

From Trauma to Testimony: Resilience in Four Contemporary Novels
The Farming of Bones, In the Time of the Butterflies, The Poisonwood Bible, and
The Rapture of Canaan

by

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Abstract

As the work of eminent literary trauma theorists Cathy Caruth and Elaine Scarry has persisted as integral to the field, literary trauma studies now has a twenty-year legacy prioritizing the silencing and shattering impact of trauma, largely neglecting the role of literary testimony. The intervention in my dissertation, *From Trauma to Testimony: Resilience in Four Contemporary Novels*, attempts to fill this gap by continuing to shift the conversation toward an emphasis on the testimonial component of trauma in literature. The four novels in this literary study of trauma provide strong and powerful representations of testimony and stand as examples of effective expressive writing in fiction. As the characters of these texts speak their suffering, they offer trauma testimony that reveal levels of post-traumatic growth that can be measured at the textual level through informed, close reading and quantified through the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count computer-based textual analysis tool. Further, the authors of these novels create fictional records of historical and personal traumas as they publically inscribe these stories, thus preventing their potential historic erasure.

Chapter 1 charts the post-traumatic growth of Amabelle Désir in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) through the evaluation of her narration and coping mechanisms as she survives the Parsley Massacre of 1937. Chapter 2 demonstrates how the multi-vocal narration of Julia Alvarez's Mirabal sisters of *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995) reveals each sister's unique courage to speak back to Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. Chapter 3 positions the different testimonies of Barbara Kingsolver's Price women in *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) as

indicative of their success and failure to effectively renegotiate their trauma through testimony. Lastly, Chapter 4 follows Sheri Reynolds's Ninah Huff in *The Rapture of Canaan* (1995) as she speaks back to her oppressive community and liberates herself and others. My study reveals that the diverse depictions of these characters' coping mechanisms and fictional representations of trauma testimony demand pluralistic interpretations of literary trauma theory that prioritize the role of testimony instead of emphasizing, as first-wave trauma theorists have, the crippling impact of silence in the wake of traumatic experience.

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For Emmy.

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List of Abbreviations

LIWC Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count

Introduction: “A Story to Understand What Happened to Us”

A cursory glance through the news reminds readers and viewers of trauma’s ubiquitous presence. Trauma is everywhere, in literature as it is in life. It extends from the news, reaching friends and loved ones, and it is part of the stories students carry into the classroom. How do we rise above this pain we encounter first-hand and vicariously, as integrated, wholehearted¹ individuals who do not ignore our own suffering and the suffering of others? How can trauma stories—real and fictional—shape us and inspire us even in their darkness? Fiction provides a window into forms of trauma experience and processing. Many works of contemporary fiction transform this pain into art and provide examples of resilience, showing readers how characters speak their trauma in order to survive and testify on behalf of those who do not survive. These sorts of stories can encourage empathy and empathic witnessing, as readers are invited to become the audience upon which a fictional trauma survivor’s story is inscribed.

Trauma and the silence, secrecy, and shame that often accompany it are at the root of much of our human disconnection, and how we deal with trauma is important to our overall well-being personally and corporately. Social psychologist James Pennebaker claims, “The refusal to acknowledge that a significant trauma has occurred—whether on the individual or community level—is both psychologically and physically unhealthy” (*Opening Up* 168). Denying or ignoring personal or historic trauma does nothing to ameliorate the effects of that trauma; in fact,

¹ I use this term “wholehearted” to refer to the work of social scientist Brené Brown who says in *Rising Strong*, “[T]he process of regaining our emotional footing in the midst of struggle is where our courage is tested and our values are forged. Rising strong after a fall is how we cultivate wholeheartedness in our lives; it’s the process that teaches us the most about who we are” (xvii).

such ignorance can have profound negative implications, as Pennebaker's research reveals.² Observing effective trauma testimonies across literary texts can provide readers with courageous examples of the transformative power of giving words to one's traumatic experience and urges readers to contend with the necessity of resisting cultural amnesia that keeps the painful past hidden from national or historic memory. Readers are invited into the struggles of various fictional characters whose stories are simultaneously relatable and foreign. The women protagonist narrators in this study invite readers to new levels of understanding suffering as they demonstrate effective trauma testimonies and coping mechanisms through their portrayals of cognitive reappraisal and renegotiating trauma to make sense of the traumatic events that impact them. Peter A. Levine's 1997 book, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*, along with Bessel van der Kolk's 2014 text *The Body Keeps the Score*, have moved away from psychoanalytic interpretations of trauma theory that elevate verbal processing and expanded theories of trauma renegotiation to include an emphasis on the physical experience of trauma. Levine contends that humans have much to learn from the animal kingdom when it comes to releasing trauma. His work points out that animals are not traumatized after freezing in the face of danger, as when one is no longer in danger, it "will literally shake off the residual effects of the immobility response and gain full control of its body. It will then return to its normal life as if nothing had happened" (16). He contends that trauma survivors similarly need to discharge this energy that is stored during trauma in order to work through and release it. Testifying to one's traumatic experience can be one step in this pivotal process, and we can observe these strides through literary examples of trauma narration. What we witness as readers of these representations of trauma

² Pennebaker's research on the effects of expressive writing have revealed that inhibiting oneself from expressing trauma can have negative implications on immune system function. Furthermore, his work with survivors of the Holocaust, the San Francisco Bay Area earthquake of 1989, and the World Trade Center attacks of 9/11 revealed that speaking and writing about what happened were beneficial in the recovery and healing process (*Opening Up* 160).

testimony invites us to reconsider traditional interpretations of literary trauma theory. Applying a psychological lens of literary analysis, including the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count textual analysis computer program, we can see how these women authors portray women characters who process and rise above their deep suffering, leaving a literary memorialization of their struggle and triumph.

Much of traditional literary trauma theory is rooted in psychoanalysis and emphasizes the destructive wound left behind by trauma and the way it intrudes in a victim's life through phenomena such as flashbacks and hallucinations. Moving away from this form of literary trauma theory that concerns itself primarily with the catastrophic event and the myriad ways it creates disruption and dissociation, my inquiry will focus on the methods trauma survivors use to build resilience and establish themselves as survivors rather than as victims in the following four contemporary novels: *The Farming of Bones* (1998) by Edwidge Danticat, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1995) by Julia Alvarez, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) by Barbara Kingsolver, and *The Rapture of Canaan* (1995) by Sheri Reynolds. I argue that the primary way the women in these novels work through and triumph over their trauma is through testifying to what they endured. As they name and give voice to their experiences, they define and re-define their experiences, rather than merely accepting that their experiences define them. Through this ownership and their bold testimony, they are also powerful forces for change within their communities, encouraging others to find freedom in the midst of trauma and oppression. Suzette Henke claims, "[W]omen authors have instinctively turned...to implement the kind of healing made possible through the public inscription of personal testimony" (xxii), and the women authors in this study fulfill that claim by publically inscribing these forgotten historical traumas through their fictional accounts of characters' testimony. My exploration will add to the current

iterations of literary trauma theory as anti-essentialist, while emphasizing the component of hope and resilience these fictional characters demonstrate in the face of struggle. Furthermore, these narratives work against erasure of marginalized voices and trauma stories as they assert non-dominant voices to counter patriarchal, hegemonic interpretations and depictions of history, family, and religion, specifically histories of the Trujillo regime during the Haitian Massacre of 1937 and the murder of the Mirabal sisters in 1960, the role of the U.S. in the Belgian Congo on the cusp of independence in 1960, and the insidious role of patriarchy in fundamentalist religious communities, including Baptist missionaries and separatist communities as portrayed through Kingsolver's *Nathan Price* and Reynolds's *Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind*. As the representations of trauma testimonies in these novels work against this erasure, they speak truth to power, refusing to permit their trauma to pass in silence, unnoticed. They further prevent these stories from being a casualty of cultural amnesia that allows difficult truths to remain unacknowledged after the immediately affected generation has passed away.

Literary Trauma Theory

Since its inception in the mid-1990s, much of literary trauma theory has been concerned primarily with the so-called inexpressibility or unrepresentability of trauma. This focus stems largely from Cathy Caruth's 1996 seminal text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, in which she says trauma resists assimilation and is unknown. In the 20th anniversary edition of *Unclaimed Experience*, published in 2016, however, Caruth asserts in the Afterword that many have misinterpreted what she has written. She writes, "Dominick LaCapra speaks incorrectly of 'unrepresentability' in my work," and she points readers to "this misunderstanding" in many other works in an endnote (182). Caruth, however, acknowledges

that this interpretation of her work “has dominated trauma theory” for the last twenty years (132). As such, traditional literary trauma theory more readily focuses on these damaging effects of trauma instead of the liberatory and testimonial possibilities in its wake. Regardless of what Caruth intended in 1996 [which she quasi-clarifies in the 2016 edition is “a *silencing*” instead of “silence,” adding, “Trauma is not a question of whether there is or is not representation but rather the question of whether there will or will not be (the possibility of) history” (132)], there is nonetheless a twenty-year legacy of literary trauma theory that prioritizes the silencing that accompanies traumatic experience, to the neglect of the empowering implications of trauma testimonies. If we take Caruth’s recent comments to heart, we can now move literary trauma theory in this new direction, and my investigation aims to be part of this significant turning point that prioritizes the role of literary testimony in overcoming trauma.

Other theorists, such as Laurie Vickroy and Michelle Balaev, share this focus on testimony and the need for a pluralism of interpretations to coexist within literary trauma theory. Some psychologists, however, such as Bessel van der Kolk and Roger Luckhurst, have asserted that traumatic memory bypasses the language center of the brain, thus making testimony less readily available. My intervention, instead, aligns with expressive writing theorists, such as Pennebaker who holds that the act of narrativizing one’s trauma is powerful and changes one’s response to lingering trauma, promoting post-traumatic growth. Applying anti-essentialist, new interpretations of literary trauma theory, we can see that these fictional stories dismantle trauma’s divisive and isolating effect, breaking with and undermining traditional trauma theory, revealing fiction writers’ unique opportunity to represent truth, trauma, and healing in composite characters and settings that are not bound by nonfiction’s limitations. Linguistic analysis is well-suited to address the gap present in current iterations of literary trauma theory, as what is missing

is elaborate scholarship on the testimonial representation of trauma, which occurs linguistically in fictional representations and creates what Caruth refers to as “*unconscious historical testimony*” (*Listening to Trauma* xiii, emphasis in original). Thus, my intervention extends the framework established by Caruth to use fiction to illustrate trauma’s ill effects, by keeping pace with current advances in psychological understandings of trauma’s testimonial representation and applying them to fictional accounts. My work parts from Caruth to evaluate, instead, the efforts toward resilience and post-traumatic growth depicted through these fictional characters.

Like Caruth, in *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry makes paradoxical claims about pain’s inexpressibility and the voice it occupies. She asserts, “Pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story” (3). This implies that on its own, the pain has no words, but it can find words to wear when necessary, although words are not part of its natural state. Scarry further concludes that “whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures its unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). If pain is not shared, it is an isolating and alienating experience. I would argue, however, that it is through bridging the chasm between separate and shared that writers like Danticat, Alvarez, Kingsolver, and Reynolds provide a powerful voice of resilience in the face of historical pain through articulating the implications of individual and collective trauma.

While Scarry asserts that pain often dismantles language, saying, “Physical pain is not only itself resistant to language but also actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans. To hear those cries is to witness the shattering of language” (172), she also leaves open the possibility that people like these authors will step into this space and speak for the person in pain. She notes, “Because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be

brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak on behalf of those who are” (6). Further, she asserts that the process of making through imagining is the inverse of the process of unmaking that occurs through pain and torture (162). In this assertion, Scarry keeps open an option that imagining, such as that which takes place by the authors of fiction, creates space for the making of narratives that express pain. In their fiction, Alvarez, Danticat, Kingsolver, and Reynolds author testimonial literature that bears witness to others’ pain, thus fulfilling and challenging Scarry’s notion that pain is unspeakable or incoherent and conveyed through written artifacts.

These authors of fiction also speak back to Caruth who explores the idea of trauma as it relates to Freud’s psychoanalytic work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). All of these elements of experience may not be seen in these works, as characters are not given to hallucinations, and their written work may be seen as a more deliberate, well-thought out contemplation, which differs from the unexpected experience that surprises trauma victims. Nonetheless, their work demonstrates individuals working through their trauma, giving voice to, claiming, and reconstructing it in more conscious ways than Caruth’s work gives room for. Furthermore, Danticat’s Amabelle and Alvarez’s Dedé work within their memories to reconstruct and work through their trauma, which could be seen as a form of controlled, dream-like but non-hallucinatory processing of trauma. While her work persists in calling attention to the so-called incomprehensibility of trauma, in *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Caruth does attempt to move her own theories more in the direction of bearing witness and testifying to trauma. As she

evaluates Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden*, she asserts, "At the heart of the performance...is a struggle between...the reenactment of trauma and the possible performance of a new kind of listening" (55). Although she maintains her focus on the disruptions and repetitions that she asserts accompany traumatic experience, with this added emphasis on listening, readers are invited to interrogate further the testimonial component that accompanies trauma. Using Caruth's own framework for evaluating literature, scholars may consider the ways characters are portrayed as pursuing survival and the drive toward life in the wake of trauma.

Caruth asserts, "It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" (*Unclaimed Experience* 58). In this assessment, there is little room for understanding the trauma, regardless of the words one might use to make sense of the event or persistent loss. She further describes the repetition of the trauma that may occur through verbal processing and flashbacks as retraumatizing (*Unclaimed Experience* 63). I would argue, however, that writing about the trauma can be healing and cathartic, as these fictional works demonstrate through characters' narration in their appeal to empathy and cross-cultural understanding. Balaev rightly concludes, "Understanding trauma...by situating it within a larger conceptual framework of social psychology theories in addition to neurobiological theories will produce a particular psychology informed concept of trauma that acknowledges the range of contextual factors that specify the value of the experience" (*Contemporary Approaches* 2). My study aligns with this focus in bringing the latest understandings of trauma from social psychology, including expressive writing, to bear on four widely-read contemporary American novels so that we may continue to extend conceptions

of literary trauma theory to be inclusive of trauma's testimonial thrust. Balaev adds, rightly critiquing Caruth, "This stance might therefore consider dubious the assertion of trauma's dissociation" (*Contemporary Approaches* 2), and I would add this way of understanding trauma focuses on its renegotiation, which is integrative rather than dissociative. Despite her assertions which are here heavily critiqued, Caruth does acknowledge the potential fruit in sharing one's story, as she discusses "the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (*Unclaimed Experience* 8). This reference to others opens up the possibility that trauma can be shared as it is named and embodied in story. This also invites individuals to connect with and identify with a wound he or she cannot share but with which he or she can empathize, such as those in Danticat's and Alvarez's novels who are living under the oppressive reign of Rafael Trujillo or those who share struggles within repressive patriarchal or religious communities, like Kingsolver's Leah and Reynolds's Ninah. Fiction, with the myriad characters and settings it conveys, can provide readers with a multitude of examples of trauma and its aftermath. David B. Morris asserts

Literary voices indeed convey such an enormous diversity of views that—together—they might approach or approximate a kind of encyclopedia of suffering. No single voice is sufficient. Women's voices will convey a different experience of suffering than the voices of men; black voices speak differently than white voices; martyrs' voices will not match the voices of inquisitors; Protestant martyrs will differ from Catholic martyrs; medieval voices, steeped in beliefs that link suffering to sin and damnation, will differ from modern voices. (30)

The voices of the women narrators in this study are merely a few examples of the power of literary testimony to speak against erasure of traumatic experience. Their methods of survival and post-traumatic growth are not prescriptive examples to follow, but they are profound entries to bear witness to in this metaphorical "encyclopedia of suffering" to which Morris alludes.

Their examples of resilience and courage invite readers to interrogate the conditions that created their suffering as well as the components that propelled their survival, such as the linguistic elements of their testimony, their narrative strategies, their coping mechanisms, and their level of connection to supportive community in the wake of their trauma.

Expressive Writing and the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Tool

In addition to literary trauma theory, the concept of expressive writing is fruitful when exploring the testimonial methods these characters employ within their novels in order to bear witness to their traumatizing experiences. Often used in counseling settings, the techniques of expressive writing translate nicely to the world of literature and provide a productive lens through which to view characters' narrations of trauma. Through expressive writing, trauma survivors translate their experiences and feelings into words, typically in narrative form. Pennebaker advises individuals to write for small amounts of time (15-20 minutes) over the course of three to four days. He notes, "In most studies, the third day of writing is highly significant. People often arrive at critical issues they have been avoiding" (*Expressive Writing* 38). His research also reveals that the middle day of writing can seem to be the most difficult, but when an individual presses on to the next day, he or she typically turns a corner to uncover beneficial insights. This arc also corresponds with the way many screenwriters structure their stories; during the second act in a three-act piece, the protagonist will experience the "lowest of the low" before realizing what will be necessary for resolution and success in the final act (Brown 30). The confluence of these structures affirms what many believe, which is that we are "wired for story" (Brown 6). Referring to the work of neuroeconomist Paul Zak, Brené Brown writes, "[H]earing a story—a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end—causes our brains to

release cortisol and oxytocin. These chemicals trigger uniquely human abilities to connect, empathize, and make meaning” (Brown 6). These findings underscore the importance of writing in order to make sense of one’s traumatic experience, and they provide further evidence of the vital role of literature to build bridges of empathy as readers are invited to connect with the stories of others.

Not all writing is beneficial, however. Pennebaker has found that “telling the same stories over and over” with “no growth, no increase in understanding...is not unlike ruminative thinking—a classic symptom of depression” (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 11). The level of cognitive processing is significant to demonstrate that an individual is integrating and processing the trauma instead of remaining fixated, replaying the events. One method for evaluating such cognitive processing is the computer-based textual analysis program, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC, pronounced “Luke”), developed by Pennebaker and his team of researchers in the 1990s. LIWC provides a way to quantify the linguistic elements in individual passages to see a snapshot of various samples of expressive writing. When paired with literary analysis and close reading, the data from a LIWC analysis provide insight inviting readers to observe characters’ post-traumatic growth, or the lack thereof. Just as close reading and specific approaches to literary criticism, such as historical, psychological, reader-response, and formalist criticism, provide a framework for looking at a text, LIWC provides another way in linguistically and psychologically and then invites us back out to one another in empathy and understanding as we encounter these trauma testimonies.³

³ While very few scholars are using this approach of combining LIWC with literary analysis, applied linguist Douglas Biber’s *Variation Across Speech and Writing* (1988) lays the groundwork for analyzing different genres, including fiction. Ryan Nichols and others affiliated with the Centre for Human Evolution, Cognition, and Culture at the University of British Columbia are among the few to use quantitative textual analysis for studies in the humanities, and they provide a clearinghouse of resources for others who wish to pursue this form of analysis in their disciplines.

A quantitative analysis, what LIWC provides, may seem on the surface like an unconventional method of literary criticism, as most other forms are exclusively qualitative in their evaluation of literary texts. However, this textual analysis tool can quickly calculate linguistic details that can yield important character insights that are not readily apparent from close reading alone. For example, the output of a text selection submitted to the LIWC program can swiftly reveal the number of pronouns, function words, and positive and negative emotion words. Scanning a passage manually for these items would be tedious and time-consuming and would not provide a way to interpret such counts. These seemingly small linguistic details can amount to valuable insights when evaluating passages of expressive writing. Pennebaker found that writing about trauma can impact one's physical health in positive ways; contrastingly, keeping trauma hidden can have serious negative health implications (Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns* 4). Additionally, his research revealed that people who demonstrated the most improved physical health and more effectively renegotiated their trauma used positive and negative emotion words. While it could be assumed that using exclusively positive emotion words indicates that an individual is coping well and feeling resolved or optimistic in the wake of trauma, a trauma narrative that does not also account for negative events and feelings is not as beneficial for the survivor. His findings further demonstrated that "those whose health improved showed a high rate of the use of I-words on one occasion and then high rates of the use of other pronouns in the next occasion, and then switching back and forth in subsequent writings" (Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns* 13). While pronouns seem small or insignificant, their use illuminates the writer's focus. Pennebaker concludes, "[H]ealthy people say something about their own thoughts and feelings in one instance and then explore what is happening with other people before writing about themselves again" (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 13). This

shared focus on others and self shows that the writer is thinking about the trauma from multiple perspectives and processing the events at a higher cognitive level.

For the fictional women narrators in this study, among other things, LIWC analyses can demonstrate characters' post-traumatic growth from the beginning of the novel to the end, as it does for Edwidge Danticat's Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones*, and it can make plain sharp contrasts between characters' narration, as it does for the Price sisters in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, where readers can see self-absorbed Rachel's narration as quantifiably different from her sisters' more robust versions of similar trauma. Each novel in this study portrays women protagonist narrators who narrate in first-person, thus mimicking the style of nonfictional person writing, making them prime literary examples of expressive writing. While LIWC numbers alone may not speak profoundly, our interpretation of them can. For example, some readers may intuit that Amabelle is stronger by the novel's end, as her severe trauma of surviving the Massacre of 1937 and losing Sebastien and others has not destroyed her. A LIWC analysis of her narration of the same event at the novel's beginning and its end, however, can give flesh to this intuition, as her cognitive reappraisal is evident.

In this study, I used the most current LIWC system, LIWC2015. The LIWC2015 dictionary contains more than 250 million words that have been coded for various categories, such as function words (pronouns, articles, conjunctions, etc...), affect words (positive and negative emotion, including anxiety, anger, and sadness), cognitive processes (demonstrating insight, certainty, cause, and tentativeness), and social words (family, friends, and male and female referents), among others. Results from a text sample will yield the number and types of pronouns, for example, as a percentage of the total word count and can also be compared to the average scores for each category of that type of writing (personal writing, scientific writing,

social media, etc...). The LIWC2015 dictionary has also been revised from the 2007 version to include four summary variables that aid in providing a composite of various categories. These summary variables of analytic thinking, clout, authenticity, and emotional tone are provided as a percentage score as well. While they are considered non-transparent variables, as the algorithm used to generate their values is proprietary, each one is comprised of specific smaller categories whose data are readily available. Analytic thinking is derived in part from the rates of nouns, objects, and concrete verbs to measure the level of formal thinking. Clout measures levels of confidence and certainty conveyed through demonstrations of power and status through pronoun use of “I” or “we,” for example, and low use of markers of tentativeness, like “maybe.” Authenticity measures the level of honesty conveyed and is derived from the number of references to self and others, along with emotion words and indicators of cognitive processing. Emotional tone takes into consideration positive and negative emotion words to convey a score where a higher number indicates a more positive tone, a number below fifty communicates a more negative tone, and a score of or around 50 conveys neutrality or ambivalence.

For each novel, I chose specific scenes of narration that demonstrated key moments of trauma testimony for each of the women protagonist narrators. In *The Farming of Bones*, I isolated two passages where Danticat portrays Amabelle as narrating the day her parents died when she was a young child. While not directly about her struggle to flee the trauma of Trujillo’s slaughter, her growth between these two passages reveals her effort to come to terms with this recurring trauma as she, too, crosses the Massacre River where they perished. Like Pennebaker’s subjects who showed the most health benefits, Danticat’s fictional Amabelle demonstrates change from the initial representation of testimony to the final one, revealing her cognitive growth and integration of her trauma story. For the Mirabal sisters of *In the Time of*

the Butterflies, I chose Alvarez's depiction of Patria's watershed moment in the mountains that compels her into the resistance, Minerva's encounter with Trujillo's sexual advances, María Teresa's torture in prison, and Dedé seeing her sisters' bodies in the morgue, along with her final words at the novel's end. Each representation of trauma testimony pertains to a different moment in the women's lives, but each is integral to the women's efforts against Trujillo and demonstrates in different ways their "special courage" that Alvarez said prompted her to write this novel (Alvarez 323). Two key moments of trauma catalyze change for Kingsolver's Price sisters of *The Poisonwood Bible*: the night of the ant swarm and Ruth May's death. I chose to analyze Kingsolver's portrayal of each sister's narration of both of these scenes to uncover their differences in representations of trauma testimonies. Additionally, I identified the passage of Orleanna's narration of her decision to leave her husband and the Congo as a pivotal portrayal of trauma testimony revealing her struggle and grief. Unlike the Mirabal sisters who are brought closer together as a result of their shared trauma, the Price women are fractured by theirs and become more distant as a result. Readers are invited to witness their diverse growth, and lack thereof, which is evidenced in this study through a LIWC analysis of these critical moments. Lastly, in *The Rapture of Canaan*, I selected three scenes where Reynolds depicts Ninah narrating significant trauma: finding James's body after his suicide, enduring the public shaming and physical punishment of a dunking, and choosing to cut apart her son's fused hands at the novel's end. Her vivid sensory details to these trauma scenes invite readers to reconsider the role of trauma memory as non-verbal and further emphasize the empowering and liberating effect of narrating one's pain. While these stories are dissimilar in many regards, their portrayal of characters' trauma testimonies similarly invite readers to complete the loop of testimony as empathic witnesses who listen to their pain and see their progress in the wake of trauma.

It is worth noting that fictional representations of trauma testimony are not the same as actual accounts of real-life trauma testimony that one may encounter in memoir, autobiography, or a courtroom transcript, for example. However, these fictional texts and this exploration ask us to consider what it means for an author to imagine trauma and craft a character that experiences and testifies to it. As the authors in this study testify for marginalized groups and reimagine ancestors' trauma, they recuperate these traumatic moments and bring their representations of testimony to an expanded audience through their ongoing readership. In her essay collection *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Danticat writes of the significance of such written representations of testimony, saying,

The immigrant artist shares with all other artists the desire to interpret and possibly remake his or her own world. So though we may not be creating as dangerously as our forebears—though we are not risking torture, beatings, execution, though exile does not threaten us into perpetual silence—still, while we are at work bodies are littering the streets somewhere. People are buried under rubble somewhere....And still, many are reading, and writing, quietly, quietly. (18)

While the representation of testimony and actual testimony are different, these fictional accounts are no less important, as Danticat reminds us, as they offer readers many ways into historical traumas they may otherwise never encounter, and they afford readers and writers the invitation to reconstruct their world and renegotiate their trauma.

Four Seemingly Disparate Novels Share Deep Commonalities

Part of the empathic qualities of these novels stems from their vivid and varied portrayals of the struggles their women protagonists endure and the degree to which the characters are strong survivors. Readers are invited into the texts through the narration that crafts relatable characters that appear honest and human in the ways they speak to their dire conditions and everyday life. The beautiful, lyrical prose almost belies the ugly circumstances

these women narrators overcome but affords readers a sort of respite from the pervasive trauma throughout the texts. Although these four contemporary novels are set in different historical conditions and time periods, there is much they share in common. These woman authors and woman narrators speak against the erasure of their individual stories of political, sexual, religious, and familial trauma. As they do, they erode patriarchal control of these corresponding spheres—families, relationships, religious communities, and the contemporary literary canon—providing strong examples of surviving and thriving women in the face of fierce adversity.

The commonalities these novels share is indicative of the body of literature being composed by American women writers across ethnicities and races at the turn of the twenty-first century. Published in the 1990s, these novels all involve historical, political, and interpersonal trauma that is inflicted by men, which urges readers to consider the cultural conditions that prompted these writers to look back at these pivotal moments to bring them to light in the literary imagination at the turn of the twenty-first century. Among these conditions is the lingering impact of war and imperialism, as the main male oppressors in these texts—Rafael Trujillo, Nathan Price, and Grandpa Herman—exhibit psychic wounds that stem largely from their military involvement. Furthermore, as these authors all portray women protagonist narrators that use their language to renegotiate their trauma, these works underscore the significance of testimony to heal trauma and speak truth to power. While I chose these four texts for their similarities in portraying trauma stemming from Trujillo and religious factors, novels from other authors publishing in the 1990s, such as Kaye Gibbons, Gail Godwin, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, Marilynne Robinson, Alice Sebold, Jane Smiley, Amy Tan, and Alice Walker, could fold seamlessly into this investigation of the role of trauma testimony in contemporary American fiction.

Many of the women in the novels in this study lose loved ones, and those losses—and by extension their desire to speak for the dead—compel their survival. Alvarez's Dedé loses her three sisters to Trujillo's henchmen, and she becomes the only one to carry on the message of the Butterflies. Danticat's Amabelle is separated from her lover, Sebastien, in the Massacre of 1937 and spends the rest of the novel searching for him, like Reynolds's Ninah who loses James, the man she loves, and carries that loss and longing with her through the text. Although their deaths are not analogous—Sebastien is murdered; James commits suicide after finding out Ninah is pregnant—both demonstrate the pervasive violence of oppressive forces (Trujillo's henchmen and the strict fundamentalist community at The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind). Further, the memory of these loved ones motivates these women to seek justice and their own freedom.

As these protagonists move forward, they speak out against the oppressors who've wounded them, which inspires others along the way. Ninah speaks out against the rules of her community, which encourages others, including men and her grandmother (the wife of the community's leader), to also break away from some of the oppressive structures of their spiritual community and disapprove of the violent punishments they've witnessed. This bravery and boldness is also palpable in Alvarez's Mirabal sisters, who are imprisoned for actively resisting Trujillo's henchmen but who continue to criticize his rule and inspire and lead the other women imprisoned with them. As survivors, Ninah, Amabelle, and Dedé all bear the burden of witness and the responsibility to tell others' stories. If they do not speak for those who have died, who will? Also burdened with the complexity of family members being their oppressors, Ninah speaks out against her oppressive grandfather/pastor just as Kingsolver's Leah and Adah stand up to their missionary father, a notable act of courage in their communities. Because of the far-

reaching implications of their testimonies, these women characters impact the women around them and are catalysts for others' liberation within their respective texts.

Through this testimonial process, which occurs throughout the four novels I am analyzing, readers are invited into experiences, communities, places, and histories in vibrant and breathtaking ways. Readers may glimpse an understanding of what life was like for Haitians and Dominicans during the reign of Rafael Trujillo, and they are invited to see how women are similarly oppressed in fundamentalist religious communities like the Price family and The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind. As the women narrators employ expressive writing techniques through their first-person narration, which includes monologue, dialogue, journaling, and dreams, readers are invited to witness their post-traumatic growth and ways of making sense of what they have endured. Further, readers are invited to bear witness to their different coping mechanisms and expressions of grief through their tactile tasks, like sewing and rug-making, and their closure-seeking efforts to make their own personal peace with their suffering. Although the texts differ considerably in content and setting, they share much in common through their construction of bold trauma testimonies and surviving women protagonists who renegotiate their traumatic experiences in order to move forward as integrated, whole individuals who are neither fragmented nor shattered by trauma's impact.

Historical Context: Hispaniola Under Trujillo

Both *The Farming of Bones* and *In the Time of the Butterflies* are set under the historical conditions of the dictatorial reign of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, who ruled over the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Although he ruled over the Dominican side of the island only, his terror was felt on the Haitian side of Hispaniola as well,

through direct violence against Haitians and through the anti-Haitian ideology he perpetuated and that persists in the Dominican Republic today. Danticat's novel is situated within the historical context of the Massacre of 1937, in which—upon Trujillo's orders—tens of thousands of ethnic Haitians living and working along the border of the Dominican Republic were slaughtered. Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* is set near the end of Trujillo's reign of terror and follows the lives of the four Mirabal sisters, three of whom were murdered by Trujillo's henchmen in 1960, though their deaths were staged to look like a car accident. While these novels take historical circumstances as their backdrops, both authors exercise creative liberty in fashioning their fictional accounts. Nonetheless, these stories bring to light the atrocities committed under the Trujillo regime and demonstrate how pervasive his rule and violence were. Additionally, they bring to light significant portions of Caribbean history that are often overlooked and forgotten, telling these histories from the perspective of often-marginalized and silenced women.

Although Trujillo's three-decade reign would prove to be one of the most cruel in the region's history, he was initially loved and revered by many in the Dominican Republic, particularly peasants who were encouraged by his plans to help them prosper. Trujillo often said, "My best friends are the men of work because nations rise up from poverty through labor" (qtd. in Turits 1). While these Marxist-leaning promises now register as hollow, at the time, they served their purpose; they enabled Trujillo to garner the support of the poor working class, which Richard Lee Turits asserts "establish[ed] the foundations for Trujillo's hegemony over the nation" (1). Their support of Trujillo further illustrates the pervasive power Trujillo exerted over the inhabitants of Hispaniola. Despite his blatant violence and oppression, many willingly followed him and even remember his reign with fondness. Turits contends, "The legacy of the

peasant loyalty to Trujillo, an adherence that impelled peasants to defend the regime against revolutionary exiles, would endure even for decades after Trujillo's assassination" (2-3). That citizens would even retrospectively approve of Trujillo despite the facts corroborating his reign as that of a tyrant demonstrates the self-perpetuating cycle of psychological power present among the people.

Through interviews with elderly residents, Turits has uncovered that "present-day depictions of everyday life during the Trujillo years...recall multiple and profound forms of oppression....Yet overall Trujillo has been remembered nostalgically for land distribution and agricultural assistance as well as for ensuring social and political order, and even for many aspects of the national state's novel presence in rural life" (19). Because of their financial gain and inclusion in the nation-state, some members of the working-class poor see Trujillo's reign as more positive than negative and are perhaps able to look beyond his atrocities because of the perceived safety and security they now enjoy that could be viewed as a result of Trujillo's agrarian policies. Their memories are not entirely affirmative, though. Turits describes the "peasants' recollections of the multiple and often contradictory effects of state power under Trujillo" as "embody[ing] a nostalgia shot through with dread" (21). That these two emotions—nostalgia and dread—could be present simultaneously further illustrates Trujillo's pervasive power and violence, in his life and even after his death. His former subjects still fear him, but they also remember him with fondness. Because of the trauma they have endured—psychological and physical—they are caught in the complexity of this contradictory relationship of power and oppression. Danticat's and Alvarez's novels depict Trujillo's violence—filled with dread and void of nostalgia—and demonstrate how female characters can respond powerfully within existing power structures to subvert Trujillo's pervasive oppression.

Religious Oppression as Form of Trauma

While the other two novels in my study take place in settings apart from the Trujillo dictatorship, the characters exist similarly in oppressed spaces and experience persistent trauma. The Price women of Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and Ninah Huff of Reynolds's *The Rapture of Canaan* are subjected to ongoing religious trauma that extends from their patriarchal, fundamentalist families and communities. In both novels, a family patriarch has established strict religious rules that exclude women from participating in the everyday freedoms men enjoy. Kingsolver's Nathan Price is domineering over his wife and daughters and is verbally and physically abusive. Further, he uses his religion as a form of punishment, forcing his daughters to write the dreaded verse when they are in trouble. When punished with "The Verse," the daughter is given a starting scripture verse and is then forced to write the one hundred Bible verses that follow it before arriving at the verse that conveys the lesson she is supposed to learn from this punishment. Reynolds's Grandpa Herman founded his fundamentalist church where women are not permitted to lead or wear pants or cut their hair, and his granddaughter Ninah suspects he just made the rules up himself and called them holy. She narrates, "He used the Bible, of course, but only the parts he liked. He had a habit of altering the verses just a little to make them match his own beliefs" (Reynolds 14). Both men use their religion to elevate themselves to the highest position of authority in their respective communities, rarely taking input or counsel from others.

Unfortunately, the behavior portrayed by these fictional patriarchs is not uncommon in isolated fundamentalist religious communities, nor is the physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse they inflict and condone. In *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Maltreatment*,

Janet Heimlich writes of religious child maltreatment, saying it “manifests itself in many ways, including justifying abusive physical punishment with religious texts or doctrine....taking advantage of religious authority to abuse children and procure their silence....[and] terrifying children with religious concepts,” to name a few ways it is evident (29). These manifestations can be seen in both *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Rapture of Canaan*, as the women are physically and emotionally abused under the guise of being insubordinate in their roles as Christian women, and their religious texts and doctrine are held up as the reasoning for their punishments. Some psychologists, such as Dr. Marlene Winell, who work with clients who have left these sorts of communities, refer to the Religious Trauma Syndrome that their clients experience. Winell writes that many clients are reluctant to talk about their religious backgrounds or to refer to what they experienced as abuse.⁴ Because of the secrecy that often accompanies these types of situations, the honest, vivid representations of trauma testimonies readers are invited to encounter in these novels are all the more valuable in helping readers consider others’ experiences and develop empathy for communities to which they are not directly connected. These texts work further to dismantle the taboo and shame around coming out as part of an oppressive religious community that is not accepted in mainstream society. As readers encounter these strong women narrators, they are invited to see them as victims and then survivors of their oppression, not complicit in perpetuating the trauma their respective religious communities condone.

While Kingsolver’s Price women leave their oppressive patriarch, Nathan, and seem also to leave their Baptist roots, Reynolds’s Ninah Huff seems to choose to remain with her community, inviting readers to consider what it means for a trauma survivor to remain connected

⁴ Winell, Marlene. *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving their Religion*. Apocryphile Press, 2006.

to her abusers. Though the novel's ending is somewhat ambiguous, Ninah seems able to stay with The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind now that she has exerted her own individuality and separated from many of their rules, by cutting her hair and wearing pants, for example. Furthermore, her defiant act to separate her son's fused hands herself demonstrates her newfound freedom to act apart from her community. Though they have inflicted great physical and psychological pain on Ninah, she rises as her own strong individual, tenacious in the face of their mistreatment. As the community is on the cusp of change at the novel's end, Ninah appears poised to continue as a member but on her own terms moving forward, deciding not to abandon her son or the strides she has made toward being her own independent, free-thinking woman. Both sets of women in these novels ask readers to question the options for women in oppressive, patriarchal religious communities and consider the arduous task of breaking free from their influence and rule. In both texts, the women must endure deep loss and pain before they act on their inclinations to differentiate themselves from their oppressors, reminding readers further of the gravity of their circumstances and the tremendous strength necessary to disconnect from a family unit or enmeshed religious community.

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My dissertation, *From Trauma to Testimony: Resilience in Four Contemporary Novels*, aims to shift the conversation around literary trauma theory from silence to speech, uncovering the methods these women narrators employ to testify to their traumatic experiences. Chapter 1 charts the post-traumatic growth of Edwidge Danticat's Amabelle Désir in *The Farming of Bones* as she escapes death during the Massacre of 1937 ordered by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. As she flees the Dominican side of the island and makes Haiti her new home, she processes the loss of her lover, Sebastien, and grieves without closure, as his death is never

confirmed. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count data from Danticat's portrayal of her narration of specific traumatic scenes at the beginning of the novel compared to scenes narrated at the novel's end reveal gains in cognitive processing, indicative of Amabelle's integration of traumatic experience into her holistic self. As she brings the pain of past trauma into the present, she paves a path forward that brings together the many pieces of her story, instead of allowing them to persist as disconnected fragments hindering her progress forward. Chapter 2 also addresses the atrocities committed under the Trujillo regime, this time following the multi-vocal narration of the Mirabal sisters in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*. As each sister narrates chapters throughout the novel, readers are invited to bear witness to their different narrative strategies, including Dedé's progression from removed third-person to active first-person perspective and María Teresa's intimate diary-keeping. Analysis of the narration of their shared and separate traumas shows how Alvarez's portrayal of the women constructs strong and confident personas, in keeping with realistic and mythic portrayals of the legendary Mirabal sisters. Chapter 3 follows the narration of the Price women in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and demonstrates how Kingsolver's depiction of their narrative strategies is consistent with their core personalities. Their responses to their trauma also invite readers to consider how characters respond to and narrate the same traumatic events in vastly different ways, thus compelling or stunting their post-traumatic growth. Like the religious trauma explored in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 uncovers how Sheri Reynolds portrays Ninah Huff, the teenage protagonist-narrator of *The Rapture of Canaan*, as narrating her trauma and leading others to freedom while still remaining connected to her toxic community, changing it from the inside.

All of the fictional women narrators in this study call attention to the significant empowering impact of testifying to traumatic experience. The portrayal of their diverse

responses and coping mechanisms demand pluralistic interpretations of literary trauma theory that prioritize the role of testimony in healing instead of emphasizing the silence that sometimes follows traumatic experience. The societal role of testimony is widely seen—from courtroom testimony to corroborate someone’s account for defense or accusation to sharing one’s story of struggle with the intent of building hope in others. The biblical text of Revelation asserts that followers will overcome evil by the word of their testimony, further demonstrating the life-giving power present and possible in speaking one’s story. The women narrators in this study bring readers their representations of trauma testimonies in various forms—linear narrative, dialogue, diary keeping, creating textile objects to tell their story—and as they do, they build an arsenal of powerful narratives that dismantle hegemonic, patriarchal interpretations of history that would seek to silence them or squelch their authority. Instead, they persist as strong feminist texts that elevate these individual women’s experiences and carve out space for their unique trauma stories. The novels additionally memorialize the “nameless and faceless” (Danticat 280) who suffered by offering specific stories of particular characters who stand in for the many actual victims and survivors. As Danticat’s Amabelle and Sebastien are an amalgamation of the women and men who suffered in the Massacre of 1937, they bring readers the important stories of those who suffered during this ethnic cleansing. Likewise, the Mirabal sisters of Alvarez’s creation bring back into the public imagination the heroism of these women and others who also endured Trujillo’s reign, resisting history’s forgetfulness. As with the conditions that made Trujillo’s terror possible, Kingsolver’s novel also raises questions of U.S. and European complicity in the tragedies that impacted the Congo in their struggle for independence, bringing an overlooked footnote in American history to the foreground. Reynolds’s text, too, unearths hidden stories in bringing to light the secret trauma sometimes present in separatist religious

communities. As these stories are inscribed publically through this literary memorialization, these texts become cultural artifacts that testify to this range of historical trauma and hinder the insidious impact of the cultural amnesia that would lead to their erasure. They further invite us beyond the scope of this project to consider the significant cultural work performed by such texts of trauma, as preventing historical erasure is one of many noteworthy roles.

Saying something aloud does something to the reality of that truth—as seen in the Genesis account of using words to call things into existence and the naming of creation, to the weight of naming and nicknaming linguistically to demonstrate ownership or intimacy. Speaking trauma testimonies, specifically, does something to the trauma, to alter it, to make it manageable in retrospect (Brison 68). Testimonies also produce hope in the listener, and readers are invited to be moved and changed as a result of encountering these trauma stories. Brené Brown has said that “shame cannot survive” empathy (Brown 195), and I contend as an extension that trauma cannot survive testimony.

What fiction provides are examples of effective trauma testimonies and an invitation for readers to hope in their own empathic witnessing, to believe that there is survival on the other side of trauma and that we are all more resilient than we believe. What we see in literature empowers us in reality and invites us into the diverse experiences of characters who are outside of our everyday encounters. By seeing their stories and being invited to enter in empathically, readers face the possibility of walking away changed with deeper understanding of the trauma someone else may endure.

These authors and their women characters defy what psychologists assert about traumatic experience and memory, and in so doing, they invite readers to interrogate their own resilience in light of trauma as readers experience these characters’ journeys of survival. Caruth and Scarry

assert that pain is unspeakable, and psychologists like van der Kolk say that trauma often bypasses the brain's language center, thus making it inaccessible to linguistic memory. Yet therapists, like Pennebaker and Levine, claim that narrating one's trauma and discharging the energy that was frozen in the moment of trauma is what leads to renegotiating trauma and moving forward in post-traumatic growth. The characters in these novels see this need, too—as in the words of Alvarez's Dedé, "We had lost hope, and we needed a story to understand what happened to us" (Alvarez 313). This investigation uncovers the elements of such stories and how these fictional women narrators use their stories to survive in the wake of traumatic experience that is neither unspeakable nor beyond the grasp of language.

Chapter 1: *The Farming of Bones*: Words to Raise the Dead

Introduction

Deliberately silenced in many official historical records, the Massacre of 1937 would persist largely forgotten if not for the grassroots efforts of concerned Haitian citizens and historians to record first-hand testimonies from those who survived the reign of terror of Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina. Literary memorialization from authors like Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat also brings this grave historical event to audiences who would otherwise remain ignorant of this ethnic cleansing and its far-reaching implications for the island of Hispaniola today. In her protagonist-narrator, Amabelle Désir, Danticat creates a simultaneously vulnerable and strong trauma survivor who uses the art of testimony to process her profound pain and heal in her distinct, fluid way.

Through Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones*, Edwidge Danticat invites readers to consider that the path to healing is as unique as the individual, but the acts of bearing empathic witness and contributing meaningfully to a supportive community are vital therapeutic elements in Amabelle's healing process. Through her survival that resists neat closure, Amabelle demonstrates that resilience is possible in the face of unrelenting trauma. As she portrays Amabelle's testimony to what she and others endured in the Massacre of 1937, Danticat rewrites the dominant historiography of the Parsley Massacre and presents an alternate history to rival hegemonic interpretations. In so doing, she performs a sort of resurrection of the dead, reviving the lives and memories of those who suffered persistent physical and enduring psychological violence under Trujillo, and ultimately illustrating that words have the power to raise the dead and heal the wounded.

Danticat's Amabelle speaks of her pain, and in so doing, crafts her unique testimony to trauma. Much of literary trauma theory is concerned with the inexpressibility of traumatic experience, but I find this emphasis to be limiting as it reduces representations of trauma testimony to an exception that remains in the margins, rather than a central element of post-traumatic experience, worthy of its own attention and consideration. At the core of this chapter is my argument about the literary trauma survivor's ability to testify and heal as a result of that testimony, so I will first explore critical elements of trauma theory in order to lay a foundation for this investigation before returning to the novel itself.

Leading theorist Cathy Caruth has been at the forefront of literary trauma studies since the 1990s, but her earlier work lends itself to a monolithic interpretation of trauma that does not allow ample room for varied experiences and expressions of trauma that do not leave the survivor voiceless. Her emphasis on the "incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" does not adequately interrogate the possibility of understanding or expressing traumatic experiences, as literary characters who are survivors so eloquently do (*Unclaimed Experience* 58). Such an essentialist view of the experience of trauma is limiting because it does not sufficiently represent the multiplicity of depictions that readers can find of trauma in contemporary fiction. Even as she analyzes works of literature, Caruth maintains her focus on trauma's silencing. Although she acknowledges the communicative urge of sharing trauma stories, saying, "It is this plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard, this call by which the other commands us to awaken" (*Unclaimed Experience* 9), she refers to that call as one that, "in this book's understanding, constitutes the new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand" (*Unclaimed Experience* 9). As she adheres to her insistence on the silence

and repetition present in traumatic experience, she limits the study of the articulation and successful renegotiation of that trauma. Further, Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, however insightful in its portrayal of the struggle to articulate physical pain, too, leaves readers with the understanding that pain cannot be "rendered in language" (162) because it has no referential content. Similarly, Bessel van der Kolk asserts, "The [traumatic] experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioural reenactments, nightmares and flashbacks" (qtd in Luckhurst 148). I, along with more recent theories of trauma, contend, however, that for pain to be healed, it must be articulated, and Danticat's novel is just one of many literary examples of the powerful force of trauma testimony.

For example, in her more recent work, Caruth expands her view of trauma to include more about the art of witnessing and opens a space for my inquiry to fill. In *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Caruth writes, "History...is reclaimed and generated not in reliving unconsciously the death of the past but by an act that bears witness by parting from it" (9). This later work emphasizing a departure from the death drive, in favor of the life drive, paves the way for my inquiry, which is concerned primarily with resilience and survival. Caruth still claims, though, in *Listening to Trauma* that "events, insofar as they are traumatic, may be defined, in part, by the very ways in which they are not immediately assimilated: by the manner in which their experience is delayed, split off" (xiii). This definition categorizes traumatic experience as clearly separate from normal experience, but it also challenges the survivor's ability to readily assimilate such an experience into one's everyday, "new normal," which is a task psychologists assert trauma survivors must complete if they are to move forward wholeheartedly toward

healing.⁵ This process of cognitive reappraisal is crucial in the trauma survivor's healing process, as it is a significant step toward making sense of what happened and bringing the past into the present in a healthy, non-traumatic manner. When done well, the survivor has control over verbally expressing his or her story of trauma when control may have been taken away during the traumatic event itself.

Given this possibility of cognitive reappraisal, interpretations within literary trauma theory need to make room for such testimonial possibilities. In *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, Michelle Balaev argues against the universalism present in the Lacanian and Freudian approaches of literary trauma studies that fail to move beyond Caruth's and others' work established in the 1990s, which defines traumatic experience in terms of its unrepresentability. She contends, instead, for the necessity of a pluralism of perspectives to prevail, which I argue can be seen in the varied representations of trauma testimony present in *The Farming of Bones* and other works of contemporary fiction. Because the experience and expression of trauma are not universal, though some trauma theorists may contend they are (as the work of Caruth, Judith Herman, Scarry, and van der Kolk convey), it stands to reason that trauma testimonies may take different forms and come to survivors in different ways and at different times. Flashbacks and other post-traumatic intrusions are not experienced by all trauma survivors, and survivors will react to their traumas with varying levels of resilience in the immediate aftermath and as triggers bring the trauma to mind again as years pass. Therefore, some survivors will share openly of their trauma right away, while others may need to process internally before sharing outwardly. This testimony may be months or years in the making. As

⁵ The term "new normal" has not been attributed to a source of origination, but it is a helpful albeit ubiquitous phrase widely used to counsel patients dealing with grief, loss, or trauma. The "new normal" implies that survivors should not seek to return to their prior state of "normal," as their lives have been irrevocably altered, and the "old normal" is not a healthy or attainable goal.

many who work with trauma survivors attest, a survivor should not be forced to share his or her story until he or she is ready. In fact, urging someone to share too soon or too much may be harmful.⁶ In *Opening Up: The Healing Power to Express Emotions*, psychologist and founder of expressive writing, James Pennebaker rightly notes, “Not all people feel or express overwhelming grief when faced with terrible traumas. Furthermore, many people who do not get particularly upset or depressed following major loss may actually be psychologically well adjusted” (78). One’s progression of healing in the wake of trauma is unique. However, Pennebaker’s work has found that in general stifling one’s feelings concerning trauma can be severely damaging. He explains,

Over time, the work of inhibition gradually undermines the body’s defenses. Like other stressors, inhibition can affect immune function, the action of the heart and vascular systems, and even the biochemical workings of the brain and nervous systems. In short, excessive holding back of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can place people at risk for both major and minor diseases. (Pennebaker, *Opening Up 2*)

If one does feel pain, formulating one’s trauma experience linguistically can be emotionally and physically therapeutic. Putting the experience of pain into words moves the experience to a place of active cognition where one composes a narrative of the events and works to make meaning from it. Furthermore, therapeutic techniques, such as scriptotherapy⁷ and expressive writing, can provide a productive lens through which to evaluate the healing impact of bringing narrative form to one’s experience of trauma. On a physiological level, “Remembering details, specific images, and writing them down helps us to heal,” and people “who had written about their emotional traumas showed a significant improvement in their bodies’ immune functions” (MacCurdy 167). Beyond an increase in immunity, other studies also reveal health benefits of

⁶ DeSalvo, Louise. *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*. Beacon Press, 1999.

⁷ For more on scriptotherapy, see Henke, Suzette. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.

writing and point out the severe danger in keeping trauma hidden. Pennebaker notes, “Many people who have a traumatic experience keep replaying the events in their minds in a futile attempt to make sense of their suffering.... Writing about the trauma... allows people to find meaning of understanding in these events and helps to resolve their emotional turmoil” (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 4). Using this psychological lens as a tool in literary criticism and evaluating fictional characters through this framework reveals the process of working through literary trauma within a text, inviting readers to consider implications within the fiction as well as those that extend to the reader’s world beyond the text. In analyzing how characters give voice to their trauma, we can understand the various trials and triumphs fictional trauma survivors face in laboring to give birth to their stories and can gain further insight into the possibilities for dealing with trauma in its aftermath.

Speaking back to the dominant discourse is one of the ways Danticat’s Amabelle demonstrates the strength and impact of her testimony. In her profound essay “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” Mae Gwendolyn Henderson articulates the power of testimony, saying:

In both dominant and subdominant discourses, the initial expression of a marginal presence takes the form of a disruption.... This rupture is followed by a rewriting or rereading of the dominant story.... Disruption—the initial response to hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse—and the subsequent response, revision (rewriting or rereading), together represent a progressive model for black and female utterance. (136)

For Amabelle to speak out against Trujillo, she must disrupt social conventions and create an alternative story to the dominant history. Furthermore, just as trauma disrupts normal experience, so testimony similarly breeches expectations of social interaction. As such, Henderson’s emphasis on disruption works on multiple levels in *The Farming of Bones*. From her subject position as an oppressed black woman who is the target of violence, Danticat’s

portrayal of Amabelle's specific utterances carves new space for marginalized voices of black laborers silenced by the slaughter of 1937. In so doing, she disrupts history that had previously left no official markers of the collective trauma that took place. Amabelle's representation of testimony, therefore, powerfully speaks back to this cultural amnesia and the hegemonic discourse of the Trujillo regime that sought to render her as subhuman because of her Haitian heritage. To speak up against such violence and discrimination necessitates that Amabelle upset the official story and assert her own strong testimonial voice as a counter-narrative.

Danticat's example also provides a strong illustration of the healing impact of trauma testimony and its important place in understanding cultural and collective pain. Extending the boundaries of literary trauma theory, in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy has written about the connection between stories and readers of trauma, saying, "Trauma narrativists endeavor to expand their audiences' awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory and warn us that trauma reproduces itself if left unattended" (3). Her explorations encourage authors and readers to speak trauma, because in avoiding it, we leave room for trauma's pain to expand and perpetuate itself. This admonishment extends to personal and collective trauma, as both individual and communal experiences of pain benefit from the healing impact of testimony. Vickroy further demonstrates the psychological foundation of testimony, saying, "For healing to take place, survivors must find ways to tell their stories and to receive some kind of social acknowledgement if not acceptance" (19). Her work reminds readers that telling is integral to the process of healing, and this healing is both public and private, as trauma writers not only make "alien experience more understandable and accessible, but they also bring a kind of sociocultural critical analysis that

helps readers formulate how public policy and ideology are lived in private lives” (Vickroy 222). The impact of trauma testimony is manifold: the individual benefits from expressing, codifying, and making meaning from the pain, and the larger community of witnesses benefits from entering into the survivor’s pain with empathy and understanding of an event they only vicariously experience. The physical and psychological benefits of this meaningful expression enhance the survivor’s well-being as well as the community’s progress and unity.

