no longer part of the bereaved’s world. Additionally, it also requires reinvesting or rechanneling energy into a new direction. Likewise, an adequate mourning in cases of trauma means that survivors work through their loss and pain to relieve themselves of the burden of their past. Mourning is “a protracted process of detachment” from the past.<sup>198</sup> Or, more precisely, it is a ritual wherein the past, the present, and the future converge in the complex process of letting go of the past and projecting a new life. Mourning connotes detachment, symbolic reinvestment, and agency. So does narrative.

Like mourning, narrative healing works in seemingly two opposite directions: through integration/assimilation and through disintegration/segregation. Although operating in opposite directions, these narrative modes of healing are closely related to each other. First, narratives bring disparate unorganized life stories into perspective, and they create or rebuild the new ontological landscape in the process. As Susan J. Brison aptly notes, narratives necessarily involve choices and integration. Thus, trauma narratives, by virtue of their performative nature as “speech acts,” often contribute to remaking of the self and bring about a shift from the object to the subject status for those narrating their own stories. “*Saying* something about a traumatic memory *does* something to it,” remarks Brison.<sup>199</sup> Narrative acknowledgment and integration of traumatic events

into survivors' lives is integral for their successful mourning and healing. Second, narratives also cure by sectioning off the hard-to-manage, highly emotionally charged cluster of events and loosening their grip on those suffering from posttraumatic stress disorders. In other words, narratives "unravel the traumatic knot" and "break the event down into smaller conceptual bits, each of which should be subjectively less threatening, and at the same time much more easily parsed than the memory as a whole."<sup>200</sup> Thus, narratives serve as a "buffer" against the immediacy of raw pain and unexamined negative associations. It is through the dynamic interaction between the two narrative modes of integration/assimilation and disintegration/segregation that those with PTSD learn to weave their traumatic past incident into their lives as one of the distinct markers of their psychological landscape, putting behind their past as past.

It is noteworthy that despite the positive effects of narratives, however, suturing the open wound of trauma by representing and narrating the horrendous experience is a challenging and even risky task. It is important to bear in mind that narrative healing, even if it does occur, does not happen in a linear, progressive manner. Nor does the simple act of narration guarantee healing. Additionally, narration, especially narration of catastrophic events of great magnitude, often involves a high risk of misrepresentation. For this reason, George Steiner, Elie Wiesel, and Claude Lanzmann, among others, plead for respect for the lives lost and for those survivors who are repeatedly put on the spot to defend themselves against indecent queries and accusations. According to Steiner, "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason." In "A Plea for the Survivors," Wiesel has also strongly suggested that the Holocaust be "approached with fear and trembling" so that people can avoid placing the "stamp of vulgarity and

obscurity on the victim's universe" in their seemingly all-knowing manner of narration. Elsewhere, he even boldly argues that the "Holocaust transcends history" and that it is "the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted." Lanzmann similarly states, "The Holocaust . . . erects around itself, in a circle of flames, a limit which cannot be breached because a certain absolute is intransmissible: to claim to do so is to make oneself guilty of the most serious sort of transgression."<sup>201</sup>

From a different perspective, another camp of critics heavily influenced by French deconstructive criticism has also emphasized the indeterminacy and even impossibility of representing the Holocaust. Jean-François Lyotard, for instance, often uses Auschwitz and "the jews" as general tropes designating an excess or a "differend" that language fails to phrase or express. In Lyotard's discourse, he often likens the Holocaust to the negative Kantian "sublime."<sup>202</sup> Likewise, Maurice Blanchot considers any "disaster" as "extratextual" or "beyond the "pale of writing," and the Holocaust as "the *absolute* event of history . . . where the movement of Meaning was swallowed up," leaving only "the fleeing silence of the countless cries."<sup>203</sup> Both Lyotard and Blanchot share a deep distrust of language and a skepticism about any privileged position of the subject and agency.

Despite some legitimate concerns critics express about the representation of the Holocaust, I believe that the insistence on the uniqueness, inexplicability, and historical transcendence of the Holocaust entails risks of blocking the process of mourning and elevating the event as an ahistorical fetish. For Freud, the fetish denies the distinction between different objects, and it is often used defensively by those who want to hide from their own fear and anxiety or guilt about a disturbing fact.<sup>204</sup> Depriving a historical event of its specificity is hazardous in that it forecloses any possibility of working through and

learning from the past, however painful the process may be. This tendency to “hollow out” the event, points out Michael Rothberg, “not only acts out a traumatic past . . . but actively constructs the past as traumatic.”<sup>205</sup> Additionally, privileging the figure of the Jews as an “excess” by trapping them within the social imaginary as an everlasting marginal or misfit group is a highly questionable practice that amounts to objectifying and victimizing them all over again. These dubious practices again rob them of their agency and subjecthood. In this kind of discourse, the Jews are again driven beyond the realm of the human, this time as an elevated, quasi-aesthetic or philosophical object. Even in contemporary cultural discourses which involve “romancing” or “hyping” survival, survivors, and redemption, this highly tendentious attempt at simplification of the Holocaust and elevation of Holocaust survivors continues to distort and muddy a clear understanding, obstructing a critical approach to thinking through and reappraising the Holocaust as a complex historical event.

What is evident from these “othering” discourses is that narratives in themselves do not have any positive value or potentiality of healing. If not properly used, narratives can also obfuscate or deliberately mislead the reader and the audience. The “othering” discourse about the Holocaust is more often a disguised, defensive deflection of bystanders’ responsibility for or guilt about the past, rather than a genuine effort to work through the trauma. In this respect, James Young’s caveat about the contemporary enthusiasm for memorial-building and memory-making is worthy of a careful reflection. In pondering the moral questions imbricated in the commemorative representation of the Holocaust, Young notes, “It might be possible that the initial impulse to memorialize the

event like the Holocaust may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them” and to “relieve us of the memory-burden we should be carrying.”<sup>206</sup>

Another critic, Eric Santer, also shares this cautious approach to Holocaust narratives by using the concept of “narrative fetish.” According to Santer, many forms of discourse on the Holocaust belong to the category of “narrative fetish,” which he defines as “the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place.” In short, narrative fetishism is “a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere.”<sup>207</sup> What both Young and Santer object to is a reification of the Holocaust that denies its historical specificity, pushes it beyond the realm of the human, and obstructs a necessary process of fair historical assessment and working through.

Regardless of the insurmountable difficulty and risk involved in its representation, however, it is integral that we should resist the “collapse of witnessing” surrounding the Holocaust.<sup>208</sup> “Testimony,” as Shoshana Felman notes, is “a form of action, a mode not merely of accounting for but going through, a change.”<sup>209</sup> In other words, we must bear witness to the seismic historical incident and claim our innocence, for not telling means forsaking our ethical responsibility by copping out of a thorny historical situation and foreclosing a possibility to work it through. Narratives are the means through which we makes sense of the world, mourn for our loss, and make it through difficult personal or historical time. Thus, in the remainder of this chapter, I will explore these questions of narrative, mourning, and survival from a psychoanalytic perspective by focusing on Isaac Bashevis Singer’s *Enemies, A Love Story*. Singer’s novel effectively portrays the never-

ending, often convoluted process of mourning, along with the negative impacts of trauma that manifest in survivors' already fragmented and highly dysfunctional lives as repetitive reliving and enigmatic encounters with the past.

**Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies, A Love Story*: A Novel of the Uncanny Haunting, the Traumatic Wound, and Repetition**

The major characters of Singer's novel *Enemies* are all immigrant survivors of the Holocaust and carry the scars of the past even though they have started new lives in America after the war. In the novel, the gripping force of past trauma is poignantly illustrated by the ways in which the past repeats itself in each character's life, even in a new locale remote from the European site of catastrophe. Herman Broder, the highly neurotic protagonist, is a Polish intellectual who escaped Nazi persecution by hiding in a hayloft for three years with the help of his former family servant Yadwiga. After the war, he marries Yadwiga out of obligation, moves to New York, and earns his living by ghost writing sermons for a rabbi. His professional life is not only built on lies and deception professionally but also threatens to collapse at any moment due to his simultaneous relationships with several women. Since he basically believes that "survival [is] based upon guiles," Herman, "devious and enmeshed in lies," lives in a constant fear that his deceptions will finally be revealed.<sup>210</sup>

It is obvious from the beginning of the novel that the idyllic and peaceful Brooklyn home he shares with his simple and dedicated wife Yadwiga is just a disguise, for Herman's tumultuously passionate affair with another Holocaust survivor Masha consumes him entirely. His carefully maintained facade of normalcy crumbles with the sudden return of his former wife Tamara, who literally rises from an open grave during the Nazi mass murder and visits guilt-stricken Herman as a haunting reincarnation of the

painful past. Presumed to be dead for years along with her two children, Tamara's unexpected return complicates the already tangled web of lies Herman has spun around himself. Furthermore, her return brings to the surface his suppressed memories, emotions, and conflicts pertaining to his past life.

Although *Enemies* seems to deal with the trivial love triangle of a sick, adulterous antihero, a closer examination of characters, their peculiar interpersonal relationships, and their highly truncated emotional lives shows that the novel is much more than a simple romantic farce. At its fundamental level, the novel is about Holocaust survivors' experiences of radical deracination. For Herman, the Holocaust is a life-altering ordeal that marks his irreparable alienation from the world: "He had spent almost three years hiding in a hayloft. It was a gap in his life which could never be filled. . . .In his thoughts, Herman had often likened himself to the Talmudic sage, Choni Hamagol, who according to legend slept for seventy years and when he awoke found the world so strange that he prayed for death" (28).

For Herman, his experiences of disconnection and disempowerment are like a hard kernel or knot of trauma around which subsequent layers of wounds and pains cluster and gradually develop into a protective thick skin of detachment, deceit, and callousness.<sup>211</sup> The tragic consequence is that it is very hard for him to break through the defensive wall he himself has set up around him, thus trapping him inside his own world of misery, loss, and exile, despite his longing for human contact and companionship. In this respect, he is different from other characters in Singer's novels such as Yasha Mazur in *The Magician of Lublin*, whose exile and detachment from society ultimately leads to transcendence and

redemption. Herman's exile from human society is detrimental, for it leads to his alienation not only from other human beings but also from himself.

The nightmarish three years Herman spent hiding in a confined space in utter isolation from other human beings have brought a dramatic change in his perception of himself and the world, pushing him into an extreme pessimism. Although he survives the horror of confinement and alienation, the Holocaust puts Herman permanently off kilter. He thinks of himself as not deserving to live or his life as not worth living. Chastising himself in an extremely masochistic self-denigration and nihilism for "lacking the courage to commit suicide," Herman lives "like a worm" by managing to "shut his eyes, stop up his ears, close his mind" (19). Herman admits, "When a man hides in an attic for years, he ceases to be a part of society. The truth is that I'm still hiding in an attic right here in America" (101).

In other words, Herman's self-narrative is so broken by his traumatic withdrawal from society that the life he resumes after the Holocaust becomes only a variation and reenactment of his previous retreat from life. Thus, even after the war, the survival strategies of secrecy, disguise, and exile, which Herman originally employed under the Nazi rule, continue to determine his mode of living in a free world and prevent him from reestablishing himself securely by formulating trusting and loving bonds with others. As a result, his misanthropic detachment and pathological lies trap him in his own lonely world, which becomes an American version of his former hayloft. In an interesting way, Herman's disconnection from others is closely related to, and reinforces, the stasis in his life. His carefully crafted re-enactment of the past in his present life as an underground

con man shows how traumatic events in life always leave their indelible marks by arresting the progression of their victims' self-narrative.

For Herman, the Holocaust continues to be a traumatic experience of disconnection, fragmentation, and stasis. Herman's morbidly overactive fantasies always hark back to his traumatic life during the war and thus show how traumas curtail the progressive movement of self-narrative by "inserting a radical, often transformative break in the flow of a life narrative."<sup>212</sup> His fantasies are a royal road to his unconscious, revealing his innermost fears and wishes. Especially important is his frequent fantasy about the Nazis' return, which takes on "the character of obsessions" (10). At the beginning of the novel, Herman stands in his apartment in Brooklyn, shaving, but his mind drifts and he soon loses himself in a daydream.

Standing here, he began spinning a fantasy. The Nazis had come back into power and occupied New York. Herman was hiding out in this bathroom. Yadwiga had the door walled up and painted so that it looked like the rest of the wall.

"Where would I sit? Here on the toilet seat. I could sleep in the bathtub. No, too short." Herman examined the tile floor to see if there was enough room for him to stretch out. But even if he were to lie down diagonally, he would have to draw his knees up. Well, at least he would have light and air here. . . .

Herman began to calculate how much food Yadwiga would need to bring him each day for him to survive. . . . Compared to the hayloft in Lipsk, this would be luxurious. He would keep a loaded revolver at hand, or perhaps a machine gun. When the Nazis discovered his hiding place and came to arrest him, he would welcome them with a volley of bullets and leave one bullet for himself. (9-10)

Evident in this daydream is his attempt at overcoming the past trauma he had to endure helplessly. He carefully plans coping strategies and thus turns the passively endured moments into something he can actively anticipate and regulate. Thus, this fantasy not only points to Herman's fear; it is also a reflection of his deepest wish. In this

regard, of particular interest is the way he recreates and slightly revises the threatening situation in such a way that he, not the Nazis, now controls the outcome. Clearly indicated in this fantasy is a sense of agency and deliberate preparation. The revenge fantasy prominent at the end of his daydream exemplifies Freud's insight in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" that the repetitive re-enactment of the painful situation is often caused by an inner drive more primordial and more powerful than the pleasure principle.

Herman's obsessive fantasizing is his only way of traveling back in time and confronting the calamity that ravaged his life and altered it permanently. Trauma in a sense is an experience that is not lived. Freud differentiates between fright and anxiety and explains the lack of preparedness or anxiety as the determining cause of trauma. In cases of trauma, people are caught off-guard, unprepared when an overwhelmingly painful and devastating incident overtakes them with a threat of annihilation.<sup>213</sup> From a slightly different perspective, Cathy Caruth attributes repetitive actions or fantasies seen in those with posttraumatic stress disorder to the "enigma" or "incomprehensibility" of their survival. As she explains, "having survived . . . without knowing it" and "awakening" suddenly to life often cause them to make attempts to "claim [their] own survival" in various forms such as dreams, fantasies, or compulsive behaviors.<sup>214</sup>

To explain Herman's obsessive, repetitive fantasies from a psychoanalytic point of view, of utmost importance for him is the necessity to come to terms with his feeling of helplessness and a harrowing sense of inadequacy. To achieve this goal, Herman, like other survivors of the Holocaust, harks back to the determining moments in his life to reprocess the overwhelming catastrophe in a delayed, controlled, and repetitive manner. By preparing himself for any untoward incident that may ravage his life again, he now

establishes some sense of control and agency, which was totally lacking in the original scene of trauma. Additionally, through this repetitive fantasizing, which makes him confront and acknowledge the fact that he is alive, Herman tests his foothold in reality and tries to “claim his survival.”

Despite Herman’s effort to bring his traumatic experience under control, however, his close encounter with death leaves permanent indelible marks on his life, creating in his life a very peculiar pattern of temporal dimension. His odd, isolated present life exists side by side with his tormenting past. The parallel existence of the past and the present confounds his already disordered and disoriented life. Specifically, the negative impacts of his past trauma manifest themselves in strange alternating modes of “intrusion and constriction,” which clinical studies find are the typical bimodal symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>215</sup>

Unsolicited past memories intrude into Herman’s daily life, making him a perennial prisoner of the past. His traumatic past haunts him, because unlike other incidents that fade in peoples’ memory, traumatic upheavals have a “durational integrity that exists outside the flow of normal time.”<sup>216</sup> Trauma, as Allan Young calls it, is a “disease of time” and continues to influence those afflicted with past losses or pains. The past for them is not the past and returns to them all the time with vivid memories and undiluted emotions.<sup>217</sup>

Herman is not the only one suffering from this disease of time. Both Herman and other survivors of the Holocaust in *Enemies*, such as Masha, her mother Shifrah Puah, and Tamara, all live in the past because the past they could not integrate haunts them, contaminating the present with unworked-through pains and losses. Masha compulsively

dwells on her Holocaust tribulation and, like Scheherazade, ritualistically accompanies her lovemaking with Herman with endless nightmarish stories. As for Shifrah Puah, who always wears black and lights memorial candles for the dead, her life is just a temporary reprieve from death. As Singer describes Masha and Shifrah Puah's agony stemming from their Holocaust experiences, "The further removed they are from the holocaust, the closer it seemed to become" (43). Finally, for Tamara, her past has so taken over her entire life that parting from it is unthinkable. Commenting on the Nazi bullet that has been lodged in her body so long and become part of her, she notes: "This bullet . . . is my best souvenir. It reminds that I once had a home, parents, children. If they take it away from me, I won't have anything left at all" (190). All survivors of the novel are riveted in their irreparable past calamities. It seems as if, in their perpetual grieving, they try to compensate for the lack of proper mourning for their beloveds during the Holocaust. Some clinical studies explain the latter phenomenon as a "missing grave syndrome" responsible for survivors' prolonged, unrelenting grief. Singer's survivors all seem to suffer from this syndrome, for the Holocaust has turned their present into a dismal graveyard for the past.<sup>218</sup>

While intrusion overloads survivors' system with the unwelcome but nonetheless persistent memories of the past, constriction considerably limits and shrivels the horizon of their present life. Survivors live an absolutely abridged and truncated life. Refraining from any unnecessary human contact, Herman in *Enemies* lives an extremely secluded and secret life in his cocoon-like world, which he carefully builds and protects by layers of lies. Always sitting on an edge of his chair as if to jump at any sign of danger, and never trusting anyone completely, he lives always on guard. With the conviction that "in

a world in which one's children could be dragged away from their mother and shot, one had no right to have more children" (7), he resolves not to have a child.

Although well before the Holocaust Herman was already a pessimist and a victim of the misery he himself created and engineered, his world after his traumatic ordeal is morbidly full of fantasies of attacks, betrayal, and pains. Once a "fatalist hedonist who lived in presuicidal gloom" (30), Herman now becomes an obsessional neurotic who constantly feels persecuted by threats and dangers he himself has created. As Singer describes Herman's excessive suspicion and insecurity, "Every human contact was a potential danger to him. He even knew he had distant relatives somewhere in America but he neither asked nor wanted to know where they were" (56). He not only adamantly stays away from human contact and keeps a low profile but also actively and compulsively seeks and prepares himself for calamity. His life is full of worries or panicky "foreboding of some catastrophe" (56). He constantly anticipates and worries about deportation, arrest by the government, or the unforeseeable sickness and loss of his beloved ones (56). Finally, his persecution anxiety reaches its peak when he projects his unrelenting insecurity and fear and creates a hostile universe presided over by a malignant God-like figure. For instance, right after hearing about Tamara's return, Herman broods on the significance of the event and comes up with an explanation that strongly reflects his fatalism and an ominous cosmic view: "Again, Herman felt like laughing. Some heavenly intelligence was conducting experiments on him, similar to those the German doctors had carried out on the Jews" (65).

Due to his traumatic past and his present defensive way of life, Herman is hopelessly stranded in his attempt at forging a new identity and life narrative. "Identity,"

as Paul Antze and Michael Lambek aptly explain, “requires steering a course between holding on and letting go” and “lies in the dialectical, ceaseless activity of remembering and forgetting, assimilating and discarding.”<sup>219</sup> Herman’s problem lies in the fact that he cannot steer his course between letting go and holding on. With the murder of his entire family by the Nazis and his subsequent immigration to America, Herman has lost almost everything that used to anchor him in the familiarized space of psychic and interpersonal history. The Holocaust has left his ontological landscape totally ruined and his layers of self starkly stripped. Similarly, reflecting on her current barren life after the war, Tamara states, ““My life seems to have been peeled away like the skin of an onion”” (100). The same goes for Herman, who survived the Holocaust but has become emotionally and spiritually bankrupt. To use another comparison, Herman is like the persona in Charlotte Delbo’s poem who returns to the world from a Nazi concentration camp only to feel bewilderment and despair, which she poignantly expresses in the line, “I am here in front of life / as though facing a dress / I can no longer wear.”<sup>220</sup>

Herman is an utterly uprooted human being who can never feel at home again in the world after his traumatic experiences. “Reduced to the positive-psychological basic content of the idea, home is *security*,” Jean Améry explains. And “homesickness,” as he continues to assert, is “alienation from the self.”<sup>221</sup>

Home is security. . . . At home we are in full command of the dialectics of knowledge and recognition, of trust and confidence. Since we know them, we recognize them and we trust ourselves to speak and to act. . . . The entire field of the related words loyal, familiar, confidence, to trust, to entrust, trusting belongs in the broader psychological area of feeling secure. One feels secure, however, where no chance occurrence is to be expected, nothing completely strange to be feared. To live in one’s homeland means that what is already known to us occurs before our eyes again and again, in slight variants. . . . If one has no home . . . one becomes subject to disorder, confusion, desolation.<sup>222</sup>

Home is people's secure anchoring point in the constantly changing and sometimes threatening world. Herman's sense of displacement and futility comes from losing his home, family, and native European Jewish culture at a single blow dealt by the Holocaust. Even if he has survived the multiple losses, he is left homeless. As a result, instead of dynamic movement and assimilation, stasis and fragmentation characterize Herman's self-narrative. Fixated on his traumatic past and unable to forge a new identity, Herman remains a hostage to his self-created world of danger and inhabits a murky time zone, hovering between the impossible present and the irreparable past. Herman's dilemma lies in the fact that he is unable to pick up his broken narrative of self and make it flow again by adapting to the changed world.<sup>223</sup>

Actually, Herman's almost schizophrenic compartmentalization in all areas of life is a direct reflection of his broken, fragmented self-narrative. As Tamara aptly puts it, "Talking consistency to [Herman] is like discussing colors with a blind man" (143). Nothing in his life makes sense or coheres; he moves frantically between two women who are total opposites without any intention of forsaking either of them, he makes his living by preaching and writing about religious beliefs he no longer abides by, and the boss he works for, Rabbi Lampert, he despises so thoroughly that he does not want to have anything to do with the rabbi outside his office space. What makes this even more absurd is the fact that, although Herman may not be aware of it, Rabbi Lampert is just a secular, social version of himself. The vices of deception, hypocrisy, and womanizing that make Herman loathe him are the ones upon which his entire life is built.

The list of Herman's incomprehensible, contradictory behaviors is endless. It is no wonder that Herman is a "riddle to himself"(15). Despite the fact that Yadwiga worships

and adores him “with the devotion of a dog”(16), he seeks solace in a highly neurotic, sadomasochistic relationship with Masha, who constantly tests and tortures him emotionally. Although he desperately seeks safety and security, he daringly flirts with danger and continuously jeopardizes himself by tightening the grip of lies and deception around him. Thus, when he finally reaches a point where he cannot keep up with his deception and duplicitous ways of living, he admits the dilemma and his own contribution to creating it. Herman’s predicament is concisely summarized in his remark, “I’m caught in a vise and can’t free myself”(144).

It is likely that Herman’s seemingly inexplicable neurotic behaviors stem from his unconscious, irreconcilable needs. His desperate need for safety and protection drives him toward behaviors characterized by detachment, deception, and evasion because the horrific catastrophe he witnessed and went through has shattered his belief in the possibility of establishing nurturing, intimate relationships with others. He cannot imagine any relationship based on genuine trust and love. Commenting on Herman’s weird attitude of guarded detachment, Rabbi Lampert expresses bewilderment and frustration: “I could help you a great deal, but you shut yourself up like an oyster. What secrets are you hiding . . . ?” (25). On the other hand, his suppressed longing for companionship, understanding, and love breaks through the thick defensive barrier he builds around him, compelling him to move toward others and seek some sort of attachment with them. For example, he exhibits a desperate clinging tendency in his affair with Masha. “I can’t live without Masha” (260), Herman confesses to Tamara right after he deserts pregnant Yadviga to elope with Masha. As if to prove his

proclamation of love for Masha, Herman actually chooses to die with Masha rather than live without her when their planned elopement is thwarted.

