

Abjection and Testimony:
Representations of Sexual Trauma
in Canadian Women's Autobiographical Texts

by

Melanie M. Brannagan

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Abstract

Trauma, testimony, feminism, autobiography, and representation – all these are at issue in my deconstructive-psychoanalytic reading of *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!* By examining the structure of testimony in relation to autobiographical representation, I argue that the power of the trauma narrative lies in the author's ability to override the assumption that the nature of her experience lies outside the realm of human understanding. By *bearing* witness, the autobiographer in the same gesture calls for a witness. With her first utterance, however she textually figures it, the writer calls to be heard. The materiality of her text makes the act of witnessing and bearing witness possible. Thus, she overrides the notion that what she has to say is unrepresentable.

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1. Speaking the Unspeakable: The Question of Representation in Trauma Narratives

Janice Doane and Devon Hodges open their collaboration, *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*, by articulating a shift in the critical discourse surrounding incest narratives. Whereas speaking of incest was once nearly impossible, and, thus, the experience was culturally invisible, they claim that “[i]t may seem that incest is now talked about too much” (1). They go on to write that “such a concern is based on the assumption that women’s testimonies about incest have become formulaic, marketable products” (1). Their critical project, following from the cultural suspicion that surrounds the production and dissemination of incest narratives, is to provide a social history of “the discursive models available for telling and hearing about incest” (1), and they hope thereby to partially recuperate that discourse. In this recuperative project, Doane and Hodges, like most critics of survivor narratives – a category that refers to an influx of texts in the 1980’s and 1990’s wherein the author represents the *recovery* of a once-forgotten experience of incest – are concerned with memory and its epistemic status. They claim that “the debate about the validity of trauma theory,” which, in critical appraisals of the discourse of remembered sexual violation, is closely aligned to the emergence of survivor narratives, “has less to do with the definition of a traumatic event than with what happens in the mental processing of it” (Doane and Hodges 103). In their analysis, Doane and Hodges focus on the socio-economic and psychological forces that frame both remembering and telling (106), and in so doing, they conclude that “[t]he incest survivor memoir is a narrative of self-understanding that

reveals self-knowledge to be a laboured production that is both constraining [. . .] and transformative, for the memoir revises and critiques that story even as it enacts it” (112).

Doane and Hodges are not alone in claiming that survivor narratives emerge from a position of economic privilege. Ian Hacking accounts for the popularity of survivor narratives in the following way: “[T]he recent popularity, among middle-class people who can afford therapists, of seeing oneself as victim [. . .] at a time when consciousness is being raised about real oppression, the confused and depressed take comfort in saying ‘me too’” (qtd. in Williamson 72). Hacking’s analysis reduces what may indeed be *real oppression* to little more than a temper tantrum in the way that it prioritizes certain kinds of suffering. Furthermore, when this aspect of Hacking’s analysis is considered in light of the biographical details of the writers of survivor narratives and in light of survivors’ professed willingness to leave lives of so-called privilege, the conclusion he draws is hostile and, indeed, only accurate if *middle class* is understood in the broadest of senses. Elly Danica, one of the first writers of survivor narratives, exemplifies the tenuous relation between class and experiences of childhood abuse. She remembers instances of severe deprivation that occurred regardless of her family’s material circumstances:

All the best food in the house goes to him. If we touch his food he hits us. It’s his food. Saturday night he has chicken and we have soup. No child at that table had so much as the grease from a chicken. It was his. (*Don’t* 32)

She continues: “He asks us if it smells good. And we say, yes daddy, it smells good. Well, he says, you can forget about it, you’re not getting any” (32). The issue in *Don’t* – and, indeed, at the heart of the abuse experience – is neither wealth nor class

identification but the experience of cruelty and powerlessness in the face of another's power. Furthermore, Danica is known to have written *Don't* in isolation and poverty, and for having done so after leaving a financially stable situation (87-90). This hardly supports Hacking's claim that only those with the leisure afforded by class privilege find it necessary to recover (from) childhood violations.

The texts centrally at issue in this project are written by women whose social position provided the necessary education and support to complete the projects – Betsy Warland is a professional writer and Janice Williamson a scholar. This fact is not a significant departure from much of the history of literary production – even now, largely (and lamentably) undertaken by a privileged minority. Economic and social privilege does not exclude, as Hacking suggests, the possibility of *real oppression*. To use a class designation to deny the value of these texts and the genuine suffering that underlies them defeats the purpose of the analytical undertaking.

Doane and Hodges refer to the paradox of representation and representability that underlies trauma studies: incest – along with a few other culturally recognized events (the Holocaust, for example) – is critically understood to be unspeakable; nonetheless, writers of survivor narratives and women in therapy must breach the aporia surrounding their experience in order to recover from it. They are expected to do so even as their experiences are called unthinkable, unrepresentable, unspeakable. For Doane and Hodges, the unrepresentability of incest in survivor memoirs correlates to “the very impossibility of knowing” that shapes the texts (107). The conflict, they write, inheres in the “attempt to tell a story about experiences that have never been fully accessible to memory but that continue to haunt and hound the victim” (107). This problem is

exacerbated when the writers choose a genre – the memoir – rooted in a strong realist tradition.

The question of what is representable and what is not is centrally at issue in the following pages. So too is the question of our cultural investment in maintaining this distinction. I approach these questions by way of what Giorgio Agamben calls “an essential lacuna” at the core of testimony (13). Agamben calls the process of interrogating this paradoxical space “[l]istening to something absent” (13), a formulation that echoes my concerns. I will interrogate this paradox, not specifically in terms of Holocaust studies – with which Agamben is concerned – but more generally in the broader discourse of trauma studies, although I will focus my analysis on two survivor narratives published in the 1990s. Betsy Warland’s *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* (1993) and Janice Williamson’s *Crybaby!* (1998) highlight the proposition that the very nature of the autobiographical project reflects and produces a cultural milieu which abjects experiences of trauma and those who choose to represent such experiences.

Far from being unrepresentable, experiences of trauma are caught in a textual double bind: Western culture as a whole has commodified incest narratives, making them and their authors the objects of voyeuristic fascination (Doane and Hodges 1); at the same time, these narratives are often dismissed by readers. Williamson notes that the denial of others’ suffering is a general cultural phenomenon. Examining the context from which the term crybaby emerges, she writes, “[t]he wronged woman and the abused child speak out and are repudiated” (9). Thus, a greater burden is placed on survivor narratives if they are to be politically effective, and the response to this demand by Warland and

Williamson, among others, has been to alter the very language and aesthetics of traditionally accepted autobiographical practice.

The theme of re-storying underwrites both *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!* In *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, Warland coins the term when she writes, “To remember, we rely on words, words already a substitute for the experience we seek to call up. Memory saved in the senses translated into language: re/storing, remembering, re-storying” (14). The re-storying that Warland practises is one concerned not only with personal testimony but also with forging connections. She posits a community of survivors, unified by certain identifiable gestures and perceptions. Re-storying is a transformative process by which the author dismantles and re-orders the structures of language and narrative, rebuilding from that ruin a new script wherein meaning emerges from both words and silence. The rebirth in the final scene of *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* does not refer to the speaker’s absorption into the discourses of knowledge or logic; rather, her lover “renders [her] speechless” in returning her to the “mother letter” (97). *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* performatively enacts the poet’s movement from being restrained by words and a story that “will not/ leave [her] alone” (12) to embracing expression outside of language: “oooOOOOOO/ & i let her o let/her” (97). The outside-of-language in Warland’s text is not a silence of being unable to speak or of being silenced. Warland’s silence, instead, comprises the ground that both suffuses her testimony and allows her to transform it.

In *Crybaby!*, Williamson refuses to confine her text to the discourse of testimony. Rather, representation is interrogated on the shifting ground provided by her body and in the frames of digitally altered photographs. The speaker insists that her vague memories and volatile symptoms are

inadequate

to

the

task

of

story[.] (35)

Furthermore, the evidence she provides in the form of photographs and their inscriptions fails to make a definitive statement regarding the veracity of her suspicions: “These photographs are not about finding ‘the truth’ of my childhood. They are a childhood. A possible account. Whether my father molested me will not be established” (26). In this text, the rhetoric of photographic evidence and historical documentation is juxtaposed to a haunting that gestures to an unknown past: “This photograph is not documentary,” she writes: “This photograph is a visible sign of the unsayable” (29). Unknown, indexed by silence, Williamson’s past is not at issue for her, although it figures prominently in her text. Rather, at issue are culturally informed responses to trauma. *Crybaby!* uses photographs, testimony, citation, and poetry to create a montage within which diverse voices from the community can be heard. Far from encouraging insularity, Williamson’s recovery narrative initiates a potential cultural transformation by reaching beyond the community of survivors.

* * *

Two diverging critical positions dominate the psychoanalytic study of sexual abuse narratives. The first, the recovery movement, considers survivor narratives to be literal accounts of healing from a traumatic event. The political importance of these

accounts is understood by such theorists as Judith Herman and Ellen Bass and Laura Davis to lie in their consciousness-raising function and the paradigm of individual healing inscribed therein. According to more recent feminist and psychoanalytic critics, however, the recovery movement's emphases on consciousness-raising, remembering, and individual healing contradict feminism's politically radical origins. Indeed, in this paradigm, such individualist emphases undermine the political importance of incest narratives. For these third wave critics,¹ the content of women's sexual abuse narratives cannot be read literally. Rather, for these critics, the important truths contained in survivor narratives are symbolic in nature. Women's incest narratives, then, become allegories that illuminate a more general state of patriarchal oppression.

What is commonly known as the recovery movement refers to a critical paradigm based on the clinical and theoretical intersection of Freudian psychoanalysis and mainstream second wave feminism. In this paradigm, repressed memories of childhood sexual victimization are assumed to underlie current social, personal, and physical difficulties. Like these repressed memories of abuse, the field of trauma studies is, according to Judith Herman, an amnesiac field. In the initial chapters of *Trauma and Recovery*, one of the touchstone texts of the recovery movement, she traces the history of trauma studies from the late nineteenth century to the present. Her observations lead her to conclude that "[t]o hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and unites the victim and witness in a common alliance" (9). In the absence of such a correlation between an interest in individual

¹ Although there has not, to my knowledge, been a formal connection made between these critics and the so-called third wave of feminism, which gained prominence at approximately the same time, I have chosen to nominally align the two because they emerge in similar relation to dominant second wave feminist positions.

psychology and a strong political commitment to human rights, “the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting” (9). The *active process of forgetting* is not an exclusively individual pathology. Rather, Herman suggests that “[r]epression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness” (9).

In addition to providing a paradigm of individual healing, Herman implicitly posits a connection between survivors of domestic violence – who might include physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional intimidation – and survivors of more public atrocities. War veterans and survivors of hostage situations, she suggests, exhibit similar symptoms to those of survivors of domestic violence, and they are subject to similar social discriminations. Furthermore, she claims that advances in trauma studies with respect to one group of survivors mutually benefit members of the other group:

The fate of trauma studies [. . .] depends upon the fate of the same political movement that has inspired and sustained it over the last century. In the late nineteenth century the goal of that movement was the establishment of a secular democracy. In the early twentieth century its goal was the abolition of war. In the late twentieth century its goal was the liberation of women. All these goals remain. All are, in the end, inseparably connected. (32)

It is ultimately this interconnectedness that politically drives and sustains Herman’s argument.²

² One of the main critiques of *Trauma and Recovery*, and indeed all Herman’s work subsequent to *Father-Daughter Incest* (1982), is that in the interest of uncovering the cultural prevalence of all kinds of trauma, Herman pays insufficient attention to the dynamics of oppression between and within victimized groups. According to Janice Haaken,

This point is made by Herman's repeated emphasis on the similar aetiologies exhibited by combat veterans, victims of ongoing political terrorism, and survivors of sexual abuse, as well as by the similar way in which members of each group psychically occlude the violence of their experience, and finally by the similarities she charts in their healing processes.

Not only are there similarities connecting survivors of different kinds of trauma, but Herman also suggests that a connection exists between survivors of sexual abuse situated in different historical contexts. The contemporary survivor of sexual abuse, she suggests, has much in common with the turn-of-the-century hysteric, and she claims that Sigmund Freud's essay, "The Aetiology of Hysteria," "rivals contemporary descriptions of the effects of childhood sexual abuse" (13). By this statement, she means to suggest that, early in his career, Freud laid the foundation for our contemporary understanding of the effects of sexual traumatization. Freud, in the "Aetiology," speculates as to the cause of the hysteric's symptoms: "[A]t the bottom of every case of hysteria," he writes, "there are *one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience*, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood but which can be reproduced through the work of psycho-analysis in spite of the intervening decades" (203, original emphasis). These earliest moments must be reconstructed in a therapeutic setting because, according to Freud, they are not immediately accessible to consciousness. In fact, he claims that the

Exalting the word of the victim [as Herman does] is a problematic strategy, particularly as victim stories come to serve as banners for various crusades and for the self-advancement of others on the cultural scene [. . .] Herman does force us to consider the commonalities in victimization experiences, advancing women's grievances through a feminist discourse of trauma and recovery. But this widening of the lens is accompanied by a tremendous loss of acuity, particularly as the solidarity of victims comes to involve the renunciation of conflict, destructive capacities, or moral complexities. (*Pillar of Salt* 196)

rupture underlying his patients' hysterical symptoms is not caused by the *fact* of their childhood experiences but in the forgetting thereof:

And since infantile experiences with sexual content could after all only exert a psychological effect through their *memory-traces*, would not this view be a welcome amplification of the finding of psycho-analysis which tells us *that hysterical symptoms can only arise with the co-operation of memories?* (202, original emphasis)

As the Freudian hysteric suffers from a surfeit of forgotten memories, so too do contemporary survivors of sexual abuse. Employing an archaeological model similar to Freud's, Danica descends past the initial "don't" by which she is rhetorically constrained (7). Passing through the knot of forbidden language, she delves into the memories of her past. She continues uncovering memories of horrific abuse until she reaches the ground zero from which she can begin to build a new life. Like Danica, many feminists of the 1980's and 1990's adopted a Freudian model of repression and recovery. However, whereas Freud recanted his initial theory of traumatic repression and shifted its focus to the drive theory and to what he assumed to be women's fantasy lives, late-twentieth-century feminists used the original repression-recovery model to lend authenticity both to the survivor's recovered memories and to her reality. This interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis, along with the assumption that "speaking out is telling all – and that telling all [makes] possible revolutionary change" (Doane and Hodges 6), form the theoretical touchstones of the recovery movement.