Edwidge Danticat’s text illustrates how a large-scale decision from a nation’s leader has a significant impact on the “private lives” (Vickroy 222) of those living on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Readers are invited to witness to the personal impact of Trujillo’s insidious public policy and ethnic cleansing. Through *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat depicts the powerful “liberatory voice” (hooks 15) Amabelle develops. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks describes this process, saying, “The struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice—the way of speaking that is no longer determined by one’s status as object—as oppressed being” (15). Under Trujillo, Amabelle is an object of oppression, but as she testifies to her trauma and the pain of others, Danticat’s Amabelle invents her own voice of freedom from her central position as a subject who testifies. In so doing, she asserts herself as a liberated individual who will no longer be stifled under the lingering influences of Trujillo’s oppressive reign. As hooks suggest, by bearing witness to what she saw and endured, with each utterance, Amabelle chisels away at the hegemonic forces that seek to hold her captive in silence.

Amabelle's witness also fulfills the revolutionary trajectory of testimony that Chandra Talpade Mohanty has written about in *Feminism Without Borders*. Mohanty says the testimonial's purpose is to

document and record the history of popular struggles, foreground experiential and historical 'truth' which has been erased or rewritten in hegemonic, elite, or imperialist history, and bear witness in order to change oppressive state rule....not the unfolding of a singular woman's consciousness (in the hegemonic tradition of European modernist autobiography); rather, their strategy is to speak from within a collective, as participants in revolutionary struggles, and to speak with the express purpose of bringing about social and political change. (81)

By emphasizing the marginal, individual experience as representative of a collective struggle, Mohanty's claim reveals a key difference between Caribbean testimonial texts and Euro-centric works, namely the momentum toward collective change and the primacy of collective experience. Danticat's Amabelle situates herself within the discourse of Caribbean history, but through her individual perspective, she paradoxically speaks as part of a larger whole with the potential to recast the history of dominant ideologies that have persisted in the Caribbean in terms now of those who were openly and intentionally marginalized. Myriam J. Chancy rightly asserts, "Danticat gives voice to... 'real' women while at the same time attempting to lift the veil of amnesia that obscures this painful period in both Haitian and Dominican history" (131). Amabelle's revolutionary act of testifying demonstrates her resilience in the face of trauma and the strength in speaking back to symbolic violence to effect dramatic change. Furthermore, Danticat represents a chorus of Caribbean writers, such as Julia Alvarez, Junot Diaz, and Jamaica Kincaid, to name only a few, who are authoring tales of witness that speak back to the dominant histories of the region.

One helpful tool for evaluating Amabelle's testimony and resilience in *The Farming of Bones* is the template of expressive writing, which originates from psychotherapy. This is a

useful intervention in that it provides a framework for evaluating growth and emotional healing at the linguistic level. Developed by social psychologist James Pennebaker, expressive writing asserts that the act of narrativizing one's trauma—if done appropriately—can lead to dramatic and lasting physical and emotional health benefits. By joining theories of expressive writing with literary trauma theory, my intervention brings these two fields together to illuminate the profound resilience depicted in Danticat's novel that invites readers to consider the implications of processing trauma in various testimonial and cathartic ways. Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count tool, LIWC, provides a helpful methodology for analyzing expressive writing in fiction at the linguistic level. While others have used LIWC to evaluate authors' psychological conditions, poets' emotional states, sex differences in dialogue from film and drama, and science fiction,⁸ I cannot find evidence that researchers have yet applied this framework to works of contemporary fiction and coupled it with literary trauma theory. Thus, my intervention is unique in that it provides a fruitful structure for evaluating the testimony authors have crafted for their fictional characters who experience and process trauma. Their fictional narratives become a form of expressive writing as they work through their traumatic experience.

Effective expressive writing will contain “concrete specific images,” as “[r]esearch into trauma recovery indicates that healing is more likely to occur when survivors can describe not just the events of their trauma but the images their memories have encoded” (MacCurdy 166). Further, these memories should be conveyed in a way that “avoids generalizations” and “dispassionate accounts often replete with clichés” (MacCurdy 173) in order to demonstrate that the survivor is connecting emotionally with the content and not writing in a detached manner.

⁸ Pennebaker, James and Molly Ireland, “Using Literature to Understand Authors: The Case for Computerized Text Analysis.” *Scientific Study of Literature* Vol.1, 2011; Nichols, Ryan “LIWC in Practice: Applying LIWC to Questions in Genre Theory, or Toward a Science of Science Fiction,” *Centre for Human Evolution, Cognition, and Culture*. U of British Columbia, 21 Jun. 2016.

Pennebaker also argues that it is beneficial for survivors to “work to construct a meaningful story,” as “the cognitive work they put into the story results in a better product and one that is more likely to allow them to get through their trauma” (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 15). Deep honesty is also a critical component of expressive writing, as “people who are honest with themselves when exploring their past are the ones who find the greatest value in writing” (Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns* 132). Additionally, individuals who are likely to benefit from expressive writing will also demonstrate growth as they write over time, as evidenced in their use of positive emotion words like *joy*, and an increase in cognitive words across successive writing samples (Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns* 10). These elements illustrate that one can acknowledge the positive items occurring alongside the negative, while constructing a story to make meaning from the trauma, elements that researchers, such as Pennebaker, have found to be crucial to the healing process in dealing with traumatic experience.

Expressive writing provides an opportunity for trauma survivors to write about their deepest pain.⁹ Pennebaker’s research has shown that effective expressive writing can have dramatic physical and emotional health benefits, even resulting in the need for fewer visits to the doctor. According to Pennebaker, “People who benefit from writing express more optimism, acknowledge negative events, are constructing a meaningful story of their experience, and have the ability to change perspectives as they write” (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 14). Additionally, he notes that it is dangerous to keep one’s trauma hidden, saying, “People who reported having a terrible traumatic experience *and* who kept the experience a secret had far more health problems than people who openly talked about their traumas” (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 4, emphasis in original). Through testifying, or writing about their trauma, survivors have the chance to make

⁹ James Pennebaker is often cited as the leading expert in expressive writing, but other scholars include Louise DeSalvo, John F. Evans, and Marian MacCurdy, though Pennebaker continues to be the most widely published.

meaning, which can lead to greater understanding of what happened, and ultimately, provide some resolution to the agony survivors feel.

To evaluate the components of expressive writing, Pennebaker and his team developed a computerized textual analysis program, the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count. This program “computes the percentage of words in a given file that reflects various positive and negative emotions as well as general thinking styles” and “analyzes language along more than 70 different dimensions” (Pennebaker, *Opening Up* 102). What this type of analysis can quickly reveal are the categories of linguistic change that occur over time in given samples of text. Among other things, this can aid in identifying one’s progress in constructing a story to relay the events and emotions surrounding one’s traumatic experience. Additionally, the program can reveal how categories of a given sample compare to averages for that type of writing. For example, one could see that a given sample uses far fewer positive emotion words than the average for personal writing, yet the same sample may use far greater cognitive words. The human researcher is therefore left to decode and evaluate the meaning of these deviations. For the purpose of literary analysis, I contend that LIWC is a helpful tool in assessing a character’s progression through scenes that represent the characters testifying to trauma. Amabelle’s survival and healing in *The Farming of Bones* provide a compelling case for the utility of such a framework in analyzing a post-trauma journey.

Many psychological frameworks have long been used to evaluate characters in literature, and LIWC adds an additional helpful lens through which to view characters’ language and narration. This dual psychological and linguistic lens invites readers to consider characters from a holistic perspective that may, in turn, invite readers to see implications for bearing witness and testifying to trauma in productive, cathartic, and healing ways.

Douglas Biber's 1988 seminal publication *Variation across Speech and Writing* includes fiction as one of the many written genres analyzed along various dimensions, alongside conversation, panel discussion, and scientific text (Biber 18) and is often cited as providing necessary groundwork for comparing the "textual relations" between different types of texts (Biber 19), a key element now inherent in the LIWC process. Others have applied LIWC to investigate authors' psychological and language matching styles, and one such application makes the case for William Shakespeare and John Fletcher's co-authorship of John Theobald's play *Double Falsehood* based on analysis and comparison of their other written works (Boyd and Pennebaker). Applications of the sociolinguistic and psychological elements of LIWC within the arena of literary studies can offer avenues of fruitful investigation and interpretation of authors' styles and characters' speech patterns and psychological and emotional progress throughout the course of a novel. In "Using Literature to Understand Authors," Pennebaker and Molly Ireland have argued, "Literature can provide a powerful window into the psychology of authors" (45), and I would add, by extension, the psychology of the characters they have created. My inquiry aims to apply this layer of investigation to works of contemporary fiction not yet analyzed through such a lens, in an effort to bring deeper understanding of characters' methods of processing traumatic experience. Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* provides an optimal case study to see fictional protagonist Amabelle journey through the psychological process of cognitive reappraisal to make sense of her pain and seek healing.

The Farming of Bones

Published in 1998, *The Farming of Bones* charts the journey of Haitian *restavèk*, or housemaid, Amabelle Désir, as she struggles to escape Trujillo's troops, save her life, and be

reunited with her lover, Sebastien. Told from Amabelle's first-person perspective, *The Farming of Bones* reveals the intensity of the atrocities committed in the Massacre of 1937 as it puts faces and names with the victims of Trujillo's regime and describes the slaughter in visceral details, conveying the pain and horror victims and survivors suffered in the Massacre and its aftermath. Amabelle recounts not only her experience in fleeing her home on the Dominican side of the island, but also the lives—and deaths—of her traveling companions, Wilner, Odette, and Tibon.

The Massacre, which took place over the course of a few days, from October 2 through October 8, 1937, seemed to sneak up suddenly on unsuspecting ethnic Haitians, many whose families had lived in the Dominican Republic for generations. Some were born in the Dominican Republic—and thus “Dominican by birth but culturally and ethnically Haitian” (Roorda 304). They were marginalized because of their blackness and their Haitian ethnicity and often left in a limbo situation without papers to confirm their citizenship. As Lauren Derby and Richard Turits's interviews with survivors of the genocide confirm, “[M]ost of those who managed to escape the killings had been born and raised on Dominican territory, hence they were, according to the Dominican constitution and also to most local officials at the time, Dominican citizens” (138). This citizenship was not without its controversies, however, as many in positions of power sought to delegitimize Haitian-Dominicans' status as citizens. In his efforts to “whiten the island,” during the years prior to the Massacre, Trujillo “imposed a quota on the percentage of non-Dominican sugar workers that an estate could employ and deported Haitians who could not produce papers establishing their place of birth and nationality” (Roorda 305). He went even further “to recruit white immigrants from Puerto Rico” (Roorda 305) instead of continuing to

employ darker-skinned and Haitian workers who had long served on—and been exploited by—Dominican sugar plantations.¹⁰

The relationship between Dominicans and Haitians is further complicated by Trujillo's changing stances and conflicting reports that people from both sides of the island lived together in peace and that Dominican territory was being encroached upon by immigrating Haitians. Further evidence of the complex relationship between Haitians and Dominicans, "Before the massacre, Trujillo presented himself to ethnic Haitians not as an eliminationist anti-Haitian tyrant but rather as a ruler granting state protection and assistance (namely free land access) to those offering political loyalty, agricultural production, and taxes to the regime" (Turits, "A World Destroyed" 609). Prior to the massacre, Trujillo also "proudly affirmed his Haitian ancestry" (Turits, "A World Destroyed" 611), making his decision to enact genocide against his own people all the more horrifying. Trujillo never admitted official responsibility for the Massacre, as "the indemnity agreement signed in Washington, D.C., on 31 January 1938 unequivocally asserted that the Dominican government 'recognizes no responsibility whatsoever' [for the killings]" (Turits, "A World Destroyed" 623), and this lack of admission afforded Trujillo the opportunity to reframe the slaughter as a defense of Dominican nationalism in the threat of the so-called "pacific invasion" of ethnic Haitians in the Dominican frontier (Turits, "A World Destroyed" 623). The reality, however, was that residents of the frontier in the northwest part of the country had been living together peaceably for generations in this bicultural, transnational region, but their "ways of life and cultural complexity...collided with an

¹⁰ For more information on Trujillo's actions and his relationship with other nations and territories under the U.S. Good Neighbor Policy, see Gellman, Irwin. *Good Neighbor Diplomacy: United States Policies in Latin America, 1933-1945*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1979 and Fejes, Fred. *Imperialism, Media, and the Good Neighbor: New Deal Foreign Policy and United States Shortwave Broadcasting to Latin America*. Praeger, 1986.

elite and urban ideal of a Dominican nation excluding and reviling everything Haitian” (Turits, “A World Destroyed” 599).

Although racial tensions had long existed between the light-skinned Dominican elite and darker-skinned ethnic Haitians, because state-sponsored racist moves had been gradual, some residents did not fully anticipate the coming genocide. Turits observes, “Unlike other cases of ethnic cleansing in the twentieth century, no prior state policy, local tension, international conflict, official ideology, or escalating attacks had signaled the possibility of such state-directed carnage. To local residents, the genocidal rampage appeared to come out of nowhere, like an act of madness” (*Foundations of Despotism* 166). Danticat mentions the moments around the beginning of the Massacre as Amabelle narrates, “Many had heard rumors of groups of Haitians being killed in the night because they could not manage to trill their ‘r’ and utter a throaty ‘j’ to ask for parsley, to say perejil. Rumors don’t start for nothing, someone insisted” (114).

Although some scholars say specific motives for Trujillo’s orders are unknown (Derby and Turits 137), and it is unclear if “the massacre was spontaneous or premeditated” (Roorda 306), the slaughter was retrospectively legitimized “as the realization of a supposedly patriotic project to ‘Dominicanize the frontier’” (Turits, *Foundations of Despotism* 146), thus perpetuating and reifying anti-Haitianism, which persists as a form of violence toward present-day Haitians. As recent as 2013, a ruling was issued that “strips many Dominicans of [Haitian] descent of their Dominican citizenship—retroactively to 1929” (Paulino and García 113), rendering stateless individuals born to an undocumented parent in the Dominican Republic and sending a further message that they are not considered equal with the light-skinned Dominican elite.

Working Conditions in the Dominican Republic

The perceived inferiority of ethnic Haitians can also be seen in the structure of their working conditions and their subsequent place in the class system of Hispaniola. Haitians living and working along the border of the Dominican Republic were often seen as lower-class unskilled workers, relegated to undesirable tasks involving hard labor. Danticat's title is in part a reference to the dangerous working conditions Haitians faced in the sugar cane fields of the Dominican Republic, what Amabelle calls "travay tè pou zo, the farming of bones" (Danticat 55). Amabelle's lover, Sebastien, is one of these laborers, and he says to her, "Sometimes the people in the fields, when they're tired and angry, they say we're an orphaned people....They say we are the burnt crud at the bottom of the pot. They say some people don't belong anywhere and that's us. I say we are a group of vwayajè, wayfarers" (Danticat 56). Sebastien attempts to reframe the social script of his role, transforming his position as a sugar cane laborer into that of a wanderer, one who has intentionally relocated, rather than being forcibly displaced and driven into these deplorable conditions. Regardless of his outlook, outsiders nonetheless view him as an outcast, unworthy, evidenced in his description of his people as "burnt crud" (56). That Haitian workers can see themselves this way and know that those in power over them see them as such, demonstrates their subject position in the stratified social system in the Dominican Republic, where ethnic Haitians, especially those with dark skin, are treated as if they are nearly subhuman.

This nearly subhuman status reinforces a culture that legitimates physical and symbolic violence against Haitians. David Swartz explains the legitimation of symbolic violence, a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, saying, "For Bourdieu, legitimation rests on common everyday assumptions—cultural schema—that individuals and groups make about the nature of the social order" (80). Part of the schema for those who are not ethnic Haitians in the Dominican Republic

is that ethnic Haitians are inherently inferior, and thus their denigration is acceptable. As Tibon, one Haitian character in Danticat's novel, is fleeing Trujillo's troops, he remarks to his fellow Haitians, "The ruin of the poor is their poverty....The poor man, no matter who he is, is always despised by his neighbors. When you stay too long at a neighbor's house, it's only natural that he become weary of you and hate you" (Danticat 178). Tibon is aware of the economic inequities between himself and those whose side of the island he inhabits, and he is further aware of the animosity that brews toward the poor Haitian laborer.

Danticat's novel portrays this schema through the use of laborers in the sugar cane fields, but she also illustrates this cultural schema through the protagonist, Amabelle, as she is employed as a housemaid for a wealthy Dominican family. Although she has a close relationship with the daughter of the family, Señora Valencia, she is viewed as an employee and not capable of being on equal footing with the white-skinned elite. After Amabelle helps deliver Señora Valencia's twins, one light-skinned boy and one darker-skinned girl, Señora Valencia says to her, "Amabelle do you think my daughter will always be the color she is now?...My poor love, what if she's mistaken for one of your people?" (12). This statement illustrates the pervasive racism present in the Dominican Republic, is an act of aggression toward Amabelle. That her employer would blatantly insult Amabelle under the guise of her perhaps genuine fear that her daughter might be mistaken as Haitian demonstrates the nonchalance that accompanies this unrelenting anti-Haitianism. Furthermore, that Señora Valencia would feel apprehensive about her daughter's skin tone in the first place is an additional indicator of the racism and violence against people with darker skin, even if they are of wealthy, non-Haitian descent.¹¹

¹¹ Miriam J. A. Chancy has articulated this phenomenon of past and present-day colorism in her book, *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile*, saying, "Afro-Caribbean women in particular survive within the Caribbean under conditions of sexism that exacerbate racism/colorism, classism, homophobia/heterosexism in ways that result in social and/or psychological exile" (211).

Amy Novak has written about this symbolic violence, saying that “[i]n the aftermath of the killing, this trauma is repeated at the symbolic level as its history goes mostly unrecorded by national and international leaders who see the Haitians as a faceless, ignorant labor force, not as subjects of history” (93). Danticat’s text, however, is able to reframe this story by creating a record of the Massacre and its impact on Hispaniola.

Bearing Witness

Amabelle’s story brings to light these racial inequities on the island of Hispaniola, and her representation of testimony defies what some trauma theorists, like Elaine Scarry, have said, which is that pain “resists language” or cannot be rendered in language (4). Danticat’s Amabelle speaks her pain and the pain of others, and in so doing, she speaks her survival into existence, as being the witness-bearer becomes her purpose and is part of what saves and heals her. Early in the novel, Danticat establishes witness-bearing as a significant element of life in Amabelle’s community. In an encounter with Father Romain after their friend, Joël, has been killed, Amabelle recounts the significance of two people being from the same town across the border in Haiti, as she and Father Romain are both from Cap Haitien. She says, “At times you could sit for a whole evening with such individuals, just listening to their existence unfold...It was their way of returning home, with you as a witness or as someone to bring them back to the present” (Danticat 73). The common bond of a hometown provides these displaced individuals with deeper community and a connection to their shared histories. Amabelle underscores the significance of witnessing and sharing these stories, saying, “This was how people left imprints of themselves in each other’s memory so that if you left first and went back to the common village, you could carry, if not a letter, a piece of treasured clothing, some message to their loved

ones that their place was still among the living” (Danticat 73). Later in the novel, it is such an item—the bracelets that Amabelle wears—that confirms for Sebastien’s mother Amabelle’s relationship with her son, though he is no longer alive. Furthermore, Amabelle conveys the power of testimony in referring to Father Romain’s philosophy, saying, “His creed was one of memory, how remembering—though sometimes painful—can make you strong” (Danticat 73). In this creed, Amabelle captures what I see as the essence of trauma testimony, succinctly conveying the tension in its pain and power, all the while emphasizing that the strength outweighs the ache.

This development of endurance does not diminish the agony present in bearing witness to trauma, however, as Amabelle conveys in her dreams after the Massacre. She says, “My dreams are now only visitations of my words for the absent justice of the peace, for the Generalissimo himself....The more days go by, the more I think of Joël’s grave. (Of Wilner’s, Odette’s, Mimi’s and Sebastien’s too.) I could no more find these graves than the exact star that exploded and fell from the sky the night each of them perished” (Danticat 265). As time passes, Amabelle’s memory of her friends increases, and her testimony as a witness to their lives and deaths becomes increasingly more important, as there are seemingly no other witnesses to keep their memories alive. As a survivor, Danticat’s Amabelle is the one to bear witness to these lives and deaths, and she becomes their living grave-marker, as there are no tombstones for those who perished in the slaughter. In speaking their stories, she empowers herself to continue living and moving forward, all the while being reminded “that the river of blood might come to [her] doorstep” (Danticat 265), embodying the coexisting elements of trauma testimony’s pain and power. Part of this pain involves speaking the names of the loved ones she has lost, even when their deaths seem as numerous and their graves as nebulous as the stars in the sky.

Because her story begins with “His name is Sebastien Onius” (Danticat 1), readers may initially see this as Sebastien’s story, but it is more fully Amabelle’s robust story, focalized through her narration and her personal experiences. Sebastien is the impetus for her testimony, but it is her unique journey that pulls readers through the novel. By saying his name, Amabelle testifies on Sebastien’s behalf, keeping his memory alive and fulfilling the ideology that “[f]amous men never truly die” (Danticat 280). Furthermore, she reasserts Sebastien’s humanity in a culture that would see him as subhuman because of his dark skin. Her testimony prevents Sebastien from being among the “nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (Danticat 280). Additionally, speaking about the Massacre keeps Amabelle’s fictional story alive and brings light to the once-nameless and faceless victims of Trujillo’s Parsley Massacre. Although it may seem on the surface that her search for Sebastien motivates Amabelle to survive, it is her “life drive” (Caruth) and need to testify to the Massacre that compels her to continue. In Caruth’s words, the “life drive...[bears] witness to the past by turning toward the future” (xi). For Amabelle, her movement toward the future and its possibilities encourages her progress. Instead of looking back at the past and at her life with Sebastien, she is propelled forward, without forgetting, into the future, toward her survival and her triumph over Trujillo.

Amabelle’s love and desperate search for Sebastien may act as a literary pull-through, drawing readers into the novel, but it is her compulsion to speak of the slaughter that overshadows the sub-plotline of romance. Demonstrative of her powerful voice, in *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle says,

It is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside.

The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on. All I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds nor remain forever buried beneath the sod. (Danticat 266)

Even though Trujillo tries to silence her, he does not succeed. Although his troops silence her lover and traveling companions in death, they live on in Amabelle's testimony, which performs a sort of resurrection of the dead, speaking back in powerful ways to the oppressive structures that sought to silence ethnic Haitians in the Dominican Republic during Trujillo's reign of terror. That she needs to "lay it down now and again" shows readers the ongoing ebb and flow in the process of recovering in the wake of trauma alongside the deep need to be heard.

Danticat's portrayal of Amabelle's use of vivid sensory details throughout her descriptions of the Massacre's trauma anchors her details in the bodily experience of the real, while undergirding her healing testimony with strength. When she watches a young wounded woman fall from the back of an ox cart, she describes this scene vividly, saying, "Her face flapped open when she hit the ground, her right cheekbone glistening as the flesh parted from it. She rolled onto her back and for a moment faced the sky" (Danticat 168). Her corporeal description is gruesome and therefore difficult to encounter, but the reality of the picture it creates for readers is an invitation into the painful aspect of witnessing trauma. As she narrates scenes such as this, Amabelle makes meaning of pain while conveying the trauma through narrative form. Part of that meaning-making is to call out such violence as senseless and arbitrary, but it also shapes her story as a story of her survival as a contrast to others' deaths, demonstrated in the closing words of this passage when Yves says, "At least we survived the night" (Danticat 169). In telling such stories, she fulfills the primary components of expressive writing by creating a narrative of events, connecting to her emotions, and incorporating strong details, all of which are shown to have therapeutic health benefits. Instead of rehearsing the past

and present trauma in a flat, removed way, Amabelle steps into the action and conveys her experiences in a moving way even as she processes through it.

Narrating Her Parents' Deaths

Further evidence of Amabelle's effective use of striking detail is found when she recounts her parents' deaths in her dream in Chapter 9. In this scene, she recalls standing at the river's edge, holding the pots that she and her family had just purchased on market day, as her father makes the decision to cross the river, carrying Amabelle's mother on his back, promising to come back for Amabelle, even though the rain in the mountains is causing the current to rise. Amabelle watches, helplessly, as they lose their balance, and the river sweeps them away. Although clearly pained, Amabelle uses vivid description and dialogue to describe their drowning, and she acknowledges that the faces of the "river rats" who pull her away from the rising river "seem blurred and faraway" (Danticat 52). This scene demonstrates the impact of trauma, as the faces are blurry in the moment, but the details are crisp and clear in memory, as though the scenes of this trauma have been seared into Amabelle's memory. Following this chapter, Amabelle tells Sebastien that she has once again had her "dream of [her] parents in the river" and that she "always see[s] it precisely the way it took place" (Danticat 55). While her recurring dream may be an indication of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in its persistent intrusion, that Danticat depicts her as able to recall the day with such clarity shatters notions that trauma survivors are unable to accurately remember their trauma. Her pain lies in remembering her loss all too clearly.

While some theorists assert that trauma cannot be named, I contend, instead, that linguistic identification and expression is essential to the healing process in the wake of trauma.

Elaine Scarry has claimed that pain is unspeakable, and similarly, Roger Luckhurst further echoes psychologist Bessel van der Kolk when he says that trauma memory is “an explicitly non-verbal, non-narrative memory,” as these theorists persist in asserting that traumatic experience tends not to be registered in Broca’s area, part of the language center of the brain (Luckhurst 148). Trauma survivors, however, are capable of processing their pain linguistically and can benefit from remembering and crafting a narrative in retrospect. This narrative construction integrates the trauma as part of an individual’s holistic experience, instead of keeping it set apart where flashbacks and other symptoms of PTSD are more apt to overwhelm one’s ability to function. While the first passage of Amabelle’s recollection of her parents’ deaths indicates Amabelle has not yet fully integrated this trauma, she is not at a loss for the details of what happened. Rather, she recounts clearly, step-by-step, the moments leading up to their drowning in vivid detail as though she cannot forget.

Additionally, through Amabelle, Danticat depicts this chapter of Amabelle’s parents’ deaths, and her other dream-like chapters, in present tense, indicating that this pain is ongoing. The use of present tense brings readers into the immediacy of the action, inviting readers to remember that a level of trauma is reenacted each time these deaths are remembered. Just as Amabelle says, “*It is* a Friday, market day” (Danticat 50, emphasis added) in describing her parents’ deaths, Sebastien’s absence, too, is an abiding presence. Amabelle articulates her ache for Sebastien, saying, “I wish at least that he was part of the air on this side of the river, a tiny morsel in the breeze that passes through my room in the night. I wish at least that some of the dust of his bones could trail me in the wind” (Danticat 281). Amabelle must move forward while carrying these losses with her, keeping them in the present, not leaving them in the past.

Describing her dreams in present tense is a textual marker of this recurring pain, a sharp contrast to the past-tense used in the narrative chapters depicting the novel's primary action.

In the dream of her parents' deaths, Danticat portrays Amabelle as placing herself primarily as an observer, narrating her parents' actions, as though she is not an active and involved witness. Only as they are drowning does her narration take on a first-person emphasis when she says, "I scream until I can taste blood in my throat, until I can no longer hear my own voice" (Danticat 52). Readers are not allowed into Amabelle's thoughts or emotions in this passage, seeing only the immediate action. Because readers are not privileged to see Amabelle's inner thought life here, the passage creates a sense of distance, as narrations of trauma sometimes do as a protective coping mechanism for the survivor. Aside from possessive pronouns like "my" to describe "my mother" and "my father" in this memory, anyone other than Amabelle watching the scene unfold could be describing the events; a personal connection is not needed to note that Amabelle's "mother tightens her grip around his neck; her body covers him and weighs him down at the same time" (51). Without an indication of the emotions rising up in Amabelle in these moments or in their aftermath, readers are pushed away from the tragedy, as Amabelle herself creates her own psychological distance through narrating only the emotionless facts.

While this chapter depicting Amabelle's recurring dream of her parents' deaths is beautiful, albeit painful, in its narrative description, it does not demonstrate Amabelle's cognitive process of making meaning from her personal tragedy. Readers are not yet aware of how Amabelle brings this pain into her present life to process her childhood trauma and its implications for her adult life. Because of this disconnect, the dream demonstrates partial benefits from articulating trauma, but it does not show the full effect of narrative's healing impact. When used as a baseline, however, one can compare Amabelle's representation of

testimony at various points in the novel and see great gains in her emotional tone and cognitive processes when she revisits the topic of her parents' deaths later in the text.

When she tells him about her dream, Sebastien suggests Amabelle revise the events surrounding her parents' death so that she will cease having her recurring nightmare. His advice is to “[r]emember...the things they did when they were breathing. Let us say that the river was still that day” (Danticat 55). This falsified revision does not have a positive impact on Amabelle or Sebastien. Moments later, Sebastien cannot refrain from speaking of his own painful past and his father's death. Amabelle observes, “We had made a pact to change our unhappy tales into happy ones, but he could not help himself” (Danticat 56). Although Sebastien tries to reframe their trauma, the lie that things ended happily cannot sustain them. It is merely a flimsy coping mechanism that prevents them from working through the reality of their pain. Reframing their realities is a temporary salve, but it masks their pain instead of unearthing and sifting through it. While such actions may be beneficial in the short-term present moment, they are not capable of producing the type of honest catharsis that empowers survivors as they endure. Their lie “that the river was still that day” (Danticat 55) illustrates what Judith Herman refers to in *Trauma and Recovery* as the “dialectic of psychological trauma” (1), which is the “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). However, it is proclaiming them in testimony that enables Amabelle to move from victim to survivor throughout the novel, entering into what Thema Bryant-Davis calls “the empowered state of going from surviving day-to-day to thriving” (9). Confronting the reality of her past and present trauma, instead of momentarily denying it, moves Amabelle to this deeper stage of healing, while Sebastien seems to remain stuck, recalling the negative aspects of his life, namely his father's death and the pejorative labels others give Haitians, like “the burnt crud at the bottom of the pot” (Danticat 56).

Though he reframes this label to the more positive term of “wayfarers” (Danticat 56), his tone is still that of deep sorrow as he speaks of his life as it is.

Expressive Writing as an Instrument of Healing

Danticat portrays Amabelle’s healing as further deepened throughout the novel as she continues to look retrospectively at her parents’ deaths and retell and reshape their stories. In “The Words to Tell Their Own Pain: Linguistic Markers of Cognitive Reappraisal in Mediating Benefits of Expressive Writing,” Francesca Alparone et al say, “The cognitive change theory (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) hypothesizes that labeling an event and its emotions linguistically leads people to re-structure and make sense of a chaotic emotional experience, promoting the understanding of the event itself and, in turn, its assimilation” (496). As *The Farming of Bones* progresses, so does Amabelle’s journey to cope with the loss of her parents. In the dedication to this novel, Danticat invites readers to consider that Amabelle is the author of the story, crediting Amabelle herself with the book’s dedication: “In confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers.” In so doing, Danticat establishes the testimonial component of this text from its genesis. According to theories of expressive writing, if Amabelle—as a narrator and a character—is to move forward more successfully in light of her trauma, her representation of testimony will demonstrate markers of meaning-making and show that she is connecting the trauma to other parts of her life, integrating it rather than isolating it. She will also show high use of positive emotion words, like *love* and *care*, and moderate (but some) use of negative emotion words, like *sad* and *pain*. In Pennebaker’s words, this would show that Amabelle is able to “acknowledge the negative but celebrate the positive” (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 10). There are varying degrees of such progressive processing with Amabelle’s fictional testimony as it relates to the

deep loss of her parents, but Danticat's depiction of her linguistic transformation by the novel's end is profound.

Using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (LIWC), we can see some surprising insights into Amabelle's word use in narrating her parents' deaths, which she recounts on pages 50-52, and which I have analyzed in the previous section. Compared to the average rates for personal writing, Danticat's portrayal of Amabelle's description contains drastically fewer I-words, positive or negative emotion words, and cognitive processes. It is also twice as analytical but nearly half as emotional in tone. Given that Amabelle is an adult at the time of narrating this dream and is therefore years removed from the actual experience of her parents' deaths, one would expect to see higher cognitive processing and a balance of positive and negative emotion words to demonstrate that Amabelle is healing from this trauma. As it stands, the narration reveals she is trapped in reliving this nightmare, as the recurring dream would suggest. It also conveys a sense of immediacy, as the use of present tense shows. In so doing, the form more closely mimics what Pennebaker has found through an analysis of blogs written shortly after the blog writers had lost a loved one. Pennebaker notes, "In the peak hours of suffering, most people used relatively few I-words and a low rate of negative emotion words. Their language was relatively simple, using smaller words, shorter sentences, and fewer cognitive words" (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 116). From this, readers can conclude that when Amabelle dreams of her parents' deaths, she is experiencing the pain anew, as if it happened recently.

If we use Amabelle's dream description of her parents' deaths as a baseline for evaluating her emotional state as it can be analyzed within the framework of expressive writing, we can see that she is not always so emotionally distant in her narration. Before the slaughter, Amabelle

narrates a vision about dust storms that seems to convey her parents' propelling presence. In this reverie, she sees herself as a child, holding her parents' hands. Once the storm passes, she finds herself "with [her] hands raised up, in motionless prayer, as though some invisible giants were guiding [her] forward" (Danticat 139). The tone of this passage, while danger is present and her physical vision is cloudy, is hopeful as her "face [is] tipped up" as though her parents will lead her and have not left her a vulnerable orphan. This hope is further evidenced in her description that "dust storms bring [her] joy" (Danticat 139). She is not afraid of the unknown when the path is obstructed because she is being shepherded by these "invisible giants" (Danticat 139). The slaughter, however, will shatter this hope-filled trajectory by compounding pain upon pain as she endures further loss and trauma. On a textual level, this rupture is registered in the interruption of the established pattern of alternating dream and narration chapters. Once the slaughter begins, the dream chapters cease until Amabelle is safely across the border and recovering. Until the dreams return and aid Amabelle in her healing process, her narration-only chapters convey the immediacy of her trauma and the survival mode necessary to endure and press on toward safety.

According to a LIWC evaluation of the final pre-slaughter dust storm dream passage on page 139, compared to averages for personal writing, Danticat's Amabelle uses an average amount of I-words and social words and a slightly below average amount of positive emotion words and cognitive processes. Her cognitive processing in this passage, however, is dramatically higher than in the passage detailing her parents' deaths.¹² An even more dramatic shift can be seen in her emotional tone. Where the LIWC average for personal writing is 38.60, Amabelle's emotional tone in this passage is 49.48, compared to 21.27 in the scene of her parents' deaths. This demonstrates that Amabelle, as Danticat has written her, is capable of

¹² For further details of LIWC data and passages analyzed, see Appendix A.

conveying more emotion when writing about a topic that “bring[s] [her] joy” (Danticat 139), illustrating that she is emotionally connected and invested; her detached description of her parents’ deaths does not convey her normal state. What her detachment conveys, instead, is that the trauma of her parents’ deaths is still fresh in her memory, and she has not yet processed it and integrated into her psychological self. She is still keeping the pain of her parents’ passing at a distance instead of connecting with it emotionally.

Part of Amabelle’s process of making meaning from her parents’ deaths occurs when she is recovering from the injuries inflicted upon her during the slaughter. Her mother comes to her in a dream, “rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her” (Danticat 208). This dream-like section is the first bold-print passage readers have seen since the slaughter began, acting as a textual reminder of the shattering impact of violence that alters prior norms or patterns. In this passage, Amabelle’s mother seems to help Amabelle heal, encouraging her and telling her “You will be well again, ma belle” (Danticat 208). Amabelle’s details of this dream are strong and striking. She says her mother “is wearing a dress of glass, fashioned out of the hardened clarity of the river” (Danticat 208). This image demonstrates the beauty and ugliness of the river, that what it produces is both hard and clear, and its impact on Amabelle’s mother is indelible.

LIWC results for this passage reveal that Danticat’s Amabelle uses twice as many social words as the average for personal writing and slightly above average positive emotion words and cognitive processes. Her emotional tone is also a high 82.96, with 38.60 being the LIWC2015 dictionary average for such types of writing. This analysis paints this scene as much more positive and upbeat than the previous two passages related to her parents. It also indicates a shift

in Amabelle's healing journey, and I argue paves the path forward toward becoming whole and healed.

Amabelle refers to her mother as using "a cheerful voice [she does] not remember, for she had always spoken so briefly and so sternly" (Danticat 208). This cheerful tone repositions Amabelle's mother in death as providing more verbal affection than she did in life and has a restorative effect on Amabelle. When Danticat writes that Amabelle confesses her fear that she "will never be a whole woman...for the absence of [her mother's] face," her mother replies by revealing to Amabelle that she was "never as far from [Amabelle] as [Amabelle] supposed" (Danticat 208). With this revelation, Amabelle can recover from her fever and move forward in wholeness, undergirded by her mother's support even in death. She does not, however, seem to move forward wholly unhindered by their loss. The trauma of their deaths continues to haunt her, inviting readers to remember Amabelle's perpetual experience of trauma.

While her journey to the river near the novel's end serves as a trigger for Amabelle's remembrance of her parents' deaths, Danticat's depiction of Amabelle's words about that day do not readily show significant markers of healing, as outlined in effective expressive writing. When she rehearses the events of that tragic day, Amabelle repeatedly says, "I thought," followed by what she wishes could have happened instead (Danticat 309). "Thought" is an indicator of insight, according to the cognitive mechanism categories of LIWC. Amabelle's statements of thought, however, are followed by conditional "if" clauses, indicating that her thoughtful dreaming does not become reality. When she concludes this passage with "nature has no memory. And soon, perhaps, neither will I" (Danticat 309), her tone is that of resignation. The novel concludes with her "looking for the dawn" (Danticat 310) conveying a semblance of hope, but this hope is tinged with despair and deep loss. In this way, Danticat's novel shows

readers that even sadness can be beautiful, that pain and pleasure coexist as part of the human experience. In her lyrical prose, Danticat conveys through Amabelle a facet of some trauma experiences, which captures the tension between the aesthetic experience, which can be enjoyable, and the deep ugliness and horror in the content of traumatic experience. In so doing, Danticat reminds readers that there is no simple dichotomy between pleasure and pain. In light of trauma, the two overlap and diverge fluidly; positive memories and emotions are experienced alongside longing, loss, and pain.

When comparing Danticat's depiction of Amabelle's narration of her parents' deaths earlier in the novel to her recollection here at the novel's end, readers are invited to see great gains in emotional tone and both positive and negative emotion words. Additionally, her cognitive processes have increased, demonstrative of her work to integrate this trauma into the fabric of her everyday life. In her first account of her parents' deaths (on pages 50-52), she uses almost no positive or negative emotion words. Her account is distant and fact-based, placing her primarily as a removed observer rather than an integral participant. In the end, however, her account contains only slightly below average amounts of emotion words. More striking, however, is the growth in her cognitive process and emotional tone. In her first account, her cognitive processes rate at 3.82, with 12.52 being average, and her emotional tone is 21.27, with 38.60 being average. As previously analyzed, the drastically below average rates for these indicate that Danticat's Amabelle is not working through the trauma or connecting with it emotionally. Both of these rates for cognitive processing and emotional tone have jumped to 9.14 and 43.79, respectively, by the novel's end. Her cognitive processing has tripled and is just below average, while her emotional tone has increased to an above average rate. Despite all of the trauma that she has been through, Amabelle has remained resilient and sought her own

methods of coping with her pain. Through her representation of testimony, readers are invited to witness this process and progression and accompany her on her journey across the border and back again, seeking solace in search of Sebastien's waterfall.

Testimony both compels and completes Amabelle's process of survival; part of her process is to grieve her parents' deaths and to survive the Massacre, but the process remains unfinished until she "gives [her] testimony to the river, the waterfall, the justice of the peace, even to the Generalissimo himself" (Danticat 264). As she repeats "His name is Sebastien Onius" (Danticat 282), she works through her own loss and pulls Sebastien's life and death from the "nameless and faceless who vanish" (Danticat 282). Yet there is no tidy conclusion, no simple resolution. Her ending peace in the river shows readers how survivors live with the lasting effects of their trauma; they do not erase them once they have "passed through" (Felman and Laub 85). The effects linger, but freedom, healing, and resilience are still possible, as Amabelle "look[s] for the dawn" (Danticat 310).

Amabelle's journey through *The Farming of Bones* provides one example of working through trauma while continuing to deal with its aftereffects. As Danticat portrays her, she is not ignorant of the pain that comes in moving forward, referring to her life after the Massacre as a "living death" (Danticat 283). In Amabelle's dream-like chapters, readers are invited into the ebb and flow of her trauma, the reality of her pain, and her persistent longing for Sebastien. In her final dream chapter, Sebastien brings Amabelle "remedies for [her] wounds" (Danticat 282), yet these imagined remedies do not heal everything, as she is still compelled to find his waterfall in search of closure and reunion, though neither will be completely fulfilled, as she does not find their special waterfall and cave when she returns. This lack of closure, however, does not keep her from seeking the start of something new in the next sunrise. Amabelle's experience echoes

what Thema Bryant-Davis has articulated in *Thriving in the Wake of Trauma*, saying, “The goal...does not end with the cessation of symptoms; thriving in the wake of traumatic experiences requires the empowerment of the survivor to regain his or her voice, body, power, and sense of self” (6). Memories of Sebastien will continue to haunt Danticat’s Amabelle, and her loss for him will continue to be palpable. She does not need to feel him less in order to thrive and survive; she can move forward in resilience and carry her loss with her into the river.

The One Word That Could Have Saved All Their Lives

Throughout the novel, Danticat uses Amabelle to embody the powerful use of language to heal and to wound, beginning with rumors of the killings, moving to the peril in the parsley Shibboleth, and ending with Amabelle’s testimony to the slaughter. Once the Massacre begins, Amabelle sets out to find Sebastien, as they had planned to flee the Dominican Republic together. What she finds instead, is that Trujillo’s troops have arrived at their meeting place first and captured the priests and Haitians who were there, including Sebastien and his sister, Mimi. Determined to find them, Amabelle sets out with Sebastien’s friend, Yves, and they make the perilous journey over the mountains toward Haiti. Throughout their journey, they encounter physical and psychological violence as the threat of Trujillo’s troops remains real, and the presence of Trujillo the Generalissimo lingers. They encounter one town “lit up like a carnival parade” with “[r]ows of fringed colored paper...strung in front of the houses, with murals of the Generalissimo’s face painted on side walls” (Danticat 188). They pass schoolchildren, audibly supporting Trujillo, “carrying banners with the Generalissimo’s name” and shouting “Viva Trujillo!” (Danticat 188). Despite the violence Trujillo is enacting, the people of the Dominican Republic support him nonetheless, terrorizing these Haitians with their persistent patriotism.

Although men spit parsley at Amabelle and her fellow travelers (Danticat 191), she does not crumble beneath their taunts; she presses on toward her destination of freedom.

Shortly thereafter, when Amabelle and her traveling companion Yves are confronted by a group of Dominicans, they are asked to say the Spanish word for parsley. Amabelle narrates,

At that moment I did believe that had I wanted to, I could have said the word properly, calmly, slowly, the way I often asked “Perejil?” of the old Dominican women and their faithful attending granddaughters at the roadside gardens and markets, even though the trill of the *r* and the precision of the *j* was sometimes too burdensome a joining for my tongue. It was the kind of thing that if you were startled in the night, you might forget, but with all my senses calm, I could have said it. (Danticat 193)

Amabelle doesn’t get her chance to prove that she is capable of masking her Haitian identity through her “correct” pronunciation of *perejil* because she is forced to the ground and made to eat handfuls of parsley. Her silence—her failure to pronounce *perejil*—does not condemn her to an immediate death, but neither does a Dominican pronunciation save her.

The parsley Shibboleth was reportedly used to differentiate ethnic Haitians from ethnic Dominicans, but it also served the insidious purpose of underscoring the perceived class differences between the two groups, thus becoming a terrorizing force and a form of violence. Richard Lee Turits notes that refugee “testimony suggested that soldiers’ demands to utter words such as *perejil* were less a genuine tactic for identifying Haitians than a threat of national linguistic difference separating Haitians and Dominicans. The perpetrators of the massacre slowed their killing machine for what was doubtless an often dubious test” (165). The use of the test, however, further re-inscribes the cultural schema that distinguishes ethnic Haitians from Dominicans and instilled fear in those Haitians who were fleeing such violence.

In Danticat’s novel, the ability (or inability) to utter one word is grounds enough to identify someone as Haitian and provide a reason for him to be killed. Amabelle believes that if she had been able to say “*perejil*” when initially confronted by the Dominican soldiers and

forced to eat parsley, she might have been able to save her companions, Tibon, Wilner, and Odette. She says, “For somewhere in me, I still believe that perhaps one simple word could have saved all our lives” (Danticat 264). Had Amabelle been able to “correctly” say *perejil*, she and her companions may have been allowed to pass unharmed—although their dark skin would have continued to mark them as Haitian—but had she broken her silence and given a distinctly Kreyòl pronunciation, which she may have done “startled in the night” as she was, she surely would have sentenced them all to death. In reflecting on her trauma, Amabelle considers rewriting it, confident that she could have responded differently and saved them. Her hypothetical recollection invites readers to consider the process of remembering trauma, part of which involves longing for a much different outcome and believing that one’s actions could have altered or prevented the trauma altogether. Drawing on his expansive research with traumatized patients, Bessel van der Kolk has said that “deep down many traumatized people are even more haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances” (13). These feelings of regret or shame lead survivors, like Danticat’s Amabelle, to recall the past not only as it was, but also how it could have been. Because the survivor is incapable of altering the past, being preoccupied with the desire to rewrite the trauma can hinder the survivor from dealing with the reality of what did occur. In addition to dealing with the aftereffects of the trauma, as a step in the healing process, the survivor must also come to terms with his or her inactivity in the moment of trauma. For Danticat’s Amabelle, this means interrogating her silence when confronted with the parsley held by her terrorizers.

In dealing with her inability to utter the word for parsley, Amabelle decides that even saying “*perejil*” would not have been sufficient for her group’s salvation. After she has made it safely across the border, Amabelle seeks to find Sebastien’s mother, and while there, she reflects

on her journey, saying, Trujillo “asked for ‘perejil,’ but there is much more we all knew how to say. Perhaps one simple word would not have saved our lives. Many more would have to and many more will” (Danticat 265). Danticat portrays Amabelle as cognizant of the power her words hold and the strength of her testimony. Her experience demonstrates what Dr. Dori Laub discusses in *Testimony*: “Repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation” (Felman and Laub 85). Amabelle is free once she crosses the Massacre River into Haiti, but her “process of survival” is incomplete until she tells her story. Amabelle knows that her powerful voice should not “remain forever buried beneath the sod” (Danticat 266). She recognizes the need to express the “voices sealed inside” her head (Danticat 266) that speak of the atrocities suffered at the hands of Trujillo and his henchmen.

Amabelle carries with her tremendous guilt for having not been able to save the lives of her friends, but she also serves as the witness to their lives—and deaths—and it becomes her responsibility to bear witness to their stories. As Danticat portrays her, sharing their stories also aids Amabelle in the process of working through her grief and guilt for surviving while others perished. Keeping their stories and memories alive is a life-giving act that assuages some of Amabelle’s lingering survivor’s guilt. In bearing witness, Amabelle speaks back to her oppressors who tried to silence her and others during the Massacre, and she claims a bold linguistic space for the story of her marginalized people. In so doing, she seizes power for herself and shows her strength in the face of physical and symbolic violence. Additionally, in authoring her trauma as a resilient survivor, Amabelle speaks against theories that suggest pain is unspeakable. By positioning a female protagonist as the narrator of this tale, Danticat establishes the possibility of rewriting history from the perspective of those who are often silenced, whose

story remains unheard. As a powerful female narrator, Amabelle brings to readers her unique story of love and loss and the mundane and horrific events she saw.

Additionally, *The Farming of Bones* may be framed as “Danticat’s healing text,” as it “demands a breaking down of national borders and boundaries to actualize a cross-national healing” between Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and also the United States (Chancy 144), demonstrating the power of the text as a tool for significant historical healing. Amabelle finds personal healing as she speaks out, and as readers encounter her testimony, they are invited to encounter a history that interrogates long-standing prejudices between inhabitants on both sides of the island of Hispaniola. Furthermore, Danticat’s text brings to light the profound injustices that occurred internationally surrounding the Massacre, particularly in the global community’s active ignorance of Trujillo’s culpability (Roorda 303, Paulino and García 112). As Todd Martin has pointed out, drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, at the novel’s end, Amabelle “finds home only between the two countries” (248), and I would add that her peace in the river on the border between the two nations signifies her role as a conduit to bridge the divide and inhabit the borderland. Amabelle notes, “A border is a veil not many people can wear” (Danticat 264), but Amabelle can, as she has experienced the parameters of life on either side and has become fluid enough to straddle both worlds. Danticat’s text, along with the work of Julia Alvarez, whose novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* is discussed in Chapter 2, and the efforts of other writers and activists, prompted the creation of the Border of Lights, an annual event on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic that “also bears witness to the Massacre’s legacies of exclusion while strengthening the historic cross-border solidarity between Haitians and Dominicans” (Paulino and García 113). Danticat’s text invites readers into this

memorialization, and as readers, we are witnesses to Amabelle's story, survival, and efforts to lift the veil of the border long enough for us to glimpse the reconciliation possible in the dawn.

Being an Empathic Witness

Just as Danticat portrays Amabelle as needing empathic witnesses in order for her testimony to "pass through" (Felman and Laub 85), she is also an empathic witness for a number of other testimonies she encounters and later passes on. Among these stories are the tales of Wilner, Odette, and Tibon, specifically, as well as the myriad of survivor voices Amabelle encounters once she crosses the border into Haiti.

In the chapter "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony*, Dori Laub writes, "The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to.... The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (57). In this interpretation, the listener is a vital part of the testimony and healing process. Without someone to hear, the story remains hidden, healing unfulfilled. Both a speaker and a witness are necessary to complete the loop of testimony, to bring into being a record of the trauma. Amabelle and readers of *The Farming of Bones* are invited to be these empathic witnesses for the stories of the Massacre.

Even in the absence of total closure, Danticat conveys Amabelle's strength in abiding in the tension between pain and hope and testifying to that space in between. Throughout the novel, Amabelle speaks of the necessity for one's story to be known. As survivors sought out the justice of the peace to be recognized for their suffering, more were turned away than were

heard by the officials. Amabelle says, “The past is more like flesh than air; our stories testimonials like the ones never heard by the justice of the peace or the Generalissimo himself” (Danticat 281). She recognizes that she needs to fill the void with her testimony, to speak it so that it may be known and not forgotten. Although the Generalissimo will not listen, she narrates to the reader, “His name is Sebastien Onius and his story is like a fish with no tail, a dress with no hem, a drop with no fall, a body in the sunlight with no shadow” (Danticat 281). Because Sebastien’s death is never confirmed, Amabelle lives in a liminal space, using her storytelling to fill in the gaps created by the absence of his body, all the while, inviting readers into an immediate present as her testimony of the slaughter and its aftermath unfolds. Amabelle is the witness to Sebastien’s life, and it is her representation of testimony that keeps his memory alive. Similarly, she is the bearer of others’ stories as well, and her account of them is the record of their lives—and deaths—that hegemonic history declined to document. Amabelle’s example demonstrates the power and strength in empathic witnessing and the responsibility and privilege survivors have to tell these untold stories.

When Amabelle first encounters Wilner, Odette, and Tibon, who will later become her traveling companions as they try to escape the slaughter, Amabelle is fascinated with Tibon’s limp and uneven arms and longs to know the story behind his physical trauma. She says, “I was drawn to him in part by curiosity but also because I pitied his condition. I wanted him to explain it to me” (Danticat 172). Tibon’s visible trauma piques her interest and compels her to be his empathic witness. As Tibon recounts his story of escaping death, the group is riveted. Amabelle narrates, “The others angled their necks toward him. They were paying close attention, as if they couldn’t help themselves” (Danticat 174). They are captivated by the gruesome details in his story but are also attracted to his resilience in surviving his forced cliff jump. As he talks,

Amabelle thinks of Sebastien, hoping he, like Tibon, has survived, and she tries to convince herself that he has not disappeared. She “shut[s] [her] ears to [Tibon] for a moment,” imagining instead “Sebastien’s voice, telling [her] he was alive” (Danticat 174). Tibon’s story of his own survival and the deaths of countless others prompts Amabelle to think of times she shared with Sebastien. This narrative juxtaposition invites readers to remember the impact of trauma, the reality of loss, and the need to deny reality at times in order to create a more palatable temporary reality. Amabelle’s coping mechanism here also affords her the opportunity to keep Sebastien’s memory and voice alive in her mind so that she can carry him with her during her perilous journey.

