

Rhetorics Of Girlhood Trauma In Writing By Holly Goddard Jones, Joyce Carol Oates, Sandra Cisneros, And Jamaica Kincaid

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HOLLY GODDARD JONES, JOYCE CAROL OATES,
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by

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ABSTRACT
RHETORICS OF GIRLHOOD TRAUMA IN WRITING BY
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This dissertation examines representations of sexual-based girlhood trauma in American literature during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Using critical theories in the fields of trauma, feminist, and rhetorical studies, it focuses on the evocative demands rhetorical structures place upon readers' interpretations and completions of plot, which effectively draw readers' attentions to the social conditions surrounding girlhood trauma. Thus, the literature of focus in this dissertation ultimately functions to expose, question, and undermine oppressive cultural constructs that facilitate the psychic and physical traumas of fictional characters. Equally important is that this study demonstrates the alignment between narrative strategies and sociological trauma theories, and, thus, demonstrates the value of literature in analyzing and understanding the social phenomenon of girlhood trauma.

Specifically, Chapter Two examines how unstable irony functions to expose characters' (and readers') ignorant and active complicity in relation to gender-based violence in the short stories "Good Girl," "Parts," and "Proof of God" from Holly Goddard Jones's collection *Girl Trouble*. I argue that the use of irony in these interrelated stories is intended to show 1) how almost all members of a community are complicit participants in girlhood trauma, and 2) the dynamics by which girlhood trauma is linked to greater social trauma. Focusing on Joyce Carol Oates's "The Girl" and Sandra Cisneros's "One Holy Night," Chapter Three examines ambiguity as a rhetorical tool for exposing the damaging consequences of culturally accepted microaggressions on young girls' self-concepts. I argue that the ambiguity in these stories functions to reveal the girls' internalizations of microaggressions as a facilitating factor in their victimization. Chapter Four examines modes of rhetorical silence in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. In this chapter, I analyze Kincaid's use of omission, voice, and fragmentation to show that these rhetorical moves convey the pain of trauma that cannot be spoken. I argue that Kincaid's use of these moves triggers readers' vicarious realizations of the protagonists' traumas.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

“Do you remember the story of Philomel who is raped and then has her tongue ripped out by the rapist so that she can never tell? I believe in fiction and the power of stories because that way we speak in tongues. We are not silenced.”

- Jeanette Winterson

In Holly Goddard Jones’s “Parts,” as a mother reflects upon the violent death of her daughter, she remembers Shakespeare’s play *Titus Andronicus* and the acts of violence inflicted upon Lavinia: after raping Lavinia, her perpetrators cut out her tongue and cut off her hands in order to silence her. Consequently, not only can Lavinia not name her perpetrators, she cannot convey the experience of her trauma. With this Shakespearean reference, Goddard Jones captures the essence of the dilemma at the heart of my dissertation project: in a culture that has arguably “cut off the tongues” of feminized victims, what rhetorical strategies do writers employ to represent the psychic scars and experiences of trauma that their characters bear, and to expose cultural practices that contribute to the sexual traumatization of these victims? The purpose of this project is to study how the writing strategies of women writers function to: 1) convey the psychic and physical traumas of real or imagined feminized characters, 2) expose and undermine oppressive cultural constructs that restrict the communication of these “unspeakable” events, 3) evoke readers’ reflections regarding their complicity within these cultural constructs, and, finally, 4) interrupt and challenge complicitous behaviors and silences. Thus, I analyze the social function of literary rhetoric, or the manner in which literary rhetoric provokes readers to recognize, question, and interrupt systems of sexual violence and trauma.

Scholars have discussed the myriad of challenges that make representations of girlhood trauma difficult to both write and discern. First, social codes of discourse dictate silence about girlhood trauma. As scholar of women's rhetorics Cheryl Glenn discusses, voice, or the lack thereof, is a construct that is part of a greater communication system produced by a "dominant group," which in many situations and cultures is white men, that has historically silenced the female experience, particularly when that experience challenges established patriarchal systems. Glenn argues, "Throughout Western social history, all people gendered feminine (or weaker) have been systematically muted if not silenced" (10). Sexual assault survivors Susan Brison and Nancy Venable Raine discuss how this silencing is accentuated in experiences of sexual violence, which not only further traumatizes victims but also serves to facilitate the continuation of the violating systems. Second, the well-studied repressed and fragmented nature of trauma memories makes remembering, narrating, and recognizing trauma difficult. Trauma scholar Bessel van der Kolk explains that traumatic experiences "may totally resist integration" into the victim's mental schema; further, because trauma is "initially organized on a nonverbal level," most traumatic memories are "experienced as fragments of the sensory components of the event" ("Trauma" 282, 287). Third, up to this point, trauma studies have largely focused on large-scale, historically located traumas, such as wars, genocides, and the Holocaust, or what Laura S. Brown calls the "normal" or "agreed-upon" traumatic events (101). However, relatively little critical attention is paid to what psychologist Maria Root terms "insidious trauma," which Brown defines as "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the spirit and soul" – the

type of trauma that many feminized individuals experience under intersecting systems of oppression (Brown 107). It is the traumatogenic effects, both overt and subtle, of cultural oppression in which I am most interested for the purposes of this dissertation, for it could be argued that it is the cultural *commonness* and insidiousness of sexual-based girlhood trauma that make it difficult to both write and discern.

Numerous scholars across diverse disciplines have established that patriarchal social structures create and reinforce cultural norms, which are among the most forceful silencers of female trauma. In women's studies, Brison and Venable Raine wrote philosophical memoirs explaining how cultural codes not only stifle the expression of traumatic experience but also create cultural symbols that are transformed into pre- and post-memories that instill widespread fear in girls and women. Historian Dominick LaCapra emphasizes that the cultural practice of discussing trauma from an objective, scientific point of view, rather than with empathy, inflicts a double trauma on victims that serves to perpetuate both the trauma and the silence. Literary scholar Leigh Gilmore picks up on LaCapra's argument in *The Limits of Autobiography*, explaining how some victims, fearing further traumatizing scrutiny, realize the cultural limits of autobiography and, thus, turn to the genre of fiction to express their lived traumatic experiences. In *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*, Deborah M. Horvitz discusses the privileged male position in instances of female trauma and illuminates how, historically, female victims and the analysts who worked with them (including Freud) were labeled "hysterical (read 'mentally unstable liars')" or were socially ostracized when they spoke of this trauma. In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Glenn further explains how women and those deemed "Other" have been excluded from

public communication and the processes of creating cultural forms and productions. She states, “Power and authority in cultural production have customarily been the prerogatives of the male citizen. The work and experiences of Others have been entered into the general currency of thought on terms determined and approved by these male citizens” (24). Therefore, I would follow, men with authority have the power to structure communal and individual thoughts as well as reality so that they themselves are the privileged figures in social events and interactions, regardless of what is inflicted upon those individuals and groups of individuals in the peripheries, including girls and those deemed Other.

Females’ internalization of this privileged-peripheral social structure, by means of internalized objectification, is another social mechanism by which their traumatic experiences become unrecognizable and, thus, silenced. As Horvitz states, “[I]ndividuals internalize the material conditions of their lives, by which I mean their social and economic realities, through symbols, fantasies, and metaphors” (5). Horvitz further explains that this internalization results in repressed traumatic memories, which may resurface in narratives. Feminist philosopher Diana Tietjens Meyers agrees with Horvitz, arguing, “Cultural gender imagery becomes lodged in individuals’ cognitive, emotional, and conative infrastructure and subverts self-determination” (“Research”). Thus, women and girls often absorb oppressive and violating cultural images that not only constrain them but that also carry out the work of the patriarchy.

For individuals who fall within intersecting systems of oppression, self-determination and trauma become even more complicated. Anne Cheng contributes to the theory of internalized objectification in her discussion of race. Cheng explains that

external (white) voices of power are often internalized by (racialized) subordinates, which contributes to the psychic wounds and dehumanization of the racialized. Further, Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Michelle L. Yaiser argue that when women – or girls – are studied as one essential group (or as white, middle-class, heterosexuals) regardless of individual differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, or ethnicity, individuals who fall outside these limiting identifiers are marginalized further. While I am highly cognizant of and sensitive to my authors' creations of characters positioned within different intersecting systems of oppression, my primary lens of analysis is the intersection of feminine youth because, in this study, the most brutally victimized characters share two common points of intersection: age (youth) and gender (feminine).

Representations of trauma experienced by children are complicated further by the disruption of identity and the struggle for identification that characterize the experiences of victims within this demographic. As fiction writer Paolo Giordano explains, one difference between young and adult traumas is that children and adolescents do not have the level of experience or tools for coping with and overcoming their traumas as adults do. He argues that children and adolescents need to “see their own pain reflected in someone else. Only in this way will they start to understand and analyze it” (“Presentation”). However, this identification and healing process – and, thus, identity formation – is challenged for young girls identifying with other oppressed feminized figures, many of which often are performing according to patriarchal dictates.

An analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed in women's fiction about girlhood trauma has yet to be conducted. Studying these stories is significant because, as Patrick Shannon states and questions, “Stories are political. Whose stories get told? What

can those stories mean? Who benefits from their telling? These are political questions because they address the ways in which people's identities – their beliefs, attitudes, and values – are created and maintained" (xi). Thus, analyzing stories about traumatized girls can reveal to readers: 1) how most girls, and individuals in general, are socially educated to assimilate sexual-based traumatic experiences, their own or another's, into greater cultural narratives that dismiss, devalue, and/or silence these traumas; and 2) how victims struggle in coping with their traumas while the general public struggles with identifying these traumas due to this education. Furthermore, unlike straightforward critical information, narrative representations are unique in their power to pull the reader into the inner lives of characters, evoke the reader's conscience (or empathetic unsettlement), and challenge the reader's complicitous behaviors, silences, and beliefs.

Appropriate modes of representation of trauma are a significant concern of trauma scholars. LaCapra supplies one of the pressing questions of trauma studies in the humanities: "What modes of narrative are most suited for rendering traumatic events . . . [and] Does one's empathetic unsettlement in the face of such events . . . itself have implications for the writing (including the very style and rhetoric) [of literature]?" (205). LaCapra is concerned primarily with the writings of historians; however, he also calls for these questions to be addressed in literary studies. While trauma scholar Cathy Caruth claims that trauma can only be represented with narrative gaps that resist a direct reference, LaCapra questions readers' empathetic responses to these gaps and argues for trauma writing that imposes interpretive limits. In the literature on which this dissertation focuses, the narratives are, indeed, created with rhetorical spaces that unsettle readers' empathies, for in a cultural *system* of sexual-based violence, a system in which we all

partake, readers find themselves empathizing not only with the victims but also with the parents of victims – or even young perpetrators. The authors provoke readers' identifications with the values and commitments of characters from whom readers simultaneously distance themselves (e.g., a character's obligation to his child, even after that child commits a brutally violent act), or readers find themselves interpreting character outcomes according to their own demographic positioning. Thus, the rhetorical spaces in these texts interrupt and challenge readers' positions and participations within violating cultural systems by means of defamiliarization: readers must stop and analyze not only the characters' complicitous acts and silences but also their own, as they identify with or distance themselves from these characters. Thus, the implication of rhetorical gaps in some trauma narratives is interrupting and challenging the cultural systems in which these traumas occur.

In analyzing the narrative strategies employed by authors to represent the phenomenon of girlhood trauma, my project both draws upon and contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of trauma, feminist, and rhetorical studies by joining in conversation rhetorical studies with trauma and feminist studies. Each of these disciplines holds significant concerns for interpreting representations of girlhood trauma; however, it is essential to distinguish the contributing purposes of each field.

Trauma studies are central to my project because they establish the foundational concepts for analyzing literary girlhood trauma: violence, trauma, voice, narrative gaps, empathetic unsettlement, and the implicated reader. I discuss not only the representation of sexual-assault trauma but also insidious trauma, which is often caused by what psychologist Derald Wing Sue identifies as microaggressions. Microaggressions are

emotional violations, such as ongoing verbal abuse, undermining, neglect, shame, humility, ridicule, and ostracization. Due to their cumulative and overwhelming nature, microaggressions have the potential to be extraordinarily harmful. I am particularly interested in the representation of the cumulative effects of microaggressions on the protagonists of focus in this study and how these violations not only anticipate and facilitate traumas but also how they silence the young victims and complicitous bystanders who commit or acquiesce to microaggressions. Literature is uniquely positioned to capture the dynamic between microaggressions and trauma, allowing the reader to *witness* and critically analyze this common dynamic and its harmful effects on victims and other members of a community. These acts of witnessing, analyzing, and recognizing are essential for effecting social change.

While trauma studies establish the critical foundation for my study of girlhood trauma, feminist studies emphasize the limitations that many girls, women, and feminized others encounter in working through their traumatic experiences. Critics argue that cultural constructs often silence the experiences of victims (and others both directly and indirectly involved), make it exceedingly challenging for feminized individuals to have their experiences acknowledged and heard, and/or deny victims and others the infrastructure to understand experiences of sexual-based trauma. As Patricia Hill Collins and Cheryl Glenn suggest, the victim's subordinate placement in the matrix of domination strongly determines the oppression and silencing that she encounters. In trauma studies, Horvitz adds to this argument by looking at how language is used to shape social views that discredit sexual assault victims *and* the critics who have historically argued in their defense. Meyers further argues the complexity of representing

trauma in her claim that the self-determination and agency of women and girls are constrained by internalized cultural images in which feminized figures are subordinate objects.

A rhetorical lens of analysis that attends to narrative perspective and structure is significant because this lens focuses the reader's critical attention on experiences and implications as they are expressed by authors within their texts. This approach demands very careful rhetorical listening on the parts of readers to the feminized perspective, which is absolutely essential for understanding the traumatization of girls. Rather than privileging cultural frameworks of understanding that presuppose the female experience and possibly impose further cultural silencing, careful employment of rhetorical analysis allows the feminized experience and construction of reality to emerge. As Susan Sniader Lanser states, "[F]emale voice . . . is a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practices . . . narrative voice is a site of crisis, contradiction, or challenge" (6-7). These narrative crises, contradictions, and challenges are precisely the points that this study identifies and explicates. Focusing on these narrative sites of political tension, critics can unpack the social dynamics behind feminized experiences, as female authors write them and, thus, work to alter political dynamics. The rhetorics in the literature of this project function at two levels. First, they destabilize readers' identifications, familiarizations, and empathies. Second, they *perform* the truth of girlhood trauma, for it is an experience fraught with ironies, ambiguities, and omissions due to the inarticulate and shameful reality of sexual-based trauma.

I argue that authors Holly Goddard Jones, Joyce Carol Oates, Sandra Cisneros, and Jamaica Kincaid create complex representations of girlhood trauma that include

rhetorical structures – ironic, ambiguous, and omitting structures – that place evocative demands upon readers’ interpretations and completions of plot, which effectively draw readers’ attentions to the social conditions surrounding girlhood trauma. Thus, these narratives ultimately function to convey the truth of the nature of girlhood trauma and to expose, question, and undermine oppressive cultural constructs that facilitate the psychic and physical traumas of fictional characters. Equally important is that this study demonstrates an alignment between narrative strategies and sociological trauma theories and, thus, shows the value of literature in analyzing and understanding the social phenomenon of girlhood trauma.

In particular, in Chapter Two, “Holly Goddard Jones’s Destabilizing Irony in *Girl Trouble*,” I analyze Goddard Jones’s rhetorical employment of unstable irony in three short stories from this collection – “Good Girl,” “Parts,” and “Proof of God.” I argue that Goddard Jones’s use of irony functions to expose both characters’ and readers’ ignorant and active complicity in relation to sexual-based violence. Goddard Jones’s employment of irony in these interrelated stories demonstrates 1) how almost all members of a community are complicit participants in girlhood trauma, and 2) the dynamics by which girlhood trauma is linked to greater social trauma. Goddard Jones reveals a consistent theme of social gendering and conditioning as confining forces for her characters – forces that limit their senses of personal agency and propel them to behave in manners that perpetuate a system of gender oppression and violence.

In Chapter Three, “Ambiguity of Oppression and Agency in Joyce Carol Oates’s ‘The Girl’ and Sandra Cisneros’s ‘One Holy Night,’” I build upon Chapter Two in my analysis of Oates’s and Cisneros’s respective employments of ambiguity as a rhetorical

tool for exposing the damaging consequences of culturally accepted microaggressions on young girls' self-concepts. I argue that the ambiguity in these stories functions to reveal the girls' internalizations of microaggressions as a facilitating factor in their victimization. Oates and Cisneros create ambiguous victim protagonists who are at once characterized as asserting their self-perceived agency and as objectifying themselves to appeal to their perpetrators. Thus, Oates and Cisneros expose the consequences of a culturally accepted system of oppression: girls internalize this system and, in effect, suppress their own traumatic experiences while glorifying their perpetrators. Also significant in this chapter is my discussion of Oates and Cisneros creating writerly texts with which they provoke conflicting responses in readers in a manner that creates an ethical imperative: the authors urge readers to examine their own participations in cultural systems in which girls are effectively dehumanized and disempowered.

Finally, in Chapter Four, "Unarticulated Girlhood Trauma in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid," I focus on Kincaid's "Girl," *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. I argue that Kincaid's rhetorical employment of omission, voice, and fragmentation in these texts convey the pain of trauma that cannot be spoken and parallel her girl protagonists' repressed and fragmented memories of trauma, which implicate a family and cultural system of sexual and racial domination. With these rhetorical moves, Kincaid also evokes her readers' vicarious realizations of her protagonists' traumas, for readers realize the protagonists' traumas as the protagonists do – through surges of memories that occur in nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusions disrupting the flow of (readerly) experience. Thus, Kincaid elicits readers' empathies for the experiences of her victimized characters.

In the end, Holly Goddard Jones, Joyce Carol Oates, Sandra Cisneros, and Jamaica Kincaid humanize the experience of girlhood trauma through their characters in a way that no critical theory – trauma, feminist, sociological, or otherwise – can. Each author effectively imbues her protagonist(s) with appropriate girlhood emotions and dependencies so that readers are troubled by the events of the narrative as they unfold. Further, each author captures the minutia of social dynamics in which these girls are caught – social dynamics in which we all partake – and instills in these dynamics irony, ambiguity, and silence in order to create narrative tensions that not only capture readers' attentions but also make readers interpret and work out for themselves the character outcomes based on both the narrative and social cues provided. In this way, each author 1) defamiliarizes her readers, making them more aware of – and sensitive to – the harm behind social interactions that they may have previously perceived as benign (if they perceived them at all), and 2) acts as a proponent of social change. Because of these targeted social dynamics, the authors position the reader as witness to the characters with whom they might identify so that the reader might recognize moments of opportunity to effect change, moments in which the reader can challenge a perception or belief, thus altering the course of events – and potentially the lives and outcomes of young girls and other feminized individuals.

Chapter Two:

Holly Goddard Jones's Destabilizing Irony in *Girl Trouble*

"Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth."

- Pablo Picasso

"Since we began life as infants, and made various judgements concerning the things that can be perceived by the senses before we had the full use of our reason, there are many preconceived opinions that keep us from knowledge of truth."

- Rene Descartes

Critical to understanding and challenging the common phenomenon of girlhood trauma is recognizing the systematic processes by which individuals impacted by this trauma are silenced in the aftermath of violence. In *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*, Deborah M. Horvitz establishes the twentieth-century history of this systematic silencing, emphasizing individual female traumas as part of a greater social phenomenon. Building upon the arguments of scholars before her, Horvitz links what she terms "personal traumas," or "sodomasochistic violence against a *designated* victim, who is personally known by her assailant," to what Horvitz coins "cultural or political trauma," or "an officially sanctioned, sodomasochistic system of oppression in which a targeted group perceived by the dominant culture as an obstacle to the goals of the existing hegemony, are tortured, imprisoned, or killed" (11, emphasis in the original).¹ Horvitz argues that "[o]nly in a culture that sanctions heterosexual misogyny can sexual violence proliferate" and that the "patriarchy, itself,

¹ Horvitz builds her concepts and argument upon the work of theorists Laura S. Brown, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Judith Herman, Kali Tal, and Elizabeth Waites.

traumatizes women” (15).² Furthermore, Horvitz claims that for women and anyone deemed “Other,” “violence may be an *assimilated* facet of ordinary life” (15, emphasis added).

Horvitz, of course, is not alone in her claim that the prevalence of sexual trauma has required feminized individuals to integrate violence against them into their everyday lives. In “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” Laura S. Brown discusses the concept of “insidious trauma,” arguing our cultural structures violate women and Others on a daily basis – deeming them less than human – with the use of common, abusive rhetoric; philosopher and rape survivor Susan Brison claims that our cultural constructs actually instill the expectation of violence in women and girls.³ Because violence is silently instilled as a cultural expectation by both men and women, it becomes systematic; and individuals, in their failure to resist it, passively reinforce it. In this way, the silence surrounding girlhood violation and trauma functions as a powerful mode of social control and conduct.

² While Horvitz primarily focuses on the traumatic experience of women, it is significant to note that boys and men who are put into the position of Woman within a patriarchal cultural logic which codes Woman as less powerful also suffer oppression and violence.

³ In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self*, Brison introduces the concepts of pre- and postmemories of gender-based violence. Brison defines postmemories as images of gender-based violence that girls “absorb [and retain] from culture,” and prememories as a fear and anticipation of gender-based violence in the future. She writes, “Girls in our society are raised with so many cautionary tales about rape that, even if we are not assaulted in childhood, we enter womanhood frightened with postmemories of sexual violence. The postmemory of rape not only haunts the present, however ... but also reaches into the future in the form of fear, a kind of prememory of what at times seems almost inevitable: one’s own future experience of being raped. Postmemories (of other women’s rapes) are transmuted into prememories (of one’s future rape) through early and ongoing socialization of girls and women” (87).

Holly Goddard Jones fictionalizes these processes in her collection of short stories, *Girl Trouble*, in order to both expose and question the ways in which we are all implicated in this violence. To do so, Goddard Jones creates characters who passively, unintentionally, and unconsciously participate in the systematic violence against the feminine. She employs multiple forms of narrative irony that come together to create a paradigm in which well-meaning characters perpetuate a culture of gender-based violence and trauma. This is best exemplified in three stories in particular, including “Good Girl,” “Parts,” and “Proof of God.” In these, Goddard Jones weaves together irony and narrative perspective to reveal how multiple protagonists – including the father of a perpetrator (in “Good Girl”), the mother of a young female victim (in “Parts”), and a young male perpetrator (in “Proof of God”) – participate, suffer, and/or are silenced within this system. Simultaneously, she exposes young female characters as the ultimate victims who are subjected to the most brutal violations and systematic muting. In her linking of these stories, Goddard Jones also reveals how the social gendering and conditioning of her characters limits their personal agency and propels them to act in ways that perpetuate a system of gender oppression and violence. Thus, Goddard Jones exposes girlhood trauma not as personal trauma, nor even as solely women’s trauma, but rather as part of a greater social trauma.

To illustrate Goddard Jones’s fictionalization of this process, I have divided the chapter into six sections. The first two discuss how Goddard Jones employs literary irony to expose the ways in which “girls” are trivialized in society and the ways in which patriarchy systematically sanction violence against the feminine. In the third section, I argue that the effect of Goddard Jones’s use of irony is to indict the complicity of all

within this system, for it is within our accepted system of gendering that the sanctioning of violence occurs. Sections four and five then examine how Goddard Jones exposes girlhood violations and traumas as social violations and traumas that characters are conditioned to perpetuate. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion on how Goddard Jones's use of unstable irony poses a final challenge to her readers who participate in these systems.

Literary Irony

Before proceeding, an understanding of the ambiguous concept of irony must be established in order to discuss Goddard Jones's ironic literary moves that evoke the reader's conscience and identifications in *Girl Trouble*. M.H. Abrams defines irony as "dissembling or hiding what is actually the case ... in order to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects" (135). In *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne C. Booth develops this definition and explains the process of reading what he terms "stable" versus "unstable" irony. Booth argues that with stable irony, an author's intended meaning is very clearly established within his or her text. In contrast, with unstable irony, the author's intended meaning is difficult to discern, and sometimes a reader may be incapable of discerning the author's irony at all. Booth also argues that the reader is an active agent in interpreting and completing the irony and that upon this completion, the reader's "predominant emotion" is that of "joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits" (28). In *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Linda Hutcheon challenges Booth's concept of stable irony with the assertion that "all ironies, in fact, are probably unstable ironies" (195). Hutcheon argues that irony is a "discursive strategy that depends on context and on the

identity and position of both the ironist and the audience” (194-195). Authors employ these different social positions in a manner that allows the reader to see from disparate perspectives at once, which ultimately evokes from the reader a more nuanced and complex interpretation of the author’s text and subject matter. Further, rather than irony *creating* communities of shared understanding, which is the assertion Booth makes, Hutcheon argues that “discursive communities . . . are what make irony possible in the first place” (195). Indeed, the reader’s own discursive communities allow the reader to shift interpretative lenses and hold multiple readings in mind at once, for with each of the reader’s communities, the reader brings a different set of experiences and understandings to the ironic moment and so is able to interpret and complete the irony in multiple ways. So rather than finite, stable moments of irony, different contexts and social positions make irony very unstable.

Hutcheon’s concept of unstable irony provides a strong critical lens for analyzing how Goddard Jones creates an ironic structure that perpetually casts characters in multiple lights, as both victims of an oppressive system and as complicit in perpetuating this same system. Interpretation of these roles of victim or complicit perpetrator rests upon the reader’s multiple positions in his or her particular discursive communities. Indeed, the unstable irony in *Girl Trouble* simultaneously instigates multiple responses within the reader, including opposition to the lack of concern for or focus on the rape victim, identification with the protective instincts of a parent, and/or even sympathy for a perpetrator. Thus, the literary accomplishment of Goddard Jones is that, through the use of unstable irony, she first challenges readers to reflect upon their own identifications, social positions, and discursive communities as the reader relates to or rejects various

perspectives regarding girlhood trauma in the text, and, second, in so doing, she creates a collection of stories that does the important cultural work of commenting upon and even attempting to intervene indirectly in the complex phenomenon of girlhood sexual trauma. For in bringing these disparate perspectives together in the mind of the reader, Goddard Jones challenges: what do we, as individuals, do about our participation in this system in which girlhood trauma is a cultural norm?

The Ironic Evasions and Trivialization of Girls in *Girl Trouble*

Goddard Jones's use of irony begins immediately with the titles of her pieces. The conflict she creates between the initial images of her titles and the actual content of her stories effectively establishes the silenced and marginalized social positioning of girls and women in these fictional worlds. *Girl Trouble*, Goddard Jones's title for her entire collection, first captures this irony-induced tension. Goddard Jones explains her title choice in an interview with Jaclyn Alexander of BOMBlog. Alexander introduces her interview with Goddard Jones with the statement that, for many readers, "the words 'girl trouble' may conjure up images of teenaged girls talking on the phone about boys." However, Goddard Jones counters this initial image in the interview, explaining,

I chose "girl trouble" because it's a phrase lodged in the male point-of-view. Women don't generally have girl trouble. At its most benign, the phrase refers to a young man's romantic problems But the bigger troubles in the book are . . . an amplification of that disconnect between men and women, that misplaced desire The phrase trivializes it, just as men trivialize women by calling them "girls."