The belief that the act of remembering the past engenders healing and, thus, empowerment underwrites the textual practices of the recovery movement. "The word

recovery has a double meaning” in this theoretical paradigm, write Doane and Hodges: “It refers to the act of recapturing memories of incest that have been dissociated and forgotten, and it also suggests the process of healing from a traumatic event” (6). Thus, the speech-act that articulates trauma allows for healing and personal transformation. However, healing is not predicated only on the possibility of uncovering memories but also on the representation of the trauma engendered by these memories. The textually enacted recovery of repressed memories, then, highlights the primary theoretical contradiction inherent in the recovery movement’s clinical and textual practices. Healing and recovery are possible only if the traumatized subject represents the abusive experience that caused the trauma; at the same time, that very act of representation is theoretically and critically constructed as impossible (Herman 237). Leigh Gilmore relates this paradox to the production of autobiography in the following way:

Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its own insufficiency. Yet at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma [. . .] For the survivor of trauma such an ambivalence can amount to an impossible injunction to tell what cannot be spoken. (*Limits* 6-7)

The third wave critics emerged in the mid-1990s. Following the work of Janice Haaken, they are concerned with recovering the social ethos of a more overtly radical feminism, which they claim the recovery movement’s idealization of the victim

prevents.³ In *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back*, Haaken examines the cultural underpinnings of women's accounts of sexual abuse. She then attempts to connect these motivations to the storytelling practices their speakers employ. Motivating her study is the assertion that current feminist discourse surrounding sexual abuse and incest "has collapsed the cultural space between fantasy and reality" such that the symbolic value of these narratives is lost (102). For Haaken, that symbolic dimension is, in many ways, more socially and politically important than the literal content of trauma narratives: "For collective meaning making," she claims,

the truth of incest *legends* does not rest on the veracity of each individual account – indeed, some accounts may be mistaken or exaggerated as the extraordinary is employed to give poignancy to the ordinary. Rather, the question of the truth of the legend centers on whether there is a pattern of feminine experience in patriarchal societies that would give rise to such a legend and *make it truthful*. (111, my emphases)

Indeed, for Haaken, incest narratives are akin to fairy tales and other myths. Their meanings signify beyond the realm of literal events, and therein lies their potential potency. The transgression enacted by these narratives lies not in their content; rather, incest narratives transgress cultural taboos by the very fact that the women in question

³ I've chosen to closely examine Haaken's work as emblematic of the position held by this heterogeneous group of critics because she is not only the most prolific and consistent of these critics, but she is also the one who is most often discussed. Others, however, echo some of her concerns, particularly insofar as storytelling practices are concerned. Paula Reavey, for example, writes:

[I]t has been made possible to tell stories about women survivors' lives, where past and present are connected in a literal manner because of the way in which trauma, storytelling practices and gender are constructed in professional and everyday cultural discourses [. . .] Child sexual abuse and subjectivity are viewed, then, not as fixed 'truths' waiting to be discovered but as phenomena laced and constructed in culturally created and gendered meanings. (148-49)

articulate their stories from the position of speaking subjectivity. Thus, she says, to focus too narrowly on their literal content, to believe their meanings are limited to a correlation between textual utterance and past event, as she claims those who align themselves with the recovery movement do, is to limit the political effect of accounts of trauma.

Haaken claims that the clinical and textual practices of the recovery movement undermine the radical politics of the feminist movement. For her, the theoretical underpinnings of the recovery movement reinscribe the traditional belief that women are defined by a fundamental lack:

There is a real possibility here for the trauma story to become a kind of Gothic fairy tale or a Cinderella story with the prince as perpetrator. The reversals are important but the narrative elements are the same: *the fantasy of discovering the missing object* (the memory, the phallus) that will *make women whole*. (82, my emphases)

While some of Haaken's reservations about the way incest narratives are constructed, disseminated, and understood are undoubtedly justified, her alignment of the perpetrator of incestuous abuse with the prince/rescuer in a fairy tale is highly problematic.

Although some critics who study fairy tales have argued that they are covert accounts of sexual violence and warnings against the possibility of such violence, the perpetrator in these stories is clearly marked as a villain.⁴ Thus, in terms of narrative structure, the prince and the perpetrator perform different functions. In an incest narrative, the abuser causes the woman's suffering, the prince in a fairy tale rescues the heroine from hers. By equating these two figures, Haaken seems to suggest that writers of recovery narratives

⁴ Cf. Haaken's own discussion of the St. Dymphna legend in *Pillar of Salt*, 116-20.

unconsciously eroticize and privilege abusive and violent acts. Furthermore, Haaken suggests that feminist theorists of the recovery movement believe that without a founding act of violence from which to *recover*, women can never be “whole.” Although she acknowledges that “the reversals are important” (82), Haaken does not specify what these reversals are, nor does she suggest what their implications might be.

Haaken suggests that, rather than reinscribing the patriarchal norm by reading trauma narratives literally, critics ought to read – or listen to – accounts of trauma for their symbolic value. That is, according to her analysis, critics ought to understand that the extremity of sexual assault can metonymically represent more *ordinary* traumas. The more ordinary transgression to which accounts of sexual violence tropologically lend poignancy is the broader oppression of women in a patriarchal society.

“Why, for example, do so many of the memories women are recovering involve sexual abuse?” she asks in her introduction (4). She elliptically answers her own question by suggesting that, “[w]omen certainly experience other difficulties in the course of development, other traumas, including poverty, neglect, nonsexual abuse, and burdensome domestic responsibilities” (4). By arguing that *recovered* memories of sexual abuse metaphorically represent these other traumas – poverty, neglect, nonsexual abuse – Haaken suggests that there is no accepted cultural discourse for these other traumas: “Emotional neglect and abandonment themes,” she writes, “are even more difficult to construct through the narrative of memory than are abuse experiences. It is easier to struggle against a demonic presence than a perniciously absent one” (“Recovery” 1087). Even as she insists that *sexual* abuse is representable and that women who disclose memories of abuse are socially well-supported, Haaken insists that

survivors of other kinds of abuse are less able to represent their experiences in such a supportive and understanding milieu. Therefore, they adopt the discourse of sexual violation in order to get the support they need.

Haaken claims,

Given the context of historical constraints and emerging feminist resistances, incest allegations may metaphorically express other female boundary violations within the family, including but not limited to sexual abuse, and provide a *socially sanctioned* means of breaking free from familial entrapments. Because child sexual abuse mobilizes public horror and outrage, as well as denial, incest allegations may provide a morally decisive bridge out of the world of the father. (“Recovery” 1072, my emphasis)

What Haaken fails to note here is that false allegations of abuse – however much they may be *symbolically* true, however much they may *liberate* the accusers – amount to perjury. An accusation of incest has bearing not only on the speaker of such an accusation, but on the accused as well. Thus, a false allegation condemns someone innocent of a crime to criminal judgment. Furthermore, the discovery of a false accusation of incest serves to call into question all allegations of incest. To suggest that a woman claiming to have been sexually abused is incapable of conceiving of these – and other more personal – repercussions is to rob her of ethical agency.

The critical understanding that some traumas – whether they are sexual in nature or not – are unrepresentable renders trauma structurally abject. Using a reading of Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* as a springboard for their discussion, Doane

and Hodges theorize that, rather than referring to the events themselves, trauma signifies the subsequent rupture of self and memory, “that gap between the event and its understanding within a comprehensible story” (27). The abject, for Julia Kristeva, is characterized by a similar failure of signification, and it threatens the subject’s annihilation by refusing the limits of symbolic discourse. Refusing the precise distinction between self and other, the abject confounds the language and possibility of subjectivity: “Ce n’est pas l’absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend l’abjet, mais se qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L’entre-deux, l’ambigu, le mixte” (12).⁵ [It is not the absence of cleanliness or health that defines the abject but that which transgresses an identity, a system, an order – that which doesn’t respect limits, boundaries, rules – the liminal, the ambiguous, the hybrid.]

The abject, like the possibility of feminine articulate speech, like the possibility of representing trauma, not only crosses boundaries, but it also defies the very possibility of the boundary by simultaneously occupying both its sides. The abject is at once the horrors of Auschwitz and its synecdochal reduction to a pile of dolls in a memorial:

Je vois un tas de chaussures d’enfants, ou quelque chose comme ça que j’ai déjà vu ailleurs, sous un arbre de Noël, par exemple, des poupées je crois. L’abjection du crime nazi touche à son apogée lorsque la mort qui, de toute façon, me tue, se mêle à ce qui, dans mon univers vivant, est censé me sauver de la mort. (12)

[I see a pile of children’s shoes, or something of the kind, something I’ve already seen, for example, under the Christmas tree – dolls, I believe. The

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers refer to the following edition: *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai sur l’abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980). Since my translation differs from Roudiez’s on some points, the translations in square brackets are mine.

abjection of the Nazis' crime reaches its apogee when death which, in all senses, kills me, intertwines itself with that which, in my living universe, is meant to save me from that very death.]

The abject is simultaneously the greatest evil imaginable, the incomprehensible trauma, and the mundane action, the familiar object.

The particular liminality of the abject both interests the subject and repulses her. Kristeva locates one aspect of acculturated abjection in the mother's body, specifically in the alterity instantiated by the desire for her:

*L'abjet serait donc l'«objet» du refoulement originaire [. . .] Disons: la capacité de l'être parlant, toujours déjà habité par l'Autre, de diviser, rejeter répéter. Sans qu'une division, une séparation, un sujet/objet soient constitués [. . .] L'abjet nous confronte, d'autre part, et cette fois dans notre archéologie personnelle, à nos tentatives les plus anciennes de nous démarquer de l'identité *maternelle* avant même que d'ex-ister en dehors d'elle grâce à l'autonomie du langage. (20, original emphases)*

[The abject would, then, be the "object" of the most primary of drives [. . . .] Let us say: the capacity of the speaking being, always already inhabited by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat [itself], without constituting a single division, a single separation, or a single subject/object [. . . .] The abject confronts us, in another way, this time in our personal archaeologies, instantiated by our very first gestures toward separating ourselves from our mother's identity, even before our entrance into linguistic autonomy allows us to ex-ist independently of her.]

This need for autonomy is supplemented by a desire for and identification with a mother who is the source of love and the source of suffering (187). The paradox of identification and separation applies not only to the subject's mother, but this archetypal paradox is also repeated in relation to women more generally, and it originates in the Biblical account of the fall:

D'un autre point de vue, le récit de la chute met en scène une alterité diabolique par rapport au divin. Adam n'a plus la calme nature de l'homme paradisiaque, il est déchiré par la contrevoies: désir de la femme [. . .] De cette nourriture pecheresse qui le deevore et dont il est avide, il lui faut se protéger. (149)

[From another point of view, the legend of the fall stages a diabolical alterity in relation to the divine. Adam is no longer imbued with the calm nature of prelapsarian man; he is torn by controversy: desire for the woman [. . .] He must protect himself from this sinful nourishment which devours him even as he craves it.]

The archetypal woman is at once nurturing and voracious, desirable and dangerous, and, as such, she is liminal in the very sense that the abject is liminal. If she can be characterized in one way – as nurturing, for example – she is always already the opposite of what she embodies.

The connections between the feminine and the abject and the abject and language profoundly influence Kristeva's feminism. In "Stabat Mater" she uses a discussion of the cult of the Virgin in Western culture as a metaphor for woman's place outside of symbolic language. For women to attempt to assume the linguistic subjectivity which

Kristeva attributes to men is a perversion of not only the philosophical tradition but also of language and femininity:

Feminine perversion [*père-version*] is coiled up in the desire for law as desire for reproduction and continuity, it promotes feminine masochism to the rank of structure stabilizer [. . .]; by assuring the mother that she may thus enter into an order that is above that of human will it gives her the reward of pleasure. (183r)⁶

Thus idealized – nonsexual and silent – motherhood offers the only possibility for women to enter the symbolic discourse – as objects thereof, as subjects to the son.