As she listens to Tibon’s story unfold, Amabelle is the understanding audience that Tibon’s gripping testimony needs in order to pass through from an event that was possible to an event that was real. In its retelling, Tibon’s story takes on deeper gravity, as his listeners too face peril. In keeping with the strongest examples of expressive writing, which, in turn, make his testimony all the more compelling for his empathic witnesses, Tibon’s testimony to his near death is ripe with vivid details, emphatic repetition, and inspiration in his attitude toward death. Tibon says, “I tell myself not to be afraid. I say to myself, Tibon, today you and the birds become one. They say for a bird to stand on its two feet and not fly is laziness. Tibon, I tell myself, today you are a bird” (Danticat 174). To encourage himself in a moment of severe crisis, Tibon reframes his impending death as a chance to become something more than he already is. He comforts himself with the idea that he could become a bird and fly instead of plunging to his death. In so doing, and in recounting this for his fellow travelers, Tibon shows incredible courage and strength, an inspirational testimony that these listeners need to encourage them on their journey. In this moment, Tibon’s story says to them that they, too, are capable of surviving

the slaughter. His refrain of “I tell myself” is indicative, however, of his need to convince and comfort himself as he stands on the edge of the cliff, reminding readers of his frailty and frenzy in the face of trauma.

While Tibon’s story of survival demonstrates his strength in the face of tragedy and his resolve to fight, it also reminds these empathic witnesses of the danger they still face and the trauma they carry with them. Amabelle captures this well when she says shortly thereafter, “Our fatigue limited our desire for more talk. Besides, each person’s story did nothing except bring you closer to your own pain” (Danticat 177). Here, Amabelle illustrates the paradoxical nature of testimony and witnessing. Sharing one’s story is cathartic, but it can also produce vicarious trauma in the listeners.

Vicarious trauma occurs when the listener feels pain as a result of hearing someone else’s traumatic experience. Typically, therapists are trained to handle this in their clinical situations and instructed to take self-care measures to avoid transference or taking on their clients’ pain. This secondary traumatization, however, can also occur beyond the clinical situation when reading literature of trauma, and readers should be prepared to handle their reactions accordingly. In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, Ann Kaplan contends that “in some cases, vicarious trauma...may be a misnomer, since...spectators do not feel the protagonist’s trauma” (90). She notes that what they feel is “the pain evoked by empathy—arousing mechanisms interacting with their own traumatic experiences” (90). This line of thought, what Dominick LaCapra has termed “empathic unsettlement” (41), acknowledges the discomfort one may experience when hearing another’s trauma testimony, but I argue this discomfort is not a sufficient reason to avoid the responsibility of being a witness. It can instead “enable readers to work through problems or mourn rather than merely to

sentimentalize victims” (Vickroy xi). Kaplan further asserts that witnessing “differs from vicarious trauma,” and she claims, “Art that invites us to bear witness to injustice goes beyond moving us to identify with and help a specific individual, and prepares us to take responsibility for preventing future occurrence” (23). This responsibility adds weight to the witness, secondary witnesses, and the representation of testimony. Readers or listeners are prompted, not just to witness, but to take action as a response to the trauma story they have encountered.

Like Father Romain, whom Amabelle encounters again decades after the slaughter, once Trujillo has been killed, witnessing urges survivors to return and help those who are still suffering. Father Romain recognizes what it took to help him heal, and he acts on this to aid others, saying he will return to Alegría. He tells Amabelle, “It took more than prayers to heal me after the slaughter....It took holding a pretty and gentle wife and three new lives against my chest” (Danticat 272). He acknowledges his pain, saying, “I wept all the time I was in prison. I wept at the border. I wept for everyone who was touched, beaten, or killed. It took a love closer to the earth, closer to my own body, to stop my tears. Perhaps I have lost, but I have also gained an even greater understanding of things both godly and earthly” (Danticat 272). Part of Father Romain’s healing journey leads him to sacrifice his vocation in favor of a family, but despite his lack of official connection to the church, his path nonetheless is to continue saving and helping others, listening to their trauma stories and sharing his own.

Even though stories of trauma are painful to tell and difficult to hear, Danticat’s text invites us to remember that creating a narrative of what happened and speaking the truth of the trauma is powerful and necessary. Remaining silent and keeping the pain hidden prevents the wound from healing. In her book *Aftermath*, survivor of sexual assault Susan Brison wisely notes that “[t]he results of the process of working through reveal the performative role of speech

acts in recovering from trauma; *saying* something about a traumatic memory *does* something to it” (56, emphasis in original). Testifying is as much an external verbal action as it is an internal cognitive process, remapping what happened and preventing it from holding the survivor hostage. It is through the act of testimony and creating a narrative about what happened, that trauma survivors piece together threads of their traumatized selves and re-create a whole self and find healing. Trauma may be a specific event or an ongoing presence, but testimony, even though painful and difficult, is an act that brings about the process of healing.

Like expressive writing theorists, Brison agrees that there is danger in keeping one’s story hidden. On the potential for vicarious trauma to be a reason to remain silent, she says,

Do we inevitably wound others with the transmission of our stories? There is some evidence that trauma, to the contrary, causes more harm to others (for example, subsequent generations) when transmitted through ‘untold stories’ than when it is narrated (Bar-On 1995; Fresco 1984). Perhaps trauma gets defused in the telling, not only for survivors, but also for the listeners, in their retellings of stories that never make sense and so must be endlessly told. (110)

Trauma may seem unbelievable; that thousands of Haitians were slaughtered over the span of a few days may be incomprehensible to those who were not there, to audiences reading about the horror for the first time. This incomprehensibility is one of the primary reasons survivors share their stories—to bring their unbelievable pain to a believing audience. There is healing in naming one’s trauma and sharing it with a witness who can be trusted with its weight. The characters of *The Farming of Bones* are a testament to this witness bearing, as Amabelle shows us through her own representation of testimony and by carrying forward the testimonies of those who perished. In sharing these stories, Amabelle reveals the truth in what her father told her when she was a child: “Misery won’t touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you; sometimes it leaves them for others to see, sometimes for nobody but you to know of” (Danticat 224). Amabelle uncovers these thumbprints in each scene she recalls, from her experience

recovering like “a sick, bedridden child” after the slaughter (Danticat 225) to her astute observations of others, like Man Rapadou who “seemed to be the only one who could laugh out of sadness, a sadness that made the laughter deeper and louder still, like the echo of a scream from the bottom of a well” (Danticat 224). Her pain enables her to recognize the lingering pain in others and call it out in an effort to name and start to mend in whatever shape possible.

In addition to bearing witness to Tibon’s trauma while they are fleeing, Amabelle also bears witness to Odette and Wilner’s struggles to escape the slaughter. Through her narration and her survival, Amabelle describes Wilner and Odette’s final moments and marks Odette’s linguistic triumph over Trujillo through the use of Odette’s dying word. Amabelle’s relationship to Odette is complicated, however, as she seems complicit in Odette’s death. Nonetheless, she narrates for readers the dramatic final moments they share.

Amabelle begins with vivid sensory details that continue to draw the reader into the bodily experience of their attempt to escape. She notes the “strong scent of wet grass and manure” as she tries “to find footholds in the sand, wedges to anchor [her] feet,” and refers to the deep water as “like trying to walk on air” (Danticat 200). That she is so present and aware of these details in this moment defies what some psychologists like Bessel van der Kolk have said about trauma, which is that it is not remembered in the same way as general or neutral material. Van der Kolk goes so far as to say traumatic “experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level” (van der Kolk and van der Hart qtd. in Luckhurst 148). Expressive writing and scriptotherapy would claim that verbalizing these memories is both possible and therapeutic.

In one sense, Danticat’s depiction of Amabelle’s narration is cathartic in its confessional quality. Initially, Amabelle seems altruistic, “yank[ing] [her] hand from Odette’s,” saying “if I drowned, I wanted to drown alone, with nobody else’s life to be responsible for” (Danticat 200).

Amabelle recognizes the danger of the situation and does not want harm to come to Odette on her account. Her statement, though, brilliantly captures the tension between altruistic protection and self-centered preservation. Though the text does not indicate it here, her thoughts may even be drawn back to her own parents' deaths, as her mother and father perhaps hindered one another in their fight against the raging current. When Wilner is shot and Amabelle covers Odette's mouth so they are not found, her description is ripe with poetic language and metaphor.

Amabelle says, "It is the way you try to stun a half-dead bird still waving its wings, a headless chicken courageously racing down a dirt road" (Danticat 201). These metaphors liken Odette to animals that are already dead, reinforcing what Yves later tells Amabelle, which is that "Odette died when Wilner died" (Danticat 249). This statement assuages some of Amabelle's survivor's guilt, but she still says, "Wherever I go, I will always be standing over her body" (Danticat 205), reminding readers that Odette's death will continue to haunt Amabelle and that closure will remain elusive.

Although she will carry Odette's death with her, Amabelle keeps her memory alive by testifying to Odette's dying word, "pèsi" (Danticat 203) and the way it directly speaks back to the dictator trying to silence them. Amabelle says, "The Generalissimo's mind was surely as dark as death, but if he had heard Odette's 'pèsi,' it might have startled him, not the tears and supplications he would have expected, no shriek from unbound fear, but a provocation, a challenge, a dare. To the devil with your world, your grass, your wind, your water, your air, your words. You ask for perejil, I give you more" (Danticat 203). In describing Odette's dying word this way, Danticat's Amabelle frames Odette's death as a strong act of defiance against Trujillo. Although his soldier has killed her lover, and by extension, killed her, she will use even

her final breath to subvert his insidious Shibboleth. Even facing death, she will not abandon her Haitian Kreyòl roots in favor of his language of dominance.

Like the stories of Tibon, Wilner, and Odette, Amabelle also brings forth representations of the testimonies of those she encounters once she has crossed the border into Haiti. Amabelle is the empathic witness for these stories, but in retelling them, she invites readers to be empathic witnesses, too, and to know the truth of what happened in the slaughter and its aftermath. Of the wounded assembled at the border clinic, Amabelle says, “As they ate, people gathered in a group to talk. Taking turns, they exchanged tales quickly, the haste in their voices sometimes blurring the words, *for greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell*” (Danticat 209, emphasis added). The survivors sense deeply the necessity of testifying; of lesser importance is the presence of a witness. Their need in this moment is to say that it happened, that their suffering and loss were real. Brison confirms this primal need and adds to its relevance, saying, “It is only by remembering and narrating the past—telling our stories and listening to others’—that we can participate in an ongoing, active construction of a narrative of liberation, not one that confines us to a limiting past, but one that forms a background from which a freely imagined—and desired—future can emerge” (98-9). In order for the survivors to move forward, they need to bring their stories into the open present. Their refrain of “I was there” (Danticat 210) reminds readers of the survivors’ urgency to share what they saw. Together, in the presence of witnesses, they can bring about a communal understanding of the way forward into freedom from their pain.

Although many of the survivors wish to tell their stories to the justice of the peace, to have an authority document their experience, not all need an authority for such affirmation, and only a few receive it. As the survivors wait in long lines to see the justice of the peace, Amabelle

notes that they “shared their tales, as if to practice for their real audience with the government official” (Danticat 232). While the official represents the hegemony, he also plays a key role in the testimonial process. His central location and position of authority draw countless numbers of survivors together to share their stories with one another even if they never get through the doors to see the justice of the peace. In gathering, they act as one another’s empathic witnesses, a wounded community asking to be whole. One woman who does get to share with the justice of the peace tells the others in line that “he writes your name in the book and he says he will take your story to President Sténio Vincent so you can get your money,” adding, “[t]hen he lets you talk and lets you cry and he asks you if you have papers to show that all these people died” (Danticat 234). Because of the secrecy surrounding the slaughter, it is unreasonable to expect survivors or family members to have any documenting paperwork as evidence that their loved ones have died. Requesting such proof is a further injury, as though a reminder of yet another way the power structures will deny the Massacre even occurred, reminding readers of another facet of bearing witness, which is that trauma testimonies are not always readily believed even when survivors are heard. What the justice of the peace can only partially give, and what the survivors deeply need, is the space to process and grieve in the presence of a witness—“a civilian face to concede that what they had witnessed and lived through did truly happen” (Danticat 236). Together, as a community of individuals, they find varied ways to make their stories known to one another, and when they are told the justice will hear no more stories, they act out and release the prisoners trapped inside—freeing others as they seek their own freedom, constructing their own “narrative of liberation” (Brison 99) through their communal and individual actions and words. Through this scene, readers are invited to witness the subversive power of testimony to make itself known even when its progress is impeded. It is further

evidence of the necessity survivors feel to speak their truths to those in positions of power and the urge bubbling up inside to bear witness at any cost.

Healing in Community

Similar to the community gathering and testifying outside the office of the justice of the peace, Danticat depicts a significant part of Amabelle's healing journey taking place within the context of her community with Man Rapadou after the slaughter. As Judith Herman has argued in *Trauma and Recovery*, "The fundamental stages of recovery are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community" (3). Without becoming part of Man Rapadou's community, part of Amabelle's pain would remain unhealed. It is through seasons of integration, breaking from her depressive tendencies toward isolation, that Amabelle continues to move forward. Others, such as Susan Brison, have echoed the significance of Herman's stages. Brison notes, "The act of bearing witness to the trauma facilitates this shift [from object to subject], not only by transforming traumatic memory into a narrative that can then be worked into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world, but also by reintegrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood" (68). Even though everything Amabelle "knew before [the] slaughter is lost" (Danticat 228), she is not lost as long as she has a connective thread to community through Man Rapadou.

It is through that community connection that Amabelle's story of survival can take on further meaning and significance. According to Herman, "A well-organized group provides both a powerful stimulant for reconstruction of the survivor's story and a sustaining source of emotional support during mourning. As each survivor shares her unique story, the group

provides a profound experience of universality. The group bears witness to the survivor's testimony, giving it social as well as personal meaning" (221). Amabelle's presence in Haiti is a living reminder of the pain so many endured at the hands of Trujillo. She reminds her community of this testimony, and they in turn, remind her that they will remember.

Demonstrative of this tension between rejoicing in survival and remembering in mourning, Amabelle says eloquently, "[I]n spite of those who wept even as they were dancing, in spite of the dead whose absence trailed us as did the dust of their bones in the wind, even as our chances vanished of ever glaring and spitting into his eyes, we were still having a celebration, if only because the Generalissimo was dead and we had survived" (Danticat 271). Even though Trujillo is "killed in a monsoon of bullets" (Danticat 267), those who survived his reign must still carry their pain every day, but in community, they do not need to carry it alone.

As she copes with the loss of her lover, Sebastien, and adjusts to her new normal as a survivor of the slaughter, Danticat's Amabelle finds an empathic witness in Man Rapadou. She says to Amabelle, "You don't need the justice of the peace... You don't need a confessor. I, Man Rapadou, I know your tale" (Danticat 244). The first time she says this to Amabelle, Amabelle wonders, "Which story of mine did she know?" (Danticat 227). What Man Rapadou acknowledges is that "everything [Amabelle] knew before this slaughter is lost" (Danticat 228), recognizing Amabelle's all-encompassing trauma; no part of her life has emerged unscathed. Just as Amabelle has been the understanding audience for the trauma of so many others, in Man Rapadou, she has a witness to acknowledge her pain as she heals. Because she did not experience the slaughter firsthand in the same way as Yves and Amabelle, Man Rapadou is an outsider, and her position as a secondary witness after the fact creates an opening for Amabelle to bring her past trauma into her present action in her new community in Haiti. Although she did

not journey with Amabelle across the border, Man Rapadou will now walk with her through the aftermath of her trauma. This support and kinship are vital to Amabelle's continued growth and healing, as Man Rapadou gives Amabelle space to grieve and further purpose in moving forward. In so doing, she helps bring Amabelle back to life during her grief after the slaughter, inviting readers to consider the significance of community connection in the healing process.

Amabelle longs to connect with Sebastien's mother, Man Denise, but Man Denise does not provide the sort of familial connection Amabelle seeks. Instead, she finds this surrogate maternal figure in Man Rapadou who is understanding and gracious and does not force Amabelle to integrate herself into their community right away. Rather, as Amabelle remarks, "Kindness prevailed on Man Rapadou to let me spend the rest of the day inside...by myself" (Danticat 245). As Amabelle grieves, Danticat portrays her as describing her pain in visceral terms, saying, "As I lay in bed with my arms and legs coiled around myself, I ached inside in places I could neither name nor touch" (Danticat 245). Although she may not know what precise words to ascribe to her pain, she speaks of this ache and acknowledges its pervasive force.

To aid in the healing process, Man Rapadou wisely draws on Amabelle's strengths and provides her with an outlet to use these gifts as a possible way to lift her out of her sadness. She says to Amabelle, "Yves told me you can make dresses and help give birth to children. Since I'm not to have children anymore, maybe you can make me a dress" (Danticat 245). Later Amabelle reflects on how Man Rapadou anchored her during that healing season immediately after the slaughter. She says, "Man Rapadou had been essential to me in the simple routine of my life. We'd wake up together at the same time every morning after Yves had left for the fields and she would help me with my sewing" (Danticat 268). Man Rapadou's consistent presence and the mundane daily habits help Amabelle reconnect and integrate into her new life in the

wake of the Massacre. Her habit of sewing provides her with meaningful work and a chance to assimilate into her community. Of her work she says, “I treasured my sewing; I enjoyed feeling my index finger cramped inside the thimble, found many hours’ pleasure in watching the needle rise and fall, guarding the fragile thread with caution as it snaked through the cloth. I never used machines because that would have taken away a great part of the physical enjoyment” (Danticat 268). Amabelle’s joy in sewing comes in part through her bodily connection to the task. Sewing provides her traumatized body, what she refers to as her “marred testament” (Danticat 227), with a productive and, I would argue, therapeutic outlet for her pain. In its repetition, this therapeutic practice affords Amabelle the opportunity to use her wounded body for a corporeal task that is productive and healing in its process and physical results. Through the language of stitching, Amabelle weaves a story that proclaims her body is still capable and beautiful despite her scars. As a survivor, she becomes the “fragile thread” that continues to be pulled through the cloth, holding pieces of the fabric of her life and narrative together.

Her tasks and connection to Man Rapadou, however, are not a cure-all for her suffering, as she bravely admits, “There were times when I shut myself in those two rooms that were mine and took to the bed for months, times when I had too much lint in my throat, or an aching arm that prevented me from sewing, when the joint of my knee would throb, and the ringing in my ears would chime without stop” (Danticat 269). She must still deal with the physical and psychological effects of her trauma, inviting readers to remember the persistent trauma that lingers despite Amabelle’s steps toward healing. This lingering trauma invites readers to consider that healing and progress are possible despite the aftereffects of trauma, indicative for readers that living with trauma is an ongoing process, not one that is necessarily finished after a survivor completes a series of steps. Rather, Danticat’s Amabelle is a brave example of a

woman who connects to her humanity and surrounding community despite still dealing with the perpetual implications of the trauma of the Massacre of 1937. Her engagement with community and meaningful work demonstrate her strength to persevere and triumph over the trauma she carries.

Furthermore, through Amabelle's representation of testimony and reconnecting with community, she fulfills what Marian MacCurdy notes as one of the great benefits of sharing stories of trauma: "The images [of traumatic memories] become stories which can be told, retold, studied, and compared with others' stories. A cultural context becomes possible. Individual barriers of isolation have been broken" (MacCurdy 185). As a living testament to the slaughter, Amabelle's story is a reminder of pain and suffering, but her survival is a reminder of resilience. Her experience becomes one of the stories passed down about this often-forgotten segment of history. Her testimony of loss and grief reaches out to readers as part of a "journey... ultimately out of themselves and back to a community which can reestablish our common humanity" (MacCurdy 198) as great literature of testimony often does. As DoVeanna Fulton asserts in *Speaking Power*, when one testifies, "One's humanity is reaffirmed by the group and his or her sense of isolation is diminished" (xi). Reconnecting to community through testimony is a vital component of the healing process, and Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* reminds readers of this through Amabelle's efforts to connect with others in Cap Haitien and find closure in Alegría, alongside her need for processing alone on her own terms as she journeys to the waterfall.

One final community-related element of Amabelle's healing journey is her return to Alegría. Although Trujillo has been assassinated, her journey across the border into Alegría is still dangerous, but she takes this risk so that she can get closer mentally and in memory to Sebastien and return physically to their waterfall. When she cannot find the waterfall at first, she

returns to see Señora Valencia one last time, and this visit, however troubling, provides Amabelle with a level of closure and increased impetus to move forward into her future and away from parts of her past.

Danticat depicts Amabelle as bold in her encounter with Señora Valencia, asserting to the señora's household help, "My name is Amabelle Désir...She will want to see me" (Danticat 292). Initially, Amabelle feels pleasure at the sight of the señora's house, saying that "a surprising feeling of joy took hold of my body. I was beginning to feel glad that I had come, happy I was going to see the señora again" (Danticat 292). Her encounter with Señora Valencia, however, changes that joy to disdain as Amabelle realizes, "All the time I had known her, we had always been dangling between being strangers and being friends. Now we were neither strangers nor friends. We were like two people passing each other on the street, exchanging a lengthy meaningless greeting" (Danticat 300). The two have never been equals, making real friendship impossible. Though they have shared significant and meaningful experiences, it has always been with the undercurrent of Amabelle as subordinate to Valencia's dominance as part of the Dominican elite. In Valencia's eyes, Amabelle will always owe her a debt of gratitude for "saving" her at the river after Amabelle's parents' deaths.

Their unequal status is also evident in their exchanges during this final meeting. Initially, Señora Valencia does not recognize Amabelle and believes she is being duped by the woman standing before her. She even accuses the supposed impostor of being "wicked to come here and use Amabelle's name" (Danticat 294). Her strong emotional reaction would indicate that she does in fact care for Amabelle and is moved to anger by the thought of someone pretending to be her childhood companion and housemaid. However, this response can also be read as anger at a perceived threat that undermines her power in trying to deceive her. Señora Valencia's

inaccurate assessment is also deeply wounding to Amabelle. She says, “That she did not recognize me made me feel that I had come back to Alegría and found it had never existed at all” (Danticat 294). The Alegría that Amabelle knew does not exist any longer; she cannot return to her life as it was before the slaughter. Her wounded body is further evidence of that, as her pain lingers and reminds her of the trauma she carries in her body. Of this disconnect between Haitians and Dominicans, April Shemak astutely notes, “It is significant that Haitians recognize other victims of the massacre, but for upper-class Dominicans like Valencia, the physical altering of Amabelle’s own body causes a misrecognition” (104). This “misrecognition” is further evidence of the perceived invisibility and expendability of many Haitians, and further reifies their class separations that persist even after the slaughter and Trujillo’s assassination. Even in the physical presence of a wounded survivor, trauma testimony is not always seen or believed, especially by those who have a stake in denying it. For many upper-class Dominicans, this history, although still taught in schools, “is not accepted as an inheritance of a cultural and political history” (Paulino and García 113), as evidenced in the continued discrimination against ethnic Haitians, compounded by the fact that no one in Trujillo’s government or military was ever punished” for their role in this genocide (Paulino and García 112), perpetuating the myth that the Massacre was due to a Dominican peasant uprising against supposed illegal immigrants.

In the novel, as Señora Valencia and Amabelle talk, Señora Valencia repeatedly turns the conversation back to how much she has been wounded, as though she is incapable of acknowledging that Amabelle has suffered. She whispers to Amabelle, “During El Corte, though I was bleeding and nearly died, I hid many of your people” (Danticat 299). Señora Valencia is quick to insert her own suffering and hardship into the conversation and reassert the us/them divide, as though to remind Amabelle of how much Señora Valencia went out of her

way during the slaughter even though her husband was instrumental in its terror. She further absolves her own culpability and passes guilt on to Amabelle for leaving when she says, “I hid them because I couldn’t hide you, Amabelle. I thought you’d been killed, so everything I did, I did in your name” (Danticat 299). Amabelle, no longer Señora Valencia’s obliging housemaid, does not show any semblance of gratitude or regret that the señora likely expects her to, and, instead, Amabelle changes the subject to see if there are other survivors in the area.

When the pair finally part, Amabelle says with finality, “Go in peace” (Danticat 305), though the señora seems to want the impossible—for Amabelle to stay longer—not realizing how painful this return has already been. With this departure, Amabelle closes the chapter of her life as the señora’s housemaid with a deeper knowledge that she is no longer the woman who “will bear anything, carry any load, suffer any shame, walk with eyes to the ground, if only for the very small chance” that her life “in some extremely modest way would begin to resemble hers” (Danticat 306). Amabelle is no longer a servant; she is a survivor, free to create the life she imagines, not the one she sees the señora’s current housemaid, Sylvie, longing for so painfully. In parting from Señora Valencia, Amabelle parts from the version of herself that felt a sense of loyalty to her oppressive employer and thought there was a chance the señora would “be brave enough to stand between” her and Señor Pico (Danticat 141). By returning to the señora’s home in Alegría and leaving on her own terms with no intent to return again, Amabelle severs the tie to this community that was such an integral part of her daily life for much of her life before the Massacre. With the thread to this toxic community appropriately cut, Amabelle is free to return to the border, and the rest of her life, unencumbered by imaginations of what became of the life she left behind when she fled during the Massacre. Amabelle’s step in severing this tie invites readers to consider that the difficult work of dealing with the past is often a necessary

element in processing trauma and its implications. As Amabelle seeks an empathic witness in Señora Valencia—but is denied this connection—Danticat demonstrates that Amabelle must take her testimony, in all its visceral truth and sacredness, to an audience who can enter into its pain, like Man Rapadou, instead of one who will refuse to see its raw and difficult reality.

Conclusion¹³

The testimonial element of Amabelle's story is profound in that it brings a collective trauma into sharper focus through the eyes of one. This distillation invites readers to witness the Massacre through Amabelle's eyes and accounts, all the while, understanding that her story is merely representative of the many silenced voices, though each experience is unique, and her voice is not universal. JM Dash praises Danticat's authorship, saying, "The strength of Danticat's writing is to give voice to or reap a harvest of testimonies from the fluid people of the borderlands, the displaced victims of the vagaries of history" (40). Amabelle is one example of this fluid form, crossing borders and boundaries, bringing the slaughter and Trujillo's terror to the forefront of public history. Danticat herself has said that "women often aren't the ones who write history," adding, "[t]his is why I am extremely interested in the role of women in historical and cultural preservation, in both the private and the public realms" (qtd in Alexandre and Howard 117). *The Farming of Bones* captures personal and public histories as it beautifully weaves Amabelle's domestic experience with the larger cultural trauma unfolding. In so doing, readers see in miniature the devastating large-scale effects of Trujillo's reign throughout the island of Hispaniola. As Pamela Rader asserts, "Literature... steps in to fill the gaps or the paradoxical din of silence. If history operates as a macro-narrative, offering a broader, more

¹³ While fields that rely on quantitative measures often refer to this final section as a Summary, I am using the term Conclusion, which is more widely accepted in literary analysis.

central scope of events in time, literature may work in micro-narratives to pull in imagined individual stories that would remain otherwise in the margins” (28). While official historical records are largely silent on the slaughter, Danticat’s text speaks volumes through the focused individual narration of her protagonist-survivor.

The complete closure that Amabelle deeply longs for in the wake of her trauma is the peace that would come in being reunited with Sebastien. Even as Señora Valencia says she heard rumors that Amabelle was killed, Amabelle’s thoughts immediately turn to the fierce hope that she clings to after all these years: “that perhaps all the people who had said Mimi and Sebastien were dead, they too might have been mistaken” (Danticat 295). Part of her survival seems to be in vain if she cannot share it with the man she loves; however, she brings his memory with her as a constant current in her post-slaughter life. She longs to return to their waterfall, but of her visit to Alegría, she says, “Sebastien, I didn’t find. He didn’t come out and show himself. He stayed inside the waterfall” (Danticat 306). With this realization that Sebastien’s presence eludes her, at the novel’s end, Amabelle remains on the border between both worlds she has lived in—her past in Alegría and her present in Haiti—and she creates her future “looking for the dawn” (Danticat 310) while being washed in the Massacre River.

Some scholars, like Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, have speculated that Amabelle commits a literal or metaphorical suicide by drowning herself in the river, but I read this ending as more hopeful. Although there is ambiguity in the text, Amabelle is careful and cautious, removing her clothing and “folding it piece by piece” and laying it on the riverbank (Danticat 310) as though she intends to wear her dry clothes again. These deliberate steps convey more about cleansing, bathing, and baptism than suicide. Furthermore, the water is “so shallow that [Amabelle] could lie on [her] back in it with [her] shoulders only half submerged” (Danticat

310), indicating that she is safe and not trying to follow her parents' path into the afterlife. By floating in the liminal space and literal borderlands between these two worlds and in the body of water that claimed so many lives, Amabelle demonstrates her strength in navigating her life as a trauma survivor. She has come to terms with the pain this river has inflicted, including the loss of her parents and Odette. By willingly submitting herself to its shallow current, she embraces it on her own terms and allows it to embrace her in return "like a newborn in a washbasin" (Danticat 310). In so doing, the dawn she seeks will find her as her new life begins now that the waters that have plagued her for so long no longer represent a traumatic threat. Because of the work of her testimony, empathic witnessing, and connecting with community, the trauma has been assimilated and integrated into the fabric of her new post-slaughter self, and she is free to be "cradled" by it (Danticat 310) and re-emerge anew with the sun.

In addition to evaluating the content and action of the novel, by implementing the tool of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count to evaluate expressive writing, readers are invited to witness Danticat's portrayal of Amabelle's growth and healing revealed on a linguistic level as well. In so doing, we can add this psychological and linguistic framework to the plurality of perspectives available to literary trauma studies and see not only that pain can be represented but also that it can be depicted and measured in quantitative linguistic ways, through items that seem insignificant, like pronouns and verb tense. Through such an evaluation, we can see evidence of the impact of these representations of testimony to speak back to trauma, and as Amabelle's testimony keeps alive the memory of those lost in the tragedy of the Massacre, we see the power of her words to raise the dead, words that are not "scattered by the winds, nor... forever buried beneath the sod" (Danticat 266) but are instead passed down as our inheritance from Danticat's Amabelle.

Chapter 2: *In the Time of the Butterflies*: The Diverse Impact of Shared Trauma

Introduction

The Caribbean island of Hispaniola has seen copious amounts of devastation throughout its often overlooked history.¹⁴ While some of these devastations have been natural, like the 2010 Haiti earthquake that claimed more than 160,000 lives throughout the nation, much of the island's trauma has also been man-made through abuses of power and dictatorial regimes on both sides of the Massacre River that divides the island's nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. From the "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier regimes that ruled Haiti from 1957 to 1986 and the Trujillo dictatorship that governed the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961, residents of Hispaniola have endured generations of pain and oppression. Like Edwidge Danticat in *The Farming of Bones* discussed in Chapter 1, Julia Alvarez reframes and rewrites collective history in her 1994 novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, and paves the way for additional historical healing. Alvarez's text extends historical accounts of Trujillo's reign of physical and psychological violence to include the previously marginalized voices of the four Mirabal sisters: Patria, Minerva, María Teresa, and Dedé. Set primarily in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960, and 1994, *In the Time of the Butterflies* chronicles the lives of these four sisters in their own words, bridging gaps between time and space as each sister narrates from her own perspective a chapter in each of the novel's three sections.

Although Julia Alvarez was born in New York City, she spent the first ten years of her life in the Dominican Republic, moving back to the United States after her father was part of the Fourteenth of June movement, an unsuccessful plot to overthrow the Trujillo dictatorship.

¹⁴ Underscoring the lack of attention in U.S. schools to Caribbean history, Dominican-American author Junot Díaz refers to "those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (2) in a footnote in his novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Alvarez's family emigrated from the Dominican Republic just months before the Mirabal sisters' murders, so Alvarez's own narrative of freedom/exile are intertwined with the imprisonment/deaths of these sisters who would become legends in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez holds strong ties to the Dominican Republic, referring to herself as a "Dominican, hyphen, American" (qtd. in Stavans 553). Interestingly, Alvarez makes the authorial decision to write *In the Time of the Butterflies* in English. When asked about this, she has said that she made this choice because of her ability to write more fluently in English than in Spanish and has said of her style, "I'm writing my Spanish in English" (Alvarez, "In the Time of Discovery"). Her choice, however, excludes non-English speakers from gaining immediate access to her story, namely Spanish-speaking Dominicans.¹⁵ However, she brings the Mirabal sisters' story to a new audience who would otherwise be unfamiliar with their martyrdom. In her postscript to the novel, Alvarez writes, "To Dominicans separated by language from the world I have created, I hope this book deepens North Americans' understanding of the nightmare you endured and the heavy losses you suffered—of which this story tells only a few" (Alvarez 324). As she explains her decision to bring this historical moment to new English-speaking audiences, she reminds readers of the ongoing linguistic and cultural tension that also exists within the novel. Gus Puleo describes this linguistic conflict as it relates to Alvarez, saying, "The gringa dominicana writes from the paradoxical position of the outsider who is also on the inside. She is an American, but she has a strong Dominican background. She speaks English, but also Spanish. She is a woman, but lives in a patriarchal world" (13). Alvarez is aware of her subject position as both an outsider and an insider, evidenced in the way she refers to herself as a Dominican-American, making an effort to accentuate the hyphen. She says, "As a fiction writer, I find that the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen—the place where two worlds collide or blend

¹⁵ A Spanish translation of the novel is now available.

together” (qtd. in Stavans 553). In this novel, Alvarez combines the history of one with the language of another, blending the two worlds seamlessly in a gruesome and gripping account of life under Trujillo.

When asked why she wrote this book, Alvarez, in a vein similar to that of surviving sister Dedé Mirabal, says, “As much as there ever is a definitive ‘reason’ for writing a book, being a survivor placed a responsibility on me to tell the story of these brave young women who did not survive the dictatorship.”¹⁶ Because Alvarez is a survivor, she now provides a voice for the otherwise silent Mirabal sisters who are now unable to speak for themselves. Her character of Dedé mirrors in the novel what Alvarez does in life by recounting the sisters’ struggle and tragedy, giving the deceased space to speak.

In her postscript to *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez writes of the deaths of the Mirabal sisters, who were the impetus for this novel,

When as a young girl I heard about the ‘accident,’ I could not get the Mirabals out of my mind. On my frequent trips back to the Dominican Republic, I sought whatever information I could about these brave and beautiful sisters who had done what few men—and only a handful of women—had been willing to do. During that terrifying thirty-one-year regime, any hint of disagreement ultimately resulted in death for the dissenter and often for members of his or her family. Yet the Mirabals had risked their lives. I kept asking myself, What gave them that special courage? (323)

It is in this quest for the source of their “special courage” that Alvarez creates her fictional version of the Mirabal sisters, all the while illustrating the horrors of life under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Her novel brings to light the obvious repressive and violent forces that his regime exerted, but she also narrates the less explicit psychological violence that exerts an oppressive force over citizens of the Dominican Republic.

In the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, the family’s use of language brings them closer together when they remark on things they are not permitted to say (for fear that government

¹⁶ juliaalvarez.com

officials should hear them) and also when they develop code words to refer to their secret, anti-government organization and plots. As this community forms, so develops the power and ability to subvert the authority of the dominant forces of Trujillo's regime. By writing the subversive histories of the fictional women in this study, Alvarez, Danticat, Kingsolver, and Reynolds validate women's experiences and provide their readers with the opportunity to acknowledge and validate these women-centered histories as well. By asserting their authorial voices, the women novelists impede the progress of patriarchy. The women in the novels work to hinder patriarchy's control, particularly through the way Alvarez portrays the Mirabal sisters of *In the Time of the Butterflies* speaking out against Trujillo and refusing to be silent. An example of this is seen when Minerva stands up to one of Trujillo's men when she says to him, "I'd sooner jump out that window than be forced to do something against my honor" (Alvarez 111). Minerva does not remain silent, but she instead speaks strongly toward a man who is threatening her and attempting to manipulate her into compromising her principles. Speaking out in such a bold way is a risk, but Minerva's open rebellion testifies to her strong character and her unshakable connection to the fight for freedom from Trujillo's regime.

While the women narrators of the novel have four distinct voices, they nonetheless all portray high levels of confidence and assertiveness linguistically by the novel's end, consistent with their legendary status as "the Butterflies." Dedé's narration demonstrates her profound journey from a removed third-person observer to a present first-person narrator once the burden to tell the story falls to her after her sisters' deaths. Additionally, Minerva's narration reveals bold dialogue as it contrasts with her internal monologue, demonstrating how Alvarez depicts her character as actively producing and conveying a brave persona through her speech, despite her inward fears. In her word choice, tone, and details hidden and shared, Alvarez's portrayal of

María Teresa's journaling, particularly while in prison, a distinct form of expressive writing, demonstrates her resilience and simultaneously reinforces her courage to survive imprisonment and abuse. Contrastingly, Patria's words reveal her changing allegiances throughout the novel, as she turns her fervent religious devotion toward the cause of the revolution once she has a watershed moment at a spiritual retreat in the mountains. Collectively, the Mirabal sisters as portrayed in this novel demonstrate the varied ways one unifying trauma can impact survivors differently and require different forms of testimony for each individual survivor, providing further evidence against essentialist theories of trauma that claim pain is unspeakable.

As early trauma theorists Cathy Caruth and Elaine Scarry asserted that pain actively "resists objectification in language" (Scarry 5), trauma theories have followed this pattern, often ignoring the meaningful impact of providing a narrative interpretation of traumatic experience. Expressive writing theorist and social psychologist, James Pennebaker, however, contends that writing about one's trauma has the potential to lead to significant post-traumatic growth and healing. He and his team developed the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) computer-based textual analysis program to measure this growth at the linguistic level. This program was initially developed in the 1990s but has been revised multiple times to account for technological changes and to integrate additional databases of text samples into their dictionary, against which new data samples are compared. The current version in use is LIWC2015. When a user enters a text sample into this computer program, numerous elements of the sample are compared to the LIWC dictionary samples for that type of writing, such as personal writing, scientific writing, and social media writing, to name a few. I classified the samples in this study as personal writing for their first-person, intimate qualities. The program evaluates items, such as function words, like personal pronouns, articles, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs; affect words, including

positive and negative emotion words; and cognitive processes, such as words indicating insight, certainty, causality, and tentativeness, among many other variables. The output for a given text sample, which reveals the percentage of words used in each dictionary category, can then be compared to the average in a given category for all samples of that type of writing in the online LIWC dictionary, providing the researcher with a baseline for comparison. This quantitative form of data provides a new lens through which to view the representations of trauma testimonies of fictional characters as they narrate the pain they endure. Coupled with other literary techniques, such as close reading where one can observe the word choice and tone in a given passage to evaluate the emotional state an author has conveyed for a given character, a LIWC analysis quickly calculates the percentage of “I” words or “they” words, as well as words indicating sadness, anxiety, or anger, among many other items. Without LIWC, such a scan would take a painstaking amount of time; however, when adding LIWC to evaluate trauma testimonies, readers can readily see similarities and differences between various characters’ narration and may then draw further conclusions accordingly. Alvarez’s Mirabal sisters provide an insightful example of the differences in narration that are provided in the wake of collective trauma. Each Mirabal sister acts as her own unique case study in the internal tension to speak trauma outwardly despite the pain and threat of violence under the Trujillo dictatorship. In these varied representations of trauma testimonies, the sisters provide readers with a multitude of examples for processing trauma in ways that speak to their personalities and address their cultural conditions, speaking back to patriarchal oppression and the constant threat of violence.

Critical Perspectives on Identity, Place, and Narration in *In the Time of the Butterflies*

Scholars have written widely on Alvarez's works, often exploring her representations of immigrant identities and how she navigates fluid conceptions of home. Writers, like Lynn Chun Ink and Charlotte Rich, have also used lenses of postcolonial theory and hegemony to interrogate how Alvarez's works "reify American imperial hegemony by reinstating an imperial divide between the Dominican Republic and the United States" (Ink 797). Ink asserts that a novel like *In the Time of the Butterflies* recreates class and political divisions through depictions of the *gringa dominicana*,¹⁷ for example, as progressive and cultured, while the *gringa dominicana* assumes Dedé and other Dominicans will be behind American advancements (Ink 797). While Alvarez critiques these American misconceptions of Dominicans, Ink notes further that her portrayal of interactions between Dedé and the *gringa dominicana* "succeed in re-colonizing Dominican women by still holding them to an American, New World standard of 'progressive' American womanhood" (798). In contrast to Ink's claims, scholars like Crystal Parikh contend that *In the Time of the Butterflies* is still a feminist text. Parikh writes, "Alvarez's novels traverse the disciplinary division between US ethnic literature and postcolonial/Latin American/Caribbean literature in order to make visible the relationality of women's subjection and of feminist agency across national borders" (3). She asserts that Alvarez portrays the Mirabal sisters as working subversively and effectively within the constraints of their geopolitical conditions. In evaluating these differing interpretations, it becomes clear that a multitude of perceptions of Alvarez's text are possible and illuminating, given the complex scope and situation of her novel with the historical conditions of Trujillo era. However, while Ink builds a strong case for her claim that Alvarez reproduces the very conditions she is critiquing,

¹⁷ The term *gringa dominicana* is used to represent an Americanized White Dominican woman, conveying to the reader this character's cultural allegiances, as she performs a White American identity.

more scholars, like Charlotte Rich and Ibis Gomez Vega, agree with Parikh's claims that the novel is more subversive in working against conditions like patriarchy and women's historical silence. As such, Alvarez's work to draw attention to women's oppression in a postcolonial context, as Parikh claims, decolonizes the women's narratives and re-centers them with political and cultural authority that has been denied in hegemonic historical interpretations of the Trujillo era.

Other interpretations view Alvarez's work as creating spaces and places for resistance. Most notably, Kelli Lyon Johnson's book, *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map*, draws on conceptions of *mestizaje*¹⁸ to assert that Alvarez is creating new locations in her writing, erasing the borders between genres and classifications of so-called ethnic literatures. Johnson writes, "By drawing together and including the myriad experiences, cultures, identities, nations, and communities of the Caribbean and the United States, Alvarez writes into being the *mestizaje* of her new place on the map" (107). This place is not fully situated within either the Caribbean or North America only, but instead, resides in a liminal space that encompasses both and more. Further, her works combine elements of history, fiction, biography, and poetry to present new accumulations of forms and themes. Johnson praises Alvarez, saying she is "inclusive, drawing together without fusing the many peoples and cultures of the Americas that have traditionally been excluded from historical, literary, and religious discourses since colonization" (159). While Alvarez's works extend to many cultures and histories, she does not conflate or essentialize immigrant experiences or entire people groups and cultures. Like Parikh, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Saez further argue that Alvarez does not fit neatly into the

¹⁸ While the word *mestizaje* can be translated from Spanish into English to mean racial mixing, the uses of this word have been contested historically, as it has sometimes been used to communicate hybridity that reifies forms of national superiority, as Octavio Paz has asserted. Kelli Lyon Johnson's use of the term here, however, follows Gloria Anzaldúa's reconfiguration of the term in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as a fluid conception of identity that permeates cultures and boundaries.

literary categories of ethnic or postcolonial literature. They assert, instead, that “Alvarez’s novels return again and again to hemispheric history to undercut... understanding of the United States as separable from Latin America and the Caribbean” (82). In so doing, Alvarez bridges these literary divides to create a new representation of the histories of the regions her words encompass.

Some, like Laura P. Alonso Gallo, Kelli Lyon Johnson, and Ellen McCracken, acknowledge that Alvarez’s fiction seems to fit within and simultaneously expand the genre of *testimonio*. Typically used to describe Latin American literature of witness, essays by John Beverley, later compiled into the text, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, are often credited with bringing this genre to the forefront for discussion. McCracken claims that the novel “might be viewed as a kind of collective autobiography or testimonio of the women (84), and Johnson adds that “Alvarez also includes in the novel the testimonio of witnesses to the sisters’ assassination” (105). These analyses build a case for this text to be formally considered literature of testimony.¹⁹ Alonso Gallo contends that Alvarez constructs the Mirabal sisters in a testimonial way “so that individual experience becomes inextricably linked to that of broader social groups” (29). Further, she notes that this portrayal “transcribes [the sisters] culturally for North American readers whose anglocentric ideology may thus be questioned” (29). By presenting the sisters’ domesticity and political activism through the variety of their voices and perspectives, Alvarez builds a representation of these historical figures that invites readers to interrogate their own assumptions about history, power, gender, and U.S. involvement in the

¹⁹ Alvarez’s Dedé narrates after her sisters’ deaths various stories of witnesses who traveled to see her with the sole purpose of telling her their piece of the story, such as the man who walked for days and carried his only pair of shoes in a paper bag “so as not to wear them out,” only to put them on right before approaching Dedé’s house so as “to show up proper” (Alvarez 303), or the shopkeeper who tried to warn the Butterflies to avoid the pass and who “will never forgive himself” that he did not have any cinnamon gum for María Teresa (Alvarez 302). These stories demonstrate the impact of this collective trauma and the vital need for witnesses to tell their stories.

Caribbean.²⁰ As the Mirabal sisters testify to the Trujillo era, readers are invited into this painful piece of history and called to question the United States' complicity and culpability.

Beyond this classification as part of the genre of *testimonio*, however, few have written about the intersections of trauma, testimony, and resilience in Alvarez's works, and the few who do write extensively about testimony in her novels tend to cover the language use of the main characters in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, not fully investigating linguistically the testimonial component of *In the Time of the Butterflies*. One of the few who has written on the language and narrative perspectives of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Charlotte Rich draws on the Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia to assert that the multiple narrative voices in the novel create "a polyphony that traces the experience of political oppression from the varied perspectives of those whom such tyranny usually silenced" (172). She concludes that the "cumulative effect of these qualities is a polymorphous, decentralized text in which many voices together evoke the experience of living within a political dictatorship, engaging in resistant dialogue with the official voices of that regime" (179). Lynn Chun Ink also notes that the "multivocal narrative eloquently conveys how this past is constituted by many different concurrent and often contradictory stories" (792). The accumulation of voices within Alvarez's text amounts to a wealth of perspectives and insights, though critics differ on the success of these discourses, as Ink claims the novel "in many ways reproduces the very discourse it seeks to subvert" (792), contrasting Rich's claims that Alvarez gives voice to these silenced political dissidents. Of the narrative structure of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Emily Robbins contends, and I agree, that Alvarez "emphasizes the curative effects and the power of speaking, of

²⁰ Alvarez's novel and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, explored in Chapter 1, both bring up the complicated relationships between the United States and Caribbean nations, including the American occupation of Haiti that preceded Trujillo's dictatorship and Trujillo's American military training. These historical moments appear in the novels through characters' lingering mistrust of Americans and the systems Americans imposed.

witnessing” (137), as “healing begins with testifying, for individuals need to be allowed to speak” (138). She says, “Alvarez sets up a layering of testimony, for she uses the framework of the Dominicans’ testimonies to Dedé, Dedé’s testimony to those who come to listen, Dedé’s testimony to the *gringa dominicana*, and Alvarez’s testimony to her readers” (Robbins 137). From a formal standpoint, the focus on testimony within this novel seems obvious, though few have thoroughly investigated its impact, opening room for my inquiry into the representations of trauma testimonies across the novel.

While a select few have written on the multivocality and polyphony conveyed through the multiple narrators of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, no one I have found has yet analyzed the text through the lens of expressive writing and the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count tool (LIWC). This tool can provide evidence at the linguistic level of the growth and emotional and cognitive processing present in the representations of the characters’ narration. Such an evaluation gives insight into how the women narrators cope with their varied experiences of trauma and how their different forms of expression have diverse impacts on their resilience. I will draw on the results of a LIWC analysis to reveal the sisters’ linguistic demonstrations of authority and confidence, as well as emotional expression and analytic thinking, to show their high levels of boldness in the face of their traumas. Such strong portrayals reveal to readers that these Mirabal sisters of Alvarez’s creation do not falter under the weight of the pain, but they endure and thrive despite their grim circumstances.

Clinical psychologists who have studied trauma’s impact on the mind and body often assert that trauma overwhelms the victim in the moment and the aftermath, making testimony difficult. In his groundbreaking work, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk claims, “Trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based

on common experience or an imaginable past” (43). If this assumption of division is true, psychologically and linguistically, the effort to compose a narrative testimony of one’s trauma experience is all the more noteworthy as a key component in a survivor’s journey toward healing. Despite van der Kolk’s assertion that “[i]t is enormously difficult to organize one’s traumatic experience into a coherent account—a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end” (43), the women characters of Alvarez’s creation do just that. They use their language to speak of what they endure, and they bring their experiences that have the potential to divide them from those who have not faced their trauma to an audience who is invited instead to empathize with their plight and be moved as a result of their trauma testimonies.

In his research on expressive writing as a tool to cope with trauma, Pennebaker has found that “writing about an imaginary trauma was almost as therapeutic as writing about a real one” (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 143). This finding is evidence that putting words to feelings, real or imagined, has an ameliorating effect on the writer, thereby underscoring the positive implications of effectively narrating one’s trauma, even in the form of this fictional account, in order to process and heal. Furthermore, the presence of an audience to become empathic witnesses to this testimony is vital. The social support witnesses provide is essential in the wake of trauma, as van der Kolk notes, “The critical issue is *reciprocity*: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else’s mind and heart. For our physiology to calm down, heal, and grow, we need a visceral feeling of safety” (79, emphasis in original). The women characters of *In the Time of the Butterflies* and the other novels explored in this study have a supportive social network, albeit small, to garner this sense of safety to share, and readers become part of this extended support as well, as the texts become a form of historical

witness and revision to grim historical situations that sought to silence the women these novels represent.

Hispaniola Under Trujillo

To understand the trauma Alvarez's characters endure in her novel, it is necessary to explore the historical conditions the real-life Mirabal sisters lived under. During Trujillo's reign, he created a culture of imposed silence, in which neighbors were expected to report one another if they heard someone say anything that could be construed as anti-Trujillo. Furthermore, citizens were expected to have a portrait of Trujillo in their home and repeat the patriotic slogan, "God and Trujillo" (Adjarian 131). These acts served to reinforce the cultural schema that underscored Trujillo's ultimate power, thus performing symbolic violence which citizens perpetuated. Alvarez writes of the terror citizens faced, as "[p]eople were disappearing in the middle of the night" (*Something to Declare* 6). Under this terror, Alvarez's own grandfather was forced to sell his family's inheritance, when according to Alvarez, the secret military police, the SIM, "came for my grandfather and put him in jail for two days. He was not tortured but 'persuaded' to sell a part of his land for the minimum price to the daughter of the dictator. It was property that my grandfather had been saving to give to his own children" (*Something to Declare* 6). As he had no choice under Trujillo's desire for his land, Alvarez's grandfather was forced to capitulate, or likely be marginalized or murdered. It was under this fear that Alvarez's parents lived and ultimately fled the country for their safety. Alvarez notes that the trauma of the Trujillo dictatorship was not one that her parents ever really left behind. She writes, "[L]ong after we had left, my parents were still living in the dictatorship inside their own heads. Even on American soil, they were afraid of awful consequences if they spoke out or disagreed with

authorities.... Silence about anything ‘political’ was the rule in our home” (*Something to Declare* 108). Her parents’ experience exemplifies Trujillo’s reach, terrorizing across the miles and even beyond the grave. Alvarez also notes this lingering cultural trauma, saying that Trujillo’s assassination “was an external event, not necessarily an internal exorcism,” adding that “[a]ll their lives, my parents, along with a nation of Dominicans, had learned the habits of repression, censorship, terror. Those habits would not disappear with a few bullets and a national liberation proclamation” (*Something to Declare* 107-8). Understanding Trujillo’s terrifying impact invites readers to a deeper recognition of the strength of the Mirabal sisters to defy and push back against Trujillo and his violence.

The Mirabal sisters, thus, become the anomaly in this era where citizens were urged and even forced to report on one another’s anti-Trujillo leanings, and readers of the novel become witnesses to the testimonies of their terror. Because as David Swartz asserts, “Symbolic violence is misrecognized obedience in that symbolic power is accepted as legitimate rather than as an arbitrary imposition” (83), many of the Dominicans who complied with Trujillo may have seen their behavior simply as obeying national rules and being patriotic. They may not have always recognized their behavior as extending the oppression of their fellow countrymen and women. David J. Vázquez argues, “While many Dominicans opposed the regime and its excesses, the majority remained silent, cooperated, or left. By focusing on the Mirabals’ courage, the ... woman [who interviews Dedé] implicates herself and others who chose self-preservation over collective resistance” (159). While Alvarez’s text brings to light questions of who resisted Trujillo and who went along with his harmful plans as enablers, it also, as Monica Ayuso argues, “sets a wide stage for the remembrance of the *trujillato* by positioning the reading public as witness through an empathic visitor from the United States” (48). Through this visitor who

inquires about Dedé's story and her sisters' lives and deaths, readers are invited in as empathic witnesses to the trauma inflicted by the *trujillato*. Such readers thus complete the loop of testimony as the hearer of these stories (Felman and Laub 85). Alvarez's novel depicts these complex historical truths of silence and complicity through the narration of each sister, including through Minerva's boldness in refusing Trujillo's advances, María Teresa's paradoxical self-censorship and freedom expressed in the journal she writes in prison as a response to violence, and Patria's shifting devotion displaced from the church and redirected toward the revolution, but Alvarez primarily depicts this subversion through Dedé's profound journey from silence to speech, which I will explore first.

Dedé, The Surviving Butterfly

Dedé, the only surviving Butterfly (as the sisters were known as Las Mariposas, or in English, The Butterflies), carries the responsibility of testifying to her sisters' lives and their untimely deaths. In the novel, a writer, whom many argue is a stand-in for Alvarez, approaches Dedé, inquiring to learn more about the Butterflies. Dedé reluctantly agrees, indulging the "*gringa dominicana*" in a tour and interview (Alvarez 3). Of the four Mirabal sisters, Dedé is the least involved in the resistance against Trujillo, which likely accounts for her survival.