Goddard Jones unsettles her readers with this amplified disconnection, and not only because the reader's expectations are jilted by the irony, but also because the reader's sympathies are often stoked for characters whose struggles seem, at best, secondary to

those of the victims. For while most of the stories are based on a gender-based violation of a girl or woman, they are centered on the concerns of other – mostly male – characters who have some direct and/or complicit link to these violations. In the three stories I am discussing in this chapter, Goddard Jones gives readers the perspectives of Jacob, a father struggling in the aftermath of his son Tommy raping a young girl; Dana, a mother grieving after the rape and murder of her daughter Felicia; and Simon, the young man who raped and murdered Dana’s daughter.⁴ I will argue that, in each, Goddard Jones structures the narrative so as to ironically capture the seemingly socially sanctioned evasion of the traumatized girl’s perspective.

The title of the opening story of the collection, “Good Girl,” suggests to the reader that this is a story about a girl, and the first line of the story tells the reader that this girl is a victim of rape. The third-person narrator tells the reader, “A year before Jacob’s son, Tommy, was arrested for raping a fifteen-year-old girl, the police chief came to his shop about the dog” (1). Goddard Jones creates a moment of readerly shock and revulsion with the words “raping” and “fifteen-year-old girl” by instigating the moral significance many readers give these linked words. However, rather than focusing the reader’s attention on this girl, or on anyone who might be sympathetic to this girl, Goddard Jones immediately immerses the reader into the interior thought process of Jacob and the subjects of *his* concern: his son Tommy, the perpetrator of the rape, and Tommy’s dog. The police chief comes to tell Jacob that Tommy’s pit bull has attacked a small neighborhood girl and the first few pages of the story reveal what these two men, Jacob and the police chief, are

⁴ “Parts,” in which Dana is the protagonist, and “Proof of God,” in which Simon is the protagonist, are written as companion pieces and give two different perspectives on the same event.

willing to do to protect Tommy from any legal charges and penal responsibility. Thus, the literary irony is set in motion with this opening scene: the reader's attention is focused on the distress and problems of a man and his perpetrator-son based on the traumas of two young girls, the young girl who has been raped and the young girl who has been mauled by Tommy's dog.

In "Proof of God," Goddard Jones creates a similar, and in some ways even more disturbing, ironic evasion. Again, the title of the story is deliberately ambiguous: in a story focused on a troubled young perpetrator (Simon) who, under the duress of being discovered as homosexual, rapes and murders a young girl (Felicia) and then walks free after he burns all of the evidence, including Felicia's body, we are left to question what "proof of God's" existence is shown in the story. Goddard Jones's reference to God and Simon suggests a Biblical perspective to some readers. Both the apostle Simon Peter and Goddard Jones's Simon instinctually act out of fear due to the social consequences of speaking their truths: Simon Peter denies his association with Jesus three times due to the consequences of being tried and sentenced to death; Goddard Jones's Simon rapes and sets fire to Felicia due to his fear of his father's wrath and of social ostracization should his homosexuality be discovered. Despite their crimes, both Simons go free: Simon Peter goes on to found God's church, while Goddard Jones's Simon becomes his father's associate in a successful local business.

Thus, Goddard Jones prompts the uncomfortable question: is the "proof of God" signified by Simon's ultimate freedom? After all, Simon's emotional anxiety is the narrative focus of concern – not Felicia's struggle. Further, Goddard Jones continually reiterates Simon's resistance to his friend Marty's plan regarding Simon losing his

virginity to Felicia: when Marty verbalizes his plan, Simon replies, “You’re crazy,” in a manner suggesting he does not want to participate. On the night of the rape, Goddard Jones writes that Simon “felt weighted down by inevitability, and he didn’t know another way [other than drinking] to disconnect”; Simon feels “relief” when he realizes that Felicia will “*just say no*” and tries to pull Marty from Felicia’s room when she refuses to leave with them (302-309, emphasis in the original). The reader understands that Simon finds himself in a desperate situation, and that he emotionally and verbally resists Marty at almost every turn of Marty’s plan; this focus logically makes many readers think that, in a disturbing way that disregards the ultimate fate of Felicia, the implied “proof of God” is Simon’s freedom.

Goddard Jones’s ironic evasion of the girls’ experiences in these stories and her redirection of the reader’s focus onto the experiences of these male characters, in part, signal the insignificance, marginalization, and objectification of young girls in this fictional world. These ironic moves also expose the consequences of this marginalized and objectified social status: the culturally sanctioned disposability and replaceability of women and girls. Thus, Goddard Jones captures in literature the violating culture in which feminized individuals are dehumanized and in which insidious trauma is their norm. In “Good Girl,” Goddard Jones employs the police chief’s demeaning and abusive rhetoric to expose how the cultural construct of victim blaming not only creates the expectation of violence but also blames women for their own victimization. The police chief responsible for handling the case states of Tommy’s victim Katie Winterson, and of girls like her,

These girls They're different nowadays. Time was, a girl knew what she should and shouldn't do She got in the truck with him And I heard things about her from that kid, the one who told me about Tommy. He said that she hangs out at the Sonic after her shift ends, smoking and drinking and all that shit. Fifteen, I mean A good girl just don't do that. Good girls know better. (25)

The fact that the police chief never refers to Katie by name suggests his failure to recognize her individuality and humanity, which, in turn, makes it easier for him (and potentially the reader) to dismiss her. The police chief's comments also suggest that Katie, in violating *his* code of feminine behavior, is responsible for the violence inflicted upon her. It might also be assumed that because Katie refuses to be silent and reports the rape, she is being denied "good girl" status, or in other words is a "bad girl." That Goddard Jones places this view in the mind of the police chief, the figure who is assigned to mete out justice and protect the oppressed, suggests her concern that there is, perhaps, no safe haven for women and girls in a patriarchal world in which their trivialization and dehumanization is the norm.

In "Parts," Goddard Jones exposes the insidiousness of this dismissal and marginalization of the feminine, for it is Felicia's (the victim's) own father, Art, who is most disturbingly conveyed as perceiving his daughter and other women in an objectified manner. Again, Goddard Jones's title "Parts" – which originates in Art's word choice and refers to women's breasts and genitalia – is deliberately ironic and ambiguous. "Parts," the reader learns, comes from a moment of discourse between Dana (Felicia's mother) and Art, who is a gynecologist. In one scene, Dana asks her husband if he ever becomes "aroused at work." Art admits that he does but that it is rare, stating, "Ninety-nine percent of the time they're just parts to us." Dana repeats (and Goddard Jones emphasizes), "Parts," to which Art replies, "Yeah. Like Picasso: a breast here, a leg there" (70-71).

With Dana's verbal reiteration and hesitation, Goddard Jones cues the reader to question the literal meaning of the text and to observe the disjunction between Art's words and Dana's sense of intrinsic value as a woman. Art very casually dissociates the full woman – her character, intellect, and emotion – from her body parts, as if this is the most natural perspective of a woman for him, as a physician, to have. Goddard Jones's employment of irony here exposes the cultural acceptance of feminine denigration: coming from a gynecologist, this "scientific" perspective may be interpreted as understandable, benign, and natural. Indeed, if not for Dana's hesitation, Art's words may not even faze some readers. However, the ironic narrative connection Goddard Jones draws between the title "Parts" and Art's word choices in a story concerning the death of Art's daughter who has been raped and murdered suggest that these words are not trivial, benign, nor natural; for they are the root of gender-based violence.

Indeed, it is in this moment of discord between Art and Dana that Goddard Jones directs the reader to her motif of female body "parts" as a significant element of the story – an element with which she points the reader to the cultural norm of objectifying women and girls, thus divorcing their physical body "parts" from their fuller humanity. In addition to Art's casual remark concerning female body parts, Goddard Jones portrays Dana as reflecting upon the following: in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia's hands are cut off and her tongue is cut out by her perpetrators in an attempt to silence her; parallel to Lavinia, in the aftermath of Felicia's trauma, her hands are amputated and her ear falls off; and Art rejects contact with Felicia's one perfectly intact body part, her foot (which is discussed in greater depth in a following section). Goddard Jones associates

Lavinia's and Felicia's shared experience of mutilation and silencing to imply that the sexual objectification of girls and women runs long in the history of patriarchal societies.

Behind the Irony: Exposing the Patriarchal Systematic Violence Against the Feminine

Goddard Jones portrays her characters – both male and female – as dynamic parts of a greater patriarchal system that not only acts as an impenetrable wall of resistance for feminized victims but that also grooms individuals to be participants within this system. As feminist theorist Marilyn Frye explains, the “locus of sexism” is not in a “particular act,” such as Tommy's and Simon's acts of violence against Katie and Felicia, but “is in the system or framework” within which that act occurs (845). Goddard Jones first conveys characters participating in and upholding this system in “Good Girl” when she depicts both Jacob and the police chief, in order to protect Tommy, readily sacrificing both Katie, the rape victim, and the unnamed girl mauled by the dog – those whom they acknowledge to be the “good” parties in the violent events involving Tommy. The police chief deems the parents of the small neighbor girl as “good folks” because they consent to silence regarding the attack on their daughter, which assures that charges will not be filed against Tommy (4). Jacob follows the police chief's lead. Jacob admits his love for Tommy's pit bull and calls her a “good girl” for the loyalty she demonstrates, but in order to protect his son, Jacob knows that he must sacrifice the “pit bull bitch,” as she is initially called. Thus, in a moment of the dog's trust and when she least expects it, Jacob shoots her in the head from behind (1). Goddard Jones ironically juxtaposes Jacob's

thinking about the dog and the neighbor girl to further demonstrate the similarly objectified position in which he places these two characters.

Goddard Jones creates a dialogue between Jacob and the police chief to convey that the actions these two characters take to protect Tommy are thoughtfully considered and planned: not only do they purposefully sacrifice the victims for Tommy's sake, but they do so with full awareness of Tommy's guilt. In a personal off-the-record meeting with Jacob, the police chief offers to withhold evidence that would lead to Tommy's rape conviction. The chief states to Jacob, "[T]he commonwealth attorney has to prove to the jury that there's sufficient evidence to try the case. If he can't – or if he doesn't – they'll throw it out Where do you think the attorney gets his evidence from What I'm willing to do is talk to the commonwealth attorney He takes my word on things. If I say back off, he probably will" (24-25). The chief gives two motives for this offer of perjury: 1) his perception that Katie stepped out of his determined proper feminine boundaries, as discussed earlier in this chapter, and 2) his long history and bond with Jacob. With this dialogue, along with the police chief's motives, Goddard Jones exposes a purposeful system working for Tommy and against Katie.

Further, Goddard Jones emphasizes Jacob and the police chief's connected personal histories, and their mutually beneficial and violence-based relationship to highlight their participation and dynamics within a patriarchal culture. She remarks that Jacob and the chief have known one another since they were teenagers, and now their respective businesses rely on the other's: the chief buys all of the police force's firearms from Jacob; in return, Jacob gratuitously maintains all of these firearms for the force. During the men's first encounter in the story, Goddard Jones symbolically depicts their

filiation through a reflection in Jacob's gun case: "[Jacob] wiped the big glass display counter . . . looking at his reflection with the guns crisscrossing below it. [The police chief] was taking off his hat by the brim . . . Jacob could see this too as the man walked up" (3). These narrative details of the crisscrossed guns and men's reflections suggest an exchange of power and control between the two. Indeed, as the chief offers to conceal evidence in Tommy's case, he states to Jacob, "Hell, Jake, we go back" (25). The chief's social power, which he maintains by a suggestion of violence marked by the phallic symbol of firearms, is clearly established, as is Jacob's financial and social standing based on his association with this power. Therefore, when Jacob's son encounters trouble with the law concerning his behavior with a local girl, Goddard Jones exposes how their dynamic functions behind the scenes: the police chief uses his connection with the commonwealth attorney to help Jacob's son, and Jacob silently acquiesces to the police chief's plan. Thus, Goddard Jones suggests an inevitable complicity between men, "old friends," dealer and gun buyer, in maintaining their power in a patriarchal society.

Goddard Jones's subtle focus on the patriarchal system these men uphold demands the reader to also contemplate how Tommy, a young man raised among these men, has been culturally groomed for violence within this system. Goddard Jones's narrative details reveal that Tommy has been raised in an environment in which women are denigrated. For example, Jacob employs the sexist Madonna-whore dichotomy as he reflects upon his history of sexual exploits: "[T]he only thing he hated worse than himself the next day was the girl who gave it up to him so easily and thoughtlessly . . . 'whores,' he called them, 'cheap whores'" (11). With this reflection and the employment of the word "whores," Goddard Jones marks Jacob's history of dehumanizing and degrading

use of women. Further, Goddard Jones explains Jacob was attracted to his wife, “sweet Nora,” as he calls her, because she had “only been with one man, one time, and regretted it deeply,” thus marking what he perceives to be her Madonna or virgin-like status. Goddard Jones suggests that Jacob’s previous intellectual and behavioral tendency was to uphold the patriarchal constructs of the “good” and “bad” female. Due to Nora’s lack of experience and silent manner (which Goddard Jones notes when Jacob recalls verbally condemning other women with whom he slept and stating Nora “hadn’t disagreed”), Jacob perceives Nora as adhering to his construct of the “good” woman, a construct that serves to reinforce his young masculine experience (11). The manner in which Goddard Jones has Jacob reflect upon the young girls in the story suggests remnants of this dehumanizing attitude. He describes Tommy’s current girlfriend as, “twenty-six and had three kids already and a loose fold of stretch-marked skin that hung over the top of her low-slung jeans, but at least had her tubes tied” (5). There is a demeaning disgust underlying his description of this young woman. Likewise, after Jacob silently observes Katie Winterson in the aftermath of the sexual violence, he shallowly remarks, “She didn’t look beaten or traumatized” (27). Thus, Goddard Jones portrays Jacob as a man still incapable of seeing and understanding woman as fully human, or at least those women with whom he lacks a personal connection – and he is Tommy’s most influential model of masculinity.

Goddard Jones similarly depicts male ambivalence for the feminine as generationally passed on in “Proof of God.” Goddard Jones characterizes Simon’s father as a man who has little respect for women and who continually asserts his superiority. She writes of Simon and his father’s trivialization of Simon’s mother: “Nobody ever

listened to her . . . she was a weak, ineffectual women, and so her love, too, was weak and ineffectual” (289, 294). This disregard toward Simon’s mother forecasts the two men’s utter dehumanization of Felicia. One of the most disturbing aspects of the story is the support Simon’s father provides his son when Simon confesses his crime. Goddard Jones depicts Simon as “sens[ing], on a level he didn’t even care to acknowledge, that his father would understand. Would forgive him and maybe even support him” (300). With this insight, Goddard Jones suggests that Simon has learned at a subconscious level his father’s standards of gender dynamics, which establishes violence against the feminine as understandable, even an expectation. Indeed, Simon’s father *does* support his son by burning all evidence of the crime that Simon might bear on his body and then vows Simon to secrecy. Goddard Jones suggests that this generational complicity in misogyny is characterized by a similarly generationally passed on sense of superiority. Simon’s father is introduced as a “local leader” who describes himself as “*a pillar*” of his community and “a walking advertisement” of his success (285, emphasis in the original). When Simon’s car is vandalized, in an attempt to appease his father, Simon says to him, “They’re just jealous They don’t like seeing somebody have something they can’t” and Simon’s father responds, “Well, that goes along with the territory [of superiority] I guess” (288). Thus, Goddard Jones has the reader understand that Simon’s father is a man bound to a very traditional sense of masculinity that requires the assertion of one’s superiority to the detriment of others, and that he desires this patriarchal model of masculinity to shape Simon: it is the model to which Simon is expected to aspire and according to which he is expected to act.⁵

⁵ How Simon’s father’s expectations damage Simon will be more fully discussed

In “Parts,” Goddard Jones exposes how women are also inclined to participate in and generationally pass on this system. Goddard Jones portrays Dana, in the aftermath of her daughter’s violent death, reflecting upon her behavior with men. Goddard Jones emphasizes Dana’s excessively agreeable manner and her tendency to passively suppress any objections she may have to the ideas expressed by the men in her life. Goddard Jones employs Shakespeare’s play *Titus Andronicus*, in part, to illustrate Dana’s passivity. Goddard Jones creates a scene in which Dana reflects upon an undergraduate class that included an analysis of the play. Dana recalls, “[The play] affected me more deeply than I could admit” (63). Goddard Jones conveys that because Dana’s male professor dismissed the play with “disdain” and “presented it to [his students] as a curiosity and sometimes a joke,” Dana silenced her interest in it and adapted her professor’s beliefs and interpretation. Dana confesses, “I dutifully penned into my bluebook that [the play] was ‘easily dismissible’” (62). Goddard Jones’s ironic move here, of course, is that Dana abides by her professor’s instructions by suppressing her disagreement and disregarding the content and deeper themes of *Titus Andronicus* concerning the disposability of women. By depicting Dana as recalling this after Felicia’s murder, Goddard Jones implies that women are culpable of participating in their own subjugation in a misogynistic system.

Goddard Jones portrays Dana’s submissive behavior with this professor as a pattern that is more deeply etched into her marriage with Art. Because this relationship is Felicia’s primary model of gender relations, Goddard Jones suggests that Dana complicitously passed on to her daughter the gendered norms of male power and female

in a following section.

subjugation. Indeed, in this marriage, Goddard Jones's characterization of Dana impresses some readers as the epitome of the feminine woman defined by Frye, who critically explains that the feminine woman is required "to take up little space, to defer to others, to be silent or affirming of others" (849). This is precisely how Goddard Jones exposes Dana in her relationships with Art: she is the dutiful, affirming, and dependent wife, who consistently defers to Art's will. Goddard Jones constructs Dana's reflections to suggest her reinforcement, through silence and appeasing acts, of Art's sexual objectification of the female body. Goddard Jones indicates Dana's awareness of Art's insensitivity toward her even in her description of their first sexual encounter: Dana is characterized as remembering the experience in terms that convey pleasure for Art but distress for herself. Goddard Jones emphasizes Dana's discomfort throughout the experience as she describes the "scratchiness of the sound, and of [the] blanket," the feeling of the "concrete block wall," and the presence of "pain and blood." Dana casually remarks, "when *he* finished I cried, because I felt trashy," suggesting she felt used for Art's sexual pleasure, and that there was little or no consideration for her experience (76, emphasis added). Goddard Jones also portrays Dana's acceptance of marriage terms that mandate the compartmentalization of aspects of their sexual lives for Art's convenience. Dana reveals that she has always turned a blind eye to Art's "business trips" that, she suspects, involve so-called adult entertainment and probable infidelity. She states, beyond the strip clubs, "I never considered, or allowed myself to consider, the degrees of betrayal" (70). Thus, Goddard Jones depicts Dana as choosing to turn a blind eye to Art's betrayal and his use of multiple women, including herself, in order to keep her life intact,

even if this requires Dana's private acceptance of her own feminized position as the denigrated, pained, and emotional-isolated wife of Art.

Goddard Jones conveys the harm inherent in the gender dynamics of Dana and Art in two ways: first, Art's complete control in the marriage ultimately leaves Dana dependent and without any power of her own upon their separation; and second, Dana's reinforcement of female self-subjugation for the affection of a man contributes to her own daughter's death. In Dana's reflections, Goddard Jones has her acknowledge her relinquishment of her independence and individual identity – or her “interests and ambitions and hopes that existed outside of [her] daughter” – when she married Art (62). Goddard Jones portrays Dana as apprehending the consequences of this dynamic and her dependence most pointedly upon her separation from Art; Dana states, “I wasn't thinking then: Where I'd go, how I'd pay for it” (67). She confesses feeling “embarrassment” and “gratefulness” when Art offers her money and a credit card to live on while she tries to reestablish herself without him. Goddard Jones's emphasis on this exchange between Dana and Art reveals Dana's long dependence upon her husband for her life, a dependence that encourages her silence in periods of discord. At the same time, Dana's dependence upon Art, along with her desire to be perceived as a good wife, are too great for her to assert her disapproval. Thus, Goddard Jones portrays Dana as maintaining her silent submissiveness throughout the story. In effect, Goddard Jones suggests that even so-called benevolent sexism is part of a greater misogynistic system that contributes to the horrific objectification, violation, and death of young girls like Felicia.⁶

⁶ In *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, Derald Wing Sue defines benevolent sexism as follows: benevolent sexism “is composed of traditional stereotypes of women, yet they are viewed positively . . . benevolent sexists are motivated paternalistically to

Goddard Jones's portrayal of the incessant *repetition* of these gender dynamics along with the objectification, dehumanization, and disposability of the young female characters by males is one of the most disturbing characteristics of her stories, for she conveys that these young people are carrying out the cultural norms and expectations regarding gender established by the adults in their lives. Just as Goddard Jones reveals Dana as submitting to the desires and will of her husband despite her instinctual resistance in "Parts," her daughter Felicia is portrayed as submitting to the desires and will of Marty, whom she hopes to attract, in "Proof of God." Goddard Jones characterizes Felicia as initially and instinctually resisting Simon and Marty the night they appear at her dorm room. Goddard Jones marks Felicia's unease when Marty asks permission to enter her room, however, Goddard Jones also writes, "Whatever [Felicia] told Marty about their night together – whatever she'd even told herself – she'd slept with him because she liked him, because she liked him and wanted him to like her back. She would do whatever Marty asked of her" (307). Thus, Goddard Jones reflects Dana's silent submissiveness to Art in Felicia's repeated behavior with Marty in a manner that conveys how gender dynamics are perpetuated in younger generations. Also in this story, and following the police chief's monologue regarding Katie Winterson's "bad girl" behavior in "Good Girl," Goddard Jones creates echoes of the systematically created victim responsibility theory and the sentiment that Felicia, like Katie, behaved in a manner that provoked the men's violent acts. Dana encounters a student blog in which the blogger writes of Felicia, "*Its [sic] so sad but she fucked them both and this is the kind of shit that*

'protect the weaker sex,' view them as objects of 'romantic love,' and admire them as 'wives and mothers.' Despite viewing women positively, it is based on an idealized stereotype perception of the opposite sex and is equally controlling and harmful" (168).

happens” (66, emphasis in the original). Like the language of the police chief in “Good Girl,” the language of this young blogger coldly dehumanizes Felicia and cites unfounded rumors of her sexualized “bad girl” behavior as the rationale for the brutal violence inflicted upon her. Goddard Jones creates a blogger who places Felicia, Simon, and Marty into readily available, recognizable, and acceptable cultural categories that sustain harmful norms in order to show how societal norms often place the rape victim as the alleged “whore” in the Madonna-whore complex. With this blogger, Goddard Jones reiterates the victim responsibility theory espoused by the police chief in “Good Girl,” and, thus, how this theory is employed in a manner that perpetuates this system of gender-based violence by reinforcing the expectation of violent retribution for any female whom others deem acts without the expected compulsion and constraint of a “proper” girl.

Goddard Jones’s last story of this trio, “Proof of God,” illustrates how this patriarchal norm of dehumanizing girls shapes Simon’s thinking and instincts, and leads to his own repetition of gender-based violence. Goddard Jones conveys both Simon’s and Marty’s disregard for their female peers, as modeled by all of the male figures in these stories. Goddard Jones explains, “Maybe [Simon] hated the girls the most – not all girls, just the ones who showed up to places like this one with their fake tans and oily mascara, their belly button piercings and side fat Those girls” (297). Further in the story, Goddard Jones portrays Marty as completely discounting any agency in Felicia when he offers her to Simon as the sexual object to whom he should lose his virginity. Marty states, “Felicia’ll do it She’ll fuck you We just gotta get her a little drunk first, but she won’t need much convincing” (302). Then, after this plan falters and Felicia gains

consciousness and screams in resistance, which threatens to expose the boys' crime, Goddard Jones conveys the boys' instinctive reaction: in attempting to silence Felicia, they accidentally suffocate her; then, instead of trying to resuscitate Felicia, Simon burns her alive in order to destroy all evidence. Goddard Jones writes, "It struck [Simon] that he should try slapping her cheeks or checking for a pulse; or CPR They'd have to call 911, come up with some kind of story. Get an ambulance here But that was all balanced by fear . . . mostly for himself – an emotion so pure it was primal" (315).

Goddard Jones places Simon's story as the very last in the collection to show that these young men have *learned* to respond in violent ways to girls like Felicia in order to protect themselves. Goddard Jones's implication of culture is most evident in Simon's reference to Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*. Goddard Jones constructs Simon as a student who "loved learning about Descartes, with his wild ideas about the world outside yourself, how everything you believe is real could just be the word of some evil genius or puppetmaster" (291). I argue that Simon and Marty are the puppets, or are being controlled by a cultural force greater than themselves; their perceptions and instincts have been molded by a greater patriarchal system that, as Horvitz states, "sanctions heterosexual misogyny" and "sexual violence." This interpretation is reinforced by the previous depictions of Jacob and Dana, each of whom is portrayed as complicitous, despite their best intentions, in passing on to the next generation the models of gender expectations and how to remain silent when one's individual conscience clashes with these expectations.

Goddard Jones's Indictment of Complicity – Intentional, Unintentional, and Ignorant

Goddard Jones's focus on common, well-intentioned characters who participate to varying degrees in a social system that harms girls and other feminized individuals subtly indicts these characters' complicity in this system – even if most of these characters are ignorant of their complicity. Her fictional representations are corroborated by Barbara Applebaum's explanation, in "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency, and the Subject of Resistance," of the concept of ignorant complicity in her discussion of race relations and white complicity in upholding violating and racist social structures. For the purposes of this chapter, I am assuming that, just as individuals may be ignorantly complicit in upholding violating and racist social structures, they may be equally ignorantly complicit in upholding violating and *sexist* social structures. Goddard Jones uses her fiction as a cultural tool through which to highlight this complicity. As background, let me elaborate upon Applebaum's sociological theory. In her discussion, Applebaum first distinguishes between deliberate complicity, which can be direct or indirect, and unintentional complicity, which is always indirect. Deliberate complicity refers to wrongdoings that are "calculated and premeditated" (60). In "Good Girl," the police chief's obstruction of justice for the purpose of discharging Tommy is deliberate, intentional complicity, for the chief knowingly acts in a manner that supports Tommy and, ultimately, his crime. Jacob also becomes deliberately complicit because he admits his certitude of Tommy's guilt. Goddard Jones creates a scene in which Jacob is in his car with Tommy; Jacob looks over at his son and in that moment, Jacob "understood that Tommy really had done something to that girl" (23). Yet Jacob chooses to remain silent and, thus, calculates his silence in

order to save his son from criminal charges. However, Jacob's complicity is indirect in nature, for he does not *act* but remains silent and allows the violent act to go unpunished by means of the police chief's intervening power. Unintentional complicity, on the other hand, refers to individuals who unwittingly support wrongdoings. Despite this ignorance, Applebaum stresses that 1) unintentional complicity is "grounded in what one *should have known*," and 2) that the ignorantly complicit individual acts in a way that "sustain[s] normative social structures" that oppress and violate marginalized individuals and communities (60-61, emphasis in the original).

Applebaum's concept of ignorant complicity begs the question underlying Goddard Jones's stories: according to the social structures Goddard Jones creates, what should these characters know? Goddard Jones constructs narrative dynamics that suggest these characters *should know* that Tommy and Simon should be held accountable for their crimes, that withholding or destroying witness testimonies and evidence from these crimes is punishable by law, that raping and murdering another human being are two of the greatest atrocities an individual can commit. Indeed, Goddard Jones suggests these characters should know these civil laws, but because their perceptions are altered by sexist veils, when these crimes are carried out upon the bodies of young feminized characters that their culture deems less valuable, they do nothing and say nothing.