If it is almost impossible for most women to speak in the symbolic order, it is doubly difficult for female survivors of trauma to represent their experiences. Gilmore, in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, writes that autobiographers must overcome the contradiction between the injunction to tell the story of traumatic experience and the structural impossibility of doing so: “When self-representation and the representation of trauma coincide, the conflicting demands potentially make autobiography theoretically impossible” (19). In addition to the critical understanding that trauma is unrepresentable, part of the reason that Gilmore claims that autobiographically representing traumatic experience is impossible are the readerly expectations that accompany the discourse. Not only are autobiographies expected to be *literally* true, but they are also expected to be representative. Because trauma is critically understood to be *not representative*, readers of autobiographies that purport to represent trauma are left with the following two positions *vis à vis* the texts:

⁶ I’ve followed the standard method of citation with regard to the separate columns of “Stabat Mater,” with *r* denoting the right-hand column of text and *l* denoting the left.

If you act, then, as the mirror of the self (for me), then in my identification with you I substitute myself for you, the other. If I am barred from doing that by your nonrepresentativeness, I withdraw my identification and, quite likely, the sympathy that flows from it [. . .] Autobiography about trauma forces the reader to assume a position of masochism or voyeurism. The reader is invited to find himself or herself in the figure of the representative, or to enjoy a kind of pleasure in the narrative organization of pain. (22)

À propos the possibility of narratively organizing pain, Elaine Scarry suggests that pain defies the very possibility of narrative organization: “Physical pain,” she writes, “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language” (4).

Gilmore suggests that writers of trauma narratives circumvent this aporia by writing narratives that test the conventions of autobiography. Her practical concern is with the ways in which trauma narratives contravene the “autobiographical conventions of ‘truth telling,’ salutary as they are” (3). This transgression places some autobiographies on the edge or limit of the genre. Of Mikail Gilmore’s *Shot in the Heart*, she writes,

[Autobiographical] language seems to offer the possibility of having the dead speak directly, in their own voices, to the living and to the future. But this illusion is a property of language, a delusion, a ruse, a trope, in de Man’s terms, passing itself off as truth. In its effort to represent life, autobiography comes inevitably upon its own impossibility. (88-89)

Despite her awareness that autobiographical discourse is self-consciously constructed, Gilmore's insistence that *truth telling* is the primary convention *violated* by trauma narratives suggest that her – and other critics' – critical expectations of autobiography run counter to the way she – and they – understand the way discourse functions in other cases.

The assumption that trauma is, itself, unrepresentable limits the ways in which trauma narratives can be read and understood. First, the prevailing insistence that trauma's unrepresentability marks a traumatic experience as different from all other experiences perpetuates an inaccurate understanding of the nature of experience in general and of the possibilities of representing any experience. Philosophers from Plato to Jacques Derrida have noted the representational inadequacies of language. However important language is to the way we interact with the world, language invariably falls short of fully representing that world or our place in it. The epistemic status of language as representative or not deflects critical attention from the cultural investments that condition the debate. According to Agamben, the designation of *unrepresentable* confers onto the object or experience in question “the prestige of the mystical” (32). He offers the following example: John Chrysostom, in his treatise *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*,

in affirming the incomprehensibility of God, who is “unsayable” (*arretos*), “unspeakable” (*anekadiegetos*), and “unwritable” (*anepigraptos*), [. . .] well knew that this was precisely the best way to glorify (*doxan didonai*) and adore (*proskuein*) Him [. . .] To say Auschwitz is “unsayable” or

“incomprehensible” is equivalent to *euphemin*, to adoring silence, as one does with a god. (32-33, my emphasis)

It is not only false to distinguish trauma from all other kinds of experience by calling it unrepresentable, but to do so is both ethically and politically suspect. To name the experience of trauma *unspeakable* or *unrepresentable* is an act of reverence; however, to so characterize trauma also provides an excuse to not listen to those who speak of it.

* * *

Trauma, testimony, feminism, autobiography, and representation – all these are at issue in the deconstructive-psychoanalytic reading of *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!* that follows. These questions play out in chapters of paired, juxtaposing and diverging motifs: abjection and framing, witness and memory, and silence and re-storying. All these motifs are essential to Warland’s and Williamson’s textual practices. I have paired them in this way because they mark conceptual and poetic tensions in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!*, as well as in trauma theory in general.

Agamben writes the following in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, a text in which he considers the importance and impact of Jewish testimonies after the Shoah:

What is at issue here is not, of course, the difficulty we face whenever we try to communicate our most intimate experiences to others. The discrepancy in question concerns the *very structure of testimony*. On one hand, what happened in the camps appears to survivors as the only true thing and, as such, absolutely unforgettable; on the other hand, this truth is to the same degree unimaginable, that is, irreducible to the real elements that constitute it. (12, my emphasis)

I address this question of the possibility of representing trauma by focusing on the structure and function of narrative. The story of trauma is characterized by a gap between the word and the world it is intended to represent, a gap partly rooted in the disjunction between the word's denotation and its connotation, between the writer's understanding of her experience and the reader's ability to apprehend it. Thus, by examining the structure of testimony in relation to autobiographical representation, I would like to broadly suggest that the power of the trauma narrative lies in the author's ability to override the assumption that the nature of her experience lies outside the realm of human understanding. By *bearing* witness, the autobiographer in the same gesture calls for a witness. With her first utterance, however she textually figures it, the writer calls to be heard. The materiality of her text makes the act of witnessing and bearing witness possible. Thus, she overrides the notion that what she has to say is unrepresentable.

2. Abjection and Framing: Trauma and the Aesthetics of Discourse

The Bat Had Blue Eyes opens by undermining the critical consensus that trauma is unrepresentable. Although she announces that the story she tells has been “obscured” by its protagonist’s invisibility (10), the speaker makes it clear that “the writer’s work” at issue in this text is to articulate her secret (non)story so that it emerges “in-the-visible” (10). The invisibility that Herman and others have attributed to the trauma survivor is disrupted by *the*, which, in addition to interrupting the invisible, also reverses its meaning. *Visible* here indexes itself; it becomes a spatial plane against which family secrets can be seen and into which they disappear. The story Warland brings *into-the-visible* is marginalized on the textual plane – the line in question offset from the bulk of the text on the page – even as it structures the content of *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*. The parergon, writes Jacques Derrida in *The Truth in Painting*,

stands out both from the *ergon* (the work) and from the milieu, it stands out first of all like a figure on a ground. But it does not stand out in the same way as the work. The latter also stands out against a ground. But the parergonal frame stands out against two grounds, it merges into the other [. . .] There is always a form on a ground, but the *parergon* is a form which has its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, *melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy*. (61, final emphasis mine)

Elliptically evident, understood rather than expounded upon, and vanishing in the very moment they are revealed, the trauma stories in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!* are parergonal. The speakers’ representations of trauma both drive and unwrite the texts,

frame and are framed by them. Even as the trauma story relates to autobiography parergonally, trauma is, itself, structurally abject. Trauma confounds horror and desire, annihilates subjectivity, and undermines discursive agency.

Writing and language in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* are tropologically aligned with false framing. Warland's father

told himself

he was *just* making certain

she fell asleep

when he abused her (21, original emphasis); her brother "told her/ it was 'just a game'" when he perpetrated the abuse (21). That her abusers use words, like "just," to minimize the experience, to blame her (34), or to "secure [her] silence" (95), frames the speaker's experience such that "words are for/ forgetting" (58). This concern with false frames, specifically in the form of words and photographs runs throughout *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*; it is, in fact, the reason the text was produced: Warland's past has been framed, and thus understood, in such a way that it conflicts with her felt experience thereof. Not only do others' interpretive impositions on Warland's experience cause her amnesia, but her own cognitive process interferes with the possibility of properly understanding the experience: "More motivated to recall pleasure than pain. Every time I was abused," she writes, "I didn't want to believe it. Doubted it. Told myself something nice was going to happen not something bad. In this way I contributed to my forgetting" (83). Given that her own cognitive process cannot be trusted to properly frame her experience, is it "any wonder/ words confounded her?" the writer asks (21). Nonetheless, Warland does not only refute interpretive frames, but she also suggests that some are useful.

The photographs described in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* are generally difficult to read. For example, the following rhetorical photograph has, according to Leslie Ritchie, at least three readings (218):

standing there

small back to the camera

some mountain somewhere in Colorado

mom insisted dad photograph

behind me

standing there

defiant back

i didn't want to

didn't want to pretend

snap shot[.] (31)

For Ritchie, Warland's position in relation to the mountain is at issue: either she is facing it with her back to the camera; or the mountain is behind the speaker's back, and, therefore, it is not in the picture; or the mountain, as it does in other places in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* metaphorically represents the mother (218). First, Ritchie is concerned with the relationship between Warland and her mother. The interpretation she favours – that of the mountain's metaphorical connection to Warland's mother – demonstrates “the

mother's knowledge of or complicity in Warland's act of resistance" (218). However desirable this interpretation might be, however much it would put feminists at ease to envision a relationship wherein Warland's mother supports her resistance, this is not a probable reading of Warland's story. Rather than being complicit in her daughter's resistance, Warland's mother is complicit in her abuse:

her eyes – mine (this is not a dream): everything in that look. me terrified
 she'll find out desperately wanting her to (please mom, can't you see?).
 she hesitates, glances away – then deletes. 'why are you here?' 'just
 reading to Betsy' he says. *and she believes him.* (76, my emphasis)

Despite having seen her daughter being abused, the speaker's mother chooses to turn away; she *deletes* the scene, which suggests that she *has seen* and actively suppressed the information, and by doing so, she allows the abuse to continue. The interpretation of photographs is similarly at issue. The photograph of the mountain in Colorado "becomes inaccessible and undecipherable even to Warland," writes Ritchie (218). If "the only testimony/ [is] her hanging head" (31), it falls to the speaker's incomplete memory to fill in the gaps left by the frame.

Photographic frames in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* do not only conceal the speaker's subjectivity; sometimes they also provide a "shock of recognition" (19) that validates the speaker's experience: "coming across this photograph after so many years, the obvious solidarity stunned me. the pleasure in each other's company. this was the one person i had trusted" (36). In this instance, rather than concealing memory or colluding in its undecipherable nature, the photograph reveals the speaker's memory. The speaker is

“stunned” by her affinity to her grandmother, and this verb suggests that she had heretofore forgotten the strength of the connection, if not the connection itself.

All these frames – linguistic and photographic, accurate or not – surround the trauma story in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*. However, the trauma story is not only the subject of Warland’s autobiography but it also precedes and frames the story of her recovery. The text itself is framed by an “old story” of trauma that must be told “in some new way” (12); *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* is, thus, about how the trauma story can be transformed by

re-learning how to read

shapes of words

like shapes of pieces

edges my only guide[.] (61)

This process of re-learning and transformation causes the trauma to fade even as it becomes most pronounced. Following the most explicit scene of abuse in the text (76) and the reminder that “the wheel of suffering revolves again and again” (qtd. in Warland 77), the speaker reminds us that

to her cat it was obvious

[. . . .]

weren’t poems a lovely place

to curl up & drift into[?] (87-8)

The speaker thus reminds us that, although the trauma story is threatening, although the memory of it unsettles and horrifies, this remains a text, and that, far from being

inherently threatening, poems are hospitable. Di Brandt writes that poetry allows the writer to “find [herself] suddenly alive again” (*Dancing* 66). Furthermore, she writes,

[I]t lets you find your voice, your many voices, through the void [. . .]
Our role is to save the world, said Jovette Marchessault, *so old, so beautiful, so cruel, and so tender*. And poetry magically puts you in touch with it, *this old world, which persists in each of our births, like an eternal memory*. This old world, our trembling, angry, joyous, howling selves. Is poetry. (66)

If writing poetry is frightening for Brandt (65), the transformation certainly outweighs the fear. So, too, for Warland, whose poetic rendering of fearful recollections allows her to transform them. Incest is “quietly passed from generation to generation until someone breaks the invisible chain” (89). The trauma story in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* frames the act of breaking that chain. “brother – i have broken the chain,” writes Warland (89), inaugurating her own rebirth.

“The photograph,” writes Williamson, “is a visual sign of the unsayable” (29). The visible marks, then, the limits of the representable. The photograph may be “incontrovertible” in its presentation of identity according to Daphne Marlatt (qtd. in Williamson 29), but “the captioned photograph/ is a poem” (Williamson 29): “[T]he poem, less presence than presentiment runs a sort of controversy between what can be identified and what remains nameless, what has been said and what is yet unsayable” (Marlatt, qtd. in Williamson 29, original emphasis). What is said – the captions that interpret the photographs in *Crybaby!* – frames and unsettles the document.

The photographic frame surrounds *Crybaby!*, delimiting the referentiality of the text: "Mother hovers at the edge of the frame. Peering through the car window, does she catch a glimpse of 'something funny'?" asks Williamson (26). The line of vision in this text limits the verifiable: "Without witnesses, my historical 'truth' eludes me; memory is suspect, a contrivance" (73). This difficulty is particularly evident when the speaker's "personal past" is "disrupted by the childhood [she] recollect[s] as an adult" (11). Williamson's text proceeds to read the line of sight in such a way that it both confirms and refutes her story: "Mother shifts to focus the lens on father who takes up his central place. The girl, me, edges toward the frame. This is as it should be. Snap. Shot. Children should almost be seen" (31). That the ideal child should *almost* be seen does not refute her existence as such; however, this *not quite* visibility calls into question the nature of her reality.