While all of the chapters attributed to the other sisters are narrated in first person, Dedé's chapters are presented in third person. The reason behind this stylistic choice becomes clear in the epilogue, where Alvarez's Dedé begins to narrate in first person. She says, "After the fighting was over and we were a broken people...that's when I opened my doors, and instead of listening, I started talking" (Alvarez 313). Through the third-person construction in the three main parts of the novel, the reader is invited to see Dedé as distant, reluctant to speak. Although

Dedé is the impetus behind the re-telling of the sisters' stories, as it is an interview with a Dominican-American writer that leads to the unraveling of the sisters' history, Dedé would rather remain tight-lipped about the entire ordeal.

Alvarez's Dedé is a prime example of the resilience expressed through testimony, her chapters moving from removed, distant, third-person narration to present, bold, first-person narration in the epilogue of *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Demonstrating the power of speech, Alvarez depicts Dedé as saying, "I didn't want to listen anymore. But I made myself listen—it was as if Manolo had to say it and I had to hear it—so that it could be human, so that we could begin to forgive it" (Alvarez 309). Later, she tells her friend, "We had lost hope, and we needed a story to understand what had happened to us" (Alvarez 313). The story and its telling provide Dedé with a "manageable grief" (Alvarez 310) and give readers a picture of a woman no longer resigned to the shadows of her sisters' deaths. Instead, she is a courageous example of the power and bravery that come with being "the one who survived to tell the story" (Alvarez 321) and the important healing ramifications of telling those stories.

Dedé's reticence aligns with the culture of imposed silence that permeated the Dominican Republic under Trujillo. In *Julia Alvarez: Writing a New Place on the Map*, Kelli Lyon Johnson asserts, "While Trujillo used language to manipulate and control Dominicans, he demanded their silence, except for those willing to inform on their neighbors" (82). Alvarez reminds readers of this fear of speaking out through Dedé's silence compared to her sisters' assertiveness against the regime. Dedé is painted as the least bold of her sisters, her chapters filled with descriptions like, "Dedé was not eloquent with reasons" (Alvarez 78), and "Ay, how she wished she could be that grand and brave. But she could not be. She had always been one to number the stars" (Alvarez 79). Because of all of the regulations and threats disseminated from the Trujillo regime, Dedé is

fearful of speaking out against him, even rushing her fiancé, Jaimito, to leave shortly after their proposal so he would not risk being stopped by Trujillo's secret police, the SIM (Alvarez 83). Dedé is caught beneath the weight of the psychological violence and culture of fear that residents lived under during the Trujillo regime. Dedé later tells the Dominican-American interviewer, "*I followed my husband. I didn't get involved*" (Alvarez 172, emphasis in original). Dedé's loyalty to her husband underscores the patriarchal culture that dictates women should behave as their husbands would have them behave, but it is also indicative of the oppressive, patriarchal forces of Trujillo's regime that silenced her. Dedé does eventually get involved, but she admits she does this "[w]hen it was already too late" (Alvarez 172).

In her third-person accounts of the past, Dedé is able to remain more of a spectator than a participant, but when her voice is finally introduced in first person during the epilogue, her story takes on a more powerful presence than in the previous chapters. Dedé chronicles her growth this way: "There are pictures of me at that time where even I can't pick myself out... Always I am looking away. But slowly—how does it happen?—I came back from the dead" (Alvarez 309). Even though Dedé does not die a physical death when her sisters are murdered, she retreats within herself and does more listening than speaking. She questions, "When did it turn, I wonder, from my being the one who listened to the stories people brought to being one whom people came to for the story of the Mirabal sisters?" (Alvarez 312). When that change takes place, Dedé is no longer the reticent, mourning sister who pieces together information she receives about her sisters' deaths, but she instead faces the trauma of losing her sisters and becomes the one with the authoritative voice on the life, mission, and death of Las Mariposas—The Butterflies. The reader is invited to be a witness to this shift in power by being taken from a

removed third-person, “bird’s eye” view of Dedé’s story into the center of the action, seeing events directly through the eyes of the one experiencing life after this trauma.

Through narrating in first person, Alvarez depicts Dedé as taking ownership of her story and her sisters’ stories, and in so doing, she breaks the code of silence that was imposed on her during Trujillo’s regime. In this move, she also frees herself of the symbolic violence that once oppressed her and demonstrates a coherent narrative of her trauma, pushing back against claims that trauma’s nature produces fragmentation and ruptures in narrative. Gus Puleo refers to Alvarez’s novel as translating “from silencing patriarchy to active and vocal ‘feminist’ resistance” (13), which can be seen clearly in Dedé’s newfound voice and the powerful narration of the other sisters. Furthermore, Charlotte Rich aptly defines the central theme of the novel as “the liberatory power of speaking out in response to a dictatorship that attempted to silence all resistance” (180). By speaking as they do in this novel, the sisters, especially Dedé, boldly defy the rules and the psychological violence and power of the dictatorship that oppresses them, thus liberating themselves and living on in testimony even after their deaths. Alvarez’s formal representation of this transformation through Dedé’s shifting narrative point of view underscores the power of testimony and Dedé’s strength to step in with her powerful voice in the wake of the trauma of losing her sisters. Her outward processing of her movement from the one who listened to the one who testifies demonstrates the perpetual process of post-traumatic growth and her resilience that is increased through testifying to what she has endured. Further, as her storytelling makes her grief “manageable” (Alvarez 310), Alvarez invites readers to consider the profound positive implications that follow testifying to trauma. As Dedé moves from passive to active, she not only survives in the aftermath of her deep loss, but she now thrives with purpose

as the historical record-keeper of her sisters' lives and deaths at the hands of Trujillo, not permitting Trujillo to silence their resistance.

María Teresa's Epistolary Form

Unlike Dedé's early, distant-sounding chapters, Alvarez portrays the youngest Mirabal sister, María Teresa, as cataloging her personal experiences in diary form, interspersing plots against Trujillo's regime with girlish talk of kissing boys. Layering the topics in such a way provides a deep element of honesty coupled with youthful innocence. María Teresa writes, "I told Minerva and Manolo right out, I wanted to join. I could feel my breath coming short with the excitement of it all. But I masked it in front of Minerva....I don't want to be babied anymore" (Alvarez 142). María Teresa is prepared to join the underground movement that her sister and brother-in-law are a part of because she wants to take a stand against Trujillo, but her diary reveals a degree of her humanity that would not be present in a less intimate form of narration. The reader is invited to observe that María Teresa is nervous with excitement when she says she is short of breath when talking to Minerva, but moreover, the reader is able to observe her fascination with one of the men involved in the movement. After meeting this man, whose code name she knows is Palomino, she writes, "Suddenly, all the boys I've known with soft hands and easy lives seem like the pretty dolls I've outgrown" (Alvarez 142). Her talk of the resistance movement is always sprinkled with talk of Palomino because they are both important forces in her life and are intricately linked. She confesses, "I admit that for me love goes deeper than the struggle, or maybe what I mean is, love is the deeper struggle. I would never be able to give up Leandro [Palomino] to some higher ideal the way I feel Minerva and Manolo would each other if they had to make the supreme sacrifice" (Alvarez 147). María

Teresa, while wholeheartedly committed to the resistance, is also wholeheartedly committed to the man she loves. Her honest accounts of her daily activities invite the reader to understand both her allegiances and see that her strength to continue in the resistance movement is motivated by her love for her freedom-fighting husband.

When María Teresa is imprisoned for her involvement in the resistance movement, she continues to write her experiences in a notebook smuggled in for her by one of the guards. She writes, “It feels good to write things down. Like there will be a record” (Alvarez 227). The record that María Teresa keeps while in prison demonstrates the unspoken—perhaps unspeakable—aspects of prison life. She says, “Every day and night there’s at least one breakdown....The alternative is freezing yourself up, never showing what you’re feeling, never letting on what you’re thinking....Then one day, you’re out of here, free, only to discover you’ve locked yourself up and thrown away the key somewhere too deep inside your heart to fish it out (Alvarez 231). Writing keeps María Teresa connected to freedom and prevents her from shutting herself off from her past and her future.

The most notable of entries in María Teresa’s diary is the final one, which Alvarez portrays her as inserting after tearing it out. The entry describes the torture she endures at the hands of prison guards. She writes, “I have never known such terror. My chest was so tight I could barely breathe” (Alvarez 254). She does not let their torture strip her of her strength to survive, however. She concludes the entry with, “I was left alone in that room with a handful of guards. I could tell they were all ashamed of themselves, avoiding my eyes, quiet as if Johnny were still there. Then Bloody Juan gathered up my clothes, but I wouldn’t let him help me. I dressed myself and walked out to the wagon on my own two feet” (Alvarez 256). Even after enduring such torture, which resulted in the loss of her pregnancy, she insists on maintaining her

dignity and walking around unassisted. Although they tried, the prison guards were not able to silence María Teresa or crush her indestructible spirit. She was brutalized, but in leaving that room with her dignity, she reveals herself as a triumphant victor, not merely a victim of their assault.

The diary that María Teresa Mirabal keeps while in prison reveals the intimate details of what life is like for Trujillo's political prisoners. She writes, "Day by day goes by and I begin to lose courage and wallow in the dark thoughts. I'm letting myself go....My spirits are so low. Our visiting privileges were cancelled again. No explanation....We were marched down the hall and then brought back—what a mean trick" (Alvarez 236). Alvarez portrays María Teresa as honest about the depths of her despair, and in this small passage, she reveals one of the many terrible things that the women experienced in prison: being deceived into thinking that they would see their loved ones. Another atrocity that she reveals is the assault she suffers at the hands of the SIM. Prior to her assault, María Teresa worries that she might be pregnant, and she says, "So if there really is no chance I'll be out soon, then I want to release this poor creature from the life it might be born to" (Alvarez 240). María Teresa, who deeply misses her daughter, Jacqui, longs to be a mother to this baby that she and her husband tried "like crazy" to have (Alvarez 239). Knowing, however, that if she gives birth to this baby in prison, the SIM will likely "give it to some childless general's wife" (Alvarez 240), María Teresa thinks about abortion.²¹ After her assault, though, she no longer has a choice; the SIM have taken all options away from her. She writes, "I've either bled a baby or had a period. And no one had to do a thing about it after the SIM got to me" (Alvarez 240). María Teresa is painfully honest about her distinctly womanly struggles while in prison. She demonstrates the difficult decision a woman

²¹ This maternal drive to save one's child from a life of pain is found in other literary examples, such as Sheri Reynolds's *The Rapture of Canaan* (discussed in Chapter 4) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, whose scene is based on the real-life story of Margaret Garner who killed her daughter to save her from being re-enslaved.

has to make when faced with a possible pregnancy in dangerous circumstances, and she also conveys a woman's despair after having this choice—and possible new life—taken from her during a brutal assault. In writing of these events, through María Teresa Alvarez reveals unspoken evils of Trujillo's reign. She breaches boundaries and conventions by speaking of the taboo topics of assault and pregnancy loss, fulfilling what sexual assault survivor Susan Brison has noted: "Whether the power is a fascist state or an internalized trauma, surviving the present requires the courage to confront the past, reexamine it, retell it, and thereby remaster its traumatic aspects" (58). María Teresa's representation of testimony speaks a defiant message of encouragement and survival to readers, as she endures much during this scene but rises resiliently to continue her part in the revolution, inviting readers to recognize that pain will not have the final word. María Teresa's written record of her trauma provides readers with a strong, personal example of expressive writing, emphasizing the cathartic component available through writing about trauma and speaking what is often viewed, as I point out above—even by discerning critics—as unspeakable pain and experience. Her youthful, honest voice invites readers to notice the various types of strength the Mirabal sisters convey. While she is not always outwardly bold for others to witness like Minerva, she confides in her diary this record of her strength and resilience, using writing as a personal coping mechanism, and invites readers to bear witness to her struggle and tenacity.

Minerva's Constructed Bold Persona

In contrast to María Teresa's youthful voice throughout her diary, Alvarez's Minerva's voice is undoubtedly the most outspoken of the Mirabal sisters. The driving force behind the Fourteenth of June Movement, Minerva is steadfast in her commitment to overthrow the

dictatorship of Trujillo. When invited to dance with Trujillo, Minerva ends up slapping the dictator when he speaks to her in a sexually suggestive way. She never capitulates to his demands and always stands her ground, remaining true to her principles. Although blatantly offensive to the dictator, Minerva's slap in Alvarez's novel is an obvious indication of her indignation for Trujillo—both the man and his political ambitions.

Her assertiveness and strength are conveyed throughout the text, and, like María Teresa, even her experience in prison does not crush her. When she speaks out against the prison guards and is put in solitary confinement, which happens on a few occasions, she develops a coping mechanism that she shares to help Dedé relax when the Butterflies are on house arrest. Minerva tells Dedé, “You start with a line from a song or a poem. Then you just say it over until you feel yourself calming down. I kept myself sane that way” (Alvarez 199). Minerva's ingenuity to develop this method for herself demonstrates her resourcefulness and her steadfastness while providing her with a repetitive calming technique that is mentally and emotionally beneficial during her harrowing time in prison.

Although she is undoubtedly resilient, Alvarez does not portray Minerva, however, without weakness. After prison but still on house arrest, Alvarez's Minerva admits, “I hid my anxieties and gave everyone a bright smile. If they had only known how frail was their iron-will heroine. How much it took to put on that hardest of all performances, being my old self again” (Alvarez 259). Minerva wrestles with being honest with herself and expressing her true feelings—those of anxiety—and being the kind of woman that society has now said she should be, one who is strong, always smiling. In so doing, Alvarez depicts Minerva as actively creating a bold persona, despite her inward misgivings. Her actions demonstrate what Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall assert, which is that identity emerges through local practice and is continually socially

constructed and mediated through language. They assert that “identity is emergent in discourse and does not precede it,” adding that they “locate identity as an intersubjectively achieved social and cultural phenomenon” (607). Alvarez’s construction of Minerva’s inner tension and deliberate production of the face she assumes others want from her is a clear example of producing a deliberate identity through one’s agency and language. Minerva maintains this strong charade, feeling a sense of obligation to those she has led throughout the resistance movement. She puts forward a confident face when she visits her husband in prison, noting, “He didn’t know the double life I was leading. Outwardly, I was still his calm, courageous *compañera*. Inside, the woman had got the upper hand” (Alvarez 267). She confides further of this inner tension, saying, “The struggle with her began. The struggle to get my old self back from her. Late in the night, I’d lie in bed, thinking, You must gather up the broken threads and tie them together” (Alvarez 267). Seeing this war raging within Minerva allows the reader privileged entrance into a closely guarded place where both sides of Minerva are revealed. Her honesty about her inner struggles demonstrates the painful depths to which Trujillo’s dictatorship reaches. She triumphs over her despair nonetheless. She says, “The butterflies were not about to give up! We had suffered a setback but we had not been beaten....Adversity was like a key in the lock for me. As I began to work to get our men out of prison, it was the old Minerva I set free” (Alvarez 269). Although her time in prison has jaded her, and the thought of her husband in prison brings her to tears, Minerva finds the inner strength to rise up and continue the fight against Trujillo. For Minerva, the technique that works for her to find her strong self again—for the inward Minerva to match the bold outward self she has been portraying—is to have a cause to fight for and to feel that she can effect some positive change. In this instance, working to free

the men from prison gives her a worthy goal to fight for. Always the revolutionary, when she has felt helpless, as she does on house arrest, she feels less like her true self.

In addition to coping through focusing on the task of getting the men released from prison, Alvarez portrays Minerva and her sisters beginning a business making dresses and christening gowns, which provides them with a tactile task to occupy their hands and time. Minerva narrates, “Our little dressmaking business was doing well.... We couldn’t sleep nights, so we sewed. Sometimes Patria started a rosary, and we all joined in, stitching and praying so as not to let our minds roam” (Alvarez 272). This textile project is similar to the coping mechanism demonstrated by Edwidge Danticat’s Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones* and Sheri Reynolds’s Ninah in *The Rapture of Canaan*, discussed in Chapters 1 and 4, respectively. For all of these women, the task of creating a tangible product provides a productive and cathartic outlet to occupy their minds, becoming a form of art or expressive therapy that has been shown to be an effective therapeutic outlet in the wake of trauma.²² Through her portrayal of Minerva’s inner conflict and her coping mechanisms, Alvarez invites readers to consider the complications present in testifying to trauma, especially when one’s testimony breaks with conventional expectations, as it does for Minerva who is perceived to be so bold and unshakable. Glimpsing this tension provides readers with even deeper understanding of the strength Minerva exerts to understand who she is in the wake of trauma and the effort it takes to get her “old self back” again and continue her fight against Trujillo (Alvarez 267).

²² Stuckey, Heather L. and Jeremy Nobel. “The Connection Between Art, Healing, and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature.” *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 100, no.2, 2010 pp. 254–263.

Patria's Religious Devotion Redirected Toward Revolution

While Minerva is headstrong and eager to get involved in plots to undermine Trujillo, her sister, Patria, self-described as “the easiest, friendliest, simplest of the Mirabal girls” (Alvarez 51) is reluctant, concerned for her safety and the safety of her family. She says, “My sisters were so different! They built their homes on sand and called the slip and slide an adventure” (Alvarez 148). However, after Patria witnesses a young boy being murdered by Trujillo’s regime, she is motivated and becomes seriously involved in the plots her sisters are a part of. It is after what she witnesses that the movement gets its name: The Fourteenth of June. She says, “His eyes found mine just as the shot hit him square in the back. I saw the wonder on his young face as the life drained out of him, and I thought, Oh my God, he’s one of mine!” (Alvarez 162) As this murdered boy reminds her of her son, Nelson, the baby she miscarried, and the baby she is carrying, Patria says, “Coming down that mountain, I was a changed woman. I may have worn the same sweet face, but now I was carrying not just my child but that dead boy as well” (Alvarez 162). Seeing this young boy murdered because of his rebellion against Trujillo forces Patria to put a face with all the nameless, faceless revolutionaries who are fighting against Trujillo. She also sees the physical manifestation of Trujillo’s evil as she watches this boy—someone’s son—die. Patria narrates this change that occurs in her, that motivates her to act, and the reader is drawn inside her conflict between speaking out against Trujillo and doing what she feels is right and remaining safe and silent and allowing his evil to continue. These conflicting ideas tug at Patria throughout the novel, as readers have seen her choose the church over the revolution, and it is not until the two become one and the same that she can give herself fully to the cause.

Alvarez portrays this tension between spiritual and worldly concerns as causing Patria much grief throughout the text, as she feels pulled toward becoming a nun and devoting her life to the church early on as a young woman, ultimately choosing marriage to Pedrito instead. Patria's internal conflict between the church and state continues throughout the text and is most sharply seen in the losses of two young people: the baby that Patria miscarries and the young soldier who dies in the mountains during the Fourteenth of June insurrection while Patria is on a spiritual retreat. Of the baby she loses, Patria says, "I wondered if the dead child were not a punishment for my having turned my back on my religious calling?" (Alvarez 52). As she puts words to her pain, her search for answers and someone to blame for this deep loss are evident. It is this search that leads her to join the revolution. She narrates, "That moment, I understood [Minerva's] hatred. My family had not been personally hurt by Trujillo, just as before losing my baby, Jesus had not taken anything away from me. But others had been suffering great losses" (Alvarez 53). Through Patria's own painful loss, she comes to understand the losses her people are facing under Trujillo, including "the thousands of Haitians massacred at the border" (Alvarez 53) that Edwidge Danticat narrates in *The Farming of Bones*, and this begins her process of coming around to Minerva's cause and the revolution. For Patria, the Lord who has taken this child from her and Trujillo who is taking dissenters from their families are now one and the same. As she looks up at a "picture of the Good Shepherd, talking to his lambs" and "the required portrait of El Jefe, touched up to make him look better than he was," she ponders, "How could our loving, all-powerful Father allow us to suffer so? I looked up, challenging Him. And the two faces had merged!" (Alvarez 53). Now that Trujillo has been elevated to god-like status and God has descended to the ranks of a cruel judge who punishes his children, for Patria—whose name ironically translates to mean *Fatherland*—God is Trujillo and Trujillo is God. She

can now focus her efforts pushing back in anger against both of them. In their merge, they now collectively come to represent the patriarchy that she actively resists in her pursuit of liberation, inviting readers to consider how Patria moves forward uncompromising against this unifying force of political and religious oppression, stepping beyond the gender roles constructed for her culturally and spiritually.

As Patria chooses to join her spiritual efforts and her revolutionary efforts, she exposes herself to all kinds of danger and speaks out more boldly against Trujillo with unwavering support for the revolution. After her husband and son and Minerva and María Teresa are all arrested, Patria does not give up on the cause she has been fighting for. She narrates this painful season, saying, “I don’t know how it happened that my cross became bearable...but... I got used to the sorrows heaped upon my heart” (Alvarez 200). The support of her mother and Dedé help Patria to cope, but she is also rushed to put her own feelings aside as she sees the children upset. She says, “[A]ll their grief pulled me back from mine” (Alvarez 200). Although Patria can set aside her grief momentarily to take care of her children, she is still traumatized by seeing her husband, son, and sisters taken to prison and watching her house burn once the SIM get to it. She says, “I recovered. But every now and then I couldn’t get the pictures out of my head” (Alvarez 201). Patria is haunted by the images of what she has witnessed and by imagining the conditions her loved ones are enduring in jail. Her descriptions of these traumas are sprinkled with religious imagery and references, as is consistent with Patria’s character. The refrain, “And on the third day He rose again” (Alvarez 201) recurs three times during Patria’s description of the aftermath of the SIM’s capture of her family and destruction of her home and twice more elsewhere in the same chapter. Patria also turns her religious devotion toward Trujillo as she begins “praying” what she calls “trick prayers” (Alvarez 203) to him as she passes his portrait in

her mother's home. She addresses this religious displacement, saying, "I was praying to him, not because he was worthy or anything like that. I wanted something from him, and prayer was the only way I knew to ask" (Alvarez 202). In prayer, Patria petitions Trujillo to release her family members and to take her instead of her son, bargaining, "I'll be your sacrificial lamb" (Alvarez 203). Through this mental bargaining, readers are invited to witness Patria's surrendered, maternal desperation, and her desperation reads as a deep strength, not a weakness. It demonstrates that she is strategic enough to fight with the tools she has and is not giving up in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and grief. Patria's strategy invites readers to consider one way survivors can work within their given constraints to effect change and remain active in the face of trauma's effects that can seem crippling. This moment further invites readers to witness what Pennebaker has noted in his research on expressive writing, which is that prayer is as effective as testifying before another person. Pennebaker explains this effect, saying, "Prayer is a form of disclosure or confiding" (*Opening Up* 24). In prayer, an individual processes through thoughts, feelings, and memories internally with a higher power as their mental audience. Even though other individuals are not involved as witnesses to this self-expression, the cognitive act of sharing has the same beneficial, unburdening impact as speaking a confession aloud to another person. As Patria prays, bargaining with God and Trujillo, she works through her grief and helplessness, transforming it into action.

Her strength is further evident when a member of Trujillo's regime comes to visit the family in an attempt to harass Patria and frighten her into making her husband confess to his involvement. Patria says to him, "Captain Peña, no matter what you do to my husband, he will always be ten times the man you are!" (Alvarez 204). Patria knows where her loyalties lie: with her family—always. Her boldness in speaking this frankly with one of Trujillo's officers makes

plain her devotion and unrelenting strength, further asking readers to take note of her tenacity and bravery in the face of emotional upheaval and manipulation. As Patria's allegiances to the church and the revolution have merged, she is free to devote her energies more wholeheartedly to the cause of the Fourteenth of June Movement with her religious-like fervor.

Through Alvarez's construction of their narration, each of the Mirabal women makes her unique story known, speaks with boldness against Trujillo's regime, and captures her tragedy with clarity so that future generations will not forget her story. The act of narration demonstrates the empowerment of these women, that they will not fade into obscurity like helpless victims, but instead overcome Trujillo's attempts to silence them. Their coherent and clear representations of trauma testimony undermine claims that trauma produces fragmentation and narrative ruptures and resists representation in language (Caruth, *Listening to Trauma* xiii; van der Kolk *The Body Keeps the Score* 66). Their varied forms of testimony further invite readers to see the necessity for pluralistic models of trauma theory that resist monolithic interpretations. As Dedé grows into her focused first-person voice, she stands in the gap left in the aftermath of her sisters' death and demonstrates for readers how she makes her pain bearable by keeping her sisters' stories and memories alive. Similarly, Minerva reveals the ongoing process of dealing with persistent pain as she shows her internal conflict to construct an outwardly bold persona, eventually coming to terms with the revolutionary self she has constructed. Contrastingly, María Teresa and Patria express themselves through diary-keeping and prayer as effective forms of expressive writing, inviting readers to glimpse two alternate forms of trauma testimony that are integral components in their post-traumatic growth, channeling their powerlessness under Trujillo's dictatorship into profound forms of action.

LIWC Analysis and Implications

Alvarez has said she wanted to portray realistic accounts of the Mirabal women in her fiction and recover them from the mythical, legendary status they have held (Alvarez 324). While some, like Lynn Chun Ink and Trenton Hickman,²³ debate her effectiveness in achieving this, one way she constructs these women characters to be both real and relatable and simultaneously legendary and larger than life is through their consistent bold and powerful language. Readers may conclude at a glance that Minerva is the sister with the most assertive language, as she is the one most active in the Fourteenth of June Movement. As previously discussed, however, Alvarez's depiction of Minerva's strong language is Minerva's deliberate construction to outwardly portray an unshakable confidence that she does not always feel internally. Revealing this contradiction humanizes the heroine who was elevated to saint-like or goddess status by those who revered her. Furthermore, Dedé, the sister with the least involvement in the revolution and who may be viewed as more passive, actually demonstrates great strength and assertiveness at the linguistic level as she steps into her role as the sister who survived. Each sister demonstrates high levels of confidence and authority through her narration by the novel's end. A LIWC evaluation reveals such quantitative markers of clout and authenticity in the women characters' language, as evidenced in their levels of first-person pronouns and words conveying certainty, like *always* and *never*, coupled with their lack of tentative markers, such as *maybe* and *perhaps*. For readers, such a construction has the effect of presenting characters that are believable and strong, despite their circumstances as victims and survivors embedded within a patriarchal culture. The women register as powerful even if readers cannot readily point to exactly why they interpret the characters as such brave women with

²³ Hickman refers to the presentation of the sisters as "hagiographic commemorative fiction," which honors the women as saintly heroines (99).

“special courage,” as Alvarez has noted in the novel’s postscript (323). A number of scenes demonstrate these linguistic markers of authenticity and clout, but I will analyze one scene of significant trauma narrated by each sister to demonstrate the nuances in and implications of their representations of trauma testimonies. Additionally, I will evaluate Dedé’s final words within the text, as her status as the surviving sister with her formal progression from third to first-person narration is substantial.

Minerva Slaps Trujillo

Although she is one of the founding members of the Fourteenth of June Movement and profoundly brave throughout the text, Minerva is not without her own fear of Trujillo and his terror, which she must wrestle with as she resists him politically and personally. This tension and terror is depicted early in Minerva’s life when she is forced to dance with Trujillo at the Discovery Day Dance. A known womanizer, Trujillo was said to have had many mistresses throughout the island, and even Alvarez’s mother was not immune to his sexualizing terror. Alvarez explains one dehumanizing parade her mother was obliged to take part in, saying that Trujillo demanded many tributes, including “the occasional parade in which women were made to march and turn their heads and acknowledge the great man [Trujillo] as they passed the review stand” (*Something to Declare* 106). In the novel, Minerva has witnessed first-hand the effects of Trujillo’s advances on her schoolmate, Lina Lovatón, and she is determined not to become his next victim.

Even though she knows resisting his advances puts her life and the lives of her family members in danger, Minerva stands firm and physically resists Trujillo as she also speaks boldly against him. When Trujillo not so subtly implies that if Minerva were to study in the capital,

they could see each other on a regular basis by saying, “Perhaps I could conquer this jewel as El Conquistador conquered our island,” Minerva thinks, “This game has gone too far,” and she speaks out, replying straightforwardly, “I’m afraid I’m not for conquest” (Alvarez 99). Minerva is unwilling to comply with Trujillo’s sexual harassment, and she makes that plain to him. In her statement, she leaves no room for interpretation, no hint of being demure or playing coy.

Trujillo, however, is undeterred and further forces himself near her as they dance. Minerva narrates, “I push just a little against him so he’ll loosen his hold, but he pulls me tighter towards him” (Alvarez 100). She further refuses his advances, pushing away more, but he “pulls [her] aggressively to his body” (Alvarez 100). After she finally pushes so hard that he lets her go, citing his cherished medals as injuring her, Trujillo removes the sash of medals and asks Minerva suggestively, “Anything else bother you about my dress I could take off?” Minerva narrates her offense and rising indignation, saying, “He yanks me by the wrist, thrusting his pelvis at me in a vulgar way, and I can see my hand in a slow motion rise—a mind all its own—and come down on the astonished, made-up face” (Alvarez 100). Not only is Alvarez’s construction of Minerva’s language forceful and powerful, but her physical resistance toward Trujillo demonstrates her strength and resolve to stand firm against his advances.

While legend says the real Minerva Mirabal slapped Trujillo, many contest the truth of that claim, and Alvarez herself notes that “what you find in these pages are not the Mirabal sisters of fact...but the Mirabal sisters of [her] creation” (Alvarez 324). This scene in the novel, however, adds to Minerva’s characterization as a woman who will stand up for herself and take nothing from Trujillo, even though it is dangerous to spurn him. Despite her obvious boldness exhibited in this scene, Minerva is nonetheless riddled with terror at the thought of Trujillo’s reaction. She is certain that he will give orders for her to be taken away immediately. In the

rush of the torrential downpour that begins after she slaps him, as Trujillo “smirks” and seems to have “other plans for” her, Minerva is able to escape and leave the party with her family (Alvarez 101). Her fears are not assuaged, though, and her trepidation follows her home, as the next day she notes, “Every time it thunders we jump as if guards had opened fire on the house” (Alvarez 102). The threat of punishment and the unknown nature of how and when Trujillo’s retribution will arrive act as a lingering trauma for Minerva.

LIWC evaluation of Minerva’s narration of this scene reveals a high level of LIWC summary variables of analytic thinking and clout, coupled with a negative emotional tone overall, indicative of Minerva’s ability to maintain her composure and think strategically even in the face of danger. The LIWC summary variable of analysis is a composite of individual values in other categories, such as nouns, pronouns, and auxiliary verbs, where higher rates demonstrate formal or categorical thinking as evidenced in greater use of objects, prepositions, and concrete verbs instead of auxiliary verbs, adverbs, and interjections. Where average for personal writing samples in the LIWC2015 dictionary is 44.88, Minerva’s level of analysis in this passage rates a very high 75.03. Her thinking is clear and formal as she evaluates Trujillo’s behavior toward her and its potential consequences, weighing these consequences against the reprehensible possibility of compromising herself in the face of Trujillo’s demands. Also indicative of her confidence and straightforwardness, her clout in this section is a 41.37 where 37.02 is average, reminding readers of her leadership capabilities that have been evident throughout the text and that continue to build from this point. Like analytic thinking, clout is also a LIWC summary variable, and the algorithm generating its composite totals takes into account factors such as markers of tentativeness, like “maybe,” and status conveyed through pronoun use, such as “I” or “we.” High levels of clout are demonstrated through low levels of tentative language and higher

levels of the first-person plural pronoun “we.” Minerva is steadfast and straightforward in her narration of this scene, not demonstrating hesitance through the use of words like “perhaps.” Although Minerva is confident and maintains her ability to think strategically and analyze her situation, she is realistic, not positive, about her predicament. Her emotional tone is a very low 11.60 where 38.60 is average for personal writing in the LIWC2015 dictionary. The summary variable of emotional tone takes into account scores for both positive and negative emotion words. The scale is such that a number below 50 indicates a negative tone, and a number above 50 indicates a more positive tone. This negative tone can be seen through her use of words like “vehemence” (Alvarez 100) and her despair “going over and over” (Alvarez 102), realizing letters from Lío were hidden in the lining of her purse, which was left behind at the party and likely now in Trujillo’s hands, further incriminating her and her family for their involvement in the resistance. These linguistic findings affirm the characterization of Minerva as a confident leader, but they also humanize her as a woman who is worried about Trujillo and his over-reaching power to which she is not immune. Though she is brave and asserts herself against him, she understands that she will be subjected to consequences for her actions. Her recognition of Trujillo’s impending retaliation makes her assertiveness all the more admirable and risky, simultaneously, as readers see that she does not view herself as superhuman or invulnerable to his punishments, as the Minerva of legend’s creation may seem. The LIWC analysis findings, such as Minerva’s very low emotional tone, invite readers to consider the honesty and humanity portrayed through this character’s trauma testimony, as she wrestles with the negative reality of her situation while asserting her resilience against Trujillo. Despite the potential consequences for acting out against his advances and defying him by fleeing the dance, Minerva nonetheless stands up for herself and remains clear-headed in this moment of personal and sexual trauma.

Patria's Watershed Moment in the Mountains

In contrast to Minerva who is devoted to the revolution early on, Alvarez portrays Patria as divided between her love for the church and pursuit of freedom for her people. Eventually, however, her grief at the loss of her baby and her anger at God for taking that life nudge her toward action. While Patria's grief and anger simmer, propelling her to support Minerva and María Teresa in their efforts, it is her moment in the mountains where she sees a young man killed for the revolution that compels her to join them decisively. As she narrates this trauma, readers are drawn into the frantic immediacy of the moment, entangled in its juxtaposition of a calm, spiritual getaway consumed by the rapid violence of gunfire and danger engulfing their retreat house. Consistent with the deliberate and methodic decision-making readers have seen with Patria throughout the novel, as Alvarez portrays her narration of this traumatic scene, her levels of analysis and confidence are strikingly high. Her clout, which measures confidence and certainty expressed linguistically, is a very high 64.59, where 37.02 is average for a LIWC analysis of personal writing. Likewise, her analytical rate is a very high 74.92, where 44.88 is average. This invites readers to consider that Patria maintains composed memories of this trauma and that her memories are not cut off, fragmented, or dissociated, as trauma theorist Cathy Caruth and clinical psychologist Bessel van der Kolk claim occurs with traumatic memory (*Listening to Trauma* xiii; *The Body Keeps the Score* 66).

Patria recalls many sensory memories of this moment, noting the "horrible smell" and how her eyes stung from the smoke that filled the room after the explosions (Alvarez 161). Her observations of the gruesome scene are narrated with precision as she recalls seeing the young revolutionaries "clearly, their faces bloodied and frantic" (Alvarez 162). Even in these violent

moments, although she is terrified, she is nonetheless mindful enough to remember that she shouted, “Get down, son! Get down!” at the young man just before he was shot in the back (Alvarez 162). The memory of his face “as the life drained out of him” is further stamped in her mind, inviting readers to see that the scene of this heightened state of emotion is encoded in visceral detail in her memory, not to be lost or blurred in the trauma or confusion (Luckhurst 148). Although Luckhurst and van der Kolk assert that traumatic memory is “non-verbal and non-narrative” (Luckhurst 148), Patria’s narrative construction here of this watershed moment in the mountains challenges such claims, providing readers with an example of the power of testifying in narrative form to one’s trauma. As such, Patria’s representation of testimony, along with the testimonies of the other women narrators in this study, invite readers to see the possible clarifying, healing impact of expressing one’s trauma through narration and the ways in which such testimonies compel these women characters to survive in the wake of their trauma.

The lifetime of wrestling between her spiritual commitment and worldly concerns culminates in this watershed moment, as Alvarez portrays Patria as “a changed woman” when she comes home after this trauma (Alvarez 162). She narrates that she prays in order to avoid crying, but her “prayers sounded more like [she] was trying to pick a fight” when she says assertively to God, “I’m not going to sit back and watch my babies die, Lord, even if that’s what You in Your great wisdom decide” (Alvarez 162). The impact of this trauma is to push Patria and the others from the spiritual retreat directly into the revolution “with the fury of avenging angels” (Alvarez 163). In so doing, she turns her pain into action, as her group merges with her sisters’ group, and her house becomes “the motherhouse of the movement” (Alvarez 166). Patria is not crippled by this trauma, nor does she suppress its effects; rather she faces it straightforwardly and creates a cathartic outlet for her emotions through the actions of the

underground movement. Through the construction of this bold, decisive persona, Alvarez reminds readers that Patria is a woman of strength and devotion. Her religious devotion is now comingled with her revolutionary cause as she tells Pedrito, “[H]ow can we be true Christians and turn our back on our brothers and sisters” (Alvarez 166). The fear that her trauma could have induced instead produces a righteous indignation that compels Patria to revolutionary activity, inviting readers to witness Patria’s active response to her traumatic experience. By using her pain to bring about positive change, channeling the momentum of her adrenaline and horror into the revolution, Alvarez’s Patria reminds readers of what Pennebaker has noted, which is that trauma, although terrible, can “bring about the best” in survivors (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 123). In so doing, Alvarez’s Patria also pushes back against claims concerning the very definition of trauma. As Judith Herman has said, “Traumatic events...overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (33). Rather than being overwhelmed to the point of being unable to adapt to life any longer, Patria instead is portrayed as resilient, allowing this trauma to move her forward in new, powerful directions against the forces that have traumatized her.

María Teresa’s Torture in Prison

Like Patria witnessing a young revolutionary die in front of her, all of the Mirabal sisters endure great pain, but Alvarez portrays María Teresa as enduring a trauma that the others cannot fully share, yet because of her diary-keeping, readers are invited in as empathic witnesses to the gut-wrenching scene of her torture in prison. In the immediate aftermath of her trauma, María Teresa does not write about what happened, her silences entering her diary with the date marked as “Not sure what day it is” and lines like, “Still very weak, but the bleeding has stopped. I can’t bear to tell the story yet” (Alvarez 240). After a few days, she has the presence of mind

and strength to write, “You think you’re going to crack any day, but the strange thing is every day you surprise yourself by pulling it off, and suddenly you start feeling stronger, like maybe you are going to make it through this hell with some dignity, some courage,” but then she adds the seemingly impossible: “with some love still in your heart for the men who have done this to you” (Alvarez 241). With this line, Alvarez, through her character and real-life revolutionary of María Teresa, invites readers to remember the perseverance required for trauma survivors to push past their pain and move forward unencumbered by the terrible things they have endured. Unlike Patria who channels her anger toward revolutionary action, for María Teresa, part of her survival process involves the audacious task of reviving a feeling of human compassion toward her perpetrators so that her anger does not stifle her own emotional growth. These differences invite readers to consider the varied paths each woman takes in the wake of her trauma. In order to move forward wholeheartedly, Patria and María Teresa require different emotional experiences to activate their post-traumatic growth. Just as their traumas are different, so are their responses. Patria’s representation of testimony involves more anger, directed first at God and then at Trujillo, while María Teresa’s testimonial response calls more on her capacity to forgive the ones who have so deeply wronged her. Both women must approach their trauma on their own terms in the methods that will afford them the greatest amounts of liberation, as Patria’s anger and María Teresa’s compassion will move them toward their individual freedom.

A LIWC analysis of María Teresa’s expressive writing about her torture reveals high self-confidence in her representation of testimony and, understandably, a very low emotional tone, indicating negative emotions. Despite her conclusion that she must move forward with “love in her heart,” her narration of the events still conveys the negative emotions she experiences related to her assault, inviting readers to consider that she is holding in tension the

brutal reality of her torture and her higher order thinking that would propel her to maintain some semblance of positive emotion toward her assailants. María Teresa's high level of clout (51.93 where 37.02 is average) indicates her confidence in what she remembers, revealing for readers that she does not question her own memory of what happened, nor does she use hedging or markers of hesitancy like "maybe" or "might have" when describing things she is certain she experienced. As the LIWC algorithm for the summary variable of clout takes into account such markers of hesitancy and pronoun use to indicate status,²⁴ among other categories, María Teresa's above average composite total reveals her high levels of confidence. Despite her horrific treatment, María Teresa's certainty and status are unshaken. She remains strong and sure as she recalls her torture.

María Teresa has the lowest emotional tone, or the most negative, of all of the passages evaluated from the novel. Where 38.60 is average, María Teresa's emotional tone is a dramatically low 5.33, even lower than Dedé's very low emotional tone of 6.62 when she sees her sisters' bodies in the morgue. Although her pain in the moment and its aftermath is severe, Alvarez portrays María Teresa as speaking the so-called unspeakable in authoring this torture and maintaining authenticity in speaking about it in such harsh terms, calling her perpetrators "monsters," for example (Alvarez 255). In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry has asserted, "Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying" (19). However, Alvarez's construction of María Teresa defies these claims as readers are privy to her narration of her torture, and she does not permit the torture to rob her of her voice altogether. Alvarez's María Teresa further speaks back against Scarry's claims that the "physical pain [of torture] is able to

²⁴ Research by Kacewicz and Pennebaker indicates that high levels of first-person singular pronouns ("I") are often used by those with lower status, while people with higher status tend to use more plural first-person pronouns ("we"). These findings are represented in the LIWC2015 dictionary and algorithms for compiling summary variables, such as clout.

obliterate psychological pain because it obliterates all psychological content, painful, pleasurable, and neutral” (34). María Teresa is well aware of her physical and psychological pain, which readers bear witness to through her graphic narration of this horrific scene as she recalls bodily sensations and mental reactions. While readers may readily see María Teresa’s bravery in sharing such difficult content, understanding through a LIWC analysis that the underlying linguistic message conveys such a negative emotional tone underscores just how painful this narration is, thus amplifying her boldness and courage in sharing. Although María Teresa does not give this letter to the OAS Committee as Minerva urges her to, its inclusion in the text sets the reader up as María Teresa’s empathic witness instead, as the OAS Committee will never hear this testimony. Readers, therefore, are invited to complete the loop of testimony as María Teresa’s audience and bear witness to the torture that she and political prisoners like her endured in the harsh conditions under Trujillo’s reign.

Dedé Speaks as the Surviving Sister

While this part of María Teresa’s testimony goes unheard by the OAS Committee during their investigation into human rights abuses, Dedé’s representation of testimony to her sisters’ lives and deaths remains as a living testament, both for readers of the text and for the general public represented within the novel. As previously discussed, Dedé’s transformation from third-person narration to first-person narration is profound, both on a formal level in the text and also on a symbolic level for readers to witness her coming into her own voice to represent these trauma testimonies directly as the surviving sister.

One intense moment of trauma that Dedé narrates is seeing her sisters’ bodies in the morgue after their murders. Readers may be surprised at Dedé’s forcefulness and bold language

and action in this passage, as Dedé has been more removed and seemingly passive previously in the text, prone to worrying about her sisters but not getting involved directly. In this moment, readers are invited to consider trauma's impact on Dedé and how she responds with decisive action, filling the active role that her sisters typically filled. Dedé steps into this gap left by their absence and commands attention and action on her sisters' behalf. Her unflinching language and action can be seen when she insists upon seeing her sisters even as the guards refuse her entrance to the morgue, saying to the guards, "I'm going in there, even if I have to be the latest dead relative. Kill me, too, if you want. I don't care" (Alvarez 307). Her grief manifests in the form of this forceful action and then takes the shape of a caretaker, as she washes and dresses them.

Unlike María Teresa's representation of the testimony of her assault where she exhibits a high degree of certainty of what happened, demonstrating the trauma has not clouded her memory of the details of the assault, Dedé's experience in this moment is less clear in memory. She narrates, "I cannot remember half the things I cried out when I saw them" (Alvarez 307). This is registered in a LIWC analysis through Dedé's levels of clout and authenticity. While above the average of 37.02, her rate of clout is 45.89, slightly lower than María Teresa's level of 51.93, indicative of María Teresa's confidence and Dedé's slight doubt over her actions. Further, her level of authenticity, which measures honesty and candor, is below average—58.31 where 76.01 is average—lower than all of her sisters' levels of authenticity.²⁵ These differences highlight the sisters' differing responses to trauma and invite readers to consider that as Alvarez portrays them, trauma does not impact the sisters in the same ways, nor are they processed and narrated in the same manner. The differences underscore the necessity for multiple perspectives

²⁵ The algorithm for the LIWC summary variable of authenticity takes into account the individual's references to self and others, as well as markers of cognitive processing and emotion words, as Newman, Pennebaker, et al have found that honest individuals refer to themselves and others more frequently than do lying individuals. They are also more likely to use higher levels of cognitive markers, such as "think" and "know," and fewer negative emotion words.

of trauma theory that allow for the healing impact of trauma testimonies, instead of emphasizing trauma's so-called inexpressibility. As Alvarez's Mirabal sisters do not testify in the same manner to their shared traumatic experiences, they reveal the plural possibilities of transforming one's trauma into anger-motivated activism, compassion, forgiveness, and history-keeping, all while moving forward with strength and courage in the midst of oppressive personal and political conditions.

Further indicative of the varying impact of trauma, Dedé's final passage in the novel, as she comes to terms with her status as "the one who survived to tell the story" and says a type of goodbye to her sisters' lingering spiritual presence (Alvarez 321), demonstrates much higher levels of analysis, positive emotion, and overall emotional tone than Alvarez's depiction of Dedé seeing her sisters in the morgue. Dedé's level of the LIWC summary variable of authenticity is a high 84.42, higher than the average of 76.01 and much higher than her level of 58.31 for the previously analyzed scene. This level of authenticity is higher than any of the sisters' scenes, giving the impression that, as Alvarez presents her, Dedé is not filtering her thoughts here but is being fully herself, honest and candid with the reader. She uses many first-person pronouns and markers of complex cognitive processing, such as her strong verb choices and fluid descriptions of her sisters. Further, her positive emotions, though still below the average of 2.57, are higher in this passage, measuring 1.59 while the previous passage is a strikingly low 0.34. Given the heartbreaking nature of both of these scenes, it stands to reason that positive emotions would be low. The increase from the scene in the morgue to this final scene invites readers to consider that the time and space Dedé has experienced in the years since the initial shock of seeing her sisters' bodies have allowed her some sense of healthy closure that enables her to express positive and negative emotions about this lingering trauma. As she thinks of her sisters, Alvarez

portrays her as saying that she often hears “[t]heir soft spirit footsteps” as she falls asleep at night (Alvarez 321), reminding readers that she carries her sisters’ presence with her even though it has been decades since they passed. She characterizes their footsteps, as though “even as spirits they retained their personalities, Patria’s sure and measured step, Minerva’s quicksilver impatience, Mate’s playful little skip” (Alvarez 321). She has not moved on since their passing, in the sense of forgetting or leaving their memories behind, but she has moved forward, bringing them into her present life. On this particular night, however, Dedé notes that “it is quieter than I can remember” (Alvarez 321), inviting readers to consider that the sisters’ spiritual presence is fading as Dedé comes to terms with life without them, noting not only their absence, but also the physical absence of her left breast, which she lost to cancer. Dedé says, “My hand worries the absence on my left side, a habitual gesture now. My pledge of allegiance, I call it, to all that is missing” (Alvarez 321). While a reference to what is literally missing from her body, this “pledge of allegiance” likely also refers to the more symbolic absence that her sisters’ deaths represent. As the survivor, Dedé is the only one who is not missing, the only one who remains to tell their stories.

While she begins her journey as their storyteller with some reluctance, as evidenced in her third-person point of view, her move to first-person shows readers her ownership of this new role. Furthermore, her acknowledgement in the novel’s final line that “something is missing now” as she remembers her family members who have already passed culminates with, “And I count them all twice before I realize—it’s me, Dedé, it’s me, the one who survived to tell the story” (Alvarez 321). In acknowledging she is missing from this memory, Dedé conversely realizes she is the only one remaining, thus bearing the responsibility to speak for the dead. As she does, she also speaks for herself, adding her personal grief to the public story of the murder

of the Mirabal sisters, the nation's Butterflies who were much more than legends to this surviving sister.

Novel as Historical Revision

Like their women characters, each of the novels explored in this dissertation is a survivor. In the literal meaning of the term, these novels have survived the production process and clichéd test of time, reprinted numerous times in the twenty years the texts have been available. In a more figurative use of the term, the novels have survived to depict alternative versions of history. Although they do not conform to the dominant—often male—interpretations of history that have widely been recorded in official discourse and history textbooks, they have withstood the pressure to conform, and they continue to increase in popularity. *In the Time of the Butterflies*, specifically, is even on many high school required reading lists, including the list for my home state, Indiana.

What is so remarkable about these texts is their construction of women's experiences and the ways in which women characters demonstrate power through their language. The women characters exert their strength through narrating the novels' events in their own words, and they are literal survivors who are capable of testifying to their experiences and the experiences of those who did not survive. By explicitly addressing their own silencing, the women characters in these novels shatter that silence and speak boldly of their collective histories. As Ruth Behar has argued, "The revolution against Trujillo Alvarez depicts is the individual revolution taking place in the hearts of each of the Mirabal sisters, who at different times, for different reasons and in different ways, join the common struggle to liberate their nation and their psyches from the power of dictators" (6). Through the focalization of these individual women characters and their

narration, readers glimpse a sampling of testimonies from those who suffered under Trujillo's reign, bringing these historical events to light in front of a large reading public.

As they recount their own silencing and simultaneously subvert that oppression by speaking out, the women liberate not only themselves, but also men who are oppressed under dictatorships. The Mirabal sisters of *In the Time of the Butterflies* are concerned with their husbands' freedom as much as they are their own liberty and safety. They seek to bring down Trujillo's regime out of concern for all those who are afflicted—men and women—not just the women he subjugates. In liberating themselves and bringing to light their stories of oppression, the Mirabal sisters reveal atrocities that men who opposed Trujillo also suffered. They add the stories of these men to the collective history just as they include the histories of silenced women.

Upon visiting her husband in prison, Minerva Mirabal says, "Our mood changed considerably when we were finally ushered into that dim, familiar hall. The men looked thinner, their eyes desperate in their pale faces" (Alvarez 268). Minerva's description of the men captures the toll that imprisonment has taken on them. Later, she notes, "Manolo pulled and pulled at his ear, a nervous habit he developed in prison. It moved me to see him so nakedly affected by his long months of suffering" (Alvarez 293). Minerva tells of her own pain and trials, as well as the anguish her husband and sisters' husbands are enduring because of Trujillo. She captures not only her own torment but also the collective, pervasive agony throughout the nation under Trujillo's rule.

While novels like *The Farming of Bones* and *In the Time of the Butterflies* are based on factual historical accounts, re-telling these histories through the eyes and words of women deconstructs and simultaneously *reconstructs* the history surrounding the events. April Shemak says that the voices of the Mirabal sisters "testify to the regime's oppression as well as disrupt

the linear patriarchal construction of history” (84). By inserting stories of their experiences into the already existing versions that were told in government (and man) controlled publications, Alvarez’s Mirabal sisters overcome oppression as it presents itself in the form of man-centered depictions of history. Kelli Lyon Johnson speaks of the new collective memory that Alvarez creates through *In the Time of the Butterflies*, saying, “The collective memory...reveals national identity and history through women’s eyes in stark contrast to masculinist versions of history and traditional historical memory, which focus on the lives, actions, decisions, deaths, and wars of men” (Alvarez 79). Although the Mirabal sisters’ lives, imprisonments, and deaths are directly connected to the masculine forces of power, their experiences are uniquely theirs, and in exposing their woman-centered perspectives which have survived in these texts, they provide an alternative to the traditionally accepted phallogocentric discourses of history.

One important way these two novels explored in Chapters 1 and 2 reconstruct the history of Hispaniola is by speaking against Trujillo’s regime through their testimonies of women’s experiences. During the historical time frames in which Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* are set, Trujillo’s voice is the ultimate authority. Because the voices of silenced and oppressed women are the authority in these novels, the stories defy the once-dominant forces of the Trujillato. Charlotte Rich writes, “The various voices within Alvarez’s novels challenge such a [monologic] representation of reality, and in their decentralizing, centrifugal emphasis, they serve to both humanize the mythic Mirabal sisters and to speak subversively in response to the official discourse of Trujillo’s regime” (179). Although many still revere Trujillo as a great leader, Alvarez and Danticat’s novels continue in the important and arduous work of exploring the truth and far-reaching ramifications of his dictatorship and ethnic cleansing. Because of the women’s voices in these novels, Trujillo is no

longer the all-powerful entity he sought to be; instead, the stories of the Haitians he murdered in 1937 and the Dominicans he tortured and killed in 1960 rival Trujillo's authority and truth.

Conclusion

By subverting the authority of Trujillo's regime and speaking out against its forces, the Mirabal sisters and Amabelle in Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* discussed in Chapter 1, threaten the power that Trujillo and his legacy hold. According to bell hooks,

For us (oppressed women), true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act—as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced. (8)

Although Trujillo attempted various methods, including death, to silence ethnic Haitians like Amabelle and Dominicans like the Mirabal sisters, his attempts were unsuccessful, as Danticat and Alvarez have written their stories into the collective memory of Hispaniola.

Rewriting history to be inclusive of the experiences of women is a noteworthy accomplishment and a step toward resisting and rejecting hegemonic, phallogocentric interpretations of history. According to sociolinguist Dale Spender,

Just as the meanings of history and literature are lost, so too are the meanings of the language (to which history and literature are both confined). Women have 'made' just as much 'history' as men, but it has not been codified and transmitted; women have probably done just as much writing as men but it has not been preserved; and women, no doubt, have generated as many meanings as men, but these have not survived. Where meanings of women have been discontinuous with the male version of reality they have not been retained. Whereas we have inherited the accumulated meanings of male experience, the meanings of our female ancestors have frequently disappeared. (53)

In the Time of the Butterflies and *The Farming of Bones*—along with the other two novels in this study, *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Rapture of Canaan*—validate the experiences of women as historically important. The women's narration provides meanings for the language they use as

women and gives credence to their representations of trauma testimonies. These novels demonstrate that there are many interpretations of the history and trauma of Hispaniola and that women's experiences should not—and will not—be discredited or unaccounted for. Their varied methods of testifying to trauma, moving from third-person to first-person, keeping a written diary, constructing deliberately bold outward personas, and channeling anger and devotion from religion to the revolution, provide evidence for the necessity of pluralistic interpretations of literary trauma theory, like those asserted by Laurie Vickroy and Michele Balaev. The Mirabal sisters' testimonies as portrayed by Alvarez move far beyond trauma's fragmentation and dissociation and emphasize instead the post-traumatic growth potential of narrativizing trauma. Their stories of this historical moment outlast the regime that tried to silence them and persist for generations of empathic witnesses to be invited to enter into this literary record of their suffering and survival, illustrating the power of their representations of trauma testimonies to compel their survival and simultaneously shape future encounters with this era of Hispaniola's history.