To better understand how Goddard Jones portrays her characters' ignorant complicity with her ironic structure, a better understanding of Applebaum's argument is in order. To develop her concept of ignorant complicity, Applebaum draws upon Judith Butler's theory of subjectivity. Butler begins with Louis Althusser's insight that subjects are created – or denied the status of subject – through power. In Applebaum's

summarization, individuals “become subjects through the process of subjugation . . . we come into being through socially sanctioned forms of address” (63). In other words, we become socially acceptable girls, boys, women, and men by adhering to the culturally created gender norms associated with each of these subject categories – or, as Butler states it, we become “bodies that matter.” In Western cultures, for individuals deemed masculine these norms often include oppression and violence, and for individuals deemed feminine these norms often include silence and passivity. Generally speaking, in the Western acculturation process, we are socially trained to see men’s power and violence and women’s passivity and trauma as cultural norms. As feminist theorist Michael Kaufman argues, acts of gender-based violence “are like a ritualized acting out of our social relations of power: the dominant and the weaker, the powerful and the powerless, the active and the passive . . . the masculine and the feminine” (1). Kaufman argues that very early on, most boys are socialized into construction of masculinity that is based on oppression (of self and others), fighting, war, and assault (5-6). Further, girls and women generally learn to assimilate into these social relations. As Simone de Beauvoir explains: “[T]he passivity that is the essential characteristic of the ‘feminine’ woman is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years . . . the delights of passivity are made to seem desirable to the young girl.” She further argues that this “trait” is the result not of girls’ biology but of girls’ socialization (281, 298). Kaufman quotes de Beauvoir to explain women’s and girls’ assimilation into positions of cultural “objects” of violence: “In spite of the inferior role which men assign to them, women [perceive themselves as] the privileged objects of their aggression” (15). Further, because girls and women are educated to accept this “aggression” as a “privilege,” the trauma experienced as a result

of this aggression is to be oppressed and silenced by passive “good girls” who adhere to gender norms – a dynamic Goddard Jones clearly conveys in the relationships of Dana and Art, and Felicia and Marty, and in the police chief’s silencing of Katie Winterson.

This cultural system of subject categories (i.e., men, women, boys, girls) is an underlying issue Goddard Jones addresses in *Girl Trouble*. Goddard Jones exposes the challenges of her characters’ subject positions. With the employment of ironic evasions and, thus, silence, Goddard Jones makes it easy for her characters to silently, though often times uncomfortably, maintain their subject statuses: Katie’s and Felicia’s stories are not voiced, so characters – such as Jacob, the police chief, and Simon’s father – may easily dismiss them; Tommy’s and Simon’s stories are conveyed through the most sympathetic channels (Tommy’s father and Simon himself) thus invoking the reader’s sympathy for the struggle of these male characters; and the socially accepted victim responsibility theory is employed to legally reinforce this interpretation of events. Further, when Katie Winterson attempts to challenge these “socially sanctioned forms of [gender] address” by reporting Tommy’s crime, she is denied the subject status of “good girl” by the police chief who dismisses her charge.

Applebaum emphasizes Butler’s point that while “compulsion and constraint” are conditions of subject status, “agency is not impossible” (65). That is, while instinctually individuals feel compelled to repeat socially sanctioned norms in order to maintain their subject status, individuals do have the power to disrupt this repetition and to challenge the expectations associated with different subject categories, as Katie Winterson does by refusing to remain silent and by challenging Tommy’s dominant social status and holding him accountable for his violence. Goddard Jones instigates a rejection of the charges that

Katie and Felicia provoked Tommy's and Simon's behavior, and are responsible for the violence inflicted upon them, and of the uncomfortable victory of the boys' freedom at the conclusion of "Good Girl" and "Proof of God." Thus, Goddard Jones's "strategy of subversive repetition," as Butler terms it, of gender norms functions as an exposé of how these norms are social, hegemonic, and ultimately harmful.

The Final Irony: Girlhood Trauma as Social Trauma

Applebaum's concept of ignorant complicity brings to the foreground one of the most powerful effects of Goddard Jones's storytelling: focusing the reader's attention on the almost imperceptible and daily lived performances that create and support patriarchal structures under which feminized individuals are oppressed and violated. Further, with *Girl Trouble*, Goddard Jones exposes not only the complicity of her characters in a harmful system but also the damages this system imparts upon them. Many of these characters are simultaneously characterized as both contributors to a violent system and victims of this same system. Thus, Goddard Jones reveals girlhood trauma as a *social* trauma. For Goddard Jones conveys that it is not only young girls who are silenced and suffer by these violent crimes, but so, too, do Dana and the male characters in the stories, arguably to lesser degrees and in different ways. All of the main characters in these stories are characterized as emotionally damaged and, therefore, all of their relationships are stunted, or, as Goddard Jones states in her interview with which I introduced this discussion, they all suffer from deep personal disconnections.

Some of Goddard Jones's most striking ironic moves in *Girl Trouble* function to

- 1) hold accountable individual characters that challenge the reader's expectations

regarding guilt in these violent acts, and 2) reveal the emotional suffering and silence of the perpetrators and other complicit characters. In “Parts,” for example, Goddard Jones ironically diverts the reader’s attribution of guilt from the perpetrator to Dana, the mother of a young victim. Goddard Jones’s association of guilt with Dana is striking since Dana seems the most unlikely character one might find guilty: she is a quiet librarian, married to a well-respected physician, and the mother of the victim. But Goddard Jones includes particular narrative details that function to not only hold Dana partly responsible, but to also convey the deep lack of emotional intimacy between herself and Art. For example, Goddard Jones tells us that when Felicia is only sixteen, Dana helps her obtain birth control. Dana states, “I took her to my doctor in Bowling Green – quietly – to get her examination and a prescription” (69). On one level of interpretation, Goddard Jones suggests that Dana consents to her daughter’s sexual activity at too early of an age. However, this narrative detail also pointedly addresses the personal divide between Dana, Felicia, and Art – Dana’s and Felicia’s gynecologist husband and father. The fact that Dana has a different doctor for her sexual health needs and feels the need to hide her daughter’s sexual health from Art suggest the lack of familial intimacy and “disconnect” of which Goddard Jones speaks. For Goddard Jones suggests Dana must keep herself as sexual object distinct from herself as a full human with sexual health needs for Art. In addition, Art’s understanding of his daughter as full human being with a sexual aspect to her person is not incorporated into his conception of her. Thus, Goddard Jones indicates that the complicity, pain, and emotional isolation that accompany gender-based violence are laced into all social positions in patriarchal societies. And even those perceived as

benefitting from sexist social structures, as a woman in Dana's esteemed social position might be perceived, are ultimately deeply harmed by these structures.

Equally disturbing are Goddard Jones's portrayals of the emotional suffering her male characters experience. Almost every male character in these stories is portrayed as emotionally damaged, and as a man who deeply desires intimacy but is incapable of it. In "Good Girl," Goddard Jones tells the reader that Jacob and Tommy lost their wife and mother, respectively, some time ago and that both men are struggling in the aftermath. Goddard Jones writes of Jacob, "The living was lonely since Nora passed, and Jacob walked around with dread, with the looming possibility of a life by himself" (5). Likewise, Goddard Jones suggests Nora had an emotional connection with Tommy that the father and son seem to lack. She writes, "Nora, even in that last, difficult year of her dying, had been able to reach Tommy, to make him do right. Jacob couldn't do it without her" (25). These words raise the reader's consciousness that both men, father and son, are emotionally adrift and disconnected.

This father-child disconnection is a theme Goddard Jones carries throughout all three of the stories to convey that it is not only women and girls who are violated within a patriarchal system – so, too, are men and boys, but they suffer more silently from emotional violence. In both "Good Girl" and "Proof of God," in which Goddard Jones focuses on father-son relationships, neither Jacob nor Simon's father are men capable of expressing tenderness to their sons. At the beginning of "Good Girl," Jacob admits to feeling love for Tommy's dog and states his certainty that Nora would love the dog, too. However, Goddard Jones reveals that Jacob could never express this to Tommy, thus indicating the assumption that masculine men do not reveal their emotional and tender

sides to other men – not even one’s son (3). The same holds true in “Proof of God.” Goddard Jones writes that Simon knew “[h]is father loved him . . . in his way: a selfish sort of love, and limited. A love that asked for more than it could return” (294). In addition, on the night Simon confesses his crime to his father, his father tells Simon, “Your mother loves you,” and the reader is told, “Simon knew what his father meant,” suggesting that Simon’s father is incapable of saying, “I love you,” to his son (319). Goddard Jones’s portrayal of Simon’s father’s love that *asks* from his son rather than *gives* to his son again demonstrates this character’s deep emotional need. Goddard Jones depicts Simon’s father as emotionally stunted and damaged, and this damage limits his ability to fully and unconditionally love his son.

Goddard Jones most deeply disturbs her readers with the father-child disconnect in “Parts” and “Proof of God,” the two stories in which we see how the limits of fathers’ emotions negatively play out in the lives of their children – thus, creating an unlikely and ironic parallel between Felicia and Simon. In “Parts,” Goddard Jones creates an image that is brief and fleeting, but that also makes a powerful impact. When Felicia is lying on her deathbed, there is one part of her body that remains unscathed: her foot. Dana says, “Can you see it? That perfect small foot, the round, almost chubby toes, the cheerful, bright nail polish” (65). By creating a nurse who tells Dana and Art to touch their daughter’s foot, Goddard Jones implies that this touch might communicate to Felicia her parents’ presence, love, and support – even if it is at a completely unconscious level. But then she depicts Art as not being able to do it: “He didn’t want to be a father to a creature as destroyed and defeated as this one was” (65). With this scene, Goddard Jones conveys just how emotionally broken and limited Art is: he so lacks emotional connection and

intimacy with his daughter, and he so objectifies her, that he cannot provide even the slightest comfort in her moment of death.

Goddard Jones's final irony is that this same kind of father-child disconnect is one that Felicia shares with her murderer, and that may have even played a part in her death. In "Proof of God," Goddard Jones's central focus is the emotional damage Simon suffers as a homosexual young man trying to live up to his father's masculine standards and needs. Goddard Jones repeatedly employs images and language in this story to emphasize the violence and emotional trauma Simon has suffered in a house and society that rejects him. The story is introduced with Simon receiving a Corvette (symbolically a high-performance, and thereby culturally defined ultra-masculine, sports car) from his father – an object that is meant to signify Simon's father's social superiority in their community and, therefore, also his son's. Immediately, the car is vandalized, and the reader is told "what hurt [Simon] the most – what embarrassed him to the point of nausea – was the graffiti slashed across the hood and trailing down both sides of the car: FAG, over and over, like a curse" (287). The damage inflicted upon the body of this car becomes a metaphor for the emotional damage inflicted upon Simon. Throughout the story, Goddard Jones emphasizes Simon's emotional pain with phrases such as, "he felt like crying," "he just plain *hurt*, inside out," "he was in hell," and "he thought about killing himself" (301-303, emphasis in original). Further, Goddard Jones suggests that Simon feels this pain because he is incapable of expressing – to anyone – who he is and the affection he feels for another young man because of the violence he associates with his desire. Goddard Jones emphasizes that it is not only Simon's peers who oppress Simon's true self but also his masculine-driven father. Goddard Jones writes that in the aftermath of the car

vandalism, Simon's father "slapped him, a hard blow that almost knocked him off balance" and asks, "You aren't – . . . You didn't . . . do anything to encourage this did you?" (288-289). Further, on the night of Simon's crime, Goddard Jones tells the reader, Simon's father "[w]ould forgive him and maybe even support him in a way he couldn't have done had Simon confessed to something else" (300). This "something else," of course, is Simon's homosexuality. Thus, Goddard Jones exposes the uncomfortable irony of Simon's father's code of masculinity: according to this code, it is more acceptable for a man to rape and brutally murder a young girl than it is for a man to express physical love for another man. And this code, Goddard Jones indicates, leaves Simon feeling trapped and pained within the masculine constructs to which he is bound by his father and greater society. Goddard Jones writes, "[Simon] felt like a wounded animal in a house with a predator" (290). With this phrase, Goddard Jones has the reader understand that this constant fear of having his true self found out – and of the emotional and physical consequences – is what drives Simon's instincts, desperate acts, and lies on the night he rapes and murders Felicia. In this way, Goddard Jones makes her readers see how Simon is just as much a victim as he is a perpetrator.

Imperfect Beings Who Are Incapable of Imagining – or Being – Perfection

In "Proof of God," Goddard Jones references Descartes's philosophical meditations, writing, "[Simon] liked Descartes's proof of God . . . God must exist . . . because imperfect beings are incapable of imagining perfection" (291). Goddard Jones has the reader assume that this "perfection" refers to Simon's desire for acceptance, and taking all of Goddard Jones's stories into consideration, the reader might assume this

perfection refers to an acceptance of the full range of emotions and desires within each character. But even in light of all of the violence, pain, and loss experienced by the characters in these stories, Goddard Jones leaves them, in the end, still incapable of imagining perfection – and incapable of change. The emotional stuntedness Goddard Jones creates calls to mind Frye’s explanation of sexism and sexist systems. Frye explains that because individuals are so conditioned by sexist systems, oppressive acts and modes of thinking invisibly persist. Frye further notes that “people cannot be persuaded of things they are not ready to be persuaded of; there are certain complexes of will and prior experience which will inevitably block persuasion, no matter the merits of the case presented” (845). As demonstrated by Goddard Jones’s generations of characters, Frye explains that this phenomenon of will is the product of constant social conditioning through messages and performances, and results in “a strong and visceral feeling or attitude to the effect that sexual distinction is the most important thing in the world” (848). This seems precisely the case and one of the most troubling aspects of *Girl Trouble*. In the end, while Goddard Jones portrays Jacob, Dana, and Simon as all feeling disconnected from their imposed masculine and feminine performances, she also suggests they are still incapable of meaningful change. She continually describes Jacob’s character as “softer” in the wake of his love and loss of his wife, Nora. Goddard Jones writes, Jacob “was softer in his middle age than he’d once been – less casual about life,” and Jacob himself states, “Marrying me settled me somehow I sure wasn’t born a good man If I am, it’s because Nora made me that way” (2, 20). Jacob experiences emotional intimacy and loss with Nora, and this experience challenges his history of objectifying and dismissing women. Jacob strikes the reader as discomforted when he is

urged to perform in a masculine, violating manner or support it in others: he is characterized as not wanting Tommy to torture his puppy, he experiences genuine panic when the small neighbor girl is attacked, and he hesitates when the police chief insinuates Katie provoked Tommy's violence. Goddard Jones directs the reader to understand that there is a genuine softness and vulnerability in Jacob's character that evolved in his relationship with Nora.

However, Goddard Jones suggests that as much as it sometimes seems Jacob desires change, ultimately, this does not happen in the story, and Jacob continues his masculine performance. Goddard Jones demonstrates that Jacob's reality is not changed at all at the conclusion of the story: Tommy's behavior is static and he still lives with his father, and Jacob does not challenge his son. In fact, Goddard Jones creates a scene in which Jacob is presented the opportunity for growth and forward movement, but Jacob rejects it: Helen, a strong female character, invites Jacob to start a new life with her, but Jacob walks away from her because she wants Tommy to move on and become independent. Jacob rejects the change Helen offers with the comment, "Kind of late for starting over, don't you think?" (29). Further, Goddard Jones concludes "Good Girl" in the same style with which it was introduced. Reflecting the casual and dismissive attitude of the men toward Katie, she casually and dismissively writes, "A little over two months after Jacob's son raped Katie Winterson, Jacob and Tommy ate dinner together at Pondersosa He hadn't seen much of Tommy since, between work and the time Tommy was spending with that woman in Springfield" (31). With this conclusion, one final time, Goddard Jones turns Jacob's interest and the reader's attention to Jacob's son, and metaphorically reinforces the disregard for Katie and the violence that was inflicted

upon her. And once again, women are marginalized and nameless, as indicated by Jacob's reference to Tommy's girlfriend as "that woman." This conclusion also returns the reader to the distanced father-son relationship with which Goddard Jones introduced the story: the two men barely see or speak to one another and there seems to be a cold lack of intimacy in their relationship. These details indicate that nothing has changed. Indeed, the reader is informed that all charges against Tommy were dismissed, therefore the men have returned to the normalcy of their lives with no awareness – and perhaps care – of Katie and how her life has been impacted.

Similarly, in the opening lines of "Parts," Goddard Jones has Dana confess an uncomfortable sentiment: at some level, individuals desire crises because crises demand change. Goddard Jones introduces the story with Dana breathlessly waiting for her daughter to emerge from under water at a local swimming pool and Dana stating, "There was that moment a mother feels when the heart pauses and the throat goes dry, that fear of – or desire for maybe – the moment of crisis, when everything changes and you have to change, too That's a strange word: desire. But it's there" (59). Later in the narrative, Goddard Jones returns to this scene as Dana describes a dream: "Over and over again, Felicia jumped into the swimming pool at Spring Acres. Over and over again, she failed to resurface. And the dream-me would think, looking at the still water, that it would be wrong to jump in after her because water puts out fires" (66). While on one level Goddard Jones employs this reflection to suggest Dana's belief that Felicia died to ignite change, what is most striking and disturbing about this scene is Dana's lack of movement: she refuses to move or to dive into the water to save her drowning daughter. With this image, Goddard Jones indicates that Dana, too, seems to desire change, but she

is shackled to her silent, passive role. Goddard Jones characterizes Dana as never honestly expressing herself to Art, instead choosing to silence her criticisms and display an artifice of support as he (re)creates a life with a new wife and daughter. Also disturbing is Dana's response when she seeks out Simon to confront him with her daughter's death. When she is face-to-face with him, Dana is unable to utter a word, and so Simon walks away, dismissing "the crazy woman," for he seems to have no idea who she is (81). Goddard Jones suggests that Dana is just as faceless to him as Felicia was, and Dana silently walks away from him aware of this reality. In the last scene of the story, when Art is married to another woman and has fathered another daughter, he returns to Dana for an evening and they have sexual intercourse. In effect, Goddard Jones conveys Dana's repeated complicity: she now agrees to be "the other woman" with whom Art is betraying his new wife and daughter. Dana simply shifts rolls that enable Art to mistreat the women in his life. Instead of changing or altering her gender performance by asserting herself and challenging Art, Goddard Jones characterizes Dana as desiring her previous position as the "privileged object of [Art's] aggression," to quote Kaufman again (15). Goddard Jones concludes the story with Dana stating, "[T]here was a moment – when [Art] placed his ear to my heart and listened, and I felt it quicken beneath his warmth, traitorous as always – that I believed, despite everything, if I gave enough of myself I could have them back again" (87).

Finally, in "Proof of God," too, Goddard Jones's repeats her pattern of concluding the story as it began. Simon's Corvette is vandalized a second time. Goddard Jones indicates that nothing has changed for Simon: "[E]very window of the Corvette was smashed No graffiti this time, but the message was as plain as that long-ago FAG

had been, just as accurate. He realized that whoever had done this could still be lurking somewhere nearby . . .” (322). With this conclusion, Goddard Jones makes clear that Simon remains trapped in his fear and silence.

Goddard Jones creates crises that challenge Jacob, Dana, and Simon to alter their perceptions of and performances in gender relations, but all three protagonists are portrayed as lacking the strength, the will, and/or the support to change, and so all three characters continue their inauthentic and stifling performances of masculinity and femininity. It is as if their senses of agency have been stripped from them, and, at the conclusion of *Girl Trouble*, they all remain fixed and isolated in ambivalent subject positions.

Conclusion: Irony and Goddard Jones’s Challenge to Her Readers

As discussed earlier, Goddard Jones’s use of irony requires her readers to first recognize and then complete the ironic literary moments and elements of her narrative, and how readers complete these moments and elements depends, in part, upon their own discursive groupings. Indeed, Goddard Jones creates rich and complex characters who occupy multiple social positions that the reader, too, may occupy. In effect, Goddard Jones creates characters who tap into aspects of the reader’s self and culture. As theorist Claire Colebrook writes in *Irony*, “[Ironic] words would not make sense if [they did] not [represent] a possible position within our [cultural] context. In order for the irony to work, there must be some possible speakers who would believe or intend what is being said” (12). Indeed, from one perspective, the reader identifies with Jacob’s fatherly instinct to believe in his son and to protect Tommy at all costs. Or the reader may so

strongly identify with Dana as a victim of her objectifying husband and within the patriarchal system that the reader grapples with Goddard Jones's irony suggesting Dana's guilt. However, when Goddard Jones exposes Jacob's and Dana's behaviors and silences as underlying contributors to the violence Katie and Felicia suffer, she effectively shifts the reader's interpretive lens so that we now see these behaviors as harmful acts of complicity and, thus, we resist them. This is Goddard Jones's genius: she creates common, well-intentioned characters with characteristics, attachments, and struggles with which many readers so strongly identify that we must stop and analyze our own social positions and how we, too, may be both shaped by and participants in this damaging system. Thus, the reader's own complicity is challenged as Goddard Jones engages us and demands reflection, discussion, and, ultimately, social change.

Chapter Three:
Ambiguity of Oppression and Agency in Joyce Carol Oates’s “The Girl”
and Sandra Cisneros’s “One Holy Night”

“In woman ... there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, her “being-the-other”; she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy.”

- Simone de Beauvoir

“[T]o internalize oppression is to incorporate inferiorizing material into the structure of the self – to see oneself as objectified, to value and desire what befits a subordinated individual, and to feel competent and empowered by skills that reinforce one’s subordination.”

- Diana Tietjens Meyers

In their short stories “The Girl” and “One Holy Night,” writers Joyce Carol Oates and Sandra Cisneros depict girlhood trauma using two narrative strategies of ambiguity that trouble our interpretation of their texts. First, they each portray their young female characters as simultaneously autonomous and victimized. On one hand, their characters are shown to exhibit strong personae and agency; on the other, they are portrayed as internalizing microaggressions, a cultural form of gender oppression, which causes them to desire their subordination in relation to the men around them. Second, both authors employ narrative strategies that demand engagement from the reader in determining the nature and extent of the violations that shape their plots. By way of ambiguity, then, Oates and Cisneros create writerly texts, or textual social spaces in which readers are challenged to actively participate in the creation of meaning – and the final fates of the girls in the stories.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses the tension between an individual’s sense of agency versus her sense of oppression that Oates and Cisneros

capture with character ambiguity in their stories. De Beauvoir argues that each individual is both subject and object. As subjects, individuals are highly conscious of themselves, and of their desires and experiences. However, the self-as-subject is limited by the self-as-object. As objects, individuals are a thing, or a “facticity” – an object that must function in collective situations. Therefore, as objects, individuals are limited – and often violated – by social constructs and expectations, and by the power of others. Oates and Cisneros capture precisely this ambiguity of self in their narrators with ambiguous language and narrative structures. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson lays out the different types of literary ambiguity employed by authors. For the purpose of this chapter, I am concerned with the following three types of ambiguity that Oates and Cisneros employ to fictionally depict de Beauvoir’s concept of individuals’ subject-object ambiguity: 1) “Where a detail is effective in several ways at once,” which Oates employs; 2) “Where two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously,” which Cisneros employs; and 3) “Where what is said is contradictory . . . and the reader is forced to invent interpretations,” which both authors employ in making the reader determine the final outcomes of their narrators (894).

Oates and Cisneros employ these different types of ambiguity in a manner that results in texts that Roland Barthes identifies as “writerly texts,” or texts that require readers to take an active role in the construction of meaning. In “From Work to Text,” Barthes explains, “[T]he Text is that *social* space [where author and reader meet] which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, or decoder” (882, emphasis in original). Barthes argues for the “plurality” of the text explaining that a text “accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an

irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plurality” (879, emphasis in original). Oates and Cisneros demonstrate that narrative ambiguity is one strategic approach to creating this kind of irreducible plurality, for the ambiguity results in a proliferation of meanings as readers move from one coded word or reference to another, and then independently place them together in various ways in order to give the story meaning and fulfill the author’s greater vision.

Oates and Cisneros’s employment of ambiguity to create writerly texts is significant for multiple reasons. First, their ambiguity results in multiple possible meanings that destabilize readers’ perceptions and understandings of plot elements, which is essential for raising readers’ awareness of harmful cultural norms in the form of microaggressions in these texts – for most individuals are so desensitized to microaggressions that they fail to notice them and the violence behind them (a concept that will be discussed in greater detail in the following section). Second, the ambiguous writerly text requires readers to take an *active* role in the interpretive and creative process: we become not passive absorbers of culture, but rather active agents who participate in the scenes and outcomes. Thus, through the characters with whom we identify, we locate ourselves, or our participating roles, in the stories – and essentially how we contribute to or challenge a violating social system. Finally, Oates’s and Cisneros’s ambiguity and interpretive demands upon their readers obscure the distinction between fiction and reality, for they evoke their readers’ reality-based experiences and references in order to fill in the narrative gaps of their fiction. In this way, they imbue their stories with cultural relevancy and a greater sense of urgency regarding addressing the issue of girlhood trauma.

I begin this chapter with a brief discussion of microaggressions and objectification theory, for they are the dominant cultural phenomena silently threaded through the stories addressed in this chapter. I then establish Margaux Fragoso's recently published *Tiger, Tiger* as a counter to Oates's "The Girl" and Cisneros's "One Holy Night." If Oates's and Cisneros's stories are understood as writerly texts, then Fragoso's memoir might be best understood as a readerly text, in which the meaning is stable and the reader is denied an active roll in creating meaning in the manner that we do with Oates's and Cisneros's texts. My discussion of Fragoso not only serves to highlight the ambiguity and writerly natures of Oates's and Cisneros's texts, but also emphasizes readers' responses to narratives regarding girlhood trauma. For the ambiguity in Oates's and Cisneros's texts create narrative gaps that allow hope for agency and/or change: the author's suggest their characters *might* find agency in the gaps between patriarchal socialization and their own desires, while readers *might* find agency in the gaps we see or hear between the discourse and ideologies in the stories. The lack of narrative ambiguity in Fragoso's text allows no such hope, no such escape – and so receives a much stronger negative reception, as we will see in a subsequent section. Finally, I conclude the chapter with Oates's and Cisneros's final challenges to their readers.

Microaggressions and Objectification Theory: The Cultural Facilitation of Violence Underlying the Narrators' Stories

In order to more fully understand Oates's and Cisneros's young female narrators in "The Girl" and "One Holy Night," and the internalized oppression with which these narrators struggle, a brief discussion of the concept of "microaggressions" and the theory

of objectification is essential. In *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, Derald Wing Sue defines microaggressions as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (5). Sue argues that the messages girls and women receive from gender-based microaggressions undermine their senses of self-worth and agency. He explains that these messages most often include: “(a) a woman’s appearance is for the pleasure of man; (b) women are weak, dependent, and need help; and (c) a woman’s body is not her own” (12).