Williamson distrusts the discourse surrounding trauma that frame *Crybaby!* even as she valorizes it. Writing about the common use of genocide motifs to characterize childhood trauma, she claims:

[S]ome find it possible to appropriate this trauma of ethnic cleansing [the Holocaust] for the stories of child sexual abuse – the secret pleasure through torture of children by adults. But the "secret holocaust" is a facile comparison. Each trauma resonates with the perverse banality of everyday destruction, one doesn't feel the burning flesh and cannot compare the pain. (73)

One kind of trauma does not necessarily shed light on the nature of another, says Williamson, and to set up a comparison between the trauma of genocide and that of

incestuous abuse invites the valorization of one trauma over another: “Is it an accident that at this moment when the turntable is spun to different rhythms, the white feminist is accused of hogging the floor, stealing the limelight, kissing the tail of the master?” she asks (72). It is, of course, no accident, first, because the perception of the heroine-victim reinforces the existing perception that women are helpless, to be acted upon,⁷ and, second, because the survivor discourse, to which Williamson refers, is generally understood to efface racial and class difference.⁸

The comparison of traumas, the attempt to say which is inherently worse, is not the only aspect of the discourse of trauma Williamson distrusts; the discourses employed in therapeutic settings similarly unsettle her. She claims that “[t]he voyage within can be an exploration in abjection” (176), a necessary exploration but also one that she distrusts. She reports being frequently at odds with her therapists: “Talk about ‘the child within’ drove me wild with fury – as though history were a series of transparent layers to be peeled off one by one – an infinite regression into a pitiful vulnerability where the tiniest of the tiniest dolls might emerge to tell the truth, mouth painted a sweet sweet confessional smile” (176). This therapeutic privileging of vulnerability and confession, she claims, is at odds with the desire to heal:

[W]e are all asked to enact our trauma in front of the others – to make an amateur drama out of the dread we have hidden within. But to perform our stories is to reengage with the pain and we refuse to do as we are told [. . . .] Why reenact the trauma when our fear is so accessible to us? MB observes wryly: *I don't know of any revolution started by this kind of*

⁷ Cf. Marlatt, “Subverting the Heroic in Feminist Writing of the West Coast.”

⁸ Cf. Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*.

therapy. You're never going to heal by picking at your scabs. (191-92, original emphasis)

This refusal to comply with the therapist's demands is, of course, not Williamson's only response to the healing process. After refusing to publicly enact her vulnerability, she retreats to the privacy of her home and "relive[s] the fear, their fear, [. . .] enact[s] [her] own fear of betrayal, inevitable loss of love, and uncomprehending abandonment" (192). The value of this private performance is not the same privileging of vulnerability she identifies in therapy. Rather, it helps her to locate herself. The resistance to public reenactment also frees Williamson to be more politically effective. It is not a case, however, of healing *or* political activism for Williamson, rather, they engender one-another: "My disillusionment contributes to my own healing since I can separate more easily from the vulnerable dependency I feel" (178).

The trauma/healing story in *Crybaby!* frames Williamson's political activism. Trauma fuels the need for political engagement even as political engagement lessens the potency of the trauma story:

Now I am less certain of the cock's identity. Less willing to lay blame.
Less eager to name him [. . .] More concerned about now. *What is accomplished in this memory and the tension between truth and not knowing?* What is it I speaks? [. . .] How do I write the accretion of sickening details. (70, my emphasis)

Williamson's concern with the *now*, with the purpose and mechanics of testimony rather than its content allows her to "*chang[e] the horizon itself*" (Irigaray, qtd. in Williamson 193).

* * *

Even as the framing devices in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!* contain the trauma stories, the stories themselves are abject, undermining the stability of the frame. Nonetheless, these textual elements, although they confound one-another, sustain each other. For Kristeva, the abject structures Western culture in much the same way that, for Freud, the unconscious structures the mind. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, she explores this *founding principle* of her culture, its influence on individual psychology, and the social implications of living in a culture so profoundly informed by the abject. To call the abject a “primer” of Western culture, as Léon Roudiez does in his translation (2), or even the *founding principle* of Western culture, is to collapse the term “amorce,” which Kristeva uses to culturally locate the abject (10).⁹ If “l’abjet et l’abjection sont [. . .] [a]morces de ma culture” (10), they are simultaneously the founding principles of that culture and the catalysts which hasten its destruction. The abject lends potency to certain cultural institutions – the church, the law, for example – as it simultaneously threatens to undermine the very potency it confers. According to Kristeva, the abject is not delimited by specific objects or actions, and it is, thus, impossible to define it using those terms. Instantiated by a traumatic split in consciousness, neither *me*, nor *that*, nor *nothing*, the abject is that *something* unrecognizable as thing (10). One might even call the abject unrepresentable, as unrepresentable as the trauma experience.

The abject, as Kristeva notes from the outset of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, derives its power from its refusal to be bounded (22). The nature of this transgression is not, however, confined to behavioral taboos, but abjection is also in play in relation to affective boundaries, and this violation confounds the distinction between interiority and

⁹ Cf. Roudiez, Translator’s Introduction to *Powers of Horror*, viii.

exteriority, between the self and the other. Writing of Freud's account of the incest taboo in *Totem and Taboo*, Kristeva explains: "Car c'est de frontières imprécises qu'il s'agit en ce lieu, en ce moment, où la douleur naît d'un surcroît de tendresse, et d'une haine qui, n'admettant pas la satisfaction qu'elle procure aussi, se projette vers un autre" (75). [For it (the violation of primary narcissism) is caused by the imprecise delineation of boundaries in this space and this moment where sorrow is born from a surfeit of tenderness and where a hatred, which refuses to acknowledge the satisfaction it procures, projects itself toward another.] While Freud claims that incest is the source of horror, the phobia of incest, for him, amounts to a fear of the maternal body that threatens to overwhelm the almost-subject. Kristeva writes the following about the psychoanalytic concern with the feminine in response to *Totem and Taboo*: "[L]es remainements internes à la subjectivité ainsi [que] la compétence symbolique elle-même [. . .] implique l'affrontement au féminin, et le codage que les sociétés se donnent pour accompagner aussi loin que possible le sujet parlant dans ce voyage" (73). [The internal remnants of subjectivity in addition to the competence of the symbolic order itself implicate the affront to femininity and the social codes intended to protect the speaking subject as long as is possible on its journey (to abjection, to death).] For Freud the prohibition against incest is specifically a patriarchal prohibition against mother-son incest, and it is intended to protect the subjective economy of the symbolic order.

The horror of incest, for Freud, does not in the end apply to father-daughter incest. Although in the first presentation of "The Aetiology of Hysteria," he proves a sympathetic listener and valorizes the suffering of his patients, by the time of its subsequent publication – after the inception of the Oedipal complex in women and its

connection to an incestuous *desire* for the father¹⁰ – he notes, “All this is true; but it must be remembered that at the time I wrote it I had not yet freed myself from my *overvaluation* of reality and my *low valuation* of phantasy” (204 n. 1, original emphases). Williamson protests that Freud’s retraction of the seduction theory indicates the patriarchal complicity in perpetuating and invalidating the violence in women’s and children’s private lives. His later theories, thus, inscribe the traumatic gap at the root of hysteria, a gap he was initially trying to eliminate: “The equivocation in Freud’s seduction theory masks fundamental refusals to validate women’s stories of abuse. Memories of the crimes are so eagerly wiped out both by the perpetrator and desperate victims,” writes Williamson (180). Thus, it is true that “the behavior of patients while they are reproducing these infantile experience is in every respect incompatible with the assumption that the scenes are anything else than a reality which is being felt with distress and reproduced with the greatest reluctance” (204). However, these particular memories differ from others: “[U]nlike what happens in the case of other forgotten material, they [the patients] have no feeling of remembering the scenes” (204). This, it seems, allows Freud to suggest that the violations remembered by his patients are, in fact, phantasmic. After Freud, then, there is pleasure in transgression. The taboo against incest becomes an *incest-wish*.¹¹

¹⁰ This theory does not, of course, mark the beginning of Freud’s renunciation of the reality of traumatic seduction, signs of which can be read in his published work as early as 1903 in “My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of Neurosis.” For a more complete discussion of Freud’s abandonment of the seduction theory, see Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Penguin, 1985), particularly chapter 4, “Freud’s Renunciation of the Theory of Seduction.”

¹¹ Cf. Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” 177; David Farrell Krell, “Engorged Philosophy: A Note on Freud, Derrida, and Différance” 7.

The autobiographical incest story is rife with boundary violations, and the most abject of these is not the *fact* of sexual violence perpetrated on daughters. Rather, the most haunting of violations in *Crybaby!* and *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* is the uneasy synthesis between desire and horror *vis à vis* the memory of incest. Williamson writes, "Afterwards she knows part of the pain is her love for him, the feel of his hands all over. Afterwards she remembers she hates the smell of rye whiskey. His smell. His uncaring abandonment to his own pleasure" (65-66). Both desire and horror, here, inflect the memory of the speaker's father, confuse the unequivocal nature of the crime in the text. If *Crybaby!* is a map of "[c]riminal injuries recorded" (61), it is also a text about the speaker's longing for her dead father, a longing that is conflated with eroticism:

My father's death complicates my "new knowledge" of his molestation of me as a child. The complication begins precisely here in my brain, the most tender of erogenous zones. *The space of desire for father, for his attentions.* My longing for my father began I don't remember when. He sang songs at the piano that waited for love or the sun to fall from the sky.
(98, my emphasis)

Williamson conflates love with sexual desire. She seems to ask: *If I say that my father raped me as a child, and if I say that I love my father, does my love for him not invalidate my complaint?*

She insists upon the relevance of this question by foregrounding her awareness of her father's sexual nature. In an exercise in automatic writing, "certain words float to the surface. I lift up some of the words as though playing with a magic screen where language floats its own secrets" (22).

Father provided his own kind of pleasures ... he sent me running from him
 in tears ... exceptional moments of pleasure ... take me ... his shoulders
 ... parade through ... candy ... coo ... good-little-girl ... pressing ... balls
 ... jelly ... into my sticky palms ... hot ... warmed ... embarrassed ... wet
 against my forehead ... this memory of father/daughter pleasure ... an
 everyday exchange ... (23)

In their first presentation, these words, and the images they engender, are contextualized by an unremarkable story about the pleasures of a father/daughter outing. However, in this repetition, Williamson destabilizes the images. What originally reads, "*Father provided his own kind of shopping pleasures*" (21, original italics, my underlining), is made ambivalent when "shopping" is removed from the sentence. It is no longer clear what the nature of the pleasures the speaker's father offers is. The story is further sexualized in the following: "pressing ... balls ... jelly ... into my sticky palms ... hot ... warm ... embarrassed" (23). While the content is clearly constructed and while the phrases in its second presentation seem consciously chosen to provide the maximum degree of horror, the motifs resonate with the rest of the text.

Although horror and desire are closely aligned in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, they are less integrated than they are in *Crybaby!*. Rather than speaking of an eroticized desire for her abusers, Warland writes about wanting her abuser to protect her:

before the bat was –

[. . .]

inexplicable horror of ...

its sound beneath my bed

how i'd yelled for him to

come

in the night

take it away! (62, my emphasis)

Although she has called her father into her room, she has called for his protection. The terror comes not from confusion on the part of the speaker, but from the betrayal of not having been kept safe. Warland foregrounds the conflict between protection and threat instantiated by familial violations:

rockabye baby ...

rockabye baby ...

getting his off

bedrock

rock bottom [.] (25, my emphasis)

The comfort of the opening lines of the lullaby is abruptly interrupted by the implication of sexual release in the line, "getting his off." The love and protection that ought to be available to the daughter are thus unsettled by her father's narcissistic need for sexual satisfaction. Herman claims that these violations – the fluidity of the boundary between protection and threat, the conflation of desire and horror – cause the victim to resort to a mode of "doublethink" in order to survive, a mode of thinking that undermines the development of her identity (101). Thus, when Williamson claims that "[t]he voyage within can be an exploration in abjection" (176), she does not speak only about her

repulsion from herself, but she also speaks of the disruption of boundaries that caused her subjectivity to be so undermined.

* * *

“L’abjet est la violence du deuil d’un <<objet>> toujours déjà perdu,” she writes. “L’abjet brise le mur du refoulement et ses jugements. Il ressource le moi aux limites abominables dont, pour être, le moi s’est détaché – il le ressource au non-moi, à la plusion, à la mort” (22). [The abject is the mourning of an object always already lost. The abject breaks the bounds of repression and its attendant judgments. It forces the subject into abominable limits from which, in order to *be*, the ego has detached itself. It drives the self to alterity, to compulsion, into death.] An objectless mourning, the abject occupies a discursive field of imagined loss. This is not to say that the effects of that loss are imagined or that such a loss, however phantasmic, has no cultural or psychological bearing. Rather, as in the case of the Freudian melancholic, the one who experiences the abject has been subsumed in such a way as to be unable to separate herself from that loss.

If the referential nature of the abject is undeterminable, its effects are certainly consistent:

Pourtant de cet exil, l’abjet ne cesse de défier son maitre [. . .] [U]ne souffrance brutale dont <<je>> s’accommode, sublime et ravagé, car <<je>> la verse au père (père-version?): je la supporte car j’imagine que tel est le désir de l’autre. Surgissement massif et abrupt d’une étrangeté qui, si elle a pu m’être familière radicalement séparée, répugnante. Pas moi. Pas ça. Mais pas rien non plus. Un <<quelque chose>> que je ne reconnais pas comme chose. Un poids de non-sens qui n’a rien

d'insignifiant et qui m'écrase. À la lisière de l'inexistence et de l'hallucination, d'une réalité qui, si je la reconnais, m'annihile. (9-10)

[However, from this exile, the abject never ceases to defy its master. [. . . .] [A]bjection is a brutish suffering which "I" accommodate, sublime and ravaged, because "I" capitulate to the father's account (père-version? [perversion?]): I endure it because I imagine that the Other wishes it so. A massive and abrupt surge of an alterity that, however familiar it may have been in an opaque and forgotten time, now harries me, radically separate and loathsome. Not me, not that, but not nothing either, the abject is the "something" I cannot recognize as thing – the weight of nonsense about which there is nothing insignificant and which crushes me. At the boundary of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality which, if I were to recognize it, would annihilate me.]