Chapter 3: *The Poisonwood Bible*: Trauma Testimonies Portray Personalities

Introduction

Published in 1998 but set in the Belgian Congo in 1960, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* is the story of five women who endure the oppressive influence of Nathan Price, a Baptist preacher from Bethlehem, Georgia, four of whom survive to tell about it. While *The Poisonwood Bible* takes place in a setting apart from the Trujillo dictatorship explored in Chapters 1 and 2, it is similar to both *The Farming of Bones* and *In the Time of the Butterflies* in that it, too, is the story of women who survived the confines of a male dictatorship. Like Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*, *The Poisonwood Bible* uses alternating narrative perspectives of women protagonists, offering readers woman-centric interpretations of history and experiences of trauma and resilience. Similar to Sheri Reynolds's *The Rapture of Canaan* explored in Chapter 4, *The Poisonwood Bible* is concerned with the implications of religious-based trauma and the intersections of patriarchy and religious legalism. As Kingsolver portrays them, the women in this novel are governed by their conservative religious beliefs, domineering father, and oppressive cultural conventions and expectations of womanhood. Their journeys throughout this novel give evidence of their myriad attempts to rid themselves of these overlapping subjugations and create their own independent futures, with debatable levels of success.

In this text, Kingsolver combines her passion for political activism with the craft of creating a novel as she gives life to the fictional characters of *The Poisonwood Bible*.

Kingsolver, who spent a small portion of her childhood in the Congo, is quick to clarify that her

novel is in no way autobiographical.²⁶ It is, instead, more of a political statement, denouncing the actions of the American government as they relate to the United States' involvement in the Congo's independence. For this reason, Kingsolver chose not to give a narrative voice to the main male character of the novel. The events that unfold in the Congo as a result of Nathan's decisions are seen through the eyes of the women they most strongly affect. They are also a critique of the larger historical circumstances surrounding Congo's struggle for independence from colonialism. As Anne Marie Austenfeld has argued,

The five female, American narrative voices offer a feminist alternative, first, to historical writing, which tends to be male-centered, focusing on political and military events and key public figures, second, to male-written and narrated European fiction about Africa, typified by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and third, to the technically conventional use of a third person narrator found even in thematically African works such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. (294)

Kingsolver's text, in breaking from these conventions, establishes a non-normative narrative perspective and invites readers to consider larger historical concerns in miniature from the small world of the women of one family transplanted from Georgia to Kilanga on the edge of independence. When asked why she deliberately chose not to provide Nathan with a narratorial voice, Kingsolver replies by drawing a parallel between the stubborn Nathan Price and the controlling U.S. influence. On her official website, she says, "We got pulled into this mess but we don't identify with the arrogant voice. It's not his story. It's ours." The story of Nathan's conquest is not his to tell; it is, rather, a story for the ones he conquered—the ones who finally have a way to voice their triumph over oppression and testify to the trauma they survived. Kingsolver's fictional text provides this liberatory voice, a testimony of triumph for the Price women as they part from Nathan and an allegorical triumph for Congo, shaking herself from the

²⁶ Kingsolver includes an Author's Note at the start of her text, the first lines of which are, "This is a work of fiction. Its principal characters are pure inventions with no relations on this earth, as far as I know. But the Congo in which I placed them is genuine" (ix).

shackles of Belgian colonial rule. These struggles for independence are not without their complications and troubling aftermath, but the trauma narratives of the Price women nonetheless articulate the beauty that can be shaped from the ashes of struggle as each woman finds her own way to walk away from Nathan's controlling influence. With their unique voices, readers are invited into the different worlds the Price women create from their shared circumstances. Given the diversity in their linguistic expressions and the experiences they choose as young adults and adults, readers are invited to witness the varying impacts of trauma testimony. Some of the women, namely twins Leah and Adah, are depicted as healing and growing more from their trauma, as evidenced in and due in large part to their robust representations of trauma narratives that analyze their pasts and acknowledge the positive moments alongside the devastatingly negative ones. Others, primarily the eldest daughter Rachel but in moments Orleanna, too, get stuck in a loop of self-absorption or crippling guilt that hinders their progress. With these varying examples, readers are invited to see the different paths possible for these women in the aftermath of their experiences and are invited to consider the implications of testimony to these women's ability to survive and thrive.

Orleanna, Nathan's wife, and each of their four daughters narrate chapters within the seven sections of Kingsolver's novel. The women each have a distinct voice and unique perspective on the family's daily life in the village of Kilanga. Austenfeld appropriately notes the importance of these narrative perspectives, saying of *The Poisonwood Bible*, "[T]he ordinary person is the most important person, and each narrator serves not only as a focal vehicle for telling the story, but also as a determining agent whose choices of whom and what to include in her portion of the story shape the overall message and thematic slant of the entire work" (294). As each woman narrator conveys her experience, readers are invited into differently portrayed

versions of the same scene, evoking different emotions, details, and characterizations. Rachel, the oldest daughter, is preoccupied with thoughts of missing out on a typical, American sweet sixteen party and says, “All I want is to go home, and start scrubbing the deep-seated impurities of the Congo out of my skin” (Kingsolver 178). Ruth May, the youngest, enjoys being mischievous and exploring the village, even breaking her arm when she falls from a tree after spying on Belgian soldiers marching through the area. Twins Leah and Adah narrate longer sections of the novel, and both are concerned with how their family’s presence in the Congo will affect larger-scale relations between the villagers and outsiders. Leah is eager to learn the language and customs of the people of Kilanga, and she tries to assimilate herself into their way of life as much as possible. She writes, “I wish the people back home reading magazine stories about dancing cannibals could see something as ordinary as Anatole’s clean white shirt and kind eyes” (Kingsolver 235). Just as Leah seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the people of Kilanga, her sister Adah is introspective and contemplative about their experience there. She muses about the perception of her family, writing, “We Prices are altogether thought to be peculiarly well-intentioned and inane....It is a special kind of person who will draw together a congregation, stand up before them with a proud, clear voice, and say words wrong, week after week” (Kingsolver 213). Adah recognizes the importance of language in dividing her family from the people of Kilanga. She also writes of the significance of naming, “If you assign the wrong names to things, you could make a chicken speak like a man. Make a machete rise up and dance” (Kingsolver 213). Nathan Price, bent on bringing salvation—at any cost—to the people of Kilanga, is unconcerned with his linguistic errors, errors that are in fact preventing him from reaching the very villagers he is trying to save.²⁷

²⁷ For further reading on Nathan’s linguistic missteps during his sermons, see Nathan Kilpatrick’s article: “Singing a New Song From the Conqueror’s Music: Religious Hybridity in *The Poisonwood Bible*.” *Religion and Literature*,

As Kingsolver portrays her, Orleanna, like her daughters, testifies to her husband's shortcomings, but unlike her daughter's narration, Orleanna's chapters are filled with more guilt than plain observation or thoughtful introspection. She writes, "Maybe you still can't understand why I stayed so long. I've nearly finished with my side of the story, and I still feel your small round eyes looking down on me" (Kingsolver 383). These eyes looking down are later revealed to be a reference to her daughter, Ruth May, but readers are invited through the use of second-person "you" to enter into this guilt as well, holding Orleanna responsible as she blames herself. She speaks of being married not only to Nathan, but also to his will (Kingsolver 210). She feels a strong sense of responsibility for her family's demise in the Congo, but, as Nathan's occupied territory, she is powerless to stop him from taking their family overseas. As she unravels her story and expresses her voice apart from his, she develops the strength to leave him, evidence of the crucial role of testimony in overcoming trauma.

The women narrators in this novel, like those in *The Farming of Bones*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, and *The Rapture of Canaan*, demonstrate—contrary to what literary trauma theorists, Cathy Caruth and Elaine Scarry have claimed—that trauma can be spoken, pain is not wholly unspeakable, and healing and survival come through testifying to what has been endured. They demonstrate their inner strength through their outward linguistic expressions which bear witness to trauma and convey their individual identities. Susan Strehle aptly notes of the Price women,

They fulfill the potential of their first-person narratives, whether these are understood as interior monologues or journal entries, to use language to think for themselves about the meanings in their experience. In the process of finding words to tell their stories, they move away from simple binary opposites and into the mazed world of complex alternatives. Rejecting their father's arrogant claim to speak for God, together with their nation's imperialist presumption to decide for other peoples, these children of exceptionalism speak only for themselves. (426)

As they express their voices, the daughters and Orleanna subvert Nathan's oppression and control, carving out their own space to speak against him. In so doing, they resist his will, which intends to silence and speak for them. While their oppression is personal and patriarchal, different in part from the political oppression experienced in *The Farming of Bones* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*, they are nonetheless stifled and abused by the force of Nathan Price in their lives. Leah Milne argues that Kingsolver elevates "the rendering of voice and perspective... indicat[ing] the significance of renaming and re-inscribing through language" (354). Indeed, the Price women rename their individual experiences of oppression and survival and depict for readers their individual truths and triumphs. By evaluating their varied experiences through textual analysis and the tool of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) developed by expressive writing founder James Pennebaker, we can see distinctions in their responses to trauma. These variations demonstrate that trauma is encoded and expressed in ways that are unique to each character yet consistent with that individual's core self and personality as communicated throughout the novel. Although the Price sisters have shared experiences and similar upbringings, the ways they narrate and react to trauma differ from woman to woman, indicating that a monolithic interpretation of literary trauma theory will not suffice for these characters. Michelle Balaev contends that contemporary literary trauma theory, with which my investigation aligns, achieves ends that are limited by the "classic model" of literary trauma theory often credited to first-wave trauma theorists like Caruth and Scarry (*Contemporary Approaches* 7). She adds, "Rather than claiming that language fails to represent trauma, pluralistic approaches consider linguistic relationships but not at the expense of forgetting that trauma occurs to actual people, in specific bodies, located within particular time periods and places" (*Contemporary Approaches* 7). Expansive theoretical approaches can

encompass the textual analysis of trauma testimonies, to the benefit of broadening and moving forward contemporary literary trauma theory. Inclusive interpretations of trauma theory that are both elastic and nuanced are necessary to understand their experiences, processing methods, and personal growth. Such flexible and expansive interpretations generate more robust understandings of the role of trauma in this novel and the varied impact of narrating trauma experiences. As such, diverse versions of literary trauma theory will allow readers to consider the unique futures that are present and possible in contemporary women's literature. The Price women and their varied paths to healing and expressions thereof are merely one example of this liberatory potential²⁸ in such nuanced literary trauma theory.

The Novel's Scholarly and Popular Appeal

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* has received much critical and popular recognition, broadening its reach and simultaneously opening it to a wide mix of praise and disapproval. When Oprah named it as one of her book club selections in 2000, the novel's recognition increased to reach to a vast popular audience, extending its time on bestseller lists. Unlike 1997 Oprah's Book Club selection *The Rapture of Canaan*, which is discussed in Chapter 4, *The Poisonwood Bible* has garnered more scholarly attention despite its popular appeal.

Much of the scholarly attention surrounding *The Poisonwood Bible* tends to interrogate the categories of colonialism, gender, or spirituality within the novel. Some of the nuanced criticism concerning the role of religion in the novel includes Mary Jean DeMarr's observations

²⁸ My use of the term "liberatory potential" is an homage to Angelyn Mitchell's use of the term "liberatory narrative," which she defines in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* as "a contemporary novel that engages the historical period of chattel slavery in order to provide new methods of liberation by problematizing the concept of freedom" (4). By using this term, I extend that these narratives of trauma are revolutionary in problematizing trauma's supposed unspeakable-ness and charting new, individual paths to healing and freedom for the Price women.

that “[t]he two eldest daughters, Rachel and Leah, bear the biblical names of two sisters who are both married to the same man” (130) and that the “apocryphal ‘Song of the Three Children’ is a passage containing a hymn sung by three male youths (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego)” (140). Readers need not know these biblical allusions to find the novel accessible or moving, but given these two connections, among others, readers are invited to recognize possible ways these stories are being rewritten in Kingsolver’s references to them. Instead of the voices of three male figures, Kingsolver’s revision takes the perspective of three young women, Rachel, Leah, and Adah. Instead of retelling the story of the three men’s salvation from King Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace, the three Price women speak of surviving Nathan Price’s fiery furnace of their failed African mission, and they now walk in freedom apart from him, as their adult lives have taken them in separate directions from him and one another. Another scholar has argued for Kingsolver’s text as critiquing what he refers to as the “Christian resurgence” of the 1990s. Christopher Douglas asserts that the resurgence of Christianity in U.S., as evidenced in the culture wars of the 1980s, continues to be referenced in Kingsolver’s text, which was written in the 1990s. He claims that “the novel invites us to read its tale about African missions during the Cold War as a commentary on the indigenous conservative Christian resurgence in the US already producing a backlash in the ‘second aftershock’ of the 1990s, enabling us to perceive that the resurgence and multiculturalism were mutually entangled responses to the civil rights movement” (144). Given this lens, readers may consider the biblical parallels and allusions as more allegorical for American culture and religiosity, which Douglas extends are also indicative of the ethnocentricity of the West.

In addition to interpreting the novel through the lens of its plentiful biblical allusions, a smaller subset of criticism unpacks the role of disability, as it is depicted through the character of

Adah and in the village of Kilanga, such as the work of Stephen D. Fox and Jeanna Fuston White.²⁹ Both scholars interestingly conclude that the cultural perceptions surrounding disability impact Adah's self-conception throughout the text. Where her differing ability is viewed as a deficiency in the United States, in Kilanga, she is perceived as fully capable. Fuston White aptly notes, "Without a standard of normalcy, the imperfection of bodies is not the basis for disabling social exclusion" (137). Her observation that "*impairment* is common but *disability* is absent" in Kilanga (Fuston White 141, emphasis in original) further sharpens the contrast between life in the U.S. and life in the Congo, inviting readers to consider Adah's oppression and liberation through this lens of her varying abilities in different cultural contexts.

In addition to using the framework of disability studies for scholarly work concerning *The Poisonwood Bible*, comparisons to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are plentiful, but most scholars, such as Pamela Demory, are quick to use Conrad's text as an example of patriarchal, Anglo-centric fiction that Kingsolver's contemporary text reimagines, revises, or speaks back to in a way that centers Congolese and women's experiences, albeit through an obvious Anglo lens. Some, such as Héloïse Meire, astutely interpret Kingsolver's text as a feminist response to Conrad's novel. Meire claims that "Kingsolver's novel exemplifies the feminist revisionist historical novel," but she adds that "this Western feminist revision of the Congo's history remains, like *Heart of Darkness*, a critique of the West rather than a voice for the Congolese" (80). As such, Kingsolver's novel maintains the dominant position of Western, often White, interpretations instead of subverting this perspective. However, Kristin J. Jacobson has claimed that Kingsolver's text is a "neodomesic novel," and "[b]y acknowledging the white

²⁹ Fox asserts that Adah's disability is viewed as more normative in Kilanga, where "it is assumed given the harshness of this life, everyone will be disabled in some way, sooner or later" (408), and therefore, she "is not marked as different, and her inclusion allows her to pursue selfhood when she returns home" (408-9). He poignantly concludes that "disability is accepted here [in Kilanga] as alternate ability" (409).

middle-class home's reliance on an Africanist presence and its role in the reproduction of white privilege, neodomestic novels destabilize the model American home" (234). This destabilization, while potentially disconcerting to traditionalists who hold to antiquated interpretations of "the model American home," moves Kingsolver's venture forward into territory where it is more concerned with exploring the tension of exploiting the Africanist presence for white gain, which the Prices must do once their wide gaps in self-reliance and survival are laid bare in Kilanga.

Given the novel's Western perspective, however, some critics claim that Kingsolver's work maintains an essentialist view of Africa and is guilty of the very structures it appears to attempt to dismantle. Critics, like William F. Purcell, point to Kingsolver's use of texts like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a source of information during her writing of the novel as evidence of her conflation of Congolese culture with Nigerian culture to be represented generally as African culture, as though an entire continent could have one collective, monolithic culture.³⁰ These criticisms are not without merit, and readers would be wise to approach the novel with such claims in mind. Other scholars, such as Anne Marie Austenfeld, view Kingsolver's depiction "of the birth of the Republic of Congo" in a more forgiving light. She asserts of Kingsolver, "[S]he delivers what history books rarely do: examples of how a variety of individual human beings act and are acted upon every day in the context of rapid and difficult social, political, and economic changes" (294). With Kingsolver's fictional portrayal, readers are invited to question hegemonic historical interpretations of this moment in history and its implications, including U.S. involvement in the assassination of democratically-elected

³⁰ Purcell, William F. "Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and the Essentializing of Africa: A Critical Double Standard?" *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37 no.5, Nov. 2007.

Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba.³¹ Historian Diane Kunz surmises, “Washington saw it very simply: Lumumba was either a stooge that Soviet agents would manipulate or he was a Communist. Either explanation justified American intervention” (294). Kingsolver’s fictional account provides readers with an impetus to interrogate this historical moment with documents that have since been declassified, allowing readers the chance to question American motives and involvement.³² Though the text still privileges Western modes of thinking and evaluating and critiquing mid-century family life and history, Kingsolver offers readers a glimpse, albeit imperfect, into one fictional family’s journey, trials, triumphs, and failures in this critical time in Congo’s history. Despite its potential shortcomings and complications, nonetheless, I assert that Kingsolver’s novel provides a stimulating woman-centered exploration of trauma’s diverse impact and the healing potential in the various methods of testimony she portrays through her multiple narrators.

The Voices of the Silenced Wife and Daughters

In the beginning, was the word, and the word was with Nathan, and the word was Nathan—at least to the Price women. The voices of “Nathan’s women” disappear when Nathan’s voice is asserted. Domineering Southern Baptist preacher, Nathan Price, pays no heed to anyone’s voice other than his own, and his daughters and wife pay a high price with their

³¹ For more information on Lumumba’s assassination, see Marouf Hasian Jr. and Rulon Wood’s “Traumatic Realism and Sublime Decolonization: Remembering the Mass-Media Representations of King Baudoin’s and Patrice Lumumba’s Speeches on Congolese Independence Day, June 30, 1960” *Controversia*, vol. 6 no.2, 2000, pp. 15-44. Susan Strehle’s essay “Chosen People: American Exceptionalism in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*” *Critique*, vol. 49 no. 4, 2008, pp. 413-428 also details American financial support for Joseph Mobutu—Lumumba’s successor—and U.S. complicity in Lumumba’s assassination out of misplaced fears of “a communist takeover” of Congo, “leaving the American-supported Mobutu to enjoy thirty-six years of despotic ‘kleptocracy’ from which the Congo has not yet recovered (Berkeley 111; Wrong)” (416). The 2000 film *Lumumba*, directed by Haitian filmmaker, Raoul Peck, also provides a compelling version of the events surrounding Lumumba’s death.

³² Pertaining to U.S. “Cold War Era” fears, in her essay “White Men in Africa: On Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*,” from *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America’s Past (and Each Other)*, historian Diane Kunz writes, “That Lumumba might allow the Soviets control of a key African nation outweighed the fact that he was legally elected prime minister of the Congo” (290).

silence. Daughter Adah writes, “I am the one who does not speak. Our father speaks for all of us, as far as I can see” (Kingsolver 32). Adah recognizes that her spoken voice cannot be as powerful as her father’s, as far as he is concerned, and because of this, she remains mute for a large part of her life and chooses writing, instead, as a means of self-expression. As such, her written voice can carry more weight than her spoken voice because it is not drowned out or interrupted by the fury of Nathan’s diatribes.

Indeed, the journey from silence to sound is one that multiple characters undergo in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Two of Nathan’s daughters, Adah and Leah, and his wife, Orleanna, all struggle to find their voices in the midst of Nathan’s dominance—and succeed. While they are under his rule, these women are all fearful to stand up to him, fail to oppose him when they know he is wrong, and lose themselves as they lose their voices. Their situation is not without hope, however. When these women begin to assert themselves against Nathan, they start to speak out and grapple with finding stronger voices to use in opposition to or apart from Nathan. The eldest daughter, Rachel, however is not portrayed to the same degree of strong or assertive as her sisters and mother, and her narrative voice and life choices are evidence of this lack of power and freedom throughout the text.

Convinced he is answering a call from God, Nathan drags his family from their home in Bethlehem, Georgia to be missionaries in the Belgian Congo during the Congo’s struggle for independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Given his missional focus, Nathan often conveys a myopic view that excludes the well-being of his family at the expense of his zeal to convert the villagers of Kilanga to his form of Christianity. His religion further acts as a source of oppression for his wife and daughters. Nathan Kilpatrick asserts, however, that the Price women “undergo distinctly religious transformations that problematize Nathan’s colonizing

religious rhetoric and replace it with a plurality of religious language that seeks to speak the truth of their experiences in the Congo” (85). Their representations of testimony, I extend, do use their own particular brands of spirituality and methods of conveying their unique experiences, and in so testifying, they overcome various pieces of their oppression even as their lives are often in peril. Constantly unconcerned for the safety of well-being of his family, Nathan does not heed advice of previous missionaries when they warn him he should leave during the Congo’s fight for independence. Nathan’s stubborn act of selfishness angers Orleanna because she fears for the health of her daughters, particularly that of her youngest, Ruth May, who is suffering from malaria. Orleanna feels she must choose between her daughters and her husband, and ultimately, after much tragedy and trauma, she chooses her children, perhaps because she feels guilty for not having stood up to Nathan before, perhaps because she truly hopes for a more liberated future for her surviving daughters.

Orleanna’s liberation is marked by profound changes in her speech that are evident and encouraging to her surviving daughters. Of Orleanna’s empowerment, Leah narrates, “She (Orleanna) was now inclined to say whatever was on her mind right in front of God and everybody. Even Father. She didn’t speak to him directly; it was more like she was talking straight to God....She declared she was taking us out of here as soon as she found a way to do it” (Kingsolver 243). As Leah sees it, when Orleanna finally has the strength to usurp Nathan, she speaks her mind in front of him, and going one step beyond that, she bypasses him and speaks to his authority—God. Her act of leaving him says that she will no longer allow her voice to be silenced by him. Nathan Kilpatrick asserts that Orleanna’s newfound forthrightness demonstrates that her “acquired linguistic ability is her version of religion,” adding that “[t]he African context, which marks her with malaria, teaches her to speak up for herself in a way that

Georgian Christianity denies” (98). Orleanna’s experience of trauma with sickness and Ruth May’s death provide the impetus for her bold new ways of speaking. Orleanna states, “Nathan was something that happened to us, as devastating in its way as the burning roof that fell of the family Mwanza; with our fate scarred by hell and brimstone, we still had to track our course. And it happened finally by the grace of hell and brimstone that I had to keep moving. I moved, and he stood still” (Kingsolver 384). After the death of Ruth May, Orleanna takes her daughters and starts walking. She walks away from Nathan, confident that he will not follow.

Kingsolver eloquently portrays Orleanna’s struggle to assert her own independence and leave her domineering husband, inviting readers to contend with the complexity and tension in Orleanna’s conflicting duties as wife and mother. As a robust character wrestling with these tensions, readers are further reminded of the significance of Orleanna’s eventual transformation. When she decides to save her daughters’ lives instead of clinging to her husband, she is also ridding herself of the metaphorical chains Nathan has put on her. Elaine Ognibene speaks of Orleanna this way: “Free of Nathan’s control, she chooses to speak and in voice comes redemption” (23). The act of telling her story proves to encourage Orleanna’s personal growth and development apart from Nathan’s oppressive forces. Ognibene says, “For Orleanna, telling her story is a syncretic process, as she aims to reconcile what has gone before” (24). Orleanna comes to terms with her own actions that led to her family’s demise in the Congo, and she realizes the freedom that comes in leaving her abusive husband. Her freedom, in turn, leads to an increase in freedom for her surviving daughters as she removes them from Nathan’s influence. Orleanna says, “Plain and simple, that was the source of our exodus: I had to keep moving. I didn’t set out to leave my husband. Anyone can see I should have, long before, but I never did know how” (Kingsolver 383). Orleanna may not have known how to leave her

husband, but she knew that she could not stand still after Ruth May's death from the green mamba bite. She goes on to comment, "For women like me, it seems, it's not ours to take charge of the beginnings and endings...Let men write those stories. I can't. I only know the middle ground where we lived our lives" (Kingsolver 383). It is this middle ground that Orleanna narrates during her passages in the novel, articulating her descriptions through the lens of her female experience. Through her descriptions of the process and her struggle, readers are invited into the strife that she experiences and are invited to be sympathetic to her situation as object of colonialism, trapped in her patriarchal marriage. She observes, "*Independence* is a complex word in a foreign tongue. To resist occupation, whether you're a nation or merely a woman, you must understand the language of your enemy. *Conquest* and *liberation* and *democracy* and *divorce* are words that mean squat, basically, when you have hungry children and clothes to get out on the line and it looks like rain" (Kingsolver 383, emphasis in original). Though she knows the potential of independence and recognizes herself as akin to an occupied country under imperial control, Kingsolver portrays Orleanna as eloquently articulating the disconnect between knowing there is a word for freedom and actually achieving that freedom in practice and reality. Orleanna's reality is consumed with the day-to-day things that are necessary for her family's survival, and often, these daily trials obscure her view and keep her from seeing the necessity in leaving Nathan. In this type of survival mode, Orleanna's narrowly focused view of her world hinders her from having the luxury of zooming out to see the liberation possible in walking away from her life with Nathan. When she must leave Nathan, however, after she can clearly see the devastating impact of staying in the Congo, she makes the risky and brave decision and walks away from him. Readers are invited to observe this courage at the linguistic level, as Orleanna's speech toward Nathan becomes more frank, often bypassing him altogether to speak directly to

God instead. Her testimony to the tension of staying and leaving is also profound to demonstrate why she remained with him so long, allowing readers the possibility of withholding judgment against her for not rescuing herself and her daughters sooner. Her explanations also illustrate Orleanna's own attempts to absolve herself of her lingering guilt wrapped up in her life with Nathan and the tension between being conquered and having a degree of agency and responsibility to her daughters even in her own captivity.

Once she is free, however, Orleanna moves forward unconcerned with what became of the man she left in the Congo. Evidence of Orleanna's total freedom in her life post-Nathan, when Adah finds out about her father's death decades after the women have left the Congo, she says to Orleanna, "Leah says he would have wanted to go that way...a blaze of glory," to which Orleanna replies, "I don't give a damn what he would have wanted" (Kingsolver 494). She is no longer controlled by this man who dominated her for so many years, and she is completely unconcerned with his welfare after they leave the Congo. She notes that "a territory is only possessed for a moment in time" (Kingsolver 384), and she is no longer Nathan's possession. She continues, "In Congo, a slashed jungle quickly becomes a field of flowers, and scars become the ornaments of a particular face. Call it oppression, complicity, stupefaction, call it what you like, it doesn't matter. Africa swallowed the conqueror's music and sang a new song of her own" (Kingsolver 385). Part of that new song belongs to Orleanna, and she will continue to sing it long after she has left the Congo. In the last chapter that Orleanna narrates, she writes, "To live is to be marked. To live is to change, *to acquire the words of a story*, and that is the only celebration we mortals really know. In perfect stillness, frankly, I've only found sorrow" (Kingsolver 385, emphasis added). Orleanna celebrates her story through her narration, verbalizing Nathan's occupation, and through articulating the victory she achieves by leaving

him, by moving from the “perfect stillness” where there is nothing but sorrow into a life of freedom apart from him where she can tell her story unencumbered. Through this depiction of testimony, Orleanna both achieves and depicts her newfound freedom. Through Orleanna, Kingsolver reminds readers that while survivors may have collateral damage, as Nathan will always be a part of Orleanna’s story, there exists nonetheless a new future to walk into unhindered by the past. As Orleanna speaks of her past, she writes her own story, taking ownership of her life with Nathan and her new life without him.

Like Orleanna, the character of Adah is one whose journey from silence to speech, from oppression to liberation, is particularly interesting because, unlike Orleanna, Adah is mostly mute for the first twenty years of her life. Concerning Adah, Stephen Fox writes, “She chooses not to speak because she accepts her role as an outsider. That is, she will not communicate with a society that does not see her as a person” (407). On one hand, Adah is powerful because she is the one who *chooses* to remain silent, but she is also without power in that she is marginalized because of her disability, which causes people to view her as subhuman. She is outside of what is considered to be normal for her family and her culture, and because she is marked as an outsider, Adah is like the postcolonial subject who is marked as “other” because of her orientation to the colonizer. In her article, “The Africa of Two Western Women Writers,” Kimberly Koza asserts that “the family structure replicates the structure of colonialism” (285). Indeed, the Price family, with its patriarch and disempowered female subjects very clearly illustrates the power dynamic that is established in colonial rule through imperialism. Those who become marginalized as a result of being outside the colonizers’ ideal become those who, like Adah, are marked as “other” and must sometimes find nontraditional ways to express their experiences when they are not heard by those in power.

As the construction of nationalism often excludes women, Orleanna and her daughters are not included in the talk of the “national interest” that men speak of. The Price family is a small-scale representation of the more general and widespread exclusion of women that occurs in society and in the shaping of nationalism. Koza writes, “[R]elationships within the family mirror, and are in large part constructed by power relationships within the larger society” (285). Orleanna and her daughters must construct their own national identity, apart from the male “national interest” from which they have been excluded. One way in which they do this, Koza argues, is by merging the personal and the political in their narration. She writes, “As ordinary women, they reshift the focus to the domestic space” (285). In reshifting this focus, the women bring large-scale political issues into the context of their daily family life, allowing the reader to more easily relate to their issues of conflict.

While they recognize it at varying points throughout the novel, with the exception of Rachel who notices her father’s behavior but seems less concerned with her captivity, the Price women are each the colonized subject of colonizer Nathan Price, acting as an echo of the imperialism taking place in the Congo through Nathan’s missionary work and the Belgian influence and political control. Leah, who initially wants “to be [her] father’s favorite” and has not “contradicted [her] father on any subject, ever” (Kingsolver 66), slowly becomes disillusioned with his dominant status and his control over her. Initially denying her access to hunt with the men, Nathan scolds Leah when she kills a bushbuck and thinks her family should have its meat. Rachel narrates that Nathan “stated that Leah was a shameful and inadequate vessel for God’s will” (Kingsolver 356), solidifying Leah’s desire to differentiate from her father. On the same evening of this statement, when their friend, Nelson, cries for help because there is a snake in the chicken house with him, Nathan forbids them to help him, but Leah asserts

to her sisters, “I’m going out there to help Nelson, and Father can go straight to hell” (Kingsolver 358). This declaration leaves no hint of Leah’s childlike devotion to her father. She is now an independent woman who will not permit herself to be among the colonized, as far as she can help it while still sharing a home with him.

Like Leah, Kingsolver’s Orleanna conveys this control clearly in her retrospective introductory chapter, saying, “Maybe I’ll even confess the truth, that I rode in with the horsemen and beheld the apocalypse, but still I’ll insist I was only a captive witness. What is the conqueror’s wife, if not a conquest herself?” (Kingsolver 9). Orleanna wrestles with her own captivity as Nathan’s wife and her seeming complicity in the power structure that negatively impacts the people of Kilanga. However, her abuse at Nathan’s hands is apparent to readers, as is the seeming impossibility that she escape his control. Orleanna notes, “What did I have? No money, that’s for sure. No influence, no friends I could call upon in that place, no way to overrule the powers that governed our lives. This is not a new story: I was an inferior force” (Kingsolver 191-2). Orleanna sees her powerlessness and feels helpless to overcome it. Part of her colonization began early in her courtship with Nathan, which began as his missionary attempt to save her, when she had no say in their future together; marriage was simply decided for her. She adds, “There was another thing too, awful to admit. I’d come to believe that God was on his side....I feared him more than it’s possible to fear a mere man” (Kingsolver 192). Orleanna is chained to Nathan, and the religious implications of his vocation as a preacher and missionary further complicate her loyalties and hinder her from leaving. Just as the colonized subjects of nations have no agency in their rule, so Orleanna has no agency to create her own freedom apart from Nathan as long as she holds to her religious and social beliefs concerning domesticity and family. Because she has long known the inequity in their relationship, once her

family structure is so irrevocably altered in the wake of Ruth May's death, Orleanna finally reaches her breaking point and seeks her own liberation.

Like Orleanna, Adah, too, finds her own freedom eventually. When Adah, despite her "otherness," finds her voice, she breaks from the colonial rule of her father and, in ridding herself of the shackles of her oppression, ceases to walk with a limp. Her linguistic freedom finds a counterpart in her physical liberation. She writes, "Congo is one long path and I learn to walk" (Kingsolver 135). While Adah still limps when she leaves the Congo (it is in Atlanta that she finally realizes she is able to walk without her limp), it is her time spent there that shapes her internally and gives her the courage to overcome her limp and stand up straight. In a sense, Adah's time in the Congo has been an incubation period, where she has watched as a spectator, keenly aware of her father's seemingly limitless power and the rest of her family's willingness to bend to his will.

Just as her family initially conforms to Nathan's will, Adah conforms to the physical abnormality that she and her family have come to expect from her. While in Atlanta, Adah realizes that her "dragging right side is merely holding on to a habit learned in infancy" (Kingsolver 439). Now that Adah has escaped her father's rule and overcome her muteness, her limp is the next barrier to surmount. Because she has already proved to herself her own strength (in speaking and being accepted to medical school despite her disability and non-traditional schooling), Adah is capable of re-learning how to walk. Her journey from muteness to speech lays the groundwork for Adah's transformation from walking with a limp to moving freely without one.

In Atlanta, Adah writes, "I have decided to speak, so there is the possibility of telling. Speaking became a matter of self-defense, since Mother seems to have gone mute, and with no

one to testify to my place in the world I found myself at the same precipice I teetered on when entering first grade: gifted or special education” (Kingsolver 407). Adah realizes that no one else will be able to recount her experience in the Belgian Congo, so she must use her own voice to tell her story. She is now able to verbalize what she has been writing and narrating throughout the course of the novel. By telling her own story, Adah takes ownership of her past and prevents anyone else from speaking in her place or assuming that they can accurately express her unique experiences or emotions. Adah believes in acknowledging the positive and negative aspects of her past in order to embrace herself as a self-actualized, holistically-minded human being, and she eloquently expresses that when she narrates, “If chained is where you have been, your arms will always bear the marks of the shackles. What you have to lose is your story, your own slant. You’ll look at the scars on your arms and see mere ugliness, or you’ll take great care to look away from them and see nothing. Either way, you have no words for the story of where you came from” (Kingsolver 495). Adah recognizes that if she ignores the painful aspects of her history, she will be unable to articulate the positive ones as well. It is through owning her past and claiming it as her own that Adah develops into a convincing storyteller and vessel of history.

Because Adah is mute, characters sometimes forget she is present at all, and this allows characters to drop their guard when she is around and gives her the opportunity to be privy to information other characters are not aware of, such as the impending assassination of the Congo’s newly elected leader, Patrice Lumumba. Adah writes,

Silence has many advantages. When you do not speak, other people presume you to be deaf or feeble-minded and promptly make a show of their own limitations. Only occasionally do I find I have to break my peace: shout or be lost in the shuffle. But mostly I am lost in the shuffle...It is true I do not speak as well as I can think. But that is true of most people, nearly as I can tell. (Kingsolver 34)

In her silence, Adah avoids becoming complicit in many of the verbal and social missteps her family makes, insulting the people of Kilanga and making fools of themselves. Additionally, she harnesses the power of her silence to gain entrance to situations and knowledge that is not available to others who stand out more by virtue of their speaking in public. Through going unnoticed, Adah transforms being silent and overlooked into being powerful and carrying secrets, like uncovering Eeben Axelroot's radio transmissions about President Eisenhower, that "[t]he King of America wants a tall, thin man in the Congo to be dead" (Kingsolver 297). In her independence and silence, Adah is able to sneak away and gather such covert, dangerous information, which further impacts her views of her family and nation's negative impact on the Congo.

In addition to being the gatekeeper of secretive intelligence, Adah is also able to focus more intently on keeping a written record of the events in the Congo because she does not often concern herself with contributing to her family's verbal dialogue. Although she verbalizes little, Adah's chronicle is clearly intelligent and well thought out, and it illustrates her ability to use the written word to testify to her experiences. Because Adah pays such close attention to reading and writing instead of speaking, she is able to be more introspective concerning her family's conditions in the Congo.

Adah's introspection provides readers with an intricate portrait of their family life, one that is perhaps more candid in some respects than the other women provide in their narration. Adah writes, "The things we do not know, independently and in unison as a family, would fill two separate baskets, each with a large hole in the bottom" (Kingsolver 209). Adah recognizes and records her family's shortcomings: the way they falter when trying to use the language of the people of Kilanga and the way they fail to understand and appreciate the Kikongo customs, to

mention just two important deficiencies. Her candor is a significant aspect of her testimony as it demonstrates her frank observations and conclusions about her family's mistakes, shortcomings, and abuse. She is perhaps the most well-equipped character to deliver such testimony, given her subject position as a marginalized outsider within her family structure because of her perceived disability and difference. As the mostly mute, limping "other," Adah turns her attention toward observation and is aware of details that other family members do not always see. Through her example, readers are invited to notice the stark changes she achieves by the novel's end, as Kingsolver portrays her as more active and involved once she is independent from her family's stifling expectations, no longer the silent observer in the background of her own life.

Leah, Adah's twin sister, also achieves a victory when she rids herself of her father's domineering influence. Throughout most of the novel, Leah is the daughter who most openly seeks her father's approval. She spends time with him planting in his garden, and she is sympathetic toward his attempts to reach out to the people of Kilanga. When her father refuses to take the family out of the Congo when they all realize it is no longer safe for them to be there, Leah's feelings toward her father begin to change. She says,

All my life I've tried to set my shoes squarely into his footprints, believing if only I stayed close enough to him those same clean, simple laws would rule my life as well. That the Lord would see my goodness and fill me with light. Yet with each passing day I find myself farther away. There's a great holy war going on in my father's mind, in which we're meant to duck and run and obey orders and fight for all the right things, but I can't always make out the orders or even tell which side I'm on exactly. I'm not even allowed to carry a gun. I'm a girl. He has no inkling. If his decision to keep us here in the Congo wasn't right, then what else might he be wrong about? It has opened up in my heart a sickening world of doubt and possibilities, where before I had only faith in my father and love for the Lord. Without that rock of certainty underfoot, the Congo is a fearsome place to sink or swim. (Kingsolver 244)

Leah admits that her father has served as a role-model for her and that she thought that following him would cause the Lord to bless her. When she describes the war that rages in her father's

mind, Leah captures a type of soldier mentality that describes how she and her sisters take his orders without regard to their own needs. For Leah, Nathan Price is just as controlling a dictator as Rafael Trujillo from the two novels previously examined in Chapters 1 and 2. She follows him out of her daughterly love for him, but when her eyes are opened to the fact that he does not see his daughters as capable of what men are capable of, she realizes she must free herself from his control. According to Susan Strehle, “As Leah comes to realize, women have no place in her father’s system of values—indeed, no place in his view of the Kingdom of Heaven.... Women and girls cannot be exceptional, in Nathan’s view; their proper role is quiet, humble acquiescence to and support for the exceptional man” (419). Leah is honest with herself about the doubts she has concerning her father, and she begins to liberate herself from his rule as she explores these doubts and places her faith in something other than her narrow-minded father. She cultivates a love for Africa and ends up settling and raising a family of her own there. As Kimberly Koza concludes, “In a reversal of the colonial view that the colonized have nothing to teach the colonizers, Leah gains wholeness through her love for Anatole, replacing her childhood faith in her father with the political commitment that Anatole symbolizes” (287). Leah differentiates herself from her father’s colonizing influence furthermore by aligning herself with Anatole and caring for the African people among whom she has chosen to make her home. Reflecting on her journey, Leah says, “We’ve all ended up giving body and soul to Africa, one way or another...Each of us got buried in six feet of African dirt...So what do you do now? You get to find your own way to dig out a heart and shake it off and hold it up to the light again” (474). Leah digs out a heart that once held fierce, blind loyalty to her father, and she shakes out a heart that is no longer bound by the confines of Nathan’s influence and is instead open to the world and compassionate toward the African people she has come to love in spite of her father’s

attitudes toward them. One scholar, Sophie Croisy, interestingly claims that Leah's love for Africa stems from her "white guilt." Croisy asserts, "Leah thus embodies, to some extent, white guilt as she examines American cultural prejudices and privileges in the Congolese context" (231). This provocative claim invites readers to see Leah as a robust character that is simultaneously oppressed and privileged. Kingsolver's portrayal of Leah's reaction to her guilt demonstrates a fruitful rather than crippling response. Croisy claims, "Leah's guilt is productive in the sense that it keeps her quite vigilant about the increasing need for social justice in the Congo and in her own country, her own region of origin" (232). Leah is not paralyzed with helplessness by her perception of her own privilege; rather Kingsolver portrays her as channeling her status and perspective toward positive ends. This tenacity persists as a trait of Leah's throughout the novel, including in her relationship with and differentiation from her father.

Further, when Nathan refuses to allow Leah to hunt with the rest of the village, Leah realizes anew that her father sees women, including his daughters, as inferior. She continues to analyze her parents and their flaws, saying

You can't just point to the one most terrible thing and wonder why it happened. This has been a whole terrible time, from the beginning of the drought that left so many without food, and then the night of the ants, to now, the worst tragedy of all. Each bad thing causes something worse. As Anatole says, if you look hard enough, you can always see reasons, but you'll go crazy if you think it's all punishment for your sins. I see that plainly when I look at my parents. God doesn't need to punish us. He just grants us a long enough life to punish ourselves. (Kingsolver 327)

As Leah sees her father trying to pay penance for his past sins by forcibly baptizing the people of Kilanga, she begins to understand his weaknesses, and she no longer sees him as the almighty god-figure her used to be to her. Additionally, she can see the wear her parents' marriage has had on her mother. She has spent a lifetime watching her mother cower under Nathan's governance, unable or unwilling, it seemed, to save them from his domineering rule. She has

observed her mother leading an almost-double life, swearing when Nathan is not around, tidying up her language when he is. As she has seen her mother struggle with pretending to be someone else around Nathan, Leah can also see that Orleanna feels guilty—guilty for keeping her daughters in the Congo, guilty for staying with Nathan, guilty for swearing, guilty for simply being who she is. Watching her mother endure this type of relationship empowers Leah to seek a more egalitarian than patriarchal partnership, which she finds in Anatole.

In addition to analyzing familial roles and relationships, the women of *The Poisonwood Bible* express their reactions to various tragedies their family experiences. After the death of her sister, Ruth May, Leah and her other sisters begin to pray The Lord's Prayer. Leah writes, "I could not remotely believe any Shepherd was leading me through this dreadful valley, but the familiar words stuffed my mouth like cotton, and it was some relief to know, at least, that one sentence would follow upon another. It was my only way of knowing what to do" (Kingsolver 372). Leah relies on the memory and familiarity of these words to comfort her in the wake of her sister's death. It is the repetition of these words, her safety net in this time of grief, that restores her strength and helps her survive. Her description of the hours following Ruth May's death, illustrates details of the intimate moments her family experienced, shared and separately. By describing situations such as this, Leah adds her version of the painful past to the collective history of her family's time in the Congo.

Because Ruth May dies while her family is in the Congo, Ruth May does not have a narrative voice that extends into adulthood to make sense of her family's demise retrospectively and demonstrate her triumph over this trauma. Her perspective, instead, acts as a textual reminder of the innocence of childhood, and her growth is stunted as she remains the baby of the Price family, perpetually five years old as they move on with their lives without her. The last

living narration readers have from Ruth May, poignantly, is of her retreating to her mental “safe place” during the trauma of the ant swarm (Kingsolver 304). Although she is saved from the swarm, her safe place as the “green mamba snake away up in the tree” (Kingsolver 304) is where she will remain after her death later in the novel, to look down over her family with what her mother, in her guilt, perceives as judgment. Readers are invited, instead, to see Ruth May as indifferent, as she claims after her death, “I am no little beast and have no reason to judge” (Kingsolver 537). Her more objective perspective offers insight into the struggle that Orleanna and the surviving sisters face to absolve themselves of their guilt pertaining to her death and their lives in the Congo. Kingsolver also uses Ruth May as *The Eyes in the Trees* to indicate the larger story of lives lost in political conflict and famine as Ruth May says, “I am...one child and a million all lost on the same day” (Kingsolver 537). Zooming out as such offers readers an opportunity to consider the implications of the Price family being merely one representative of a larger set of traumas entangled with patriarchy, politics, colonialism, and religious missions. Their fictional representation provides the foundation for putting these overlapping traumas in conversation and asks readers to interrogate their impact and potential for liberation.

Like Ruth May, Rachel fails to make much progress over her family’s trauma, but not because her life is cut short like Ruth May’s. Rather, even into adulthood, Rachel aligns herself with consumer capitalism and does not demonstrate the same level of liberation, growth, and maturity that her surviving sisters and mother portray. Like Ruth May, whose voice represents childlikeness throughout the text, Rachel’s voice comes to depict more childishness, as her concerns remain akin to those of the selfish teenager she is when her family arrives in the Congo. Her vanity and self-centeredness persist into adulthood, and she remains trapped in a cycle of failed familial connections, lacking depth and connection. Nathan Kilpatrick argues that Rachel

“avoids close relationships with her family precisely because their suffering would drag her down. Rather than share in their lives, Rachel isolates herself” (97). This isolation, rather than insulating and protecting Rachel, deepens her sadness and demonstrates her lack of growth as an adult. As a contrast to the portrayal of her sisters, Kingsolver’s depiction of Rachel invites readers to see Leah and Adah’s growth with sharper clarity, making their representations of testimony to trauma all the more noticeable and meaningful. During a reunion with her sisters when they are adults, Rachel reflects on Ruth May’s passing and narrates, “I ask myself, did I have anything to do with it? The answer is no, I’d made my mind up all along just to rise above it all. Keep my hair presentable and pretend I was elsewhere” (Kingsolver 465). She does not lament her lack of connection with her family, nor does she see any role in their plight in the Congo, including the loss of Ruth May. Her lack of emotions concerning this loss is further evident when she narrates coldly and glibly, “I refuse to feel the slightest responsibility. I really do” (Kingsolver 465). Rachel’s distance from her emotions and her family prevent her from progressing beyond the self-focused teenager she is at the outset of the text and act as a clear example of a stunted and stifled character ignorant of trauma’s impact and the potential of freedom that comes in processing and testifying.

Speaking Trauma: Distinctions in the Daughters’ Narration

While they demonstrate varying levels of liberation through their narration and progress, of the trauma that the Price women endure, two scenes stand out as significant narrative moments: the night of the ant swarm and the morning of Ruth May’s death. The Price daughters narrate these scenes in varied ways, expressing their individual personalities and processing methods. Through their storytelling, which reveals different interpretations of the same event as

experienced through their individual eyes, readers are invited to consider the diverse impact of trauma as they see each daughters' testimony in successive chapters. A Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) analysis of these scenes demonstrates categorical and quantifiable distinctions in each of their trauma testimonies and reveals insights into their characters. Their different forms of trauma testimony echo what researcher Rachael Goodman has noted of the necessity for varied counseling approaches to trauma and posttraumatic growth. She asserts that there is a "need to understand resilience not as a binary characteristic...but as a process that can be developed and that exists along a continuum" (290). The Price women exhibit varying degrees of growth as they make meaning through narrating their trauma. As they testify to trauma in ways that are consistent with their core personalities as Kingsolver has characterized them, readers are invited to consider that trauma's impact is not delayed or cut off³³ but rather a response out of the overflow of these characters' crafted core selves. For example, during the night of the ant swarm, readers see each daughter escape through a different path, but their stories overlap and demonstrate connections that reveal how the community endures this nightmare collectively. Each narration also reinforces significant aspects of each daughter's personality, urging readers to see that trauma, while disruptive, does not inherently shatter one's sense of self. To positive or negative ends, these core elements of selfhood are retained throughout the traumatic experience of the ant swarm.

Each sister portrays her allegiances and uniqueness through her language used to describe the night's events unfolding. For example, true to her love for Congolese people and culture, Leah is the only daughter to demonstrate what this night means in Kikongo: "*Nsongonya...Les*

³³ Caruth has claimed that traumatic events "may be defined, in part, by the very ways in which they are not immediately assimilated: by the manner in which their experience is delayed, split off, or subjected to social and political denial" (xiii) *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience*, Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.

fourmis!...Ants” (Kingsolver 299).³⁴ Meanwhile, Rachel reminds readers of her selfishness in both her insistence on saving her mirror as the family tries to escape their home and her reference to the book *How to Survive 101 Calamities*, which she recalls when she decides to stick her “elbows very hard into the ribs of the people who were crushing in around [her]...and [pick] up [her] feet” (Kingsolver 302). As a counterpoint to Rachel’s teenage selfishness, Ruth May’s childhood innocence is communicated through her recurring reference to the lullaby “Hush, little baby” as Orleanna repeats this to her during their escape. Lastly, Adah’s narration is consistent with her character in her unique use of palindromes to convey her experience of being “*left...behind*,” such as “Live was I ere I saw evil” and “Nod, nab, abandon” (Kingsolver 305) as Orleanna chooses to save Ruth May and leaves Adah to save herself. Each daughter’s narration of the ant swarm scene provides an example in miniature of the sisters’ vastly distinct personalities and experiences, despite being part of the same family of origin and sharing similar upbringings. While they have shared many of their experiences, Kingsolver depicts their trauma testimonies as unique as the women are, asking readers to question their varied responses to trauma, which range from resilience to regression, and impact their adult lives profoundly. As such, readers may witness the separate paths the women take to acceptance and healing or victimization and blaming, reminded that the same trauma will not touch the survivors in the same way.

Through Leah’s narration, readers are invited to consider her inner turmoil as her allegiances have shifted from her family to the people of Kilanga. As Leah escapes the ants and moves with the crowd toward the river, her thoughts turn to Mama Mwanza as she wonders if “her sluggish sons [will] carry her” (Kingsolver 299). It is not until Leah reaches the river and Anatole asks her where her family is that she realizes she had been so concerned with the

³⁴ “Nsongonya” is the Kikongo word for fire ants, and “les fourmis” is the French word for ants.

villagers that she did not consider her own family's well-being. She berates herself, saying, "*How could I leave Adah behind again? Once in the womb, once to the lion, and now like Simon Peter I had denied her for the third time*" (Kingsolver 300, emphasis in original). Leah's concern for her family is genuine, but as this passage illustrates, it has been surpassed by her affinity for the Congo, the place she will choose to call home as an adult. As Leah thinks she is dying during the ant swarm, she says of the moon over the Kwilu River, "I stared hard at the ballooning pink reflection, believing this might be the last thing I would look upon before my eyes were chewed out of my skull. Though I didn't deserve it, I wanted to rise to heaven remembering something of beauty from the Congo" (Kingsolver 300). That she longs for this beautiful image in the midst of pain to be her final memory is further evidence of her allegiance to the Congo over her family of origin, but it is also indicative of her tenacity to find something salvageable in the middle of turmoil, a pebble of hope in the reflection of the pink moon despite the physical pain of the ants gnawing at her skin. This detail also reminds readers of the strength that Leah will carry with her into adulthood and paints her as an example of resilience in the face of trauma. Her representation of testimony is an example of the beneficial implications of effective trauma testimony that recognizes the positive alongside the negative.

A LIWC analysis of Leah's narration of the ant swarm scene on pages 299-300 reveals that she is the most analytical but least emotional of her sisters when compared to their narration of the same event. In the analytic category, Leah's rate is 68.85, with 44.88 being average for personal writing. Her emotional tone, however, is far below average, rating at 13.48, with 38.60 being average.³⁵ This evaluation furthers Leah's characterization as introspective and thoughtful with an eye for appraising the causes and effects of the actions and events around her. To do so,

³⁵ See Appendix C for further details on LIWC data, including full text analyzed and averages in all evaluated categories.

she must be less emotionally engaged in order to analyze more objectively. This serves Leah well as she asserts her independence throughout the novel, including when she insists on participating in the antelope hunt with the men of the village even though she is young and a woman. It further aids her in processing the pain of the ant swarm, as she does not flinch under the weight of strong emotions but instead remains calm and focused in the face of her presumed death. Her more level-headed testimony stands out as an example of the possibility of maintaining a sense of composure in the midst of overwhelming feelings and perilous circumstances. Instead of collapsing in the face of danger, Leah remains herself, collective and analytical in her words and actions.