To illustrate this concept of gender-based microaggressions and the profound negative impact an environment of microaggressions potentially has upon a young girl, I turn to Fragoso’s *Tiger, Tiger*, in which Fragoso tells her story of growing up as a young girl who suffered long-term sexual abuse at the hands of a family acquaintance, a man she identifies with the pseudonym of Peter Curran. The “relationship,” as Fragoso labels it, was initiated by Peter when Fragoso was only seven years old and ends with Peter’s suicide when Fragoso is twenty-two. In order to convey to the reader the conditions that left her so vulnerable to Peter’s long-term abuse, Fragoso emphasizes her home life in which she was subjected to her father’s constant microaggressions. Fragoso gives detailed accounts of her verbal interactions with her sexist and emotionally abusive father: he repeatedly calls her a “beast” in moments of anger, criticizes her physical appearance, belittles her, and suggests that she would be more honorable dead than alive. Fragoso quotes her father’s misogynistic reference to honor killing or self-immolation in

his advice to her: “[I]f a savage ever catches you, and gives you a choice between being raped or him killing you, you should choose death. That way, you still have your honor” (119). Frago notes this “fatherly” advice after she has already been sexually victimized; therefore, she emphasizes her awareness of the “dishonor” she was responsible for imparting upon her family as a seven-year-old girl. While Frago incorporates overt examples of microaggressions in her memoir, Oates and Cisneros include more subtle examples of microaggressions by male characters that impose a connection between female sexuality and shame upon the young girl narrators.⁷ Oates and Cisneros suggest the girls’ chronic exposure to gender-based microaggressions with the verbal slights made by the male characters in the narratives (which will be discussed in greater detail in successive sections).

While some perceive these “commonplace” microaggressions, as Sue labels them, as seemingly benign (and perhaps even benevolent), they are, in fact, harmful at both the social and individual levels.⁸ Socially, the cultural acceptance of microaggressions encourages environments in which gender-based violence is the norm. Sue argues that sexist environments expose women and girls “to greater emotional and physical violence,

⁷ Some microaggressions are less obvious because they are more culturally accepted. As Sue explains, “socialization and cultural conditioning imbues within people unconscious and biased attitudes and beliefs that are directed toward specific groups” (48).

⁸ Individuals who benefit (or perceive themselves and/or others as benefiting) from sexist attitudes, behaviors, and social structures may understand sexist messages as benevolent. In Holly Goddard Jones’s “Parts,” the narrator Dana demonstrates this concept: until the violent death of her daughter Felicia, Dana lived comfortably and contently as the wife of a well-established, though sexist, doctor. Only after her daughter is raped and murdered does Dana sense her roll in perpetuating a sexist social structure that harms at a greater social level, even if she perceived herself as benefiting from this for some time.

sexual assaults, and sexual harassment” (176). Sociologist Richard Harris reaches a similar conclusion in his analysis of data from studies concerned with the relationship between sexist environments and rates of gender-based violence. Harris concludes his report with the statement, “[A] sexist environment is one that facilitates both environmental and individualized sexually harassing behaviors, and in such ‘climates’ assault is far more likely to occur” (15). Therefore, even seemingly benign sexist comments, images, and acts have the potential to significantly harm, for their insidious nature permeates modes of thinking and, therefore, cultural practices – thus, leading to the cultural phenomenon of gender-based violence.

At the individual level, beyond the overt violence women and girls suffer, they also internalize the messages of microaggressions as cultural “norms” that have the cumulative power of psychological and physical oppression. In their objectification theory, Barbara L. Frederickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts explain the toll that constant exposure to objectifying microaggressions has on women and girls. Frederickson and Roberts begin their argument by emphasizing that objectification theory “takes as a *given* that [girls and] women exist in a culture in which their bodies are . . . looked at, evaluated, and always potentially objectified” (177, emphasis in original). The authors then argue that girls and women are “acculturated to internalize an observer’s view” of themselves, which, significant for my purposes, leads to a “*diminished awareness of [their own] internal bodily states*” (173, emphasis added). The authors cite psychologist Philip Costanzo to explain this acculturation process: “Effective socialization . . . begins with compliance to minimally sufficient external pressures, proceeds through interpersonal identification, and ends with individuals claiming ownership of socialized

values and attitudes, often by incorporating them into their sense of self” (177).

Frederickson and Roberts explain that external social and cultural microaggressions that encourage young girls’ preoccupations with their bodies pervade their young lives; in patriarchal societies, the messages of these microaggressions are often reinforced by girls’ parents, peers, and other significant influences who shape the girls’ “feminine” identities; the girls then own the values embedded in these messages as their own.

Finally, because girls are acculturated to be so highly conscious of how others perceive and appreciate their physical bodies, they risk assuming a third-person perspective of their bodies, which can prove detrimental to their own relationships with their bodies.

To clarify, for the purposes of this chapter, then, I am discussing microaggressions 1) as a category of gender violence that harms women and girls at the emotional and psychological levels, and 2) as social interactions that facilitate acts of physical gender violence, such as physical assault and rape.⁹ All the authors I discuss in this chapter – Oates, Cisneros, and Fragoso – portray their narrators as socially and psychologically struggling with damaging microaggressions that limit their perceptions of self: their personae are written in a manner that suggests they understand their self-worth as their sexuality and, therefore, value the sexual attention they receive.

Consequently, they suffer numerous violations, including sexual abuse, social isolation, and culturally imposed shame, as depicted by all three authors in this chapter.

⁹ One might say that microaggressions facilitate *graver* acts of physical gender violence, but the emotional and psychological harm women and girls suffer as a consequence of microaggressions have the potential to be equally as grave as the physical harm.

Margaux Fragoso's Readerly Text and Real Account of Sexual Trauma

To more fully illuminate the “irreducible plurality” of meaning, to quote Barthe, that Oates and Cisneros create with ambiguity in their texts, and, therefore, their involvement of the reader in the interpretive process, I am briefly turning my critical attention to Fragoso's *Tiger, Tiger*. While Fragoso does portray her narrative persona as ambiguous in accordance with de Beauvoir's philosophy, her narrative account is otherwise fairly unambiguous. Indeed, Fragoso spares the reader few details in disclosing her history as a victim of sexual abuse. Fragoso provides an unequivocal account of the emotional damage she suffers as a young girl due to gender-based microaggressions and how this damage facilitates Peter's physical violence. Fragoso's employment of dialogues between her narrative persona and her father throughout the memoir convey the dichotomous figurations of womanhood to which her father instructs her to aspire: she must be desired but not touched (thus, the virgin-whore dichotomy) – figurations that imply her body determines her worth.¹⁰ In one father-daughter scene, right before Fragoso's father informs her that he has a girlfriend with whom he is having an affair, he says to his daughter, “[W]ithout beauty to admire, what do [men] have? A beautiful woman's face and a fine horse, well groomed and ready to run on the track: these sights do not last” (40). Thus, Fragoso's father suggests to her: 1) the inferior social status of women whose sole purpose is to be an object of men's appreciation, 2) women's similarity to an animal that must be carefully groomed and controlled, and 3) the replaceability of women in the fact that he has replaced Fragoso's aging and ill mother with a younger, healthier woman. In addition, as already mentioned, Fragoso's father

¹⁰ I more fully discuss Diana Tietjens Meyers's concept of figurations of womanhood in a later section of this chapter.

indicates his daughter's loss of value in his eyes by the fact that her "virtue" has been ruined by Peter. Frago suggests her father teaches her that she is most valuable for her desirability to males, but that this desirability is also a potential source of ruinous shame. She further emphasizes that she internalized her father's words and values, and, thus, valued her body as a sexual object. She writes, "I felt like I'd gotten addicted to the catcallers' attention even if it made me uncomfortable. Like I needed to be constantly reassured that boys liked me even if all they wanted was sex" (192). She simultaneously conveys that at a very young age, she understood that her value was lost due to Peter's violations of her body. In another scene, when there is the threat that her father may come to realize the nature of her relationship with Peter, Frago writes, "I couldn't forget Poppa's words, that a raped woman was better off dead" (263). Frago's reiteration of her father's words indicate that at a very young age she was conscious that her young "honor" had been lost according to her father's code of patriarchal conduct.

Frago weaves together these interactions with her father and her thoughts with accounts of Peter's assaults in order to convey how her environment of microaggressions shaped her psyche and her desire for a pedophile's violating attention. This narrative strategy of moving back and forth between her father's demeaning words, Peter's sexual abuse, and the young narrator's internal monologues indicate that her father's microaggressions left her vulnerable, for since she learns to equate the loss of male attention with the loss of her personal value, she dismisses her own instinctual needs as she seeks male attention, and Peter is the male who provides it. Therefore, despite the sexual abuse, Frago seeks Peter's attention and validation. Frago tells us that after the abuse has been occurring for some time, she enters Peter's room in one scene and

observes a painting of her portrait next to another young girl's, a girl whom the reader assumes is another child Peter is sexually abusing, for throughout the memoir it is revealed that he is a convicted serial child abuser and has even abused his own daughters. Fragoso reflects, "I was both angry and awed by the sight of [the other girl]; her good looks drew my eye back again and again with the urgency of thirst, and whenever I looked at her I felt bad because my picture on the left side was nowhere near as radiant" (154). While Fragoso experiences a sense of being violated by Peter, her father's demeaning lessons regarding feminine value have been engraved in her to the extent that she suppresses her instinctual rejection of Peter in the hopes that he will continue desiring and valuing her – and, therefore, he is able to continue assaulting her. Through this interplay of scenes between the author and her father and the author and Peter, Fragoso conveys that her father's objectification of her and his emotional violence facilitated Peter's physical violence.

Fragoso's narrative persona clearly manifests Fredrickson and Roberts's objectification theory: while she instinctually repels Peter's attentions, she learns to suppress her instincts in order maintain his attention and, thus, her perceived value. In one scene, when Fragoso is approximately eight years old, she describes these contradictory emotions like the turning of a switch. She writes, "Maybe it was when his hands reached for me under the table, when my feet were kicking at his hands, and I was growling, hating him. I hated him because he was humming. Because he had sweatpants on, not jeans." She writes that an instant later, "[H]e pulled my Kangaroo sneaker out from behind his back, and I love him again, and started to cry . . . 'Don't leave me!' I charged out from under the table . . . clawing at his clothes. 'Don't *ever* go away from

me!’” (98). Peter manipulates this response from her with the threat that she has no place else to go, subtly implying *he* is the only one who cares for her, thus, picking up where Frago’s father left off and threatening her with an overt macroaggression. Frago maintains that these contradictory emotions spanned their entire relationship. She tells the reader of her hospitalization in an adolescent psychiatric ward after an attempted suicide. While she reveals to a fellow patient that she is being sexually abused, she refuses to name Peter, stating, “The bad Peter of course was just a stranger. As long as I didn’t mention his name, it didn’t seem like I was talking about the man I loved It occurred to me again that Peter was a child molester and that everybody would hate him here. I loved him still and had protected him from jail” (279). Frago’s contradictory responses to Peter suggest her own struggle to understand how she can express love for – and protect – her sexual predator, and at the expense of her own instincts and self-preservation. These scenes reveal that at some level she is very conscious of Peter’s violence and her own trauma, but that she suppresses this consciousness.

Indeed, despite Frago’s contradictory emotions, she clearly conveys her sense of being violated to the reader by incorporating scenes in which she dissociates from Peter’s abuse and her environment. Psychologist Christiane Sanderson defines dissociation as a defense mechanism with which an individual separates from his or her environment. During this separation, the individual may experience a “loss of awareness of experiences, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, wants, desires, sensations, and memories.” Further, Sanderson explains that the presence of dissociation is often “indicative of severe trauma,” for dissociation allows victims to momentarily and psychologically escape the physical violence they experience. Thus, it serves as an internal defense

mechanism and “protects the child from a fully conscious appreciation of the terror and helplessness inherent in the experience” (182-183). Sanderson notes that children sometimes dissociate by feigning sleep in order to avoid the abuse. Fragoso incorporates precisely this phenomenon in her memoir when she recounts feigning sleep or death when Peter touched her “past [her] threshold” (53). As a young girl she cannot respond with the “fight or flight” responses, and so she “freezes” – dissociates – through pretending sleep or death with the hope that Peter will lose interest (186). Fragoso’s accounts of dissociation recur in her responses to Peter throughout the memoir. In one scene in which Peter is kissing her, she explains, “I would feel for a second that it was gross; then the emotion would die off as suddenly as it appeared. Whenever I lost an emotion like this, I couldn’t feel much of anything for the rest of the day, sometimes for the next few days” (87). In another abuse scene, Peter is making her perform oral sex on him in his basement, and she dissociates by imagining herself as a mouse in her childhood book *The Tall Book of Fairy Tales*. Fragoso writes, “I wasn’t sure if I was a mouse drinking milk out of a cat’s bowl on the basement floor. I wasn’t sure if I was a baby having a bottle or whether I was upstairs having some milk and Oreos Was I upstairs or downstairs” (95). While Fragoso does not identify her behaviors explicitly as dissociation, in these moments of her narrative persona psychologically separating herself from the abuse she is experiencing, Fragoso suggests that she experienced Peter’s violations as traumatizing.

Still, Fragoso incorporates numerous scenes in which *she chooses* to repeatedly return to Peter, which suggests to some readers her eventual agency and complicity in the relationship. At one point, Fragoso tells us that her father becomes suspicious of Peter

and forbids Frago from seeing him for some time, but during this time apart Frago repeatedly telephones Peter until her father finally relents and Frago is able to resume her relationship. Further, Frago tells us that as the relationship progresses and she matures, she takes a more active role in the sexual relationship, wanting sexual intercourse so that she might give birth. She tells the reader of taking her basal temperature “to make sure [she] was ovulating” and stating to Peter, “Please, even if it hurts. Rape me . . .” (274). With scenes such as these, Frago reveals her internalized oppression and captures the ambiguity of the individual of which de Beauvoir speaks: Frago expresses the tension between herself as both subject and object. She also raises objections from her readers.

The Offense of Frago’s Unambiguous Reality

Frago’s unflinching and detailed account of her abuse has received harsh reviews from some critics, who find everything from her narrative tone to her ambiguous self-characterization troubling. Daisy Goodwin of *The Sunday Times* writes that Frago’s writing style in *Tiger, Tiger* is “almost as troubling as its awful subject matter” and questions whether Frago’s “flat, affectless prose is a stylist choice or simply the deadened testimony of a survivor.” Goodwin further asserts, “I can’t imagine why anyone would want to read this book, outside of Frago’s therapist, members of her family and the odd paedophile looking for a cheap thrill.” Likewise, Rachel Cooke of *The Observer* criticizes, “[*Tiger, Tiger*] felt as blank as pornography to me – and the more it went on,

the more convinced I was that only a voyeur or a pervert could admire it.”¹¹ But the most troubling element of Frago’s memoir for many critics is her perceived participation and acceptance of her role in the relationship, or her perceived complicity. An anonymous writer for *The Observer* best captures this criticism, stating, “Frago’s portrayal of herself seems almost completely defined by Peter’s idolisation of her. I felt she was objectifying her child self in the descriptions of how imaginative she was and how conscious she was of her sensuality. That Peter has infected her self-image in this way sickened me more than the deeply disturbing graphic sexual content.” *ABC News*’s Susan Donaldson James goes so far as to state Frago “became a willing victim,” which Wesley Yang of *New York* magazine echoes, writing, Frago’s memoir portrays her “complicity in her own victimization.”¹²

The anger and offense Frago evokes in readers with her memoir is significant to note, for works of fiction depicting the same phenomenon, such as Oates’s and

¹¹ Cooke’s remark that Frago’s prose felt “as blank as pornography” is a shallow criticism since this blankness is a response indicative of trauma. In *Traumatic Stress*, Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander McFarlane, and Onno van der Hart label this response as “numbing,” explaining, “Aware of their difficulties in controlling their emotions, traumatized people seem to spend their energies on avoiding distressing internal sensations, instead of attending to the demands of the environment . . . [they] may feel ‘dead to the world’ . . . they feel that they just ‘go through the motions’ of everyday living” (421-422). This style of “flat, affectless prose,” as Goodwin calls it, will also be discussed in Chapter Four, which is focused on the literature of Jamaica Kincaid.

¹² It should be noted here that the above critics pick up a long-running strand of discourse concerning the complicity of child victims. People lacking full knowledge of child abuse sometimes accuse child victims of complicity along much the same lines Freud famously did. However, the scholarly literature on child abuse has been very clear that both ethically and psychologically this child “complicity” is not complicity in the sense we would use it for adults, but something quite different – a symptom of victimization from a person by definition and nature dependent, who is materially and psychologically rightfully unable to separate abuse from attachment.

Cisneros's stories, do not often receive the same critical response, which begs the question, "Why?" In part, certainly, is the fact that Fragoso's story is a *true* account of events that happened to a *real* young girl. Thus, Fragoso instigates cultural judgments that reject repelling images of and references to child sexual activity and abuse. However, perhaps even more disturbing for some readers is Fragoso's direct challenge to the individual tendency to quietly look away from such offensive instances of violation, which Fragoso displays in the behavior of her parents and most of the other adults in her book. In her review of *Tiger, Tiger*, Kathryn Harrison of *The New York Times*, writes, "The real cost of a broken taboo [child molestation] is that the revulsion it awakens allows predators freedom to claim one victim after another: because we glance away from crimes – abominations – prevented only by vigilance, the most disheartening aspect of this story is sickeningly familiar." Finally, as noted earlier, Fragoso's readerly text leaves the reader with a disturbing finality about which we feel we can do nothing. The feelings of revulsion the reader experiences with *Tiger, Tiger* are not necessarily so poignant in Oates's and Cisneros's fictitious works. While all three authors create ambiguous characters, Oates and Cisneros also employ other forms of narrative ambiguity that Fragoso does not. Thus, they enable an assemblage plot elements in a manner that allows for the interpretation of the narrators as self-empowered subjects and, therefore, for the reader to again "glance away from . . . abominations," as Harrison states it. Further, Oates and Cisneros do not require us to see nor hear that which we do not necessarily want to. While they strategically create young narrators battling with their own lived traumatic experiences in the aftermath of sexual assault, they omit offensive images that directly reveal violation. Further, whether or not these narrators are victorious

in this battle is ultimately left to the interpretation of the reader, for both Oates and Cisneros conclude their stories in a state of ambiguity that evokes the reader's interpretive judgment: the reader is challenged to decide if these young girls have emotionally and intellectually conquered their internalized oppression, or if it has conquered them, leaving them oppressed casualties of a patriarchal system that often devalues and, both subtly and violently, violates girls. Thus, Oates's and Cisneros's ambiguity serves a provocative, as opposed to a proscriptive, function: it invites readers' interpretations – interpretations that leave some readers with a healthy resolution and, thus, able to look away from the scenes they just read; while leaving other readers troubled and concerned. How Oates and Cisneros achieve this plurality in their texts and the significance of this narrative structure for the reader will be the focus for the remainder of this chapter.

The Oppression Inherent in Cultural Figurations of Womanhood

Both Oates and Cisneros depict two young narrators oppressed and traumatized while attempting to fulfill cultural myths. Just as Fragoso explains her struggle and oppression under the figurations of womanhood established for her by her father, Oates and Cisneros convey phenomena of the same nature in their fiction – all authors depict young girls struggling with some cultural version of the virgin-whore dichotomy. In *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency*, Diana Tietjens Meyers defines figurations of womanhood as “the dominant system of tropes, mythic tales, and pictorial images that encode the various meanings of womanhood and norms applying to women” in any given culture” (25). Meyers argues that in the United States these

figurations are both insidious and oppressive, and so a form of microaggressions. In “The Girl,” Oates portrays a young girl trying to emulate the revered American cultural myth of the iconic Hollywood starlet, while in “One Holy Night, Cisneros captures a young girl trying to emulate a conflation of revered Mexican and American myths: the Mayan goddess Ixchel, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and the Virgin Mary. All of these figurations represent female icons that are to be appreciated from afar, never touched. However, both of Oates’s and Cisneros’s girl narrators are “touched” – or violated – amidst their attempts to emulate these desirable but untouchable figures, thus “spoiling” them in the eyes of their respective community members, and leaving them cast in the whore category and disempowered.

Also significant to note is the different levels of agency with which Oates and Cisneros characterize their narrators. Oates depicts her narrator as relinquishing her agency and autonomy to The Director in order to achieve the starlet status he promises her with his film – and perhaps reclaiming this agency when she finds The Director in the aftermath. Cisneros, on the other hand, depicts her narrator as asserting a self-perceived level of agency as she strives to achieve Ixchel/La Virgen/Virgin Mary status. Nevertheless, both end up socially denigrated and ruined, which demonstrates that within this restrictive patriarchal victim-whore construct, girls and women have no real agency. Also significant to note here is that reading Oates and Cisneros together allows for a more nuanced reading of the racial and cultural elements in each, and the insidious nature of the differing but equally damaging figurations of womanhood. Together these stories drive home the following points: 1) figurations of womanhood can serve as harmful microaggressions, 2) these figurations are complicated by race and culture, and 3) the

cultural virgin-whore dichotomy leaves young girls violated and powerless, even when culturally revered images of them promise otherwise. I first turn my critical attention to Oates.

Oppression by Fulfillment of the Hollywood Starlet Cultural Myth in Joyce Carol Oates's "The Girl"

The works of Joyce Carol Oates may come to mind for many scholars when discussing literary representations of girlhood trauma. Indeed, Oates has dedicated her literary career to capturing both the insidious nature and horrific consequences of the objectification of girls in American culture. In an interview with poet Haines Eason, Oates describes her fictional characters as “part of this mural, a kind of historic phenomenon” in which American girls and women are “swallowed up” by the greater culture and history in which they live. In “Lost Girls: The Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates,” Tanya Horeck further explicates the concerns of Oates’s literature stating that her oeuvre reflects an interest in American mythology, or “the stories American culture tells itself” about masculinity and femininity that “inexorably lead to tragedy” (25-26). Horeck argues that Oates’s narratives disrupt America’s mythological discourse about masculinity and femininity, myths “that help to maintain violence” (26). In the short story, “The Girl,” Oates emphasizes the perpetuation of these American myths by telling the story of an eight-minute movie filmed solely for the purpose of capturing the violent sexual assault of a sixteen-year-old girl by a group of young men. Oates has the title character – generically and simply named “The Girl” – and victim narrate the story in a somewhat rambling style with flashbacks and forwards between three melded scenes: the

filming of the assault, the narrator's hospitalization, and the police investigation. Oates's title and story demonstrate how the reiteration of American myths leave this young girl (or potentially any young woman, thus the generic title and character name) vulnerable prey – both physically and psychologically – in a patriarchal system. Further, Oates's employment of ambiguity, particularly her use of the single word “saved,” to simultaneously reference two ideas that are connected through context, demands the reader draw conclusions regarding the final state of the girl – a textual approach in accordance with Barthes's notion of the writerly text and involving the reader's subjective position and active role in constructing the meaning of the text. In this way, Oates does, indeed, disrupt the American mythologies of femininity and masculinity not only by exposing their inherent violence, but also by invoking the reader's interpretive and ethical responsibility: she leaves the reader to decide whether The Girl has internalized her objectification to the point that even in the aftermath of brutal violation she cannot move beyond the oppression, or whether the violence she suffers sparks an awakening of her self-volition. She also sparks an awakening in readers as she troubles our identifications: do we identify with The Girl character (or even some of the violating male characters) who renounces her autonomy in order to fulfill the aesthetic vision of another, The Director who readily violates in order to achieve his vision, the direct bystanders who deem The Girl vile and/or complicit in her violence, or indirect bystanders who watch the violation of The Girl as a form of entertainment?

Oates's unconventional narrative structure and stock characters in “The Girl” prompt the reader to consider the motif of cultural production in the story. As Marilyn Wesley explains in “Reverence, Rape, and Resistance: Joyce Carol Oates and Feminist

Film Theory,” ““The Girl’ functions as a parodic adaptation of classic cinema in keeping with Oates’s general critique of American ideologies of feminine identity.” Indeed, Oates structures the story in a manner that resembles the different stages of a film production: Background Material, The Rehearsal, The Performance, A Sequel, and The Vision (Wesley). This structure and these section headings are significant for a number of reasons. First, this construction represents the way the movie industry (and mass media in general) reinforces the objectification of women that society imparts through microaggressions. Second, Oates subtly has her readers reflect upon women’s participation in this system and the rewards that accompany this participation, such as the Hollywood starlet who readily accepts the dehumanization of the media’s and the public’s gaze for the rewards such as social recognition, perceived significance, and fame. Relatedly, Oates’s structure directs the reader to the authorial emphasis on the common cultural script that the characters perform to highlight that the depicted social dynamic – sexual violence – is one of continuing *cultural (re)production*. Finally, Oates ends the fictional film production on The Vision, or on the disturbing and lasting image that The Director creates: the film elements (i.e., actors and public gaze) coming together to violate The Girl. By use of the filmic narrative frame, Oates signals that the gender-based violence within the story is a culturally *scripted* drama in which each stock character has a culturally established role to play: The Girl aspires to be recognized as a film star; The Director, The Cop, and The Motorcyclist all promise The Girl the fame this film production purportedly offers – only to rape her in the end; and the viewing public passively observes this vision, thus silently supporting the cultural reproduction of it.

Oates immediately establishes The Girl's completely objectified and flattened position by detailing her role in the film, which contrasts with those of the male characters. In this production, the feminized role of "The Girl," to which the narrator is assigned, is of little consequence to The Director and other actors. While the men are defined by functions they perform, The Girl is defined by the functions done unto her (a flatness representative of the dissociation that rape victims often experience). Indeed, Oates emphasizes the narrator's self-identification throughout the story as only "The Girl," and establishes The Girl's assigned, reduced, and shallow identity with the following quote: "I was The Girl. No need to describe. Anyone studying me, face to face, would be in my presence and would not need a description. I looked different. The costume didn't matter . . ." (5). Oates suggests that The Girl's feminine youth is the only important quality to The Director, for violating this quality fits into his greater vision of violence. In the scene right before the assault, Oates creates a sacrificial image: The Director kisses The Girl on the forehead and tells her she is "very sweet," and this is "part of the tragedy" (8).¹³ She is part of the film only to serve as a foil to the male characters and to serve as a catalyst for their character developments in accordance with The Director's aesthetic vision. Oates suggests as much with The Director's description of the film: "[I]t's a poem centered in the head of The Cop It's a test of The Cop" – and The Girl's body is the object used in the film to test his character (9). While this "test" is never clearly and directly conveyed to the reader, Oates directs the reader to the realization that as The Cop encounters The Motorcyclist raping The Girl, his "test"

¹³ It might be noted that these kisses on the forehead echo the biblical betrayal of Judas who kissed Christ and sacrificed him to the Sanhedrin priests.

involves deciding between stopping the assault or joining The Motorcyclist in violating The Girl. And he joins The Motorcyclist.

Also significant are the details with which Oates has The Girl characterize each of the male characters, which differs from her nondescript self-characterization. The male characters are all given a more distinct identity and identifying roles with assigned material objects, each with varying levels of purpose and control: The Girl describes The Director's face as "sharkish skinny [and] glamourish," and he is always in possession of a camera; The Cop's face is described as "scruffy . . . like an explorer's face," and he is provided with a cop hat and the police club that inspired the creation of the movie; and finally The Motorcyclist is described as a muscular, solid man and is characterized with a helmet, goggles, and motorcycle (3-5). Oates signals that each male character possesses a relative level of power in The Girl's estimation. The Girl tells us that she "snubbed" the young actor who plays The Cop when he attempts to engage her, while on the other hand, she writes of The Director, the man with the camera and the power to *make* her, with a sense of awe: "When The Director told me what to do I listened to the beat of his voice. I knew I was in magical presence, he was not an ordinary man, but I was outside of him, outside waiting. I was not yet The Girl" (8). With this awe-inspired description from The Girl, Oates indicates that this young girl places herself at the mercy of this perceived "powerful" man with his camera and directing, without an awareness that he has the power to "capture" her body on film and "direct" her to do as he commands.