The abject, if it is acknowledged, threatens to annihilate the subject. It marks the space where the ego must detach itself from itself in order to survive (22). To endure the abject suggests both that the subject experiences the abject as suffering and that abject experiences reduce the self from active mastery to acted-upon objectification (13). That which is abject does nothing, if it does not undermine the self: "De l'objet, l'abjet n'a qu'une qualité – celle de s'opposer à *je*" (9, original emphasis). [From the object, the abject has only one quality – that of opposing itself to *I*.]

The trauma story subjects Warland to a profound misrecognition. That her experience cannot be acknowledged in a wider social context results in her erasure from it. The poet becomes/ is reduced to "no body" (47). Her mother's denial upon finding

out that her daughter was raped “deletes” the scene from her memory (76), and this failure of recognition also deletes the poet-daughter, disallows the possibility of her experience. The abjection of experience in society allows for and encourages the father’s hypocrisy and further reinforces the dichotomy between private and public life. Thus, Warland, in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, is profoundly invested in reconstructing a post-traumatic identity. In contradistinction to other incest narratives produced around the same time, Warland refuses to fuse the subject she has split into girl/woman/writer at the outset of her text (10). The author-narrator “writes/ at the heart’s cleavage/ where it clefts or/ splits apart” (64). In this way, Warland refuses to be inscribed onto the ideal healing narrative: presumably, telling the story of one’s trauma with affect integrates the memory and causes the self which was fragmented and disconnected by the experience of trauma to cohere and connect again (Brison 63, Lundgren 241). Rather than locate the transformative possibility of healing in the trauma narrative, as do Judith Herman and other psychologists, Warland suggests that the greatest transformation occurs in the very impossibility of narration that precedes the new story, from the self’s split center.

Warland suggests that fragmentation is not analogous to disconnection from others by tropologically aligning herself with other survivors and family members by means of similar hands and eyes. She suggests that trauma survivors’ “hands [are] never still” (15), and in repeated gesture is room for mutual recognition: “[Y]ou notice/ if you know what to look for,” says Warland (15). Connections are made with others through “the language of hands” (59), a discourse which does not require a unified, narrated subject. Warland also posits connections to others – particularly to those in her family – by means of eyes. Her dying aunt recognizes her by her eyes. The link between “that

blue/ our history” (67) suggests a mutuality of experience. When her mother walks in on the rape her brother tries to conceal, Warland’s eyes meet her mother’s. The connection is established syntactically in the text by means of a dash, “her eyes – mine” (76) before her mother breaks the connection by looking away. Most disturbingly, by means of her own eyes Warland identifies herself with her father, emblematically represented as the bat with blue eyes (72). Warland’s connections to others in *Bat* are thus grounded in the physical; hands and eyes provide the bases of recognition. Identity for Warland is grounded in fact, but that fact is physically manifested: “*fact, facere, to do, make, facies, shape, face/ [. . .]/ face our i(d)entity*” (81). Though it is constructed from the facts of the life it represents and though it is physically manifested, the i-entity is not self-evident: not only is the i-entity one’s facts and one’s face, it must, itself, be faced.

Furthermore, facing one’s identity is contingent on process. For Warland, the important part of that process is coming to terms with her experience: “How to reconcile remembering with forgetting: the i who knew she was being abused with the i who disowned me, pretended otherwise; the i made invisible by language and the i becoming visceral in words?” (84). Like her mother, Warland has complied with the cultural injunction that she forget the violence done to her. However, rather than deleting the scene of the abuse, she returns to it, attempts to understand the oscillation between remembering and forgetting. That remembering must be reconciled with forgetting suggests that each figures prominently and importantly in the self. In *Words of Light*, Eduardo Cadava notes that we register the memory of our experience only when we are not ourselves: “During the flash of the mind’s camera – a moment when, beside ourselves, we are no longer ourselves – we experience the shock of an experience that

tells us that memory, all remembrance of things past, registers, if it registers anything, its own impossibility, our own immolation” (106). The nature of the fractured self that Warland represents in *Bat* is rooted in the presence of these dichotomies. Personal identity, for Warland, is not more stable than “my fleeting name/ [written] in sparkler script” (43). The self that exists at any one moment of the identification process can only exist in that instant, fleetingly, and disappears. To fix them for longer than a moment, to fix their *facts* too solidly is, itself, an act of violence.

For Williamson, “[t]he voyage within can be an exploration in abjection” (176). The remembrance of pain profoundly undermines her subjectivity: “Were she to read her crimped agonizing breaths through the I word, she could sound victim rather than subject of suffering [. . . .] Cautious: she wants to tell a story with the I word and won’t” (127). Even as she doesn’t want to “expropriate her body’s suffering” (127), her bodily suffering undermines her subject position because the pain remains undeciphered. She cannot read her suffering through the “I word” – through the frame of the incest story – because that victimization removes her agency, nor can she read her suffering through the self – a different “I word” – because to do so would split the self from the survivor. In a photograph captioned by her father, Williamson is “invisible to [herself], though the edges of the child distinguish me from what I am not. Her/my being is not mine” (32). The subject of the photograph, the child of Williamson’s “personal past” (11), is disrupted by her invisibility. Williamson can no more “tell a story with the I word” than she can interpret her body’s suffering through it: to tell a story about incest undermines her subjectivity by making her a victim; however, to write her I (story) without the I word (incest) also separates her from herself.

3. Memory and Witness

*memory
the scene of an accident
everyone has a different version
adjustments must be made
to eradicated contra/dictions
or (else)*

antagonisms set in

-Betsy Warland, The Bat Had

Blue Eyes

Near the end of *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, Warland asks a question crucial to her poetic project, a question about how to negotiate the slippery ground between memory and denial: “How to reconcile the remembering with forgetting: the i who knew she was being abused with the i who disowned me, pretended otherwise; the i made invisible by language and the i becoming visceral in words?” (84). Memory, for Warland, always produces its own forgetting. The articulation of memories, she suggests, citing Simone de Beauvoir, replaces the memory with written text, allows memory to be forgotten (37). The simultaneity of remembering and forgetting is partly embodied in Warland’s representation of the split subject. She identifies an “i who knew she was being abused” and an “i who [. . .] pretended otherwise” (84). Even as she enforces forgetting by pretending she wasn’t being abused, Warland suggests that in so doing she also remembers: she doesn’t say that her other self didn’t know she was being abused; in fact, that self covered a surfeit of knowledge by *pretending* not to know.

The presence of these separate selves is also echoed in the tension between language and silence operating in Warland’s text. She writes of a time when she “forgot” how to read (34). Her victimization had so shaken her “faith in the written word” that, in place of reading, she draws: “During class time,” she writes, “I retreated, taught myself

how to draw – a form of reading I could trust” (34). That drawing is an alternative form of reading, for Warland, suggests that the act of reading is not limited to the absorption of a text, but it also creates the text. Drawing is not only an alternative form of reading for Warland; the act of drawing is also an alternative form of writing, the inscription of another language to oppose the imposition of another. Drawing, like writing, inscribes the page, and Warland’s inarticulate inscriptions counteract the erasure others’ stories force upon her: “Words,” she notes, “begin our forgetting” (14). Forgetting, however, is only begun, never complete. Words may enforce forgetting, but memories are “then held in our senses, speaking through symptoms, nervous physical habits, inexplicable intuitions” (14). The fundamental untrustworthiness of language, the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, the opacity of meaning enforces this public encryption of trauma. *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* is a document both of remembering and forgetting. As she documents specific memories of abuse, she also documents her process of forgetting: “More motivated to recall pleasure than pain. Every time I was abused I didn’t want to believe it. Doubted it. Told myself something nice was going to happen not something bad. In this way I contributed to my forgetting” (83). The memory of trauma is, for Warland, “the interface (inner face) of a self-induced amnesia” (*Proper* 47). Trauma is, for Warland, the site at which memory and forgetting interact. Traumatic memory provides the content of amnesia. Traumatic memory, then, is characterized by a lack of memory.

For Williamson, the question is not how to reconcile memory with forgetting. Rather, she negotiates the ground between memory and denial by asking how both memory and forgetting are enacted: “These remnants of my fence are not a nightmare,

but a morning awakened to a body's power to forget nocturnal violations. My mental/physical paralysis/erasure leads me to query what it means to remember and how it is we become this forgetting" (16). Forgetting is wholly embodied. The body oscillates between forgetting the present and forgetting the past: "One day, remembering, she soils her pants, infantilized into forgetting she is not a child [. . . .] A hard forgetting. Am I writing this or is it writing me?" (61). In remembering the past, the speaker's body becomes unglued from present reality. In so doing, she loses control over the writing process. The past, thus, begins to write the present.

Nonetheless, the past is indeterminate for Williamson; it is always constructed in and by the present. It is a question of *now*, she writes, and also a question of "[w]hat is accomplished in this memory and the tension between truth and not knowing" (70). However much *Crybaby!* is a text about memory and about trauma, Williamson insists on this space between truth and not knowing, between remembrance and regret (57): "A story that spells out facts without doubt is a story of dread. The dread of an author who confesses her history, risking misreadings by those who don't believe her or wish for her silence" (70). If, for Warland, language itself is full of doubt, and if this doubt *confounds* her, for Williamson doubt inheres in the nature of stories. Dread follows when that measure of doubtfulness is not acknowledged. Stories are not necessarily factual, yet Williamson suggests the facticity of her text is at issue when confession is something to be believed or not, when autobiography is reduced to telling the truth or telling lies. The *I* in Williamson's text "shifts" (57) between validating "the trauma and its denial, which has been reinforced from so many directions" (Brandt, "Re: the gordian knot," 3): "Without witnesses, my historical 'truth' eludes me; memory is suspect, a contrivance.

This writing is not propelled by a desire to lie or misrepresent – and yet, how do I take into account the constructedness of memory itself?” (Williamson 73). Although both memory and forgetting in *Crybaby!* are represented as originating in the body, both are constructed, viewed through the lens of Williamson’s cultural critique, retouched photos, overt conjectures, explicit refusals: “These photographs are not about finding ‘the truth’ of my childhood. They are a childhood. A possible account. Whether my father molested me will not be established,” she writes (31). Just as, by drawing, Warland creates the text she reads, Williamson unsettles the perceived passive representationality of photographs by inscribing and altering them.

* * *

The memory of trauma is conditioned by the circumstances surrounding its utterance: the way the story is told determines its contents. However, the context of an utterance is not the only factor that frames traumatic memory. Rather, the broader discourse surrounding claims of traumatic memory also limit the testimony being articulated: “[T]he joint project of representing the self and representing trauma,” writes Gilmore, “reveals their structural entanglement with law as a metaphor for authority and veracity, and as a framework within which testimonial speech is heard” (*Limits* 7). The discourse of memory lies on this fault line between testimony as a genre of self-representation and the juridical impetus to evaluate the epistemological value of claims.

Susan Brison argues that the way in which memory is represented in the context of testimony informs the validity of the utterance: “Only the pathological memory, inaccessible to consciousness, but active (and destructive) because of it, on this view, is true to the event, registering what really happened,” she writes (70). This conception of

traumatic memory, one which distinguishes the memory of trauma from other kinds of memory by its somatic manifestation and uncontrollable intrusions, is generally associated with the recovery movement paradigm, and finds its support in the work of Bass and Davis, Cathy Caruth, and Herman, among others. Third wave critics are at odds with the formulaic, performative qualities associated with this critical construct.

Traumatic memory is, as Brison summarizes,

accurate because untouched (*like an unretouched photo*), not worked over or thought about with the distorting categories of cognition. This apparently gives it privileged epistemological status as a bearer of truth – as that which, for ethical and political reasons, must be preserved [. . . .] Such a theory of traumatic memory consigns the traumatized person to the status of credible (but – or because – sick) victim-witness *or* untrustworthy (but – or because – healthy) survivor. (70, first emphasis mine)

The effortlessness, the *not worked over* quality, is supposed to guarantee accuracy. This emphasis on *what really happened* and on how to determine the *Truth* permeates the critical discourse surrounding testimony based on the memory of trauma; ethically, the discourses in which trauma is most obviously at issue – therapy, judicial testimony, and autobiography – must each, to varying degrees, consider these questions, and these questions are more easily resolved when the testamentary scene is performed in a recognized and accepted way. Thus, traumatic memory is critically framed as pathology – its performance uncontrolled and unalterable.

Memory, Warland reminds us, is “the scene of an accident” (21). Trauma initiates a gap in memory such that speaking of trauma comes to take on formulaic qualities. In *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, this scene of woundedness provides the ground on which the crisis of forgotten memory and the catastrophe of testimony converge. The *scene of an accident* comprises a cacophony:

everyone has a different version
adjustments must be made
to eradicate contra/dictions
or (else)

antagonisms set in[.] (21)

Either the various participants must reconcile their versions, or the noise of speech countering speech subsumes sense: “is it any wonder/ words confounded her?” Warland asks, after recalling her father’s and her brother’s accounts of the abuse they perpetrated, accounts that counter her own memory of the events. Furthermore, the partially parenthetical threat of *or (else)* suggests that her father’s and brother’s accounts will out when she challenges them.