Karen Horney's theory of neurosis can shed light on Herman's contradictory and seemingly inexplicable behaviors. Herman belongs to those neurotics in Karen Horney's theory who use avoidance, resignation, and detachment to avoid any kind of inner conflict and, for safety's sake, to live a "life at a constantly low ebb." Herman adopts the movement away from people as his dominant coping strategy for survival so that he will not put himself in any vulnerable position. Resigned people, as Horney explains, are characterized by their "hypersensitivity to influence, pressure, coercion or ties of any kind."<sup>224</sup> They resist any kind of change and want to be left alone in a status quo. Hence, in their interpersonal relationships, whenever they sense a possibility of an everlasting tie, they become stricken with fear. However, Horney also notes that their mode of life is not a simple, clear-cut reflection of their dominant inner need. Although aversion or detachment may determine their main psycho-social orientation, their behavior, Horney explains, may often exhibit other underlying qualities of moving toward people or even against people. In other words, "a curious mixture of compliance and defiance" often manifests in their ambivalent attitude toward others.<sup>225</sup> First, for their ultimate purpose of "preserving their inner life unsoiled and untarnished," they may comply with others' wishes and accommodate others' needs in a self-effacing manner to avoid friction. Sometimes this attitude can develop into, in Horney's terms, a "morbid attachment" to a particular individual. Or on other occasions, they act as "subdued rebels" who simply choose to fight against any kind of pressure and retain their noncommittal, nonchalant attitude.<sup>226</sup>

Herman embodies all the characteristics of the different types of people Horney describes: the detachment and longing for freedom of resigned hermits, the morbid dependency of self-effacing love-addicts, and the arrogant hostility and resistance of subdued rebels. These incoherent and highly compartmentalized behavior patterns reflect his fragmented self-narrative. Herman's highly convoluted interpersonal relationships mirror his conflicting inner needs to move away from, toward, and against people.

A careful study of the dynamic of survivors' interpersonal relationships is integral for any fair assessment of the impact of trauma, for it is in this area that their unique self-experiences and their emotional processing of trauma are played out. And nothing illustrates the severity of Herman's traumatic wounding and the subsequent fracturing of his psyche more than his simultaneous involvement with Yadwiga and Masha. The object choices Herman makes clearly reflect the continuing dominant mode of his life, evasion and detachment, which used to determine his coping mechanism on both the behavioral and emotional levels. As he denied the responsibilities involved in marriage and parenthood and lived the life of a bachelor before the war, he now chooses as his partner Yadwiga, a person who helps him evade the thorny emotional issues of guilt, shame, and remorse his survival entails. An interesting irony is that, although Herman's object choices stem from his primary need to forget his trauma and the past, all the women he is romantically involved with represent different parts of his past. With all his family members, whom he used to ill-treat, now murdered, Herman, an escapist, cannot or would not face the loss. Thus, by moving away from the world and creating air-tight, claustrophobic worlds with his women, he tries to bracket the traumatic memories of his family and wants to stay oblivious to the hard-to-forget period of his life that brings a

tremendous amounts of pain, sorrow, and guilt. But at the same time, a complete erasure of the past is impossible, and, unconscious as it may be, he also has another strong need to have around him empathic others who know about the ordeal he went through. As a result, he chooses his love objects from his past and creates with them a perfectly isolated world.

Obviously, Herman's marriage to Yadviga is driven by his dire need for safety and protection. The Brooklyn apartment he shares with her is his sanctified comfort zone where he is like an innocent child, for he is protected and cared for no matter what happens outside its narrow confines. The apartment is filled with the aroma of home-cooked meals Yadviga prepared by recalling his mother's recipes; the apartment recreates the pre-war, pre-Holocaust past. The twittering sound of parakeets, their pets, also endows the place with Edenic qualities. As if to enhance the dream-like atmosphere of this artificially created, infantile world, the amusement park in Coney Island envelops his home with its noises of merrymaking and carousels. Furthermore, his wife Yadviga is a simple, Gentile Polish peasant with no heavy burden associated with the tragic Jewish history. No wonder he discourages her interaction with Jewish neighbors and looks upon the developing bonds between them with suspicion.

Herman's complete retreat to his isolated life with Yadviga in the Brooklyn apartment, which is his American version of the Lipsk hayloft, can be figuratively explained as his regression to the earliest, infantile stage of life. In a sense, the self-sufficient, encapsulated apartment is like a womb; the apartment is completely severed from the outside world, without even a phone. It is also maintained and nurtured by a woman absolutely devoted to his well-being. Plagued, exhausted, and defeated by the

hostile world outside, Herman longs to return to the kind of warmth, protection, and comfort that can be found only in the absolutely static and serene conditions of the womb. Interestingly, his relationship with his wife Yadviga takes on more of the qualities of a mother-son relationship. As she was his lifeline and took care of all his basic bodily needs for his survival back in Lipsk hayloft, she again feeds, bathes, and cleans after him in their Brooklyn apartment. In Herman's somewhat bizarre bathing scene, Singer describes this odd dynamic between them: "Yadviga started to soap his back, his arms, his loins. He had frustrated her longing to bear children and so had taken the place of child for her. She fondled him, played with him" (11). In his Brooklyn home, time not only stands still; sometimes time moves backward, and Herman travels back in time to his Lipsk years, and further, to his childhood.

In addition, Herman's infantile regression serves another important function, which is closely related to his unrelenting sense of guilt and his poignant wish to bring his dead children back to life. In a sense, it is possible that in frustrating Yadviga's wish for children, Herman not only takes the place of a child for her, but he also identifies with and becomes his own children whose death he can never face and mourn for. The bereaved who never openly acknowledge or grieve the death of loved ones often unwittingly act out their pain and loss. In Herman's case, the shadow of his children falls heavily on him, the guilt-ridden father who used to deny their existence and live a free, unrestrained life as a bachelor. Even in his typical evasive and hypersensitive behavior toward parenthood, Herman exhibits many symptoms indicative of his insurmountable guilt and remorse about failing his children.

Even when he heard people talking about children who were alive and healthy, he felt something akin to panic. Every time Yadviga or Masha expressed the wish to have a child by him, he would change the subject. Somewhere among his papers there were photographs of little Yocheved and David, but he never dared to look at them. Herman had not behaved toward them as a father should. (71)

Both the unrealizable wish for undoing his terrible neglect of his children and his fear of repeating the failure as a parent motivate Herman to deny his women the chance to have offspring. By becoming a child again in his relationship with the nurturing and protective mother-like Yadviga, Herman unconsciously actualizes his longing to bring to life his murdered children. Despite his stupendous regret and guilt, however, Herman never changes or learns from his experiences, for his unconscious coping mechanism is just a way of acting out his pain and loss, not working through them. In this respect, it is significant to note that toward the end of the novel, he again walks out on the pregnant Yadviga and deserts his unborn child, recreating the previous scenario of paternal negligence and dereliction. As the traumatized often compulsively repeat and act out the hurt and shock that have left a permanent emotional scar on them, Herman duplicates the situation that brought him such tormenting guilt and pain. Trauma is an open wound that never heals. Herman's uncanny repetitions of his previous errors prove this point.

Whereas Yadviga provides Herman with a shelter from the tragedy of the Holocaust, Masha exposes him to the unavoidable horror of the Holocaust with her constant diabolic tales about it. If the former symbolizes innocence and simplicity uncontaminated by the Holocaust, the latter embodies the devastation and complication the Holocaust brings to the lives of survivors. At the root of Herman's seemingly uncontrollable attraction to Masha and their highly sadomasochistic relationship lies their common need for the sympathetic other who can mirror their existence as survivors

and help appease their pain and guilt through sharing and examining their broken narratives of the self.

Interestingly, narratives play a significant role in both characters' lives and their relationship with each other. Herman is a writer and makes his living by ghost writing sermons. In his personal life, he makes up fake stories and spins lies to sustain his polygamous relationships. Actually, his passion for writing and narratives has always been with him. Versatile in both Hebrew teachings and other philosophical discourses, he was a scholar immersed in the world of ideas and language. Even in the confined space of the Lipsk hayloft or in his dreams, his writing never stops. Writing becomes the one and only consistent companion for him, who has lost almost everything he had. Writing or narrative activities become Herman's security blanket, or, to use D. W. Winnicott's term, a "transitional" activity that helps him negotiate the world within and the world without, helping him carve out a creative, unique "potential" space of self-experience even when the world around him threatens to annihilate him and wipes out his entire family.<sup>227</sup>

Just as Masha always had to hold a cigarette between her fingers, so Herman had to hold a pen or a pencil. He wrote and made notes even in the hayloft in Lipsk, whenever there was enough light coming through the cracks in the roof. . . . He even wrote in his dreams—on yellowish paper in Rashi script, a combination of a story book, cabalistic revelations, and scientific discoveries. He sometimes woke up with a cramp in his wrist from too much writing. (41)

Connection, integration, and making sense are the fundamental characteristics of narrative activities. Perhaps Herman's persistent habit of writing stems from his longing to make sense of gratuitous sufferings that consume him and everyone around him. His constant urge to write might indicate his struggle to make sense of his befuddled life and feelings of meaninglessness in the wake of a series of uprooting events such as the

Holocaust and immigration. Writing is his desperate attempt at threading together his fragmented self-narrative. In response to a serious traumatic damage to his carefully built self-narrative and personal history, Herman holds onto his writing to retain and restore some measure of self-identity. Unable to share this integral process of reflection with the simple-minded Yadwiga, Herman emerges from his hiding place and moves toward Masha, another restless survivor who in many ways is a mirror image of himself. Like those who need a mirror to examine their reflected images, Herman and Masha need the audience who would echo back their self-narrative and validate their existence as survivors.

The relationship between Herman and Masha is based upon their mutual need to claim their life as survivors, but seemingly conflicting activities of remembering and forgetting, in an odd fashion, oscillate in this process of reclaiming their life. Although obvious sexual attraction plays a significant role in bringing them together, actually even their ritualistic lovemaking, which is always accompanied by Masha's catastrophic recounts of her Holocaust experiences, is a disguised means of confirming the unbelievable fact that they withstood the tests of life and death and outlived the endless persecution. Their ritualistic love making clearly shows that there is something sanctified about their union.

Masha compared herself to Scheherazade. The kissing, the fondling, the passionate love-making was always accompanied by stories from the ghettos, the camps, her wandering through the ruins of Poland. . . . Their love-making was not merely a matter of a man and woman having intercourse, but a ritual that often lasted till daybreak. It reminded Herman of the ancients, who would relate the miracle of the exodus from Egypt until the morning star rose. (44-45)

Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is essentially a “missed encounter” and belatedness and incomprehensibility always plague survivors because of a “temporal delay that carries [them] beyond the shock of the first encounter.”<sup>228</sup> Herman and Masha’s curious ritual of lovemaking is related to the nature of trauma as a missed encounter and the mystery of survival. Through their intense love affair, Herman and Masha face and reprocess their trauma in order to fully claim their survival. For both characters, their survival is an inexplicable miracle comparable to that of the Exodus. In both miracles, the shackling force of the past and the crippling desubjectification are so powerful, and the duration of excruciating agony so long, that survivors have a hard time accepting and claiming their renewed life even after they finally become free. To borrow Caruth’s expression, they have difficulty “awakening to life” after “surviving their trauma without knowing it.”<sup>229</sup>

An interesting point about the role of narratives in Herman and Masha’s relationship is that through their narratives they engage simultaneously in remembering and forgetting. Basing his research on trauma and mourning on Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” Dominick LaCapra ponders the issues of acting out and working through. Unlike melancholia, which statically implicates and fixates the bereaved in the perpetual endless circuit of grief, mourning involves both ceremonial remembering and letting go. LaCapra especially emphasizes how the latter requires “controlled symbolic doses of absence and renunciation.”<sup>230</sup>

LaCapra’s theory illuminates the significance of Herman and Masha’s narrative re-enactment of their pain and losses. By repeatedly staging and playing out their traumatic losses in a highly controlled environment with a sympathetic other, they attempt to

confirm their losses as losses, to loosen the tenacious grip of their traumatic pasts on them, and to integrate their pasts symbolically into their life. Their enactment exemplifies the creative, curative aspect of “performativity,” which LaCapra defines as “the conjunction of necessary acting-out in the face of trauma with attempts to work through problems” and emphasizes as a critical dimension in the process of mourning.<sup>231</sup>

Herman and Masha’s relationship not only makes them reflect upon their past to claim and embrace their survivorship but also partially numbs their minds like an anesthesia to help them forget about or at least relieve their pains and losses by enabling them to focus hedonistically on their current microcosmic world of romance. The critic Lawrence S. Friedman argues that both Herman and Masha use hedonism as a “mode of evasion,” and that their relationship is mainly based upon their need to “immerse themselves in the present as a means of forgetting the past and warding off the future.”<sup>232</sup> Friedman views Herman and Masha’s relationship as stemming only from their defensive needs, but I find his reading too reductive. However, it is indeed true that Herman and Masha employ hedonism as one of their coping mechanisms.

Like many human behaviors, survivors’ behaviors are often an overdetermined outcome of their complex needs and serve multiple functions. Singer’s characters are no exception. To offset the pernicious power of trauma and to try to ground their existence in another realm beyond their trauma-inflicted past, Herman and Masha try to live intensely in the present moment. At the same time they repeatedly test their survivorship against the responsive other and try to claim their lives again. As Scheherazade’s stories beguile the tyrannical king and enable her to escape imminent death unscathed, Herman and Masha’s deeply intimate moments of narrative sharing and lovemaking enable them

to tame the powerfully painful force of their trauma and the disturbing emotions associated with it. Moreover, according to the critic Frances Vargas Gibbons, Herman's being with "fiery" and "energizing" Masha helps him release his suppressed anger, for she acts as the "conduit for his inchoate aggressiveness."<sup>233</sup> In their relationship, Herman and Masha manage to tame the annihilating force of their past and help each other deal with their emotions in a cathartic manner. Thus, their turbulent relationship can be interpreted as both a serious symptom of trauma and an experimental attempt at working through and mourning for their pain and loss. As LaCapra argues, perhaps there is no clear-cut demarcation line between acting out and working through, for "acting out" to a certain extent is a "requirement or precondition of working through problems."<sup>234</sup> Herman and Masha's ceremonial story telling accompanying their lovemaking is their way to negotiate acting out and working through their traumatic losses.

Particularly for Herman, his relationship with Masha has other compensatory emotional values, which again hark back to his unrelenting survivor guilt. As many clinical researchers show, it is nearly impossible to survive trauma without guilt. People with PTSD suffer tremendously from their guilt about their survival due to the "moral dimension inherent in all conflict and suffering."<sup>235</sup> By exposing himself to the graphic details of the cruelties Masha recounts, Herman punishes himself for outliving his loved ones by his cowardly behavior of hiding. Also, perhaps by vicariously participating in the ordeal Masha repeatedly narrates, he relieves his sense of guilt. The Holocaust, for Herman, was not a direct experience. Although it brought a radical break or "gap in his life that could never be filled" (28), his hermetic life during the Nazi rule was a sheltered one, free from firsthand persecution and afflictions. By being part of Masha's and her

mother Shifrah Puaah's tribulation, he joins the collective Jewish fate and shares his people's pains. No wonder his guilt and reverence for Judaism intensify when he is around the extremely pious old woman Shifrah Puaah, who seems to symbolize the tenacity and perseverance of the Jewish people who endured and survived ceaseless historical calamities. Even her name is fraught with symbolic significance, for as S. Lillian Kremer points out, it is combination of two biblical figures' names, Shifrah and Puaah, who courageously rebelled against the tyrannical rule and genocidal plan of Pharaoh.<sup>236</sup>

Kaja Silverman insightfully sums up the psychic dynamics involved in listening to and commemorating others' distress vicariously: "If to remember is to provide the disembodied 'wound' with a psychic residence, then to remember other people's memories is to be wounded by their wounds."<sup>237</sup> A similar logic applies to Herman's affinity with Masha's family. In wounding and punishing himself by becoming part of their Holocaust-seeped environment, he compensates for his lack of courage and mitigates to a certain degree his survivor guilt.

Psychoanalyzing Herman's object relations with Yadviga and Masha has shown how "surviving" trauma is an arduous, never-ending process, comparable to rebuilding one's ontological landscape in the site of a total ruin, and how it is different from the abstract, elevated notion that contemporary culture often cultivates in its tendentious trend of "hyped" or "romancing" survival for the easy, self-serving purpose of spiritual uplift.<sup>238</sup> Additionally, surviving trauma requires struggling with various serious, long-term effects and straddling on the worlds of life and death. As Henry Greenspan aptly says, the dilemma that survivors face is that of "to be and not to be." In other words,

survivors are doomed in the sense that they can seldom resolve the “dualities inherent in surviving.”<sup>239</sup>

Tamara, in this respect, is a very significant symbolic figure in Singer’s novel whose sudden appearance unleashes all Herman’s suppressed conflicts and anxieties. As a result, she foregrounds the undeniable dualities in his existence. If Herman’s involvement with both Yadviga and Masha symptomatically betrays his desperate unconscious needs that point to his unfathomable psychic wound, his reencounter with his former wife Tamara, a reincarnation of his traumatic past in many ways, seems to symbolically illustrate the inescapable fate that survivors have to struggle with in their process of coping with and working through their personal tragedy.

In many ways, Tamara is a symbolic figure who represents the pains and sorrows of the Holocaust. Even her name “Tamara” bears a striking resemblance to the word “trauma.” With her static self-image as a ghost, her almost selfless generosity, and her abnegation of all worldly passions or attachments, Tamara, along with Yadviga, is one of the most one-dimensional major characters of the novel. And the fact that she literally dragged herself out of a massive open grave, as well as the otherworldly aura she exudes that makes others experience “the miracle of resurrection” (131) around her, all help establish her as an abstract, symbolic figure with enigmatic qualities, not a normal human being. Thus, to close this chapter, I will analyze Tamara metaphorically as a personified symptom of both historical and personal trauma and examine the symbolic implications of her sudden reappearance in terms of Freud’s theory of “The Uncanny.” In doing so, I will examine the gripping force of trauma that repeatedly haunts its victim. In addition, I

will review the significance of her participation in bringing about a renewed sense of life, which is symbolized in Singer's novel by the birth of Yadviga's baby girl named Masha.

Tamara is a symptom of history that has not been acknowledged and worked through. Like Beloved in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Tamara intrudes on, disrupts, and destabilizes the barely maintained veneer of normalcy of other survivors' lives with her abrupt reappearance. In the process, Tamara, again like Beloved, compels others to face the disturbing memories and emotions that they failed to deal with. Tamara's uncanny reappearance symbolizes the aforementioned "durational time" of trauma, which, unlike "chronological time," remains static and does not contribute to survivors' healing of their past psychic wounds. Just as the unbidden traumatic memory haunts survivors, Tamara, who was presumed for years to be dead with her children, suddenly reappears to Herman to tip the carefully maintained balance of his life in America. In this respect, it is significant that she resurrects herself from a massive open tomb of murdered Jews, which makes her seem almost a personification of the collective trauma the Jews had to endure as their open wound. Moreover, since she mainly identifies herself as the mother of murdered children, and the unbearable loss of her children thoroughly saps the life out of her, her open--in the sense of hollow or emptied out--womb becomes the source of her trauma, her open wound. Thus, in Tamara, the open tomb, womb, and wound converge to illustrate traumas on both the personal and the historical or collective level.

The feeling of uncanniness surrounds Tamara. In "The Uncanny," Freud explains the uncanny basically as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."<sup>240</sup> He illuminates the concept by referring to the German word "*unheimlich*," the meaning of which also comprises its opposite *heimlich* (familiar,

homely) in an interesting way. Thus, the feeling of the uncanny is evoked not when people encounter something totally new or strange, but when they notice “the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations.”<sup>241</sup> Freud attributes the frightening, simultaneous feelings of familiarity and strangeness to the elements of recurrence and repression. In other words, what constitutes the uncanny is the recurrence of something that has been repressed. At the crux of Freud’s argument is the frightening return of a repressed infantile complex or the fear of castration. To support his theory, Freud uses as an example a neurotic man who fears the female genitalia for the uncanny feelings it triggers in him. The womb, as he explains, is the “*Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning.”<sup>242</sup> Thus, the neurotic man is seized with the feelings of uncanny fright and anxiety because he revisits the forbidden secret home of his forgotten past.

There is a very close correlation between the enigmatic phenomenon evoking the feelings of uncanniness and the traumatic haunting of a catastrophic event that plagues survivors. In both cases, what has been repressed returns in a slightly modified form of the original object or state. Hence, the return of the repressed points to the momentous power of the uncanny force revisiting and shaping the present in the shape of the past to resolve an issue or problem. And the feeling of uncanniness arises at the exact moment when the past and the present link with each other after a period of oblivion or repression.

It is very interesting to note that the figure triggering the uncanny feelings of fear and fright is Tamara, a mother whose womb is closely related to the pains the never-

ending trauma of the Holocaust causes. Her womb, like a bleeding heart, is open in the sense that it is hollow, barren, emptied out or never-healing after the death of her children. Tamara maintains to Herman, ““You are looking at a different woman. Tamara who left her murdered children and fled to Skiba . . . is another Tamara. I am dead”” (77). She is in a sense a “double” of Tamara, whose return from the dead exacts a heavy toll on Herman, making him confront his traumatic past and breaking the chain of his habitual lying and deception that has been sustaining him his entire life. Unlike self-abnegating but ineffectual Tamara before the war, who played into the hands of irresponsible and selfish Herman, her double, or the other Tamara who has been resurrected from the other world, controls him and his world. As a result, like those ghosts returning to the world of the living to realize their unfulfilled wishes or to rectify any injustice committed against them, Tamara ultimately manages to make peace with guilt-stricken, remorseful Herman and finally order and shape his world.

Indeed, till Herman’s final disappearance at the end of the novel, many uncanny incidents reminiscent of his bygone years occur, cornering him and tightening their grip on him, and Tamara is right at the center of these concentric circles. Actually her sudden reentry into Herman’s life is responsible for his ultimate downfall. Indicative of the potentially damaging and uncontrollable outcome of trauma’s intrusion on survivors’ life, Tamara’s appearance is always sudden, unpredictable, and catastrophic. Tamara’s unannounced sudden appearance is also associated with fright and guilt. Both in her meeting with Herman and in her visit to Herman’s apartment in Brooklyn, Tamara acts like and is viewed as a ghost haunting people for its unfinished business. Repeatedly Tamara claims, ““I really no longer think of myself as being part of this world”” (100) or

“I am a corpse” (135). Interestingly enough, in response to Yadviga’s terror at seeing her alive, Tamara tersely explains her visit: ““They say dead people sometimes come back to pay a visit and in a way I’m that kind of visitor”” (193). Tamara is now, in the critic Frances Vargas Gibbons’ words, “a sort of trinity of Herman’s guilt” along with her two dead children, and painfully reminds him of his failure as father and husband.<sup>243</sup> Besides, her repeated claim of being a “corpse” and even cherishing and displaying her “souvenir,” a Nazi bullet lodged in her body, all evoke tremendous guilt on Herman’s part for surviving the Holocaust unscathed and rebuilding his life by marrying a Gentile.

In many ways, Tamara’s return puts Herman in a strangely familiar dilemma where he is forced again to be responsible for his choices and actions. In a sense, Tamara’s return gives Herman an opportunity to work through his unresolved conflicts pertaining to interpersonal relationships and fatherhood. However, he miserably fails again in this second trial because he simply repeats and acts out his fears, insecurities, and lack of commitment.

In contrast to Herman, Tamara controls and is right at the center of the wheel of his fate. Exposing his carefully built web of lies to the Jewish community via Mr. Pesheles, whom she befriends during her visit to Herman’s apartment, her reentry into his life complicates and puts such additional strains on his already tangled relationships with his women that it consequently puts an end to his clandestine, bigamous existence. After finding out about Herman’s predicament, she volunteers to take over his life and become his “manager” to shape up and put his life in order. Furthermore, she even assumes responsibility for his unborn child when Herman fails to carry out his paternal duty and, as if to restage his previous negligent and selfish behavior during his marriage to Tamara,

walks out on Yadwiga at the last stage of her pregnancy. As Tamara even typed *his* dissertation, taking care of the product of intellectual labor, now Tamara tends to and becomes the guardian of *his* baby, the outcome of his befuddled and ill-fated love. But in taking over Herman's duty and acting on his behalf, she ends up becoming a mother again, even if vicariously. Tamara's altruistic behaviors curiously bring her back to the source of her grief, motherhood, and make her live again as a mother. Unlike Herman, who compulsively repeats his previous behaviors to his destruction, Tamara, in the equally odd turn of events reminiscent of her previous life before the war, seems to have tamed the sinister force of her trauma to her benefit.