In this ongoing state of naïve submission, Oates then has The Girl provide details that reveal her subjugation to The Director's microaggressions in the objectified and flattened role of The Girl. The Girl notes The Director's constant surveillance of her body

and his directives that the other male characters in the film production also gaze upon her body. The Girl quotes The Director as stating, “Oh Jesus honey your tan, your tanned legs, your feet, my God even your toes are tan, tanned, you’re so lovely I mean, look at her! Isn’t she – ? Isn’t it?” – to which The Motorcyclist who later rapes her replies, “Perfect” (4). Thus, these microaggressions mark The Girl as the body and object of desire and lust in the film – she is the physically “perfect” body to precipitate the male characters’ “development.” Oates reveals The Director’s dehumanization of The Girl with the shift in personal pronouns he assigns to her, from “she” to “it.” His dehumanizing behavior toward her is further developed with Oates’s narrative details that The Director constantly “put his hands on [The Girl]” to position her and “stepped on [her]” (5). Oates indicates the other male characters involved with the film also come to see The Girl in this dehumanized manner, as they are directed. The Girl states of The Motorcyclist, her “closest friend of all of them” on the set: “I looked at Roybay [her inaccurate name for The Motorcyclist], who was looking at me. Our eyes didn’t come together; he was looking at me like on film. The Girl” (9). With this indicator of a lack of genuine interpersonal connection, Oates conveys “Roybay” as refusing to genuinely see the individual beyond “The Girl,” as marked by his dismissal of eye contact with her: he refuses to see her expression and to connect with her. Instead, he only sees her as The Girl object of the film.

Oates marks The Girl’s instinctual discomfort with the male characters’ messages being driven into her with their harsh and silencing demands: she must cooperate with the men’s plans and visions, and in these she is the marginal object upon which the men act for their fulfillments. Oates conveys The Girl as uncomfortable with the men’s

microaggressions with her verbal reiterations: as The Director comments regarding The Girl's body, she states, "[H]e stared at me, he stared. When we met before, he had not stared like this" (4). Oates emphasizes The Girl's unease with The Director's constant gaze; for just as Sue explains with his theory of microaggressions, Oates captures in literature The Girl receiving the hostile message that her "body is not her own" but rather is for The Director's filming pleasure with his unceasing gaze (Sue 12). Further, Oates emphasizes The Girl's sense of a lack of agency with her repetition of the men's drilling demands that she cooperate; both The Director, during the filming, and the police investigator, in the aftermath of the physical sexual assault, demand The Girl act according to their instructions. Six times throughout the story The Girl repeats their demands: The Director controlling the film repeatedly states, "[N]eed everyone's cooperation . . . [T]he parts must cooperate," which the investigator interrogating The Girl after the sexual assault echoes, stating, "[N]eed your cooperation" (5, 10). Oates includes these verbal reiterations to mark The Girl's unease not only with The Director's demands, but also with the police investigators', as she states, "They were angry. They said: 'Describe them.'" Oates then indicates that The Girl is only able to respond with a feeble, "But." Thus, Oates conveys how this insidious and hostile environment of objectification effectively disempowers The Girl, and how The Girl's social structures perpetuate her victimization, for in The Girl's inability to respond, Oates captures psychologist Maria Root's concept of insidious trauma: it is not only The Girl's body that has been violated but also her sense of self by the oppressive hostility directed toward her, hostility that "do[es] violence to [her] soul and spirit," to repeat Brown's words (Brown 107). Oates weaves together The Girl's experience of violation at the hands of

The Cop in the film production with her experience of violation by the real policemen in the aftermath of the filming in a manner that suggests systematic violence: while the men on the film production physically violate her, the men of the police force perpetuate that violence, but at the psychological and emotional levels. Indeed, Oates follows The Performance section of the story, in which The Girl is raped, with the section entitled “A Sequel,” which suggests a continuation of the violation of The Girl. Further, Oates creates a scene in which The Girl is hospitalized and notes the hospital workers’ and police’s “disgust” when looking at her, with an unidentified man saying to her, “The police, they won’t find them [the perpetrators] . . . they don’t give a damn about you . . .” (11-12).

While the cultural reproduction of oppressive figurations of womanhood (and the prevention of girlhood from moving into womanhood) in the film, along with the consequential physical and emotional violation, are disturbing enough in “The Girl,” equally disturbing are Oates’s indications of The Girl’s internalized objectification and oppression, for Oates has the narrator employ a third-person perspective of herself that indicates she perceives herself as an object just as the male characters do. This is first evidenced by the style with which Oates’s narrator refers to and describes herself. She never states her name nor, apparently, sees a reason to; I repeat her statement, “I was The Girl. No need to describe” (4). Thus, Oates indicates that The Girl gives no real self-identifying features. The most significant information Oates has The Girl reveal about herself is that she is a “pretty” sixteen-year-old girl, who does not have a relationship with her father; she writes, “No, I haven’t seen my father for a while. But the world is still there.” (6). Oates’s incorporation of this detail prompts the reader to associate

emotional trauma in *The Girl* from her father's abandonment. Further, it triggers an enlightenment of *The Girl's* reverence for *The Director*, for it is widely held that girls without a father figure will seek male attention elsewhere. As research suggests, these girls "often become desperate for male attention . . . [and] constantly seek refuge for the missing father . . . there is a constant need to be accepted by men from whom they aggressively seek attention" (Krohn and Bogan 12). Oates's quick detail regarding *The Girl's* lack of relationship with her father cues the reader to understand *The Girl's* dynamic with *The Director*, to whom she is so drawn and willing to please. Oates indicates that *The Girl* accepts *The Director's* vision of herself and speaks of herself as a flattened, one-dimensional character; she repeatedly states, "I was *The Girl*," and just as Oates explains the male characters as not really seeing the full young woman when they look at the narrator and instead see "*The Girl*," Oates indicates that *The Girl* sees herself with the same flattened gaze. Oates creates an image of *The Girl* watching herself during the filming: "I am *The Girl* watching the film of *The Girl* walking on a beach watching the water. Now *The Girl* watching *The Girl* turning. *The Girl* in black-and-white . . ." (11). This disturbing description of *The Girl* watching herself as if disconnected from and outside of herself clearly echoes Frederickson and Roberts objectification theory. Oates calls our attention to this self-objectifying pattern when *The Girl* describes herself in this scene "as an object or 'sight' to be appreciated by others," or she has assumed what they refer to as "a third person perspective" of herself (180, 188).

Oates creates *The Girl* to acquiesce to, rather than resist, *The Director* and his diminished vision of her. She invests *The Girl* with naively romantic language to describe *The Director*: "It was all music with him In magical presence. I knew . . . I knew I

was in magical presence, he was not an ordinary man . . .” (4, 7-8). Oates portrays The Girl as internalizing the mythology of this man’s vision of herself, and as feeling fortunate to be chosen by him for his film. The Girl waits for him to insert her into his vision, for she feels legitimized by his choosing her and capturing her on film. Further, when The Director gazes upon The Girl, she states, “So sensitive. It was a sensitive moment. Staring eye-to-eye with me, dark green lenses and yellow lenses, shatter-proof” (10). Oates provides this detail of The Director and The Girl staring “eye-to-eye” through thick or “shatter-proof” sunglasses meant to *shield* eyes in a manner that emphasize the young girl’s naivety: Oates implies that The Girl, in her own victimized state, is no more able to see this “sensitive” director than he is to see her. Thus, Oates’s construction of this exchange between The Director and The Girl emphasizes that The Girl is so consumed with the idea of fulfilling the figuration of womanhood revered in film that she cannot see beyond that image nor trust her own instincts of distrust regarding The Director and his gaze upon her body.

In the end, in accordance with the notion of a writerly text, Oates leaves it to the reader to determine The Girl’s final outcome and whether she is an individual who accepts her oppression through objectification or attains her autonomy. Oates concludes the story with an ambiguous statement from The Girl that allows for diverse interpretations. As the story concludes, The Girl appears to be most concerned about the existence and authenticity of the film. Sometime after the assault has occurred and after The Girl has physically recovered, she encounters The Director on the street and asks him, “Was it a real movie? Did it have film, the camera? . . . [L]ook it had film didn’t it? I mean it had film? I mean you made a real movie, didn’t you? (13). The Girl is almost in

a panic, which is indicated by both her pressing, repeated questions and her side comment, “Beginning to be afraid. Beginning. But I kept it back . . .” (13). The Director kisses her on the forehead and assures her that there was film in the camera and that the movie had been made. The Girl then responds with the troubling final statement that concludes the story, “So I was saved” (14). One interpretation of this final line is that The Girl is “saved” by the film because she now has evidence with which she can convict the rapists. After all, Oates depicts The Girl as suppressing her fear as she questions The Director in this final scene; The Girl states, “I kept smiling to show [The Director] no harm,” thus, Oates suggests that perhaps The Girl *does* mean him harm in that if the film exists and she can lead the police to The Director and the film, then the film can be used to convict the perpetrators. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, throughout the story, Oates creates a parallel setting in which The Girl is telling her story to police investigators. Up to the final scenes, Oates has The Girl incorporate police demands, such as, “What were their names? Don’t you know? Can’t you remember? Can’t you –? . . . Describe them” (4). But Oates indicates that The Girl is never successful in naming nor describing the perpetrators, though she seems to be desperately searching her memory and grasping for any scraps of identifying information she can remember to give to the police. Also, upon waking in the hospital, Oates depicts The Girl as desperate to find the perpetrators, as she immediately asks, “Did they find them?” (11). So Oates seems to suggest that this film could finally serve as a means to identify and convict the men. Reading the story in this manner allows for more agency and self-determination in Oates’s characterization of The Girl. If, up until the filming event, The Girl has naively internalized objectifying messages and sought recognition within a patriarchal construct

that required her subordination, then turning “The Vision” back onto The Director, The Motorcyclist, and The Cop and using the film for their demise certainly demonstrates a turning point, strength of character, and degree of agency in The Girl. Oates leaves open the possibility of interpreting the conclusion in this more positive and empowering manner.

However, Oates also sets up an alternative interpretation of The Girl’s last words, “So I was saved” (14). She uses the ambiguity of the single word “saved” to simultaneously suggest that The Girl’s last words indicate that even in the aftermath of the violence she has suffered, The Girl still clings to The Director’s vision and her oppressed, violated role in that vision. When The Girl encounters The Director in the final scene, Oates writes The Girl’s first point is, “I was pretty again,” thus suggesting that in The Girl’s attempt to prevail upon The Director to see her and to recognize her, her physical “prettiness” or her objectified body – what The Director values – is her first resort (13). Further, Oates allows for an interpretation of The Girl’s fear and panic in this scene as her response to the possibility that the violence she suffered was for naught, or the “film” was fabricated as a means to isolate and assault her, and not part of some greater aesthetic vision and purpose. If this were the case, she would not be cinematically immortalized as significant or valid, as she believes her filmed “desirability” makes her. In this portrayal, Oates suggests that women – and young women especially – when living under a matrix of objectification that includes the psychological trauma of a missing father, inevitably resort to internalizing the microaggressions that have shaped them.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence for piecing together Oates's story according to this darker interpretation, however, are the repetitions Oates includes in this final scene that refer back to The Director and The Girl's interactions during the filming. There is a repetition of the sacrificial vision: Oates conveys that just as The Director sacrificed The Girl once before for his greater vision, he confirms his use of her for his greater purpose once again. Prior to the filming of the rape in The Performance section of the story, Oates creates The Director kissing The Girl on the forehead, which is repeated in the final scene. The Girl states, "It was like a crucial scene now; he put his hands on my shoulders and kissed my forehead He said, 'Honey oh yeah. Yeah That's it. That's the purpose, the center, the reason behind it, all of it, the focus, the You know what I mean? The Vision?'" (14). The Director marks The Girl for sacrifice right before the filming of the rape and again to confirm the publication of the film – and his final vision. And, of course, The Girl's response to this kiss and confirmation is, "So I was saved." Oates intentionally refuses clarity so as to leave the reader disturbed about The Girl's understanding of her "salvation" lying in a produced act of brutal violence that is viewed by a public – or in herself as a violated spectacle.

In this scene, Oates has The Girl also replicate language spoken by The Director during the production of the film as he describes his aesthetic vision, a narrative detail that also suggests her internalized oppression. The Director states to the cast, "You can't control a vision. It's like going down a stairway and you're cautious and frightened and then the stairway breaks, the last step gives way, and you fall and yet you're not afraid . . . *you're saved*" (10, emphasis added). Thus, Oates suggests that The Girl is not speaking from her own sense of experience and agency, but rather is speaking The

Director's words, or as Meyers writes it, *The Girl* is "lip synching the ominous baritone of patriarchy" (17). Indeed, we are left to conclude, again, that Oates intentionally seeks to demonstrate in fiction the social reality of internalized oppression with which I introduced this chapter: "[T]o internalize oppression is to incorporate inferiorizing material into the structure of the self – to see oneself as objectified, and to feel competent and empowered by skills that reinforce one's subordination" (8).

Thus, through literary ambiguity, Oates allows for multiple interpretations of the text, depending upon the context and interpretations diverse readers bring to the reading process. In so doing, she constructs a writerly text that demands readers' ethical engagement with the social ills depicted in it. As Barthes states, "The Text . . . practices the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier . . . the *infinity* of the signifier refers not to some idea of the ineffable . . . but to that of a *playing*" (879, emphasis in the original). Indeed, at play and infinitely deferred in "The Girl" are at least the signifiers of the film in the camera; the narrator's fear; The Director's kiss; and most significantly, The Girl's final word of "saved." This "infinite deferment of the signified" is precisely the literary strategy that joins Oates and her readers into a common determining project and the strategy that, as Horeck argues, disrupts our mythological discourse about femininity and masculinity, as marked by race and class.

Oppression by Fulfillment of Conflated Cultural Myths in Sandra Cisneros's "One Holy Night"

Sandra Cisneros is an American author whose oeuvre captures the phenomenon of girlhood trauma in the United States as it occurs among young racialized Hispanic girls.

Critic Deborah Madsen explains, Cisneros's characters often demonstrate how the effort to negotiate a cross-cultural identity is complicated by the need to challenge deeply rooted patriarchal values of both Mexican and American cultures, and her stories often focus on how the myths from these cultures clash with her young characters' realities (57). This clash is precisely what Cisneros demonstrates in "One Holy Night." Through this fictional tale, Cisneros depicts not only how the phenomenon of girls internalizing oppression repeats itself cross-culturally and within ethnic enclaves in the United States, but also how the phenomenon becomes even more convoluted for a young girl who must negotiate her borderland identity. Similar to the narrative strategy employed by Oates in "The Girl," Cisneros employs a first-person narrator whose name is never revealed to the reader, thus implying this narrator could be any young Hispanic girl. All Cisneros tells the reader of the narrator is that she is in eighth grade, or approximately thirteen years old, and is a Mexican-American girl being raised by her Mexican-born grandmother and uncle somewhere within a United States Mexican-American community. Cisneros's text focuses on the narrator telling the story of her first sexual encounter with a man who claims to be a descendent of Mayan royalty, presumably to take advantage of her. However, as the narrator tells her story, Cisneros slowly reveals that this man of "Mayan royalty," in fact, turns out to be a serial killer of girls. As with Oates's story, Cisneros makes it fairly clear that the young narrator has been manipulated by internalized sexist cultural myths and values. Also similar to Oates's tale, Cisneros uses ambiguity to leave open to the reader's interpretation the degree of self-determination actually exhibited by the character, but the form of ambiguity that Cisneros employs is that of comparison, or a young narrator who compares herself to female religious figures. This ambiguity draws

the reader into Cisneros's text compelling us to once again become active listeners and, in Barthes term, *writers* of the text. Either way the reader interprets the story and narrator, the ambiguity challenges the reader to examine our own engagement with culturally engrained values and myths, and, further, to acknowledge the potentially deeply detrimental consequences of the repetition of some of these myths.

Cisneros creates a strong persona and attitude in her narrator of "One Holy Night," which may lead one to reasonably argue that the narrator is a strong, self-empowered character, as Rose Marie Cutting does in her essay, "Closure in Sandra Cisneros's 'Woman Hollering Creek.'" According to Cutting, Cisneros's narrator is a young Latina who challenges the submissive gender confines socially established for her and pursues what she desires. Specifically, Cutting states that the narrator "actively pursue[s]" her first sexual encounter, "chooses to go to the room of the man she is attracted to," "touches him first when they have sex," and "enjoys the dominant role that society says belongs to [the man]" (66-67). Cutting's analysis is bolstered by Cisneros's creation of a retrospective account in which, even before the narrator's sexual encounter with Chato Cruz, the man who assaults her, she declares, "I knew what I felt for him," referring to the attraction she feels toward Chato after he repeatedly seeks her out and makes her feel the focus of his attention. Cisneros also includes details that indicate the narrator's imagining and longing for her first sexual experience for some time, stating, "I wanted to come undone like gold thread, like a tent full of birds. The way it's supposed to be, the way I knew it would be when I met [Chato]" (28). This quote precedes an oppressive gender comment by the narrator's uncle who links female shame with sex and sex (presumably premarital) with "devil things," or sin. Thus, the narrator does, indeed,

challenge oppressive gender confinement and assert her attraction to Chato and her imaginings of her first sexual encounter, which does suggest a level of autonomy.

Cutting's reading of the narrator as autonomous may be further supported by the fact that Cisneros creates her narrator as imagining herself as empowered as she draws upon her Mayan cultural roots as a source of strength. Cisneros informs the reader that the narrator does not inhabit a social position of power within the United States with narrative details such as the "bad neighborhood" in which she lives and her uncle's response upon learning of the narrator's pregnancy; she tells us Uncle Lalo "blamed this country," or the United States, presumably due to the family's disadvantaged social position in this country (31-32). Therefore, Cisneros suggests the narrator asserting her strength in this disadvantaged U.S. social position by imagining herself as an adored and creative Mayan queen – and this is the critical argument for Cisneros's narrator drawing strength from a tradition of strong women. As scholars explain, for some time, Mayans lived in matrilineal societies in which women were particularly appreciated for their procreative powers. Lowell S. Gustafson explains that gender relations in Ancient Mayan cultures were fairly equal due to women's creative powers. He writes, "Ancient Mesoamericans saw a vigorous role for females in myth art. It may be argued that this early culture created by women was matrifocal, or concentrated on the feminine contributions to natural creation and social development . . . [their cultural] view emphasized the female role in creation" (67). In "One Holy Night," following Chato's fabrication that he is of Mayan nobility, Cisneros writes the narrator as envisioning herself as empowered by her sexual encounter, for whatever the nature of this encounter, it triggers her feminine, procreative capabilities.

Indeed, Cisneros suggests that Chato's mythological fabrications and sexual attentions provide the premise for the narrator's imagined social power and fulfillment, and that motivates her acquiescence to him. When Chato first meets the narrator, he immediately identifies himself as Chaq Uxmal Paloquin, descendant of Mayan kings. The name Chaq echoes origins in the Mayan god Chac, or the god of rain, thunder, and fertility. Cisneros provides verbal details that suggest Chato's employment of the Ancient myth keeps the narrator drawn to him. The narrator states, "What I like to hear him tell is how he is Chaq, Chaq of the people, of the sun, Chaq of the temples . . ." (29). The narrator embraces the mythology Chato creates, a mythology in which she envisions herself honored and empowered by his attentions. Indeed, on the night Chato assaults her, the narrator is portrayed as slipping into the fantasy of this mythology to imagine herself as royalty – or as Chaq's queen. Cisneros writes, "So I was initiated beneath an ancient sky by a great and mighty heir – Chaq Uxmal Paloquin. I, Ixchel, his queen" (30). As Gustafson explains, in Ancient Mayan culture, Ixchel was a moon goddess who symbolized women's procreative powers. He writes, "Ix Chel was the goddess of weaving, divination, fertility, pregnancy, midwifery, and childbirth. Women from all over the Yucatan made pilgrimages to her shrines . . ." (68). In this scene, Cisneros creates a narrator who perceives herself in a moment of fulfillment, for she is fulfilling the cultural myth of a Mayan goddess revered for her sexuality and procreative capabilities. Further, rather than shamed for her sexuality, the narrator is culturally revered according to these ancient myths. So, given these possible readings, Cutting's analysis of the narrator as defiant of her U.S. social position and self-empowering with her cultural myths is not unreasonable.

At the same time, however, Cisneros's use of literary ambiguity simultaneously undermines this interpretation. Indeed, the sexual moment in which the narrator slips into the fantasy of Mayan mythology and envisions herself as a goddess might be read as a moment of dissociation and, therefore, trauma, much like Fragoso depicts in her memoir: for just as Fragoso envisions herself as a different being in a different place, so, too, does Cisneros's narrator when she imagines herself as a Mayan goddess. Indeed, Cisneros's narrative details suggest that Chato and the narrator's sexual encounter is much more violent than the narrator directly conveys. The narrator's descriptions of Chato reveal that her naïve and romanticized imaginings of him clash with the reality of his character. The narrator tells us that she calls Chato "Boy Baby," a term of endearment that suggests her imagined infantilization of him and cognitive effort to bring him down to her age and maturity levels; she is, thus, imaginatively creating her romantic partner. However, Cisneros disrupts this fantasy with the following scene: the narrator and her grandmother attempt to locate Chato at his home and ask for him by his Mayan name Chaq. The narrator notes, "[W]hen the other mechanics heard that name they laughed, and asked if we had made it up" (32). Immediately after this encounter with the mechanics, the narrator hears the reality: her first sexual encounter was with a 37-year-old man named Chato, or "fat-face," not Chaq, Mayan god of fertility, and that "fat-face" is a serial killer of young girls who disposes of their bodies in a hidden cave. Cisneros incorporates these conflicting names of Chaq, Chato, and Boy Baby to signify the narrator's lack of a grasp on reality, and the clash between the imagined myths that Chato employs to manipulate her and the reality of the narrator's situation.

Cisneros creates the narrator as either denying the violence and trauma involved in her encounter with Chato, or as incapable of comprehending and processing them. Take, for instance, the narrator's sexual encounter with Chato. While Cutting reads this encounter as the narrator pursuing Chato, it may be read much differently – or as Chato violating her. The narrator's supposed "seduction" consists of her child-like desire to see Chato and so she wears her favorite blue dress to sell cucumbers and mangoes from the family kiosk outside of a grocery store. Further, the narrator is a prepubescent thirteen-year-old girl, while Chato is twenty-four years her senior. In other words, perhaps the narrator does not "have sex" with her "lover" as Cutting states, but rather is a girl who is raped by a violent man (67, 71). Cisneros seems to reinforce this interpretation by using guns to symbolize Chato's threatening nature: before the assault, the narrator tells us, Chato "showed me the guns – twenty-four in all. Rifles and pistols, one rusty musket, a machine gun, and several tiny weapons with mother of pearl handles that looked like toys. So you'll see who I am, he said, laying them all out on the bed of newspapers. So you'll understand" (29). Though one might also interpret this gun display as a sign of Chato's virility, as Cutting seems to, Cisneros's placement of it directly prior to the rape scene seems to give more credence to it as signifying danger. Indeed, immediately following this display, Chato rapes the narrator on this bed of newspapers strewn with guns and the narrator tells us, "I put my bloody panties inside my T-shirt and ran home hugging myself" (30). By focusing on this exchange concerning the guns as one of the most important elements of their encounter, and then referencing the consequential blood and the narrator's need to "hug" or comfort herself, Cisneros provides equal evidence that

this was an experience of violence and trauma rather than enjoyable sexual self-possession on the narrator's part.

Cisneros also indicates that Chato's violation of the narrator is embedded within a greater culture that demeans, dehumanizes, and violates women; in other words, she conveys a culture in which gender-based microaggressions are the norm. Cisneros invests the narrator with language that reveals her social situation and the sexist environment in which she is being raised; she is caught within a cultural pattern of women being socially disempowered by becoming pregnant at a young age and/or out of wedlock, or by some other socially "crooked" behavior. The narrator states, "I don't know how many girls have gone bad from selling cucumbers. I know I'm not the first. My mother took the crooked walk too, I'm told, and I'm sure my Abuelita has her own story . . ." (28). Through this generational genealogy, Cisneros suggests a cultural pattern of girls and women being "ruined." Further, as previously mentioned, we know the narrator is subjected to confining figurations of womanhood in her own home by her uncle who states, "if they have never left Mexico in the first place shame enough would have kept a girl from doing devil things" (28). Thus, with this comment from the narrator's uncle, Cisneros's narrative returns us to the cultural linkage of shame, sex, and virginity running through this chapter. Cisneros emphasizes the uncle's assertion that the narrator's personal worth and identity are dependent upon her body: on the one hand, the narrator is offered a figuration of womanhood that values the female body for its sexuality; on the other hand, she is offered another figuration of womanhood that values the female body for its purity. Cisneros suggests the narrator's trapped social position, for regardless of the figuration the narrator chooses, the perceptions of others in this sexist culture hold the

narrator in a demeaned, subservient position: she must choose between being the target of negative hostility for her sexuality or being put on a pedestal in a cultural logic that perceives women as weaker, less human, and in need of masculine protection. With either choice, her humanity and individual volition is limited.

Significant to note is that Cisneros creates a conflation of figurations of womanhood in the narrator's reiteration of myths, suggesting the narrator's struggle with the complexities of both 1) her identity in a space between two conflicting patriarchal values, a space in which the narrator attempts agency by owning both her Mexican and American cultural myths, and 2) internalized oppression. Meyers explains that:

Internalized patriarchal oppression names the selections of culturally certified concepts and interpretive schemas together with the repertoires of culturally favored and disfavored agentic skills that recruit women into self-subordination. Since different cultures (and subcultures) structure women's agency differently, internalized patriarchal oppression is not uniform across cultures (or subcultures), and since different women internalize materials differently, internalized patriarchal oppression is not uniform among women within the same culture (or subcultures) either. (24)

While Cisneros has the narrator name the "culturally certified concept" of the Mayan goddess Ixchel and the "culturally favored" female capability of procreation to metaphorically imagine herself as powerful, in fact this cultural construct functions to ultimately oppress her, at least in her contemporary Western society; for Cisneros suggests that this myth conflicts with the narrator's reality. Cisneros further complicates the narrator's self-comparison with the goddess in Mayan myths with allusions of Western religiosity woven into the narrator's version of the myths, which suggests the narrator's young naivety, thus undermining her self-perceived power. Cisneros suggests the narrator's conflation of the Mayan feminine figure of Ixchel with the Western

Christian feminine figure of the Virgin Mary, or La Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexican culture. Cisneros's story's title, "One Holy Night," alludes to the contemporary Christianity's reverence for the Annunciation and the Virgin Mary, or the night Mary received word that she was pregnant with God's son. Thus, Cisneros portrays the narrator as drawing a comparison between herself and the Christian Marian figure, but while identifying herself as a Mayan goddess.¹⁴

While some may read these allusions as the narrator's character strength, they also suggest an impressionable young girl who is confused as she tries to create an identity while caught between two worlds. Professor of Latino/a studies Bridget Kevane argues that "One Holy Night" and the greater collection of stories of which this short story is part provide readers with an understanding of "how [Hispanic's] balance their Mexican traditions with their contemporary status in the United States" and that "Cisneros explores how . . . ancient [Mexican] traditions, myths, and history affect the characters on both sides of the border Through her characters, Cisneros demonstrates how Mexico's cultural traditions have come to bear on the contemporary Mexican American individual" (58-59). The narrator's attempt at this balance in her feminine identity is evident through her combined Ixchel/Marian self-figuration; she is emulating this combined figuration of woman – half Mayan goddess of procreation (or whore) and half Christian Virgin Queen (or Madonna). She repeats Chato's words on the night of the assault: "The stars foretell everything, he said. My birth. My son's. The boy-child who will bring back the grandeur of my people from those who have broken the

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche, the virgin-whore figurations of womanhood in Mexican culture, in Mexican feminists' works, see Chapter Four in Jenny T. Olin-Shanahan's *Writing Guadalupe: Mediacion and (Mis)Translation in Borderland Text(o)s*.

arrows, from those who have pushed the ancient stones off their pedestal” (29). This quote captures how the narrator is internalizing conflated Mayan and Christian myths: the Mayans employed astrology to determine the future, yet the imagery of the foretold mother and child, and the son who is born so that he may save us from the sins of man, echoes Christianity.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Cisneros creates these confining gender constructs to suggest they act as microaggressions that not only harm the narrator’s perception of herself and relationship of her own body, for Cisneros suggests that the narrator understands her value *only* in her body, but that also facilitate Chato’s physical violence. Cisneros demonstrates the narrator identifying with and clinging to this conflated figuration of womanhood – a conflation of cultural myths that are part of what Meyers terms the “pronatalist doctrine.” Meyers argues that the lives of women and girls are so saturated with this culturally accepted pronatalist discourse that their life options are limited and “self-determination is diminished” since it is taken as a given that procreation is the ultimate – and most culturally respected – life-purpose and vocation of women and girls. Meyers quotes Donna Bassin to emphasize the oppression that may be inherent in this “calling”: “If motherhood is taken on for nostalgic reasons . . . the mother can experience herself only as an object” (172). It can be argued that this is precisely the case in “One Holy Night.” Cisneros imbues her narrator with romanticized pronatalist language at the age of thirteen, thus, the reader understands that she is not genuinely speaking of her own accord nor in her own interests, particularly since the myth flourishes from Chato’s motives and his own self-interest, which is violating her.