“Can i write an i in the process of disinheriting itself, an i that knows an i-full isn’t the whole story, that recognizes word as angel not servant?” Warland asks (85). Words, as Warland has previously acknowledged, work in the service of whoever uses them; they have no self-evident connection either to memory or to truth: “words are no mother” (55). Thus, because of their shifting nature, words mark a danger zone in Warland’s text. They announce the very cataclysm of the text. In her relation to words,

the speaker of *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* resembles Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* as Walter Benjamin encounters him in "Theses on the Concept of History":

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned to the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. (257)

Just as Benjamin's messenger is unable to "stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (257), so inarticulately horrified is he, words are, for Warland, an ineffectual conduit for memory. "With words we begin our forgetting," she writes:

"Tongue forgets taste, forgets touch, as it quickens to its work of words" (14).

* * *

The performative nature of experimental autobiographical incest narratives sets these texts apart both from other forms of autobiography and from other trauma narratives: "A woman's autobiographical text that recounts an experience of incest and *enacts recovery* from it exists on the edge of genre," writes Lundgren (233, my emphasis). The action of recovery is rooted in the metonymic connection between the autobiographer's lived body and the autobiographical text. For Lundgren and others, the body becomes a substitute for and a metaphorical representation of the text: "For an incest survivor, the body is the site of oppression, and so the body must be recuperated for healing to occur. To enact – not recount – recovery from incest, a text must deviate from the standard of traditional autobiography; the disembodied characteristic of the

universal self is counterproductive to healing” (Lundgren 237). The autobiographical text, then is the site of the body’s reclamation.

The relation between the text and the body need not be reduced to metonymy. Although the psychoanalytic assumption that “one’s psychological life history is *written* on and worn by the body, just as in turn, the psyche bears the history of the lived body” remains relevant (Grosz, “Psychoanalysis,” 270, my emphasis), the text does not stand in for the body, nor is the body uncomplicatedly a text: “[T]he body can only be named thanks to the word, and the word can only take form thanks to the idea of the body” (Wills 141). Here, David Wills represents the body and language in a far more fluid relationship than the psychoanalytic tradition represents them. The body articulates language even as it must subject itself to language in order to be *articulated*. This relationship between language and the body is one of the many relationships that Wills calls prosthetic:

[S]till within the perspective of prosthesis, the body, as articulation of this linguistic relation, will necessarily be infirm, or lacking, in need of the other. Before any physiology and beyond any psychopathology, the body to be found at the scene of prosthesis is deficient, less than whole, *and has always been so* [. . .] [I]t is by means of prosthesis that I wish to insist on the non-originary status of the body, on the nonintegrality of its origin, in order to resist the idea that the originary dissemination of sense might be weakened by the presumption of a corporeal entity. (135-37)

Prosthesis has both a referential and tropological relation to the body. The figure of prosthesis refers to Wills’ father’s wooden leg, a meditation on which occasioned

Prosthesis. However, for Wills, the signification of prosthesis is not limited to the autobiographical or the medical. The trope of articulation is the site at which the body and the text overlap: *articulation* both refers to linguistic utterance and to embodied movement. Not only is the autobiographical body written, but the body to which the text refers produces that same text.

To encounter the body as language is to open oneself to a different kind of signification. Not contingent upon gesture or syntactical connections that repeat the structure and movement of conventional language, body language articulates an ontological transformation of the extant cultural narrative insofar as it concerns women, memory, and trauma. Warland transforms the zero that conceals her by transforming its signification: absence is replaced by a body when “0 characters” (10) becomes “the O” of female flesh (96) through which she passes to reclaim her body:

o vulnerable *mountain* mons mountain mons

mountains

o luminous ring o disk o halo of

rock reflected light

giant cradle holding

me of the many generations

who came out of the mountains

[. . .]

o mons veneris mons veneris o venerable mountains [.] (26, original emphasis)

The *o*, here, emerges as an invocation: Warland transforms the “vulnerable *mountain*” of the first line, which is connected to female sexuality by way of “mons” or *mine*, by repetition and homophonous word play, into a venerable mountain, “mons veneris,” *my* venerable mountain. Warland literizes this linguistic performance that metaphorically reclaims the body later in the text when she quotes the following from Chrystos’ *Dream On*: “No metaphor/ Mountains ARE our mothers” (92).

When the once-injured body, itself, becomes the statement, when it materializes the memory at issue, trauma is irrefutable:

No person lives his or her own body merely as a functional instrument or a means to an end. Its value is never simply or solely functional, for it has a (libidinal) value in itself. The subject is capable of suicide, of anorexia [. . .], because the body is *meaningful*, has significance. (Grosz, *Volatile*, 32, my emphasis)

For both Warland and Williamson, the body articulates its own story. Hands in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* not only signal traumatic experiences by their gestures, but Warland’s hands materialize the trauma memory: “Sudden pungent smell of semen on the web of my hand, so strong, precise, my therapist recognized it too” (14). Just as Warland’s body produces the (irrefutable) memory of trauma, Williamson’s body is the medium that instantiates memory:

MONTHS LATER, THE SECOND TELLING COMES OUT OF MY HEAD like a slide show. Between the right ear lobe and temple, a slit opens up. No blizzard obscures the straight-ahead traffic of Edmonton Trail. Blinded by the images of a photographic slide framed by white

cardboard, I pull over to the side of the highway. As intense as a waking dream, nothing to do but look through the lens of my mind, now projector.

(18)

The body and the trauma memory are both technologized – the body becomes the mind’s lens, its projector, and the memory slide is produced by technological means.

Williamson’s body does not coincide with her subjectivity; rather the body masks the subject which looks through it. Not only does the phrase *now projector* suggest that the body and memory are technological, but the phrase also suggests that what the mind projects refers as much to the *now* as it does to the past.

In “Adorable Dora” and “Fragments of an Analysis,” Williamson constructs a genealogy predicated not, as in Lacan’s writing, on *the name of the father* but on the name of Dora: “This book is also about a collective history longer than my own – one that begins with Freud’s Dora” (11). This lineage of abused women shares a textual body. Williamson’s present body and Dora’s *hystorical* one are conflated in Williamson’s identification with her predecessor’s experience. She writes of both Dora’s experience and her own under the heading “[*from Dora’s journal*],” further eliding the difference between the two voices by excluding the date from these entries and writing in the first person. Their experiences, she suggests, are similar, in that both rebel against the psychoanalytic father who silences their story: “When you tell me Herr K’s advances are ‘neither tactless nor offensive,’ I don’t know what to say,” writes Williamson in Dora’s voice (163). She continues, “I hear my writing repeat over and over this sadness. *oh god oh god* addressed to no one. My haunting will not make me believe in ghosts. My words spill out in syllables and cries. Just *Oooohhh* or *Aaaahhh* or words to this effect” (164).

Here, the distinction between Williamson and Dora is less clear, first, because the entry from which the latter passage is taken melds the two points of view, and, second, because the symptoms she enumerates are echoed in other parts of the text more clearly located in the present. The regress of language from words to syllables recalls Williamson's inability to write (105) and her inarticulacy when confronted by her memories: "**THE FIRST TELLING** comes out of my skin like a smell, out of this bed like a shiver, through my spine like a tremor or shake" (16, original emphasis). The haunting recalls Williamson's father's suicide and its afterlife in her own body: "This book lives inside me long enough for words to become dangerous parasites. I recall my father's death by practicing my own" (123). The body, for Williamson, houses and articulates historical connections and acts as the medium to express inarticulable memory.

* * *

Memory is, ultimately, not about words but the body that houses them: "Words that force our forgetting: memories then held in our senses, speaking through symptoms, nervous physical habits, inexplicable intuitions, redundant emotional culs-de-sac" (Warland, 14). After recalling an incident wherein her father comes to her bed "under the cover of night" (46), Warland reflects:

out of character
 or in character?
 nobody would ever imagine –

precisely

no body [.] (47)

Impossible for others to imagine, Warland's experience becomes ciphered. Even her memory becomes, under these circumstances, unreliable. She cannot determine whether her "Pater of the night" (46) is acting within the limits of his character or outside them. Furthermore, that the question is followed by the line "nobody would ever imagine" suggests that her father's behavior is as encrypted as her own memory is. That her experience remains unacknowledged in the wider world results in her erasure from that scene. The speaker's life – and her memory of that life – becomes obscene in its etymological sense of outside the limits of sight.

The poet is reduced to "no body" (47) when words supplement body memory. Words add to the experience of trauma in that they contextualize it, make it understandable; words also replace the experience of trauma, producing their own event:

he grabs an old *Life* as she flings open the door. her eyes – mine (this is
not a dream): everything in that look. me terrified she'll find out
desperately wanting her to (please mom, can't you see?). she hesitates,
glances away – then deletes. "why are you here?" "just reading to Betsy"
he says. and she believes him. (76)

In this passage, language not only conceals a rape – the speaker's brother uses the act of reading to cover his crime – but it also produces its own event. Read and written words textually reproduce the abuse Warland has suffered. Furthermore, even though the connection between Warland and her mother is not contingent on language, its syntactical reproduction and dissolution by means of dashes mimics the linguistic structure and the act of reading that obscures both the crime and the victim.

Similarly, Williamson writes,

To testify is to encounter – *and make you encounter – strangeness*. I write I did not experience incest and feel abject, ashamed at my lack of courage. I write nothing, and am saddened by the blank page. I write nonsense and am aggrieved by this play of dissimulation. I write. I find myself dissolved into these letters which you hold in your hands. (42, original emphases)

Here, too, as in *The Bat Hat Blue Eyes*, words erase the speaking subject. The speaker dissolves into letters, becomes, as Warland writes “no body” (*Bat* 46) – nobody, but words.

* * *

Dori Laub suggests that the very act of speaking in a testimonial or therapeutic setting breaks the frame of the trauma story. At least, such an act breaks the referential connection between speech and event:

The woman’s testimony, on the other hand, is breaking the frame of the concentration camp by and through her very testimony: she is breaking out of Auschwitz by her very talking. She had come, indeed to testify, not to the empirical number of chimneys, but to resistance, to affirmation of survival, to the breakage of the frame of death [. . . .] It is not merely her speech, but the very boundaries which surround it, which attest, today as well as in the past, to this assertion of resistance. (62)

In Laub’s account, by speaking, the trauma survivor attests not to the factuality of her experience but to the very impossibility of speaking, to the *unthinkable* and

incomprehensible nature of the experience, and of the relation between trauma and subjectivity. For both Williamson and Warland, the memory of trauma and the act of testifying to that memory are in tension with one another. Although testimony is understood in both judicial and therapeutic settings to refer to a *real* historical event, to recall an originary moment, Williamson suggests that “[s]tories are gathered from memory and told in images and words that leave tracks somewhere between imagination and history” (11).

The act of testifying does not referentially connect to past experience or even to the memory thereof but to the very act of speaking. The witness who testifies announces the disintegration of the knowing/speaking subject: “Precisely because testimony is the relation between the possibility of speech and its taking place,” writes Agamben, “it can only exist through a relation to an impossibility of speech – that is, only as *contingency*, as a capacity not to be” (145, original emphasis). According to Derrida, “[a] testamentary scent always presupposes [. . .] at least a third party who sees, the mediation of a lucid witness” (*Memoirs* 21). Nonetheless, he calls into question the very possibility that lucidity and witnessing can coincide. The one who cannot see, he claims, is paradoxically the most reliable witness (104):

[A] witness as such is always blind. Witnessing substitutes narrative for perception. The witness cannot see, show, and speak at the same time, and the interest of attestation, like that of the testament, stems from this dissociation. No authentication can show in the present what the most reliable witness sees, or rather, has seen and now keeps in memory. (104)

The act of testifying, of bearing witness, instigates the adoption of an impossible subject position. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida suggests that the act of drawing mimics that of speaking and both actions are implicated in the transmission of narrative:

By praying on the verge of tears, the sacred allegory *does* something. It makes something happen or come, makes something come to the eyes, makes something well up in them, by producing an event. It is performative, something vision alone would be incapable of if it gave rise only to representational reporting, to perspicacity, to theory, or to theatre, if it were not already potentially apocalypse, already potent with apocalypse. By blinding oneself to vision, by veiling one's own sight – through imploring, for example – one *does* something with ones eyes, *makes* something of them. (122, original emphasis)

Tears reveal, even as they partially obstruct the vision of the one who cries. The affect they represent, for Derrida, lends weight to the witness's words; they become evidence of trauma. The tearful witness, as Brison notes (70), is more likely to be believed. Tears are most effective because of their inarticulacy. The *crybaby* of Williamson's text is not trustworthy precisely because she is articulate. Thus, for Williamson, bearing witness is an interplay of gazes,

inadequate

to

the

task

of

story
[. . . .]
the
strip
of
self-disclosure
looped
circuit
of
looking
being
looked
at [.] (35)

Words are not spoken. Their existence is separate from the speaking subject; they “read/ themselves” outside the testamentary economy of gazes.