The novel concludes with Tamar's final wish to marry Herman in the next world. Actually, although Tamara's final remark is hard to understand and leaves lots of room for different interpretations, in many ways it puts the entire novel in perspective. Her remark might be easily interpreted as a sign of a grief-stricken wife's unshaken devotion and loyalty. However, in light of Herman's repeated deceptive and unfaithful behaviors that have clearly proved his incompetence as father and husband, her wish seems to take on a rather obsessive character. Frances Vargas Gibbon interprets Tamara's last hope as a "threat" and asserts that she is "the worst enemy an escapist like Herman can have."<sup>244</sup> Even after his disappearance and in the hypothetical world of imagination, Herman is not free from Tamara's tenacious grip. Additionally, her wish to marry Herman again in the next world darkens, to a considerable extent, the prospect of hope and regeneration that comes with the birth of Yadwiga's daughter.

Yet, in a sense, it is both ironic and understandable that Tamara, the personification of the never-healing traumatic wound, has such an obsessive loyalty and attachment to

the one person with whom she shares her unforgettably painful past. To symbolically interpret Tamara's final remark from the standpoint of those who want a respite from the harrowing pain of their trauma, her tenacity may illustrate how difficult it is to escape from the persistent and steadfast grip of their past memories and pains. To approach it from a different angle, however, her remark also poignantly sheds light on a sad psychic truth of those who cannot let go of their traumatic past. For survivors of the Holocaust, who have lost everything they had, their past, tragic as it is, might be the only thing left, and they might want to cling to it desperately. For Tamara, Herman is the only person who connects her to the past that has been totally annihilated without a trace. As she does not want to part with the Nazi bullet stuck in her body because it reminds her of the fact that she once had a family, for the same reason, she *has to* stay connected to Herman even in the next world. Her seemingly perplexing wish to be married again to Herman betrays the poignant, desperately earnest wishes of survivors to reverse the time and recapture the essence of their destroyed lives.

Singer's novel ends with a very complex, ambivalent tone in which pessimism and optimism coexist. With Herman missing and possibly hiding again in an American version of his Lipsk hayloft, the novel does not seem to provide any closure or resolution. The novel that started with Herman's idle fantasy of hiding from a hypothetical danger ends with the fulfillment of his fantasy. Thus, the feeling of uncanniness dominates the novel as it brings its protagonist's actions full circle. Furthermore, Tamara's final wish makes the reader feel as if he or she is witnessing a repeating cycle of misery that will never end. Rather than a linear motion of progression, a circular movement dominates all the major characters' lives, except for Yadviga, who,

in a way befitting her peasant background, endures and perpetuates life. Considering how deeply the scars of trauma may run, it is quite fitting and understandable that the novel does not provide any easy sense of resolution or closure.

Yet the novel's vision is not entirely bleak. Nor does the trauma trap people in their past forever. Although past traumas may repeat themselves in survivors' lives, no traumatic incident replicates itself exactly the same each time it reoccurs. With each revised repetition comes the possibility of working through. In Singer's novel, the hope for this working through lies in the future generation, specifically in the birth of Yadviga's baby, named Masha.

Obviously, the birth of little Masha suggests a possibility that the past wound may heal and there will be a regenerated hope for the future. The birth of this baby in the midst of betrayal, separation, and death brings a sense of wonder and disbelief. Like a fresh wind entering a suffocating, enclosed place, it offsets and dispels the aura of the uncanny that weighs down on all the survivors of the Holocaust in Singer's work. The ending of the novel indicates the possibility of imagining a horizon beyond the survivors' grief-stricken and guilt-ridden lives. In this connection, Lawrence S. Friedman astutely notes that little Masha is born on the night before Shevuot, a traditional Jewish holiday commemorating God's giving the Torah to Israel on Mount Sinai and celebrating the first offering of the harvest to God. Thus, arguing that little Marsha's birth is the "promise of Jewish continuity" and "reaffirms the covenant with God that Herman had broken," Friedman claims, "Named after Masha, the baby is the symbolic linchpin binding the Jewish past to the Jewish future."<sup>245</sup>

In light of the novel's overall tone and various clinical findings of the intergenerational transferral of trauma, Friedman's optimism needs to be taken with some reservation. But it is true that Singer does suggest, via the birth of little Masha, a glimmering hope for the future not outweighed by the heavy historical baggage the survivors of the Holocaust carry with them.

Singer himself called his religion "a religion of protest" against a merciless God and was never content with merely accepting and describing the world as it is.<sup>246</sup> Once, responding to an interviewer's comparison of the universe to an infinite book, Singer acknowledged the analogy and expressed his mission as a writer: "[The universe is ] An infinite book of which I've read a few lines. These lines seem to me beautiful but cruel. The best we can do is be silent, but there are times when we must cry out."<sup>247</sup>

Published more than two decades after the end of the calamity that befell his people, *Enemies* was an important work for Singer. Writing *Enemies* was Singer's way of crying out *for* the numerous unknown victims and survivors. It was also his way of crying out *against* the silence and ignorance of the general public about the historical upheaval that took away so many innocent people's lives. Permanently wounded, ghostly figures inhabit Singer's novel. Even though they have survived the Holocaust, they seem to perpetually engage in an aborted mourning process that repetitively restages and acts out their trauma. Their unrelenting pains and heart-rending grief might be more than the reader can handle. But by giving voice to the nameless suffering and "specifying" their losses, Singer accomplishes what Aharon Appelfeld defines as one of the primary and significant goals of writing about the Holocaust: "bringing it down to the human realm."

Everything in it [the Holocaust] seems so thoroughly unreal. . . . Thence comes the need to bring it down to the human realm. When I say “to bring it down,” I do not mean to simplify, to attenuate, or to sweeten the horror, but to attempt to make the events speak through the individual and in his language, to rescue the suffering from huge numbers, from dreadful anonymity, and to restore the person’s given and family name, to give the tortured person back his human form, which was snatched away from him.<sup>248</sup>

Through his narrative, Singer rescues the perished Jewish victims and their suffering. In doing so, he fights against the inhumanity that has forced anonymity on them in the first place. Additionally, although he portrays the irreparable spiritual desolation the Holocaust has caused its survivors, he manages to adumbrates a dawning hope for their future in the birth of little Masha. Following the teaching of Jewish mysticism, Singer’s understanding of the catastrophe that befell his people is closely related to his belief in the hidden face of God or *hester panim*.<sup>249</sup> But as a self-proclaimed practitioner of the religion of “protest,” Singer does not passively wait for God’s face to reappear.

In *Enemies*, Singer locates the glimpse of the hidden face of God in the future generation, specifically, in little Masha who, according to Frances Vargas Gibbons, embodies “Americanness” or “melting-pot” qualities, in that, born in the land of freedom, she is the amalgamated product of Herman and his three women.<sup>250</sup> Raised by Herman’s two wives Yadviga and Tamara but named after his dead lover Masha, little Masha represents the collective identity of all major characters Singer portrays. Thus, despite the dismal portrayal of immigrant survivors and their endless suffering, Singer seems to hint at the end that in the wake of a total catastrophe, a new life is still possible for its survivors, even if it may not happen in their lifetimes and they have to wait for their next generation to realize their poor immigrants’ American dream.

## Notes

<sup>162</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," trans. Richard Cohen, *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 162. Quoted in Rober Eagleston's "From Behind the Bars of Quotation Marks: Emmanuel Levinas's (Non)-Representation of the Holocaust," *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, eds. Andrew Leak and George Paizis (New York: St. Martin, 2000), 102.

<sup>163</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988) 100-101.

<sup>164</sup> There has been a controversy not only about the "Holocaust" but also about other terms such as "Soah" and "genocide" used to refer to the Nazi murder of the Jews during the World War II. All these terms have different connotative political, religious, and cultural meanings and, as historian Omer Bartov argues, the very presence of multiple names testifies to "an unease with its presence, fear, and anxiety at calling it *what it really is*" (79). For a detailed discussion see his "Antisemitism, the Holocaust, and Reinterpretations of National Socialism," *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998), 78-82.

<sup>165</sup> Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Doria Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 224.

<sup>166</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1987), p. 163; in English *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989). Quoted in Saul Friedlander, "Introduction," *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), 3.

<sup>167</sup> I am indebted to cultural psychiatrist Laurence J. Kirmayer and his idea of "landscapes of memory" for this concept. In "Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation," he emphasizes the importance of social expectations and demands that influence and form a particular type of memory. He argues that these expectations and demands create a "landscape of memory," which he defines as "the metaphoric terrain that shapes the distance and effort required to remember affectively charged and socially defined events that initially may be vague, impressionistic, or simply absent from memory"(175). Our memories, as he explains, are selectively determined not only by the

personal and social significance of an event and its memory but also by what he calls “meta-memory” or what people generally and implicitly believe to be a truthful model form of memory. My approach to trauma is not as cultural and social as Kirmayer’s. Nor is it primarily focused on the issue of memory. But I find the concept of “landscape” useful in metaphorically understanding the importance of people’s general beliefs and assumptions that work as a psychological backdrop against which all their life events take place, make sense, and take on significance. This way, the detrimental effects of trauma can be figuratively understood. Trauma collapses the psychological landscape that used to coordinate and arrange random events into a meaningful and coherent sequence of personal narrative. See Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation,” *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* eds. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), 173-198.

<sup>168</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 31.

<sup>169</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 53, 86.

<sup>170</sup> Doris Brothers, *Falling Backwards: An Exploration of Trust and Self-Experience* (New York: Norton, 1995), 56.

<sup>171</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, “Interview” (with Cathy Caruth), *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 140.

<sup>172</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 104.

<sup>173</sup> Lifton, “Interview,” 140.

<sup>174</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” *SE* 18 (1921), 100.

<sup>175</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 27.

<sup>176</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drown and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 38.

<sup>177</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.

<sup>178</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 88.

<sup>179</sup> Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 43, 125, 181.

- <sup>180</sup> Henry Krystal, "Trauma and Affects," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 23 (1978), 98; Henry Krystal, "Trauma and Aging," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, 82-87.
- <sup>181</sup> Edward Lewis Wallant, *The Pawnbroker* (New York: MacFadden-Bartell, 1962), 88, 91.
- <sup>182</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 133.
- <sup>183</sup> Victor E. Frankl, *Men's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square, 1984), 91.
- <sup>184</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 98.
- <sup>185</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 93.
- <sup>186</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and Continuity of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 173.
- <sup>187</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1 (1994).
- <sup>188</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980), 28.
- <sup>189</sup> Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self," *New Literary History* 26 (1995), 171.
- <sup>190</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 27.
- <sup>191</sup> Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling," 171-172.
- <sup>192</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, "Introduction," *Auschwitz and After*, by Charlotte Delbo, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), xv.
- <sup>193</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991). Memory and the self is the dominant focus in Langer's research on survivors' testimonies and he divides his book into the subsections of "Deep Memory," "Anguished Memory," "Humiliated Memory," "Tainted Memory," and "Unheroic Memory."
- <sup>194</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), 131.

- <sup>195</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), 267.
- <sup>196</sup> Sara R. Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 38.
- <sup>197</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *SE* 14(1917), 253.
- <sup>198</sup> Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (New York: Grove, 1975), 62-63.
- <sup>199</sup> Susan J. Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crew, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1999), 38-39; Susan J. Brison, "Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity," *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tjetjens Meyers (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 25.
- <sup>200</sup> Kent D. Harber and James W. Pennebaker, "Overcoming Traumatic Memories," *The Handbook of Emotion and Memory*, ed. Sven-Ake Christianson (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992), 378.
- <sup>201</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 123; Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1978), 202; Elie Wiesel, "Trivializing the Holocaust," *New York Times*, 16 April 1978, 2:1, quoted in Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Mariner, 2000), 211; Claude Lanzmann, "De l'Holocauste à *Holocauste*" [From the Holocaust to *Holocaust*] (1979), quoted in Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000), 232.
- <sup>202</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988); Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the Jews,"* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990)
- <sup>203</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1986), 7, 47.
- <sup>204</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *SE* 21(1927), 149-157. See also Eric Santer's discussion of "narrative fetishism" in "History beyond the Pleasure Principle," *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander, 144-146.
- <sup>205</sup> Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, 80.
- <sup>206</sup> James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 5, 127.

- <sup>207</sup> Santer, "History beyond the Pleasure Principle," 144.
- <sup>208</sup> For a detailed discussion of this unique phenomenon, see *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- <sup>209</sup> Felman, "After the Apocalypse," *Testimony*, 163.
- <sup>210</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Enemies, A Love Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), 16, 247. All subsequent textual references are to this edition and will be parenthetically referred in the text.
- <sup>211</sup> For clinical studies that defines as disconnection and disempowerment as the "core" of any traumatic experience, see Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.
- <sup>212</sup> Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, "Introduction," *Tense Past*, xvii.
- <sup>213</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *SE* 18(1920), 31-32.
- <sup>214</sup> Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," *Trauma and Self*, eds. Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 34.
- <sup>215</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 47.
- <sup>216</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 141.
- <sup>217</sup> Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995), 7.
- <sup>218</sup> Henry Krystal, *Massive Psychic Trauma* (New York: International UP, 1968), 74.
- <sup>219</sup> Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, "Introduction," *Tense Past*, xxix.
- <sup>220</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 240.
- <sup>221</sup> Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 46, 43.
- <sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>223</sup> Similarly, emphasizing the importance of PTSD patients' reconstructing their life stories, Judith Herman refers to the need to "re-create the flow" of their life and to

“restore a sense of continuity with the past.” See Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 176-177.

<sup>224</sup> Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle toward Self-Realization* (New York: Norton, 1991 [1950]), 260, 266.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 280, 281-284.

<sup>227</sup> D. W. Winnicott, “The Place Where We Live,” *Play and Reality* (New York: Tavistock, 1971), 104-110.

<sup>228</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Introduction,” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 10.

<sup>229</sup> Cathy Caruth, “Traumatic Awakening,” *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination* eds. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 208- 222.

<sup>230</sup> Dominik LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), 65.

<sup>231</sup> Dominik LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998), 111.

<sup>232</sup> Lawrence S. Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1988), 154, 167.

<sup>233</sup> Frances Vargas Gibbons, *Transgression and Self-Punishment in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Searches* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 67.

<sup>234</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 71.

<sup>235</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 172. See also Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), especially his essay “Surviving.”

<sup>236</sup> S. Lillian Kremer, *Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1989), 191.

<sup>237</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 189. Quoted in Marianne Hirsh. “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy,” *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crew, and Leo Spitzer, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 21.

<sup>238</sup> For more discussion and critique of the contemporary trend of “romancing” or “hyping” survival, refer to Henry Greenspan, “Imagining Survivors: Testimony and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness,” *The Americanization of the Holocaust* ed. Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), 45-67; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Mariner, 1999), part three and four.

<sup>239</sup> Greenspan, “Imagining Survivors,” 49.

<sup>240</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny.” *SE*, 19(1919), 220.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>243</sup> Gibbons, *Transgression and Self-Punishment*, 61.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>245</sup> Friedman, *Understanding Isaac Bashevis Singer*, 173.

<sup>246</sup> Issac Bashevis Singer, *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer*, eds. Issac Bashevis Singer and Richard Burgin (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 175.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>248</sup> Aharon Appelfeld, “After the Holocaust,” *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 92.

<sup>249</sup> Kremer, *Witness Through the Imagination*, 26.

<sup>250</sup> Gibbons, *Transgression and Self-Punishment*, 75-76.

CHAPTER 4  
THE INTERSTITIAL PLIGHT OF A MINORITY SUBJECT AND THE TRAUMA OF  
SOCIAL ABJECTION IN CHANG-RAE LEE'S *NATIVE SPEAKER*

**The Interstitial Ethnic Subject and Abjection**

Loss is inseparable from trauma. Loss is a painful experience that implies losing part of the self and some integral self-experiences, which in some cases causes an irreversible rift in one's life and self-narrative. Whether the loss comes in the form of a death of a loved one or losing one's ideal in moments of disillusionment, a close examination of the psychosocial dimension of loss shows that whereas not all losses are traumatic, traumatic events inevitably involve a significant loss difficult to accept and acknowledge in the first place and even more difficult to cope with and recover from to a certain degree. "Traumatic events," as the psychologist John H. Harvey asserts, "fundamentally are about loss," and a major traumatic loss consequently causes a drastic identity change.<sup>251</sup> Profoundly rupturing and disempowering in nature, a traumatic loss strips one, to explain it in Kohut's term of self psychology, of the selfobject, which, as part of the self, provides one with a nurturing and protective psychological environment and sustains one through the vicissitudes of life challenges. If the selfobjects surrounding one keep one stable and secure against the unforeseeable contingencies of life, then a traumatic loss, by severing the tie to those selfobjects, makes one feel forlorn, suddenly exposed, and quite helpless without the familiar and empathic milieu.

In this chapter, I will explore the psychological impact of cross-cultural passage on minority ethnic subjects by examining their multiple losses, which, often

unacknowledged and not mourned, can cause various long-term negative effects. After briefly reviewing several psychological and psychoanalytic researches conducted on the issues of immigration, loss, and the intergenerational transfer of trauma, I critique the ways in which these studies approach their subject in such an abstract manner that they neglect the specificity of historical contexts and backgrounds, which create different types of the problem and challenge to different groups of people. Later in my study, I will narrow my scope of discussion by focusing on Asian-Americans, Korean-Americans and a novel by the Korean-American writer Chang-rae Lee, in particular, in order to examine how the reception of Asian-Americans, or the lack of it, by mainstream society often causes them to develop highly questionable survival strategies and to adopt a self-betraying, servile, assimilative stance for acceptance and approval.

Cultural relocation or immigration involves inevitable loss, separation, and anxiety and entails a significant identity change. Although the hardships the individual faces may differ depending upon the circumstances precipitating the departure from the native country and the attitude of the host country toward the ethnic group to which he or she belongs, immigration is a serious upheaval that puts a tremendous cumulative strain on the individual's coping mechanisms. In this respect, several researchers have shed light on the issues of the complicated link between cultural relocation, loss, and trauma.

Drawing on various psychoanalytic theories such as Winnicott's object relations theory and Kohut's self psychology, the psychoanalyst Juana Canabal Antokoletz, for example, explains the daunting task of surviving a potentially catastrophic cultural relocation and its psychological impact on cultural migrants. According to Antokoletz, a cross-cultural passage is particularly challenging in that migrants run the risk of losing

their native culture, which Antokoletz compares to Winnicott's "holding environment" in its facilitating and protective role.<sup>252</sup> Furthermore, the difficulty of finding a new community that can provide them with the mirroring, idealizing, and alter ego functions, which are the basic roles of selfobjects, compounds the problem. Thus, Antokoltez argues that unless newcomers manage to create a Winnicottian "transitional space," the intermediary potential space between themselves and the environment that enables their participation in productive cultural activities, their cross-cultural passage turns out to be a self-alienating and frustrating one. As a consequence, Antokoltez continues, immigrants often develop a "false self" in their effort to make themselves acceptable to the new community in the absence of equal dialectic cultural exchanges between their old and new community.<sup>253</sup>

In the sense that the individual has to face a radical ontological insecurity and endure chronic anxiety in the process of adjusting to a new society, cultural relocation or immigration leaves long-lasting repercussions in its wake. For this reason, Leon Grinberg and Rebeca Grinberg argue in their psychological research on migration and exile that "migration as a traumatic experience comes under the heading of what have been called cumulative traumas and tension traumas in which the subject's reactions are not always expressed or visible, but the effects of such trauma run deep and last long."<sup>254</sup> To support and further elaborate on their view, the Grinbergs observe that immigrants often postpone or delay their mourning because of the pressing necessity to deal with challenges in the external world, creating a "latency period" commonly found in trauma cases, which indicate the lapse of time between the traumatic event and the manifestation of

symptoms. In some cases, the Grinbergs point out, the immigrant family's mourning is delayed for so long that it is transferred to the next generation.<sup>255</sup>

Yet the Grinbergs' view of the migration-related trauma and its long-term effects is not entirely new. In *Moses and Monotheism*, written and published under the dire circumstances surrounding the immanent threat of Nazism and his move to England, Freud had already taken note of and established the intricate relationship between trauma, cultural/symbolic displacement, transgenerational transferal of trauma, and the return of the repressed. What is striking about the highly charged Oedipal drama Freud creates in *Moses and Monotheism* is that his exploration taps into the undeniable presence of repetitive violence, the delayed mourning, and the need for redemption in the narrative of mythic self-making after a massive migration and a series of cross-cultural contacts between different ethnic and religious groups.

At the center of Freud's theory is the seemingly contradictory presence of a man's powerful need to seek a strong protective father figure, and an equally compelling desire to repudiate and displace him to take his place. Yet of particular interest here is the fact that Freud places this Oedipal conflict and ambivalence toward one's forefather not in the setting of a nuclear family but in the broader context of the politico-religious evolution of a group through its continuous contacts and exchanges with other groups. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud revisits ancient Jewish history and speculates that Moses was actually an Egyptian nobleman who imposed a monotheistic religion on the Jewish people, who subsequently killed him in a violent resurgence against him. In Freud's Oedipal rewriting of the Exodus and the Jews' return to Canaan, the sense of guilt and the need of reparation, which the descendants of the primal founding father feel toward him become

salient, illustrating how cross-cultural passage further complicates the Oedipal drama between the son and the father.

Freud's interpretation seems to imply that whatever people fear and want to repudiate, be it an atrocious crime of the past, a history of betrayal or a threatening object or situation, they tend to assimilate it into themselves and perpetually recreate in a different and distorted fashion. Interestingly, this assimilative recreation of the painful past or trauma, in many cases, is closely related to multiple leave-takings and coming into contact with ethnic, religious or cultural others. Thus, as Cathy Caruth maintains, what we ultimately find in Freud's investigative narrative, as in many other parables of psychoanalytic theory, is "the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another."<sup>256</sup>

The psychoanalytic or psychological studies by Antokoletz, the Grinbergs, and Freud briefly reviewed above all suggest that some irretrievable loss happens in the process of cross-cultural passage. They also point out that the loss, whatever kind it may be, returns with a belated impact as a traumatic symptom, if it is not acknowledged or mourned. Despite their valuable insight on the issue of cultural relocation, loss, and the impact of an often delayed mourning, however, these various psychoanalytic researches all have their own shortcomings. First, they use such concepts as loss, mourning, and trauma in a fairly abstract manner. What they often overlook is the traumatogenic socio-political structure surrounding a cross-cultural passage. For instance, although Antokoltz astutely links the concept of a false self to the pressure of assimilation, she does not particularly examine the specific intergroup dynamics which determine the form of

cultural exchange in such a way that the movement of cultural access and appropriation is often uneven and unidirectional between the hegemonic majority group and the minority group. Nor does she delineate the concrete ways in which symptomatic group-specific attributes of the false self manifest themselves, under the pressure of assimilation, in a particular symbolically coded manner, reflecting the socially constructed and historically sedimented lived experiences of that particular group.

It is my contention that any exploration of the intricately related issues of loss, mourning, and trauma in cases concerning cross-cultural passages should take into account the socio-political structure that selectively enforces a migration-related loss to a particular group of people and perpetually delays mourning for it by disenfranchising the minority and their grief. To confine the scope of discussion to America and its history of immigration, the American cultural milieu strongly encourages or compels newcomers to “shed” their past for successful assimilation into its community. The “‘American’ qualities,” Shirley Geok-Lin Lim says, “collapse the diasporic subject into the amnesiac condition of the ‘new American,’ a tabula rasa on whom is inscribed an ethnic-cleansed national identity.”<sup>257</sup> Thus, relocation is bound to entail a sense of rupture and loss on the part of those who find themselves on the other side of power spectrum as the object of the assimilation discourse and project. Despite the already well-established critique of its “melting pot” rhetoric of assimilation and the current multicultural emphasis on hybridity and heterogeneity,<sup>258</sup> however, there are certain ethnic groups whose assimilation, regardless of how much they might have sacrificed in the process or how long their struggle might have been on the American soil, is not “good enough” for the mainstream

hegemonic group to accept them, for their differences are regarded as inherently “alien” and hence difficult to amalgamate.