In addition, Cisneros makes clear sexual experience is the narrator's primary interest. Cisneros suggests that the narrator's encounter with Chato bestows her with a sense of superiority. After the encounter, she states, "I was wise," and while "[t]he corner girls were still jumping into their stupid little hopscotch squares . . . suddenly I became part of history" (30). Further, all of her young female cousins want to know from her "how it is to have a man" (34). Thus, Cisneros depicts a child's internalization of the pronatalist doctrine that instills in her the belief that the significance of her existence in history depends upon her body and her sexual relationship with men. Cisneros weaves together pronatalist figurations from both the narrator's familial Mayan cultural roots and her contemporary Western society, suggesting her vulnerable borderland position as she attempts to negotiate her identity between these two worlds and cultures – two cultures that convey similar messages regarding female value. This position is conveyed as facilitating Chato Cruz's violence and allows him to fully take advantage of her. Further, Cisneros's narrative includes a reality in which the narrator no longer lives in an ancient Mayan society, nor is the goddess of fertility still culturally revered and empowered – and the narrator's adherence to these ancient cultural traditions leaves her effectively disempowered as an uneducated, unemployed, and impoverished young mother who ends up hidden away in her family's Mexican compound out of the family's shame of her condition. Cisneros drives this reality home with the exposure of the narrator's imagined King Chaq as a brutal murderer of young girls, as well as the narrator's own brush with death. Thus, Cisneros's narrative displays the particular vulnerabilities of a young girl caught between two patriarchal cultures as she tries to carve out her identity in this cultural position.

Once again, Cisneros creates a story rich with ambiguity that leaves the reader with no clear conclusion concerning the young narrator's final state. On one hand, her narrative rejects an easy label of a "victim" story as she creates a narrator who portrays herself as a strong agent who combines socially strong figurations of womanhood from her combined Mexican and United States cultures in order to assert herself. On the other hand, Cisneros simultaneously creates a narrator who can be interpreted as a young girl who has been manipulated and effectively disempowered in her contemporary society. In fact, Cisneros leaves open the possibility that her protagonist could have easily been the next female body that Chato added to the Cave of Hidden Girls – a fact that undermines any artifice of power the narrator projects.

Ambiguity and the Reader as Agent

Barthes states that the Text can only be a Text "in its difference . . . its reading is semelfactive . . . and nevertheless woven entirely with citations, echoes, cultural languages . . . antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (880). Accordingly, neither Oates nor Cisneros create narrators that provide readers with satisfying conclusions to their stories, thus employing the last of Empson's concepts of ambiguity: "Where what is said is contradictory . . . and the reader is forced to invent interpretations" (894). Even if a reader strongly leans toward one interpretation rather than another, disturbing residual elements of the stories disrupt the settled-upon interpretation. In "The Girl," the reader may want to believe that the narrator's final statement, "So I was saved," indicates self-ownership and self-empowerment. For the assertive use of the personal pronoun "I" suggests this possibility

of self-ownership, and since the narrator's story is, in part, her report to the police as they push the narrator to identify the rapists, the reader may interpret the narrator's statement as the indication that the film, finally, is serving as evidence to identify and capture the perpetrators. Thus, giving The Girl a sense of final self-empowerment. However, this interpretation cannot rest settled and established, for even if the reader interprets the narrator's final statement as indicating the film can now be used as police evidence, there is a disturbing and complicated layering of violation unfolding with this reading, for the real police officers must still watch the video of the faux police officer raping The Girl in order to identify the men. So the narrator is ultimately still objectified and violated yet again – her violation is repeated and watched, and her body is a means to an end. Even more disturbing is the fact that the narrator's last words echo The Director's words as he is sharing his vision of the film with the cast: “[A]nd you fall and yet you're not afraid, you're not afraid after all, *you're saved*” (10, emphasis added). Thus, the narrator's final words are not her own – they are The Director's, who implemented her violation, and her final statement indicates the narrator's satisfaction in finally fulfilling The Director's vision.

The same holds true with Cisneros's “One Holy Night.” Neither interpretive lens provides the reader with a definitive conclusion to the narrator's story. In one sense, Cisneros conveys the narrator as strong and self-empowered. Chato did not murder her, like he did the other girls, so perhaps she is different – stronger and more self-empowered than the other girls (or so naïve and acquiescing that Chato does not need to murder her). Further, the narrator's employment of Mayan myths to envision herself as revered and powerful defies the Western U.S. culture that demands her feminine submissiveness. The

reader certainly wants to believe this vision the narrator creates of herself. Yet when the reader strips away the narrator's envisioned fantasy to see the factual structures of the story, Cisneros leaves the reader with a disturbing vision of reality: a thirteen-year-old girl is raped by a thirty-seven year old man, and as she is only thirteen, rape is the only word that can be used to describe this encounter. Further, while the narrator's voice and sense of self may be conveyed as powerful, at the end of the story she is a young girl who is denied an education, she is pregnant and without resources, and she is put into hiding in a distant relative's Mexican home. In other words, the reality of her material conditions undermines any sense of authority or power she attempts to convey.

That said, the vision of Oates's and Cisneros's young female narrators as narrative representations of helpless victims and targets of violent sexual predators – or of a violent, predatory culture – is also unstable, for in interpreting the narrators through this lens, these constructions unwittingly support and contribute to the culture in which these girls are perceived as only objects and victims. Catharine Lumby addresses this issue in “Ambiguity, Children, Representation, and Sexuality.” Lumby cites literary critic James Kincaid to explain that the popular discourse surrounding children in which they are always “constructed” as potential victims or victims of sexual predators denies children agency and fuller constructions of identity (4). Lumby writes,

[I]mages of children as devoid of agency – as empty pages to write on – are everywhere. Hyperbolic assertions of the need to protect the sanctity of children from corruption by the adult world are equally claims that children lack agency or even full humanity The very thing, then, that responsible adults are most concerned about . . . children being subject to – i.e. sexual attention from adults – may in fact be deeply rooted in a denial that children have any sexuality or agency of their own [B]oth discourses of protection and discourses which sexualize children are mired in denial – on one hand, they portray children as pure beings who are

absolutely other to the adult world, yet on the other they represent them as always on the threshold of becoming sexual. (5)

Exposing how each individual reader writes on these so-called “empty pages,” or the ambiguous white spaces on these pages, is perhaps the ultimate function of Oates’s and Cisneros’s short stories. The ambiguities in the narratives of these two young narrators draw the reader in so that we must first listen attentively and then filter the narrators’ experiences through our own lenses of perception and understanding, which, in turn, reveals how the reader contributes to the popular discourse regarding the sexuality of young girls. In “Literature, Moral Reflection and Ambiguity,” philosopher Craig Taylor writes, “[I]t is through our [conflicting] responses to [ambiguous works] . . . that we can gain a sense of what serious moral reflection really requires of us, of the kind of unflinching scrutiny it requires, scrutiny not most fundamentally of others but of *ourselves*” (89, emphasis in the original). Indeed, the ambiguity employed in the works in this chapter pull the reader in so that we must, in part, construct the story. Thus, we become agents. In this agency, we are challenged, for we must ask, “What must happen for these violations *not* to occur?” Is it enough for a strong narrator to deny the occurrence, whether emotionally or by reframing the sexual encounter so that it appears less violent – or vindicated? Or must there be a change in the gender figurations we present to girls and in how we talk to and about girls? These are ultimately the challenges these stories pose to the reader through their combined use of young, nameless narrators who have suffered violence and ambiguity that demand the reader’s determination of the narrators’ final fates.

Chapter Four:

Unarticulated Girlhood Trauma in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid

“For a writer, what you leave out says as much as those things you include There are so many things that we can’t say, because they are too painful When we tell a story we exercise control, but in such a way as to leave a gap, an opening . . . perhaps we hope the silences will be heard by someone else When we write we offer the silence as much as the story. Words are the part of the silence that can be spoken.”

- Jeanette Winterson

“The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialect of psychological trauma.”

- Judith Herman

The experience of girlhood trauma lies at the heart of the majority of Jamaica Kincaid’s literary works. In particular, Kincaid’s *Annie John*, *Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, and “Girl,” a short story in the collection entitled *At the Bottom of the River*, all subtly express the violations young Dominican and Antiguan girls experience in their home environments – environments in which these girls are devalued and subjected to deep-rooted oppression. Many critics have discussed the postcolonial and racial experiences portrayed in Kincaid’s works, but few have honed their focus on Kincaid’s portrayal of girlhood and on the writing techniques she employs to express the trauma her narrators endure. Kincaid conveys her characters’ traumas as originating in their tightly interconnected demographic realities, including their female gender, dark skin color, low economic levels, and their inheritance of a history of colonialism and slavery. While it is nearly impossible to separate these tightly woven threads of the characters’ identities and realities (and, certainly, each influences the others), for the purpose of this chapter, I am focusing on the characters’ gender to argue Kincaid employs literary omission to convey the insidious trauma her young female narrators

experience as a consequence of constant verbal abuse and social slights. While Kincaid depicts her characters suffering as a result of their gender intersecting with their racial, economic, and postcolonial realities, she portrays girlhood as the primary driving force behind the insidious violence her narrators suffer. Particularly when these four works are read together with the presumption of an interconnection and set against Kincaid's biographical history, Kincaid depicts girlhood trauma as both her own and her characters' gender inheritance.

Among literary critics, Kincaid's works are well established as trauma literature: Elaine Pigeon argues that colonial education is the source of trauma in *Annie John*, Laurie Vickroy examines how Kincaid's character Xuela develops survivor skills in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Victoria Burrows reads the intersection of trauma and whiteness in her reading of *Lucy*, and Leigh Gilmore studies Kincaid's choice of fiction as the genre with which to express her trauma due to the social and academic expectations that constrict an author's freedom of expression with the use of autobiography. In this chapter, I discuss Kincaid's fine balance between the articulated and the unarticulated, or the rhetorical techniques of voice and fragmentation that Kincaid employs to suggest the "iceberg" of girlhood trauma looming beneath the surface of her narratives. With these techniques, Kincaid creates a narrative effect of resistance. While Vickroy argues that in most trauma literature, authors depict "communal or family support . . . as necessary for healing," this is not the case in Kincaid's works (26). Kincaid's characters are depicted as strongly resisting communal and family support, as these are the sources of their traumas.

Insidious Trauma

Important to note at the outset of this discussion is the nature of trauma being discussed in this chapter. My previous chapters focus on literary texts representing the conventional understanding of trauma, which is most often defined as a one-time, sudden, and unexpected event, such as the physical violence, or rape, experienced by the female characters in Goddard Jones's, Oates's, and Cisneros's texts. However, a more complete understanding of trauma (and an understanding of trauma underlying my discussions throughout this dissertation) includes Maria Root's concept of insidious trauma, as discussed in previous chapters. Psychologist Laura S. Brown argues that a more comprehensive understanding of trauma includes in its definition of "traumatic stressors" "all those everyday, repetitive, interpersonal events that are so often the source of psychic pain for women" – stressors, Brown claims, that trigger trauma responses, such as numbing, in women who have never personally experienced physical violence (107-108).¹⁵ Root's and Brown's concept of insidious trauma is connected to Derald Wing Sue's concept of microaggressions, as discussed in Chapter Two. In light of the concept of insidious trauma, microaggressions can be understood as acts of violence committed against a victim's sense of self. So, as discussed in Chapter Two, not only do microaggressions facilitate violence by fostering environments in which the dehumanization of feminized and other marginalized individuals and groups is the norm,

¹⁵ Trauma scholar Arieh Y. Shalev further supports this claim in his discussion of studies that find individuals experience traumatic responses to everyday stressors. Shalev summarizes, "PTSD symptomatology occurs after ordinary as well as extraordinary events PTSD may follow events of less magnitude" (79).

but they also “do violence to the soul and spirit” of the victims.¹⁶ Indeed, Sue explains, “microaggressions are constant and continuing experiences of marginalized groups in our society; they assail the self-esteem of recipients, produce anger and frustration, deplete psychic energy, lower feelings of subjective well-being and worthiness” (6). Thus, the psychological effects of both overt and more insidious trauma are similar: the “self-altering, even self-shattering, experience of violence, injury, and harm,” as trauma scholar Leigh Gilmore articulates it (132). This concept of insidious psychic trauma – or the experience of having one’s spirit injured, altered, and/or shattered by violating and harmful maternal abuse – is the nature of trauma represented in many of Kincaid’s works and, therefore, at the foundation of my argument in this chapter: Kincaid depicts gender-based insidious trauma, which is difficult to identify and articulate because it is Kincaid’s characters’ environmental norm, as shattering the psyches of her girl narrators and pervading their silences.

Trauma in the Works of Kincaid and Hemingway’s Theory of Omission

Before proceeding with an analysis of the unarticulated trauma in Kincaid’s work, it is critical to have two frameworks with which to understand Kincaid’s rhetorical approach for this “unarticulation.” Kincaid’s literature can be more fully appreciated with brief discussions regarding 1) trauma in relation to Kincaid’s own biographical context, and 2) Ernest Hemingway’s theory of omission, also known as his iceberg theory. These two frameworks are critical because much of the narrators’ traumas in Kincaid’s stories

¹⁶ For my fuller discussion on Sue’s concept of microaggressions, see Chapter Two.

remain unspoken or omitted. Kincaid reveals only fragments of information and experiences in each work. However, the fragments she does reveal in one particular work often fill in the gaps of information she leaves in other works. Thus, when the stories are read in conjunction, with one story informing our understanding of another, we gain a fuller picture of the events and pain lying just below the surface of Kincaid's narratives. Further, Kincaid readily admits that her writing functions as a form of self-therapy with which she works through the trauma of her girlhood in order to understand and come to terms with it. In an interview with Moira Ferguson of *The Kenyon Review*, Kincaid emphasizes the healing function of writing in her life, stating, "I am not a real writer because it is not a career for me For me it is a matter of saving my life . . . it is an act of survival" (169, 171).

That Kincaid writes about her own girlhood experiences and the emotional abuse she suffered under her mother as a child growing up on the island of Antigua is well documented in numerous interviews Kincaid has given. In her interview with Ferguson, Kincaid repeats multiple times, "My writing has been very autobiographical" and states of the voice she creates in the short story, "Girl," "[I]t is my mother's voice exactly over many years" (171). Likewise, in Kincaid's interview with Kay Bonetti of *The Missouri Review*, she confesses, "I write about myself for the most part and about the things that have happened to me." While she admits her penchant for exaggeration, Kincaid stresses the truth underlying her stories, stating, "Everything I state is true, and everything I say is not true. I don't aim to be factual. I aim to be true to something, but it's not necessarily the facts [In *Annie John*] I tried to write a story about my mother and myself, and there were incidents that I perceived as betrayal, at the time." She further states of *Lucy*,

“The true characters in *Lucy* are the mother and Lucy.” Kincaid makes very clear that the mothers and daughters in her stories are shaped in the image of two people: herself and her own mother. Further, Kincaid suggests she continually repeats these two characters in her stories in order to arrive at some kind of understanding of the psychic trauma she suffered as a girl. Kincaid states of her writing and repetitions, “For me, writing is a revelation When I sit down to write I reveal to myself what I already know I know how it works, but I haven’t quite said it yet” (“An Interview” 74). “[I]f you look at something over and over again, it begins to open a door. You think, ‘Oh that is what they were doing, that’s what that meant’” (“A Lot of Memory” 183). It is as if each character in each story is part of a greater picture Kincaid is trying to create, and when these characters are read together, they reveal a fuller history to both Kincaid and the readers of her texts. Thus, read in conjunction with the evidence of her fiction, Kincaid’s interviews suggest that she is writing to work through her own girlhood trauma and to bring to the surface the fuller picture of the emotional violence she endured.

While Kincaid does not necessarily intend her intertextual links that give both herself and her readers fuller access to the girlhood trauma looming beneath the surface of her writing, inadvertently or intentionally, this is exactly what her repeated mother-daughter dynamics and memory fragments achieve. Throughout the four works on which I am focusing in this chapter, there is evidence of what Freud first identified as the repetition compulsion, or the tendency of traumatized individuals to psychologically repeat the traumatizing event or conditions under which the trauma occurred. This repetition can take on many forms, including dreams in which the individual suffers the repeated feelings associated with the traumatization. Contemporary trauma scholars

Mandi Horowitz and Paul Russel reiterate Freud's findings regarding the healing function of what he labeled "traumatic neurosis" (qtd. in Caruth 2). Horowitz explains that the process of repetition helps victims work through their trauma memories by allowing them to create a "mental schema" with which to understand and, finally, assimilate the trauma into their identities. This process allows victims to "resolve" their traumas (qtd. in Dayton 237). Psychoanalyst Russel repeats this finding, stating, the repetition compulsion ultimately produces relief that "the person needs to feel in order to repair the injury" (qtd. in Herman 41-42). Indeed, in Kincaid's interview with Ferguson, she states, "[I]f I hadn't become a writer . . . I would have been insane, and that's the truth. I would have had nervous breakdowns upon nervous breakdowns" (169). It is, then, in studying the repetitions in these four works by Kincaid that both the writer and the reader gain an understanding of the oppression and psychic trauma lying at the heart of Kincaid's oeuvre.

A second key concept for understanding Kincaid's writing is Ernest Hemingway's theory of omission. Hemingway's theory sheds significant light upon Kincaid's writing techniques. Hemingway explains his philosophy of aesthetic writing as one that demands a withholding of information from the reader. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway writes, "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water" (132). In an interview with George Plimpton of *The Paris Review*, Hemingway further explicates,

Anything you can omit that you know you still have in the writing and its quality will show I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is that part that doesn't show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story . . . the knowledge is what makes the underwater part of the iceberg.

In this same interview, Hemingway states of his purpose behind his iceberg theory: “I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened.” In “Hemingway’s Camera Eye,” Zoe Trodd expands upon Hemingway’s explanation, writing that Hemingway’s rhetorical approach of omitting information “demanded that the reader *feel* the whole story” and that Hemingway’s style leaves readers to “fill in the gaps left by his omissions with their feelings” (17, emphasis in original).

Hemingway’s “iceberg” is an apt metaphor for the affect Kincaid creates in her works. Similar to Hemingway’s style, Kincaid writes seemingly simple sentences that convey the narrators’ direct observations and experiences in a very controlled and flat manner, which not only suggests a degree of numbness in her narrators, but also allows the reader very limited emotional engagement with the characters. However, Kincaid communicates the sense of something greater – something withheld – lying below the narrators’ flat affects, some kind of information and emotion that the reader senses but cannot fully access, and, indeed, that the narrators, themselves, cannot fully access. This “something,” this body of the iceberg in Kincaid’s text, I argue, is the experience of girlhood trauma.

Kincaid communicates the experience of girlhood trauma by offering the “words [that] are the part of the silence that can be spoken” (Winterson 8). Specifically, Kincaid performs omission with the rhetorical and poetic devices of voice and fragmentation. Just as Hemingway and Trodd argue in their explanation of omission theory, the effect of Kincaid’s rhetorical style is the evocation of her readers to *feel* the numbed and often fragmented psychic responses her young narrators experience as a consequence of psychic trauma, and this feeling, just as Hemingway explains, indeed, becomes part of the reader’s experience.

Kincaid’s Repetition of Oppressive and Oppressed Voices in “Girl,” *Annie John*, and *Lucy*

Kincaid creates two voices throughout “Girl,” *Annie John*, and *Lucy* that are significant for discussing her rhetorical techniques for conveying girlhood trauma: the voice of the mother figure and the voice of the young daughter, which is also the narrative voice in these works. The mother figures in her stories function as the medium for delivering the oppressive and traumatizing blows upon the young girls. This is most apparent and is the thematic focus of “Girl,” in which Kincaid creates a maternal voice hurling a constant drone of words that acts as a bludgeoning force upon her daughter. The title, “Girl,” is one of Kincaid’s most important directives for understanding her intent with this voice and the dynamic between the mother and daughter in this story, for Kincaid immediately places the reader in a receptive mode and in the subject position of the daughter at the receiving end of this voice. Further, she offers only one perspective through which to understand this story: the girl’s – first when she is young, then as an

adult daughter for whom the mother's comments during many years are compressed into this one scene, representing the way that the daughter's identifications with the mother's voice plays over and over inside her head.

Kincaid writes the mother's voice in "Girl" using parataxis, a rhetorical technique that effectively conveys the harsh and oppressive nature of this voice. Parataxis is defined as the "coordination of clauses without conjunctions" that explain the relationship between the clauses; the resulting effect is a sense of "terseness and compression" (Cuddon 638). In Gayatri Spivak's political discussion of *Lucy*, she argues that Kincaid's paratactic form emphasizes Lucy's alienation in her new world and, thus, her subject position. Spivak argues that Kincaid's use of parataxis functions to resist the narrow categorization of *Lucy* by the situation Kincaid presents or by "only its subject matter – a story about a migrant governess" (338). Kincaid also employs parataxis in "Girl" to portray the mother's voice and the damaging impact this voice has upon the girl, which is linked to greater cultural structures. In Kincaid's interview with Allan Vorda in the *Mississippi Review*, she explains a personal revelation: "I've come to see that I've worked through the relationship of the mother and girl to a relationship between Europe and the place I'm from [Antigua], which is to say, a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless and the mother is powerful" (56). In this same interview, Kincaid laments on the legacy of colonial rule in the interpersonal relations of Antiguans and the fact that oppressive politics by individuals in positions of power have remained intact long after the departure of the colonizers. Kincaid states, "[P]eople in your own family [do] these terrible things. They look like you. They're not white. They're not from far away. Yet they are behaving the same way colonial powers did"

(55). Accordingly, in “Girl,” Kincaid employs a paratactic narrative voice to depict the mother character carrying out upon her daughter this legacy of violence and oppression that she herself suffered, and as perpetuating damaging patriarchal cultural constructs.

Kincaid’s employment of parataxis in “Girl” serves a number of affective functions. First, it expresses a building or compounding effect to the reader. Kincaid creates one long stretch of phrases that span three pages with only semi-colons or dashes separating these phrases. The phrases read as follows:

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk barehead in the hot sun; . . . is it true you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won’t turn someone else’s stomach; . . . don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions. (3)

Kincaid’s employment of parataxis in depicting the mother’s voice compels the reader to *feel* (using Trodd’s term and emphasis to describe the effect of Hemingway’s style) the weight of the mother’s words as she directs duty after duty and instruction after instruction at the girl. With each added duty, instruction, and verbal slight, Kincaid conveys the sense of weight upon weight or blow upon blow being laid upon the girl.

Kincaid characterizes the mother’s words as “blows” with the sense of interruption she creates between the unrelated phrases imbued with different tones and purposes. Take, for example, the following didactic and derogatory lines:

[O]n Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming . . . this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming . . . this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming. (3-4)¹⁷

¹⁷ For emphasis and compactness, I have placed the three phrases in which the girl’s mother threatens her with the “slut” label side by side here. However, within the

In one moment the mother is giving benign household instructions and in the next she is lashing the girl with accusations and insults. In effect, Kincaid communicates the unexpected and, therefore, even more harmful nature of the mother's verbal blows upon the girl, for the young girl is in a mode of reception as she follows her mother's instructions when she unexpectedly falls under her mother's attacks. Further, Kincaid's paratactic style makes the reader *feel* the abruptness of these blows: for just as the girl is taken by surprise, Kincaid's withholding of conjunction between phrases makes the reader feel this suddenness with the rhetorical content and tone disjointedness inherent in the coordinated phrases.

In effect, Kincaid's paratactic style also functions to emphasize the aggression underlying the mother's voice so that the reader understands that this is not simply a mother teaching her young daughter, as it may first appear on the surface, but rather is a negatively charged and damaging interaction. Kincaid makes her readers keenly aware that the microaggressions woven into the mother's litany are a central element of the mother's voice, and that the daughter is being molded into a house servant as she is taught to be pleasing to others while oppressing herself. As if to erase any doubt of the mother's violating undertones, Kincaid depicts the narrator repeating her mother's disparaging accusation of being a "slut," which effectively emphasizes the cutting harshness of the mother's voice. The girl narrator repeats three times in this very brief story the mother threatening her with "slut" status should she violate her mother's expectations. Further, Kincaid's paratactic style emphasizes the heaviness and

story these phrases are more spread out and so more strongly convey the sense of the girl being blindsided by her mother's demeaning word as it is slipped into her domestic-related commands.

abrasiveness of the word “slut,” and, therefore, the oppression lingering beneath the mother’s words: according to the mother, challenging the cultural confines established for women and girls will cast the girl as sexually promiscuous, dirty, and vile – and not only according to the perspective of distant others, but also to her own mother – and, consequently, deserving of her subjection to the derogation of others. Kincaid employs the mother’s paratactic voice to communicate its effects upon the girl: the mother’s voice serves as a controlling, coercive force upon the girl that strips her of her self-determinacy and threatens her with social shame for the slightest transgression of gender-based boundaries. As Kincaid explains to Vorda, with the creation of this voice, Kincaid depicts the mother maintaining the interpersonal relationships with her daughter that she, herself, learned as a child in a colonized nation: “the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror” (56).