Sharply contrasting Leah's portrayal of the ant swarm, Rachel's narration is highly self-focused and emotional, in keeping with the characterization readers have previously encountered. Most notable in Rachel's response to the trauma is her reaction to use other traumatized people for her own gain. As she remembers reading in the book *How to Survive 101 Calamities*, "[I]f ever you're in a crowded theater and there's a fire, you should stick out your elbows and raise up your feet" (Kingsolver 301), she does just so and observes, "Instead of getting trampled I simply floated like a stick in a river, carried along on everyone else's power" (Kingsolver 302). Rachel, who continues to represent the colonizer throughout her adult life as she remains in Africa, here embodies the abuses of the colonizer who survives and thrives as a result of someone else's strain and effort. Readers may experience some sense of justice when the beloved mirror Rachel has carted with her during her escape slides out of her hands and breaks, further illustrating the futility in her vanity and self-focus. Throughout her narration of the ant swarm, she has been unconcerned for the well-being of others, including her family, and has actively defied them. She describes Orleana as "screaming us out the door with very force

of her lungs, but I turned around and shoved straight past her and went back, knowing what I had to do. I grabbed my mirror” (Kingsolver 301). Not only does Rachel brazenly disobey her mother, but she also demonstrates blatant disregard for their family friend Nelson, who worked to build a frame for her mirror so that it could hang on their wall, as she tears it from its frame. She also expects others to look out for her, but she is never concerned with looking out for them, as evidenced in her attempt to join the Mwanza family in their boat, saying, “[S]ince I am their neighbor I thought surely they would want me with them, but I was suddenly thrown back by someone’s arm across my face. Slam bang, thank you very much! I was thrown right into the mud” (Kingsolver 302). Rachel’s self-focus has not made her self-reliant, as she is dependent on the kindness of others to save her and meet her needs.

Further indicative of her self-focus, in her narration, Rachel uses an above average amount of I-words, such as *I*, *me*, and *my*. Where average use is 8.70, Rachel’s use is 9.69, higher than all of her sisters, with the exception of Adah, whose rate is 10.77 as she describes being abandoned by their mother. Rachel’s emotional tone of 25.77, while below the average of 38.60, is significantly higher than her sisters’ emotional tone, which stands to reason as she is typically a more outwardly dramatic teenager. With her tendency to express heightened emotions, however, Rachel is unable to demonstrate high levels of insight in her narration of this scene, revealing that she does not see this event as part of a larger whole. It is, instead, for Rachel, an isolated, highly inconvenient moment in time that leaves her “flat in the middle of all that bad luck and broken sky” (Kingsolver 302) when her mirror crashes around her and the Mwanza family does not take her into their boat to escape the plague of ants. Through Rachel’s trauma narration, Kingsolver invites readers to see the self-destructive tendencies that coexist with a self-absorbed character who sees a moment of trauma as an isolated, disconnected event.

Rachel's inability to integrate the events of the night of the ant swarm and see it as having an impact beyond herself hinder her from growing in light of this trauma and her self-focused testimony to it.

As a contrast to the selfishness evidenced in Rachel's narration, readers are invited into a different type of self-centeredness expressed in Ruth May's story of the ant swarm. At only five years old, Ruth May is the youngest of the sisters, and her childlike voice comes through in her narration through the use of phrases and misnomers like, "Everybody was whooping and hollowing" (Kingsolver 303). Her concern for herself without thinking of others is an expected response, as she is too young to care for herself and relies on others to look after her. Perhaps predictably because of her age, Ruth May's section is the least analytical when compared to her sisters' narration. Her passage also demonstrates the lowest overall emotional tone (3.54 when 38.60 is average) but the highest negative emotions of the four sisters' narrations of the ant swarm. Her emotional tone may be blunted as she is sheltered from some of the trauma because Orleanna cradles and protects her during the escape. Once she is passed to "somebody Congolese and not even Mama anymore" (Kingsolver 303), she becomes increasingly upset and expresses more negative emotions, as she cries and kicks to be put down. It is this transfer to a stranger and away from her protector that is more traumatizing for Ruth May than the actual swarm of biting ants.

To cope with the overwhelming experience of fleeing the ant swarm and being temporarily separated from her mother, Ruth May remembers what her Congolese friend Nelson taught her, which is "to think of a good place to go, so when it comes time to die, I won't, I'll disappear and go to that place" (Kingsolver 303). This coping mechanism brings Ruth May some comfort as she can drown out the noise and panic around her and "put [her] fingers in [her]

ears and [try] to think of the safest place” (Kingsolver 304). For Ruth May, her safest place is “a green mamba snake away up in the tree” (Kingsolver 304), which brings clarity to Kingsolver’s final chapter, titled “The Eyes in the Trees,” and reveals that Ruth May is the lingering presence that Orleanna expresses guilt toward in a number of her sections. It also eerily foreshadows the way Ruth May will die—from the venomous bite of a green mamba hidden by Tata Kuvundu in her family’s chicken coop, intended, most likely, to harm Nelson for his allegiance to the Price family. That Ruth May would choose the green mamba high in a tree as her imaginary safe place demonstrates her childlike bravery, as she is often fearless in forging ahead even toward the different dangers of climbing trees and meeting new children in Kilanga. Additionally, it is the vantage point of the mamba that is so appealing to Ruth May. Of becoming a green mamba when she disappears, Ruth May says, “Your eyes will be little and round but you are so far up there that you can look down and see the whole world....Finally you are the highest one of all” (Kingsolver 304). Instead of being the youngest and smallest daughter in her family, Ruth May longs to be above them, watching over them. By preceding them all in death, she gets her chance to watch them, “tribes of Ham, Shem, and Japheth all together” (Kingsolver 304), indelibly altering their lives with her untimely death. Her representation of testimony, while childlike, indicates the effectiveness of her chosen coping mechanism, which shields her from the blunt impact of the ant swarm. While retreating to her safe place mentally, Ruth May spares herself some of the agony and echoes the response of some trauma survivors, which is to leave their traumatized bodies in the moment of the trauma and escape elsewhere in their minds. Because of Ruth May’s death, readers are not afforded the opportunity to see how this coping mechanism impacts Ruth May’s healing as an adult—if retreating to her mental safe place spares her long-term harm or hinders her from fully accepting the trauma and healing in spite of it.

Arguably even more significant than Ruth May's allusion to the green mamba in the tree is Adah's moment of speech in her recollection of the night of the ant swarm. Prior to this night, Adah has been mute, preferring to observe and write rather than talk, attributing her muteness to the brain damage she supposedly suffered at birth. Because of her limp that is also believed to be a consequence of her supposed hemiplegia, Adah is not able to easily escape the ants on her own, and she looks to her mother for help. Orleanna does not help Adah, however, because she is already carrying Ruth May "like a load of kindling" (Kingsolver 305). Underscoring her desperate plight, Adah says, "I spoke out loud, the only time: help me" (Kingsolver 305). This speech, as a profound anomaly, should have compelled Orleanna to help both of her seemingly helpless daughters, but Orleanna instead rambles in a flurry about the other family members, saying, "Your father....I think he must have gone on ahead with Rachel. I wish he'd waited, honey, he'd carry you but Rachel was...I don't know how she'll get through this. Leah will, Leah can take care of herself" (Kingsolver 305). Orleanna fails to mention Adah, and Adah, reading between the lines, thinks in response to Orleanna's assertion that Leah can take care of herself, "She can you can't you can't!" (Kingsolver 305), revealing her inadequacy to save herself from the swarming ants and the frenzy in her thought process. Adah then speaks for only the second time in her life, saying, "Please" (Kingsolver 305). Her plea is answered in the negative, as Orleanna "studied [her] for a moment, weighing [her] life. Then nodded, shifted the load in her arms, turned away" (Kingsolver 305). This tragic turn leaves Adah to fend for herself, a crucial test of her ability to survive in light of her disability.

Rich in visceral details and ripe with Adah's primal struggle to survive, Adah's narration succinctly captures the horror of the ant swarm and Adah's constant peril to navigate trauma in her disabled body. She knows she cannot keep up with her mother in the flow of people fleeing,

and separated from the family who could protect her, she recalls being trampled, saying, “My heels were nipped from behind by other feet. Stepped on, though I felt it vaguely, already numb from the burning ants. I knew when I went down” (Kingsolver 306). She remembers with clarity, “Someone’s bare foot was on my calf and then my back, and I was being trampled. A crush of feet on my chest” (Kingsolver 306). Although she is outnumbered and repeatedly wounded, she fights to protect herself and get back to her feet. In triumph, she says, “I found my way to my elbows and raised myself up” (Kingsolver 306). Throughout this process, Adah notes, “I heard myself crying out loud—such a strange noise” (Kingsolver 306), indicating that this struggle has prompted her to scream out in pain and cry out for help, temporarily overcoming her muteness and underscoring the significance of one’s voice, however strange and unfamiliar, in a moment of great pain. Kingsolver’s portrayal of Adah’s trauma testimony compels readers to consider the growth potential possible even in the moment of trauma, when self-reliance is one’s only option. Adah, although concerned for her own survival like all of her sisters, uses her inner strength and vocalizing to motivate her to survive and care for herself in a way she did not even know was possible physically. In so doing, she reveals herself as a character of even deeper resilience than she has been up to this point in the text.

Adah’s experience of abandonment and forced self-reliance during the ant swarm reveals to her a powerful lesson: “that even the crooked girl believed her own life was precious” (Kingsolver 306). Her reaction to being thrust into the throng of people and left to fend for herself reveals her deep will to survive in the moment of her trauma. Jeanna Fuston White argues, “All of her life, [Adah] felt herself worthy of abandonment; only by accidents of fate had she been saved—from special education, from a lion in the jungle, or from eternal damnation. Faced with the ants, however, Adah’s salvation stems not from an accident of fate, but from her

determined will to survive” (139). Although she retrospectively sees this night as her “life’s dark center, the moment when growing up ended and the long downward slope toward death began” (Kingsolver 306), she fights for her life on that night and looks back on it as the pivotal moment when she could call herself a child no longer.

While Adah’s use of I-words in this passage is higher than all of her sisters’ sections, her sense of self-focus comes more from a place of brute survival than of the teenage selfishness Rachel’s passage conveys. True to her character, Adah is also highly analytical in her narration, with a rate of 52.95, with 44.88 being average, and she is not very emotional, as her emotional tone is a low 9.46, with 38.60 being average. However, at 95.86 when 76.01 is average, her authenticity is the highest of all of her sisters, indicating that she is firmly confident in what she says. This confidence and stoic attention to facts over feelings is consistent with Adah’s behavior before and after the trauma. Though she doubts her capabilities at times, as her limp and muteness set her apart from others and present unique challenges in daily life, she is certain of her intelligence and bolstered by this aptitude. Adah’s coping mechanism is to rely on the evidence, the clinical facts, while Leah’s method is to think of others at the expense of neglecting her own family. Rachel defaults to blaming others and being selfish, while Ruth May avoids the trauma directly by plugging her ears and thinking of her safest place, like Nelson taught her. Each method reveals the sisters’ individual processing strategies that are indicative of their deeper core personalities—Adah is scientific, Leah is altruistic, Rachel is self-focused, and Ruth May disappears in her imagination. These strands will recur throughout the novel, including as the sisters bear witness to the death of their beloved baby sister, Ruth May.

Because these characters maintain their core personalities during their trauma and testimonies to their trauma, monolithic interpretations of literary trauma theory prove to be

insufficient for evaluating the varied impact trauma has on these unique women characters. No two characters experience and internalize their pain in the same manner, but rather, they cope with and process these painful events in ways that align with their dominant traits, such as altruism and selfishness. In the moment Ruth May is bitten by the green mamba, Leah is first maternal and comforting and then focused on repairing what has been broken, like the buttons on Ruth May's blouse. She is other-focused, demonstrative of her core personality trait of altruism and her role as an older sister, concerned with comforting Ruth May. Leah's emphasis on details is contrasted by Adah's attention to the literary and scientific interpretations available in the moment. She draws connections to the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the clinical details of Ruth May's "bluish face" (Kingsolver 365), inviting readers to remember how central these introspective and scientific processing methods are to Adah. Furthermore, her narration does not include references to the presence of the other sisters, reminding readers of Adah's isolated, independent experience as the marginalized sister, the disabled twin. While Leah and Adah both narrate how the moment of Ruth May's death impacts them, Rachel's narration conveys the highest degree of selfishness. For Rachel, the shattering moment of trauma does more than take Ruth May's life; it steals Rachel's ability to "pretend the Congo never happened" (Kingsolver 367). Her primary concern in this moment is not the loss of her baby sister, but rather, it is the loss of her imagined, potentially carefree future. Because of Ruth May's death in the Congo, Rachel loses the hope of returning to the United States, untouched by what she sees as a tragedy that she fears will cause others to "duck their eyes from" her (Kingsolver 367). That she is more concerned with what others will think of her now demonstrates Rachel's core self-focus and the impact this personality trait has on her testimony to this moment of trauma. As distinct characters with varied core personalities, the Price sisters convey their unique interpretations of

trauma's impact as they give their testimony to the pain they endure collectively and individually. Their divergent responses invite readers to contend with the diverse reactions to trauma that are possible and the accompanying potential for growth and healing or the lack thereof.

As the three oldest sisters painfully and insightfully narrate Ruth May's death, their stories of this moment demonstrate their honest witness to a deep, sudden, profound loss that alters the rest of their lives. A LIWC analysis also illustrates surprising insights into how each sister processes and perceives this tragedy in the initial moment of its impact and as the effects linger. For Orleanna, this loss leads her to liberate herself and her daughters. For Leah, it anchors her to the region surrounding the Congo and illustrates her attention to detail and penchant for fixating on what needs to be changed. While Adah is further propelled into a life of healing through science, as demonstrated in her use of medical observations, Rachel regresses into self-absorbed childishness, concerned with how this moment shatters her hope for a different kind of future.

Although losing Ruth May is an unimaginable tragedy, rather than having a shattering impact that affects the women in an entirely negative manner, her death is the catalyzing moment that prompts Orleanna to walk away from Nathan and liberate herself and her daughters from his domineering influence. As such, the after-effects of the trauma of Ruth May's death are colored by their newfound freedom in lives no longer limited by Nathan. To see this freedom most clearly, it is first helpful to evaluate each sister's recollection of the moment they lost Ruth May. This moment of loss alters their trajectory and invites readers to see the four different futures that the Price women create after this trauma. Such an analysis illustrates that trauma is neither

experienced nor interpreted universally; rather, each woman testifies and responds differently, in ways consistent with her core personality as Kingsolver has crafted it.

Leah's narration, full of factual details, is recounted in a distant, removed manner, evidence that she is watching the incident unfold but not connecting to it emotionally. She begins with sensory details, what she hears and then sees. Readers are not invited into her specific feelings, as she does not name them; readers are instead left to infer from her emotionless tone that she is numb in the moment, though she does not explicitly state such. According to a Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count analysis, Leah's emotional tone is a strikingly low 1.77, where, as mentioned above, 38.60 is average. Adah and Rachel's emotional tone rate 37.82 and 13.71, respectively, demonstrating that Leah is the least emotionally connected in her narration of this trauma experience. Her attention to facts in neglect of feelings might convey a sense of standoffishness to the reader, but it also provides an audience with the step by step progression of how the moment unfolded from her perspective.

The sensory details that Kingsolver portrays Leah as using to convey her experience in this moment of trauma invite readers to consider how trauma has been encoded for Leah in this moment. Leah opens with aural details, saying, "I only remember hearing a gulp and a sob and a scream all at once, the strangest cry, like a baby taking its first breath" (Kingsolver 363). The juxtaposition of new life being born with the reality of Ruth May's life being taken is particularly poignant in hindsight, as is the cacophony of different sounds coagulating to form Ruth May's final breath, indicative of the intensity of the event. Following this, Leah moves to visual memories, remembering that "we all looked up at the treetops," acknowledging, "It's a very odd thing to recall" since no one looked down at Ruth May in that moment (Kingsolver 363). Readers have well been aware of Orleana's references to the "bright eyes that bear down on

[her] without cease” (Kingsolver 7) and can now be certain that those eyes belong to Ruth May. Leah’s use of these sensory details in her remembrance of this moment underscores an element of traumatic memory in which senses are heightened and details are acutely recalled, rather than being suppressed as some claim trauma survivors do as a defense mechanism against the shattering impact of trauma in the moment. Drawing on the work of Bessel van der Kolk, Roger Luckhurst claims, “Trauma is engraved in the mind under distinct conditions, etched in by the heightened adrenaline of the physiological reaction to bodily stress. It is also an explicitly non-verbal, non-narrative memory” (Luckhurst 148). Leah defies this claim as she translates her trauma into words, noticing the sights and sounds in the details of this moment.

During this scene, Kingsolver also invites readers to notice one way Leah copes with the possibility that her sister has suffered a fatal snake bite, drawing readers’ attention further to methods for experiencing and processing trauma. While Leah does not suppress the details of this painful moment, one of her coping mechanism in this scene, instead, is to fixate on the buttons of Ruth May’s shirt so she can avoid the reality that Ruth May has died. This temporary distraction affords Leah the chance to step back into a position of being in control and taking care of things, which is the role she typically fills for her sisters. Rendered helpless after the green mamba bites Ruth May, Leah falls back on this role to comfort her. She says, “As we watched in dismay I remember thinking I should pay attention to where the buttons fell, so I could help her sew them back on later....The strangest of things I thought of, so ridiculous. Because I couldn’t look at what was in front of me” (Kingsolver 364). To bring order and purpose to this scene of chaos, Leah’s default response is to focus on the objects that she can control, noticing where the buttons have landed. In retrospect, however, she realizes this was only a distraction because she felt unable to see what was really going on. As such, Leah’s

realization brings to light one potential initial response to trauma, which is denial. In her inability to accept what is happening, she displaces her attention to something that falls within the boundaries of what she is willing to accept in the moment—the scattered buttons. With the distance time provides, Leah can retrospectively admit her denial, and her self-awareness demonstrates her maturity to learn from the trauma and grow as a result.

Through Leah's narration, readers are also invited to witness to the sisters' inability to aid Ruth May contrasted with the brave, controlled manner in which their Congolese friend, Nelson, handles the tragedy. Initially, even Nelson is rendered silent by the sudden realization that Ruth May has been bitten, but he is the first—and only—to take action toward finding a remedy for her snake bites. Leah says, "Nelson shoved me away. He'd come to life again so suddenly and spoke so fast in Kikongo I couldn't think to understand. He tore her blouse open, just ripped it, and put his face against her chest. Then drew back in horror" (Kingsolver 364). Though his frenzy and panic are evidenced in his quick speech, he remains level-headed and urges the sisters to run for milk to "draw out the poison" or to find Mama Nguza who "will know what to do [since] she saved her son from a green mamba once" (Kingsolver 364). As an insider who is not alien to the dangers of Congolese wildlife, Nelson draws on his knowledge in an attempt to save his dear friend. The sisters cannot move, however, frozen in place by the horror before them. Leah describes herself, saying, "I felt hot and breathless and stung, like an antelope struck with an arrow. I could only stare at Ruth May's bare left shoulder, where two red puncture wounds stood out like red beads on her flesh" (Kingsolver 364). Although Ruth May is the one who lies motionless and wounded before them, Leah feels as though she has been hit, too. Her comparison to a hunted antelope is particularly striking, given the division that developed in her family and the village at large when Leah was allowed to hunt antelope with the men. By

breaking the gender conventions of the village, Leah's family is further ostracized, and Nelson, in his allegiance to the Price family, becomes the intended target of Tata Nuvundu's green mamba. Despite her efforts to assimilate into Congolese life, Leah is not fully accepted, and her boldness, coupled with her relationship to her father, whom the villagers do not respect, places her family in a precarious position, vulnerable to the attacks of those who disagree with their actions.

In contrast to Leah's narration which fixates on details like Ruth May's buttons, when Adah speaks of Ruth May's death, she uses her typical conventions of references to palindromes and Emily Dickinson, but her text is also sprinkled with bodily images that have a stoic clinical tone, which is consistent with Adah's scientific way of seeing and describing events. All of the sisters narrate this trauma with first-person references, but Adah is the only one who almost never mentions her other sisters as she recalls Ruth May's death. Her passage also rates the highest in analytical tone and authenticity when compared to her sisters' recollections. Where 44.88 is the average for analytic content in personal writing, Adah's rate is 88.42, double that of Leah and quadruple that of Rachel. Additionally, where the average score of authenticity for personal writing is 76.01, Adah's writing is a high 82.17, markedly higher than Leah's 28.45 and Rachel's 62.26, indicating that Adah is confident in what she is remembering; she is not writing it as a way to convince herself of what could have happened or what should have happened. This adherence to reality demonstrates Adah's ability to live in the present instead of dreaming about the future or desiring to relive and change the past. As such, this frankness asks readers to consider the benefits and pitfalls of a trauma testimony that is unconcerned with questions of culpability or regret. Such a testimony is factual and not clouded by feelings, but the testimony is also void of self-reflection and awareness that has the potential to lead to depth and healing.

Further analysis of Leah and Adah's narration reveals a striking difference in the twins' coping mechanisms in the aftermath of tragedy. While Leah demonstrates regret, saying, "I can't change what I did: I shook her too hard, and screamed at her. Maybe that was the last she knew of her sister Leah" (Kingsolver 364), Adah's uses clinical descriptions, such as "her bluish face" and "eyes closed up tightly, and her swollen lips clamped shut" (Kingsolver 365). Leah is critical of her own actions and self-reflective while Adah is more straightforward and matter-of-fact, not as introspective or concerned with what could have been. Her priority is to see things just as they are and interpret the tragedy at face value. In so doing, Adah shields herself behind the protection of factual observations without the messiness of emotions. Even her reference to Emily Dickinson's poem, "Because I could not stop for death—He kindly stopped for me" (Kingsolver 365) conveys a simple frankness without a complicating layer of emotion. While remaining disconnected from her emotions may hinder Adah from fully feeling and understanding the pain of the moment, Kingsolver's portrayal of Adah's honesty and lack of emotion is a core part of Adah's character and reminds readers of the variety of responses to trauma that are possible.

Adah's forthrightness is consistent with her character throughout the novel, so it is fitting that she would convey this trait in a moment of tragedy and reflection. Rachel's description, however, demonstrates a higher level of maturity than readers have previously encountered in her rants as a stereotypical, selfish teenager, indicating that this trauma is a momentary catalyst for personal growth. Like Leah, Rachel recalls the silence that followed Ruth May's green mamba bite. She reflects, "There's a strange moment in time, after something horrible happens, when you know it's true but you haven't told anyone yet. Of all the things, that is what I remember most. It was so quiet. And I thought: now we have to go in and tell Mother. That

Ruth May is, oh, sweet Jesus. Ruth May is gone” (Kingsolver 366). Rachel cannot even bring herself to say the word “dead” yet, and her thoughts are turned toward her mother who will undoubtedly be utterly devastated at the news. It is telling that Rachel is not concerned with her father’s grief or reaction at the news of Ruth May’s passing, but Rachel recognizes that her mother’s pain will be unbearable. In this moment, Kingsolver conveys Rachel with more depth than she appears to possess elsewhere in the novel. This momentary change invites readers to consider that this shared trauma and Rachel’s opportunity to imagine speaking it aloud to their mother impact her deeply, despite her often selfish and cavalier attitude, illustrating the significance and emotional gravity of testifying to trauma. Even Rachel is uncharacteristically moved by her testimony.

In addition to her concern for their mother, Rachel’s narration poignantly notes the tension between reality and acceptance of that reality in the wake of trauma, coupled with the belief that speaking trauma makes it real. Rachel concludes, “We thought we could freeze time for just one more minute, and one more after that. That if none of us confessed it, we could hold back the curse that was going to be our history” (Kingsolver 367). This hope as a denial of the truth of Ruth May’s passing is a common coping mechanism, as denial is often cited as a first step in the grieving process. For Rachel, the shattering impact of this trauma is that she can no longer, as she had “always believed...still go home and pretend the Congo never happened,” claiming that the “tragedies that happened to Africans were not mine” (Kingsolver 367). Ruth May’s death has left an indelible scar on their family, and Rachel astutely realizes, “All the other people in the whole wide world might go on about their business, but for us it would never be normal again” (Kingsolver 366). Her family’s new normal will be a life without their youngest

daughter or baby sister, Ruth May, a future none of them could have imagined when they embarked for their missionary journey in the Congo, but a reality that they must now face.

While all the surviving sisters are paralyzed in their grief immediately after Ruth May's snake bite, unable to move, unwilling to make the trauma real by telling their parents, for Rachel, this moment is devastating on a level apart from her family's grief. The loss of Ruth May negates Rachel's plans to "get back home to Bethlehem, Georgia, and be exactly the same Rachel as before" (Kingsolver 367). Unlike Leah and Adah, who have been comfortable not to conform to society's expectations for American teenagers and women, Rachel's goal has long been to "grow up to be a carefree American wife, with nice things and a sensible way of life....[She'd] never planned on being someone different. Never imagined [she] would be a girl they'd duck their eyes from and whisper about as tragic, for having suffered such a loss" (Kingsolver 367). If not more at least equally tragic to Rachel as the loss of her baby sister is the loss of the future she had imagined as a 1960s American housewife. This layer of loss compounds Rachel's grief as she must now also process through the disappointment of her expectations of what the future will contain for her as one marked by such loss.

In this passage, Rachel demonstrates higher than average rates for cognitive processing and clout, and her rates are also higher than the corresponding rates in her sisters' passages on this topic. Rachel's cognitive processing rate of 17.91 (when 12.52 is average in a LIWC analysis) can be explained in her process of weighing the consequences of telling their mother that Ruth May is dead and simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of living into the American housewife future she had imagined. Through her reasoning, she conveys why none of the sisters rushed to tell their parents the horrible news. Rachel's high rate of clout (79.27 when 37.02 is average) conveys her status in this recollection, which places her in a position of

authority and confidence as she describes the life she thought she would have. Although Rachel is the eldest daughter, she rarely seems like the strongest leader. This passage, however, conveys her attitude toward Africa and her false belief that she and her family “were different, not just because we were white and had our vaccinations, but because we were simply a much, much luckier kind of person” (Kingsolver 367). Realizing that she is not in fact luckier, Rachel must now come to terms with her new fragile reality. As she persists in her self-centeredness, Kingsolver’s Rachel portrays for readers a type of uninspired future that is available to trauma survivors who remain stuck as victims, more concerned with how they have been wronged than with how they can heal and grow and change. Kingsolver’s depiction of Rachel shows a lack of resilience in the face of trauma, contrasted with her surviving sisters who come to terms with what happened and integrate its meaning into their adult selves.

Each of these trauma narratives illustrates important details about the sisters’ characters and coping mechanisms. The manner in which they recall and process this life-altering moment is indicative of the ways they will carry into their adulthood the pain of losing Ruth May. They will bear guilt, as Leah does in questioning the last Ruth May knew of her, they will press further into the structured, fact-oriented life of medicine, as Adah does, and they will release the lives they imagined they would live, as Rachel does in relinquishing her dream of becoming a traditional American housewife. Their adult lives echo the paths they allude to in these passages, as Leah remains in Africa, married to Anatole, trying to right the wrongs Americans have inflicted, while Adah pursues a career in medicine, and Rachel never returns to the States, choosing, instead, to stay in Africa and become the wife or mistress of successful businessmen who exploit the ills of colonialism. Her housewife dream has been altered to fit the context this trauma has created. Their challenging, successful, and self-destructive paths, respectively, invite

readers to witness and consider the ramifications of trauma and the significance of coping in such a way that brings the truth of the past into the present in helpful and productive ways instead of being limited and stifled by the scars of traumatic experience.

Guilty Hindsight and the Power of Healing Through Retelling

Similar to those who complied with Trujillo by remaining silent, *The Poisonwood Bible*'s Orleanna Price is initially compliant and silent until she liberates herself from her husband, Nathan. Orleanna's compliance is harmful to her daughters who live in fear of their domineering and controlling father. Orleanna recognizes the harm she is doing by remaining with Nathan and allowing him to rule his family ruthlessly. She says, "I wonder what you'll name my sin: Complicity? Loyalty? Stupefaction? How can you tell the difference? Is my sin a failure of virtue, or of competence? I knew Rome was burning, but I had just enough water to scrub the floor, so I did what I could" (Kingsolver 383). Because Orleanna's options to fight against Nathan are limited—she can't "go hop on the Greyhound Bus to Atlanta" (Kingsolver 166)—she does what little she can to make her family's life bearable. She does not stand up to Nathan when he assigns the girls the dreaded Verse as punishment, not does she interfere when he uses "the strap" to whip them. She does, however, help her daughters barricade their room on an evening when Nathan is particularly angered after Leah disobeys him, telling him she will hunt with the men of the village. Barricading the room is how Orleanna "scrubs the floors while Rome is burning." She cannot stop her husband from burning down the family, so to speak, but she can show her loyalty to her daughters in the simple moments when she tries to protect them in whatever way she knows how.

According to Elaine Ognibene, “Orleanna’s story comes from a kind of guilty hindsight” (22). This is certainly true when Orleanna narrates to her deceased daughter, Ruth May, questioning if Ruth May will ever forgive her for contributing to her death by not insisting they leave the Congo. Orleanna also says, “I have my own story, and increasingly in my old age it weighs on me...I stir in bed and the memories rise out of me like a buzz of flies from a carcass. I crave to be rid of them, but find myself being careful, too, choosing which ones to let out into the light. I want you to find me innocent” (Kingsolver 8). Orleanna wants to air her story, tell how she survived Nathan’s conquest, but because Ruth May did not survive, she feels haunted and burdened by the loss. Her story is laden with guilt, but it is hers to tell, and she tells it in the only way she knows how: “blinded from the constant looking back” (Kingsolver 98).

Orleanna’s retrospective view allows her to analyze events with a perspective that is more remorseful and pensive than the Orleanna who is in the present moment in Kilanga, worrying with “scrubbing the floors,” unable to take time to reflect on her situation. Powerful in processing her past openly, Orleanna’s story is a verbal representation of her internal scars, and by sharing it, she helps herself heal by coming to terms with what she has endured. After the Congo, she reflects, “How we wives and mothers do perish at the hands of our own righteousness. I was just one more of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls off to conquer in another war. Guilty or innocent, they have everything to lose. They *are* what is to lose. A wife is the earth itself, changing hands, bearing scars” (Kingsolver 89, emphasis in original). Through her words, Orleanna makes her scars known and brings to light the painful past of her life with Nathan and the losses she endured in the Congo. By expressing herself as both innocent and guilty, she acknowledges the role she played in her family’s trauma in the Congo, not speaking against Nathan but silently supporting him as a

patriot supports soldiers heading off to war, but she also holds her silence in tension with herself as a conquered land, Nathan's property, lacking an authoritative voice. In the moment, Orleanna seems powerless, unable to voice her opposition to her husband, but in retrospect, her trauma narrative is a powerful representation of testimony that holds Nathan responsible for the trauma he caused.

Although she cannot forgive herself while her family is in Kilanga, the largest part of Orleanna's healing comes through her act of retelling her story with the luxury of distance and hindsight. While she does not absolve herself of all guilt related to her daughters' misery, she does explain herself, allowing the reader to place strong sympathies with her as the "occupied territory" she is. Her marriage to Nathan is a failed partnership, to say the least. Instead of communicating and compromising with her, Nathan expects to always have his way. Orleanna's desires and dreams get lost. Instead of being equals, Nathan and Orleanna have a patriarchal relationship where Nathan expects to be able to lord over, govern, and control his wife. As such, Orleanna's story is "sad, insightful, and redemptive" (Ognibene 23). She describes herself as "swallowed by Nathan's mission, body and soul" (Kingsolver 198), and she adds, "And you wonder why I didn't rise up and revolt against Nathan? I felt lucky to get my shoes on the right feet, that's why I moved forward only, thinking each morning anew that we were leaving the worst behind" (Kingsolver 200). Unfortunately, the worst is rarely behind them, each new day bringing its share of new pain. Orleanna admits that she was "so thoroughly bent to the shape of marriage [she] could hardly see any other way to stand" (Kingsolver 201). She says, "I'd lost my wings. Don't ask me how I gained them back—the story is too unbearable. I trusted too long in false reassurances, believing as we all want to do when men speak of the national interest, that it's also ours. In the end, my lot was cast with the Congo. Poor Congo, barefoot

bride of men who took her jewels and promised her the Kingdom” (Kingsolver 201). She describes her story as “too unbearable,”—and it might be such if described in one continuous attempt—but she does tell it throughout the novel, interspersed with the perspectives of her daughters. Broken down into such manageable parts, Orleanna’s testimony becomes her confession that leads to her liberation. As she tells the truth as she saw it, reflecting on her trauma becomes bearable, and readers are invited to be empathic witness to her representation of testimony instead of holding her responsible for her daughters’ pain while she remained in her abusive marriage. This empathic witnessing is transformational, as readers are invited into deeper understanding of a world they do not inhabit. Extending ideas of the empathy depicted in the text, Nathan Kilpatrick notes that Kingsolver’s narrators “are similarly able to identify with Congolese people because of their shared experience of subjugation to a totalizing and dominating authority, which then serves as the source for empathic solidarity between the postcolonial people of the Congo and the four surviving female narrators” (84). This solidarity is evidenced clearly in Leah’s relationship with Anatole and her adult life in Congo, and there are various points throughout the text where villagers of Kilanga are sympathetic toward Orleanna and Adah, but I contend that Rachel and her standoffish and prideful relationship with the Congo warrant and depict little to no empathy. As such, she provides readers with a point of contrast for the empathy engendered by the other narrators. Further evidence of the novel’s impact, April Morgan has found *The Poisonwood Bible* to be an important text for students of International Relations. In her study, she found that her students’ experiences with Kingsolver’s novel “speak to empathy as a person-to-person dynamic...triggered by an emotional connection between specific individuals” (397). As such, students were able to further understand the complicated international relations at work in the novel and its historical referent.

Characters within the novel seem aware of the need for empathic relations that come through sharing testimony as well. Orleanna recognizes the need for testimony to heal her as she narrates near the novel's beginning, "I have my own story, and increasingly in my old age it weighs on me" (Kingsolver 8). Of her memories, she states, "I crave to be rid of them, but find myself being careful, too, choosing which ones to let out into the light" (Kingsolver 8). As she exercises her agency over which memories to release in the novel's subsequent chapters, Kingsolver's Orleanna comes to terms with her brutal past and the scars she will always carry, but the memories no longer haunt her like "flies from a carcass" (Kingsolver 8). Instead, she claims that a "territory is only possessed for a moment in time" (Kingsolver 384), indicating that she has authored her freedom through the words of her story, "the only celebration we mortals really know" (Kingsolver 385). This testimony of Orleanna has included her much sought-after forgiveness from Ruth May whose absence haunts her. In the novel's final chapter, Kingsolver invites readers to consider that Ruth May has released Orleanna from her guilt, saying, "Mother, you can still hold on but forgive, forgive and give for long as long as we both shall live I forgive you, Mother" (Kingsolver 543). Ruth May's forgiveness brings a sense of final healing for Orleanna's testimony, as her chapters have often been directly addressed to Ruth May, pleading for forgiveness. Through her testimony, Orleanna has now been found not guilty and is free to "[w]alk forward into the light," as her last-born liberates her to do (Kingsolver 543).

Like Orleanna, daughters Leah and Adah have their own scars that need healing, stories that need revealing. Leah says, "It's the writing I need, the pouring out" (Kingsolver 474). The letters that she writes to Adah when they are adults may never be read (the postal service in Leah's village is unreliable), but expressing herself through the writing of those letters aids Leah in purging herself of the painful past that continues to haunt her in the present. Leah further

liberates herself as she describes her father's lack of concern for his family during the plague of ants, saying, "I pictured myself a ghost: bones and teeth. Rachel a ghost with long white hair; Adah a silent, staring ghost. Ruth May a tree-climbing ghost, the squeeze of a small hand on your arm. My father was not a ghost; he was God with his back turned, hands clasped behind him and fierce eyes on the clouds. God had his back turned and was walking away" (Kingsolver 310). Leah's adoration for her father begins to break down as the illusion of him as father-protector and father-provider begins to be peeled away. When he abandons his family during the ant invasion, leaving other villagers to be responsible for the safety of his wife and daughters, any amount of faith that was lingering in Leah's heart vanishes like the flesh of their chickens in the wake of the plague.

In their own words and through their own eyes, Adah and Leah tell the real story of Nathan Price. Adah says, "We are the balance of our damage and our transgressions. He was my father. I own half his genes, and all of his history. Believe this: mistakes are part of the story. I am born of a man who believed he could tell nothing but the truth, while he set down for all time the Poisonwood Bible" (Kingsolver 533). Adah does not deny her connection to her father, genetically and historically. Instead, she accepts the mistakes that are made, for she realizes they are an integral part of the story of her survival.

In telling their stories, the Price women wield power over Nathan, claiming their lives and their stories as their own, preventing him from having complete power over them. Through the narration, Nathan becomes the one who is silenced, not having the chance to narrate from his own perspective. The reader sees Nathan only through the eyes of his wife and daughters. While history is often told from the perspective of the victors, as Kingsolver reorients this text by giving the narrative voice to the women only, she reframes the locus of power and elevates the

perspective of these oppressed women. Through their viewpoints, readers are invited to see Nathan's shortcomings and abuse even if he chooses to be ignorant of them himself. As Anne Marie Austenfeld has noted, the Price women tell "their own foundational truths, [which are] the subversive currents of personal truth that run underneath the official version" (Austenfeld 298). Their minority voices are centered and prioritized in Kingsolver's version of this history, giving them the power as official history-makers and gate-keepers of their stories.

After escaping the Congo and leaving her father, Adah's perspective of her father continues to change as she begins to learn more about her father's past as she searches for his military discharge papers in an old trunk of his. She realizes that he left the military unharmed, while the men he served with all perished. She writes, "The conditions of his discharge were technically honorable, but unofficially they were: Cowardice, Guilt, and Disgrace....Fate sentenced Our Father to pay for those lives with the remainder of his" (Kingsolver 413). Adah is brutally honest in her assessment of her father, no longer looking up at him with the admiring eyes of a submissive daughter. She has freed herself from his controlling grasp, and she now sees him with the eyes of a woman who has finally found the voice he tried to silence and conquer.

Conclusion

With this triumph over their conqueror, *The Poisonwood Bible* beautifully tells the stories of five women in their own voices, noticeably omitting the voice of the dominant male, Reverend Nathan Price. In being told from the women's perspectives, the stories of these women become the sources of authority. With this authoritative voice, the women's stories

become powerful representations of their family's history, as well as the history of the Belgian Congo on the cusp of independence, speaking to the ramifications of colonialization.

Pamela Demory has compared *The Poisonwood Bible* to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, concluding that one major distinction between the two is the absence of a male voice in *The Poisonwood Bible* and the absence of a female voice in *Heart of Darkness*. Of the Price women, she writes,

These women do not tell their stories out loud; they do not have an audience within the world of the novel to listen to them. In their everyday lives their voices are regularly silenced by [Nathan] Price. In giving them a voice, Kingsolver comments on the political, social, and family constraints that keep them from speaking, and at the same time comments on *Heart of Darkness*, pointing out by implication the absence of women's points of view in Conrad's story. (190)

An assessment such as this reveals the significance of *The Poisonwood Bible* as a novel about culture, family, religion, and gender, to name just a few of the issues *The Poisonwood Bible* explores through these women's perspectives.

Because both *Heart of Darkness* and *The Poisonwood Bible* deal with issues surrounding colonization, it is certainly worth noting that Kingsolver's text uses women narrators to speak of events, and in so doing, crafts a distinct depiction of events as they relate to the Price women. Leah and Adah write of their thoughts and opinions of their father in a way that a man would not be able to express because he is not the daughter of an oppressive father. Likewise, Orleanna tells of her life as the submissive wife of a controlling husband in a candid first-person manner that the pen of someone not in that scenario would not be able to fully capture. Furthermore, as Sophie Croisy claims, "Orleanna's process of speaking up, of telling the story of the fragmentation of her family and the Congo leads to the intervention of a new account, a new history as spoken by a voice that used to be silenced but that becomes politicised as it challenges sovereign structures of power" (229). Orleanna's representation of testimony both rewrites

hegemonic accounts and demonstrates the power of her woman's account of subverting oppression and surviving to tell her story.

Orleanna writes, "We would all have to escape Africa by a different route. Some of us are in the ground now and some are above it, but we're all women, made of the same scarred earth" (Kingsolver 89). Regardless of the widely varied experiences Orleanna and her daughters have, there remains some shred of universality in the femaleness—something that unites them as women, something male narration cannot express. One unifying factor for the women of *The Poisonwood Bible* is that they all feel neglected and controlled by Nathan. Orleanna is constantly evaluating and analyzing her daughters' complicated relationships with their father and, in turn, with her. Orleanna writes,

For time and eternity there have been fathers like Nathan who simply can see no way to have a daughter but to own her like a plot of land. To work her, plow her under, rain down a dreadful poison upon her.... You can shield them with your body and soul, trying to absorb that awful rain, but they'll still move toward him. Without cease, they'll bend to his light. (Kingsolver 191)

Orleanna sees her young daughters being moved by Nathan's control over them, and though she tries to shield them, it is not enough to protect them fully from his domineering influence, brute insults, and emotional neglect. She describes her husband's relationship to their daughters as one of ownership. To him, they are more like slaves, more like property, than family. She is honest about her struggle between protecting them from him and permitting them to see him as he is and reject his lordship on their own. She acknowledges, however, her daughters' agency and power in overcoming their father's influence, saying,

The day does come, finally, when a daughter can walk away from a man such as that—if she's lucky. His own ferocity turns over inside her and she turns away hard, never to speak to him again. Instead she'll begin talking to *you*, her mother, demanding with a world of indignation: *How could you let him? Why?*... There are so many answers. All of them are faultless, and none good enough. (Kingsolver 191, emphasis in original)

Orleanna recognizes she is not in a position of ultimate power while her husband is present. Nonetheless, she maintains her strong influence in her daughters' lives and eventually ushers them toward freedom when she leaves Nathan. Although she leads them toward freedom, Orleanna realizes that her daughters will blame her for allowing them to live with him as long as they did. In their minds, she is just as guilty for allowing him to rule as he is for trying to own them like property. By witnessing Orleanna's first-person account as Nathan's occupied territory, the reader is invited to consider Orleanna's struggle. The reader is taken inside this woman character's mind and is permitted to explore her unique perspective, which is expressed through the powerful medium of personal testimony. Orleanna's representation of testimony becomes one of the authoritative sources of her family's collective history.

Daughters Leah and Adah also contribute to the family's collective history by speaking first-hand of their experiences in Africa. Adah illuminates her perception of her father in saying, "He was merely trying, that sigh suggested, to drag us all toward enlightenment through the marrow of our poor female bones" (Kingsolver 76). Even in her youth, Adah recognizes that her father sees his wife and children as inferior and in need of enlightenment. Adah's assessment of her father's sigh reveals her characterization of him. He is man who views his wife and daughters as unenlightened and "poor"—lacking in every possible way: physically, intellectually, and spiritually. The women are never permitted to lead and are certainly never seen as "enlightened," as Nathan would consider himself to be. By describing her father in such a way, Adah reveals her father's less-than-desirable perception of his wife and daughters.

Through their woman-centered accounts, the women of *The Poisonwood Bible* reconstruct personal and collective histories through their eyes and in their women's language, reclaiming their pasts as their own, not those belonging to the male versions of history that are

often passed down and validated. In contributing their personal histories, these women provide alternative texts to the male accounts of history and create a more well-rounded depiction of past events and their traumatic experiences. Their stories survive to be added to collective history and passed down to future generations. By surviving, this novel, as well as the others in this collection, represents the struggle that these women endured and remind the reader that freedom and justice still need to be fought for. Furthermore, their testimonies survive to speak back to the “tyranny of language” that claims trauma is unspeakable because “traumatic events are almost impossible to put into words” as traumatic memory bypasses the language center in the brain (van der Kolk 231). Through these resilient women, Kingsolver invites us to consider the liberating and longstanding impact of sharing one’s trauma testimony and of inviting others into a deeper understanding of the tragedies that one has endured. As they share their trauma testimonies, they fulfill what Bessel van der Kolk has claimed: “as soon as a story starts being told, particularly if it is told repeatedly, it changes—the act of telling itself changes the tale. The mind cannot help but make meaning out of what it knows, and the meaning we make of our lives changes how and what we remember” (van der Kolk 191). The Price women retrospectively create and extract meaning from the tragedies they endured in the Congo as they recall living with the domineering Nathan Price, surviving the ant swarm, and losing Ruth May. In so doing, they invite readers into their trauma and stand as resilient examples of triumph, as their varied futures remind readers of the diverse paths individuals can take in the wake of their trauma, simultaneously urging readers to consider the expansive ways one can process and speak of so-called unspeakable pain and loss.

Chapter 4: *The Rapture of Canaan*: Surviving Religious Trauma

Introduction

Similar to the patriarchal religious family unit explored in Chapter 3 in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, the fundamentalist religious community in Sheri Reynolds's *The Rapture of Canaan* also creates a traumatic, oppressive environment for its members, particularly its young women. The novel's protagonist narrator, teenager Ninah Huff, however, is bold and brave as she rebels against her community leader/grandfather and expresses her own opinions, a stark contrast to the majority of the community members who blindly comply with their leader's restrictions and punishments.

Reynolds reveals through this novel the devastating pitfalls community members face as they aim to align their lifestyles with their church's restrictive and twisted beliefs. In this coming-of-age novel, readers encounter common teenage trials, such as puberty and young love that are anything but ordinary within the fundamentalist religious community of The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind. Founded by Grandpa Herman, the church is undeniably conservative, enforcing a strict code of behavior and dress. Herman's granddaughter, Ninah, falls in love with James, another young member of the church, and becomes pregnant with James's baby. When she tells the community members that the baby "belongs to Jesus" instead of James, she is severely punished and ostracized—although, strangely, they come to believe her outlandish claim after the baby is born with his hands fused together as though in prayer. Unable to face the ramifications of his actions, James commits suicide, leaving Ninah to face teenaged motherhood alone.

In addition to facing the trauma of her oppressive religious community's daily regulations, Ninah also endures great physical and emotional trauma as a result of her connection to her community. As Ninah recalls her abuse and processes through the loss of her lover, James, the reader is invited to consider how the way Ninah remembers and reshapes the narrative as the novel's storyteller are significant to her liberation process.³⁶ Further, she uses her speech to influence other community members to defy their oppressors and achieve some form of freedom for themselves, as she speaks frankly in opposition to her religious community's leaders. In so doing, she is a powerful example of a strong woman character defying claims that trauma is unspeakable. Rather than remaining silent, she demonstrates the resilience that can be found in the wake of recurring trauma and how one can thrive while in the process of severing ties with an abuser, which in Ninah's case, is her fundamentalist religious community and family. Through all of this, Reynolds invites readers to bear empathic witness and complete the loop of testimony, extending the social significance of encountering in literature the religiously motivated oppressions at The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind.

As she testifies to her trauma, Ninah also finds tangible outlets for her pain that lead to her post-traumatic growth. Through cutting her hair and the hair of community women, weaving rugs from found materials, and cutting her son's hands, Ninah crafts her own liberation and motivates others to find freedom as well. She does this while still remaining part of their restrictive community, illustrating a kind of agency that is possible within the constructs of abusive relationships while pushing back against the abuse. Additionally, she is a catalyst for

³⁶ Reynolds establishes Ninah as the novel's narrator, one form of a storyteller, but Ninah also places a high value on storytelling within the novel. The novel's opening scene refers to Ninah weaving rugs like weaving together parts of a story, and Ninah's first scene with Nanna conveys the significance of Nanna telling and re-telling to Ninah the story of the day Nanna's father died (5). This scene also illustrates how integral storytelling is to Ninah and Nanna's relational bond, which is significant as they are support structures for one another.

change at The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind, as the community seems to be changing for the better by the novel's end, though the fate of the church remains somewhat ambiguous. This ambiguity invites readers to consider the importance of testimony even in the face of opposition and incomplete freedom, as Ninah's representation of testimony and her example chisel away at the oppressive power structures of her church community even if they do not dismantle it entirely. Her process of acting out and working through trauma by using her hands to create and subvert invites readers to take notice of the beneficial impact of her personalized form of verbal and non-verbal testimony that compels her survival and change. By remaining with her community, Reynolds's Ninah invites readers to see that steps of change, however small, are nonetheless significant to push back against repression and continue to create one's own way forward.

Trauma Theory and Expressive Writing

While traditional literary trauma theory has been concerned primarily with a survivor's inability to represent pain linguistically, my intervention holds that the authors of the fictional texts I am examining defy such claims by depicting characters that testify to their trauma in distinct and profound ways. Cathy Caruth and Elaine Scarry, who paved the way for literary trauma theory, asserted that "pain cannot be rendered in language" (Scarry 162) and that trauma has an "unassimilated nature" in that it cannot be fully known or understood and is therefore intrusive and haunting long after the initial trauma occurs (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). In her later work, Caruth has expanded upon those initial claims to broaden her scope to include more of the possibility of testifying to trauma, but her approaches, and the narrowly focused following they have gathered, are still limited in their emphasis on what is not fully known in the

moment and wake of traumatic experience.³⁷ In contrast, the more recent work of Laurie Vickroy and Michele Balaev contends—and I agree—that new approaches to literary trauma theory are necessary to encompass the plurality of trauma experiences. Vickroy evaluates the role of survival in fiction and concludes, “Trauma fiction testifies to the value of knowledge and resistance” (224), reminding readers of the important function of trauma testimony and its impact on survival. Balaev is critical of the “unspeakable void” that she asserts “became the dominant concept in criticism for imagining trauma’s function in literature” as a result of early work in trauma studies that emphasized trauma’s lack of referential content (*Contemporary Approaches* 1). She rightly asserts that a “pluralistic model of trauma suggests that criticism may explore trauma as a subject that invites the study of the relationship between language, the psyche, and behavior without assuming the classic definition of trauma that asserts an unrepresentable and pathological universalism” (*Contemporary Approaches* 4). My intervention responds to Balaev’s call for pluralistic models of literary trauma theory, as I contend that these fictional characters speak of their trauma, not allowing the truth of their painful experiences to fall into any “unspeakable void.” Their representations of testimony, rather, propel and represent their healing in the aftermath of their trauma and invite readers to bear empathic witness and extend the social and cultural significance of their stories of suffering and survival.

As characters like Reynolds’s Ninah in novels like *The Rapture of Canaan* give voice to their suffering, they convey their post-traumatic growth, which is registered at the linguistic level through their word choice and evidence of cognitive processing, and in their choice of therapeutic outlets, such as Ninah’s rug-making and hair-cutting. A Linguistic Inquiry and Word

³⁷ In her 2014 publication, *Listening to Trauma*, Caruth emphasizes testimony but still holds to trauma as unassimilable, saying of her interviewees, “[T]hey have made the study of and response to trauma into a site of historical memory and have, conversely, revised our notions of what it means to remember and to act around the imperative to respond to something that consistently resists conscious assimilation and awareness” (xiii).

Count (LIWC) analysis of Ninah's text confirms this growth. Developed by psychologist and founder of expressive writing James Pennebaker, LIWC provides a quantitative method for evaluating text, which, in turn, provides readers with the chance to observe new insights into these fictional characters and draw conclusions about their post-traumatic growth—or lack thereof, in the case of Rachel Price in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*—over the course of the novel. As Ninah testifies to topics that are taboo in her community, such as sexual desires, suicide, and shame resulting from acting against her religious community's regulations, she stands as an example of the healing power present in speaking out. As Pennebaker has found, those who keep traumas hidden and bear the burden of secrecy also face significant physical health problems, along with the psychological and emotional implications of stifling one's urge to testify (*Opening Up* 103). He contends that remaining silent leaves the trauma unresolved. Further, he addresses the community component of the relationship between trauma and testimony, saying, "The refusal to acknowledge that a significant trauma has occurred—whether on the individual or community level—is both psychologically and physically unhealthy" (*Opening Up* 168). Ninah acknowledges her trauma, but her community as a whole remains largely ignorant until they witness Ninah's progression toward liberation and some consider how they may also be free. Linguistic analysis of Ninah's trauma narration shows readers her resilience in withstanding her community-inflicted trauma and her progress toward resolution by the novel's end. Such an evaluation of Reynolds's already-eloquent prose and characterization provides further impetus for bringing this novel back to the forefront of classroom study and academic scholarship for new audiences to experience the peculiar world at *The Church of Fire and Brimstone* and witness Ninah's triumph over her religious trauma.

Popular Appeal of *The Rapture of Canaan*

Excluding more than a dozen book reviews and author interviews, the number of scholarly pieces on *The Rapture of Canaan* can be counted on one hand. With this lack of criticism, scholars have yet to interrogate *The Rapture of Canaan* with questions of literary trauma theory or expressive writing. While some have written of the suffering and religious components of the novel,³⁸ no one has evaluated Ninah's narration as testimony and her actions as liberatory, thus illuminating the necessity of my intervention in light of this critical gap. Much of the criticism concerning *The Rapture of Canaan* takes a more popular than academic slant. While it would appear there is a dearth of academic scholarship, as evidenced in the novel's widespread flash popularity followed by a rapid decline in attention after 1997, I argue there is much this novel has to offer scholars. More than being a momentary best seller, the text provides insights into religious trauma and oppression and one heroine's journey to cope and thrive despite her bleak conditions.

Published in 1995, *The Rapture of Canaan* was chosen as an Oprah's Book Club selection in 1997, catapulting author Sheri Reynolds suddenly into the limelight and exposing a large popular audience to the strange world of the fundamentalist Pentecostal community Reynolds created. While the community is based loosely on Reynolds's experience growing up in South Carolina, she is quick to say that the novel is not autobiographical. In fact, she says the story began with an image she had in a dream of a child born with hands fused together.³⁹ Furthermore, the regulations and punishments depicted in the novel are drawn from medieval law codes, as Reynolds was studying medieval history while she wrote *The Rapture of Canaan*.

³⁸ Kathaleen Amende and Cindy Wallace

³⁹ Seymour, Marilyn Dallman. "Ample Ambiguity: Interview with Sheri Reynolds." *The South Carolina Review*, vol. 41, no. 2. 2009, pp. 90-109.