For Agamben, the witness must mediate between the *testis*, or third party, and the *superstes*, or the one who “has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore *bear witness* to it” (17, my emphasis):

[T]he meaning of “witness” also becomes transparent, and the three terms that, in Latin, express the idea of testimony all acquire their characteristic physiognomy. If *testis* designates the witness insofar as he intervenes as a third in a suit between two subjects, and if *superstes* indicates the one who has fully lived through an experience and can therefore relate it to others,

auctor signifies the witness insofar as his testimony always presupposes something – a fact, a thing or a word – that preexists him and whose reality and force must be validated or certified [. . .] Testimony is thus always an act of an “author”: it always implies an essential duality in which an insufficiency or incapacity is completed or made valid. (149-50)

The writer, in Agamben’s formulation, “completes” what he, at the outset of *Remnants of Auschwitz* identifies as an “essential lacuna at the heart of testimony” (14).

* * *

If *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!* undermine the very notion of referentiality by the rhetorical strategies they employ – Warland with her surreal symbolism and focus on language and frames, Williamson with her foregrounded cultural critique, retouched photographs, overt conjectures, and explicit denials – that is not to say that these texts are ineffectual. Rather, Warland and Williamson address a broader culture in the very terms it imposes. Williamson writes, “The crybaby’s song goes not unheard but unheeded; not only the story of woe but the desire to be heard warrants condemnation [. . .] The wronged woman and the abused child speak out and are repudiated” (9). Carol Tavis, in a book review in *The New York Times*, claims that autobiographical accounts of private trauma – specifically of incest – are self-indulgent: “Betsy Petersen¹² seems to have completely shut out ‘the world outside my skin,’ and ultimately this is the problem and the appeal of survivor narratives” (17). The middle-class incest survivor memoir, she continues, “places responsibility for the common problems in women’s lives on a single clear villain, someone safely in the woman’s past.

¹² *Dancing with Daddy: A Childhood Lost and a Life Regained*. New York: Bantam Books, 1992.

The victim doesn't have to do anything but understand the origins of her problems [. . .] And she gets a love bath from her friends and supporters. Who could resist?" (17). The best-case scenario, for Tavis, is that survivor narratives are formulaic and self-indulgent; at their worst, she suggests, these narratives may well be false. *Who could resist?* she asks, as though survivor narratives commonly claim specious claims of incest, as though the ease and benefit of writing an incest memoir outweigh the costs of doing so, and, in fact, as though the very act of writing were suspect. The qualities that, for Tavis, render writing suspect – the possibility it opens of containing the writer's *problems*, the valuation of individual over collective well-being, the *easy* support available to those who write about the trauma they experienced – are the very results that render writing seductive. The cultural denial of private traumas, then, does not necessarily extend to the content of the account, but it relates to the fact of speech. The crisis of testimony, for Williamson, is not a crisis of memory; rather,

the figure of the child has a lot in common with the woman who speaks into the wind; in spite of experience and accomplishments, the problem of legitimacy persists. The culture's unwillingness to listen to those imagined as less worthy of a voice is not about scale and chronology but a crisis of language, power, and the body. (176)

If for Warland, memory is located in the disappearing body, for Williamson, the body, even as it archives memory, locates testimony in the present. The body, itself, bears witness, remembers by re-enacting the past: "**IN 1996 MY BODY BECOMES A QUESTION** [. . .] This book lives inside me long enough for words to become dangerous parasites. I recall my father's death by practicing my own" (123). The body,

even as it enacts memory, transforms it. Even as “[c]hildhood is at the centre” of *Crybaby!* (11), the speaker’s “fifties childhood” is “disrupted by the past I recollect as an adult” (11). Furthermore, Williamson calls into question the historical referentiality of her text with the etymology she provides for the term she uses – *recollect* – to signify the memory of her childhood: “To recollect is *to gather again* [. . .]/ com + legere *to gather, select, read more at LEGEND*;/ *akin to Gk legein to gather, say logos speech, word, reason*” (11, original emphasis). The act of gathering and speaking stories is an act not only of remembering but also of selecting, of choosing what to remember. Finally, *Crybaby!* is about “a collective history, one that begins with Freud’s Dora” (11) and, indeed, about a history that exceeds Williamson’s own experience, inhabiting past, present, and future.

4. "Nothing is the same after the revelation": (Re)Storied Silences

speech & silence it is all one
- bp Nichol, "Monograms – Genealogy –
Grammarology"

The question is always a question of trace.
What remains of what does not remain?
- Robert Kroetsch, "hornbook #99"

In his essay, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," Derrida claims that the invocation of secrecy – of unspeakability – in language produces those very conditions it names, even as their spoken presence denies them. Derrida calls this function of language *dénégation*: "There is a secret of denial and a denial of secret. The secret as such, *as secret*, separates and already institutes a negativity; it is a negation that denies itself. It denegates itself" (25, original emphasis). This originary de-negation of the secret can occur only once the secret has been spoken and named as secret. *Let me tell you a secret; you must promise to tell no one else.* The utterance of those – or other, similarly significant – words makes the secrecy of whatever follows impossible, even as the secret does not exist until it is spoken: "There is no secret *as such*; I deny it," writes Derrida (26). "And this is what I confide in secret to whomever allies himself to me" (26). Just as the secret is constituted and denied in the same linguistic act, so too is the name of God, which in this essay functions for Derrida as the index of unspeakability: "The name of God (I do not say God, but how to avoid saying God here, from the moment when I say the name of God?) can only be *said* in the modality of this secret denial: above all, I do not want to say that" (26). Silence is, thus, a linguistic construct, produced by the language which lends it significance. Warland's and Williamson's narrative strategies – surrealism, fictionalization, and denial, among others – produce the

secret of their childhood victimization and reproduce the cultural silence surrounding incest and trauma. However, by placing their aporetic disclosures in a context wherein their secret is known and acknowledged, *in advance of being spoken*, Warland and Williamson ontologically transform the silence they invoke.

* * *

For Herman and other theorists of the recovery movement, the process of healing from trauma is deeply intertwined with the desire to enact social and political change: “[C]reating a protected space where survivors can speak their truth is an act of liberation [. . .] [B]earing witness, even within the confines of that sanctuary is an act of solidarity” (247). In order to regain both a sense of self and a sense of agency in the wake of a traumatic experience, in order to properly heal, the survivor is expected to narrate the trauma story in a therapeutic setting. In so doing, Herman claims that the survivor transforms the very meaning of the trauma story: “The work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). She contends that storytelling transforms “wordless *and static*” *traumatic* memory into *normal*, unpathological, memory (175, my emphasis). On this point, Herman cites Pierre Janet, who claims that so-called *normal* memory is “the *action* of telling a story” (qtd. in Herman 175, my emphasis). The status of memory – and, by extension, that of the trauma story – is, by this account, circumscribed by the survivor’s performance thereof. Memory becomes a speech-act, not an ontological category.

Only integrated memory can be properly storied, according to Herman and Janet; paradoxically, a memory cannot be integrated *until* it is brought into language. At stake for Herman in this narrative performance of the trauma story is the (re)creation of a

unified and adjusted subject and the empowerment of that subject to act both powerfully and ethically. This is not to say, however, that for Herman the trauma story itself remains static after being told: "The reconstruction of the trauma story is never entirely completed; new conflicts and challenges at each new stage of the lifecycle will inevitably reawaken the trauma and bring some new aspect of the experience to light" (Herman 195). In fact, a certain dynamism characterizes this stage of the healing process. As Herman writes, when the major portion of the reconstruction has been completed, "[t]ime starts to move again" (195). The ideal *life story* at the conclusion of the healing process is no longer characterized by the dissociations and somatic symptoms of the original, *traumatic* memory:

After many repetitions, the moment comes when telling the trauma story no longer arouses quite such intense feeling. It has become a part of the survivor's experience, but only one part of it. The story is a memory like other memories, and it begins to fade as other memories do [. . . .] When the "action of telling a story" has come to its conclusion, the traumatic experience truly belongs to the past. (195)

We do not, however, as I earlier claimed, speak to the past so much as we, by speaking, bring the past into the present, and it is only in the present that the past can be changed. The transformation that Herman posits is not only borne out in the transformation of individual memories and symptoms, but it is, more importantly, manifest in the possibility of a cumulative, revolutionary change on the societal level (Doane and Hodges 7). Brandt writes that the only way to stop public and personal violence "is for each person to withdraw into *silence* & self-reflection & grief & self-transformation, to

come to terms with their own personal history of violence, & *then to speak about it*" ("black ball" 54, my emphases). Speech, or storying, does not here engender understanding and self-transformation, but it follows from them. Although public statements make possible societal transformation, silence necessarily precedes the insight, the *coming to terms*, the healing from which public statements can be made; as such, silence makes speech possible.

Although both authors acknowledge the impulse toward narrativizing their experience and the potential for transformation encompassed by that project, Warland and Williamson, to varying degrees, question the ideal, integrated story that Herman presents in *Trauma and Recovery*. Warland bristles against the

nostalgia for narrative

credo of characters

everything spelled out

structure that characterizes traditional narrative form (51). Such a structure would reify what Herman insists is the collective "truth" (247) expressed by a multiplicity of trauma survivors. Such certainty, Warland contends, enacts its own violence. Specifically, stories – and those who tell them – compete with one another, attempt to subsume the other's voice. Indeed, others' stories have ciphered Warland's experience and delegitimated her voice:

(m.) Brain wave? As an incest victim of familial male sexual abuse, I watched how my abusers conceived and rationalized their violence and manipulation of my body by making language into a vehicle for deception and denial. (m.) Brain wash: CONsequently, I experienced the abusers'

power of words to not only erase but to cruelly invert the truth. (f.) Brain wave – I absorbed my abusers’ words of blame and denial, *which obliterated my words of fear and pain.* (*Proper 35*, my emphasis)

Thus, for Warland, the act of storytelling carries with it deeply suspicious undertones. In her use of language Warland questions the dominant power structures and seeks to escape her traumatic past; the act of speaking, she suggests, threatens to overturn these subversions. In her article,

“‘Words are for Forgetting’: Incest and Language in Betsy Warland’s *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*,” Leslie Ritchie writes that in *Proper Deafinitions* Warland “explicitly links her experience of incest with the ability of language to rationalize abuse” (207). She connects the *brain wave* section of *Proper Deafinitions* to *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* in the following way:

[Warland] adopts an ironic dictionary-like form and assigns gender to supposedly neutral English words [. . .] Not surprisingly, in view of the complicity of the father tongue in erasure and inversion of the truth that Warland uncovers in *Proper Deafinitions*, in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* she emphatically declines the imposed feminine brain wave. (207)

For Warland, language and the act of speaking are the sites of conflict between an old system of meaning, exemplified by her father’s and brother’s uses of language, and her life’s newly re-storied signification, a system of signification that is encoded in “the language of hands” (59) and in her interaction with her lover’s body (97). Williamson, too, is deeply concerned with this crisis of meaning that renders the very act of storytelling suspicious. She frames this crisis not only as one of meaning but also in terms

of “language, power, and the body” (176). As such, the story of trauma is not, for Williamson, about what can be said or not but about “legitimacy” of voice (176).

Autobiographical storytelling is an act of public, therapeutic disclosure that “exposes a limit between the private and the public: it is a representation of personal experience meant to make a claim on public attention” (Gilmore 49). The disclosure of traumatic experience, then, refuses the limits of the speakable or the representable, and trauma narratives make the very claim on public attention that is socially prohibited. However, such disclosures are bound by what can be heard:

Can't stop reading about the body and memory. Want to write more ... about hysteria to blow apart the psychoanalytic mystification of desire and seduction. The equivocation in Freud's seduction theory masks fundamental refusals to validate women's stories of abuse [. . . .] *Whether real or imagined, the effects are the same.* The effects may be “the same” but the analysis, the cure, the recovery, the writing, the history, the facts, the touch, the legal and ethical issues, the family dynamics ... *nothing is the same after the revelation.* (Williamson 180, second emphasis mine)

Here, Williamson identifies one of the problems of connecting healing and integration to testimony as Herman does. If, as Herman writes, one can never know the entirety of the trauma story, if the story continually changes shape and evolves (195), if even the memory of the events themselves remains uncertain – either because a great deal of time has elapsed, because there is no incontrovertible evidence to support the survivor's memory, or because there has been so much denial surrounding the experience that the survivor does not know whether or not to believe herself—if any of these possibilities are

true, the question ceases to be exclusively one of healing and becomes one of ethical and juridical limits.¹³

* * *

Words have agency, entirely apart from their speakers, suggests Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech*. To have power – to be an agent or a subject – is to have language, and, thus, for Butler, language is “constituted as ‘agency’” (7). Therefore, she writes, “a *figural* substitution makes the thinking of the agency of language possible. Because this very formulation is offered *in* language, the ‘agency’ of language is not only its formulation but its very action” (7, original emphasis). Citing Toni Morrison’s 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature, Butler claims that violent speech does not merely represent violent action but that it enacts its own violence (6-7). As such, Butler claims that “[u]nteathering the speech act from the sovereign subject founds an alternative notion of agency and, ultimately, of responsibility” (16). This separation is transformative because, by separating the speech act from the one performing it, one allows “nonjuridical” forms of resignification to take place. Butler’s conception of the separation of language from speaker allows for meaning to shift in *unofficial* or *unbounded* ways and thereby to subvert established, juridical norms. However, this linguistic subversion does not transform the discourses it subverts; instead, it adds a layer of signification accessible only to those party to its creation, and, therefore, it has limited impact on groups with the power to subordinate other cultural visions to their own. The juridical norm on which popular understandings of testimony are based remain largely intact, and, in addition to subjecting the speaker, language is stripped of much of its

¹³ I would suggest that the juridical dimension of testimony affects private acts of disclosure in a far less noticeable way than it does public ones, and I highlight the question here because questions of ethics and legal responsibility surely condition some of Warland’s and Williamson’s silences.

transformative possibility when its agency subordinates the one using it.