Of many ethnic groups, Asian-Americans, particularly, are the target group that suffers most from the overly zealous assimilation-oriented rhetoric still dominant in America, and this symptomatic phenomenon is a telling sign that reflects a troublesome Asian immigrant history in America. The long arduous strife of Asian-Americans and their subjugated status as others in the American national scene exemplify the double dilemmas of losing a crucial part of one’s native culture as a holding environment and repeatedly finding this loss canceled out, ignored, or trivialized. As Ronald Takaki explains, the mainstream American society still sees Asian-Americans as “foreigners,” “sojourners,” or “strangers from a different shore,” regardless of their several generations-long history of settlement.<sup>259</sup> In this respect, the hegemonic society’s treatment of Asian-Americans is different from that of African-Americans, although both groups suffer from racism and discrimination. While African-Americans are degraded and mistreated, their status as Americans is not questioned, but Asian-Americans’ claim for their legitimate status as citizens is constantly jeopardized. As a result, regardless of over one hundred fifty years of Asian-American history, Asian-Americans, to white Americans, are still the same “small and dark” people who “huddle over dishes of strange food.”<sup>260</sup>

To put it in a somewhat crudely schematic manner, the assimilative movement of European immigrants is mostly progressively linear whereas that of Asian immigrants is punctuated by frequent setbacks and retro-movements. Unlike European immigrants, who can blend into the national fabric relatively easily with the passage of time, Asian

immigrants and their American-born descendants repeatedly have had to seek admittance and validation. In a circular motion that mercilessly revokes their lived history since immigration, Asian immigrants and their descendants are often compelled to return to and face the moment of their entry to America generation after generation. “To become a ‘subject’” or a lawful citizen, as Judith Butler argues, is tantamount to submitting oneself to the rules of the dominant ideology and “to have been presumed guilty, then tried and declared innocent.” Pointing out that this act of becoming and maintaining a social subject depends on constant repetitive performances of proving one’s legitimate status of citizenship, Butler emphasizes the “tenuous” nature of the subject status attained by the process.<sup>261</sup> The tenuous status of the social subject becomes even more precarious for Asian-Americans.

To be an Asian-American subject in a white-dominant American society means, to put it in Butler’s phrases, to constantly find oneself trapped in a vicious circle of “being presumed guilty, then tried, and declared innocent.” The individual Asian-American’s history or *prehistory* leading up to admission to America becomes a negative alibi used repeatedly against the claim for his or her legitimate social status as an American. For example, the seemingly innocuous question, “Where are you from?” frequently addressed to people of Asian descent, including those born in the United States, illustrates the point. For Asian-Americans, their or their ancestor’s entry into the United States becomes a perpetual reference point. It becomes the “primal scene” that transfixes Asian-American subjects in an ahistorical past.

I here coin the term “the primal scene of immigration” to refer to a fabricated historical myth and the discursively manipulated rhetoric about the “birth” of the Asian-

American minority subject in America. Since both the primal scene and immigration are the crucial reference points that involve a certain mythical sense of beginning, shocks, and subsequent ordeals of coping, it might be possible to use Freud's notion of the primal scene metaphorically, without the usual sexual implications, and apply it to the case of immigration. In the discourse of both the primal scene and immigration, we notice the common recurrent focus on the alleged "origin," the tenacious grip that such a fabricated origin has on its posterity, as well as the bewildering effects of the haunting past. Thus, to explicate the psychopolitical repercussion of immigration in general and its long-term effects on the descendants of Asian immigrants in particular, I use the term "the primal scene of immigration."

For people of Asian descent, the primal scene of immigration is often transformed into a site of traumatic abjection. As Freud insightfully points out in his analysis of the Wolf Man case, our perception of the primal scene, or of any past incident, is always already mediated by the process of deferral (*nachträglich*), and it is impossible to relate to the past incident per se without our invested interests, anxiety, and wishes of the present.<sup>262</sup> Thus, for descendants of Asian immigrants, the primal scene of immigration, perceived in a deferred and distorted fashion, becomes a complex nodal point in their history, for they project toward it both their sense of ontological insecurity and anxiety they feel as a result of social abjection. Sometimes it also provokes a longing for the pristine state fraught with the possibilities of a radically new beginning. In other words, the primal scene of immigration for Asian-Americans exists as a symptomatic historical kernel surrounded by what psychoanalysts would call "screen memories," a composite of imaginary recollections and fantasies that preserve the original event in a disguised form.

Yet it is integral to approach the primal reference point of immigration from a different angle in order to see that the primal scene of immigration is the contested site which is constantly fabricated and manipulatively exploited by a hegemonic society to control its minority subjects. To refer again to Freud's analysis of the primal scene again, Freud maintains that the scenes from the analysand's early years are "not reproductions of real occurrences," but "products of the imagination" that are "intended to serve as some kind of symbolic representation of real wishes and interests, and which owe their origin to a regressive tendency, to a turning-away from the tasks of the present."<sup>263</sup> The key here is that a primal scene from the past is a kind of symbolic representation of the perceiver's interests and wishes, which often divert his or her focus from the tasks of the present. Then in connection to the issues of immigration and assimilation, the question we might ask is, If the reproduction of the primal scene (of immigration) is to serve a particular symbolic function, how is the symbolic articulation staged and for whom? Or whose real wish or interests is this regressive turning intended to serve and at what expense? How is this regressive turning transformed into the practices of social abjection?

The basic functions of a regressive phantasy, which Freud sums up as "a shrinking-back from life and a harking-back to the past,"<sup>264</sup> propel the rhetoric of the "primal phantasy" of immigration that the hegemonic group adopts and repeatedly uses to discriminate against cultural others. Social abjection hinges upon a symbolic regulation and defilement of the very distinctive attributes and history of others that make them who they are. The twisted logic behind the dominant cultural and political discourse about minorities works by singling out, reifying, and making one particular aspect of their self,

such as skin color, gender, ancestry, or religion, turn against the rest. The propelling force behind the often staged regressive turns toward the “origin” of Asian-Americans is closely linked to this regulatory will for abjection, management, and control of the “others within.”

Historically, Asian-American subjects in the U. S. have been required to relate to the primal scene of immigration that has been constantly and selectively evoked in order to serve the majority’s interests. This does not mean to question and invalidate immigration as a historical fact. What is problematic are the ways in which the dominant cultural and political discourse invokes the ancestry of minorities as a facile alibi in disempowering, alienating, and subjugating them. Like the tragic Sisyphus, Asian-Americans are repeatedly thrust back to the threshold of admittance to the U. S. nation state. They have been continuously engaged in a tedious struggle of bearing and working against the overwhelming pressure of proving their allegiance to America.

For example, the internment of the Japanese during World War II and the further segregation and conviction of Nisei “no no boys” who refused to comply with the unfair treatment illustrate the quandary Asian-American citizens faced in a volatile political climate that saw their “racial strain” “undiluted” and hence troublesome.<sup>265</sup> Directly contradicting the central tenets of American democracy predicated upon the principles of freedom and equality, Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy asserted the necessity for the mass detention of Japanese-Americans: “If it is a question of the safety of the country [and] the Constitution. . . . Why the Constitution is just a scrap of paper to me.”<sup>266</sup> His exemplary remark succinctly shows how precarious the human rights of racial and cultural minorities are and, more specifically, how the regressive turnings toward

ancestry or the primal scene of immigration, strategically evoked and unfairly used, nullify the existence in the here and now of people of Asian descent. In his novel *No-No Boy*, Nisei (second generation Japanese-American) writer John Okada voices, through the protagonist Ichiro's reflective comment, the sense of bewilderment and helplessness Japanese-Americans felt as the massive trauma suddenly uprooted their life and stigmatized them as enemy aliens: "It is not an easy thing to discover suddenly that being American is a terribly incomplete thing if one's face is not white and one's parents are Japanese. . . . It is like being pulled asunder by a whirling tornado and one does not think of a slide rule though that may be the thing which will save one."<sup>267</sup>

The constant reminder of Asian "otherness" via repeated evocations of Asian immigrants' previous provisional status as greenhorns operates to discipline and subjugate both Asian-Americans and other minorities of color as docile subjects. The practice of evoking the "other" origin of Asian immigrants has worked to consolidate the existing hierarchical social order. In this connection, Ray Chow points out that admission into a community means "to be recognized as having a similar kind of value as that which is possessed by the admitting community," and that "there is admittance in the sense of confession," which connotes "a surrender of oneself in reconciliation with the rules of society."<sup>268</sup>

A cursory review of the American history of immigration shows that the admission of Asians to America has always been determined by the fluctuating interests of the dominant majority group. Since the fabled gold rush and the massive initial influx of Chinese immigrants that fueled San Francisco's explosive population and economic growth in the 1850s and 1860s, cheap, non-unionized Asian labor was mobilized in many

sectors such as mining and farming or in building the much needed national infrastructure like the transcontinental railroad. Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* portrays these early days of Asian immigration, and Frank Chin uses the railroad as a prominent motif exemplifying the history of Chinese-Americans in his short stories "Railroad Standard Time" and "Eat and Run Midnight People."<sup>269</sup> After the Civil War, Asian migrant workers were again viewed by Southern employers as an ideal problem solver. Since noncitizen laborers did not have political voting rights, southern owners of farms could use them to discipline African-Americans who used their right and influence to improve their working conditions and wages.<sup>270</sup> As historian Gary Okihiro astutely points out, as if anticipating the model minority discourse that selectively showcased Asian "successes" for the purpose of disciplining vociferous African Americans during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Asian laborers, after Emancipation, became handy substitutes for African-Americans in the South. Thus, the use of Asian labor served to underpin the economic and political supremacy of whites.<sup>271</sup>

Yet the early heyday of Asian immigration was short-lived and was followed by a backlash against the Asian population within the U.S. nation-state. As the settlement of Asians (mainly Chinese in the early days of Asian immigration) increased, it caused native white laborers to complain about competing with cheap labor. Whites saw the increasing number of Asians immigrants as a serious challenge to the alleged racial and cultural "purity" of white America, and a paranoiac national panic ensued that viewed these immigrants as an "anomaly" that "broke the chain of westward historical progress" and "pollutants . . . in the symbolic structure of society."<sup>272</sup>

Perpetually assigned to the subject position of outsiders within, Asian immigrants and Americans of Asian descent exist in America as what I call “interstitial ethnic subjects.” As David Palumbo-Liu points out, a border crossing creates a new diasporic identity: “In the Asian American narratives,” Palumbo-Liu points out, this movement produces “*at once diaspora and ethnicity*,” for “the reconstitution of the subject as a subject in diaspora takes place at the same moment that the subject is labeled ‘foreign.’”<sup>273</sup>

The “interstitial ethnic subjects” are such a product of diasporic border crossing Palumbo-Liu discusses. Hence, these interstitial ethnic subjects have both spatial and racial or ethnic implications. They are placed strategically in the liminal zone between the potentially threatening or polluted outside and the guarded inside, and they are often used by a white hegemonic society to strengthen and promote its economic, political, and cultural stability and advantage. In addition, being an Asian-American in America means being caught in the strife between the blacks and the whites.

There are numerous historical cases that illustrate the interstitial plight of Asian-Americans. Asian-Americans have straddled the national demarcating line that treacherously changes its landscape depending on the dominant economic-political climate and demands of each era, and for this reason, their lives and their precarious rights have been subjected to a series of immigration laws that frequently oscillate between admitting and later excluding the immigration of the same Asian national groups for various changing reasons of their being a source of cheap labor, a cultural peril, political enemies or allies. For instance, World War II and the American alliance with China led to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. Consequently, Chinese immigrants and their

posterity, who used to be perceived as a peril or nuisance, were transformed overnight into trusted allies. On the other hand, while Japanese-Americans were treated less harshly previously, due to Japan's growing military power in the Pacific and its government's strong remonstrance against discriminatory acts such as school segregation in San Francisco and the alien land laws,<sup>274</sup> they were singled out and collectively interned as enemy aliens. Examining just a few instances in the history of Asian immigration is sufficient to show that what distinguishes Asian-Americans from other minorities in the American nation state is their malleability into a particular subject position that serves to reinforce the already established white American political, economic, and racial supremacy.

**Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, A Novel of Immigration and Trauma**

Chang-rae Lee's highly acclaimed first novel *Native Speaker* portrays the interstitial plight of Korean-Americans. The novel poignantly foregrounds the psychological impact that the occupation of the precarious, liminal zone between the outside and the inside, as well as between blacks and whites, puts on the Asian-American interstitial ethnic subject. In addition, the novel also hints at the Korean-Americans' group-specific problems as a middleman minority and the post-1965 Korean immigrants' struggle for survival in the urban world, which is densely populated by other people of color. Although not specifically mentioned, the novel also has as its backdrop the sense of sense of betrayal and disillusionment those post-1965 Korean immigrants must have felt, when their ideal image of America, which was cultivated after Korea made its transition from a colonial country ruled by Japan to a free independent country espoused by America, crumbled as they encountered racism and discrimination in it.

Present in Lee's novel, in a highly controlled, subdued tone, are some of the key issues associated with immigration, cross-cultural passages, and assimilation, such as loss, mourning, trauma, and delayed grieving. The protagonist of the novel, Henry Park, is a Korean-American born to a Korean immigrant couple, and the main plot covers his activities as an ethnic spy working for a multinational information-gathering corporation, as well as his working through difficulties with his estranged Caucasian wife, Lelia, after their son Mitt's death in an accident. Both Henry's emotional entanglement with his family members and his professional quandary of betraying his own ethnic community stem from his problematic internalization of social abjection as an interstitial ethnic subject. His tricky, precarious subject position in society often begets in him a blind desire to "fit in" by impersonation, even at the expense of his authenticity as an individual.

Although *Native Speaker* takes the form of a spy novel, which, on the surface, seems to follow a somewhat formulaic plot based upon Henry's infiltrating the political campaign of a Korean-American New York City councilman named John Kwang, the hidden crux of the novel revolves around several traumatic incidents in his personal life and his deferred mourning for them. In Lee's novel, both personal and professional areas of Henry's life are so intricately conjoined that internal conflict in one dimension reflects and echoes those in the other dimension of his life. Thus, the difficulty Henry faces in his constrained relationships with his immigrant father and his Caucasian wife, as well as the multiple losses of loved ones he endures, cannot be dissociated from the context of immigration and cultural relocation.

### **Post-1965 Immigration and the Interstitial Predicament**

*Naive Speaker* mainly deals with a Korean immigrant family. The Koreans the novel portrays reflect a relatively recent influx of Asian population since the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 removed the previous basis of national origins regulating the admission and number of immigrants. The main character, Henry Park, is the only son of a successful Korean immigrant owner of several grocery shops in New York. As a spy working for a clientele consisting of “multinational corporations, bureaus of foreign government, individuals of resource and connection,” he makes a living by “provid[ing] them with information about people against their vested interests.”<sup>275</sup> Highly self-conscious of his Asian heritage and the accent in his speech, but fully utilizing his background as an ethnic spy for his self-advancement, he thinks that he has found “the perfect vocation for the person [he] was” (127). Although his work involves a high level of deception, betrayal, and sacrifice of all people involved, including himself, he is grateful to his boss for offering him the job and feels “indebted to him for life.” “I found a sanction from our work, for I thought I had finally found my truest place in the culture” (127), states Henry explaining the reason for his feeling of gratitude for his boss. This seemingly inexplicable gratefulness stems from his anxiety about his place in society and a desperate need for a sense of belongingness.

His occupational choice, however, is not the only area of his life that is contaminated by his sense of insecurity; it is just a facet of the multiply layered insecurity of his life, for even his most intimate personal matters, such as his choice of spouse, for instance, is governed by his desire to “fit in” and find a rightful place in America. Henry recollects the moment he broached the news of his engagement to Lelia to his father and ponders upon his father’s unexpected liking of her:

He never said it, but I knew he liked the fact that Lelia was white. When I first told him that we were engaged I thought he would vehemently protest, . . . but he only nodded and said he respected her and wished me luck. I think he had come to view our union logically, practically and perhaps he thought he saw through *my intentions, the assumption being that Lelia and her family would help me make my way in the land.* (Italics mine, 58)

Henry's intention to find a niche in a white-dominant society by marrying a Caucasian reveals what Karen Horney would call the "basic anxiety," which accounts for "a profound insecurity and vague apprehensiveness . . . in a world conceived as potentially hostile."<sup>276</sup> The need for safety and belongingness, which is one of the basic but powerful components of human motivation,<sup>277</sup> dominates both Henry's and his father's life. Whiteness for them becomes a property they acquire vicariously by a civil union, which they think will guarantee their sure foothold in society.

This attempt to redefine one's identity through a marital relationship is quite ironically "American" in nature, though. As Werner Sollors argues, the conflict between "descent" and "consent" relationships runs throughout American history from the very beginning of the country. Americans have often tried to override the constraints and discrimination imposed by nativity and the hereditary hierarchy in society or "descent" relationships by contractual and volitional allegiance or "consent" relationships.<sup>278</sup> In addition, since romantic love requires severing the ties with a protective native environment and often involves overcoming difficulties or obstacles in obtaining gratification, it has played a key role in American ethnic interactions, becoming a fitting example of the consent relationship that is closely associated with American identity.<sup>279</sup> In marrying Lelia, Henry thinks that he has kept at bay all the negative baggage coming from his Asian descent. So it is no wonder that when his son Mitt is born with visibly

Asian features, he is both disappointed with this “untoward” resurfacing of his heritage in his son and hurt by Lelia’s response to it: “Though I kept quiet, I was deeply hurting inside, angry with the idea that she wished he was more white. The truth of my feeling, exposed and ugly to me now, is that I was the one who was hoping whiteness for Mitt, being fearful of what I might have bestowed on him . . .” (285).

Many psychological conflicts and insecurities of the protagonist in *Native Speaker* are intertwined with, and echo, the dilemmas new immigrants faced as ethnic interstitial subjects. Notably, the demographic profile of new Korean immigrants was quite different from that of their predecessors in that these newcomers came mostly as intact family units and had high educational and professional backgrounds since the 1965 act stipulated occupational preferences for skilled workers.<sup>280</sup> According to Harry H. L. Kitano and Roger Daniels, the history of Korean immigration to the United States consists of three waves. The “first wave” of Korean immigration started in 1903 as sugar planters in Hawaii recruited over 7000 Korean laborers, and it later included a small number of students and politicians in exile escaping from Japanese colonial rule. After the outbreak of the Korean War (1950-1953), the “second wave” of Korean immigrants, war orphans, wives of American soldiers, and students, added to the small number of Koreans in the States, but they did not form any distinctive ethnic community. With the “third wave” or post-1965 immigration, Koreans now migrated into America in large numbers, and Korean ethnic communities like Korea Town in Los Angeles started to emerge in large cities around small business sectors.<sup>281</sup>

The recent post-1965 Korean immigrants are unique in that they are not like the old-timers, who were driven to migration by poverty, political reasons, and other

domestic turbulence like a civil war. While their predecessors regarded their stay in America as a merely temporary state, these newcomers have chosen to move to America with an intention to settle permanently in search of economic prosperity and better educational opportunities for their children. America or *mikuk* in Korean literally means a beautiful country. After the division of the country into North and South Korea after thirty-six years of colonization by Japan, Cold War ideology dominated South Korean politics. During the Cold War era, the U. S. A. played a significant role in promoting South Korea as a stronghold of democracy against a communist regime in the North. Thus, for these Korean immigrants who were educated under a Westernized, renovated school system that eulogized America as an economic and political savior-benefactor in a war-torn, poverty-stricken country,<sup>282</sup> the discrepancy between their expectation about a new life in their imagined beautiful country and the not-so-beautiful reality they faced after their arrival was quite obvious and difficult to adjust to.

Although a majority of these newcomers were college-educated and well-trained professionals, racism and the language barrier limited Koreans' employment prospects, and they often moved downward in occupation. Such is the case of Henry's father in *Native Speaker*, who was an engineer with a master's degree from a top Korean university. But Henry's father starts his life in America by making a meager living doing menial work as a greengrocer. Many new Korean immigrants started small-business enterprises for which they were rarely prepared. Actually, these shopkeepers, according to Ronald Takaki, have been driven to self-employment in the retail industry due to racism and a changing demographic pattern in urban population within America. Urban areas have become densely populated by African-Americans and Latinos after the white

middle class moved to the suburbs, and white merchants, many of whom were Jewish and Italian immigrants, have now retired, with their mainstreamed descendants no longer working for the family business.<sup>283</sup>

Korean small business owners in inner cities illustrate what it is like to occupy an interstitial economic, racial, and social zone, and to bear the brunt of antagonism, prejudice, and mistreatment. With their business usually located in a poor urban area deserted by the white middle class and populated by other ethnic minorities, Korean small business owners serve the function of what socialists often call a “middleman minority.” Positioned between haves and have-nots, they distribute corporate products and mediate, like a bumper, the conflict between different economic strata and racial groups, finding small niches left by large corporations in poor, less profitable locations that are nonetheless more accepting to immigrants.<sup>284</sup> This often leads to an increasing interracial hostility and violence, making self-employed Korean merchants an easy target of the rage of other people of color.<sup>285</sup>

Like other racial stereotypes, the stereotypical images of Korean immigrants also have a tendency to erroneously reduce them to one-dimensional figures utterly focused on survival and material gain. Henry’s father in *Native Speaker*, in many ways, embodies the immigrants’ tenacious will to survive and succeed against all odds, which often brings about unintended side effects. While the stereotypical view of Korean-Americans, especially immigrant small business owners, as another recent version of the model minority helps rationalize existing socioeconomic inequalities by eulogizing their hard work and thriftiness, it also brings about interracial violence, because Koreans tend to be misperceived by other people of color as callous and supercilious competitors. As Shirley

Geok-lin Lim asserts, “ethnicity as a marker of difference” in America has been “an active cultural yeast,” creating distorted images of other groups, reinforcing the already existing ambivalence toward them, and instigating violence against them.<sup>286</sup>

In fact, the seemingly callous and gruff image of Korean immigrant merchants, for the most part, can be attributed to what Saul-ling Cynthia Wong calls the “necessity” of survival or “all the hardships, deprivations, restrictions, disenfranchisements, and dislocations that Asian-Americans have collectively suffered as immigrants and minorities in a white-dominated country.”<sup>287</sup> In this respect, it is helpful to pay attention to King-Kok Cheung’s studies on the different modalities of silence depicted in Asian-American literature and her assertion that the silence of Asian-Americans is overdetermined and that a reductive culturalist’s interpretation of silence as a pure Asian characteristic neglects other more significant social, structural elements that cause them to “swallow” their pains and ordeals to survive as minorities.<sup>288</sup>

In *Native Speaker*, Henry’s father, too, carries himself with such a stoic stance of endurance and perseverance that he is often judged harshly by Henry as overly rigid and emotionally unavailable. As Henry observes, “For him [his father] the world operated on a determined set of procedures, certain rules of engagement” (47), and he manages his business “with an iron attitude,” seeing “his customers as adversaries” (185). Extreme reticence and steely fortitude characterize all the dealings Henry’s father has with the world. For instance, even after a mugging incident at his store that makes him return home covered with bruises and blood, he simply retreats from his family and refuses to explain what happened despite his wife’s imploring until she breaks down weeping outside the locked door. Thus, during the final moments of his father’s life, Henry

describes his father as a “gritty mule” and finds it hard to accept the fact that he is actually dying: “I thought he was never going to die. Even after the first stroke . . . I would see him as a kind of aging soldier of this life, a squat, stocky-torsoed warrior, bitter, never self-pitying, fearful, stubborn, world-fucking heroic”(48).

Published in 1995, *Native Speaker* presents another subtly hinted, but nonetheless significant backdrop incident that exemplifies the collective plight of Korean-Americans as interstitial ethnic subjects. As some critics have already noted, the novel unmistakably makes oblique references to the upheaval in Los Angeles in 1992.<sup>289</sup> The uprising that followed the verdict of Rodney King trial is a telling example of how Korean-Americans share the lot of other Asian-Americans. They have been inadvertently caught between the long historical black-white conflict and become the “shield” protecting whites from anger and violence by African-Americans and other oppressed minorities. The incident also illustrates quite effectively how psychological defense mechanisms such as splitting, displacement, and projection characterize the perception and treatment of Asian-Americans, particularly Korean-Americans.

During the turmoil in 1992, the highly charged racial friction split Korean merchants into dichotomous images of either a hard working, docile model minority or a sadistic and greedy persecutor of other people of color. In “Korean Americans vs. African Americans: Conflict and Construction,” Sumi Cho astutely observes, “the embrace of the model-minority by the media,” as well as the promotion of Korean immigrant shopkeepers as “legitimate victims” deserving sympathy, “becomes a bear hug particularly at times when Black/white tensions intensify and white America wishes to discipline African Americans.”<sup>290</sup> Cho also examines the process by which the outrage

against white officers' brutality against Rodney King is deflected and projected toward Korean merchants as a result of the repeated image on television of Soon Ja Du shooting Latasha Harlins and other camera shots of armed Koreans defending themselves against looting in the utter absence of the police protection. Cho's analysis of the riot points out clearly that what is achieved by the deflected anger and violence in the Los Angeles upheaval is "a needed release, a transferal of [white] guilt."<sup>291</sup>

In this respect, it is interesting to note that in *Native Speaker*, most of the spies at Henry's company Glimmer & Company are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who use an "ethnic coverage" to serve Dennis Hoagland, a white "cultural dispatcher," who establishes his firm in the mid-seventies to capitalize on the "influx of newcomers" (18). For the "same reason the CIA had such shoddy intelligence in nonwhite countries," Dennis expands his base of intelligence operation, making his subordinates work "by contriving intricate and open-ended emotional conspiracies" against their own ethnic communities (18). Monitoring his own employees by using secretly installed hidden cameras and "luring about, snooping somewhere on the grounds" (28), Dennis, "the human black cloud" (33) or the "grand never-knocker" who sneaks up on his employers "from an unseeable angle" (38), is a sinister and powerful figure.