In addition, one of the central concerns of this story is the mother’s voice repeatedly playing out in the daughter’s consciousness: Kincaid depicts the mother’s voice as a didactic hyper-monologue inside the young girl’s head and, therefore, as a fundamental aspect of the girl’s thinking and self-conception. Very little of this girl is revealed other than this voice flooding her thoughts. With Kincaid’s rhetorical choice to create an endless stream of commands, along with her employment of assonance and consonance that emphasize the mother’s droning rhythm, she effectively implies the overwhelmed feeling the young girl on the receiving end of this litany must experience as she is constantly subjected to an overbearing mother who allows no space for her young daughter’s own voice and identity. Thus, Kincaid’s creation of this internalized maternal voice directs the reader to the narrative tension between the mother’s oppressive voice

and the daughter's oppressed voice (and self), as the girl is portrayed as struggling with her mother's barrage of instructions and criticisms that are consuming her.

Kincaid most clearly conveys the girl's struggle by setting up her voice as a counter to the mother's voice. Two times in the story, the young girl asserts her voice and attempts to interrupt her mother, and both times the mother silences the young girl with her continued litany. The first time Kincaid has the girl speak it is to protest her mother's accusation of singing benna in Sunday school. The girl interjects, "*[B]ut I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*" (4, emphasis in original). Kincaid's employment of benna in this scene reveals a great irony in this mother-daughter dynamic. Benna is a type of Antiguan music characterized by its gossipy content and call-and-response style. While Kincaid establishes the daughter's voice as a counter to mother's, in the moment, the daughter never has the opportunity to respond to her mother's accusation. Therefore, in Kincaid's allusion to a call-and-response dynamic, the daughter's "response" portion is completely eliminated under her mother's rule.¹⁸ For Kincaid demonstrates the mother completely refusing to acknowledge her daughter's voice and protests as she continues to speak over the girl, thus, completely disempowering her daughter by allowing her absolutely no voice until the girl disconnects herself from her mother. Further, by the time the girl does interject her voice in protest, the mother is already chastising the girl on other behaviors, indicating the mother's trampling-like effect upon her daughter.

¹⁸ It is only in retrospect and after the daughter is completely removed from her mother that she can write a benna-like response in the form of this short story; this story gives the girl voice, the final response, and, thus, a kind of justice.

The second time Kincaid has the girl speak, it is to question her mother's instructions: the girl asks, "[B]ut what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?" in response to her mother's instructions on buying fresh bread, one of the daily functions and, thus, part of the social fabric in Antiguan life (5, emphasis in original). This question by the girl leads to the final line of the story, which is the mother's voice: "[Y]ou mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" (5). Kincaid depicts the mother's manipulation of her daughter's question to serve her own oppressive purposes and effectively silence her daughter. With this exchange between mother and daughter, Kincaid conveys the hopeless defeat of this young girl: her voice and questions are perceived as transgressive to her mother, and her primary influence and protector – her mother – ultimately coerces, threatens, ignores, and manipulates her. Kincaid has the reader understand that the "thing" she has omitted, as Hemingway states it, is the mother's essential betrayal of her daughter and the consequential psychic trauma with which the girl struggles as she drowns in her mother's voice as it is repeated in the girl's internal monologue. Kincaid conveys that beneath the mother's mounting and oppressive orders, she is betraying her daughter by stripping her of her individuality and humanity, and preparing her for a life of servitude.¹⁹ However, in this story, Kincaid depicts the daughter ultimately refusing these life-directives of her mother; for, finally, with this short piece, the daughter is represented as discerning the shaping patterns in mother's discourse and, in true benna fashion, responding to her mother, but with the mother's own words, which she wittily exposes as equally absurd as they are violent.

¹⁹ The projected identification behind the mother's verbal attack in this scene will be discussed later in this chapter.

These same oppressive-oppressed, mother-daughter voices are carried throughout *Annie John* and *Lucy*. In *Annie John*, Kincaid repeats the harshness of the mother's abusive voice as she, again, acts as a demoralizing force upon the young female narrator by wielding the disparaging term "slut" upon her. Kincaid depicts Annie's suffering under her mother's verbal abuse after Annie is confronted on the streets by a group of boys, and her mother witnesses the scene. Kincaid has Annie confess,

[My mother] went on to say that, after all the years she had spent on drumming into me the proper way to conduct myself when speaking to young men, it pained her to see me behave in the manner of a slut The word 'slut' was repeated over and over, until suddenly I felt I was drowning in a well but instead of the well being filled with water it was filled with the word 'slut,' and it was pouring in through my eyes, my ears, my nostrils, my mouth. (102)

Kincaid characterizes Annie speaking forthrightly of her emotional experience of drowning, which the narrator in "Girl" only makes the reader feel. Kincaid's employment of the word "drowning" suggests the young girl's psychic drowning as she is immersed in a hostile environment: as she inhales this hostility and her mother's verbal violence, she is emotionally suffocated.

To be sure, Kincaid has Annie repeat numerous times in the novella that it is her mother's voice and words that deliver the traumatizing blows upon the young narrator. In one mother-daughter scene, Kincaid uses precisely the term "blows" to describe some of Annie's mother's words, which Annie claims are said with the intent of damaging "everything that she suspected had special meaning to [Annie]" (87). In another scene, Kincaid writes that Annie's mother "was using that tone of voice: it was as if I [Annie] was not only a stranger, but a stranger that she did not wish to know" (101). Finally, Kincaid writes that Annie found her mother's voice "treacherous" (70). All of Kincaid's

descriptions of the mother's voice imply Annie's perception of it as a dangerous and harmful weapon that Annie's mother employs to inflict emotional damage upon her daughter. In addition, Kincaid's repetition of the mother's verbal hostility in both "Girl" and *Annie John* suggests an escalation not only of the harmful effects of the mother's voice upon the daughter but also of Kincaid's understanding of the trauma she suffered under her mother's verbal abuse.

Near the conclusion of *Annie John*, Kincaid suggests that the violence of the mother's verbal abuse results in a prolonged psychic illness for Annie. She cues the reader to the fact that Annie suffers a *psychic* breakdown, as opposed to a physical ailment, with details that Annie's illness is not bodily in nature. Annie states, "Nothing unusual seemed wrong. I did not have a fever. No wild storms raged through my stomach. My appetite was as poor as it has always been. My mother . . . could not see any signs of biliousness. All the same, I was in no condition to keep up in my usual way, so I had to take to my bed" (108). Further, Kincaid creates an association between Annie's psychic breakdown and her experience of "drowning" under her mother's barrage of accusations and insults. Kincaid titles the chapter in which Annie's illness is described as "The Long Rain," noting the onset and end of Annie's illness coincides exactly with the onset and end of an unprecedented island rainfall that "[came] down in a heavy torrent . . . for over three months" (109). Kincaid suggests this experience of Annie's illness – or her final drowning – results in a kind of death of the old Annie and the rebirth of a new Annie. At one point during the illness, Kincaid depicts some kind of emotional snap in Annie. While Annie is characterized as incapacitated for most of the illness, she is depicted as experiencing two moments of aggressive hyperactivity during which she

symbolically acts out against her family. In one scene, Kincaid depicts Annie, who has been left alone for the first time since the onset of her illness, “washing” a collection of family photographs, which Annie describes as having an “unbearable smell,” thus marking the overwhelming effects these family photographs have upon her senses (119). As a consequence of the washing, not one photograph portraying a unified John family is left: Kincaid emphasizes the detail that Annie either washed her parents or herself away from each so that either she or her parents stood alone in all of the damaged photographs – which symbolically suggests the death of Annie John, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John. In another scene, Kincaid depicts Mr. Nigel, the fisherman who delivers his catch to the John family, looking in on Annie. Annie remarks, “He reminded me of my father” (123). Her thoughts then turn to the fact that Mr. Nigel and another man “shared everything,” including a “barren, slightly crippled” wife whom Annie’s mother disliked. An instant later, Kincaid portrays Annie in a possessed state: Annie reveals, “I leaped out of bed and cast myself at him with such force that it threw him to the ground. Then, in a burst of chat, I told him all these things as they rushed through my mind” (123). Kincaid depicts Annie as aggressively lashing out, both physically and verbally, against this man who triggers memories of her familial past. This scene also captures the moment in which one of Kincaid’s daughter figures becomes possessed by (or embraces) her Satan-like identity – an identity imposed upon her by her mother, as we learn in *Lucy*. Before this scene in which Annie attacks Mr. Nigel, Kincaid notes a moment in which Annie identifies with Lucifer. Annie is looking at a reflection of herself in a window when she recalls a painting of Lucifer: “It showed Satan just recently cast out of heaven for all his bad deeds, and he was standing on a black rock all alone and naked” (94). Thus, with these

combined scenes of Annie's identification with a "cast out" Satan and her psychic break during which she emotionally separates from her family, Kincaid suggests that Annie has erased herself from the John family – or has rejected her mother's possession of her while asserting her self-possession – and like Satan, she, too, is cast out, alone, and metaphorically naked. In Vorda's interview with Kincaid, he questions her about her characters' identifications with Satan, to which Kincaid replies, "It is better to reign and to have self-possession in Hell than to be a servant in Heaven" (64). This quote captures precisely the force behind her depiction of Annie's illness and ultimate identification with Satan.

At the conclusion of Annie's illness, Kincaid employs a description of a drowned portion of the island to serve as a metaphor for a drowned part of Annie and her girlhood past: "By the end of it [the rain], the sea had risen and what used to be dry land was covered with water . . . the sea never did go back to the way it had been" (109). Likewise, when Annie's illness breaks, she, too, is permanently changed: not only has she grown physically but she also "acquired a strange accent – at least no one had ever heard anyone talk that way before"; in addition, she develops a new assertiveness and determines to forever leave behind the island of Antigua. Thus, Kincaid has us understand that the young Annie John to whom she introduces the reader at the beginning of the novella has died, and the cause of this death is asphyxiation by her mother's verbal and emotional violence.

Kincaid introduces *Lucy* where *Annie John* concludes: Lucy has just left her island home of Antigua and lands in the United States. Just as Annie left Antigua with a "drowning" soul, Lucy enters the United States with the same. Kincaid depicts Lucy as a

teenage girl fleeing an oppressive and harmful past. She introduces Lucy with the conveyance of psychic trauma that echoes the trauma with which Annie John is characterized. Just as Kincaid depicts Annie as drowning in her mother's abusive verbal blows, she characterizes Lucy as emotionally drowning. In the first paragraph of *Lucy*, Kincaid writes, "In a daydream I used to have, all these places were points of happiness to me; all these places were lifeboats to my small drowning soul, for I would imagine myself entering and leaving them, and just that . . . would see me through a bad feeling I did not have a name for" (3). Thus, Kincaid characterizes Lucy as a young girl who has dreamed of exile in order to escape a stifling past – a past that has left her emotionally damaged.

While Kincaid depicts Lucy struggling with numerous realizations that she experiences in her new world, it is her mother's voice that, again in this text, delivers the most forceful and damaging violence upon Lucy. In fact, the entire novella seems to build to the final pages in which Kincaid finally reveals the source of Lucy's simmering anger and psychic angst. Just as Hemingway explains with his iceberg theory, throughout the reading experience, Kincaid's rhetorical omissions result in the reader *feeling* Lucy's emotional damage and suffering, but also prohibit us from fully comprehending it. It is not until the conclusion of the text that Lucy confesses to Mariah "how it was that [she] came to hate [her] mother" and experiences her first emotional release (130). What she reveals to Mariah is a sense of deep betrayal by her mother: Kincaid's words communicate Lucy's mother's dehumanization of Lucy by denying her only daughter an education and future, while plotting her sons' great successes in university and beyond. Lucy confesses, "[W]henver I saw her eyes fill up with tears at the thought of how

proud she would be at some deed her sons had accomplished, I felt a sword go through my heart, for there was no accompanying scenario in which she saw me, her only identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation” (130). Further, Kincaid repeats the mother’s violent hostility toward her young daughter by threatening her with the social mark of a “slut” should Lucy act unseemly (127). However, Kincaid reveals that the most psychological harm comes to Lucy from her mother’s cruel confession regarding the inspiration for Lucy’s name. Kincaid writes that Lucy’s mother states to her daughter, “I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, short for Lucifer. What a botheration from the moment you were conceived” (152). While Kincaid depicts Lucy as suddenly “feeling light, new, [and] clean” upon hearing this disclosure by her mother, these feelings are sourced in Lucy’s breaking point and final submission to the role in which her mother has cast her: evil, fallen, and rejected. Lucy accepts defeat in the world created by her mother (and colonizers before her mother) and no longer struggles for her mother’s grace. However, Kincaid depicts this fall as fortunate for Lucy, for it is what ultimately propels her forward, away from the oppression of her mother and island home, and into a new world in which she finds self-possession and self-bestowed grace.

The repetitions Kincaid creates in these three stories with the mother’s abusive voice and the daughter’s oppressed voice facilitate a fuller understanding of the violence and psychic trauma underlying these stories. In particular, Kincaid’s depiction of Lucy’s revelation of her mother’s Lucifer confession helps the reader make sense of Annie John’s identification with Satan and the force of abuse behind her psychic breakdown. Likewise, the death of Kincaid’s character Annie John at the point of her psychic split helps us to understand her characterization of Lucy, who is depicted as a social outcast,

emotionally numb, and as fully embracing her Lucifer identity. Just as Kincaid conveys Annie as emotionally broken by her mother's verbal abuse, she depicts Lucy. Throughout the text, Kincaid depicts Lucy's voice with an emotional numbness suggesting some emotional trauma concealed beneath Lucy's emotionless surface, and Lucy is characterized as completely incapable of breaking past this surface in order to connect and to create an emotional bond with another. Kincaid most clearly conveys Lucy's emotional brokenness in her sexually intimate relationships with men: Lucy refuses to reveal any vulnerability that might allow a man to have power over her – or to possess her in even the slightest manner. For instance, she confesses lying about her virginity to the boy with whom she had her first sexual encounter, stating, "I could not give him such a hold over me" (83). When she becomes sexually involved with a character named Hugh in the story, she asserts, "I was not in love," and leaves him abruptly without any notification of her departure (67). Kincaid repeats this emotionally void depiction of Lucy as Lucy enters into a second relationship with a character named Paul; Lucy states of their first encounter, "this is usually the moment when people say they fall in love, but I did not fall in love. Being in such a state was not something I longed for" (100). Kincaid then depicts Lucy having an affair with another man in the midst of her relationship with Paul (117). Kincaid characterizes Lucy with a surface-level numbness and coldness – an indicator of trauma and a characterization with which Kincaid introduces Lucy and carries to the conclusion of the novella. To be sure, Kincaid suggests Lucy's emotional numbness as critical for both her freedom from her mother and her self-development – for Lucy needs to reject vulnerability and to claim power in the immediate aftermath of her mother-induced trauma – but regardless, it is indicative of her trauma. Without the

parallel stories of “Girl” and *Annie John*, one may not intellectually grasp the fuller image of the psychic trauma – or the iceberg beneath the narrative surface – in *Lucy*. However, “Girl” and *Annie John* allow the reader to more fully grasp the vulnerable girl Lucy once was, the verbal abuse she endured, and the emotional breakdown she consequently experienced. Further, Kincaid creates a more sympathetic character in Lucy when she is read side by side with Annie, for Lucy’s utter rejection of emotional possession has a much more solid and understandable foundation when read in conjunction with Annie’s emotional trauma.

Kincaid’s Narrative Fragmentation

Narrative fragmentation is the other rhetorical technique Kincaid employs within and between these texts to convey her narrators’ immersed psychic trauma and consequential *self*-fragmentation. The phenomenon of self-fragmentation is explained multiple ways within the field of trauma studies.²⁰ Psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg explains the phenomenon as the consequence of an individual’s psychological “splitting,” which is defined as “an early defense that operates to keep separate good and bad affects, good and bad self-representations, and good and bad object representations.” When a child’s “environment is harsh, particularly with regard to interactions around dependence and independence . . . the child’s inner and outer world fragment” (qtd. in Layton 108). In order to continue developing, the child psychically hides the “good” aspect of their identity and suppresses their trauma, while a harder aspect of their identity comes to the

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of these different explanations, see Lynne Layton’s “Trauma, Gender Identity and Sexuality: Discourses of Fragmentation,” published in *American Imago*, 52.1, 1995.

fore (Siegel). However, when the suppressed identity and trauma memories are triggered by some experience, they intrude upon the presented identity, which the individual must then work through. As van der Kolk and McFarlane explain, due to the intrusive nature of these memories, the narratives of . . .

traumatic memories are often not coherent stories; they tend to consist of intense emotions or somatosensory impressions, which occur when victims are aroused or exposed to reminders of the trauma. The intrusions of traumatic memories can take many different shapes: flashbacks; intense emotions . . .; nightmares; interpersonal reenactments; . . . and pervasive life themes. (9)²¹

Kincaid incorporates all of these “shapes” in her writing, with nightmares being one of the most obscure forms to appear in *Lucy*. Ruth Leys outlines the theoretical discussion regarding trauma victims’ intrusive dreams in *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Leys emphasizes that trauma scholars believe “traumatic dreams” are not always “exact or cinematic replays of the past” trauma, but rather most are marked by the commonality of a “threat of annihilation” (204). Laub and Auerhahn further explain that these dreams are a form of the “overwhelming” and “pervasive” trauma pushing itself into the victim’s consciousness (288). Thus, with Kincaid’s fragmented style of storytelling – which is indeed imbued with flashbacks, strong emotions, nightmares, and pervasive themes – she depicts her narrators’ fragmentations as the consequences of their mother-induced traumas. Returning to Gilmore’s definition with which I introduced this chapter,

²¹ Van der Kolk and McFarlane’s discussion of intrusive memories is based on Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn’s “Knowing and Not Knowing Massive Psychic Trauma: Forms of Traumatic Memory,” in which the authors discuss 1) how the ego of trauma victims “defends” victims by breaking off memories – i.e., not allowing the victim to know these memories – thus, avoiding the emotions associated with them; and 2) the different forms these memories takes in both the lives of the victims, their children, and others completely distanced from the trauma.

Kincaid's rhetorical fragmentation conveys in fiction the "altered" and "shattered" psyches of these girls.

In light of this concept of self-fragmentation, Kincaid's depiction of Annie John's illness can be understood as the moment of her psychic splitting; it is the breaking point for Annie, or the point at which her mother's hostility and emotional abuse overwhelm Annie and become too much for her to bear. Consequently, the good, young, and vulnerable Annie, as Kincaid initially characterizes her, is broken off and buried in the recesses of Annie's self. Kincaid uses the precise term "breaking" in Annie's description of her illness: "Inside me, the black thing that was lodged in my head grew more leaden. A part of the black thing *broke* away, as if it had been dropped to the ground" (114, emphasis added). Kincaid characterizes the new character who emerges from the illness as foreign from the previous Annie, and this new character is older, colder, harder, and possessed by a strong will to survive. Thus, Kincaid captures the moment of Annie's psychic splitting.

In *Lucy*, Kincaid depicts a character on the other side of this psychic split: she conveys Lucy as a character whose traumatic past is suppressed within her, but memory fragments of this past regularly intrude upon her life. Just as van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Leys describe in their discussions of the different forms of intrusive memories that plague victims of trauma, Kincaid depicts Lucy experiencing a series of dreams and flashbacks that clearly communicate her struggling through subconscious reminders of past, but inaccessible, trauma. Kincaid creates moments of strong plot disjointedness by inserting fragments of dreams or flashbacks in moments that Lucy feels her self-sovereignty threatened. The first dream memory concludes the first chapter, "Poor

Visitor,” after Lewis, the male head-of-the-house in Lucy’s new home, isolates her in a moment of vulnerability and publicly mocks her difficulty in acclimating to her new home, thus branding her the “Poor Visitor.” In this moment, Kincaid interrupts the family dinner scene, during which Lewis’s mocking is occurring, with Lucy’s remembrance of a dream in which she is naked and being aggressively pursued by Lewis until Lucy falls into a hole and is surrounded by snakes. Kincaid emphasizes Lucy’s inaccessibility to her traumatic past with details concerning her ignorance of the significance of the dream: Lucy simply states she shared the dream as an attempt to express her bond with the family, but Kincaid characterizes Lucy as incapable of linking the dream to her past experiences of emotional trauma under her mother’s verbal violence. Thus, Kincaid suggests Lucy’s unreliable awareness, for she is not conscious of what she experiences in the present, nor of what she experienced in the past. In this way, Kincaid draws the reader’s attention to the unarticulated elements of Lucy’s narrative as we question the significance of her dream and the source of emotional tension underlying this dream.

It is only when collectively reading the narrative fragments interspersed in *Lucy* and Kincaid’s other writing that we understand the dream as Lucy’s experience of an intrusive trauma memory. As discussed in the previous section, almost all of Kincaid’s characters, and particularly Annie and Lucy, identify with Satan in the form of serpents, which Kincaid eventually reveals in *Lucy* as an identification rooted in Lucy’s mother’s verbal abuse, as she tells Lucy she was named for Lucifer. Likewise, the black hole is another pervasive image in Kincaid’s writing. Significantly, van der Kolk and McFarlane describe the experience of trauma in precisely these terms, as a “black hole” (3). Kincaid characterizes motherless Xuela as remembering her childhood as if the entire time period

occurred in a black hole; likewise, she depicts Annie as writing an essay in which she describes a moment of fear at the thought of losing her mother as falling into a “huge black space” (*Annie John* 43). Thus, Kincaid’s repetition of these serpent and black hole motifs in Lucy’s dream serves to direct us to Lucy’s emotional trauma as she is caught between two different experiences of annihilation: Kincaid suggests a kind of annihilation by the mother’s verbal abuse with the image of the serpents and a kind of annihilation by Lucy’s loss of her mother with the black hole. So to reiterate, Kincaid communicates Lucy’s inaccessible traumatic memories re-emerging in the form of annihilation nightmares.

Kincaid depicts Lucy having two subsequent and similar dreams that also interrupt the flow and sequence of her narrative. In one, she is being chased “by bunches and bunches of . . . daffodils,” a flower linked to her oppressive past and psychological splitting, and, thus, which she “vowed to forget” as a child. In his recurring dream she states, she finally falls and “[the daffodils] all piled on top of me, until I was buried deep underneath them and was never seen again” (18). In a third dream, again she is being chased, but this time by “people on horseback . . . each of them carrying a cutlass to cut [her] up into small pieces” (33). While Kincaid alters the forms the threatening forces take on in Lucy’s nightmares, they serve the same function as the snakes and black hole in the previous dream: they communicate a trauma memory lingering beneath the narrative surface that intrudes upon Lucy. I reiterate Leys’s assertion that these dreams are not “exact . . . replays of the past,” but rather are consistently marked by some “threat of annihilation” (204).

In the final dream Kincaid incorporates into the novel, Lucy is reflecting on the contrast between the people in her current life, who have too much, and the people in her past, who had too little. She feels “relief” by the fact that those with “too much” can be unhappy, too. She states, “I had been so used to observing the results of too little” (87). This thought triggers her remembrance of a recurring dream in which she has a gift “wrapped up in one of her mother’s beautiful madras head-kerchiefs.” She states, “I did not know what the present itself was, but it was something that would make me exceedingly happy; the only trouble was that it lay at the bottom of a deep, murky pool, and no matter how much water I bailed out I always woke up before I got to the bottom” (87). Thus, Kincaid clearly links Lucy’s unhappiness to something withheld from her by her mother, or something in Lucy’s mother, some emotional connection, which Lucy cannot grasp, cannot see, and cannot access no matter the effort she makes.

In addition to Lucy’s nightmares, Kincaid portrays Lucy as experiencing intrusive flashbacks after witnessing images connected to her past. Perhaps the most powerful example of these flashbacks is when Lucy meets Paul, a man with whom she has a sexual relationship, at his party. In the middle of this party, Lucy witnesses a moment in which Paul’s hands are immersed in a fish tank, which triggers a flashback to her childhood.

Lucy states, Paul’s . . .

hands were plunged into a fish tank in order to retrieve an earring of rhinestones in the shape of a starfish. It looked strangely at home there, for all the things in the tank – the coral, the vegetation, the sand, even the fish – had looked unreal in the first place. Paul’s hands, as they moved about the tank, looked strange also; the flesh looked like bone, and as if it had been placed in a solution that had leached all the life away. (102)

Kincaid then conveys that this image of Paul’s immersed hands evokes a memory of vicarious girlhood trauma for Lucy. She remembers Myrna, a neighbor girl who was

sexually violated by a neighborhood fisherman, Mr. Thomas. Kincaid's transition into Lucy's memory of Myrna's sexual violation is significant, for she starts with Lucy's memory of Myrna's *mother* and the limiting effect Myrna's mother has upon her daughter. Lucy states, "I used to know a girl named Myrna, whose mother was so cruel that it was as if she were not a mother at all but a wicked stepmother. Perhaps in response to this situation, everything about Myrna refused to attain a normal size . . ." (102). From this transition, Lucy then remembers Myrna's sexual violation by Mr. Thomas who, she states, "would put his middle finger up inside [Myrna]" (104). Kincaid depicts Lucy linking Myrna's psychic and physical traumas inflicted upon her by her mother and Mr. Thomas, thus suggesting an association between the traumas. Kincaid's omissions, images, and disturbing associations in these scenes strike and disturb readers, as she evokes our curiosity regarding Lucy's history and emotional trauma.

Again, reading *Lucy* alone, Kincaid leaves the source of Lucy's memory associations elusive and unknown. However, when this memory fragment of Paul's hands are read in conjunction with a memory fragment in *Annie John*, we see the fuller image of the iceberg immersed beneath Lucy's memories. In *Annie John*, Kincaid emphasizes Annie's perceived association between her mother's hands and death after her mother prepares a local girl for burial: Annie states, "I then began to look at my mother's hands differently," suggesting she sees them as an instrument of death (6). In a later scene, after Annie's mother begins her emotional abuse of Annie, Annie observes her mother's hand as she is having sexual intercourse with Annie's father. Annie takes no heed of their sexual act, but rather focuses solely on her mother's hand, stating, "But her hand! It was white and bony, as if it had long been dead and had been left out in the elements. It

seemed not to be her hand, and yet it could only be her hand, so well did I know it If I were to forget everything else in the world, I could not forget her hand as it looked then” (30-31). Kincaid repeats the two descriptions Annie and Lucy give of the hands they witness: Annie describes her mother’s hand as white, bony, and dead – just as Lucy describes Paul’s hand. Thus, Kincaid gives the reader a clear link (perhaps unconsciously) between the mother’s violating hand in *Annie John* and the violating hands she creates in *Lucy*. Kincaid’s intertextual memory fragments suggest her narrators experience an emotional death by the hand of their mothers. While Lucy may not be fully cognizant of the rush of memories she is experiencing, Paul’s hand triggers associations of her mother’s hand. As van der Kolk explains, “[E]ven though vivid elements of the trauma intrude insistently in the form of flashbacks and nightmares, many traumatized people have a great deal of difficulty relating precisely what has happened. People may experience sensory elements of the trauma without being able to make sense out of what they are feeling or seeing” (qtd. in van der Kolk and McFarlane 10). It is only by reading *Annie John* with *Lucy*, or the narrator pre- and post-fragmentation, that Kincaid gives us firm understanding of the narrators’ associations with the violating hands. Further, by laying these memory fragments of trauma in different stories side by side, Kincaid begins to create the narration of a survivor out of her trauma narratives, as discussed in greater detail in a later section.