For Williamson, the assumptions surrounding the reconstruction of incest memories causes “[t]he pain of remembering [to become] a revictimization of sorts” (44). This revictimization, as Williamson suggests, results from a conflict in critical paradigms associated with cultural understandings of trauma and memory:

The status quo has a long history. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, obsessions about masturbation and the continual policing of children’s sexuality acted not as a prohibition, but as an incitement to incest. This public and professional (medical, legal, psychological) concern with children’s sexuality did not necessarily protect the child. Rather it simply provided the public with a highly charged sexualized context in which to perceive children. (186)

According to Williamson, then, the entrenched medical, legal, and psychoanalytic discourses at the core of cultural understandings of trauma limit the possible understandings of victimization and circumscribe the value of testimony.

Gilmore argues that the juridical assumptions that permeate autobiographical discourse suppress the very language that would allow the survivor of trauma to articulate her victimization. In a discussion of Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*, she writes,

Not only is there no ready-made language that Bone can use to tell what Daddy Glen is doing to her, rather, that language is suppressed by the very law that would define and criminalize incest. The disavowal of incest, in this text and beyond, partakes of a silencing collusion of subjects and legal

discourse around the contravened sites of sexuality, law, shame, family, and self-representation. (*Limits* 58)

Florence Rush identifies a similar paradox in the discourse of psychoanalysis: “Once a child has been raped or molested,” she writes, “no matter how impressive the psychological nomenclature described by her caretakers, the little girl is an outcast, a nymphomaniac, a whore” (99). She argues that although, strictly speaking, Freudian theories regarding female sexuality are considered *passé*, the cultural assumptions that they expressed in the form of the female Oedipus Complex and the drive theory remain current:

[T]hough the words may have changed, the melody lingers on and Freudian concepts are more popular today than ever [. . .] [D]octors, nurses, educators and social workers – and parents who have never heard of “infant sexuality” or “penis envy” readily accept Freud’s theorizing that *children are sexy*;¹⁴ that they participate in, and even instigate, their own molestation; and that, in the famous words of every child molester, “the kid really asked for it.” (98, my emphasis)

Thus, language in the form of juridical pronouncements and psychoanalytic pathologization silences the survivors’ attempts to tell and interpret their experiences. In both *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!* this collusion between language and silencing profoundly informs the authors’ distrust of both the language available to them and the traditional structure of autobiographical storytelling: “The written word **was** The Bible – The Law: one in the same. The Word was The Truth. No questions asked.// in grade 3 i

¹⁴ I would like to distinguish this summary of the assumption about children that underlies Freud’s writing from more recent analyses of childhood sexuality. Jaqueline Rose, for example, suggests that, although children’s asexuality is fetishized, it is not the case that children do not experience erotic sensation.

lost faith in words,” writes Warland (35). Despite the danger of words, both texts turn on the need to transform the old story of women’s sexual victimization. The authors achieve this transformation, in part, by providing silence a voice.

* * *

Despite her claim that language is fundamentally untrustworthy, Warland acknowledges the importance of words to her project of *re-storying* her life: “[W]ords will not/ leave me alone,” she writes (12). Initially, her urge to “*tell* this old story/ in some new way” coincides with her desire to forget the very story she wishes to tell (12):

will words become bored,
abandon me
for another desperate one?

i’ve read if you play dead
the bear may sniff you
then amble away[.] (12-13)

The words and the story of Warland’s trauma, here, pose a metaphysical threat, and Warland speaks only reluctantly. In *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, the space of silence becomes a refuge. Her “mirage” is a space of “no words” (95), and she turns to the nonverbal expression and extralinguistic utterance to express the trauma and her healing.

Lundgren notes that Warland devotes little textual space to recounting the details of her experience (243). For Lundgren, this textual silence, this reliance upon others to supply the details, indicates Warland’s indebtedness to a tradition of sexual abuse narratives that began to be published in the 1980s: Warland is able to devote little textual

space to the scene of the abuse because “her text does not exist in isolation but builds on preexisting feminist work” (Lundgren 243). While it is undoubtedly true that Warland’s text builds on a developing tradition of incest narratives,¹⁵ in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* she actually devotes a great deal of physical (in addition to textual) *space* to the scene of trauma. Rather than simply referring to a series of preceding texts, Warland invokes silence as a testimonial strategy and as a means of preserving and transforming the memory of trauma:

Memory transposed into a textual or visual image is framed. It relinquishes the mutability it might have enjoyed within the shiftings of our minds and the minds of others sharing the initial experience. Its chatter and argument no longer mutable but mute. (37)

Silence in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, then, does not equate to *being silenced*, nor does it signify muteness and passivity, as Ritchie suggests it does when she pointedly notes that Warland “does not advocate repose for the eye or silence for the tongue, for she interrupts the space of the page with words” (221). It is not a question of what Warland does or does not advocate; the relationship between language and silence in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* is in a state of constant negotiation. The chatter of words, by falsely framing the abuse, subsumes the trauma and the healing process, rendering both illegible. Silence, however, is not the solution to the problem of storytelling. Rather, silence is inseparable from the transmission and transformation of the trauma story.

The speaker in *Crybaby!* finds herself unable to articulate the transformation she wishes to enact:

¹⁵ Cf. Doane and Hodges, Chapter 6, “The Incest Survivor Memoir” for a more detailed analysis of the place of experimental texts such as Warland’s and Williamson’s in the developing canon of survivor literature.

The child wants to write a different ending, but can't find her pencil to begin. The daily insists on mistrust; small betrayals. Thoughts of suicide or madness write themselves in commonplace books of bad advice. Her fears and dislocations may be dismissed as neurosis. Or will the ending be less torturous? (74)

For Williamson, in this instance, words merely reinforce the story she is trying to escape. Language *in the present* (re)inscribes a cycle of betrayal, mistrust, madness, and denial. The most common response to a woman's "fears and dislocations" is to pathologize them (Williamson 74). Women who articulate the urgent need to change social norms become subject to cultural silencing. Thus, the ostensible paralysis of inarticulacy is not, in fact, an experience of stagnation. However unable Williamson is, in the present, to realize her vision of transformation, she envisions a future utopia where such change is actualized:

Imagine the voices which have carried them here. I wants to imagine this place beyond the violence of retribution and exploited sensation. Beyond abandonment too. Straining her eyes into the dark street below, I is certain they have left her alone. I calls and calls into the deserted alley until she hears them shout from above. When they meet for a good talk, this roof of quiet locates her, filled with welcoming laughter, just beyond your sight. (155)

Not only does Williamson envision this transformed space, but she also balances reflection and social critique of the "inertia of this historical moment" which prevents the change she desires from taking place:

If the wellbeing of children were uppermost in the government's thoughts,

they might be concerned that since welfare cuts in 1993, the number of children in foster care increased almost 50 percent. Newspaper headlines read: *Poverty blamed for the rise of kids taken into care: Alberta growth rate leads the nation*, and yet the Social Services minister denies the impact of poverty on children and diverts our attention to more pressing moral conundrums like sexual orientation.

The insistence on maintaining a narrow definition of the family reinforces the erroneous association of homosexuality with pedophilia. The villains are *perverts* or *lone abusers* outside the traditional family circle. However the easy opposition of this moral tale falters when we examine those who abuse – more often than not upstanding god-fearing heterosexuals. (189)

The idealization of the traditional family, reinforced by patriarchal power, endangers children and silences survivors of domestic violence. The construction of isolated abusers and of their actions as *perversions of the norm* assumes a preexisting norm, and this assumption of normality places implicit judgment on those whose experience is understood to be abnormal. This judgment proves a powerful disincentive to speaking out.

* * *

In *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, Warland affirms the importance of silence in the transformation of trauma. She first refuses to be inscribed into the traditional healing narrative advocated by Herman and others. The fragmented girl/ woman/ writer present at the outset of her text is not unified at its close. The author/ narrator

writes

at the heart's cleavage

where it clefts or

splits apart (64)

Thus, not only does Warland refuse the lure of the ideal healing narrative for herself, but she also reclaims the split initiated by traumatic experience as a space of power and potency: "Femininity and the female body have taught i about the fluid nature of i. How relative and insubstantial i is. Without envy, i watches the effort required by men to endlessly reassert, maintain, and defend their I" (84). She claims the cleavage of the self as a space of women's writing. Rather than locating the transformative possibility of healing in the trauma narrative, Warland suggests that the greatest transformation occurs in the relation between speaking and its impossibility. *Re-storying* does not erase the split in the self's center, but the transformative possibility of testimony depends upon that space. When Warland coins it, the term *re-storying* occurs as the last item in a sequence, following from "re/storing" and "remembering" (14). The act of re-storying, then, promises a changed story, one that restores connections to others, one that re-members the subjugated body.

Theorists of the recovery movement base their assessment of the healing process and of the narrativization of trauma on the double meaning of the term *recover*: "The word *recovery* has a double meaning. It refers to the act of recapturing memories of incest that have been dissociated and forgotten, and it also suggests the process of healing from a traumatic event," write Doane and Hodges (6, original emphasis). However, these theorists refuse the possibility of adding a third meaning to the term *recovery*:

The temptation to use the term *recovery* in a playful way – in recovering

memories, victims re-cover the past – is hard to resist. However, given that *recovery* already has a double meaning as retrieval and healing, we have decided not to make our use of the term more complicated than it already is. (134 n. 7)

However much tripling the meaning of *recovery* complicates the term, it is, I think, necessary to acknowledge the desire to re-cover the trauma story in both *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!* by returning to a state of inarticulacy. The metaphysical threat embodied by the trauma story, the doubt and dread inherent in language and narrative, and the authors' emphases on unsettling narrative and realist autobiographical conventions, all these suggest that Warland and Williamson, by telling their stories "in some new way" seek to cover over the trauma story.

There is a plausible argument to be made that the final ecstatic invocation of memory (Warland 96-7) in conjunction with the process of re-storying evident throughout the text actually acts to minimize the epistemic importance of silence. I would, however, argue otherwise. First, Warland arrives at a public understanding and re/cognition of her past by way of "a story obscured" (10). In other words, only by having trusted the "inexplicable intuitions" that prompt her to probe beneath the surface of "the story that isn't a story but a punch line" (56), only by fragmenting and shattering the words and grammar she aligns with cognition, can she "subvert, deconstruct, and ultimately translate incest from 'invisible' to 'in-the-visible'" (Ritchie 207). Second, the ecstatic rebirth into a new cognitive frame at the end of the collection is, itself, counter-cognitive. Warland is not birthed into knowledge or logic or understanding; rather, her lover "renders [her] *speechless*" in returning her to the "mother letter" (97, original

emphasis). *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* performatively enacts a process whereby the poet moves from being constrained by words and a story that “will not/ leave me alone” (12) to embracing expression outside of language. She embraces a letter, a cipher, a metaphoric representation of space, not words. She ecstatically evokes her experience rather than expounding upon it. She is rendered speechless in the erotic possibility of being driven “down to the earth’s opening sound” (97). True, she arrives at a new understanding; however, the understanding is reached by way of a process grounded in the value of the unarticulated, the illogical, the incomprehensible, and the bodily.

Silence in *The Bat Had Blue Eyes* and *Crybaby!*, although it formally reproduces the cultural silence surrounding childhood sexual trauma, need not be read exclusively as denial or as (self-)censorship. Rather, the conditions under which both these texts were published collect a community of survivors, even as the authors re-collect their memories (Williamson 11). In their acknowledgments, both authors name a core group of women as those who *accompanied* them during the writing of their texts. These women – other survivors, critics, and therapists – exemplify the community for whom these texts are intended. Given that, for others, the “experience of abuse is shadowy/ ... almost assumed ...” (Warland 90), the stories contained in Warland’s and Williamson’s silences are already known, and the community’s ability to understand the trauma *outside of language*, without the explicitness of narrative, draws it together.

The refusal to speak also separates the community of survivors from those who would threaten its integrity. Warland speculates as to her abusers’ personal trauma histories:

who abused them?

i can not speak for them

imagine the details

i think it's safe

to assume you can[.] (90)

By her refusal to speak for her father or her brother, Warland refuses to appropriate their story. She refuses to take a place in it, even as she acknowledges the certainty of their suffering. Furthermore, by insisting that readers “imagine the details” – in contradistinction to the way she tropologically represents her own trauma history – she locates them on the margin of her re-storied life. Theirs is not a story she can understand, not only because she cannot know *who abused them* nor how, but also because she chose her story differently: “[B]rother – i have broken the chain,” she writes (89). The chain of abuse has, she said, lasted seven generations, and although her physical resemblance to her family and ancestors connects her to them, she has chosen to remember, to recover, to avoid repeating the old family story; her father and her brother perpetuated it.

Like Warland, Williamson, too, ends her text by refusing to speak: “Now all that matters is that this writing refuses to document, record, reveal their words. All that matters is vagueness, abstraction, and indeterminate scenes,” she writes (192). The women may share their stories of violation in this last scene that pertains directly to childhood trauma; however, Williamson insists that the “[d]etails are confidential” (192). All that matters is that the community of survivors regains its integrity. It may be that the “small story” allows the survivor to “exit from an old empire of fear” (192), but the

silence that frames that healing story both allows it to emerge and reinforces its integrity.

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