The secretive and controlling way in which Dennis conducts business at his firm exemplifies exactly what Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* about the "disciplinary gaze" of "hierarchical observation," which is used to train and produce a particular type of individuals who become both the object and instrument of power.<sup>292</sup> This hierarchical observatory is based upon the "techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen."<sup>293</sup> By utilizing the "techniques of

subjection and methods of exploitation,” Foucault notes, the power in the hierarchized surveillance of discipline that is “everywhere and always alert” basically functions “according to the laws of optics and mechanics.”<sup>294</sup> Dennis, who operates and exercises his power in a similar manner, is not a cultural dispatcher; he is a clever manipulator whose secret surveillance maintains a social pecking order and puts those venturing out of their assigned role back into their place by intimidation. For example, when Henry suspects and questions about Dennis’s possible involvement in the “accidental” drowning of Emile Luzan, a Filipino psychoanalyst whom Henry is assigned to spy on but grows emotionally attached to, Dennis retorts, “‘Then you know that no matter how smart you are, no one is smart enough to see the whole world. There’s always a picture too big to see. No one is safe . . . someone is always bigger than you. If they want, they’ll shut you up. They’ll bring you down’” (46).

In a sense, Dennis, who is in charge of all activities of espionage, symbolizes the white hegemonic power that profits by pitting minorities against one another or turning against themselves and their own communities. Being part of such a system means becoming a complicitous partner with it and shouldering the guilt associated with the alliance. In a conversation with Henry, Jack, one of Henry’s co-workers at Glimmer and Company, explains why he thinks people like them are recruited to become the “hyenas” sent to “eat [their] own” and what kind of payoffs they get out of it: “‘He [Dennis] always wins the game, if only because he knows how large and wide it truly is. People like us can see just a small part of things. This is inescapable. We are just good immigrant boys, so maybe we don’t care. What you and I want is a little bit of the good

life. If we work hard, and do not question the rules too much, we can get a piece of what they have” (288).

Jack’s comment is interesting, in that his view of the menacing existence of a bigger and more powerful system outwitting small individuals is almost an exact replica of Dennis’s. What is clear in this remark is the tendency to “go with the flow” or not to “ruffle the feathers.” Immigrants usually develop their unique mentalities to protect themselves and survive in a foreign land. As Jack’s remark shows, being “good” is one of them, and it means not to interfere with social systems and ideologies, even if they oppress them. A Japanese saying goes, “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.”<sup>295</sup> Some minorities unfortunately adopt this mentality in their pursuit of the American dream. A white-dominant society, which is represented by Dennis in *Native Speaker*, has an ingenuous way of tapping into the immigrants’ tendency to get intimidated and acquiesce under the pressure of survival and turning it into its own profit. The result of this sinister manipulation and its implication are quite grim: while the Glimmer & Company and Dennis, safely ensconced in an affluent upscale district of Westchester County, maintain a semblance of respectability and prosper, Henry and his coworkers, the minions of the insidious power, become the “hyenas” strolling their own ethnic communities, looking for subjects to sacrifice in the hope that they can also have “a piece of what they [Dennis and his likes] have.”

It is the plight of the interstitial ethnic subject, positioned between the inside and outside, as well as between different racial or ethnic groups with conflicting interests, to find his or her subjection position constantly questioned and exploited for others’ advantage. It is against this backdrop of an arduous process of immigration and

assimilative efforts on the part of Asian-Americans, particularly Korean-Americans, and the harsh reality they have faced in America that the readers of *Native Speaker* should read Henry's overly self-conscious endeavor to fit in and his father's unrelenting drive to succeed and make it against all odds in America, which makes him perceived as the quintessential "definition of a thick skin" (58) by his son Henry, who even seriously doubts his father's capacity to love.

### **An Inverted Oedipal Drama and a Traumatic Chain of Unspoken Grief**

Henry's relationship with his father is one of the areas in which the predicament of his interstitial subject position is played out in a highly emotionally charged way. Rather than reflecting a simple generational conflict, the highly complicated relationship between them reveals much more about the social conditions surrounding immigrant families that obstruct and contaminate the strongest and most natural bond imaginable in the world, and about the distorted pattern of object relations the oppressive social conditioning produces. Henry's strong ambivalence and even muffled resentment toward his father may appear to be Oedipal in nature. However, the Oedipal conflict and structure portrayed in the novel is not the typical one with a powerful father symbolizing the law of society and the son's successful socialization being accomplished by his relinquishing the forbidden libidinal object and obeying the father's law. Immigrant experiences create a unique, inverted Oedipal drama in which the authority associated with the parental disciplinary power is displaced onto the society outside the household, leaving the father feeling deposed and inadequate.

As Frantz Fanon points out in his discussion of colonialism and the Antilleans' sense of nonexistence, the colonized or the marginalized feel that they do not have their own values; "they are always contingent on the presence of The Other," or those in

position of power who controls the symbolic order of society. “Everything that an Antillean does is done for the Other,” continues Fanon, “because it is the Other who corroborates him in his search for self-validation.”<sup>296</sup> The position of Henry’s father is comparable to that of the Antillean who finds himself trapped in an incomplete, aborted circle of recognition, which does not recognize him.

In a sense, the immigrant father is already symbolically castrated, and facing constant reminders of inadequacy is painful and traumatic. Freud claims that “the essence and meaning” of traumatic events or situations lie in “the subject’s estimation of his own strength . . . and in his admission of helplessness in the face of it.”<sup>297</sup> The daunting challenges of adjusting to a new environment, if not ameliorated over time, can be overwhelming and induce a profound sense of helplessness. For immigrants, the loss of familiar selfobjects and the difficulty of acquiring them anew in an adopted land are extremely painful and hard to deal with, for they feel suddenly bereft and stranded. For the immigrant father in particular, constantly straining to cope with new challenges without the nurturing assistance of selfobject brings about different negative repercussions on another level.

The conditions of the immigrant father’s life, which come with his diminished authority in society, also make him feel that his masculinity is under serious attack. In her examination of gender and ethnicity in Chinese immigrant literature, Saul-ling Cynthia Wong asserts, “In a society like that of the United States, ethnicity is . . . always already gendered, and gender always already ethnicized.” She also points out that since “the ability to cope” is considered as one component of masculinity in both Eastern and Western culture, male immigrants find their masculinity seriously challenged.<sup>298</sup> The

overly aggressive, hypermasculine stance Frank Chin adopts is his defensive reaction to the threat of emasculation from the American culture that translates the ethnicity of its minorities into an easy, convenient sexual code that it can manipulate. In a similar vein, David Eng also dwells on the concept of “racial castration” in his psychoanalytic study of the debilitating effects of racism and sexism on Asian-American male subjects and analyzes the ways in which America has managed their masculinity to disempower them and keep them “safe” within economic and political boundaries as a non-threatening and useful presence. Eng argues that many “feminized” professional activities Asian-Americans immigrant laborers engage in, such as doing laundry, cooking, tailoring, or cleaning, for example, show how “economically driven modes of feminization cling to bodies not only sexually but also racially.”<sup>299</sup>

Similarly, Henry’s father’s work in *Native Speaker*, which concerns buying and selling the produce and groceries for household consumption, belongs to the category of the “feminized” professions that his Asian-American ancestors were compelled to choose. Conscious of the belittling nature of the work that does not do justice to her husband’s higher professional degree, Henry’s mother admonishes Henry not to ask his father anything about his job. “Don’t shame him! . . . It’s below him. He only does it for you,” she advises Henry in a hushed voice (56). Shame is a natural emotional response to a sense of helplessness and powerlessness. Additionally, the feeling of shame also gets transferred to those who witness an individual in a state of helplessness. Thus, abject shame, along with the harrowing sense of guilt, surrounds and contaminates Henry’s relationship with his father. “What belief did I ever hold in my father, whose daily life I so often ridiculed and looked upon with such abject shame?,” Henry asks himself (53).

In *Native Speaker*, the typical Oedipal theory does not hold up to explain the complex inner dynamics of Henry's household. The Name of the Father, one of the fulcrums of Lacan's theory, which "sustains the structure of desire with the structure of the law"<sup>300</sup> and initiates the individual into the Symbolic order of society, exists only nominally. Henry's father is not an impressive, awe-inspiring figure endowed with significant power, nor does he represent and embody the structure of the law governing the white-dominant world outside his home; to the contrary, Henry's father, who is intimidated by the Symbolic order, silently endures humiliation and endlessly toils for the daily survival of his family. As a result, he is seen at best as "the most holy and fragile animal" (306) or the "low master" (47) by Henry. Although he is stern and steely at home and wields some power over his employees in his stores, Henry's father is for the most part a socially castrated, emasculated being outside the familiar and narrowly confined realm of his daily life. The only exception, however, is found in his interaction within the Korean community, which serves as his "selfobject," sustaining him through the tough times at the beginning of his life in the States. With his compatriots, Henry's father can relax and be his usual self, the boisterous, "funny one": "He'd make them all laugh with old Korean jokes or his impressions of Americans who came into his store, doing their stiff nasal tone, their petty annoyances and complaints" (50).

The carefree demeanor Henry's father exhibits around his Korean friends contrasts sharply with the overly cautious and timid manner with which he carries himself around his neighbors after his later move to Ardsley, an affluent, predominantly white residential area. The jarring contrast succinctly portrays how people out of touch with the base of their selfobjects or "holding environment" must feel and how feelings of marginality

corrode their sense of self, pushing them to a vanishing point of nonexistence. Henry recalls his father's perplexing behaviors and observes,

He mostly operated as if the town were just barely tolerating our presence. The only time he'd come out in public was because of me. He would steal late and unnoticed into the gym where I was playing kiddie basketball and stand by the far side of the bleaches with the rolled-up newspaper in his hand, tapping it nervously against his thigh as he watched the action, craning to see me shoot the ball but never shouting or urging like the other fathers and mothers did. (52)

Obvious in Henry's father's careful attempt to keep a low profile are his sense of insecurity and lack of confidence about himself as a legitimate and rightful member of his community. In public places, he often uses silence and invisibility like a magical cloak to hide from the possibly inquisitive and dominant gaze of others. His behavior effectively illustrates Rachel Lee's point about the difference between "making home" and "making oneself at home." Lee maintains that while the former concept is associated with the efforts of accommodation and sacrifice that certain groups of people, usually women and minorities, make in the process of obeying and upholding the dominant rules of society, the latter concept is often allowed to only a selected, privileged group of people as their prerogatives. According to Lee, the American narrative of home conflates these two different concepts of "making home" and "making oneself at home" and masks its exclusionary ideological hierarchy by suppressing "the concession of the former" and "highlighting the 'freedom' associated with the latter."<sup>301</sup> In doing so, the politics of home disguises and obstructs a critical awareness that home actually is "the place one is *in* because an Other(s) is kept out."<sup>302</sup>

Although Henry's father buys into the American myth of "freedom and success for all" and achieves an impressive material prosperity, his fidgety look around his neighbors

and muffled cheers for his son tell another story. In another instance, with a “halting, polite English” (103), he tries to confront the parent of the white kid who has bullied Henry. But instead of demanding an apology and remedies to protect his son from a further mishap, he ends up excusing the boy’s behavior by sheepishly explaining, “My son . . . is no good for friends” (104). The timidity he shows in his interaction with white neighbors clearly indicates that he has adopted a coping mechanism typically associated with social underdogs. It also testifies to the existence of an impenetrable discriminatory barrier separating those who make home in America but cannot make themselves at home in it due to their different racial and cultural background, from those others whose freedom and rights associated with their citizenship make them immune from the exclusionary politics of home.

Psychic trauma, if broadly defined, subsumes under its heading different types of life-altering, overwhelming incidents that rupture the continuity of life and deprive one of a basic sense of safety and security. Painfully aware of the divisive line between “us” and “them” and the constrictive life it imposes upon his parents, who go to great lengths not to overstep the carefully maintained boundaries, Henry thinks about his mother who “would gladly ruin a birthday cake rather than bearing the tiniest shames” of borrowing any missing ingredient. And he wonders,

. . . *What’s she afraid of*, what could be so bad that we had to be that careful of what people thought of us, as if we ought to mince delicately about in pained feet through our immaculate neighborhood, we silent partners of the bordering WASPs and Jews, never rubbing them except with a smile, as if everything with us were always all right, in our great sham of propriety. . . . That we believed in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground. (52)

As such words like “careful,” “mince delicately,” “pained feet,” and “immaculate” indicate, an extreme restraint is the dominant mode of life that characterizes Henry’s family. Interestingly, Henry’s remark begins by revealing the fear, anxiety, and need for control that promote this constrictive way of life, but it ends with a sinister undertone associated with the “perfect” images and images of violence. The last phrase, “our shops and offices burned down to the ground,” brings up the still fresh memories of the Los Angeles riot. By doing so, it hints at not only the invisible psychic strain an immigrant’s peripheral existence causes but also the possibly destructive outcome over the long haul.

Immigrant experiences that involve a prolonged state of displacement, degradation, and emotional anguish can be quite traumatic, especially if the internalization of shame and inferiority is involved and translates the racial or cultural differences of immigrants into a lack that they need to redeem or compensate for somehow, for example, by controlling appearances and presenting only the “perfect” images. According to Benjamin Kilborne, shame is a toxic feeling associated with being seen in a helpless or degraded state and triggers a defensive tendency to control appearances.<sup>303</sup> Yet since the first symptoms of excessive strain caused by immigration and a subsequent exposure to discriminatory practices immigrants face tend to seem innocuous and negligible, the significant psychological repercussion may not be immediately noticeable. After all, looking “perfect,” working hard, and trying not to impinge upon others by being self-sufficient can be laudable qualities, not deplorable ones. But the problem is that the mainstream American society promotes and glorifies these as specifically praiseworthy Asian or Asian-American virtues in order to deflect attention from the structural defect of society that produces the conditions of inequality and poverty for its minorities, and to

stifle their demand for social justice by showcasing the “success story” of a few selected individuals or groups. William Peterson, for example, took such a stance in his article “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” published in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1966. Focusing on the success of Nisei and attributing their success to education, frugality, good work ethics, and the intact family structure in which the respect for authority is strongly preserved, he presented a conservative and optimistic view of ethnic America, implying that anything is possible if the individual is willing to work hard enough.<sup>304</sup>

As those who have studied the issue of diaspora and its psychic impact show, however, the truth is that oftentimes a strenuous task of physical survival that consumes the first generation drives the emotional and psychological issues underground, whereas the second generation has to work through these more complex issues transferred to them and suffers the consequences of their parents’ pathological development.<sup>305</sup> In Henry’s case, despite his outburst against the suppressive facade of his parents’ propriety and perfection, he himself becomes an “impeccable mate” (161) and “the obedient, soft-spoken son” (202), not to mention all the “good names” at work accrued to him because of the “textbook examples” (171) of his daily register. In addition, his speech is again “perfect” according to the professional assessment of his wife, who happens to be a speech therapist and acquires the nickname “the English lady.” But the irony is that notwithstanding all these outward achievements, his life, like his profession, turns out to be more a matter of impersonation. With a troubled marriage, the sudden death of his son, the suppressed negative feelings toward his parents, and an unrelenting guilt over the acts of betrayal he has been committing due to the nature of his work, he faces serious

interpersonal crises on almost all fronts of his life. “*Who, my young friend, have you been all your life?*” (205), astutely asks Dr. Luzan in his psychoanalytic session with Henry, as if he sees through Henry’s controlled mask of the “amenable Asian face” (89). By divulging the hidden pains and struggle behind the carefully managed appearances of success and perfection of an Asian-American family that buys into the narrative of “American dream,” Lee’s novel eloquently portrays the heavy burden of unacknowledged grief, loss, and abjection that the first generation immigrants endure and transfer onto their children.

Henry’s father is a fallen patriarch who finds himself symbolically castrated in America, for he exists in a liminal state, suspended between the two stages of *de jure* admission to America and *de facto* acceptance by it. Consequently, security becomes the theme of his life, making him pursue it in the most tangible and evident form: material comfort and success. Henry thus remarks, “I thought his life was all about money” (49). “What he disliked or feared most was uncertainty” (59), Henry observes, recollecting his father’s way of “leaving absolutely nothing to luck or chance or someone else” and his indomitable drive to accumulate wealth with his “ability to make [money] almost at will” (49). Rigidly approaching life with “a determined set of procedures” and “certain rules of engagement” (47) and obsessively controlling all aspects of his life, including his innermost feelings, Henry’s father offsets the gnawing sense of insecurity he feels in an adopted land and maintains his authority as the head of family. Furthermore, he builds up his family as a bulwark against the outside world, dedicating himself to “a rigid matter of family” (6) that becomes his life, and seeking “the basic comfort in this familial precision, where the relation abides no argument, no questions, or quarrel” (7).

Unfortunately, Henry, who inherits the ontological insecurity of his father and the deeply ingrained anxiety about his shaky status in society, is not immune from his father's behavior, either. Despite his irritation and resentment toward his father's overly rigid way of life and excessive need for order and control, Henry also learns from his father how to manage anxiety and feelings of insecurity and faithfully sticks to the coping strategy of precision, caution, and self-control. As he himself admits, he is "the most prodigal and mundane of the historians" (18). He exhibits a tremendous meticulousness in taking care of even the most minute and trivial daily task. In doing so, he often deflects and manages negative emotions he feels in an anxiety-provoking situation. For instance, when Lelia, on her trip to Italy right before their separation, leaves him a note, he responds to it in a very unusually way. Lelia's note is a highly cynical and incisive list of who he is: "You are surreptitious, B+ student of life, . . . illegal alien, emotional alien, . . . Yellow peril: neo-American, . . . papa's boy, . . . stranger, follower, traitor, spy" (5). When he finds this note, Henry oddly makes three copies and puts them aside for different purposes: One in his wallet as a way of "personal asterisk . . . in case of accidental death," another saved for a future use against Lelia in case he "wanted pity or else needed some easy ammunition," and the final copy "sealed in an envelope and mailed" to himself to "historicize" (4). Interestingly, he also gets rid of the original, under the pretext that he prefers "versions of things, copies that are so important" (4).

The way Henry documents and keeps close to him all photocopies of Lelia's list, which is a biting reminder of his failure as a husband, may seem perverse and even masochistic. But by destroying the original and replacing it with the copies he has made to use for his own purposes, he tames, obliterates, and distances himself from the stinging

negativity of Lelia's note. Besides, the methodical calculation prevents his emotion from going haywire and helps him stay in control by turning an obvious attack on his ego into occasions to protect himself from any possible future disaster or interpersonal altercation and to reinforce the illusion of self-importance via official documentation. On the other hand, what is also interesting about the cautious way in which he makes and treats the duplicates of Lelia's note is that it seems to evoke the image of anxious immigrants warily collecting and guarding the legal documents they need to prove their identity and the legitimacy of their presence in a new country. If considered in the context of Asian-American immigrant history and the Asian-Americans' unremitting struggle against the alienating practices against them, Lee's characterization of Henry as an obsessive historian of his own life story, and a worrier plotting a scheme to circumvent a future attack or challenge resonates with profound implications. Lee uses dark humor to describe Henry's underhanded attacks and survival tactics. By using Henry as the narrator of the story and making him reveal his troubled, anxiety-ridden inner world, which is a symptom of his "colonized" consciousness, Lee portrays to the reader the dark, ominous world the minority subject is compelled to inhabit.

While living with constant vigilance may protect the immigrant family from any hazard, it also comes with a heavy price. Living with one's guard up may provide a sense of safety, but it also locks other people out. In Lee's novel, the rift among family members starts to show in conjunction with Henry's father's excessive need to control his entire life and operate with a certain prescribed notion of honor and duty befitting a "Confucian of high order" (6) within his family. His attempt backfires, for it stifles any spontaneous display of emotions and creates confusion and unnecessary

misunderstandings for young Henry. Born in America and educated in an American way, Henry is acutely aware of his parents' differences from the majority of Americans and cannot understand their unique way of relating to each other or to him. After seeing his white friends' interaction with their parents, he wishes he could be "familiar and friendly" (221) with his parents like them. Young Henry is not in tune with nor does he appreciate traditional Korean culture, in which a subtle empathic communication of feelings is more common than a direct open communication and public display of affections. Especially in regard to his father's extreme taciturnity and appearance of emotional callousness, he has no clue until much later that they might be his father's way of coping with the psychic burden that the harsh reality of diasporic life has placed upon him. Communicating the frustration he felt with his parents to Lelia, Henry confesses, "I wanted just once for my mother and father to relax a little bit with me. Not treat me so much like a *son*, like a figure in a long line of figures. They treated each other like that, too. Like it was their duty and not their love" (221).

For Henry, feeling deprived of parental love becomes a sore spot in his life, especially after his mother dies of cancer when he is only ten. If the tension between the father and the son in the traditional Oedipal drama revolves around the mother, the Oedipal drama in Henry's household unfolds differently with the death of Henry's mother. The demise, rather than the presence, of the common object of their affection, drives a wedge between Henry and his father. It sparks from Henry a strong ambivalence toward his father that turns into something like an approximation of the Oedipal hostility and hatred that the son harbors toward his formidable rival.

After his wife's death, Henry's father's adaptive habit of controlling and suppressing losses, grief, and sorrow does not relax; rather, it intensifies, causing Henry to doubt whether "he ever wept for her" (58) and increasing his resentment toward him. In a poignant scene after the death of Henry's mother that describes the subdued but painfully obvious grief both Henry and his father feel but suppress, as if in a peculiar contest to outshine his rival, Henry recalls about his father:

His life didn't seem to change. He seemed instantly recovered. The only noticeable thing was that he would come home much earlier than usual. . . . For dinner we went either to a Chinese place or the Indian one in the next town, and sometimes he drove to the city so we could eat Korean. He settled us into a routine this way, a schedule. . . . I wondered, too, whether he was suffering inside, whether he sometimes cried, as I did, for reasons unknown. I remember how I sat with him in those restaurants, both of us eating without savor, unjoyous, and my wanting to show him that I could be as steely as he, my chin as rigid and unquivering as any of his displays, that I would tolerate no mysteries either, no shadowy wounds or scars of the heart. (59)

Obviously, what they swallow mechanically and with great difficulty is not only unsavory food but also the sorrow of losing an irreplaceable member of the family.

Although Henry's pent-up sorrow stays within, his bitterness toward his father does not. Whether social or personal, unacknowledged and disenfranchised grief, if protracted, is trauma-inducing and brings about unforeseeable dire consequences. After the loss of their common object of affection, Henry and his father do not take any time to console each other by grieving the death of their loved one. Instead, they use a routine they settle into as an emotional crutch in their attempt to avoid the distress caused by the loss of their common love object. Seeking comfort in the regularity and predictability provided by a routine is their way of sublimating the pain and guilt the passing of the beloved stir in them.

Kirby Farrell argues that depending on how people manage their responses, tragic or traumatic events can be a means of creating a bond among them. Furthermore, he also points out that social support and controls often help people tame the pain and horror they experience and deal more effectively with the tragedy that has befallen them.<sup>306</sup> In Henry's case, his pains, although hidden from others' view, stay unhealed because of the lack of proper mourning and emotional support. Additionally, clinical studies also show that not involving young children in the ritual of mourning makes it hard for them to accept reality and sometimes causes them to feel "cheated."<sup>307</sup> This is exactly how Henry feels about his mother's death. He perceives his mother's death as "more a disappearance than a death"(77). Even before her death, people surrounded him, albeit with good intentions, with a protective wall of deception about her sickness. Her frequent absences and outings were totally disguised and explained as casual visits to friends living in town. On top of that, people told him a lie that "her constant weariness and tears were from her concern over [his] mediocre studies" (77), causing him tremendous guilt.