Nonetheless, the unbelievable archaic rules and reprimands are made believable within the modern-day Holiness community of Reynolds's novel.

Some critics argue that Oprah's choice of *The Rapture of Canaan* for her successful Oprah's Book Club resuscitated Reynolds' ailing career and spurred the novel to its temporary high sales.⁴⁰ Reynolds herself said of Oprah's choice, "I felt like I'd been saved—that my career...had been resurrected...through nothing I had done" (Charters 55). Others further argue that *The Rapture of Canaan* is ideal summer reading for those, like teachers, who work and read so fervently during the academic year.⁴¹ This notion of *The Rapture of Canaan* as a "break" seems to dismiss *The Rapture of Canaan's* literary qualities and set it up as a lighter, more disposable book, ignoring its depth of perspectives, treatment of trauma, and pedagogical possibilities. While reading for pleasure is not without its merit, *The Rapture of Canaan* has more to contribute to readers' experiences of literature of trauma and to students' perceptions of contemporary American fiction than a book suitable merely for poolside reading would imply. Rather, readers should interrogate the social and spiritual conditions that have coalesced to make Ninah's painful life a reality at The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind. They should also investigate the intricate ways Reynolds weaves liberation throughout Ninah's story, through the subtle and bold ways she subverts her community's strict standards and carves out her own form of freedom.

Reynolds, like the character of Ninah she has crafted, has said she uses language to overcome her own oppressive circumstances. Reynolds told *Publishers Weekly* that she often uses writing as a form of personal processing and therapy, adding, "I think I used the stories I wrote to do things that I couldn't actually do" because of her strict religious upbringing (Charters

⁴⁰ Flamm, Matthew. "Between the Lines." *Entertainment Weekly*, no. 379, 1997.

⁴¹ Barlow, Dudley. "The Teachers' Lounge: Summer Reading." *The Education Digest*, May 2009, pp. 52-55.

55). Readers, likewise, are invited into a world where what is done may be unlike what they would do, but they can nonetheless connect empathically and see some semblance of themselves in Ninah's experience of pain and rebellion and her persistent pursuit of freedom. Robin Murray argues that *The Rapture of Canaan's* weight is felt as readers, specifically referring to her students, see practices like those at The Church of Fire and Brimstone repeated in the real world around them, like the Branch Davidians in Waco or friends' families who restrict their children from consuming certain media, like Disney movies (Murray 12). These repetitions and reinforcements make Reynolds's fictional world more believable and, therefore, more terrible.

Some scholars, like Cindy Wallace, have further evaluated *The Rapture of Canaan* on the merits of its biblical symbolism, and while her discussion of allusions to Ninah as the Virgin Mary and James as a dualistic character who is both Jesus and Judas hold merit, her conclusion seems to be reaching. She claims that readers are "led to forgive the evil committed by the membership of the Church of Fire and Brimstone as they, in the end, have become representations of all sinners redeemed through the birth of a child savior" (Wallace 11). I think readers may leave open the possibility that the congregants are neither redeemed nor should readers be so gracious to them. While the community is on the brink of change at the novel's end, readers cannot be certain what direction the church will take—toward a new beginning with newfound freedoms or back to their familiar comforts of rules and punishments, not yet willing to lean into too much change or progress. Given Reynolds's depiction of Ninah's final words about the community—that she is "sure as *hell* tired of it," and Canaan does not need to listen to their arguing or their rules—I would contend that Reynolds leaves readers to judge The Church of Fire and Brimstone accordingly for the wounds they have inflicted (Reynolds 313). Such a reading would not absolve them of their wrongdoing in their abuse of Ninah. It would likewise

leave open the likelihood that while Ninah remains with the community at the end, she has not merely forgotten and forgiven her abusers. Rather, she creates the space for her own freedom and promotes others' agency while coming to terms with the trauma and loss she has endured. Kathaleen Amende, in contrast, writes more recently on the intersection of sexuality and spirituality in *The Rapture of Canaan*, concluding ultimately that the community is to blame for Ninah's maltreatment, which is intertwined with her sex as a woman. She interrogates the methods within The Church of Fire and Brimstone that send women conflicting messages concerning secular and spiritual passion and also blame women for men's shortcomings (58). Her 2013 investigation, *Desire and the Divine: Feminine Identity in White Southern Women's Writing*, keeps the conversation concerning *The Rapture of Canaan* moving forward, but it is only one small step. While she evaluates Ninah's suffering as form of trauma and adequately indicts Ninah's womanhood as a source of much of her strife, her investigation is concerned primarily with the spiritual entanglements of this suffering and less with Ninah's capacity and strategy to overcome. As such, her emphasis on what ails Ninah fails to call readers to see Ninah's resilience and survival in the face of her traumas.

Although there is a small amount of criticism pertaining to *The Rapture of Canaan*, most related to its spirituality and popularity, a body of thorough, in-depth scholarship is still lacking.⁴² This investigation aims to bring *The Rapture of Canaan* from its more obscure corners of criticism back to the forefront with detailed attention to Ninah's experience of trauma and her unique methods of testimony and liberation. As writer Barbara Kamler has said of the value of stories, "Stories are specific rather than abstract, they...do not tell single truths, but rather represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it. Stories

⁴² In addition to the texts already mentioned by Amende, Murray, Seymour, and Wallace, a 2009 dissertation by Sarah L. Peters investigates the religious imagination in a selection of contemporary southern women's fiction, including Reynolds.

are... a representative of experience rather than the same thing as experience itself” (qtd in MacCurdy 45-6). When read in this light and with knowledge of the multiple views of contemporary literary trauma theory and expressive writing, readers are invited to become empathic witnesses to Ninah’s religious oppression and are encouraged to walk away from the text with a deeper understanding of this unfamiliar and bizarre world and the tools Reynolds has given Ninah to fashion her own way forward. Further, the broad, popular appeal of this text of trauma, as with Kingsolver’s text discussed in Chapter 3 and the film adaptation of Alvarez’s novel from Chapter 2, urges trauma studies scholars to stay informed of the impact of these texts outside of academia instead of remaining insular in their discussions of these texts.

Trauma at The Church of Fire and Brimstone

Members of The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God’s Almighty Baptizing Wind are exposed to a variety of traumas—physical, verbal, and emotional. In addition to these recognizable forms of trauma, the members are also victims of religious trauma and oppression that permeates their lives. It is worth exploring these intersecting traumas as overlapping forms of oppression for the church members.⁴³ The novel’s protagonist, Ninah, is a significant victim-turned-survivor of these traumas, and I will explore her liberation in this chapter’s final section, but I will first elaborate on the impact of these intersecting traumas on her life.

The members of The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God’s Almighty Baptizing Wind adhere to the rules Grandpa Herman created when he founded the church after the church he

⁴³ This concept is borrowed and adapted from bell hooks who writes in *Talking Back*, “By calling attention to interlocking systems of domination—sex, race, and class—black women and many other groups of women acknowledge the diversity and complexity of female experience, of our relationship to power and domination” (21) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who writes of *kyriarchy* in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* of “the multiplicative interstructuring of the pyramidal hierarchical structures of ruling which affect women in different social locations differently” (114). She adds, “Kyriarchal power operates not only along the axis of gender but also along those of race, class, culture, and religion” (123).

“had been attending split into little pieces” (Reynolds 13). In Grandpa Herman’s “brand of Christianity” (Reynolds 13), Grandpa Herman is the authority and sole rule-maker, though Ninah wonders “if Grandpa got a copy of the laws from some other religion or if he just made them up” because “he’d walk around saying things like, ‘He who invades another man’s nets or fish traps or takes fish from another man’s fishing preserve shall pay fifty dollars as compensation’” (Reynolds 15). In addition to such Grandpa Herman-created regulations, church members avoid association with those who are not part of their church community, although the young people do attend local public schools. Girls are also not permitted to wear pants or cut their hair, abiding by a strict dress code that includes wearing long dresses in bland, neutral colors that make everyone look the same (Reynolds 37). While community members seem to willingly abide by these rules and standards, the young people express their feelings of being different and separated from their schoolmates, indicating their displeasure at being forced to follow the rules their parents and community demand. This lack of individuality reinforces the conformity necessary to be a functioning member of this particular religious group and acts as a subtle traumatizing force. Disobedience or questioning the beliefs and practices is almost unheard of among the families who willingly comply with Grandpa Herman’s doctrine. This silence in the face of conformity and oppression makes Ninah’s testimony all the more striking and bold, as she often stands alone as the sole voice crying out against their abuses.

Part of the community’s religious practice includes regularly held worship services that last for an undetermined amount of time, not concluding until someone has “caught the spirit” and then persisting until the spirit’s work is finished (Reynolds 43). Children attend classes after dinner where they recite more of Grandpa Herman’s rules, and pairs of adults participate in evening prayer time as prayer partners. It is this time set aside for prayer partners that paves the

way for Ninah and James to spend time alone with one another and eventually leads them to transgress many of the community's boundaries.

Because the religious trauma and oppression is so prevalent in Ninah's community, that spirituality is also where the physical, emotional, and verbal trauma are housed. Much of the abuse that takes place comes in the forms of fear and punishment. For example, Ninah is so afraid of the impending rapture that she checks the faucet some nights to see if it is pouring blood, which would indicate that her parents have been taken in glory, and she has been left, an unrepentant sinner, unsaved (Reynolds 66). Author Sheri Reynolds has said that this detail found its way into her novel based on feelings she had as a child, growing up in a fundamentalist Pentecostal community in South Carolina (Shoup 267). Ninah's narrative acknowledgement of this nagging fear of being left behind is a bold representation of testimony for readers who encounter other community members who follow unquestioningly and do not outwardly express their traumatization. Because these alarming stories are so emphasized in the community, the children live with a constant fear like a chronic low-grade fever that is normalized to the point of becoming imperceptible. This sort of scare tactic is common in communities that practice religious child maltreatment. In her book, *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Maltreatment*, Janet Heimlich defines religious child maltreatment as "child abuse or neglect that is largely caused by religious beliefs held or propagated by perpetrators or a surrounding community" (29). One manifestation of this abuse comes through "terrifying children with religious concepts, such as an angry and punitive god, eternal damnation, or possession by the devil or by demons" (Heimlich 29). Ninah and other children at Fire and Brimstone are certainly scared both of these religious concepts and of Grandpa Herman, evidenced in Ninah's compulsion to check the faucet and simultaneous fear of checking it. Reynolds further invites

readers to an awareness of this religious fear when Ninah seems to reference the sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” by Puritan Johnathan Edwards. During her punishment known as a “dunking,” Ninah notes, “I shook like that spider suspended over the pits of Hell by a thread, the one Grandpa Herman referred to in his sermons ever so often” (Reynolds 194). As this memory comes back to Ninah in her moment of fear and punishment, readers are further reminded of the way fear of God and man has been ingrained into the psyches of the congregation at Fire and Brimstone. God’s love and kindness that brings repentance is rarely referenced,⁴⁴ replaced instead by God’s judgment, anger, and wrath at his children, these sinners.

As part of an enmeshed community, the members of The Church of Fire and Brimstone reinforce the top-down trauma exerted from Grandpa Herman and the imposition of his rules rather than seeking ways to subvert his oppressive power and carve out their own freedom. As group members are alarmingly dependent on one another, they lack independent agency of their own to act apart from the group’s established norms. Part of the oppression and dysfunction of the community stems from this enmeshment and, as such, they unquestioningly abide by Grandpa Herman’s commands. Ninah and Nanna are two intriguing exceptions, however. Although they fight for freedom in different ways, both are strong women who oppose the systemic abuse in their community, and both women stand up to Grandpa Herman in various subtle and overt ways. Ninah stands up for herself by not bowing to Grandpa Herman’s will that she “admit to fornication” and repent while she is in forced isolation after her pregnancy is revealed (Reynolds 204). Further, Ninah does not compromise on what remains holy to her as she narrates, “But I didn’t pray with him [Grandpa Herman]. I saved prayer for myself, for all the sacred times I could be alone with God and my baby” (Reynolds 205). While this refusal is subtle, and it is possible Grandpa Herman does not even know Ninah is not praying with him as

⁴⁴ Romans 2:4

he prays for her “to admit to her mistakes, to think about the Scribes and Pharisees who condemned the prostitute” (Reynolds 205), it is nonetheless a powerful subversive act for Ninah. In maintaining this boundary for herself, she reinforces her will to remain individuated from her community rather than enmeshed. She also reserves for herself alone the spoken and unspoken forms of prayer, a type of testimony, reminding readers that Ninah values this communication with God even if her community has tainted religiosity with their oppressive interpretations and abusive actions. Prayer has been documented as a conduit for healing testimony, as Pennebaker found, “Prayer, in fact, worked the same way as talking to friends about death. It is easy to see why this is true: Prayer is a form of disclosure or confiding” (*Opening Up* 24). Through her prayer, Ninah keeps for herself a form of expression that helps her cope with her trauma and resists giving in to Grandpa Herman’s demands.

Nanna, too, stands in opposition to her community’s abuse, but her actions are more overt than Ninah’s initial actions. She stands up to Herman in commanding that Ninah’s dunking cease (Reynolds 198) and further says to him, “Old Man, I believe we need to revise the rule book” when Ninah and Pammy are on the cusp of punishment for cutting their hair (Reynolds 264). Both of these passages are explored in greater detail later in this chapter, but they illustrate the strength of these two women to maintain their individual identities in a community that would have them assimilate and remain enmeshed, under the rule of one authoritarian ruler. Their bold examples stand as a beacon of hope for the women of Fire and Brimstone who long to be so brave and defy Grandpa Herman. They remind community members of the freedom that is possible from physical, emotional, and religious oppression, even if it comes in small glimpses along the way, and even if not every woman seeks a part in the path toward liberation.

Physical Punishment: *The Wages of Sin*

Before she is free of her community's physical, emotional, and religious oppression, Ninah endures great physical punishment—some self-inflicted, some dispensed by the church—as penance for her sins. Ninah has so internalized the belief that physical desires are evil that she secretly punishes herself for feelings that she has not even acted upon. After she has a dream in which she kisses Jesus as he turns into James, she punishes herself by putting nettles in her bed and pecan shells inside of her shoes. She rationalizes, “I decided to concentrate on Jesus’ pain as hard as I could...to remind me with every step of how Jesus had suffered” (Reynolds 74). Further, to address the sexual component of her dream, she cuts “out a picture of Jesus on the cross and tape[s] it to the inside of [her] underwear for protection” because, in her words, “[i]f I was saving myself for Jesus, I knew I’d better get him there fast” (Reynolds 74). These self-inflicted punishments illustrate on a small-scale the pervasiveness of the community's teachings on purity and penance and the ways in which erotic love is warped into love for Christ. As such, this distortion and displacement of love and desires creates a continuous trauma for the young believers at The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind as they are beginning to come to terms with their budding adolescent sexuality alongside their community that cannot acknowledge such facets of their selfhood, let alone provide helpful insight for navigating such desires.

Because of their strict rules and separatist patterns, Ninah's mother is confident that Ninah will not fall prey to typical teenage temptations that plague outsiders from more lenient backgrounds. These incorrect assumptions give Ninah's mother a false sense of security as

Ninah's parents agree to allow James and Ninah to spend copious amounts of time alone together as prayer partners. Referring to Ben Harback, a church member who was not raised in the community and was "found guilty of imbibing in the forbidden drink" and punished severely (Reynolds 98), Ninah's mother says, "One of the benefits of our children *growing up* in this community...is that we don't have to worry about them doing something like that" (Reynolds 101). Ninah's mother fails to acknowledge that her daughter is not immune to adolescent curiosity and explorative behaviors. Instead, Ninah is ill-equipped to handle her physical desires, having been taught that her feelings are sinful and warrant punishment.

Once it becomes clear through Ninah's pregnancy that she and James have been involved in a sexual relationship, Ninah becomes the victim of community-sponsored punishments like the ones readers of the novel have seen previously in the treatment of Ben Harback.⁴⁵ Ninah is punished further for the sin of blasphemy by claiming that their baby is the child of Jesus (Reynolds 187). To involve the entire community in this punishment, and thereby extend the suffering to all and reinforce Grandpa Herman's totalitarian rule, no one is permitted to eat dinner the night before Ninah's dunking, and the community lines the street in a "ridiculous parade" (Reynolds 190) the next morning, following Grandpa Herman to the site of Ninah's punishment. An additional layer of trauma is present in the mystery of the punishment, as Ninah notes, "I'd never seen a dunking in my lifetime. I wasn't even sure what a dunking was" (Reynolds 192). Because the details are unknown, Ninah cannot prepare herself mentally or

⁴⁵ For his transgressions with alcohol, Ben is forced to stay overnight in an open grave dug by church members. Later, after admitting to his sexual relationship with outsider Corinthian Lovell, Ben is punished by being cut and then having to live alone in a cellar for forty days to heal while Grandpa Herman decides how Ben will repent of his sins, reminding the other church members of the severity of punishment for sex outside of marriage. By having community members dig Ben's grave for his alcohol-related transgression, Grandpa Herman reinforces the severity of his punishments, thereby solidifying most church members' desire to remain within the community's boundaries. Not only are community members drawn in as active co-conspirators in the punishment, but they are also admonished against partaking in future behavior that would be viewed as a sin against their congregation and its strict ways.

physically for the trauma she is about to encounter and must remain at the mercy of her punisher, Grandpa Herman, who involves Ninah's relatives, David and Everett, in the process of setting up the cage and rope for the dunking.

Through this scene, readers are afforded a glimpse of Ninah's process of traumatization on mental, spiritual, and physical levels, from her fear of the unknown form of punishment, to her community's adherence to religious practice during the dunking, to the physical pain inflicted. During the dunking, Ninah is made to crawl into a cage of "the same wire [they] used to fence in the chicken coop" (Reynolds 194) and dropped repeatedly from a ledge created between two tree branches into the water of the pond below. Not only is she physically trapped within the chicken wire cage, more like an animal than a human, but she is also trapped by the limits of the enclosed body of water, all of these references further inviting readers to consider their parallels to Ninah's condition trapped within her church community.

All of the members of The Church of Fire and Brimstone are present for the dunking, participating and condoning, though readers may presume that if a member decided not to attend, he or she would be punished for that defiance; therefore, presence and participation is more forced than voluntary. Ninah's father does, however, walk away during the event, unable to withstand watching his daughter suffer, but seemingly unable to do anything to prevent or halt it. Demonstrating their perverse religious practices, the church members stand on the shore, praying while Ninah prepares to be dunked. She observes, "They were praying down there, voices that didn't sound like voices at all. It sounded like clapping and whistles and moans" (Reynolds 195). Their "prayers" are further torture to Ninah, a reminder that they are praying for her repentance and salvation, that they view her as a sinner, and they continue to pray as she is dropped into the water, raised up, and dropped again. These religiously-focused efforts deepen

the religious trauma that is enacted through the authoritarian, fear-based culture that is common in cases of religious child maltreatment (Heimlich 50).

While Ninah withstands this punishment, her thoughts are drawn to James, and she, too, contemplates suicide. After the third time they drop her into the water, Ninah narrates that she tries to breathe underwater “like James... and be done with the whole damned thing” (Reynolds 197). The only thing that initially stops her from letting herself drown is opening her eyes underwater and noticing the life teeming from the bottom of the pond. She notes, “There were things growing, even in autumn, even underwater...it seemed like they were a miniature world, underwater, operating by different rules, knowing different things to be true, and thriving all the same” (Reynolds 197). A glimpse of this alternate world and the hint of the freedom it carries by being outside the bounds of The Church of Fire and Brimstone’s oppression give Ninah hope and nudge her to seek thriving over surrendering in the face of her trauma. The inclusion of this underwater scene provides readers with a moment to connect to Ninah’s inner thought life and see evidence of what compels her to choose to return to her community instead of plotting an escape or committing suicide. It invites further consideration of the role of hope in Ninah’s freedom, hope that is bound up in the birth of her son, Canaan.

Though surviving means returning to the community that has abused and punished her so severely, she chooses to remain among the living with the possibility of improving the lives of others at The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God’s Almighty Baptizing Wind. Once she sees the life at the bottom of the pond, her thoughts, too, turn further to the life within her body. She says, “I decided I couldn’t die. Not when I had a baby living in me, depending on me, a baby who could change things. I knew there was something inside me that could imagine a different world and make it so” (Reynolds 197). Ninah possesses unwavering confidence that her baby is

capable of altering the lives of those at Fire and Brimstone, paving a path toward freedom. Reynolds's use of the phrase "something inside me" to refer to Ninah can also be read as a personal conviction and confidence that Ninah holds apart from the baby in her womb. She, too, is capable of dreaming a new future for Fire and Brimstone and working to make that dream a reality. As Ninah processes this personal revelation, she realizes she is innately powerful and creates momentum for herself, finding the motivation to remain alive and part of her community. In locating and naming her goal of making the world of Fire and Brimstone a better place, she moves from merely surviving toward actively thriving. According to Thema Bryant-Davis, "Thriving... refers to the ability to go beyond survival and recovery from a stressor to actually using the challenge as an impetus for personal positive outcomes through psychological growth (162). Reynolds's Ninah transforms this moment of trauma into a representation of testimony that moves her toward thriving in its aftermath, asking readers to consider Ninah's strength and the power of renegotiating trauma and translating it into positive growth and change.

While Ninah does not make much sound during the dunking, her lack of screaming or crying out is a subversive act. Just as she does not scream out in pain or fear, in silence, she also does not give her abusers the satisfaction of knowing just how much they are wounding her with their actions and prayers. The dunking finally ends when Nanna stands up to Grandpa Herman and says, "She's had enough" (Reynolds 198). Ninah's silence during the punishment also causes Nanna's outspokenness to stand out in contrast as a bold example of testifying in the face of someone else's pain, as Nanna persists as Ninah's greatest ally during her many traumas. Ninah's lack of speech further affords readers an opportunity to see the complicated mental processes Ninah undergoes during this trauma and how she comes to make sense of what is happening to and around her. Through Ninah's narration, readers can step into her observations

of the crowd on the shore, James's potential final moments on earth, and the life of freedom possible beneath the water.

Emotional Trauma and Solitude

In addition to being forced to endure the physical punishment of the dunking, Ninah must withstand the emotional abuse of her community shunning and condemning her, following the dunking and throughout her pregnancy. Although the physical punishment eventually has a finite end with Nanna's assertion that the dunking cease, the emotional abuse lingers with no clear indication to Ninah that it will relent.

Following the dunking and for the duration of her pregnancy, Ninah is "left in Grandpa Herman's care, so he could witness to [her] and read the Bible and try to win [her] back into Christ's fold" (Reynolds 200-1). She is not permitted to eat with the rest of the community or be in church until the baby is dedicated and she repents, further isolating her from the only community she has known, leaving her to face pregnancy without their support or advice. Her mother visits to speak with Nanna, but she does not see Ninah. Even when Nanna suggests that Maree step into the next room to see her daughter, Maree refuses, offering excuses, saying, "I don't want to upset her....It's too soon" (Reynolds 201). Her mother's deliberate avoidance of her further increases the divide between Maree and Ninah, reminding readers that Maree chooses to align herself with her father, Grandpa Herman, rather than reach out to her daughter during Ninah's time of extended punishment. This isolation and abandonment are additional forms of trauma, as trauma-survivor Susan Brison notes, "When trauma is of human origin and is intentionally inflicted...it not only shatters one's fundamental assumptions about the world and one's safety in it, but it also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of

humanity” (40). Ninah’s connections to her community and family are doubly-severed in her forced isolation. If she is to recover, she must restore her connection to her community (Herman 3), which she does by the novel’s end, though she is not as enmeshed as she once was.

A key component in the restoration of Ninah’s community connection and a steady source of strength and hope, Ninah’s father, in contrast to her mother, visits Ninah daily (Reynolds 201). While their conversations are rarely deep, filled with things like talk of the weather, they are a meaningful lifeline for Ninah during her time of imposed separation from the community at large. Her father also supports her rug-making efforts by building Ninah a loom while she is in isolation (Reynolds 215). Although the interactions and effort seem minor, they are actually steady reminders of hope and strength for Ninah, and this relationship with her father persists as a supportive force throughout the text. Having allies in both Nanna and her father keep Ninah connected to supportive community, albeit small, which as Judith Herman claims, is crucial in a survivor’s journey toward recovery. These brief connections are enough to sustain Ninah’s sense of connection during this traumatic time of isolation. As Brené Brown has found, “[M]oving out of powerlessness, and even despair, requires hope,” and she further defines hope as “a function of struggle” (202). As Ninah wrestles with her forced solitude, the hope that she builds as a result of this struggle and in response to her visits from her father is a key element in her survival and thriving, reminding her of the world that exists beyond Grandpa Herman’s house and the world that is possible on the other side of her trauma.

Theoretical knowledge of the outside world or life beyond her present trauma is not sufficient for Ninah’s recovery, however, as evidenced in her pursuit of a tangible, immediate experience of freedom. While she is isolated from everyone except Grandpa Herman, Nanna, and her father who visits, Ninah is not allowed outside, but she sneaks out one cold day in

January while everyone else is at church. She says she “felt like [she’d] die if [she] didn’t step outside” (Reynolds 215), inviting readers to consider the gravity of her punishment of solitary confinement. Ninah notes that she “missed being able to walk from house to house, sit down by a fire and be treated like [she] belonged there” (Reynolds 216). Though she is taken care of physically with food and shelter, because she is not free and connected to her community, she is emotionally and spiritually deprived, and her overall well-being suffers tremendously. She is left to fill this void herself, which she does through sewing and rug-making, the liberating effects of which will be discussed later in this chapter. Her sense of belonging has been shattered, and she has been marked as an outsider in the only community she has known.

If she is to heal through what Judith Herman has called “the fundamental stages of recovery...establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (3), she will need to reconnect to parts of her community. Since reconnecting to her entire community means reconnecting to those who have abused her, it is not safe to be close once again to everyone, including Grandpa Herman. However, there are a few who remain safe for Ninah. When she sneaks out, without thinking, she walks into her parents’ house instead of back to Grandpa Herman and Nanna’s where she has been staying. There, she catches her dad and James’s dad and brother playing cards instead of attending church. They know she cannot stay long, though, and risk being punished for sneaking out, and her dad says, “Honey, it’s good to see you out, but you got to go. I don’t think I can stand to watch you get punished again” (Reynolds 219). Her father is moved at the recollection of Ninah’s past punishments and is concerned both for her safety and protection and his own emotional well-being. Unlike other members of the community, including Ninah’s mother, who see her punishments as part of the process of leading her to repentance, her father is more apt to

see them as the abuse they are, inviting readers more readily to see the abuse as inflicting great physical and emotional harm. Further, her dad's recognition asks readers to see the impact of Ninah's individual trauma on the greater community at large. The pain inflicted upon her in turn afflicts others in the community as they witness her isolation and suffer vicariously as a result, worried for her well-being as well as their own.

This emotional abuse inflicted on Ninah at The Church of Fire and Brimstone aligns with what some researchers claim is part of religious maltreatment or religious trauma syndrome. Fire and Brimstone exhibits what Janet Heimlich claims are the three characteristics of such an abusive culture. They "adhere to a strict, authoritarian social structure" and are "fearful" and "separatist" (Heimlich 50). Ninah is guilty of violating their social codes and is therefore punished and "ostracized" (Heimlich 50). Because of the religious component to her trauma and her connection to this lifelong community, Ninah is further bound or must differentiate from either her community family or religious ideology, both of which are not simple or painless. Ninah has so internalized her community's standards that she has abused and punished herself growing up, illustrating the depth of her allegiance to her community's beliefs prior to her dunking and isolation. Although Ninah has been a consistent member of the Fire and Brimstone community, her transgressions are enough to marginalize her and push her beyond the community's parameters for grace. As her community turns their backs on her, readers are invited to see this emotional abuse as an additional layer of trauma compounded in the wake of her physical punishment of the dunking.

Ninah's History of Self-Punishment

These types of religious oppression and abuse are not new or unique to Reynolds's novel; one needs only to remember the literary example of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne or the biblical example of the woman caught in adultery to recall that women have long been shamed within religious communities for sexual sin, while their male counterparts have passed unpunished. Although Jesus tells the woman in chapter 8 of the Gospel of John to "go and sin no more," The Church of Fire and Brimstone cannot be so forgiving to Ninah. In some ways, even Ninah is incapable of forgiving herself until she pushes back against her community and rids herself of their yoke of oppression and legalism. Early in the novel, when Ninah has a dream about James, she is overcome with guilt and shame and says, "All I could think about were the clothespins I should have with me. If I had the clothespins on my chest, I'd be thinking about Jesus' pain and not the unholy things parading through my mind" (Reynolds 73). Her thoughts initially turn toward self-punishment and then to doubts of her salvation. She says to Everett, "What if I'm not saved?...[S]ometimes I don't feel I believe enough" (Reynolds 73). That Ninah thinks each small transgression is indicative of her lack of faith invites readers to question the culture at The Church of Fire and Brimstone. Through this detail, Reynolds invites readers to remember the culture of religious trauma that permeates the community. Ninah links her potential sins and impure thoughts directly to her salvation, pleading with God, "[I]f he'd just let me go to Heaven when the rapture happened, I'd give up kisses until I was married. I promised I'd never let James touch my legs or even hold my hands, if God would just save a place for me in the sky" (Reynolds 73). Ninah's bargaining calls readers' minds to Ninah's conflation of perfection and salvation, which is a direct result of her upbringing in this fundamentalist community. Because punishment has been so widespread at The Church of Fire and Brimstone,

Ninah has punished herself for her so-called sins since she was young, demonstrating that she has internalized her community's value for penance and the behavior and thoughts that warrant it. Furthermore, Ninah's self-flagellation is indicative of the guilt and shame created by the punitive, works-based culture at Fire and Brimstone where rule-following is praised, fear reigns, and grace seems nonexistent.

The children at The Church of Fire and Brimstone are so accustomed to punishment as a deterrent to sin that Ninah punishes herself for lustful thoughts about James expressed in a dream where Jesus turns into James. Even though no one else knows about her so-called transgression, and no authority figure has insisted she be punished, she takes it upon herself to enact this retribution. This system of punishment has been reinforced throughout the community, even by her supportive father who tells Wanda (an outsider who married into the community) that she "should pinch herself with clothespins for distraction" when she feels homesick, adding further, "Physical discomfort is one of the best ways to keep your mind on Heaven" (Reynolds 61). Ninah takes this advice for herself when she narrates, "That night I carried a handful of clothespins to bed with me, since my mind was on anything *but* Heaven" (Reynolds 61, emphasis in original). She details her self-flagellation: "I clamped them to the skin on the inside of my arms and on my stomach. I saved two for my nipples, and those hurt almost too much to bear" (Reynolds 61). Because the nature of her sin is sexual, Ninah decides that her punishment should also be sexual in nature, choosing highly sensitive and sensual body parts to focalize her penitent efforts. These self-inflicted punishments come before Ninah's community-sanctioned punishment during the dunking and forced isolation, indicating that self-induced trauma is one learned coping mechanism that young Ninah has developed as a result of her community's standards. Such a crippling emphasis on guilt and shame aligns with the traits Janet Heimlich

claims are components of communities where religious child maltreatment abounds (50). Even though an authoritarian figure is not dispensing the punishment, Ninah feels compelled by her beliefs to punish herself for her perceived transgressions. Readers may gather from this scene that Ninah has internalized her community's beliefs around sin and punishment, thereby making more significant her strides toward freedom later in the text as she cuts her hair and Canaan's hands and speaks out against their regulations.

The secretive nature of Ninah's self-indictments further illustrates the guilt that pervades The Church of Fire and Brimstone where a culture has been cultivated that shames young people for their natural biological desires during adolescence. There is no healthy outlet for such feelings or budding romances; therefore, the youth are left to process these feelings shamefully in secret and silence. Through Ninah, Reynolds invites readers to consider the effects such insular and shame-motivated communities have on the well-being of youth and children, as the youth are left in a position to hide their thoughts and feelings, compounding the negative implications of the shame these feelings produce. Concerning these sorts of sexual traumas specifically, studies on the psychological impact of writing about one's trauma have revealed that "the problem was that sexual traumas were almost always secret traumas. Any type of major upheaval that people kept secret from others tended to compromise their physical and mental health" (Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns* 126). Pennebaker's research suggests that secrecy—and I would add the shame that so often accompanies these secrets at The Church of Fire and Brimstone—has clear detrimental effects on trauma survivors. Being forced to inhibit one's desire to testify and inquire stifles survivors' capacity for healing, mentally and physically, and adds yet another barrier they must overcome in order to thrive in their post-traumatic world.

For Ninah, initially this secrecy means that her only confidante concerning her growing feelings for James is James himself, which proves problematic, as he, too, is a confused teenager with his own complicated desires to contend with. When Ninah and James act on their feelings for one another, they do so under the guise of showing the love of Jesus to one another (Reynolds 94). James says, “If you could be Jesus for me and I could be Jesus for you? Wouldn’t that be the best thing?” (Reynolds 115). At first, Ninah agrees with him, but eventually, she begins to feel guilty. Not wanting to convey this guilt to James and risk that he may feel guilty enough to tell someone, she instead affirms their involvement when he wonders, “Do you ever worry that what we do sometimes during prayer partners could be considered... fornicating?” (Reynolds 146). Reynolds writes that Ninah lies, saying, “No....What we’re doing is different. It’s just a part of prayer. Besides, it isn’t *you* I’m doing it with. It’s *Jesus*” (Reynolds 146, emphasis in original). For these young teenagers, they can convince themselves that consummating their relationship is not sinful if they believe it is instead true spiritual communion with Christ. This mindset further illustrates the confusion their community’s beliefs create and the dangerous way they have isolated their adolescents from outside teachings on sex and relationships. Because they have so exalted their insular community and religion, spirituality has become the method the teenagers use to rationalize their biological urges and behaviors so that they can absolve themselves of the guilt and shame produced by their religious beliefs, which condemn such physical interactions.

Through combining the sexual with the sacred, transgressing a clear community boundary against premarital sex, Ninah draws attention to one of the primary contradictions within her religious community—the expression of passion, which is encouraged in spiritual contexts and vehemently discouraged in physical contexts. In *Desire and the Divine: Feminine*

Identity in White Southern Women's Writing, Kathaleen Amende astutely observes that in Ninah's community "female sexuality is condemned and female religious ecstasy is condoned and encouraged" (58). While women are permitted and urged to express passion in church, praying and speaking in tongues, they are not encouraged to extend a similar fervor to their sexual expressions. Amende points out that the lives of these women characters "are *not* holistic. Sexuality and spirituality are departmentalized" (63, emphasis in original). For this reason, Ninah's behavior of integrating the two can be read as both an act of defiance, seeking robust expressions of the sacred and the sexual, and a sad casualty of a culture that has taught her that desires for anything other than Jesus are nothing but sinful.

As their relationship deepens, so does the trauma of Ninah's guilt and shame, but she knows that she must pretend they are not sinning so as to keep James from confessing to the congregation. In order to assuage James's growing guilt, Ninah claims Jesus has given her a ring to give to James so the two can be married (Reynolds 148). This fake ring exchange seems to be sufficient for James to continue their sexual relationship, but Ninah is riddled all the more with guilt after their encounters. She says, "I didn't feel glowing and holy afterwards. I felt like I was made from mud" (Reynolds 149). In her honest narration, Ninah testifies that she no longer finds pleasure in their physical relationship, being so weighed down by the community's standards and the lies she must embody for James to believe they are not sinning. Her guilt is so strong that she prays "for the ceiling to fall right in on [her] and flatten [her] face and scar [her] up so that nobody, not James, not Jesus, not anybody at all would ever want to touch [her] again" (Reynolds 149). That Ninah turns her guilt toward praying for the punishment of her physical body, specifically to mar what makes her sexually desirable, further indicates her community's flawed and dangerous beliefs about women. It also invites readers to consider that Ninah has

internalized the damning community belief that the “Devil comes to man in the shape of a woman” (Reynolds 159). Ninah does not blame James for their transgressions or even his lack of self-control; instead, she places their dual responsibility on herself alone. This moment is another reminder for readers of the self-indicting and self-deprecating beliefs that Ninah holds and must rid herself of if she is to liberate herself from her community’s patriarchal oppression.

When Ninah becomes pregnant, James is quick to blame her for their sin, reminding readers of the patriarchal overtones at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, which are an additional source of trauma for Ninah. Having admitted that he knew all along they were “sinning like crazy,” James says to Ninah, “The Devil comes to man in the shape of a woman. I knew that. But I didn’t think it’d be *you*,” and then he abruptly walks away from her (Reynolds 159, emphasis in original). Taking no responsibility for his part in the conception, James further avoids potential repercussions by taking his own life before anyone else in the community knows about the pregnancy. James’s suicide leaves Ninah to face pregnancy, punishment, and parenthood alone. The trauma of this loss of a loved one is compounded by the trauma of his abandonment. Further, the community refuses to admit he committed suicide, instead rewriting the story to conclude that he drowned accidentally. This denial of the truth is an additional layer of trauma for Ninah, particularly when it demonstrates the community’s extension of grace to James while denying similar grace to Ninah. Just as the community denies the truth surrounding James’s death, James himself refuses to testify to the reality of his and Ninah’s behavior. His unwillingness to face this truth compels him to commit suicide, thereby escaping his reality and inevitable punishment. It further reminds readers of the bravery necessary to testify to trauma and face possible scrutiny, bravery that James does not possess. Instead, his refusal to testify is a reminder of the harmful effects of keeping pain hidden, as psychologist James Pennebaker

explores in his work on expressive writing.⁴⁶ Pennebaker's research reveals that people who inhibit in the wake of trauma, instead of expressing their pain, are more likely to have mild or severe physical symptoms and health complications as a result (*The Secret Life of Pronouns* 4). Reynolds's character of James is an extreme example of the weight of unacknowledged trauma. As he denies the reality and responsibility of his impending fatherhood, he silences himself in death, unwilling to accept this truth or face his trauma.

As Ninah's bears the sole responsibility for their pregnancy, the community punishes Ninah only and praises James posthumously through rewriting his death as accidental instead of intentional, thereby sparing him the community's judgment for taking his own life. This gender-based injustice typifies the community's beliefs about women as temptresses who need to be modest, covered up, and controlled. With the exception of Nanna, the women of The Church of Fire and Brimstone, instead of rallying around Ninah with their motherly experience in support of her pregnancy, abandon her as a result of her sin, choosing their church's rules and punishments over their human kindness and free will.

Impact of Trauma

While trauma does have a temporary "shattering impact" on Ninah's life (as trauma theorists, Cathy Caruth and Elaine Scarry would assert of the nature of trauma), trauma does not obliterate Ninah's spirit. Rather, she proves to be subversive, brave, and resilient in the face of her overlapping traumas. Reynolds's example of Ninah invites readers to reconsider traditional theories of literary trauma, as Ninah paves her own path forward and inscribes the text and testimony of her trauma through her narration and onto tangible items in her community, such as

⁴⁶ Pennebaker, James. *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us*. Bloomsbury, 2011.

welcome mats and rugs, and reshapes her community's ethos through her unflinching confidence and perseverance in the face of the trauma they inflict upon her.

As such an example, Ninah demonstrates the boldness of women characters to triumph over trauma, never crumbling beneath its so-called unspeakable impact. In *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, contemporary trauma theorist Michelle Balaev asserts, "Cultivating a plurality of psychological theories, especially those that offer non-dominant views on trauma and memory, allows greater versatility for scholars interested in exploring the varied representations of trauma in literature" (37). Traditional notions of trauma that asserted "trauma shatters identity and pathologically divides consciousness... ascribe universal characteristics to a matrix of intricate emotional responses and combines without distinction the phenomena of traumatic experience and dissociation" (Balaev, *Nature of Trauma* 23). Ninah does not fit this template, moving forward with an undivided consciousness, determined all the more to survive and flourish in her oppressive community. Balaev reveals one of the primary shortcomings of traditional literary trauma theory: it does not allow for experiences and interpretations as unique as the individuals affected. Her critiques create space for explorations, such as this one, that reveal a variety of ways trauma is experienced and processed. Some characters may internalize more of their trauma, while others' actions may be more outward. This internal/external dichotomy can be seen in the varied reactions from the sisters in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*, explored in chapter 2, namely through Minerva's interior monologue that depicts more fear than her external actions would betray and María Teresa's brave, confessional journals in contrast with her failure to speak of the abuse she endures in prison. Some women characters, like Ninah, may demonstrate a combination of both internal and external processing of trauma through her narration and actions. Further, Balaev's critique of essentialist interpretations of

trauma theory validates traumatic experiences that do not leave the survivor in a shattered or dissociative state. She reminds readers that one's actions and feelings in the moment and wake of trauma will not fall into a "one size fits all" diagnosis, as the women characters in this study readily demonstrate.

While the initial work of Caruth and Scarry has created space for critical investigations of trauma and literature, and the foundations they have set are helpful starting points, their work does not always leave room for the varied perspectives of trauma that readers encounter in texts like *The Rapture of Canaan*. For example, Scarry claims, "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (4). In fiction, however, characters such as Ninah are able to speak of their pain and even go so far as to create new languages to express their suffering and survival.⁴⁷ Ninah's new language is in the form of weaving stories as she weaves her rugs, but even apart from this invention and form of processing, Ninah is still capable of narrating the events of the trauma she endures. In recounting for readers scenes like finding James's body after his suicide and her "dunking," Ninah shares her physical and emotional pain with readers, inviting them to enter in as empathic witnesses to her religious trauma. In so doing, through Ninah, Reynolds extends these limiting theories of trauma to include the possibility of retelling and witnessing. Although Caruth contends that trauma is "not immediately assimilated," adding to interpretations of its unspeakability, she also eloquently notes, "To respond effectively to trauma is...to create the conditions by which the very possibility of collective social witness and response may finally take place" (*Listening to Trauma* xvi). This form of social witnessing and sharing collectively is

⁴⁷ Many of the women characters in this study take up tactile tasks to cope with their trauma. Danticat's Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones* sews for Man Rapadou after she survives the Massacre; the sisters in Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* open a business sewing christening gowns when they are released from prison and on house arrest. Like Ninah's rugs, these "texts" speak a new language of survival and healing as the women contribute to their communities and use their hands and skills to work and create, leaving artifacts of their life and survival.

what I claim is at work in novels like *The Rapture of Canaan*. Through Ninah's representation of testimony to her intersecting traumas, Reynolds asks for the creation of such "collective social witness" to the religious maltreatment that occurs in some fundamentalist communities like the one of her creation at The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind.

Underscoring the significance of the process of trauma testimony, Pennebaker notes, "[W]riting seems most beneficial when you are trying to make sense of an event you don't yet understand" (49). As the character of Ninah progresses, she is portrayed as continually making sense of the trauma she has endured as she charts a new path forward. Some of Pennebaker's key findings show a correlation between the types of emotions conveyed and the way a story gets told and retold. He writes,

One of the most surprising linguistic findings about expressive writing is that people who use more positive emotions in their writing benefit more from the exercise. We can see positive emotions when words such as *love, caring, funny, joy, beautiful* and *warmth* are used. If you can use these words even when you are dealing with terrible traumas, you are more likely to notice improvements after writing. (47)

Seeing goodness and the potential for a silver lining even in dark situations can build resilience within trauma survivors, reflecting a hope-filled anchor deep within their psyche that has not been altered in their trauma. Pennebaker is also quick to point out that the way a person narrates her trauma is a factor in her healing. He reveals, "Writing about the same topic in the same way day after day is not at all helpful—and may possibly be harmful. You can analyze something too much" (19). If one's narrative is not moving forward but is merely rehashing events with pat answers without unearthing the deeper story, questions, and emotions beneath, it can stifle growth. Pennebaker's findings demonstrate that it is not enough simply to talk (or write) about trauma; *how* survivors testify is just as (or more important than) *what* they say. Readers are invited to see evidence of this in Ninah's representation of testimony through her progression

from her preoccupation with unholy thoughts and sin and guilt to her rejection of Fire and Brimstone's limiting legalism. Early in the text, she narrates her repeated fears of being left behind in the rapture, saying things like, "I still imagined that I'd wake up the next morning, and everyone would have been resurrected except me" (Reynolds 74). Her testimony is laden with fear and doubt, crippling her progress. After Canaan is born, however, Ninah's boldness increases, and she defies her community's standards, using vulgar language (Reynolds 245) and asserting her freedom by laughing and saying, "They'd better not dunk the *mother of God*" (Reynolds 246, emphasis in original). That Ninah can joke about her new status is evidence of her progress and the freedom she experiences from her past fear and doubt.

Testimony and Liberation: Ninah's Freedom and Healing

Ninah survives her community-sponsored trauma and thrives to liberate herself from their oppressive influence in a number of ways. Evidence of her freedom can be seen in her representation of testimony to what she has endured. As she narrates her relationship with James, including his suicide, her dunking and solitary confinement, and cutting Canaan's hands, she invites readers to bear empathic witness to her predicament and her power. Tangible evidence of her liberation is also seen when she defies her community's standards and cuts her hair and the hair of other women in the community, when she uses available materials to weave stories through crafting rugs for everyone, including her accusers, and when she takes it upon herself to set her son free from his birth defect and cut his hands apart.

Thoughtful and introspective, Ninah has prioritized storytelling from the genesis of this text, and it is through these stories and narrations that she builds up a vault of testimonies to speak to her strength and endurance. Reynolds opens the novel with Ninah reflecting on a rug

she has created, using this creation as a metaphor for storytelling. Ninah says, “I weave in fragments of myself, bits of other people. I weave in lies, and I weave in love, and in the end, it’s hard to know if one keeps me warmer than the other” (Reynolds 1). In describing the weaving process as one uniting physical materials and ephemeral materials, like lies and love, Reynolds establishes Ninah as a dynamic character, one who will come to sharply contrast the blind followers at Fire and Brimstone. Further indicative of Ninah’s free-thinking, she narrates of the rug, “I wrap it over my shoulders, wear it like a shield, covering myself with a tapestry of views” (Reynolds 2). Ninah does not hold merely to one view, as most in the community do. Rather, she recognizes the lies that stand alongside the love and chooses to protect herself with a variety of perspectives instead of clinging solely to Fire and Brimstone’s limited—and limiting—worldview. Given Ninah’s fluidity to weave lies and love into her rugs and her stories, readers may question the reliability of her narration. Rather than calling into question the validity of her testimony, as she admits not everything she believes is true, this reference early in the text likely foreshadows the significance of the fictitious stories the community invents to make themselves feel more comfortable. One example is the truth and falsehood surrounding James’s suicide. Another is the story of Nanna’s father’s murder that Grandpa Herman insists she retell often.⁴⁸ Instead of undermining Ninah’s honesty, her acknowledgement of lies is an integral part of her interaction with her community that sometimes refuses to admit what is true.

Readers are invited to consider the multiple meanings this opening scene conveys, recognizing that it may indicate the physical rugs that Ninah weaves while she is pregnant and isolated later in the novel. In this interpretation, readers may realize that she uses scraps of

⁴⁸ Grandpa Herman repeatedly uses Nanna as a sermon example of sin and confession, saying she “[t]urned her sinful eyes away from God and lied” when she told the courts that her father had beaten her, prompting her mother to murder him (Reynolds 11). Ninah, however, is grateful that Nanna is “just as at home with lies as she [is] with the truth” when Ninah becomes pregnant but is not ready to tell anyone (Reynolds 176).

fabric from various community members, as well the hair of community members who ask Ninah to cut their hair in defiance against Grandpa Herman, to bring her storied creations to life. Likewise, these rugs may also be metaphors for the stories and freedom that Ninah has crafted throughout her time of trial at The Church of Fire and Brimstone. Because Reynolds opens the novel with the line, “I’ve spent a lot of time weaving, but you’d never know it from my hands” (Reynolds 1), readers are invited to see this possibility of metaphor since Ninah’s hands do not bear the marks of her diligent creation. Working on literal and metaphoric levels, the act of weaving is a consistent thread throughout the novel and a symbol of Ninah’s well-being and independence. The “lies, loves, [and] stories” (Reynolds 2) that Ninah wears as a shield protect her from her community’s abuses and judgment, as she steels herself against their opinions of her instead of buckling beneath the weight of their condemnation as the novel progresses.

Establishing Ninah as a storyteller from the start of the text lays the foundation for her liberating efforts to testify to her conditions and to rise up as a result of those testimonies. On a structural level, Reynolds opens and closes the novel with brief passages about weaving that Ninah narrates in present tense. The rest of the novel is in past tense, inviting readers to see the novel as Ninah’s effort to retrospectively make meaning from this past trauma as she tells her story to readers who become her empathic witnesses. For Ninah, thriving in the wake of her abuse and trauma involves acknowledging the pain and loss and speaking her own way forward apart from her enmeshed community.

As she speaks of her relationship with James, she notes the ugly alongside the beautiful, and she bravely perseveres alone in the face of her abusive community even after she loses James. Because suicide is seen as sinful and taboo at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, the community erases the truth surrounding James’s death, perhaps because they do not know how

to punish James's sin when he has already punished himself in death. Perhaps they lie, in part, because they do not want to face the truth and subsequent pain. Ninah, however, holds onto the truth and notes, "Some people say you can't change history, but that isn't entirely true. We did it at Fire and Brimstone, and it was easy. James didn't take his own life. He drowned on a hot night, caught on a root in the bottom of the pond. Nobody ever mentioned that he was tethered to that sunken tree with thick, deliberate knots" (Reynolds 172). As such, the community remains stuck in the first stage of grief, denial, never progressing to acceptance, which would lead them closer to their own post-traumatic growth.⁴⁹ Reframing the narrative does not lead community members to healing, however. It merely keeps them isolated in their pain at the loss of their son, brother, friend, or lover. James's father, Olin, stops going to church, James's sister, Pammy, "couldn't stop shaking" all summer (Reynolds 172), and James's brother, Mustard, "just stomped around, his head hung down to hide his strange eyes" (Reynolds 173). The community fractures at the loss of James and cannot mourn collectively or share in their common grief. Like Mustard, they are even ashamed and embarrassed to cry and openly grieve in the presence of one another.

Ninah realizes early on, before James's suicide, that the community processes loss in secret and silence. After relatives endure yet another miscarriage, Ninah says, "Nobody talked much about Laura and David's loss, but everybody grieved it, I guess. Even old Grandpa Herman kept his nasty opinions to himself, and the community healed over, quietly, with nobody picking at scabs" (Reynolds 43). For The Church of Fire and Brimstone members, the way to deal with trauma is to ignore it and pretend the pain subsides in time. Trauma theorists and clinicians would assert that this denial and ignorance leaves survivors unable to fully move forward, as they cannot honestly acknowledge the past. Susan Brison argues, "[I]t's essential to

⁴⁹ Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. MacMillan, 1969.

talk about [the trauma], again and again. It's a way of remastering the trauma" (16). Without asserting their own mastery over the pain that they have experienced, the community members cannot integrate the truth of the trauma into their current selves and bring that experience into their futures as holistic individuals. Reynolds reveals that Ninah knows this is not an effective way to heal as she says, "But sometimes things hide beneath healed-up places. Flies lay eggs inside the gashes on cows and kittens, and then the wounds swell up, even after they're closed over, and *unless somebody opens the wound again to release the worm*, the thing inside keeps growing and burrowing its way out, painfully, blindly, persistently" (Reynolds 43, emphasis mine). Re-opening the wound is not without further pain, but leaving the parasite inside will do more harm than addressing the hidden trauma and lingering pain. While the others at The Church of Fire and Brimstone would choose to ignore their own and one another's pain, Ninah is not content to leave it at that level of false resolution. While she does not always have a clear outlet for this longing, she nonetheless wrestles with its tension, often seeking an understanding audience in Nanna, who "was just at home with lies as she was with the truth" (Reynolds 176). Nanna's openness affords Ninah the opportunity to come to her with the truth of her pregnancy, pain, and deep loss when she is ready to tell her story and open her wounds again so the wounds may begin to heal.

Using LIWC to Illuminate Ninah's Narration

As Ninah begins to open her wounds and use her storytelling to testify to what she has endured, readers are invited in as potential empathic witnesses to her trauma and her survival. Readers then are invited to act as the audience to complete Ninah's testimony loop, which Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue includes the speaker and the hearer (57). In becoming

witnesses to Ninah's intersecting traumas, readers may also now carry forward the literary memorialization that Reynolds has created through this text in bringing such a fictional but believable story of religious trauma into existence. The empathy generated through the literary encounter may allow readers to enter into a world they might otherwise never know and further bridges cultural understanding across readers of different religious backgrounds. Furthermore, this particular text provides readers with one framework for a literary example of a character thriving in the aftermath of trauma while remaining connected to her abusers, thus extending the possibilities of literary trauma theory to inform the myriad depictions of freedom and survival as expressed in fiction. While Ninah's liberation may appear unconventional or incomplete to some readers since she remains at Fire and Brimstone instead of escaping to a community where she could be free entirely of the shackles of their religious beliefs, Reynolds invites readers to consider that Ninah is nonetheless crafting her own freedom throughout the text and by the novel's end.

One method for evaluating Ninah's path to freedom is to analyze her narration and testimony linguistically through the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) developed by expressive writing theorist and social psychologist James Pennebaker. Evaluating her narration as such reveals her growth and healing by the novel's penultimate scene. As Ninah progresses in narrating three key scenes—finding James after he has committed suicide, enduring her own physical trauma during the dunking, and cutting apart her son's fused hands—she grows in cognitive processing and emotional expressiveness. These two areas of growth demonstrate that through the way Reynolds has crafted her narration, Ninah is in a stronger mental and emotional state by the novel's end, revealing that she has not succumbed to trauma's weight but has instead used her storytelling to rise above it to thrive and move forward.