Fragments of the Violence and Projection Identification Behind the Mother's Abusive Voice

Kincaid troubles both her girl narrators and her readers with the mothers' verbal abuse as we struggle to understand the mothers' daughter-focused hostility and their deeper entrenchment of violating cultural systems throughout the stories. As discussed previously, Kincaid depicts the narrator in "Girl" as completely blindsided by her mother's verbal attacks, Annie as feeling her world has been swept away at the first indication of her mother's rift, and Lucy as emotionally stunned by her mother's betrayal. It is in Lucy's reflections that Kincaid subtly reveals the source of Lucy's mother's violence. Kincaid notes Lucy's sense of pain from her mother's betrayal by emphasizing Lucy's identification with her mother, with Lucy describing herself as her mother's "only identical offspring" and stating, "[M]y mother knew me well, as well as she knew herself: I, at the time, even thought of us as identical" (130). This revelation that Kincaid incorporates into Lucy's narrative is key for understanding the mother's violence, for it suggests that whatever triggers the mother's verbal attacks is not actually a quality within Lucy, but rather is a quality or experience sourced within the mother herself. Kincaid quietly suggests that the mother perceives some undesirable aspect of herself and past experiences in Lucy, and so directs the pain and anger associated with that past identity or experience at her daughter. While this redirection remains unstated throughout Kincaid's collection of stories, it is part of the iceberg that, again, comes into fuller view as the voices and fragments from Kincaid's narratives are pieced together.

While I am most interested in Kincaid's depiction of the mother figure in this section, she portrays both her mother and daughter figures displaying what trauma

scholars identify as projection identification. In “The Complexity of Adaptation to Trauma,” van der Kolk defines projection identification as “attributing to others one’s own most despised attributes, without consciously acknowledging the existence of those characteristics in oneself” (196). Likewise, Peter Gay summarizes Freud’s understanding of the phenomenon explaining it as a psychological defense mechanism that allows an individual to “expel feelings . . . the individual finds wholly unacceptable – too shameful, too obscene, too dangerous – by attributing them to another” (281). Important to note is that projection identification occurs unconsciously; thus, true to the actual experience of projection identification, Kincaid depicts her mother characters’ hostilities coming from an unidentified source, while her girl characters’ hostilities (particularly Lucy’s) toward their mothers are rooted in their unacceptable realizations that they are reflections of their mothers. Indeed, in one scene, Lucy is reflecting upon her relationship with her mother and states, “I was not like my mother – I was my mother” (90). It is only through Kincaid’s repetition of the mother-daughter dynamic in her stories that an understanding of the mothers’ and daughters’ hostile projected identifications emerges. Kincaid conveys this dynamic as rooted in a greater culture of oppression: the mother is simply more deeply entrenching the culture of gender violence and oppression that she, herself, learned and experienced as a girl by inflicting it upon her daughter, which the daughter then reflects back upon her mother – thus, Kincaid depicts each mother and daughter inflicting their learned self-loathing upon the individual who stands as a mirror of their own self-image.

Kincaid creates an interpretation-directing link between the sexual violence her character Xuela suffers at the age of her onset of puberty in *The Autobiography of My*

Mother and the mothers' verbal abuse in her other stories, for the mothers' hostility in both *Annie John* and *Lucy* is marked at the onset of the girls' puberty at approximately the same age the character Xuela is raped. While Kincaid makes clear Xuela is a fluid character – or a mother and/or daughter character – who experiences violence, she does state that *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a story about “a woman who could be [her] mother” (Brady 116). The important point here is that in Xuela, Kincaid creates the history of a maternal character (thus the title, *The Autobiography of My Mother*), and this history includes so little affection and an excessive amount of explicit gender-based hostility and violence. Kincaid suggests that this hostility and violence is all Xuela – and other women in her demographic grouping – knows, and so it becomes the emotional interaction she expresses and passes down to the generation of girls who come after her. In so doing, Kincaid raises pivotal questions about feminine identifications. For when women shaped by patriarchal and oppressive forces are carrying out the work of these forces, female identification has the potential to be extraordinarily damaging.²²

Kincaid relays a series of critical scenes depicting Xuela's sexual maturation in *The Autobiography of My Mother* that, when placed side by side with fragments of *Annie John* and *Lucy*, assist readers' understanding of the onset of Annie's and Lucy's mothers' verbal attacks. Kincaid emphasizes Xuela's sexual maturation at the age of twelve as a time particularly marked by cruelty, coldness, pain, and violence. At this age, Xuela notes her physical maturation and menarche, which elicits her stepmother's hostility: Xuela's stepmother states to her that now that Xuela is “a real woman,” she “would have to guard

²² Thus, in order to truly break free from their cultural oppression and to claim themselves, Kincaid depicts with her narrators as necessarily severing this female generational identification.

herself against” Xuela (58). Thus, Kincaid marks Xuela’s physical transition as a time of competitive attention and tension that results in Xuela’s displacement and eventual sexual assault, for shortly thereafter, Xuela is removed from her father’s house and placed in the LaBatte home. Kincaid makes the reader understand that Xuela’s father offers his daughter’s maturing body to the LaBatte household as part of “the financial arrangements they [the two men, Xuela’s father and Monsieur LaBatte] made with each other” (60). Kincaid then describes Xuela’s sexual initiation by LaBatte as one of pain and violence, but mixed with some kind of disturbing pleasure. Xuela states, “[T]he force of him inside me . . . came as a shock, a long sharp line of pain that washed over me with the broadness of a wave, a long sharp line of pleasure: and to each piercing that he made inside me, I made a cry, a cry of sadness, for without making of it something it really was not I was not the same person I had been before. He was not a man of love” (71). Kincaid imbues this scene with violence – indeed, it is the sexual assault of Xuela when she is little more than a child – but, significantly, also with a strain of pleasure, which may be perceived as a shameful and obscene feeling to experience in a moment of violation. As Gay summarizes, part of the reason individuals are driven to expel feelings is because they find them shameful, obscene, or dangerous. Regardless, Kincaid marks Xuela’s sexual assault as a moment in which she was forever changed.

Kincaid demonstrates how Xuela’s violent sexual relationship with Monsieur LaBatte further traumatizes her in the form of an unwanted pregnancy that leads to a disturbing termination of her pregnancy. Significantly, Kincaid repeats the black hole motif in the scene in which a terrified Xuela learns of her pregnancy: Xuela states “[P]erhaps because I no longer had a future I began to want one very much I was

standing in a black hole. The other alternative [terminating the pregnancy] was another black hole, this other black hole was one I did not know; I chose the one I did not know” (82). Particularly in *Annie John*, the black hole denotes Annie’s loss of her mother; this scene in which Xuela chooses an abortion also captures a similar mother-child loss – or *the* moment Xuela explicitly refuses a child. Kincaid further describes Xuela’s pain from the termination of her pregnancy as a pain “like nothing [Xuela] had ever imagined before, it was as if it defined pain itself; all other pain was only a reference to it” – Kincaid emphasizes that it was a pain that made Xuela “a new person” (82-83). Kincaid imbues this scene of Xuela’s refusal of motherhood with irony, for she describes the pain Xuela experiences at the moment of this refusal as akin to the pain often ascribed to giving birth. However, she suggests the birth occurring here is the birth of Xuela as a newly self-governed and self-directed woman; in her refusal to give life to a child, Kincaid suggests Xuela chooses to give life to herself. This physical pain associated with pregnancy and birth is tightly interwoven with Xuela’s psychic pain throughout *The Autobiography of My Mother*, as Xuela defines herself as deliberately refusing motherhood, stating, “I knew . . . that this refusal would be complete. I would never become a mother, but that would not be the same as never bearing children. I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god” (97). Thus, Kincaid depicts her character’s denial of traditional female roles in an oppressive and violating patriarchal culture in which mothers are conditioned to impose this violence and oppression upon their own self-images, their daughters. In essence, mothering becomes impossible as Kincaid’s mother figures

necessarily traumatize their daughters. Kincaid then carries this maternal destruction out in “Girl,” *Annie John*, and *Lucy*.

Kincaid subtly repeats the violence invoked in this stage of Xuela’s violation and traumatization throughout her other stories and quietly suggests it as the source of the mothers’ projected identification. In both *Lucy* and *Annie John*, Kincaid provides details that mark the girls’ mothers’ verbal abuse initiating at the onset of the girls’ puberty, thus suggesting that the girls’ transition into womanhood triggers the mothers’ projection identification. In *Annie John*, it is the exact age of twelve that triggers Annie’s mother’s hostility. Kincaid suggests that it is the onset of Annie’s maturation that marks the mother’s disconnect: Annie notes the physical growth she undergoes the year she turns twelve, which she suggests triggers her mother’s refusal to dress in matching material for the first time in Annie’s life. Shortly after this scene of mother-daughter separation, in which Annie is portrayed as emotionally stunned, the mother turns cold and eventually cruel toward Annie. Kincaid notes Annie’s hurt when her mother “turned and walked away from [her]” for the first time; Annie states, “What a new thing this was for me: my mother’s back turned on me in disgust” (28). Eventually, the mother’s animosity toward Annie creates a quiet internal conflict and terror in Annie. Kincaid creates a dream in which Annie’s subconscious fear surfaces; Annie states, “My mother would kill me if she got the chance. I would kill my mother if I had the courage . . . I would never have the courage with which to kill my mother, and then, since I lacked the courage, the chance would pass to her” (89).²³ *Lucy* also associates the age of twelve with feelings of

²³ With this scene, Kincaid alludes to Carl Jung’s Electra complex, which he proposed as the feminized version of Freud’s Oedipus complex. According to the theory of the Electra complex, daughters psychosexually compete with their mothers for their

“confusion and dread,” for she reveals at this age, “certain parts of [her] life [i.e., her sexual maturation] could no longer be kept secret from [her] mother” (67-68). Kincaid depicts Lucy as attempting to wash away the physical signs of puberty, until she states, “I was undergoing change, and there was nothing I could do to stop it” (69). Just as with Xuela’s sexual maturation, Kincaid imbues Annie’s and Lucy’s maturations with feeling of hostility, tension, and shame – however, Annie’s and Lucy’s feelings are rooted in their maternal relationships. Thus, Kincaid suggests that when the mother figures in these stories apprehend their daughter’s sexual maturation, their own painful memories of sexual shame and obscenity are evoked, and they project this shame and obscenity onto their daughters. Consequentially, Kincaid depicts puberty as a transition period associated with great emotional angst for the daughters in her stories, as it is linked to their mothers’ emotional detachment, to the onset of verbal abuse, and to the narrators’ feelings of shame. It is only when Kincaid’s audience reads *The Autobiography of My Mother* alongside “Girl,” *Annie John*, and *Lucy* that Kincaid allows us to grasp the root cause of the mother’s cruelty, and to understand the violent force of unwanted memories and associations as compelling the mother’s hostility and abuse, for she suggests the mothers in these stories are projecting their own traumatic and unacceptable experiences upon their daughters.

fathers’ attractions, thus harboring a death wish. However, Kincaid offers a revision of the Electra complex, for her mothers and daughters are not competing for the attraction of a male father/husband, whom Kincaid depicts as the ultimate figures of oppression and violence, but rather for *autonomy*. Both the mothers and the daughters in Kincaid’s stories want to kill each other in order to claim self-determinacy.

Communion, Resistance, and Healing in Kincaid's Writing

In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy argues that one of the foremost themes in trauma literature is “communal or family support . . . as necessary for [a victim's] healing” (26). This theme is not overtly conveyed and is arguably rejected in Kincaid's works. In fact, Kincaid depicts her narrators' acts of resistance and complete breaks with family and communal bonds as the most essential acts of their self-salvation. While “Girl” concludes with the mother's final words shaming her daughter and damaging her sense of self-determinacy, *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother* conclude with the narrators freeing themselves of these violating relationships and choosing isolation, as opposed to family and communal connections. Kincaid depicts Annie's relief upon entirely escaping the island of Antigua at the conclusion of the novella, with Annie stating, “[S]uddenly a wave of strong feeling came over me, and my heart swelled with great gladness as the words ‘I shall never see this again’ spilled out inside me” (145). With these words, Annie rejects her mother's final suffocating embrace and breaks her bond with her parents as her boat departs and their silhouettes are “swallowed up in the big blue sea” (145). Kincaid also depicts Lucy forcing herself free of her family ties, both those associated with her birth family in Antigua and those of her adopted family in the United States. In the end, Lucy states, “I was now living a life I had always wanted to live. I was living apart from my family in a place where no one knew much about me; almost no one knew even my name, and I was free more or less to come and go as pleased me” (158). Likewise, Xuela finds peace in her disconnection, stating, “[T]he reality of how alone I had been in the world, how I would become even more so, brought me an air of peace I refused to belong to a

race, I refused to accept a nation” (223-226). Thus, at the narrative level, it is not family and community that Kincaid portrays as necessary for her narrators’ healing processes, but abandoning family and a family legacy of oppression, harshness, betrayal, and loss in order to claim self-determinacy.

Thus, the apparent thematic focus of Kincaid’s literature is the severance and refusal of intimate relationships as the consequence of girlhood trauma. Her writing most overtly captures Laub and Auerhahn’s findings that “[t]rauma can, literally, disrupt familial relations by undoing basic trust, precipitating mutual blame, and creating barriers against intimacy . . . trauma disrupts the link between self and empathetic other . . . the essential experience of trauma [is] an unraveling of the relationship between self and nurturing other, the very fabric of psychic life” (287). Certainly, evidence of this claim is conveyed with the isolating conclusions I cite above. Kincaid’s numb narrative voices that express coldness in her narrators’ personal relationships equally characterize this distrust, blame, and refusal of intimacy inherent in her narrators. As previously discussed, Lucy, in particular, refuses intimacy: she leaves men and her family situation abruptly, and betrays the men with whom she is having a relationship. Likewise, Kincaid depicts Lucy’s mother-figure employer, Mariah, attempting to forge an emotional connection (however inappropriately) with Lucy by claiming “Indian blood” (40). Lucy states, “I looked at her; her face was miserable, tormented, ill-looking. She looked at me in a pleading way, as if to ask for relief, and I looked back, my face and eyes hard; no matter what, I would not give it . . . she reached out, her arms open wide, to give me one of her great hugs. But I stepped out of its path quickly, and she was left holding nothing” (41). Kincaid depicts her narrators as consistently needing to maintain this kind of emotional

distance in order to create themselves independent of the emotional violence and oppression they endured in their most intimate and “nurturing” relationships.

However, looming beneath Kincaid’s narrative surfaces is an implicit desire for healing, which is not fully expressed until the final page of *Lucy*. At the conclusion of *Lucy*, Kincaid leaves readers with an ambiguous characterization of Lucy as she struggles to both understand and overcome the traumatization she endured as a child. With the final lines of the story, Kincaid suggests that Lucy’s deepest desire is to overcome the psychic trauma of her past. The first sentence Lucy pens in her personal journal is: “I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it” (164). Thus, contrary to Vickroy’s findings, Kincaid characterizes Lucy not as associating love and intimacy with healing, but rather with *death*. Lucy then reflects, “[A]s I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great blur” (164). As Kincaid depicts Lucy as barren of emotion until this final line, this scene is striking and evokes readers to question this depiction of Lucy: can we trust this image of a crying Lucy, is this an authentic moment of catharsis, is Lucy capable of redemption and healing from her emotionally traumatic past?

Regardless, Kincaid finally expresses one of the quiet central conflicts running throughout her writing with this scene: underlying her narrative surfaces are the narrators’ impetuses toward healing. With Lucy’s final act of writing, Kincaid offers the possible interpretation of writing as a breakthrough for Lucy. Thus, Kincaid captures in fiction the findings of trauma scholars: “The act of thinking about an experience, as well as expressing emotions . . . helps people to organize thoughts and give meaning to a traumatic experience.” Further, writing, in particular, “may enable [traumatized

individuals] to . . . foster an intellectual process – the act of constructing a story about a traumatic event . . . [which] helps someone break free of the endless mental cycling” (Robb-Nicholson). Kincaid suggests that Lucy’s isolation and her act of writing allows her the space for self-discovery and determinacy, for the very first words she writes in her journal is her full name: Lucy Josephine Potter. Thus, Kincaid suggests Lucy experiences some kind release – perhaps of shame – and the possibility of making sense of her traumatic past.²⁴

Finally, Kincaid’s depictions of her narrators compel the reader to question Kincaid’s own ability to heal and if she, herself, embodies the emotional isolation with which she portrays her narrators. That Kincaid writes to psychologically heal is made clear in her interviews; I repeat the statement she makes to Ferguson: “For me [writing] is a matter of saving my life If I hadn’t become a writer . . . I would have had nervous breakdowns upon nervous breakdowns I am someone who had to make sense out of my past” (169, 176). Whether or not Kincaid is ultimately capable of healing is left undetermined, for the person for whom she ultimately writes and seeks to understand in order to understand herself is her mother – and this is an understanding and relationship

²⁴ Interestingly, Kincaid’s description of Lucy’s moment of emotional release parallels that of Myrna, Lucy’s neighbor girl who suffered sexual assault at the hands of Mr. Thomas. Kincaid creates a scene in which Lucy remembers hearing of Mr. Thomas’s death while she is with Myrna. Lucy recalls, “We walked along for a while and then I realized that she was crying quite hard, and that made me feel how wrong I always am about my judgments of other people, because if I had been asked, I would have said that Myrna was not capable of feeling great sorrow about Mr. Thomas’s death, or about too much else, for that matter” (104). Kincaid’s description of Lucy’s observation of Myrna’s state of traumatic numbness is a direct reflection of Lucy, herself – for Kincaid characterizes Lucy just as Lucy characterizes Myrna: as “not capable of feeling” as a consequence of her trauma. Likewise, both Myrna and Lucy possibly experience some kind of a breakthrough moment in which they are released of the grips of their traumas: for Myrna that release comes in the form of Mr. Thomas’s death and for Lucy in the form of writing.

she describes as forever elusive and broken. In Kincaid's interview with Bonetti, Bonetti asks, "Who do you think you write for?" Kincaid responds, "[M]y mother [is] the person I really write for I suspect. My audience is this one-half Carib Indian woman living in Antigua." However, Kincaid also states in this interview that she does not believe her mother reads her writing. Further, when Bonetti asks Kincaid if her writing has been an attempt to win her mother's approval, Kincaid emphasizes her severed mother-daughter relationship, stating, "I am fairly sure that that's not a part of my life anymore. I didn't see her for twenty years, so the desire for her approval was greater in her absence. Then as we saw each other and spoke, I realized there was a certain chasm that could not really be closed." Thus, the image of Lucy with which Kincaid leaves her readers is almost the same image Kincaid leaves her readers of herself: a woman harmed by her emotionally violent past and choosing to forever sever the family and community bonds that inflicted this violence – and so she turns to writing to heal and make sense of this past.

Conclusion

Kincaid's rhetorical style that includes omissions surrounded by overwhelming voices, unexplained and confusing intrusions of memory fragments, and emotional disconnections results in her readers vicariously experiencing the disjointedness of her narrators' psychic traumas. As Hemingway and Trodd claim of the rhetorical effects of the omission theory, Kincaid's texts evoke in readers the *feeling* of traumatization that her young narrators experience, such as the crushing litany of the mother's demands and derogations, emotionless moments of intimacy, and the disorientation that results from the narrative fragmentation. With these rhetorical techniques, Kincaid's readers sense the

emotional disorientation that is psychic trauma. Readers' occasional incomprehensibility regarding the narrative events, especially when some of these events are read independently, is also similar to the actual experience of trauma that her narrators bear. For while Kincaid has her readers experience the symptoms of trauma, she never explicitly states the source of this trauma; thus, we are never able to fully comprehend the larger monolith that consumes the life of these young girls. But this is precisely how a trauma victim who experiences trauma and suppresses the memories of her trauma would experience intrusive memories, as evidenced with Annie's incomprehensible illness and Lucy's unawareness regarding her confusing nightmares and flashbacks. In this way, Kincaid's rhetorical style evokes readers' own senses of isolation and disorientation, and thus, generates empathy for the young girls who are characterized as forever struggling with the emotional damage of their mothers' abusive voices that have been woven into their very thinking and identities.

Conclusion

The conveyance of representations of girlhood trauma is challenged by oppressive cultural constructs, including common oppressive figurations of womanhood and the very nature of fragmented trauma memories, which obstruct the telling, hearing, and discerning of traumatic events. Therefore, in this study, I analyze how the writing strategies of women writers function to convey the psychic and physical traumas of feminized characters. Focusing on writing by Holly Goddard Jones, Joyce Carol Oates, Sandra Cisneros, and Jamaica Kincaid, I have argued that authors create narrative spaces with rhetorical techniques such as narrative irony, ambiguity, and omission that not only perform the truth of psychic trauma that sexual-based trauma victims experience but that also 1) expose and undermine oppressive cultural constructs that restrict the communication of girlhood trauma, 2) evoke readers' reflections regarding their complicity within these cultural constructs, and 3) interrupt and challenge complicitous behaviors and silences. With these narrative spaces, the authors draw readers into the creative process, thus challenging readers' own identifications and participations in the social dynamics they witness as they are fictionally depicted. Thus, all the authors discussed in this dissertation perform the important work of interrupting readers' empathies as well as identifications and, therefore, the social systems into which they are conditioned by provoking their evaluations and final stances regarding this system.

These fictional representations are essential in critical discussions regarding girlhood trauma for numerous reasons. First, they capture common social dynamics that may otherwise be difficult to recognize as connected to the dehumanization of girls and the phenomenon of sexual-based violence. For instance, Goddard Jones's "Parts" draws

readers' attentions to the husband-wife dynamics of Art and Dana: when Art casually defines women as a collection of body parts, Dana silently accepts this definition. Thus, Goddard Jones emphasizes and focuses readers' attentions on the dehumanization of girls as a thread in our social fabric. Second, these authors' representations capture the truth of girlhood trauma with their depictions of trauma as disjointed, fragmented, and confusing – this is particularly true in the works of Oates and Kincaid. As a result, readers vicariously experience trauma memories as victims might; thus, the authors creatively provide insight into the psychic reality of trauma and evoke readers' empathies for the emotional struggles that traumatized individuals experience. Finally, these stories are provocative and draw readers into the texts so that they must wrestle with the events and characters in order to piece together the plot and the social dynamics generating the denouement. In this fashion, Goddard Jones, Oates, Cisneros, and Kincaid all compel readers to genuinely reflect on 1) the characters, culture, and dynamics represented in their texts; and 2) what needs to happen or change culturally in order for these sexual-based traumatic events *not* to occur. Each author effectively unsettles her readers by defamiliarizing them to harmful cultural constructs – constructs into which they are assimilated and, therefore, accustomed. With this defamiliarization and provoked thought, the authors interrupt systems of gender oppression.

Many authors depict girlhood trauma as a culminating point in a greater system of social trauma. In other words, it is not only young girls and women who are oppressed and traumatized by a dominant social group but also many other individuals with so-called feminine characteristics, as many feminist scholars assert. This is most drawn out in the works of Goddard Jones in which readers witness men, namely Jacob and Simon,

socially and emotionally struggle due to their (feminized) emotions and personal attachments that conflict with cultural expectations regarding masculinity and femininity. This struggle leads to devastating results for the girls in these stories. These representations suggest that in order to address the phenomenon of girlhood trauma, the greater system of gender expectations and oppression – including the emotional oppression and traumatization that boys and men suffer – must be interrupted and challenged.

In a similar vein, the narrative representations studied here suggest that more critical attention must be paid to environments that subtly support large-scale traumatizations by means of insidious violations and traumatizations. As explicated in all the chapters, individuals internalize cultural messages regarding acceptable forms of womanhood and manhood, which are often too restrictive, too dehumanizing, and ultimately violating. As Goddard Jones, Oates, Cisneros, and Kincaid depict in many of their characters, due to the constant and insidious nature of these messages, individuals become desensitized to them and shaped by them – thus, these messages assimilate individuals into a system of gender oppression and violence.

In regard to LaCapra's question regarding the most appropriate modes of discourse for critically discussing trauma and evoking readers' empathetic unsettlements, the authors in this study suggest that some of the most appropriate narrative discourse forms indeed may be those that create rhetorical spaces and, thus, compel the reader to struggle through and piece together the fragments of memory, confusion, and strong emotion as victims must. Thus, readers' assumptions regarding girlhood trauma are destabilized while they must actively explore the social cues provided by the author in

order to make sense of the text and its implications. Further, these spaces defamiliarize readers to social norms in challenging them to slow down and analyze the interpretive possibilities and their own social standpoints as well as cultural norms that compel readers to complete the narratives as they do. In this process, authors complicate empathy as readers experience identifications, empathies, and rejections with or for multiple characters: at times readers might identify and empathize with the young girl characters most victimized and, at other times, with a struggling bystander or young perpetrator. Sometimes readers find themselves simultaneously empathizing with and rejecting the same character. Thus, the authors illuminate yet another truth regarding girlhood trauma: it is part of a greater systematic and social trauma in which individuals' responses are complicated due to their own conditioned values and/or violated and oppressed identities.

As I close this study, I look to the future and how this project might be further developed. One fascinating discovery I made in the course of writing this dissertation involves the narrative perspective that writers employ to tell tales of trauma. Interestingly, in the works I studied, girlhood trauma is always told from a first-person point-of-view when a female is conveying her experience; in contrast, when conveying the emotional trauma of feminized male characters, the stories are told from a third-person, limited point-of-view. Thus, significantly, regardless of victims having or not having a voice, which was one of my initial concerns when embarking on this project, their traumatization still occurs in a violating system. In addition, the contrast between (female) first- and (male) third-person points-of-view invites exploration into the silencing of boys and men whose internal voices would be absent in these stories if not for a limited omniscient narrator exposing their inner turmoil. Therefore, the

traumatization of feminized male characters as part of the greater social trauma of which girlhood trauma is a part is a direction this study may take: how are feminized male characters represented, how are their stories conveyed, and what do their voices sound like? These are some of the questions that emerged while writing this project, particularly when studying the works of Goddard Jones.

Another question that surfaced while completing Chapter Three involves talking about girlhood trauma in a manner that cedes power to girls or children. Catherine Lumby insightfully notes that children are dehumanized equally by conversations in which they are sexualized and those in which they are denied sexuality while being overprotected. In both discourses, Lumby claims that children are simply “blank pages” on which adults write. Thus, critical to discourses regarding girlhood trauma is a study on how to conduct these discourses with integrity – or in a manner that honors the agency, individuality, and sexuality of children.

Finally, from the conceptual state of this dissertation, I also have been interested in the phenomenon of projected narration, or the phenomenon of protagonists narrating the traumas of other girls and women in order to make sense of the traumatization they experienced as girls. As noted in my introduction, fiction writer Paolo Giordano argues that children and young persons who suffer trauma lack the life experience to make sense of their traumas, so they seek an individual with whom to identify in order to create meaning. Projected narration appears to be another rhetorical mechanism with which authors convey trauma and victimized characters’ attempts to heal. Thus, projected narration is another rhetorical technique that might be studied in the future.

In closing, one of the most significant findings of my study is that narrative strategies employed by authors of girlhood-trauma fiction closely align with all the sociological theories discussed in this dissertation. This alignment suggests that literature is a critical tool for all scholars and researchers studying the phenomenon of girlhood trauma, particularly since primary accounts of this phenomenon are most often kept undisclosed to the public and public discourse. Works of fiction that realistically represent the experience serve as an important social tool for understanding, disrupting, and challenging systematic sexual-based violence and the consequential trauma. With authors' creation of works of literature that function as tools for understanding and recognizing moments of systematic oppression and violence, readers are empowered to interrupt these moments and the violating dynamics that transcend the works themselves.

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Ora parto per Roma...