Trauma triggers a unique phenomenon in which the emotions caused by a harrowing incident are short-circuited, because survival value overrides any other considerations such as mourning. For young Henry, not only is the death of his mother itself traumatic, but also the aftermath of the loss is even more painful and hard to deal with because the lack of empathic others and his father's tough way of coping with bereavement make him drive underground all the gamut of emotions the passing of a loved one usually stirs up. As Melanie Klein explains, for the human subject, there exists no pure emotion of love that is unmixed with destructive impulses, for love is a very complex emotion that brings with it a whole array of other simultaneous feelings of guilt,

hate, and the need for reparation. Consequently, as Klein argues by reviewing the developmental process of the human being, the “feelings of guilt and distress . . . become an inherent part of love.”<sup>308</sup>

To pursue Klein’s line of thought further, it is reasonable to speculate that the death of the loved one stirs up even more intense feelings of guilt and distress as well as a sense of abandonment. After Henry’s loss of his mother, since the way to express these troubling emotions is blocked and his love object is dead, he finds an easy way to cope with his painful loss by projecting all his distressing feelings onto his emotionally unavailable father. By blaming his father, Henry absolves himself from the overwhelming guilt triggered by the death of his mother. Consequently, Henry’s parents remain, to use Klein’s term, split “part objects” to him, with the lost mother representing the good and the remaining father the bad. Henry’s resentment toward his father builds up without any release and finally erupts in a sudden emotional outburst one day after his father loses mobility and speech after a stroke. Henry conducts his “berating” of the bed-ridden and speechless father right before his imminent death, “half-intending an emotional torture” (49). The first among the list of the faults Henry hurls at his dying father is, “how he had conducted himself with my mother” (49). Henry’s confrontation, which is the culmination of his long standing resentment toward his father after his mother’s death, testifies to the continuing power of unacknowledged loss and grief. An invisible kernel of trauma lives on without letting up its grip on those who endure their pain silently.

One of the tragic repercussions of trauma is that it causes a repetitive reliving of the painful past in the present. It also determines the pattern of behavior by which people

cope with an overwhelming experience. The specific way in which Henry deals with another painful loss much later after he has his own family illustrates the tenacious power of trauma, which makes Henry recreate the scene of muffled sorrow and evasion of the open sharing of grief. When his son Mitt dies in an accident caused by some innocent children's play, Henry, like his father, suppresses his sorrow so much for so long that it becomes a thorny issue estranging him from his wife. It is clear that Henry's father has bequeathed to Henry the legacy of silent enduring of personal pains. As the death of Henry's mother drove a deep wedge between Henry and his father, so does Mitt's death put Henry's marriage with Lelia in jeopardy. Thus, the curious plotting of Lee's novel gives the impression that the past, like a nightmarish movie, repeats itself with only a slight difference in who plays what role in a modified new scenario. A similar drama of blame, frustration, and bottled up anger ensues. "You did a great job hiding it," comments Lelia, accusing him of being "solemn and dignified" while she became "the mad and the stupid one" or "the crazy white lady in the attic" (117). In Lelia's perception, there is not much difference between Henry and his father; the father is "just a more brutal version" of the son (58). The resemblance between Lelia's frustrated outcry against Henry and Henry's bitter blame against his father is striking. This shows that in a continuing chain of traumatic loss and unacknowledged grief, Henry has become not only a victim, but an active participant.

With the death of Henry's mother, the oedipal drama of young Henry's family further diverges from the typical scenario. The death of Henry's mother leaves an irreparable void in the lives of the bereaved. If the immigrant father is a deposed patriarch whose authority is seriously diminished by a series of new challenges he faces, and if the

son's ambivalent stance toward him is prompted not by an emulative aspiration to be like him and ultimately displace him, but by a desire to distance himself from his father in order to avoid witnessing his social abjection and to chart his own path out of his father's rut of disempowerment, then the presence of the immigrant mother is integral for many reasons for the survival of the family.

It is necessary to approach the oedipal conflicts and struggle of the immigrant family from a perspective that does justice to their social environment, their values, and goals in a new land. For the immigrant family, the pressing concerns of social adjustment and survival tend to override other concerns of the libidinal investment and rivalry within the family. Additionally, the numerous social challenges the immigrant family faces become such an integral part of each family member's life that they change the interaction within the family, putting an additional burden on the immigrant mother.

The Korean mothers in Lee's *Native Speaker*, like Henry's mother and John Kwang's wife May, are self-abnegating martyr figures who live in their husbands' shadow. The literary critics You-me Park and Gayle Wald aptly observe the "hyperprivatized existence" of the female characters in Lee's novel and comment on its ideological implications: "The shadowy figures of Korean American women disrupt Lee's narrative, which mostly concerns itself with the legitimation of a male immigrant subject in the public sphere. Tucked away in the hyperfeminized private sphere sanctioned by both traditional Korean ideals of domestic women and the U. S. belief in Asian-American self-sufficiency . . . these women are denied any meaningful access to the public sphere."<sup>309</sup> It is true that women in Lee's novel, as Park and Wald assert, are endowed with no "interiority" and live extremely private lives away from the spotlight.

Yet the notable lack of a female presence plays a significant role in the unfolding of the overall plot of the novel. The muted existence of Korean-American women, especially immigrant mothers, in Lee's novel is a symptom indicating the lopsidedness and fallibility of Korean-American males' overly zealous pursuit for legitimation and power in American society. The fact that immigrant mothers are not much developed and mostly stay in the background in *Native Speaker* ironically shows how much sacrifice and silent service the hardship of immigrant life exacts from them.

Henry's mother plays an invisible but important role in making the Parks remain a close family. She mediates and ameliorates the inevitable conflict between Henry's father and Henry. Born in America and exposed to the dominant ideology, Henry sometimes openly challenges the authority of his father, whom he sees as an inferior misfit. For example, when his father intimidates and scolds his mother with an "awful stream of nonsensical street talk" he has picked up at work, Henry intervenes in the quarrel between his parents by flaunting his textbook English and outsmarting his father with "complete sentences" and "biggest words (63). But Henry's mother quickly stops him with a whack on his head and puts him in his place by asking, "'Who do you think you are?'" Henry clearly gets her message: "Fair fight or not, she wasn't going to let me dress down my father, not with language, not with anything" (63). Finally, as in many immigrant families, Henry's mother also acts as a bearer of the traditional culture of their homeland. By preserving the cultural mores of the motherland, she helps them remain a cohesive family unit and maintain a sense of continuity and connection with their native culture and past, which are easily forgotten or destroyed because the assimilative logic of the American national identity encourages an amnesiac orientation toward the past and

ethnic differences. The role of Henry's mother Lee portrays is in keeping with the long tradition of immigrant literature in which the ethnic food prepared by the mother symbolizes her protective love, the cohesiveness of the family, and the intactness of cultural heritage.

Understandably, Lee thus portrays in *Native Speaker* the painful void the death of Henry's mother has left in the fabric of the family through the images and episodes associated with Korean food. In a restaurant he and his father stoically swallow the unsavory food prepared and presented to them without motherly care and love. There and then, Henry for the first time feels the acute pain of losing his mother and senses a widening emotional gap between him and his father. Again, when his father brings "Ah-juh-ma," an anonymous Korean woman, to take care of Henry and keep the house, it is the smell of his mother's Korean dish that Ah-juh-ma now prepares that brings such a pang of sorrow to Henry and provokes from him a strong hostile emotional outburst against the surrogate mother figure whom he simply calls "the woman." In angry outburst, Henry rejects the food Ah-juh-ma has prepared and slams the door behind him, and "after that," Henry recalls, "we didn't bother much each other" (78).

Henry's rejection of Ah-juh-ma's food symbolizes a rejection of any possible tie that might be forged between them. It is a defiant unspoken statement that no one can replace his mother and that the irreparable loss will remain just as it is. It also foreshadows how Ah-juh-ma will remain to him a total non-entity or merely functional unknown figure who is looked down upon. Henry's friends call her "Aunt scallion" (65) and both Henry and his friends spy on her to watch her "alien" behavior. For young Henry, the woman is "some kind of zombie" (65). Furthermore, Henry despises the

Koreanness Ah-juh-ma embodies. With the loving touch of his mother lost forever, the Koreanness embodied by Ah-juh-ma's unrefined manner or by his father's immigrant principle of fortitude and rigid precision is only a source of embarrassment or resentment. It sparks from him an assimilative desire to distance himself from his ancestral background. Years later, Henry marries out of his ethnic community by choosing Lelia, "an average white girl with no mystery" (10). He then has to admit to his wife that he does not even know the name of Ah-juh-ma, who has devoted twenty years of her life to taking care of him and his father. When Lelia gets visibly upset and bewildered by his "stunning ignorance" (68), he tersely sums up his feelings about Ah-juh-ma: "'She's always been a mystery to me'" (72).

In short, the death of Henry's mother is a critical turning point that signals the breakup of closely knit family ties and Henry's moving away from his Korean family and ancestry. In Henry's family the much needed presence of the mother is sorely missing, and this missing presence also accelerates Henry's estrangement from his father, foregrounding the conflict and tension between the son and the father. As a result, when Henry emerges from his formative years, his mother is already dead and his father exists only as what Christopher Bollas would call an object of "loving hate." In a situation of "loving hate," Bollas explains, "an individual preserves a relationship by sustaining a passionate negative cathexis of it" and hate is the individual's way to "act out an unconscious form of love."<sup>310</sup> Hating his father and distancing himself from his Koreanness is an option Henry chooses in order to resolve the deeply ingrained ambivalence he feels toward his father, whom he sees as a fallen but tyrannical patriarch (hence his "low master").

### **The Model Minority and the Aborted “Family Romance”**

Henry’s moving away from his biological father in *Native Speaker* coincides with his moving toward the symbolic paternal force or figures who will help his initiation into the national narrative of citizenship as a minority male subject. In a stark contrast to the unusual absence of female characters, Lee’s novel is full of many male characters who serve as Henry’s father figures. In characters such as Jack, his coworker; Stew, his father-in-law; and John Kwang, his prime subject of work, Henry sees the aspects that he wishes to see in his own father. But most importantly, the hegemonic social power and its disciplinary national narrative of citizenship become a potent symbol of the paternal force toward which he gradually gravitates during the process of his socialization as a minority subject.

Lisa Lowe sees this socializing move of the minority male subject toward the sphere of the national symbolic as another type of oedipalization in that it involves the male subject’s identification with the paternal state, which necessarily means accepting “the terms of this identification” that require suppressing and excising his racial, cultural, and other material differences that exceed the generic notion of the nationalist subject. Consequently, Lowe argues, for minorities, their subject formation is based upon a repudiation of their ties to the “feminized and racialized ‘motherland.’”<sup>311</sup> By becoming a docile son to the paternal state or his potent adopted parent, Henry sacrifices his ties to the feminized and hence disempowered birth father. But just like the feistiness of Henry’s father, who struggles to survive after several strokes, Henry’s Koreanness and ancestry that are handed down by his father are not easy to deny or repudiate despite his assimilative efforts.

Lee's novel presents a powerful last image of Henry's father who, when he was found dead, "was still gripping the knob of the brass bedposts, which he had bent at the joint all the way down to four o'clock" (48). Like the lingering image of the dead father, the haunting ethnic and cultural legacy, even if one succeeds in suppressing it temporarily, does not easily fade. As Freud shows in *Moses and Monotheism* through his hypothesized reconstruction of a Jewish history of migration and Jews' patricide of their founding father Moses, in particular, it seems that crossing a cultural or ethnic border, coming into contact with other groups of people, and establishing a new social order often involve acts of violence, sacrifice, and displacement committed by the son or descendants against, to use Freud's term, the primal father. Yet the son's dream of a radical rebirth, which is built upon a violent site of symbolic patricide and a denial of the past and history, never succeeds completely and comes with a costly price of guilt. *Native Speaker* indeed is a narrative about Henry's ready acceptance and a dutiful performance of his role of an "obedient, soft-spoken son" (202) of America and about those invisible social forces that dictate this assimilative course of his life. But the novel also painstakingly delineates the gradual demise of Henry's great romance with America and his assimilative dream by prying open the tightly sealed lid of denial and repression supporting his dream and making him confront his own "ugly immigrant's truth" (319).

In his search for a legitimate identity in the sphere of the national symbolic, Henry embraces the readily available myths that seem to secure and sanction his place in the white-dominant mainstream society: the myth of the "model minority," which is coupled with and strengthened by another American cultic belief in the "self-made man." In embracing this myth, Henry puts his ancestry behind, which he regards as too heavy a

burden to carry around, and spins his own scenarios of the ideal American family, both at the personal and symbolic levels. “The processes through which the marked Asian American male subject is interpellated and stitched into the national fabric,” David Eng points out, “are sustained through the register of an imaginary whose force of seduction and lure of fantasy create a fiction of identification as seamless equivalence.”<sup>312</sup> By aligning himself with the paternal state and accepting its ideological stance toward minorities, he is reborn as a good, trusted son of America, offering his willing service to its hegemonic group, whoever they might be.

Henry’s assimilative moves take place on several levels. First, he joins Dennis’s firm that sells its ethnic coverage to the powerful and influential clients who want to control and punish the minority ethnic subjects within the State who work against their interests. It is significant to note that the dominant mode of the firm is, as Henry tersely puts it, “always to resist history, at least our own” (28). In order to become good spies working for the firm, the ethnic subjects have to put aside their loyalty to their own communities and their roots. Not surprisingly, the firm endorses and reinforces Henry’s belief that “I could be anyone, perhaps several anyones at once” (127). His job, espionage, even demands a constant metamorphosis and impersonation. On the personal level, he becomes a devoted husband when he marries Lelia, a white woman from old WASP stock. She is a conduit for his self-empowerment, or, to use Sheung-mei Ma’s term, an “Occidental Madame Butterfly” sought after by the disadvantaged to “fulfill the need for security and power.”<sup>313</sup> Finally, he is a loving father. But out of the “assimilist sentiment” backing up his “half-blind romance with the land,” he harbors an earnest but questionable wish that his biracial son “would grow up with a singular sense of his world,

a life univocal” because he believes that it will provide his son with “the authority and confidence that his broad half-yellow face could not” (267).

What compels Henry to create an intricately crafted life-narrative is not much different from a child’s imaginative longing for a perfect family of a noble origin, which Freud eloquently expounds in “Family Romances.”<sup>314</sup> As the child matures and grows out of his belief in the absolute power of the parents, Freud explains, he starts to view his parents realistically and criticizes them in comparison with other parents. In the meantime, he also develops phantasies of a particular type in which he is born of different parents of a well-endowed family but somehow becomes a step-child or an adopted child in the current lowly household. The core of this imaginative dreaming consists of “getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who . . . are of higher social standing.”<sup>315</sup> Many of the assimilative moves Henry makes in *Native Speaker* are similar to the child’s imaginative activities propelled by his desire to replace the real parents of a humble origin with others with more power and prestige. In both cases, elements of denigration and glorification coexist, producing a powerfully seductive phantasy of an identity affiliated with the big Other that will rescue one from feelings of helplessness and belittlement.

Although Lee maintains a sympathetic touch toward most of the main characters, his portrait of Henry, especially his embrace of the identity dictated by the mainstream society’s stereotypical notion about an Asian-American male, is sometimes quite satirically cynical. Henry is a more ominous version of the model minority of the 1960s, resurrected and refurbished in a milieu of globalization and multiculturalism. The intelligence agency Henry works for is a private firm not affiliated with any government

bureau and traffics in gathering information about various ethnic subjects living in America for its various clients from all over the world. As Crystal Parikh points out, this reflects the general socio-political climate of the post-cold war era and its increased demand for minority ethnic informants who can work independently without being bound by the nationalistic political agenda.<sup>316</sup> Despite the lack of the obvious nationalist rhetoric that promoted the model minority discourse to curb the upsurge of civil rights movements in the 1960s, Henry revives and embodies the mythic image of the model minority with the major characteristics intact.

An “invisible underling” (202) as he identifies himself, or “B+ student of life” (5) as his wife summarily labels him, Henry maintains a semblance of the “good enough” stature in both his private and occupational dealings. Even in his work place, he is extolled for his “textbook examples of . . . workday narrative” and even gets ridiculed by being called “Teacher’s pet” and “Korean geek” (171) by his peers in a half-joking way. By employing the stereotypical image of the Asian as a good student, Lee clearly pokes fun at the reductive American rhetoric about Asians that skews and tames the cultural others’ politeness into docility, as well as at some Asian-Americans’ self-demeaning acceptance of others’ authority, which often occurs during the process of assimilation. But Henry’s “good enough” self is only a defensive facade, or, to put it in Winnicott’s term, a “false self” in the sense that an introjection of the imposed will and desire of others determines the course of self-development.<sup>317</sup>

Henry’s “good enough self” is indicative of his tacit acceptance of and docile response to a social interpellation that exacts a sacrifice and self-abnegation of minorities who are conditioned to accept their subjection in their process of becoming social

subjects. As Louis Althusser expounds the ominous power of ideology, “The individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject . . . in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection. . . There are no subjects except by and for their subjection*” (italics from the original).<sup>318</sup>

Thus, Henry’s dilemma cannot be dissociated from his subject status in a society where minorities’ basic need for a sense of safety and acceptance, when unmet, becomes an obsession that perpetuates the self-sabotaging acceptance of their own subjugation. As long as the ongoing subjugation and the search for social recognition from the Other remain the condition and the theme of his life, the suturing of his identity into the national symbolic happens at a costly price of self-betrayal and self-sacrifice.

Henry’s self-portrayal succinctly sums up his role in an American society as a model minority: “I am an amiable man, I can be most personable . . . and whatever I possess in this life is more or less the result of a talent I have for making you feel good about yourself when you are with me. . . . I am hardly seen” (7). For this reason, the comment, “I have only known proximity” (131), which Henry makes on the nature of his relationship with his Caucasian wife, whom he half-jokingly calls “the lengthy Anglican goddess” (15), poignantly echoes both the general feelings of insecurity and inadequacy he feels as an Asian-American in a white-dominated society, and a simultaneous longing for a genuine contact with others across divisive racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers. The difficulty Henry faces in his constrained relationships with Lelia results not only from the obvious cause, i. e. the death of their son and the muffled grieving following the loss, but also from the oppressive social force that he internalizes and uses as a sublimating art of “proximity” in his personal relationships. “It was nearness and not touch that had always

compelled me. I have only known proximity,” Henry confesses (130). Proximity is an ontological marker of his status in America as an ethnic minority subject.

Henry’s profession of espionage symbolically illustrates the dilemma of the model minority or a docile inside-outsider whose admittance to a mainstream society is often predicated upon the performative manipulation/exploitation of his interstitial minority subject position, which underpins the privilege and rights of the majority. Lee’s characterization of Henry is particularly interesting, because of its simultaneous invocation of the seemingly incompatible characteristics often attributed to Asians. In critiquing Anglo-American literature for its biased portrayal of Asians, Elaine Kim has pointed out that it typically splits the stereotypical image of Asian Americans into the “good” ones, loyal sidekicks and amiable servants, for example, and the “bad” ones or “brutal hordes and sinister villains.”<sup>319</sup> Lee integrates these two split images of Asian-Americans into one in Henry, who is a very complex mixture of both these “good” and “bad” stereotypical images of Asians, despite his good surface appearance of the model minority. Interpellated as a social abject in the Althusserian sense, Henry lives in a dismal inner vacuum caused by the lack of the idealizing and mirroring selfobjects, the existence and support of which, according to Kohut, are critically important for psychological survival and health. As a result, Henry internalizes the hegemonic racial and cultural ideology and serves mainstream American society by performing the art of duplicity and proximity as a cultural mole. However, Henry’s docility and servitude cannot override the undertone evoked by the theme of a sinister and treacherous Asian villain in popular formula fiction, which has produced many well-known characters like Sax Rohmer’s Dr.

Fu Manchu, whom Robert G. Lee calls “the archetype of the sado-masochistic Asian male character in American popular culture narrative of the twentieth century.”<sup>320</sup>

Overall, Henry’s undercover activities as an ethnic spy, as well as his difficulty in establishing and maintaining an intimate relationship with his family members, symptomatically reflects his plight as an interstitial Asian-American subject. Always on the artificially created border between “us” and “them,” interstitial Asian-American subjects are expected or dictated to become “good enough” for the acceptance and approval by others by effacing themselves to the point of invisibility in order to serve them. Commenting on Lee’s deliberate utilization of the spy novel format, Tina Chen observes that Lee’s novel modifies the formula fiction in such a way that a spy’s “racially determined invisibility” connotes “not license but a debilitating erasure of self and power.”<sup>321</sup> *Native Speaker* is a unique novel that explores and divulges what lies behind the serene and perfect mask Asian-Americans don to protect themselves and survive as “minor” subjects: layers of trauma, both social and personal, that are not healed and mourned for while Asian-Americans silently endure and cope with their hardships in a hostile and discriminatory environment. As a symptom of the suppressed, but not forgotten trauma, the invisible, well-hidden pains in Lee’s novel exist in parallel with the invisibility characterizing Asian-Americans’ presence as American citizens.

The accidental death of Henry’s son Mitt is a traumatic incident that marks a crushing point of the American family romance that Henry dreams of creating on his own terms. A biracial child with his form “already so beautifully jumbled and subversive and historic” (103) even at an early age, Mitt embodies a harmonious integration of the two different worlds of Henry and Lelia. Besides, Mitt finally brings to Henry what he so

terribly missed while he grew up under his parents' silent code of honor and devotion. His immigrant parents' love was an anxious love which was heavily weighed and toned down by a sense of responsibility and the hardships of the immigrant life. "We're difficult people," comments Henry to Lelia, recalling his family, especially his mother. And he adds, "She treated it [motherhood] like a job. She wasn't what you'd call friendly" (221). By starting his own family with Lelia, a bearer of cultural standards in many ways, and by having Mitt, Henry materializes his old wish to have a "normal" family that expresses its affection freely. He feels that despite occasional fights with Lelia, he can mostly bask in the love unconstrained by the burden of guilt, responsibility, and hierarchically arranged obligations and devotion. Gazing at Mitt comfortably tucked in Lelia's warm coat and kissed by her, Henry wonders: "If I had tasted a family hunger all my life . . . this should be my daily bread. What else is there to behold?" (109).

Mitt's tragic death at the age of seven, however, takes away the essential "daily bread" on which Henry wants to live. Consequently, Henry and Lelia's marriage starts to fall apart after their son dies, and the signs of the disintegrating marriage are painfully visible everywhere. Even the spacious loft they rent becomes intolerably large and barren, so that it becomes a "little city with naturally separate habitats" for Henry and Lelia; the "expanse and room" becomes an "easy excuse for not seeing one another" (24). The sad portrait of this married couples' drifting away from each other inside their own home painfully reminds one of the missing presence of their son, who used magically to make their apartment, which was "a surprisingly dysfunctional space" with an "inappropriate temperature," livable and even enjoyable (24).

Mitt's passing has wide, unforeseeable repercussions that cannot be contained within his immediate family, and other catastrophes ensue from it. In many ways, Mitt's death is similar to that of Henry's mother in terms of its catastrophic effects on the bereaved, for in both cases, the death of a family member rips apart family unity. The only difference is that Henry's father does not survive the loss this time, for he dies shortly after the tragic accident that has killed his grandson. It is highly possible that Mitt's death is at least remotely related to the death of Henry's father. Although Henry's father dies of a massive stroke, the short intervening time, i.e. a year and a half, between the two deaths seems to suggest the possibility. Before the tragedy, Mitt's integrating presence brings together different generations of the Park family and mends the rift between Henry and his father. Henry brings his family to his father every summer in order to provide Mitt with a better environment and to protect him from the heat and danger of the New York City. The fact that Mitt dies during the annual visit to his grandfather's suburban home, presumed to be a safe haven, adds an ironic twist to the tragedy.

When alive, Mitt acts as a redeeming force of love that ameliorates the strain in the relationship between Henry and his father. The strong link between the grandfather and the grandson in a way serves to compensate for a long history of disappointment, frustration, and misunderstanding that has transpired between the father and the son. The bond of love between Mitt and his grandfather is clear and strong, unlike that between Henry and his father, which is riddled with doubt, resentment, and shame. Henry's father dotes on Mitt and cares for him with a fierce protective love, which he did not dare to display while he raised his own son. For Henry, seeing this side of his father is like

finally retrieving a missing puzzle of his boyhood, the absence of which has pained him a great deal. A particular episode exemplifies this point. One day Mitt comes home with soiled clothes after being bullied by neighborhood white boys. This is not a totally new mishap to Henry's father, though, for his own son was subjected to the same bullying practice in the past. But Henry's father reacts to the incident in a totally different way. Unlike the previous case, where he did not utter even a word of complaint against his white neighbors, this time he suddenly bursts into fury and vigorously protests on behalf of his grandson, "chopping the air with his worn fingers, cursing red-faced like a cheated peasant" in his "throaty mother tongue" (104), and finally scares into tears a white boy who bullied Mitt.

Such an explosive outburst surprises Henry, who witnesses the dramatic scene, but it also gives him a great deal of vicarious satisfaction, for it belatedly shows from his father what he longed to see as a boy: an undisputable sign of fierce love that is not fettered by the self-conscious consideration of others' opinion or judgment. Thus, he just lets "his old man yell this one bloody murder, if only for Mitt" (104). Henry's restored faith in his father is only short-lived, however. The tenuously rebuilt bond between Henry and his father is broken, for as was the case with his wife's death, Henry's father again exhibits "amazing properties of emotional recovery" (217) from his grandson's death, which Henry misunderstands again as callousness and a lack of caring. In short, Mitt's death shatters the chance of the ultimate reconciliation between Henry and his father by further deepening Henry's resentment toward him. Mitt's death is a traumatic incident that pushes Henry and his father back to the old rut of misunderstanding and bitterness. After enduring a vehement verbal attack from Henry, who "ticked through the whole long

register of [his] disaffections” (49) while his father lies helpless and paralyzed from a stroke, Henry’s father dies a lonely death just a week later. Trauma, in essence, is timeless and causes people to unwittingly relive their painful past. Mitt’s death is not an exception. A vicious cycle of love and guilt between the son and the father perpetuates itself as a symptom of trauma.

For Henry and Lelia, Mitt’s death is particularly difficult to accept, because of the sheer absurdity that caused the tragedy and its dismal symbolic implications. One of the most pernicious and distinctive aspects of trauma is that it traps its victims in the inescapable mire of grief because the traumatic pain usually deprives them of the means to translate it into a sublimated, socially sanctified form of mourning. Additionally, like any other happenings in the human world, catastrophic incidents also require an interpretation. But the common denominator among different types of traumatic incidents is the absolute nonexistence of any kind of meaning that people can find to justify or attenuate their loss or pain. Trauma pushes people out of the normal framework of meaning that supports their lives. Such is the case with Mitt’s death.

Mitt’s death is a traumatic incident that has significant symbolic implications for the future of the ethnic American and for Henry’s search for his place in America.<sup>322</sup> Mitt is killed in a children’s game. Suffocated at the bottom of a “stupid dog pile” of white boys, Mitt, a cherished fructifying product of Henry’s American family romance, dies a meaningless, cruelly nonsensical death. The same white Westchester boys, who used to throw racial slurs at Mitt and put dirt in his mouth, crush him to death in their “innocent” play. The crushing weight of white kids is fraught with ominous symbolic meanings. Looking back upon her son’s death, Lelia remarks, “Maybe the world wasn’t ready for

him” (129). The “stupid dog pile” that kills Mitt hints at what he would have to face ultimately if he were alive and grew up in a society that pushes its minorities to the bottom of its social ladder and mistreats them with prejudice and discrimination.

On a personal level, the absurd death of their son also means to Henry and Lelia a parental failure to protect their child that causes them an agonizing sense of guilt and grief. Parental grief, as clinical studies show, is closely related to survivor’s guilt and parents’ perceived failure in sheltering their children from danger.<sup>323</sup> Mitt’s death crystallizes into a hardened knot of trauma for Henry’s and Lelia. Consequently, as a symptom of the unrelenting parental guilt and grief, the heavy weight that kills Mitt haunts them, riveting them in the very painful moments of their son’s death and causing them to reenact the tragic scene in their grief. In a doleful scene of lovemaking in which they desperately try to appease the pain that is still raw quite some time after the tragedy, Henry and Lelia become their lost son in a sad ritual.

During certain nights, I pulled a half-sleeping Lelia back onto my body, right onto my chest, and breathed as barely as I could. . . . She knew what to do, what to do me, that I was Mitt, that then she was Mitt, our pile of two as heavy as the balance of all those boys who had now grown up. We nearly pressed each other to death, our swollen lips and eyes, wishing upon ourselves the fall of tears, that great free anger, that obese heft of melancholy. . . . In the bed, in the space between us, it was about the sad way of all flesh, alive or dead or caught in between, it was about what must happen between people who lose forever the truest moment of their union. Flesh, the pressure, the rhymes of gasps. This was all we could find in each other, this novel language of our life. (106)

The gripping force of traumatic pain is obvious in the couple’s terribly lonesome and sad lovemaking, which turns into a suffocating scene of death where each parent becomes the dying child who lies crushed by the pressure of thrashing bodies among gasping sounds. As if replaying the scene of Mitt’s death in slow motion, Henry and

Lelia relive the tragic moments with their “flesh, the pressure, the rhymes of gasps,” which becomes “the novel language” of Henry and Lelia’s life and all they can find in each other (107). The sad ritualistic lovemaking is the couple’s way of reconnecting with their dead son and commemorating his last dying moments, which Henry often imagines: “Reside, if you can, in the last place of the dead. . . . A crush. You pale little boys are crushing him your adoring mob of hands and feet, your necks and hands . . . Too thick anyway to breathe. How pale his face, his chest. Blanket his eyes. Listen, now. You can hear the attempt of his breath, that unlost voice, calling us from the bottom of the world” (107).

The bereaved’s identification with the dead is not a rare phenomenon, though, especially in the context of a traumatic loss. According to David Aberbach, mourners often identify with their beloved who passed away, “sometimes even going so far as to adopt his characteristics or the symptoms which lead to his death.”<sup>324</sup> Freud also comments on the griever’s identification with the dead in “Mourning and Melancholia.” As Freud explains, melancholia is different from normal mourning, for unlike the normal grieving process of mourning in which the pain fades away as the griever accepts and comes to terms with the loss, in cases of melancholia, the grieving process is almost interminably protracted and the griever cannot withdraw the cathexis from the lost object. The melancholic finally identifies with the dead love object, causing the “shadow of the object” to “fall” upon his or her ego, which often leads to a distorted object relations with the lost object in which the melancholic stages a severe self-torment.<sup>325</sup>

Similarly, the dark shadow of Mitt’s death falls on Henry and Lelia heavily. Reenacting the death scene of their child together, they partake in the fatal ordeal Mitt

endured alone and alleviate their survivor guilt by punishing themselves. Furthermore, in the process, they also share their pain by commemorating the demise of the “truest moment of their union” (107) in acts, not in words, because, like other traumatic incidents, the tragedy that befell them defies symbolization and robs them of the means to articulate their agonizing sorrow. As a Korean saying goes, “When their children die, parents bury them in their heart.” Thus, their own “obese heft of melancholy” hangs over Henry and Lelia during their sad lovemaking as a reminder of the abiding presence of their traumatic loss, which they can grieve only via a stultified bodily language.

If Mitt’s death brutally shatters Henry’s assimilationist, private dream of living out the perfect American family romance on a personal level, the debacle of John Kwang’s political campaign that leads to his scandalous public exit from the political arena annihilates another version of Henry’s family romance, the one he dreams of on a public, political scale. John Kwang in many ways is the ideal father that Henry wishes to have. As Henry the spy infiltrates Kwang’s political circle as a disguised volunteer worker and gets more heavily involved in his campaign, his adoration for this powerful political figure, whom many regard as a strong mayoral candidate, grows, and he cannot help comparing his father with Kwang. Although both are Korean immigrants who started life in America from a humble beginning, what differentiates them and also appeals to Henry the most is the fact that Kwang made a “crucial leap” of character by embracing his adopted country and learning its language and comes to “think of America as a part of him” (211).

The vast difference between his father and Kwang is painfully clear to Henry. In his eyes, his father was “nothing if not a provider and a bulwark” (136) whose “five

stores defined the outer limit of his ambition” (183). Henry sums up his father’s life by tersely commenting, “My father simply did his job. Better than most, perhaps” (183). In contrast, his admiration for Kwang is obvious. Expressing his infatuation with Kwang, Henry observes, “Before I knew of him, I have never even conceived of someone like him. A Korean man, of his age, as part of the vernacular. Not just a respectable grocer or dry cleaner or doctor, but a large public figure who was willing to speak and act outside the tight sphere of his family”(139). The difference stands out when it comes to how they deal with members of other ethnic groups, too. For example, Henry’s father “turned to stones” (185) with blacks, perceiving “a black face” only as “inconvenience or trouble, or the threat of death” (186). But Kwang emphatically stresses in a public speech and urges Korean-Americans to commiserate with the historic pain and sorrow of African-Americans. He mediates in the frequently erupting disputes between Korean immigrant merchants and blacks. ““John’s a genuine peacemaker”” (93), remarks a member of his campaign staff in complimenting him for building a coalition between Korean-Americans and blacks in a highly volatile situation.

Kwang builds his political base among a wide variety of multiethnic groups, including newly arrived immigrants, and aspires to build a big, harmonious, panethnic family. His unique concept of family is at the root of his political vision, and it becomes a true driving force propelling him into the political spotlight in the New York City, which is one of the most diversely populated metropolises in the United States. Henry quickly notices Kwang’s unique approach to the institution of family:

I want to say that he was a family man, that being Korean and old-fashioned made him cherish and honor the institution, that his family was the basic unit of wealth in his life, everything paling and tarnished before it. But then I would be speaking

only half of the truth, and the most accessible half at that, that part that had the least to do with him. . . . he loved the pure idea of family as well, which in its most elemental version must have nothing to do with blood. It was how he saw all of us, and they by extension all those parts of Queens that he was now calling his. (146)

Since Kwang's "pure idea of family" transcends the constrictive boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, and ties of blood, his political campaign becomes a polyglot embracement and celebration of diversity. Furthermore, he organizes a modified version of the *ggeh*, a Korean money club that works by pooling capital from its members and handing it over to one member on a rotating regular basis until everyone has a turn, in order to sponsor his campaign funding and help people from his electorate who need financial aid. And he includes in his *ggeh* everyone willing to participate, regardless of his or her ethnic, financial, or even legal status as a citizen. The shady management of the *ggeh* and the participation of many illegal immigrants ultimately lead to Kwang's political demise, because when Henry, disillusioned with Kwang later, provides Dennis with the list of members of the *ggeh*, the government targets and investigates Kwang's campaign. Yet until Kwang loses his grip on his political and personal life by forsaking his principles and engaging in morally reprehensible activities, his charisma attracts many followers. Thus, feeling as if they were "his guerrillas" and delivering the message "Kwang is like you. You will be an American" in "ten different languages" (143), volunteer workers dedicate themselves to promoting Kwang's cause, and they indeed become a tightly knit family. This "messianic" mood in the office affects Henry, too, despite his hidden agenda of spying on Kwang. In Kwang, Henry finally finds an ideal role model whom he can look up to and emulate in his assimilative endeavor to be a part of the great American family. He has finally found a symbolic paternal figure in Kwang.

The relationship between Henry and Kwang quickly develops into a “kind of romance” (139), and both see each other in an ideal light. Although some might view their relationship as colored by homoeroticism, Henry relates to Kwang more as an ideal paternal figure. As Henry later admits, “a question of imagination” or “what I was able to see,” explains why he finds Kwang such an “arresting” figure (139). Henry, in his growing adoration for Kwang, is like the children in Freud’s “Family Romances.” The family romance children spin is also a phantasy of rescue. The children, as Freud analyzes, often become engrossed in the phantasy in which they are reborn as the anointed heirs of ideal parents of noble origin. Henry’s growing infatuation with John Kwang is comparable to the children’s powerful wishful longing for ideal parents, whom they have conjured up to rescue themselves from the parentage that they find lacking or disappointing and hence want to dissociate from.

The “ready connection” (138) Henry already has as a Korean-American endears him to Kwang, who rescues him from a plaguing feeling of doubt and insecurity he feels as a “minor” subject in America. Lee foreshadows the growing affinity between these characters early in his novel. Even before he gets to know Kwang personally, Henry is asked to pose as Kwang when his staff prepares for a choreographed rehearsal of his on-street political meetings. To Henry, Kwang becomes a powerful paternal figure who serves both as what Kohut would call an “idealizing selfobject” and a “mirroring selfobject.” Kwang as a successful and respected politician becomes a strong ideal figure Henry can look up to and wants to merge with in his endeavor to carve out a niche in American society. His empathic mirroring is also invaluable to Henry, whose significant others have denied him self-approval and made him self-conscious of his “foreignness.”

His father, for instance, perceives Asianness as a liability in America and instills in Henry a profound sense of insecurity by reminding him to “know his place.” ““You think she like your funny face?”” (73), asks Henry’s father when Henry takes a white girl to his school dance, blaming his son for being foolishly taken in by a clever girl who he claims only needs a free ticket. As Henry recollects about his father, “He was forever there to let me know every disadvantage I would have to overcome” (135). Unfortunately, the Asian ethnic background, according to Henry’s father, is one of the disadvantages for his son to overcome. In contrast, Kwang sees it as an asset to tap into in order to build a strong future America. That is why Kwang probably sees in his young Korean-American protégé, as Henry himself puts it, someone “from the future” or “a someone we Koreans were becoming, the last brand of an American” (139).

Idealization and adoration are mutual in the evolving relationship between Henry and Kwang, but the fledging “romance” between them cannot materialize into a solid, sustaining partnership. A sad truth about their relationship is that, as with any couple in the initial stage of their romance, they both do not know exactly what they see in each other; they see only what they want to see in the other. The other becomes a screen onto which they project and play out their own unmet needs and desires. Clearly, Kwang validates Henry’s subject position in American society, and Henry for some time feels that he can find a steady foothold in America society via Kwang’s multiethnic campaign and his concept of a big American family. But the undeniable fact is that both Henry and Kwang hide a web of lies and betrayals behind their carefully built-up images. After all, Henry is a planted mole hired by an unknown client, obviously one of Kwang’s opponents who strongly objects to his soaring political power and wants to forestall his

future mayoral bid by undermining his campaign from within. Since Henry's job is to pose as a devout supporter of Kwang and to clandestinely fish out any information detrimental to his political operation, betrayal is at the core of his relationship with Kwang. Consequently, as he gets more deeply involved in Kwang's campaign, a mounting sense of guilt weighs heavily on his conscience. Henry has to admit that even writing and sending a daily report to Dennis Hoagland pains him: "I could not accept the idea that Hoagland would be coming through them. It seems like an unbearable encroachment. An exposure of a different order, as if I were offering a private fact about my father or mother to a complete stranger in one of our stores" (147).

Yet what eventually deflates Henry's infatuation with Kwang, the principal father figure in his American family romance, is not his unappeasable sense of guilt but a dawning revelation that he is not the only culprit and that Kwang is also guilty of misrepresenting himself and involving others in his web of deception and underhanded betrayal. As a couple living in an insulated bubble of romance are soon bound to face reality that punctures the inflated, idealized image of each other, Henry in a similar manner has to witness and acknowledge Kwang's unattractive dark side that tarnishes his polished public image. Henry first comes to know that Kwang has been behind the death of Eduardo Fermin, his Dominican volunteer worker, who also turns out to be another ethnic betrayer hired by outside forces. He learns that Kwang asked a Korean gang to take care of the ugly situation when he found out that Eduardo had been secretly handing over information about him to an unidentified outside source. Although the gang's bombing of Kwang's office that kills Eduardo and another worker is staged as an accident, it puts Kwang in a tough media spot. In the midst of the tumultuous uproar that

surrounds and corners Kwang, Henry sees only a broken, dismayed man who suddenly “looks much older” and “as if diminished” (268). In addition, Henry also finds out about Kwang’s improper liaison with his female staff member and observes his licentious and questionable conduct at a Korean bar, which belies his professed claim of being a good family man. In revulsion and disillusionment, Henry decides to leave Kwang by refusing to be “a necessary phantom in his house” (312) and delivers the list of Kwang’s *ggeh* members to Hoagland. Although Kwang has a truly ambitious utopian dream, he falters under the mounting pressure he has to bear as a minority politician. Thus, when he abuses his power and loses control in his public and personal life, he brings upon himself his own political demise.

It is a painful irony of Lee’s novel that Henry comes to understand and appreciate his father’s struggle as an immigrant and belatedly learns to respect him only via the downfall of his surrogate father Kwang, who gets stripped of dignity and power in the wake of the highly publicized report about his *ggeh*, his association with illegal immigrants, and his dubious personal conduct. Overnight Kwang falls from a promising politician and a guiding light for the multiethnic America of the future to a suspicious “foreigner” who draws a vigorous protest from whites rallying outside his house, chanting the threatening message that they want to deport every last one of illegal immigrants “back to where they came from, kick him back with them, let alone drown in the ocean with ‘Smuggler Kwang’” (331). Once fallen off the pedestal as a respected city councilman, Kwang is just another Asian-American who makes white Americans raise their eyebrows in disapproval and suspicion. The general public’s radically changed stance toward Kwang shows that, regardless of his achievement and years of public

service, one mishap is enough to make him forfeit his Americanness and be retrapped in the “primal scene” of immigration. After all, it turns out that Kwang shares with Henry and Henry’s father the same interstitial plight as a marginal Asian-American man whose status as an American citizen is often questioned or accepted only with qualifications. Witnessing Kwang’s public mortification and hearing the news about the deportation of illegal immigrants involved in Kwang’s *ggeh* are particularly painful for Henry, because he keeps seeing the image of his father overlapped on their faces. Henry now realizes the self-evident truth even Denis Hoagland knows, that “in every betrayal dwells a self-betrayal, which brings you to that much closer to a reckoning” (314).

Although Kwang’s disgraceful fall and scandalous exit from the political arena shatter Henry’s American family romance, it brings Henry a clear insight about himself and the deeply treacherous nature of his profession, as well as an empathic understanding of his father’s struggle as an immigrant: “What I have done with my life is the darkest version of what he [Henry’s father] only dreamed of, to enter a place and tender the native language with body and tongue and have no one turn and point to the door” (334).

Henry also realizes that he inevitably has to confront his “ugly immigrant’s truth”: “I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited” (319). Thus, when he finally catches a glimpse of Kwang in an utterly pitiable state, surrounded by an outraged crowd and photographers, he cannot help throwing his body to protect Kwang, who is “crushed down, like a broken child” (343) under the milling bodies that keep falling upon him. This final moment of Kwang’s political demise, particularly the crushed look of Kwang “shielding . . . his wide immigrant face” from Henry in shame, strike a deep core of Henry’s mind and immediately brings other painful personal memories.

As June Dewyer has pointed out, Kwang's last image strongly evokes and plays out the circumstances that lead to Mitt's death.<sup>326</sup> Interestingly, it seems that while Henry witnesses his fallen hero's public humiliation, the images of Kwang, his father, himself, and his dead son all commingle to become a "wide immigrant's face" that bears the blows and crushing weight from those established members of the community who police and self-righteously defend what they think is their own rightful American turf from the "strangers from a different shore."<sup>327</sup> Without question, Henry's half-welcoming the falling blows and shielding Kwang from the angry crowd is his way of punishing himself and appeasing the stinging sense of guilt about his involvement in bringing down his paternal hero he once worshiped. Coming from someone who used to pledge no allegiance to anyone and professionally work under the cloak of invisibility and impersonation, this act is a great leap of character that foreshadows his future departure from the downtrodden life of betrayal and imposture that his sub-rosa vocation has dictated.

Yet Henry's action can also be interpreted as his attempt to re-script the deeply disturbing traumatic incidents of his life that concern the deaths of his loved ones, his son Mitt and his father, whom he feels he has failed terribly as a father and a son. While Henry failed Mitt as a parent by not being able to protect him, he also harbored murderous feelings toward his father and intentionally inflicted pains on him right before his death. The listless, crushed body of Mitt and the paralyzed, bed-ridden body of Henry's father, who silently endured Henry's inflammatory words of half-intended emotional torture, were all helpless like Kwang's, which is also crushed to the ground and is subjected to the physical and verbal assaults from enraged people.

Repetition in the traumatized is not just a symptom of the haunting past not worked through; the traumatized are not simply passive victims upon whom the gripping force of trauma wreaks havoc repeatedly. One of the driving forces behind the uncanny repetition of the traumatic past is the desire of the traumatized to revisit the past and undo the unforgettable harm done to them or rectify the wrongs they committed. Repetition is the royal road to trauma and the troubling past. In Henry's case, reenacting the hurtful past scenes with a slightly different twist and playing a moderately active part in it enable him to loosen the tightening grip of guilt the several traumatic deaths of his family members have woven around him. Kwang is a composite of all those loved ones of Henry whose deaths caused Henry a tremendous amount of guilt and an equally strong need for reparation. Henry's action of belatedly pledging loyalty to Kwang by protecting him at the risk of his own safety is significant in that it puts him on a different life path. It is a reparative gesture that helps him start to resignify his personal self-narrative, which had been riddled with betrayal, remorse, and suppressed grief.

### **The Language Game and an Open-Ended Ending**

Lee presents a drastically different portrayal of Henry at the end of the novel. Henry's new job and his changed attitude toward English, in particular, adumbrate a different life path he will embark on after his terribly disappointing involvement in Kwang's campaign. In the wake of Kwang's public downfall, Henry quits his job at Hoagland's firm and starts working with Lelia in her speech therapy after they patch up their troubled marriage. Although Henry's pursuit of the American family romance is aborted by the death of his son Mitt and the symbolic death of his surrogate father figure Kwang, Lee's novel turns his painful experiences into a valuable transformative impetus that catapults him into an uncharted territory, which is no longer contaminated by the

doubt, suspicion, and guilt that continuously plagued him. Thus, the novel ends with a positive note of Henry's rebirth and his newly found love and appreciation for the disparate accents and cacophonies around him in the city of New York, which he calls "a city of words" (344). Wearing a "a green rubber hood" and playing the role of the "Speech Monster" (348), Henry assists Lelia in a language game designed to teach ESL children an important lesson that "there is nothing to fear" and "it's fine to mess it all up" (349). At the end of the lesson, Henry takes off his mask and embraces the children, who are often surprised to see the revealed identity of the voice behind the mask and check that the voice matches the face, perhaps possibly more so because of Henry's Asian features. In the meantime, Lelia gives out a sticker to each child, saying, "Everybody . . . has been a good citizen" (349). She calls out "all the difficult names of who we are" as best as she can, "taking care of every last pitch and accent" (349).

Some critics view Lee's portrayal of Henry's new life and its celebratory tone with skepticism. It is true that, as Tina Chen argues, there is an element of imposture and pretense continuing in Henry's new job, and it might be premature to rejoice in Henry's liberation from the mask and impersonation that negatively summed up his previous profession of espionage.<sup>328</sup> Yet Henry's performance as the Speech Monster is an act of disguise with a totally different import. At the crux of his previous work of spy were his docile assimilative desire and his social abjection as a minority. His carefully measured, guarded speech, which Lelia once called in frustration "the Henryspeak" (6), was just one facet of his work that demanded a constant policing of all aspects of his life so that he could abide by the mantra of espionage that his boss Hoagland instilled in him: "Just stay in the background. Be unapparent and flat. Speak enough so they can hear your

voice and come to trust it, but no more, and no one will think twice about who you are” (44). In addition, disowning and exploiting his ethnic roots was the prerequisite of his successful performance of the mission assigned to him by invisible clients with a substantial political or economic power. Hence, his work of impersonation simply served and reinforced the hegemonic power of his society that exploited its minority subjects.

In striking contrast, Henry’s discursive play at the ESL teaching scene deliberately disrupts the prescribed notions and expectations about becoming a speaker of a good, standard English and being a good citizen. The plight of the interstitial minority subject cannot be dissociated from the question of language. The Korean-American poet Myung Mi Kim argues, “The space between two languages is a site of mutation.”<sup>329</sup> While a hierarchical view of language repudiates, denounces, or tries to obliterate the site of mutation between languages, Henry and Lelia take a different approach and acknowledge the gap between English and the children’s mother tongues without establishing English as *the* language in a valorized system of linguistic hierarchy. The playful games of the puppet and the Speech Monster they use for teaching English foreground the indeterminacy of the speaker’s position within language and the gap between the seemingly seamless match between the speaker and the language he or she uses. Consequently, although their ultimate goal is to teach English, the way they handle the subtle and delicate differences between languages and within a language almost approximates to the Bakhtinian celebration of “heteroglossia” and the dialogic aspect of language that challenges the normative view of a unitary language. In a similar vein, Crystal Parikh maintains that what dominates the teaching scene in *Native Speaker* is the “productive agency of desire” or “the excesses” that cannot be easily contained by the

prescribed notion of citizenship, for it works to “circulate and produce new possibilities for articulating discursive positioning” and “subjective relationality.”<sup>330</sup>

Judith Butler aptly points out that “the problem of speaking properly” reflects the aspect of profound ideological indoctrination and is “central to the formation of the subject.”<sup>331</sup> Henry’s previous obsession with speaking properly, reiterated throughout the novel, was one of the significant indications of his willing submission to and compliance with the dominant rules of the mainstream society. Speaking properly was an epitome of his assimilative desire, which consequently bred in him an abject shame for those immigrants whose spoke with an accent. Henry used to “cringe” at the “funny tones” of his father and other immigrants (337). Immigrants’ lack of language competency denies them the vital symbolic capital needed for daily survival and marks them as perpetually foreign Others. Henry’s abject shame for immigrants’ “improper” speaking, actually, was for himself and reflected his sense of insecurity as a minority subject. Thus, when Mitt started to learn language, Henry felt very uncomfortable with reading stories to his son, out of fear that he “might “handicap him, stunt the speech blooming in his brain” (239). His obsession with speaking properly was indicative of his inner policing that maintained the precarious demarcation line between him vs. those immigrants denigrated as unassimilated foreigners. In this respect, his overly self-conscious stance toward “proper speaking” and his work as an ethnic spy are not so different in nature. Both can be interpreted as his distorted pledge of loyalty to a univocal America and as the manifestation of his assimilative desire to side with the majority beyond the discriminating demarcation line.

Lee's portrayal of Henry's final image juxtaposes the timid self-consciousness of his former self with the playfulness of a more relaxed, contented self of the present. With no haunting cloud of guilt, deception, and suspicion that used to hang over his former work of espionage, he is now surrounded by innocent children and genuinely likes his job. Via his engagement in the game that teaches immigrants' children the liberty and acceptance of "messaging it up" in their learning process of English, Henry unlearns the insidiously detrimental lesson of subjection and inferiority he learned and internalized long ago as a boy in a Remedial Speech class, when he was lumped together with the "school retards, the mentals, and the losers" (235) simply because of his difficulty with pronouncing English. His involvement in this kind of liberal speech lesson is an innovatively reparative act that questions and sabotages the rigid demarcation line between us vs. them that has pushed so many people of foreign descent to the margins of society.

In a way, the guilt resulting from his professional acts of betrayal or personal shortcomings, the troubled affection for his family members and Kwang, and the suppressed grief over multiple losses in his life are part of the traumatic trials and tribulations that Henry had to endure in order to come to an understanding that there is, or should be, no difference between immigrants and their children, and himself. "The more I see and remember the more their story is the same. The story is mine" (279), Henry came to realize toward the end of his career as a spy, when Kwang's political debacle started to take a heavy toll on his conscience. There is no telling whether this hard-earned insight will sustain him through Henry's new life, which he has just embarked on with Lelia.

As Lee's *Native Speaker* shows, the ongoing subjection of immigrants and their children is a social trauma that begets many unpredictable versions of personal trauma, and it is not easy to identify and cut off the debilitating link between them. In many cases of trauma, the phenomenon of persistent haunting and recurrence of the painful past testifies to the indestructible, untamable power of trauma. But Lee's novel at least provides its main character with some measure of insight about the nature of his traumatically difficult past, which is inseparably entwined with his parent's struggle as immigrants and his status as an interstitial ethnic minority. By doing so, Lee enables Henry to distance himself from the gripping force of the traumatic incidents in his life. Putting the troubling past in perspective and making peace with it is one of the most effective ways of halting the vicious cycle of trauma. It is true that although Henry seems to have managed to attain this hard-to-reach stage of insight and acceptance, his future remains very open-ended at the end of the novel. Yet probably, that is the best that the author Lee, who is also a son of a Korean immigrant like Henry, can do, for the story of America, the land of immigrants, is not finished, but still in the process of making.

### Notes

<sup>251</sup> John H. Harvey, *Perspectives on Loss and Trauma: Assaults on the Self* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 2, 20.

<sup>252</sup> Juana Canabal Antokoletz, "A Psychoanalytic View of Cross-Cultural Passages," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 53.1 (1993), 37-39.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43, 38-39.

<sup>254</sup> Leon Grinberg and Rebeca Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), 12.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>256</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 8.

<sup>257</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Immigration and Diaspora," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 296.

<sup>258</sup> For some of the well-known critique, refer to Chapter 3 "Melting Pot" of Werner Sollers's *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) and Lisa Lowe's seminal essay "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian-American Difference" in her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian-American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996). For a detailed discussion of traumatic stress related to a strong ethnic identification in individuals engaged in transcultural or transethnic changes and interactions, see Erwin Randolph Parson, "Ethnicity and Traumatic Stress: The Intersecting Point in Psychotherapy," *Trauma and Its Wake: The Study and Treatment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*, ed. Charles R. Figley (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1985). Instead of the "blanket perspective" of the melting-pot ideology, Parson argues for a more empathic "quilt perspective" that takes into consideration elements of patients' specific ethnic backgrounds and their ethnicity-based identification in psychotherapy.

<sup>259</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian American* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 10-12.

<sup>260</sup> Frances Park, "Around the Block," *Echoes upon Echoes: New Korean American Writings*, eds. Elaine H. Kim and Laura Hyun Yi Kang (New York: The Asian American Writers' Workshop/Temple UP, 2002), 74.

<sup>261</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 118.

<sup>262</sup> Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The 'Wolf Man')," *SE* 17(1918).

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>265</sup> The term "No-No Boy" comes from Nisei males' negative answers to the specific two questions 27 and 28 in the questionnaire that the War Department conducted between early February and late March of 1943 in order to sort out "disloyal" internees in the process of forming an all-Japanese combat unit. All citizens of Japanese ancestry and aliens over age seventeen were required to fill out and sign the loyalty questionnaire, which included the question 27, "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?" and question 28, "Will you swear

unqualified allegiance to the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the “Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?” See Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 397 and Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 130. I have also referred to the phrase “while the second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil . . . have become ‘Americanized, *the racial strains are undiluted*’ (italics mine) by Lieutenant General John L. De Witt, who was in charge of the Western Defense Command and expressed his pro-internment view by referring to the “undiluted” Japanese racial and ethnic heritage. Rather than a reflection of an individual’s view, this kind of sentiment was prevalent after the outbreak of the World War II. See Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1994), 169-170.

<sup>266</sup> Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps: North America, Japanese in the United States and Canada during World War II* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1981), 55-56, quoted in Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, 170.

<sup>267</sup> John Okada, *No-No Boy* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1976 [1957]), 54.

<sup>268</sup> Ray Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity-Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998), 57.

<sup>269</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Ballantine, 1981); Frank Chin, “Railroad Standard Time,” and “Eat and Run Midnight People,” *The China Men Pacific and Frisco R. R.* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1988), 1-7, 8-23.

<sup>270</sup> James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971), 21-24, cited in Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, 44-45.

<sup>271</sup> Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture*, 45.

<sup>272</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999), 31.

<sup>273</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 346.

<sup>274</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 200-201.

<sup>275</sup> Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 18. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be parenthetically referred in the text.

<sup>276</sup> Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle toward Self-realization* (New York: Norton, 1991[1950]), 18.

<sup>277</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 18-20.

<sup>278</sup> Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, 4-6, 149-153.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-112.

<sup>280</sup> Of the seven specified preferences the 1965 act had for Asian immigrants, two concern educational and occupational qualifications. One preference was for professionals, scientists, and artists of “exceptional ability.” Also welcome were workers in the industries in which the U. S. needed additional supply of labor. See Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, 146.

<sup>281</sup> Harry H. L. Kitano and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1988), 106-111. Some historians, Donald Takaki for instance, view the Korean immigration history in two phases, pre-1965 and post-1965. See Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989).

<sup>282</sup> For the influence of the Cold War ideology on the South Korean politics and education, and the role the U.S.A. played in the recent Korean history in particular, see Chungmoo Choi, “The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea,” *Positions* 1.1 (1993):77-102.

<sup>283</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 441-442.

<sup>284</sup> Edna Bonacich, Ivan Light, and Charles Choy Wong, “Small Business Among Koreans in Los Angeles,” *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, ed. Emma Gee (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1976), 446-447.

<sup>285</sup> For more details and exemplary instances, refer to Helen Zia’s her discussion of the incident of African-American boycotting in 1990 of The Red Apple Market, a Korean-owned grocery shop in New York. Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 97.

<sup>286</sup> Shirley Geok-Lim, “The Ambivalent American: Asian American Literature on the Cusp,” *Reading the Literature of Asian America*, eds. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992), 26.

<sup>287</sup> Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 20.

- <sup>288</sup> King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), 20.
- <sup>289</sup> For more details about the connection between the novel and the L. A. riot, and the distinctive Korean ways of processing historical trauma for forging a group identity, see Min Hyoung Song, "A Diasporic Future? *Native Speaker* and Historical Trauma," *LIT* 12.1 (2001), 70-98.
- <sup>290</sup> Sumi K. Cho, "Korean Americans vs. African Americans: Conflict and Construction," *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 203-204.
- <sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 203-204.
- <sup>292</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 170-177.
- <sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.
- <sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 171, 177.
- <sup>295</sup> Quoted in Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 44.
- <sup>296</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 213.
- <sup>297</sup> Freud, "Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety," *SE* 20, 166.
- <sup>298</sup> Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Ethnicizing Gender: An Exploration of Sexuality as Sign in Chinese Immigrant Literature," *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, eds. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992), 126, 116.
- <sup>299</sup> David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in America* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2001), 17.
- <sup>300</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 34.
- <sup>301</sup> Rachel Lee, *The Americas of Asian American Literature: Gendered Fictions of Nation and Transnation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 5.
- <sup>302</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), 27.

- <sup>303</sup> Benjamin Kilborne, *Disappearing Persons: Shame and Appearance* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 122-125.
- <sup>304</sup> William Peterson, "Success Story: Japanese-American Style," *The New York Times Magazine* (January 9, 1966),
- <sup>305</sup> Leon Grindberg and Rebeca Grindberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, 168, 166.
- <sup>306</sup> Kirby Farrell, *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), 18, 13.
- <sup>307</sup> John Harvey, *Perspectives on Loss and Trauma*, 52.
- <sup>308</sup> Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere, *Love, Hate and Reparation*, (New York: Norton, 1964), 65. For a more detailed comprehensive study of the emotion of love and its evolution from a child developmental perspective, refer to chapter 6 and 7 in Melanie Klein, *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986).
- <sup>309</sup> You-me Park and Gayle Wald, "Native Daughters in the Promised Land: Gender, Race, and the Question of Separate Spheres," *No More Separate Spheres!: A Next Wave American Studies Reader*, eds. Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2002), 265.
- <sup>310</sup> Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 118.
- <sup>311</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 56.
- <sup>312</sup> Eng, *Racial Castration*, 23.
- <sup>313</sup> Sheng-mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 67.
- <sup>314</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Family Romances," *SE* 9 (1909 [1908]): 235-241.
- <sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-239.
- <sup>316</sup> Crystal Parikh, "Ethnic America Undercover: The Intellectual and Minority Discourse," *Contemporary Literature* 43:2 (2002), 271-272.
- <sup>317</sup> D. W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self," *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International UP, 1965), 140-152.

- <sup>318</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 182.
- <sup>319</sup> Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982), 4.
- <sup>320</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism*, 116.
- <sup>321</sup> Tina Chen, "Impersonation and Other Disappearing Acts in *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee," *Modern Fictional Studies* 48.3 (2002), 638.
- <sup>322</sup> June Dewey makes a similar point and reads Mitt's death symbolically in her essay "Speaking and Listening: The Immigrant Spy Who Comes in from the Cold," *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature: Carving Out a Niche*, eds. Katherine B. Payant and Toby Rose (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999).
- <sup>323</sup> In a section "The Death of a Child" in his book, the Grinsberg points out the connection between parental grief and survivor's guilt and refers to several clinical studies. See the Grinbergs' book *Perspectives on Loss and Trauma*, 42.
- <sup>324</sup> David Aberbach, *Surviving Trauma: Loss, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), 16.
- <sup>325</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *SE* 14(1917 [1915]), 247-251.
- <sup>326</sup> Dewey, "Speaking and Listening: The Immigrant Spy Who Comes in from the Cold," 77.
- <sup>327</sup> "Strangers from a different shore" is the title of Ronald Takaki's canonical book on the history of Asian-Americans. I borrow the phrase from his book title.
- <sup>328</sup> Tina Chen, "Impersonation and Other Disappearing Acts in *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee," 659.
- <sup>329</sup> Myung Mi Kim, "Interview" by James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Words that Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2000), 94.
- <sup>330</sup> Crystal Parikh, "Ethnic America Undercover: The Intellectual and Minority Discourse," *Contemporary Literature* 43.2 (2002), 281.
- <sup>331</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 115.

CHAPTER 5  
SURVIVING TRAUMA AND THE POLITICS OF MOURNING

[Writing about invisibility and haunting] . . . requires attention to what is not seen, but is nonetheless powerfully real; requires attention to what appears dead, but is nonetheless powerfully alive; requires attention to what appears to be in the past, but is nonetheless powerfully present; requires attention to just who the subject of analysis is.

Avery F. Gordon

**Traumatic Haunting, Interpretation, and the Politics of Mourning**

The story of trauma is the story of the haunting of the unacknowledged and irreparable loss and grief. What Avery F. Gordon argues about writing about haunting also applies to the story of trauma, for underlying both is “what appears dead, but is nonetheless powerfully alive” or “what appears to be in the past, but is nonetheless powerfully present.”<sup>1</sup> In both haunting and trauma, not only is the past inextricably entwined with the present but it also repeatedly intrudes upon the present with persistent force, stopping the progression of time and locking people into the perpetual reliving of the earlier moments of terror and agony. An invisible kernel of trauma lives on without letting up its grip on those who are compelled to endure their pain silently.

Trauma, whether personal or social, is, at its core, about the disenfranchised pain that cannot be integrated into the general meaning structure and the belief system that support our lives. Jonathan Shay, who treated Vietnam veterans and studied combat trauma, observes that veterans’ war-time experiences of “betrayal of what’s right,” as

well as their sense of the meaningless of their sacrifices and the lack of communal support after the war, rather than strenuous and heavy combat duties themselves, often lead veterans to berserk states and posttraumatic stress disorder.<sup>2</sup> Like the character Beloved in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, who embodies the collective trauma of African-Americans amidst the national amnesia about the atrocious legacy of slavery that founded the nation, the traumatic pain, which is essentially "disremembered and unaccounted for," returns as an unappeasable specter of the past, insisting upon its story, although presumed by the majority not fit for narrativized commemoration, to be passed on.<sup>3</sup>

As Homi Bhabha argues in his analysis of the "unholy second coming" of the ghostly figures, traumatic hauntings capture and represent "the outsideness of the inside that is too painful to remember."<sup>4</sup> The excised history of those whose unspoken grief remains outside the realm of the symbolic order of society is part of the invisible but ever-present landscape of our lives. The "public silence and private terrorization," upon which all forms of oppression are built,<sup>5</sup> also laid the foundation of the perpetuated experiences of trauma. Thus, the traumatic haunting of the past testifies to the undetectable but irrefutable presence of what Patricia Yaeger calls the "world of subsemantic history that demands the weight of political speech."<sup>6</sup>

Significant and imperative as it is, translating the world of subsemantic history into proper speech that can do justice to the many disenfranchised lives on the margin of society is a difficult and daunting task because traumatic experiences cannot be perceived and examined apart from the social context surrounding them. As Ron Eyerman asserts, "calling [a certain] experience 'traumatic' requires interpretation," and it is inconceivable

to approach trauma without considering the increasing role of the cultural media that selectively choose, construct, and represent all facets of our lives.<sup>7</sup>

“If experience is the transposition of the event to the realm of the subject,” then “the experience *of* an event is already a representation of it and not the event itself.”<sup>8</sup> The issue of interpretation of trauma brings us to the vexed questions of the interpretation of loss and the politics of mourning.

The social context of traumatic incidents defines, conditions, and propagates socially prescribed responses to certain types of experience, often setting up and regulating the parameters of loss, memory, and mourning. Since traumatic events foreground the fissures and gaps of the social symbolic, as well as the discursive limit of representing experiences and incidents of extremity, they give rise to the politics of mourning, which is propelled by the societal need to contain, tame, and control any force disturbing its established order. “Politics,” Jenny Edkins explains, “is part of what we call social reality. It exists within the agendas and frameworks that are already accepted within the social order.”<sup>9</sup> The role of the politics of mourning, the ultimate goal of which is the maintenance, restoration, and reinforcement of the social order, is comparable to that of rituals. The social rituals about losses, the burial of the dead, for example, suture a tear in the social fabric by identifying and sublimating loss, absence, and departure. Rituals transport them into the comforting communal context of the lives of the remaining members of society. Patricia Yaeger admits the undeniable truth about our relationship to the unbearable weight of the dead and their traumatic experiences: “the trace of the specter’s speech resides neither in the dead’s wished-for presence nor in their

oblivion, but in their inevitable hybridity. They must be fed on the lifeblood, the figures of the present, if they are to speak.”<sup>10</sup>

The politics of mourning intervenes in the way we approach and interpret others’ traumas and the legacy of trauma upon which our own society is built. The politics of mourning works via its mechanisms of distancing, division, and the selective “leaning” toward others’ tragedies, which deflects attention from some of the traumatogenic forces within our own society. For example, as many critics have noted, there is something telling about the fact that the American society builds a memorial and commemorates the tragedy of the Holocaust and the lost lives of the European Jews while there is no national museum chronicling its scandalous history of slavery and its anonymous victims.<sup>11</sup>

To explain this odd turn of event without belittling the extreme suffering of those Jews who perished in the Holocaust, the American politics of mourning draws a divisive line between “there or them” and “here and us.” American culture explicitly appropriates others’ suffering to safeguard and accentuate its social stability. In this selective politics of mourning, the distant tragedy that befell one group is used or abused as a pawn for the national celebration of American life, while another tragedy and its lingering, debilitating effects on a group of people constituting a vital part of American society are conveniently neglected. This type of maneuvering of others’ pain is one of the defensive strategies commonly used to sanction one’s own survival and forestall any threatening challenge to the already established communal order and stability, when the underside of that order and stability is exposed. As I discussed in the analysis of Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, the townspeople’s scapegoating of Pecola, the most vulnerable and the

weakest member of the community, follows the same, perverse logic or politics of mourning, in which the pain of the marginal self is exploited as a safety valve for the alleged sanctity of majority rights and well-being.

Making the traumatic haunting have a bearing on our lives without objectifying and reducing it to a reified, distant matter of the past, and interpreting its meaning properly without endowing it with our vested interests and needs, are extremely difficult tasks. In order to accomplish these tasks, it is crucial to resist the lures of the politics of mourning. It may be nearly impossible for us to relate to the hauntingly traumatic past of others without the mediation of the culturally prescribed discursive structures or our interests in them. As Dominick LaCapra observes by borrowing the psychoanalytic concept of transference, however, it is possible to acknowledge one's subject position and be critically aware of one's role in shaping and altering the object of one's analysis.<sup>12</sup>

Addressing and dealing with traumatic haunting, or the legacy of the painful past not worked through, pose a serious challenge to those who are interested in the ethical project of bring to the fore the irreducible presence, on the margins of society, of those whose unspoken grief is suppressed or exploited for the sake of others' benefits. Yet it is imperative to engage in a dialectic process of listening and responding to the disenfranchised, suppressed voices in order to place and empower them in an empathic communal context. The preliminary but essential step to take in order to achieve this goal is restaging trauma as trauma. The performative restaging of trauma helps the victims to work through the pernicious power of trauma that traps them in the repeated reliving of their harrowing ordeals. It also intervenes in and stops the cycle of perpetuating

disempowerment, which the insidiously debilitating social structure creates by inflicting the psychic wound on its “minor” subjects.

### **Restaging Trauma or Traumatic Restaging**

Repetition is one of the distinctive after-effects of trauma, and it characterizes the ways in which the traumatized approach and try to tame or reclaim the cataclysmic incidents in their lives. Repeated scenes or acts of trauma point to the repressed, excised part of the self that pushes for its recognition and expression. In this respect, it is critical to note that, although past traumas may repeat themselves in survivors’ lives, no traumatic incident replicates itself exactly the same each time it reoccurs. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak maintains in her discussion of postcolonial studies and colonial subjects’ relationship to their past, whatever troubling, haunting past we may have, “what is said to return is not the repressed but a version of it; the repressed is not the thing that we return intact.”<sup>13</sup> With each revised repetition of the past trauma comes the possibility of working through.

The re-enactments of traumatic incidents per se are not necessarily harmful. What determines the impact of the repetition of the traumatic past on survivors and bystanders alike is the nature, quality, and purpose of the re-enactment, as well as the social context within which the experience takes place. The important social context includes the social stance toward a particular type of traumatic experience and the degree of receptivity or empathy of the audience or witnesses toward it.

A deliberate restaging of trauma within a sustained empathic social atmosphere helps to relieve or at least alleviate the unbearable psychic burden the utterly isolated victims have to shoulder. It also restores the interpersonal link between the survivors of trauma and the rest of society, which traumatic incidents destroy by stigmatizing and

shaming their victims. The empathic link thus restored offsets the tendency prevalent in most societies to blame the victims of atrocious crimes or catastrophes in order not to be “contaminated” by their pain and sorrow. The conscientious restaging of trauma brings about effects similar to those that narratives create in the testimonies of trauma survivors. Its performative aspect helps the survivors of trauma to work through their unacknowledged loss and grief without merely acting them out.

As Dominick LaCapra argues, some measure of repetition and acting out is necessary and inevitable for working through trauma, but working through is essentially different from merely repeating and acting out the past, for working through is “a controlled, explicit, critically controlled process of repetition that significantly changes a life by making possible the selective retrieval and modified enactment of unactualized past possibilities.”<sup>14</sup> The alternative vision LaCapra strives to forge by his analysis of the intricately entwined relationship between working through and acting out is similar to that of Judith Butler, for whom repetitive speech acts, if employed critically, become a vital means to create a sense of agency for those whose psychic lives are dominated by the arbitrarily imposed rules of others. As Butler points out, the “insurrectionary redeployment of wounding words” creates a critical distance from the injurious situations or experiences and enables the disempowered to disrupt the hierarchy of social order.<sup>15</sup> Both LaCapra and Butler argue for the possibility of signifying differently to critique, deconstruct, and detoxify whatever source of distress that oppresses one.

The deliberate restaging of trauma of the disempowered is what Toni Morrison, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Chang-rae Lee, the authors of the novels I analyzed in this dissertation, do through their writings. Through the performative restaging, in an

artistically controlled way, of the wounding and pains of people on the margins of society, their works evoke in readers the desired response, similar to an experience that LaCapra explains by the term “empathic unsettlement.” While affects are engaged and their sense of responsibility move those empathically unsettled by the stories of others’ suffering and victimization, LaCapra notes, their attentive attunement does not lead to an identification with victimized others, which would traumatize them vicariously. Nor do the empathically unsettled appropriate others’ victimization for a totalizing, didactic mission of their own in which the horrendous suffering others had to endure is sublimated into another edifying or “spiritually uplifting” case.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this kind of “virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place,”<sup>17</sup> is the best that literature can hope to achieve. Or perhaps it is the best way the self can relate to others, let alone their traumatic pains. Thus, I end my project of regarding and studying the pain of others with Christopher Bollas’s astute remark: “Not to gather the other into one’s consciousness is, strangely enough, to be in touch with the others’ otherness, to remain in contact with the inevitable elusiveness of the other who cannot be known. . . .”<sup>18</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Touchstone, 1994). Refer to chapter 1 and 10.

<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 274-275.

<sup>4</sup> Homi Bhabha, "The World and the Home," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 455.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Yaeger, "Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ernst van Alphen, "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma," *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NJ: UP of New England, 1999), 27. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Yaeger, "Consuming Trauma," 38.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: A Mariner Book, 1999), 13; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 88.

<sup>12</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Representing the Holocaust: Reflection on the Historians' Debate," *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), 110-112; Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 12, 199.

<sup>13</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Transnationality and Multiculturalist Ideology," Interview with Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva, *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*, eds. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996), 67

<sup>14</sup> LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 174.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 163, 160.

<sup>16</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), 41-42, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self-Experience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 190.

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