Describing James's Suicide

One of the most gripping scenes of trauma that Ninah narrates is that of finding James's body after his suicide. Reynolds paints this scene as one of a frenzied search and characterizes Ninah as both actively persistent in her hunt for James and dumbfounded and numb with shock upon finding him. With this sharp transition in mood, readers are invited to witness trauma's startling and jarring impact on Ninah. Through her narration of this scene, Ninah testifies to the pain of finding her lover has taken his own life while inviting readers to bear witness to her strength in the face of this profound loss.

As Ninah realizes James has drowned himself in the pond, her rushed actions of racing through the woods and frantically pulling the rope up from the water turn abruptly to silence and stoicism. She stares at James's body and narrates, "I was suddenly cold and suddenly still, and I didn't hear Mustard say, 'Give me the rope,' until he'd already pulled it from my hands" (Reynolds 171). This detail demonstrates Ninah's understandable shock in this moment, and her narration of the unfolding scene reveals her contemplative and inquisitive demeanor. Even in the face of this trauma, she maintains her composure and is not hysterical, sliding instead to the opposing extreme of subdued silence. As she processes the event, Ninah attempts to fill in the gaps and unravel the mystery of what James might have been thinking. Reynolds portrays her as using the phrases "I wondered" and "I imagined" no fewer than six times in one paragraph (Reynolds 171). These verbs indicate Ninah's curiosity and efforts to make sense of what has happened. They also draw readers' minds to Ninah's characterizations of James when she says, "I wondered what the rope was for—if he'd worried that no one would find him and he'd sink to the bottom, or if he'd worried that without it, he might change his mind" (Reynolds 171). In this

juxtaposition of rationales, Ninah frames James as varying degrees of considerate and cowardly, and in the absence of James to testify to his actual motivation for tying the rope around his waist and the tree, Ninah is left with her open-ended theories and without closure.

A LIWC analysis of this passage confirms Ninah's numbness and reveals extremely low emotion words for her narration of finding James's body. Where 2.57 is average for positive emotion words, Ninah's narration is an extremely low 0.25. Her use of negative emotion words is slightly higher at 1.47 but still below the average for personal writing of 2.12. Similarly, her overall emotional tone is a dramatically low 10.32 where 38.60 is average. All of these quantitative values further build a case for Ninah's emotional disconnectedness in the immediate aftermath of James's suicide. Her stoicism becomes her coping mechanism, helping her to detach from the reality of being abandoned at Fire and Brimstone, left to face pregnancy and persecution without the father of her child, who, under the codes at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, should be equally as guilty of the sin of fornication for which Ninah is soon punished. Without this partner, Ninah is left to face the brunt of judgment alone, and her triumph over trauma is all the more remarkable given the plethora of obstacles she faces. When taken as a baseline for Ninah's reaction to trauma, readers can see her progress from detached in this scene to more connected and expressive in the subsequent scenes of trauma.

Narrating Her Physical Trauma

Compared to her narration of James's suicide, Ninah's narration of her physical punishment demonstrates much more emotional connectedness, indicative of her ongoing growth in her responses to trauma. When Ninah endures the physical punishment of a "dunking," she describes for readers her sensory experiences as well as her thoughts while she contemplates the

possibility of escaping The Church of Fire and Brimstone by drowning herself during this punishment. A LIWC evaluation reveals that Ninah's cognitive processing is gradually increasing throughout the novel. Where average is 12.52, Ninah's narration of the dunking is 11.94, higher than the 9.09 cognitive processing score of her narration of James's suicide, indicating she is using more linguistic markers of insight and causation.⁵⁰ This increase is indicative for readers of Ninah's continual ability to manage the trauma she experiences, and one method that contributes to her survival is making meaning from the pain. Further showing readers her continual growth and emotional progress, Ninah's emotional tone more than doubles in this scene when compared to the scene narrating James's suicide. Where 38.60 is average for samples of personal writing, Ninah's emotional tone is 27.88 in this scene, slightly below average but significantly higher than the 10.32 of the previous scene.⁵¹ Part of her meaning-making process includes recounting what she endured, but as a storyteller, Ninah reassembles the significant details deliberately, not merely relaying each detail moment-by-moment as one would replay a recording. As such, her assemblage of the events aligns with what Richard McNally notes in *Remembering Trauma*: "Autobiographical recollection is a reconstructive, not a reproductive, process" (35). As Ninah becomes more emotionally expressive and connected, she creates more meaning from her dire and painful circumstances, as evidenced in her details and observations.

For Ninah, one of the meaningful results of this trauma is to solidify who is for her and who is against her, which further pushes her to the fringes of her community as her resolve to distance herself from them is deepened in this scene. Ninah sees her father walk away, unable to

⁵⁰ For further information about LIWC data, including full text analyzed, see Appendix D.

⁵¹ Emotional Tone is a summary variable of LIWC2015 calculated by a proprietary algorithm, but it is a composite of such values as positive and negative emotion words and is given as a percentage of total words in the passage. Higher numbers indicate a positive emotional tone, and numbers below fifty indicate a more negative emotional tone.

endure further witnessing his daughter's abuse, and it is Nanna whose bold command brings the dunking to an end, revealing these two family members as her only allies at Fire and Brimstone. Once the dunking has ceased, Ninah concludes that, "if the rapture had happened right then...[she] knew that [she'd] have been the first one to go to Jesus" (Reynolds 198). While the rest of her community sees her as their utmost sinner, guilty of fornication and blasphemy, Ninah now sees herself as closer to her savior and first in line to be taken into glory should the trumpets sound. That Ninah is capable of seeing herself in this positive light, not weighed down by her community's imposition of guilt, demonstrates her resolve and strength in the face of this physical abuse and persistent psychological trauma. She says, "I dallied over that pond for what seemed like a long time, crouched above the water, *closer to Heaven than Grandpa*, with all my doubts draining out" (Reynolds 198, emphasis mine). When Ninah is permitted to align herself more with Heaven than with her oppressive church leader, she is liberated to see herself as light, not burdened, and worthy of salvation, not condemned to hell. That Ninah has this realization at the conclusion of this brutal punishment reveals her tenacity and capacity for clarity, reminding readers of her will to survive and strength to triumph over her abusive church community.

While Ninah does not cry out during this abuse, thereby not testifying in front of her abusers, her testimony is narrated here for the reader to be her witness. Through her first-person account of this unusual and harsh physical punishment, readers are invited to side with Ninah, not to view her like her church does, as a sinner deserving of this treatment. Her visceral details, such as the water that "dripped on [her] nightgown and chilled [her] arms" (194) and "dropping hard...see[ing] the water come for [her]" (195), invite readers to experience this pain alongside Ninah as she reconstructs this story. These details also ask readers to reconsider the assertion that trauma is not encoded linguistically in survivors' memories (Luckhurst 148). To the

contrary, Reynolds's representation of Ninah illustrates a highly detailed, verbal, and imagistic account of the abuse she endures. Such a clear account provides readers with a representation of trauma testimony that is not hindered by intrusive flashbacks or nightmares, further demonstrating the necessity for pluralistic interpretations of trauma theory, as all experiences and testimonies do not contain these intrusive elements. Ninah's recollection, rather, is lucid in its striking detail and clarifying in her community's complicity.

Narrating Cutting Canaan's Hands

As Ninah deepens in her drive to overcome her community's abuse, she also furthers her resolve to save her son from their oppression. In the novel's penultimate passage, Ninah's narration further illustrates her growth in emotional expressiveness throughout the text. As she narrates the scene in which she cuts Canaan's fused hands, thus freeing him from his birth defect, she uses higher positive and negative emotion words than she has used in previous scenes of trauma testimony. Where the average for positive emotion words is 2.57 (indicating that 2.57 out of every 100 words in the passage is a positive emotion word), Ninah's use is 1.31 in this scene. Her use of negative emotion words is slightly above average, at 2.87 where 2.12 is average. Further illustrating her growth, her cognitive processing is also above average in this scene, higher than the two prior scenes, both of which reveal below average cognitive processing. Where average is 12.52 for cognitive processing—words indicating causality, certainty, tentativeness, and insight—her cognitive processing is 12.79 as she narrates Canaan's liberation. This progression invites readers to consider that Ninah is no longer selectively numbing herself in the face of trauma. Rather, she is connecting to the emotions—both positive and negative—that her trauma and triumph bring to the surface.

While Ninah's cognitive processing and use of emotion words remains high, it is worth noting an anomaly in this scene. Ninah's overall emotional tone is a drastically low 7.60 where 38.60 is average, the lowest emotional tone of the three trauma testimonies evaluated here. Though this may initially appear to undermine the individual scores of her positive and negative emotion words, thus hindering Reynolds's depiction of Ninah's progress, I contend that the overall emotional disconnectedness demonstrated is a necessary result of Ninah's initial plan to enact a murder-suicide to save herself and Canaan from The Church of Fire and Brimstone's oppression. It is not until the scissors "seemed to act without" her (Reynolds 315) that Ninah's actions turn from murder as a path to her son's salvation toward liberating him physically through separating his hands. As Ninah prepares for what she thinks will be the death of her son at her own hands, she must distance herself emotionally in order to go through with inflicting pain on Canaan. While this separation creates a disconnected emotional tone overall, Ninah's use of more emotional words like "love" and "pain" reveal her persistent emotional growth when compared to her use of similar words in previous scenes.

While readers may intuit Ninah's growth throughout the text, reading these scenes through the quantitative analysis of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count reveals the linguistic evidence undergirding these intuitions. It further provides readers with a beneficial tool for recognizing and evaluating the healing impact of Ninah's trauma testimony. As readers are invited to enter into the experience of reading the text as empathic witnesses to Ninah's testimony, their understanding of Ninah as a character of Reynolds's creation and a product of her oppressive, abusive religious community may be deepened and expanded through the lens of such a psychological and linguistic evaluation. Through her progress in cognitive processing and emotional expression, LIWC further provides readers with linguistic evidence of Ninah's

unrelenting path toward freedom as she abides in her community but does not remain enmeshed in it.

Liberating Others as She Liberates Herself

As Ninah brings about her own freedom from her oppression at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, she encourages others to find freedom as well. One of the primary ways this freedom can be seen is in the defiant act of cutting hair. For women at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, tradition and religious rules hold that women should not cut their hair; however, after she gives birth to Canaan, Ninah chooses to cut hers and use the material in the rugs she weaves. Describing her gesture, Ninah says, “I took the shears and went into the bathroom and clipped at my hair until it all hung evenly at my shoulders. With every strand that fell, I felt lighter” (Reynolds 253). What for most women is a commonplace occurrence is a revolutionary act for Ninah and the women at Fire and Brimstone. Having shoulder-length hair not only sets her apart from all of the other women in her community, but it also communicates a clear message that she is unconcerned with following their rules for modesty and femininity. That she “felt lighter” invites readers to consider the literal and non-literal weight that has been lifted from her. Like Samson in reverse, cutting her hair is a symbol of Ninah’s strength.⁵² Having taken this drastic measure, Ninah can now move forward less encumbered by The Church of Fire and Brimstone’s regulations and subsequent judgements.

With her bold example, Ninah clears the path for other women, older and younger, to follow, and in so doing, she sets in motion a dramatic revolution at The Church of Fire and Brimstone. Though it would seem subtle to outsiders, women cutting their hair and playing the “guitar and banjo, after prayers” is considered “living it up at Fire and Brimstone” (Reynolds

⁵² Judges 16

265). With the freedom their newly trimmed hair gives them, the women at The Church of Fire and Brimstone are similarly internally liberated to celebrate with joyful songs and instruments in ways that have not been permitted in the past. Ninah notes the content of the songs mirrors the women's newfound freedom, saying, "Mostly we sang Jesus songs, but we didn't bother with the sad ones—like the one where the little girl tells her daddy that he can't be her daddy anymore because the rapture's happened and her daddy's been left behind" (Reynolds 265). No longer fixated on stories and songs about the end of days and what may happen in the apocalypse, the women are liberated to celebrate with songs that speak of happier times, not families who are torn apart by unbelief. Their view of God now more closely resembles Jesus of the New Testament than the fire and brimstone God of Moses in the Old Testament, to which their church's name alludes. These new songs and shift toward a celebratory savior demonstrate that the community is no longer bound by the scare tactics they have grown accustomed to in order to reinforce their faith and allegiance to the church's rules. Instead, they willingly remain part of the church but are determined to praise and rejoice on their own terms now.

The first woman to cut her hair after Ninah is Wanda, who approaches Ninah with the specific request to "get rid of this heavy mess" even though it might mean that she will have to "sleep on nettles for a night or two" as punishment (Reynolds 262). Ninah "chopped Wanda's hair off" and remarks, "I liked the way cut hair looked. It didn't need to be short like a man's but cutting it in general made me feel good. Uncut hair doesn't grow even, and it hangs down in the middle longer than on the sides so you always look indecisive, like you don't have an opinion at all" (Reynolds 262). For Ninah, the appearance of cut and uncut hair conveys something about the woman, and for the women at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, their unkempt locks have been reinforcing their subjugation by suggesting that they are not strong and decisive.

Because Wanda wears her hair up, the change in her hair length is not readily noticed, but when young Pammy's hair is cut too short, more conservative community members, including Pammy's mother, Bethany, and Grandpa Herman, are incensed. Outraged at her daughter's short bob, Bethany chastises Ninah, saying, "Just because *you're* special and were chosen for something special by God don't mean you can go around inflicting the same things on other people" (Reynolds 263, emphasis in original). Bethany does not see her daughter's new hair as indicative of freedom and self-expression; rather she is resentful of Ninah, as evidenced in her use of "inflicted" to describe the process of Ninah cutting Pammy's hair. As punishment for their violation, Grandpa Herman sentences both of them "to a night in a grave to contemplate the wages of sin," which Ninah recognizes as the same punishment Ben Harback received for the presumably more significant offense of drinking alcohol (Reynolds 264). Given the chasm between the gravity of these offenses, readers are invited to consider the deeper significance this change in physical appearance has for the Fire and Brimstone community. If these young women are to suffer such severe punishment, one may conclude that altering the women's appearance to resemble a more masculine style is a profound violation of longstanding community codes and traditions and is more severe a transgression than it appears on the surface. By violating these gender constructs, Ninah (and by extension the other women who have cut their hair or allowed Ninah to cut it) have crossed a cultural line that marks them as sinful and disobedient of the patriarchal authority in place. Ninah, nonetheless, is brave to exert this symbol of freedom, and her testimony to her feelings and the words of the other women are evidence of the power in this seemingly simple subversive act.

Understanding the level of the women's gender-based transgression allows readers to see more clearly the significance of the scene that follows Grandpa's Herman's declaration of Ninah

and Pammy's punishment. Just as Grandpa Herman has ordered the young men, "Get your shovels!" (Reynolds 264), Wanda stands up and declares, "Preacher Herman, I've cut my hair off too" (Reynolds 264) and reveals that her newly short hair falls "only to the middle" of her back when released from her bun (Reynolds 264). Following Wanda's lead, Great-Aunt Imogene says, laughing, "When I saw how pretty them girls looked, I just decided there weren't no need in an old woman like me having to carry around a headful," and she reveals that her hair is now only shoulder length (Reynolds 264). Great-Aunt Imogene's laughter in this moment breaks much of the tension, and she is further supported by Nanna, who approaches Grandpa Herman and laughs and says, "They ain't doing no wrong by wearing their hair different than the ways our parents wore theirs. Times change, and we're the only ones resisting it" (Reynolds 264). Nanna's courage to speak up and stand up to her husband underscores the other women's subversive attempt to create their own liberation. This scene illustrates the women's solidarity against their overlapping religious and sex-based oppression with the elder women having greater influence to convince Grandpa Herman that their punishment is not warranted. While it is the young women who lead the charge toward this form of freedom, the clout the older women carry bolsters the women's overall mission and aids their success in avoiding punishment. Ninah notes that this is "the first time [she'd] seem him back down before" (Reynolds 265), further illustrating the significance of this moment of solidarity between the women present even though Grandpa Herman is not yet convinced that women should be permitted to have more masculine hairstyles or to disobey the cultural codes he has long implemented.

This catalyzing moment of unity among this group of women, however, is a turning point in Ninah's story toward the ongoing pursuit of liberation at The Church of Fire and Brimstone. What the haircuts externally represent is the internal evidence of the minds of the women at Fire

and Brimstone who have now experienced a paradigm shift away from their lifelong blind allegiance to their church and community. Acting out in this public way leaves the women with a visual reminder of their ambition of freedom each time they see one another and recall their revolutionary hair-cutting, further reinforcing their internal goals. As this external reminder, their haircuts become their ongoing testimony to freedom, speaking visually a message of defiance even when the women are not speaking verbally. While this moment catalyzes the women, their freedom is not fully encapsulated in this one bold moment; rather, their liberatory efforts ebb and flow as the women gain ground but then revert back to old patterns of guilt and shame. Their liberation is not linear, as Reynolds invites readers to consider the ramifications of trauma through their circuitous route to various levels of individual and collective freedom.

While the women at The Church of Fire and Brimstone are seeking their own sort of liberation, their efforts are complicated when Grandpa Herman suffers a major stroke and is no longer in a position physically or mentally to lead the congregation. While this lack of leadership could provide an opportune moment for change, as new leadership could emerge, the community instead flounders with a lack of clear direction. During this time, the church fractures into groups who want to maintain life as it has been with their rules and regulations and factions who want to blossom into a progressive community unhindered by the shackles of such legalism. This division stunts the development of the women's movement, as they are distracted by the seriousness of Grandpa Herman's ailment and are preoccupied with the daily tasks of keeping their fracturing families together in this tumultuous time in their community. Instead of taking strides forward, they appear content to keep things as they are, their newly found freedom to cut their hair sufficient as a marker of their progress. Even Great-Aunt Imogene, who cut her own hair and laughed when Grandpa Herman said Pammy and Ninah should sleep in a grave

overnight for their transgressions, later appears to repent of her forward-thinking ways. David challenges the congregation, saying “that he was disappointed in the community....that everybody who had backslidden at Fire and Brimstone...should be sleeping on nettles” (Reynolds 280). He then digs a grave for anyone willing to punish themselves. Ninah narrates that Great-Aunt Imogene, perhaps guilty for her progressive ways, perhaps condemning herself for being part of the “unconfessed sins” that some believe led to Grandpa Herman’s sickness, “limped her way across the lawn, slowly bent to the ground until she could sit there, edged her legs against the side of the hole, and then plunked off like a penny out a window” (Reynolds 280). Although no one is forcing her to sleep in the grave overnight, Great-Aunt Imogene is so riddled with a combination of guilt and conviction that she must punish herself. Although she previously stood with the women pushing toward greater freedom, she now seems to dissent and fall back into line with the old traditions and rules, illustrating the push and pull between longstanding habits and possible freedom present at The Church of Fire and Brimstone. Through Ninah’s narration of this scene with Great-Aunt Imogene, Reynolds invites readers to remember that pursuing liberation from trauma and oppressive structures can be a complicated and arduous process, filled with steps forward, steps back, and standing in place. Ninah’s testimony to Great-Aunt Imogene’s progress and regress likewise underscores the non-linear path that these women must take to ride themselves of their community’s rules, one piece at a time. While the women have been brave to testify against Grandpa Herman’s old-fashioned rules to avoid cutting their hair, their one momentary decision is not enough to unlock their full freedom. As she recounts this story, Ninah’s tone of disappointment is evident, as she recalls the men gathering their shovels to dig the grave and uses words like “limped” and “plunked” to convey Great-Aunt Imogene’s movement toward the open grave (Reynolds 280).

In bold contrast to Great-Aunt Imogene, however, Reynolds paints Ninah as forward moving in spite of her community's confusion. While Great-Aunt Imogene is guilty or repentant for breaking from her community's norms, Ninah persists as part of the vanguard, processing her trauma and disrupting her community's expectations. One way Reynolds portrays Ninah as further disrupting her community norms is through Ninah creating—and gifting—clothes and rugs. During her pregnancy and isolation, Ninah expresses herself through creating baby clothes and other items from scraps of fabric she finds at Grandpa Herman and Nanna's house. While this domestic task itself is not beyond the boundaries for women at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, Ninah subverts her community's standards by creating a skirt for Pammy that secretly contains a pair of shorts sewn inside, a clear violation of the community's expectations for women's dress. When Pammy thanks Ninah for this practical fashion adaptation, Ninah tells Pammy, "If you'll let Nanna wash it, your mamma won't never know about the shorts" (Reynolds 203). In saying this, Ninah reminds Pammy and Reynolds reminds readers of the significant transgression that is taking place, and Pammy understands the need for secrecy, saying, "I'll wash it in the bathtub" (Reynolds 203). This scene demonstrates Ninah's perseverance during a trying and isolating time, but it also shows her drive to work against her community's various oppressions. Although sewing shorts into a skirt may seem insignificant, her subversive act helps to unravel the sex-based power structures at The Church of Fire and Brimstone. Her subtle behaviors, as they go unnoticed by those who oppose her liberatory acts, are permitted to pass without punishment and quietly add to the arsenal of collective and individual feminist ammunition for the women of her community.

Just as Ninah is concerned with others like Pammy, not just herself, during what could be a traumatic time of isolation during her pregnancy, she further reaches out with a gift of a

handmade rug for each family at Christmas. Ninah narrates, “[E]ven though we didn’t usually give presents, I had one for everybody” (Reynolds 215). In her generosity, Ninah has turned what was meant as a time of punishment and forced reflection toward repentance into a productive and cathartic season. Subverting Grandpa Herman’s punishment and the community’s norm against giving gifts, Ninah has crafted a useful and inviting item for every household to enjoy. Further demonstrative of Ninah’s charity and selflessness, she notes that “Nanna gave [the rugs] out for [her] because [she] missed the family Christmas” as a result of her punishment (Reynolds 215). Instead of retreating inward during her time of isolation, she finds a productive outlet for processing her pain and includes others during the journey.

Ninah’s craftsmanship provides her with a cathartic and productive outlet for her pain. In her creative acts, Ninah is regaining control over her body and mind in the wake of physical and mental punishment. As Bessel van der Kolk notes, “Trauma robs you of the feeling that you are in charge of yourself. . . . The challenge of recovery is to reestablish ownership of your body and your mind—of your self” (203). Like Edwidge Danticat’s protagonist-narrator, Amabelle Désir, in *The Farming of Bones* discussed in Chapter 1, Reynolds depicts Ninah as using a tactile textile activity to ease her pain and cope with her trauma. As such, these creative acts demonstrate a form of art therapy that is expressive and permits the individual to process pain through a creative outlet that provides distance from the trauma.⁵³ Furthermore, this coping mechanism produces a tangible product, which is its own form of testimony and serves as an outward expression of progress and healing when internal healing seems less measurable or noticeable. Because she has these baby clothes, skirts with secretive shorts, and mixed media rugs to see and feel, Ninah is reminded of the value of her time and the skills she offers her community despite

⁵³ Schouten, Karin Alice, et al. "The Effectiveness Of Art Therapy In The Treatment Of Traumatized Adults: A Systematic Review On Art Therapy And Trauma." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2015, pp. 220-228.

being an outcast. She is additionally able to provide for herself, not relying on others to support or sustain her emotionally in this trying time when most have turned their backs on her.

Although she is young, she takes on an adult role of creator as she crafts these household items for others to enjoy. Reynolds shows Ninah exerting her adult-like leadership and initiative when Ninah teaches herself to make rugs, a task she has not undertaken before. Out of the necessity to find a task that would not hurt her fingers so much, Ninah realizes that she could learn how to build and use a loom to weave rugs like the ones she sees at Nanna's house. Part of what draws Ninah to this process, Reynolds invites readers to discover, is that "when the rug-maker had run out of one piece of cloth, she'd just started in with another one, and... it didn't really matter when the fabric knotted up" (Reynolds 214). The imperfection and the ability to keep creating even when the materials present problems provide more of an opportunity than a hindrance to Ninah, and this flexibility despite challenges is indicative, too, of Ninah's resilience. As such, the rugs that Ninah creates, in process and in finished product, are analogous to Ninah's strength and tenacity, as Reynolds has crafted her. Unhindered by her lack of a loom to begin her rug-making, Ninah starts "sketching out how a loom would have to look on pieces of notebook paper, holding up the rug, measuring it with [her] tape measure" and begins to build a loom after asking her dad to bring her scrap pieces of wood, a hammer, and nails (Reynolds 214). Demonstrative of her maturity and perseverance in her time of confinement and punishment, Ninah takes it upon herself to figure out how to weave by studying an existing rug. This initiative and ingenuity show Ninah's strength and self-awareness to participate in creating something that brings and makes meaning of her time of trial.

In addition to creating a rug for all of the households at The Church of Fire and Brimstone—which means extending kindness to those who shun her and say she is a sinner in

need of repentance—Ninah also makes rugs for herself, for her baby, and in memory of James. This memorialization and forward-looking creating give Ninah a connection from her past into her present and future by linking James and baby Canaan, although the two will not meet physically, unless readers interpret as real the dream-like encounter Ninah recounts with what seems to be the ghost of James (Reynolds 272). Regardless, this linkage of past, present, and future through the rug that Ninah weaves provides a tangible type of closure for Ninah, propelling her forward while not demanding she forget her past with all its complications and complexities.

The rug that she creates in memory of James is made of “[t]obacco twine and burlap, barbed wire, and rope,” and Ninah uses her own hair that she has cut herself “to weave in a big cross, right in the middle” and outlines the cross with barbed wire (Reynolds 226). The mixture of these physically and symbolically rough materials with the softness of Ninah’s hair underscores the tension Ninah resides in, remembering James’s life and the beautiful times they shared while being unable to untangle the uplifting memories from the painful memory of his death and lingering absence. This tension is illustrated in Ninah’s choice of materials through the juxtaposition of the rope that James uses to tie himself to the tree during his suicide alongside the injurious barbed wire, all crafted in the shape of a cross—a Christian symbol of both pain and death and salvation and life. As Ninah has used her own hair for this cross, one may wonder if she is depicting herself as a sacrificial lamb or scapegoat for The Church of Fire and Brimstone, as much of their anger and abuse is directed at her. Another interpretation may call readers’ minds back to passages in the text where Ninah dreams that James is Jesus. Reynolds invites readers to hold both of these possibilities in tension, that Ninah is both a sacrificial character, and James still represents salvation for her, as a sort of Christ figure providing a temporary mental

escape from The Church of Fire and Brimstone. Although Ninah is angry with James for leaving her to survive The Church of Fire and Brimstone alone, she still cares and longs for him deeply, not unlike the followers of Christ who were afraid of being abandoned.⁵⁴ Reynolds depicts Ninah as working through her mixed emotions during her process of crafting this rug. Ninah narrates, “I shredded my fingers working on it, and the burlap had little blood stains smeared all over. I wove for most of the night, and I cried a little too” (Reynolds 226). Ninah’s blood and tears combine as an additional material to enhance her creation. Her blood demonstrates her physical pain from the process of using barbed wire as a material, but it is also representative of her internal pain. That she cries demonstrates the connection she feels to this project and the deep loss of her lover, along with the cathartic quality of this tangible task. Later, Ninah adds blood from childbirth to further allow the rug to depict her family with James and Canaan (Reynolds 244). As Ninah enters into this pain in the creative process, readers are asked to notice that she is permitting herself to feel her trauma and work through it as she weaves in search of healing. Because this rug, with its uncomfortable and sharp materials, is not practical, readers are invited to consider that Ninah’s representation of testimony through her creation here is more for closure and therapeutic outlet than merely to have a task to occupy her time in confinement with her labor and Canaan’s birth looming. Ninah herself refers to it as her “rug for James that nobody would ever walk on” (Reynolds 226), and Reynolds draws readers’ minds further to its emotional value as Ninah tosses it over her feet to sleep. In this action, readers may conclude that Ninah wants to experience the pain and connection that come from being near this rug, with its intricately woven painful materials that are intertwined with James’s death and her new life without him at The Church of Fire and Brimstone. That she can sleep with it on her feet

⁵⁴ In John 14:18, before his death, Jesus says to his disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans.”

invites the possibility that she has found enough closure or peace to move forward and rest, allowing herself to feel both love and sadness simultaneously.

While Ninah's rug-making subverts her community's punishment of shunning her in that she rises above their abuse and extends grace to them while providing herself with a way to cope during her isolation and process her internal pain externally through weaving and creating, her final subversive act is her greatest example of triumphing over her divisive and dangerous community. When Ninah cuts apart Canaan's fused hands, she not only frees him from the weight of the community's expectations for him, but she also frees herself from the church's strict influence and crippling abuse. Through this depiction, Reynolds provides readers with an example of a character who thrives in her unique way in the aftermath of trauma while remaining connected to her abusers and traumatic community.

Reynolds's Ninah has insisted throughout her pregnancy that she is carrying the baby of Jesus, not James, and readers are invited to consider that Ninah herself both believes and doubts this claim throughout her pregnancy. The community at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, however, doubts her entirely—until the baby is born. When Canaan is born with his hands fused together at the palms, most of the community believes he is New Messiah, and because he represents the Promised Land, they name him Canaan, accordingly. Grandpa Herman even apologizes, uncharacteristically, saying, "I didn't mean to doubt you, Ninah...I didn't mean to falsely accuse you of fornication" (Reynolds 239). Reynolds reveals Nanna, however, has her doubts, telling Ninah when she asks if Nanna thinks Canaan is the New Messiah, "I think your baby was born with a simple problem that would have been fixed already if we'd taken you to the hospital where you belonged" (Reynolds 244). Despite Nanna's realistic interpretation of Canaan's extraordinary feature, the community at large persists in believing Canaan has been

sent to save them. Thus, his entrance into their community sparks a shift that alters the overall tone of the congregation. This revival of hope among them acts as a temporary unifying force, and they also begin to see Ninah in a more positive light since she is now the mother of their new savior, a sort of Virgin Mary. Throughout the text, Reynolds has invited readers to see Ninah's burgeoning boldness as akin to Nanna's persistent courageous moments in the linguistic similarities of their names. While Nanna's given name is Leila, she is most frequently referred to as Nanna throughout Ninah's storytelling, reminding readers to see these two women as similar, and Ninah's bravery is one way in which she grows up to be like this unsung matriarch of her family whose power sometimes goes unnoticed but whose influence is felt throughout the family line.

Evidence of Ninah's new status comes in the way people listen to her now and no longer expect that she will participate in her former chores, like taking care of the chickens. When she approaches Olin and Mustard to urge them to come back to church for Canaan's dedication, both decline but then show up for the ceremony, demonstrative that Ninah's words and status have impacted them. Ninah's convincing argument is, "We need something...It's like a big split's come in our community, and Canaan might be the one way to get us all back together" (Reynolds 255). Mustard retorts, "After all they've done to you, you want things to be the way they used to be? You're crazy" (Reynolds 256). While Mustard rightly notes that Ninah has endured much abuse from her community and should not want to let that pass unchecked, Ninah clarifies, "No....That's not what I want at all. But things don't have to be the same for us to all live together and be happy..." (Reynolds 256). Despite the trauma she has suffered, Ninah still maintains the goal of community progress and unity even though it means that she must remain part of the congregation that has so wronged and harmed her.

Once the community's fissures become even more crystalized for Ninah, she makes the bold decision to remove Canaan from the metaphorical pedestal on which the church has placed him. After Grandpa Herman's stroke and sudden temporary disappearance that the community wrongly interprets as the rapture that has left them all behind, Ninah decides she cannot tolerate the community's incorrect theological assumptions any longer. Of the church obsession with the pending rapture and their argument about potential new leadership, Ninah tells baby Canaan, "You don't have to think about it...You don't have to dream about it. You don't have to live this way, and I'm sure as *hell* tired of it" (Reynolds 313, emphasis in original). Initially, Ninah contemplates killing Canaan and then killing herself, so desperate and determined to remove them both from the harmful influence of The Church of Fire and Brimstone and God's Almighty Baptizing Wind.⁵⁵ Reynolds portrays Ninah's mind as drifting back to James and what thoughts and motivations might have run through his head when he decided to end his life. Ninah goes so far as to grab the rugs she made for Canaan and James, and she "put Canaan's rug beneath [them] and James' rug at [their] back. To finish telling both stories. After [they] were gone" (Reynolds 315). The finality in Ninah's thought process illustrates the gravity of her situation at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, inviting readers to conclude that for Ninah, death is preferable now to living to suffer under their oppressive and traumatizing religious ways.

Ninah does not follow through on her impulse to end their lives, however. She narrates instead, "When I picked up the scissors, they seemed to act without me, in spite of me, and before I knew what I was doing, I had placed them between his palms and snipped, snipped, snipped his hands apart" (Reynolds 315). It is then Canaan's loud cries of pain that cause Ninah to realize she "couldn't hurt him any worse" (Reynolds 315). She then decides to let him live,

⁵⁵ This scene is similar in content to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, inspired in part by the real-life story of Margaret Garner, who chose death for her daughter instead of allowing her to be returned to a life of slavery.

and he proceeds to run “around the pack house squealing, shaking his hands maniacally and splashing the slightest bleeding over the walls and floor, bleeding from both palms” (Reynolds 316). Readers may consider this newfound physical freedom indicative of Canaan’s literal liberation from his birth defect, but Reynolds’s reference to the blood on both palms may also be Christological, reminding readers of his presumed messianic status at The Church of Fire and Brimstone. As such, this scene may be read as a type of death with undertones of a hopeful resurrection, a new life for Canaan and Ninah. Canaan seems to embrace this hopeful future, as Ninah realizes he is no longer crying out in pain, but he is laughing instead (Reynolds 316). Ninah then narrates her freedom, saying, “I understood something new. Something about connections. Somehow, I knew that splitting his hands was like severing a vine, like killing the vine about to strangle *not* somebody else but me. *Me*” (Reynolds 316, emphasis in original). While Ninah sets out initially to save herself and her son through a murder-suicide, she realizes instead that the freedom they have found in life is greater than the liberation they would experience in death. Instead of escaping her abusers, she remains with them as an emblem of hope and survival through her courageous act to set her son free. She understands deeper, though, that in freeing Canaan, she has really liberated herself.

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, narrator-storyteller Ninah has increased her awareness of how oppressive her community is. During the scene near the novel’s conclusion, Ninah demonstrates that she will no longer abide by the false beliefs that her church perpetuates, primarily the lie that Canaan is their new messiah. By exerting her own truth in separating Canaan’s hands, she untangles herself from the internal anxiety she has experienced, that she compares to choking her

like kudzu vines running rampant inside. Near the beginning of the novel, Reynolds notes that Ninah sees The Church of Fire and Brimstone “[l]ike an island sinking from the weight of fearful hearts” (Reynolds 17). Ninah has now taken matters into her own hands in order to rid herself of this weight and thrive instead of sinking, too. Her decision to sneak away with Canaan and to snip his hands apart defies what the community wants, but she acts on her own regardless. While she could decide to walk away completely from The Church of Fire and Brimstone in this moment, she instead chooses “the slow walk back” (Reynolds 317), indicating her decision to remain. Reynolds leaves open what exactly this new future looks like for Ninah at The Church of Fire and Brimstone, but she conveys Ninah’s attitude in the closing passage as one of introspective hope. Reynolds closes the text with Ninah’s narration about the rugs she creates. Just as she opens the text with a reference to Ninah’s rugs as representations of stories, she begins to close the novel with Ninah saying, “When I’ve used up all my rags and lies, rope and hair, fabric and love, when I’m out of twine and my loom is broken and there’s still a story in me, that’s when I unknot and begin the unraveling” (Reynolds 317). Situating Ninah as creator and storyteller underscores her role as the community’s messenger and history-keeper, a role she seems to have shared with and picked up from Nanna. As she steps more into this role in the text’s conclusion, readers are invited to consider that her position at The Church of Fire and Brimstone has expanded to include the authority that accompanies being an unofficial historian and bearer of the community’s truth and lies. She says her “rugs are never finished” and poetically ends her narration referring to their materials waiting to be interwoven, saying, “If I sit with them silent long enough, they will talk. Just listening I can give them tongues. They will speak like prophets” (Reynolds 317). As such, her rugs are a language and a collection of stories all their own. Departing from but analogous to the prophets in her church’s scriptures, Ninah

listens for the wise voices that will come forth from the materials she will use to tell her stories through weaving patterns and pictures, a temporary testimony until she unravels one rug to tell a new story.

Conclusion: From History to the Classroom

While the stories created and retold in fiction cannot erase or make right the wrongs of history, these novels show that it is possible to mine some good from history's ills and leave behind a lasting literary monument. As the women protagonist narrators in this study work against their own erasure, pushing back against patriarchy and its hegemonic interpretations of history, they speak new, women-centric testimonies to their historical, personal, sexual, and religious traumas. Their testaments provide readers with a glimpse into the stories history forgot.

In my introduction, I asserted that previous literary trauma theory has been too narrowly focused on the wound trauma creates and the so-called silence that may follow. My study finds that we can recuperate testimony to be central to our understanding of literary trauma theory moving forward and use tools such as expressive writing and the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program to examine literary texts of trauma. The quantitative data gathered from LIWC is consistent with informed, close reading and offers scholars an additional way into these texts and the fictional representations of testimony they portray. Based on these findings, as we expand our understanding of literary trauma theory to encompass these tools and illuminate testimony, we will continue to move literary trauma theory in new directions that interrogate the power and purpose of such testimonial representations as the ones evaluated in this study. As Michelle Balaev has aptly noted, "A single conceptualization of trauma will likely never fit the multiple and often contradictory depictions of trauma in literature because texts cultivate a wide variety of the values that reveal individual and cultural understandings of the self, memory, and society" (*Contemporary Approaches* 8). Broadening contemporary literary trauma theory to encompass this multiplicity of representations creates space for analyzing the vast range of texts in the contemporary canon. It further affords scholars the opportunity to offer interpretations

that are flexible and responsive as psychological and physiological understandings of trauma shift and grow over time.

The fictional histories depicted in these novels challenge readers to reconsider the stories they may already know—and become aware of the gaps therein—concerning historical trauma across Hispaniola, the Belgian Congo, and fundamentalist religious communities like The Church of Fire and Brimstone. In so doing, they work against cultural amnesia that allows stories to be forgotten as generations pass. Like the work of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that she asserts speaks against the “national amnesia” of slavery, these texts place these historic moments back in the public memory, thus preventing them from fading as the memory-keepers and witness-bearers pass away (Angelo). As these novelists bring these histories to light, the trauma testimonies of these novels persist as a cultural artifact of the moments they represent, further inscribing their significance and resisting erasure. These artifacts additionally invite audiences to critically evaluate the cultural conditions surrounding the range of personal, political, sexual, and spiritual traumas represented. As Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel rightly claim, “The Americas still suffer from historical amnesia, a deep unwillingness to face and confront the inflicted wounds of the past: the legacies of genocide, slavery, and colonialism...” (2). These novels force readers to remember the painful histories contained therein and persist as a record that prevents complete amnesia of the wounds represented. Furthermore, as the “work of historical remembrance...[is] clearly about the wounds of the past, [it] is also about the present and the future,” as these texts invite readers to look back to these historical conditions while simultaneously inviting them to interrogate present circumstances and future implications of remembrance, trauma, and healing” (Young and Braziel 2). Danticat’s and Alvarez’s texts, in

particular, bring to the forefront the present implications of Haitian-Dominican relations and the wounds that linger unresolved and are continually inflicted.

Encountering these novels that work against cultural amnesia through their various depictions of trauma testimonies invites the reader into the role of witness, where according to E. Ann Kaplan, “Witnessing involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common” (122). As a result, literature of trauma has the power and potential to provoke positive change as readers are not just touched, but are moved empathically.⁵⁶ When bearing witness to literary trauma does nothing more than evoke pity for characters and their plight, this is a failure of witnessing, as readers then are distant spectators who remain unmoved and unmotivated to act against injustice or grow in their capacity for empathy. As Brené Brown asserts, “Empathy is the ability to understand what someone is experiencing and to reflect back that understanding,” and she further emphasizes, “[E]mpathy is *understanding what someone is feeling*, not feeling it for them” (155, emphasis in original). Effective empathic witnessing of literary trauma involves understanding what characters are enduring, not merely feeling shallow sorrow for their condition.

Another potential failure of witnessing that is worth noting involves encountering literary trauma testimonies as a voyeur who delights in the suffering portrayed. As the novels explored in this study were all best-sellers, the trauma testimonies represented therein have reached a wide popular and scholarly audience, who likely have various reasons for picking up the text and finding pleasure in reading it. While reading about someone else’s trauma may be titillating for some readers, these stories represent the real traumas of innumerable unnamed individuals whose historical traumas have otherwise remained untold and, therefore, ask readers to take up the task

⁵⁶ Concerning the reception of her novel of trauma, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison has said that “many readers remain touched but not moved” as they pity the protagonist but fail to interrogate themselves (211).

of bearing witness to their forgotten traumas. While popular women's novels have often been wrongly dismissed as non-literary (Tompkins 13), these texts push against that binary through their popular and scholarly appeal that maintains their literary qualities and expansive readership. As Jane Tompkins claims that novels can be "powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself" and "attempts to redefine the social order" (10), these texts, too, are involved in important cultural work that invites readers to think about and bear witness to these historical traumas and present-day conditions that permit these traumas to persist. This witnessing invites readers beyond mere fascination with others' pain and into the challenging and deeper work of recognizing the systemic inequality depicted therein. E. Ann Kaplan asserts that witnessing "differs from vicarious trauma, from voyeurism/sensationalism, and from melodramatic attempts to close the wound as in Hollywood treatments of historical trauma" (22). She adds that witnessing involves "understanding the structure of injustice," which demands cognitive work on the part of the witness to think deeply about how these wounds were inflicted (23). Readers who approach the text with a macabre interest in the portrayal of characters' suffering deny themselves the opportunity to enter in as empathic witnesses unless they are able to move beyond their initial curiosity of and fascination with the darkness and out instead into the light of empathic understanding that takes neither pleasure nor pity in another's suffering.

As the characters in this study survive and bear witness to their traumas, readers are invited in as effective empathic witnesses who also bear responsibility of listening to these stories and carrying forth their social and political significance. By extension, these texts have broad implications in the literature classroom, urging instructors to consider effective ways of teaching texts of trauma in the post-secondary classroom, including the responsibilities and obligations instructors have when using such provocative texts. Marian MacCurdy, for example,

in her personal autobiography writing course promotes the type of writing readers witness in these four novels. She cautions, however, that such self-disclosure is not for all students and would not be well-suited for a compulsory freshman-level course. While MacCurdy discusses personal writing, her claims are still applicable to the teaching of such personal fictional texts, as topics uncovered in these texts may in turn unearth emotions within their student readers. MacCurdy reminds us that “therapy’s goal is mental health; our goal is to help our students become strong writers” (161), and I would add, strong readers and critics.

Although these texts of trauma may trigger personal and challenging content for our students, we should be clear that the classroom is not a counselor’s office, and the role of an instructor is not that of a counselor. However, texts such as these with strong messages and themes will inevitably bring up controversial and potentially delicate topics for some students in any given classroom, and instructors should be sensitive to that possibility and prepared for what the semester may unearth. Because trauma narratives can have healing value, it is valuable to teach them in literature and writing courses so that students can see the empowering impact of giving voice to trauma. If students are made aware of the qualities that bring about the most effective expressive writing, their writing may improve in other genres as well, as they learn to connect feelings and memories to specific events and images.

Furthermore, evaluating survival narratives through the lens of expressive writing could also benefit students by showing them the ways in which “through writing, suffering can be transmuted into art” (DeSalvo 41). This transformation may impact students on a personal and intellectual level. As the students make personal connections, they dig deeper into what they are learning and are more likely to recall the information that has been linked personally. Evaluating the artistic quality and social, cultural, and historical contexts of these survival narratives are just

a few of the many possible ways into the expansive worlds these authors have created. As a result of entering these worlds, readers are urged to empathize with experiences that they may not otherwise encounter, as authors of novels of trauma “build, through fiction, their [readers’] capacity to contemplate complex human dilemmas and to enrich their own humanity in the process” (Vickroy 225). Fiction that deals with these complexities through the portrayal of difficult topics, such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, murder, and suicide, invite students to consider the experiences of unfamiliar others, like political dissidents, such as the Mirabal sisters of Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*, or teenagers who rebel against religious fundamentalism, like Ninah in Reynolds’s *The Rapture of Canaan*. In witnessing these characters’ narratives, students are invited to become more culturally aware and globally engaged, as their own resilience is reinforced through analyzing effective trauma testimonies.

When students are provided with an array of critical and psychological frameworks through which to evaluate these texts, they are better equipped to make sense of these stories of trauma and the nuances of the characters’ narration. In turn, they are also better equipped to make sense of their own experiences of trauma, personal or global. As they witness characters express trauma in narrative form, they are invited to consider what researchers, such as Pennebaker and Seagal,⁵⁷ claim is the benefit of expressive writing: the process of forming a coherent narrative. As the trauma narrative unfolds, so does the narrator’s newfound sense of control over the trauma, leading to the narrator’s potential post-traumatic growth through renegotiating their trauma. Students witness this process in the well-crafted narration of these literary examples, and when this process is made more transparent through students’ critical evaluation of the narration using frameworks such as LIWC, students are invited to consider the

⁵⁷ Pennebaker, James and J.D. Seagal. “Forming a Story: The Health Benefits of Narrative.” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* vol. 55, (1999): pp. 1243-1254.

implications of this narrative process for working through trauma. Students and scholars are also invited to contend with questions of what it means to force people to remember, as these texts bring historical traumas to light, not allowing them to be forgotten. They further encourage readers to interrogate what these cultural moments mean for the communities they represent and the impact they may have in the present day, through relations between Haitians and Dominicans, the impact of U.S. foreign policy in places like the Congo, and hidden practices of fundamentalist Christian communities.

Beyond practical classroom implications of this research on trauma and testimony in literary examples, this investigation uncovers the necessity of further research on the testimonial representations of trauma in contemporary fiction. As literary trauma theory has emphasized the silencing impact of trauma and the disruption of intrusive phenomena, such as recurring flashbacks and hallucinations, more work evaluating the linguistic representations of trauma, including the process of creating a narrative to understand what happened, will yield more productive conversations around the role of testimony in resilience, alongside fiction's empathy-building potential. While LIWC is more frequently used to evaluate examples of nonfiction, expanding its use to encompass further fictional texts, like the ones used in this study, will allow scholars and critics to observe character insights they may otherwise overlook and draw conclusions made readily apparent in the post-traumatic growth evidenced through characters' narration.

Additionally, an emphasis on the resilience of characters such as those in this study leads to greater observations of the tools characters use to survive and thrive in the wake of the various forms of trauma they encounter. For example, women characters in three of the four novels in this study develop coping mechanisms that involve creating objects; the women of *The*

Poisonwood Bible are the only ones who do not use creating as a coping mechanism. The created objects, in turn, become an additional form of testimony to tell the story of what the women experienced. Furthermore, their use of domestic tasks, such as sewing and weaving, to heal and simultaneously tell their trauma stories undermines their respective patriarchal cultures that demand their silence. A comparative study of the trauma testimonies in novels such as these invites critics and scholars to consider the array of coping mechanisms present in other fictional representations of trauma testimonies and has the potential to produce insightful inquiries that shed light on how authors portray trauma survivors processing and subverting cultural expectations in the aftermath of their trauma.

If we approach literature expecting to appreciate more than the pleasurable experience of reading, and we instead encounter it expecting to learn and grow or be touched and moved with deep empathy instead of the mere pity that Toni Morrison cautions readers against, we are better positioned to witness the powerful and nuanced trauma testimonies portrayed by characters like the women of *The Farming of Bones*, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, and *The Rapture of Canaan*. Using an expansive lens of literary trauma theory that is concerned primarily with testimony and resilience, which I have proposed through this study, we are invited to see the methods these fictional trauma survivors use to renegotiate their traumatic experiences and discharge the energy that was potentially frozen in the moment of trauma. We are also poised to take note of characters who fail to effectively process trauma and instead remain stuck in destructive patterns, as Rachel Price of *The Poisonwood Bible* demonstrates. As we evaluate characters through this lens of post-traumatic growth, we are also able to witness the process of working through trauma that is not always evident when we see and share stories that convey the tidy ending instead of the messy process. As a shame researcher, Brené Brown notes, “We like

recovery stories to move quickly through the dark so we can get to the sweeping redemptive ending” (xxiv). These works of literature hold steady through the dark as their characters endure trauma throughout the text, and they invite readers into the chaotic middle as characters grapple with finding their new way forward. When readers witness characters, like Alvarez’s Patria, transform the traumatic event of witnessing a young man’s murder into the momentum necessary for her revolution against Trujillo, readers are likewise invited to recognize the healing impact of reshaping trauma and giving a name through narrative to the pain one has experienced. Through this recognition, readers enter in empathically as part of the community created through these works of literature, and they are challenged and encouraged to move forward as the living witnesses of these inspiring works of literary memorialization whose texts are testimonies of the historically silenced and marginalized who now speak loudly of their resilience in the wake of surviving personal, political, spiritual, and sexual trauma.

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Appendix A
Chapter 1: *The Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat
Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Results and Passages

Fig. 1 LIWC2015 Results

<i>The Farming of Bones</i> (page)	Analytic	Clout	Authenticity	Emotional Tone	I- words	Social Words	Positive Emotions	Negative Emotions	Cognitive Processes
Average for Personal Writing	44.88	37.02	76.01	38.60	8.70	8.69	2.57	2.12	12.52
Amabelle Narrating Her Parents' Deaths Early in Novel (50-52)	90.78	717.3	68.76	21.27	6.02	12.92	0.29	0.64	3.82
Amabelle Narrates Dust Storm Dream (139)	93.43	39.93	80.29	49.48	8.92	8.92	1.27	0.00	8.92
Amabelle Sees Her Mother in a Dream (207-208)	8.83	80.65	51.03	82.96	7.37	16.03	3.85	0.64	13.46
Amabelle Narrating Parents' Deaths Later in Novel (308-310)	91.00	35.54	85.73	43.79	7.65	8.15	2.22	1.23	9.14

Passages Analyzed

Amabelle Narrates Her Parents' Deaths Early in Novel (pages 50-52)

“It is a Friday, market day. My mother, my father, and me, we cross into Dajabon, the first Dominican town across the river. My mother wants to buy cooking pots made by a Haitian pot maker named Moy who lives there, the best pot maker in the area. There is a gleam to Moy’s pots that makes you think you are getting a gem. They never darken even after they have been used on outdoor cooking for years.

In the afternoon, as we set out to wade across the river again with our two new shiny pots, it starts to rain in the mountains, far upstream. The air is heavy and moist; a wide rainbow arc creeps away from the sky, dark rain clouds moving in to take its place.

We are at a distance from the bridge. My father wants us to hurry home. There is still time to cross safely, he says, if we hasten. My mother tells him to wait and see, to watch the current for a while.

“We have no time to waste” my father insists.

“I’ll carry you across, and then I’ll come back for Amabelle and the pots,” my father says.

We walk down from the levee. My father looks for the shallows, where the round-edged rust-colored boulders we’d used before as stepping stones have already disappeared beneath the current.

“Hold the pots,” my mother tells me. “Papa will come back for you soon.”

On the levee are a few river rats, young boys, both Haitian and Dominican, who for food or one or two coins, will carry people and their merchandise across the river on their backs. The current is swelling, the pools enlarging. Even the river rats are afraid to cross.

My father reaches into the current and sprinkles his face with the water, as if to salute the spirit of the river and request her permission to enter. My mother crosses herself three times and looks up at the sky before she climbs on my father’s back. The water reaches up to Papa’s waist as soon as he steps in. Once he is in the river, he flinches, realizing that he has made a grave mistake.

My mother turns back to look for me, throwing my father off balance. A flow of mud fills the shallows. My father thrusts his hands in front of him, trying to keep on course. My mother tightens her grip around his neck; her body covers him and weighs him down at the same time. When he tries to push her up by her legs, a cluster of vines whisks past them; my mother reaches for the vines as though they were planks of a raft.

As the rain falls, the river springs upwards like an ocean rip-tide. Moving as close as they can to the river’s edge, the boys throw a thick sisal rope to my parents. The current swallows the rope. The boys reel it back in and wrap it around a boulder. The knot slides away from the boulder as soon as it leaves their hands.

The water rises above my father’s head. My mother releases his neck, the current carrying her beyond his reach. Separated, they are less of an obstacle for the cresting river.

I scream until I can taste blood in my throat, until I can no longer hear my own voice. Yet I still hold Moy’s gleaming pots in my hands.

I walk down to the sands to throw the pots in the water and then myself. The current reaches up and licks my feet. I toss the pots in and watch them bob along the swell of the water, disappearing into the braided line that is the river at a distance.

Two of the river boys grab me and drag me by my armpits away from the river. Their faces seem blurred and faraway through the falling rain. They pin me down to the ground until I become still.

“Unless you want to die,” one of them says, “you will never see those people again.”

Amabelle Narrates Dust Storm Dream (page 139)

“The valley’s dust storms bring me joy. The dust rises in funnels from the ground and sweeps down the road. Like a sheet come undone from the clothesline, it makes its own shadow, along with the birds that circle above, trying to spot the humans cowering with their heads mashed into their chests.

In dust storms, I always imagine there are people walking ahead of me, people I cannot see, but whose forms I hope will emerge again once the air is cleared. I see my mother and father and myself. I am with them, a child who still must hold a hand to walk, a child who must look up to talk, to see all the faces. After the storm has cleared, I find myself with my hands raised up, in motionless prayer, as though some invisible giants were guiding me forward, my face tipped up towards the trees covered with a veil of white loam.”

Amabelle Sees Her Mother in a Dream (pages 207-8)

“In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her.

She is wearing a dress of glass, fashioned out of the hardened clarity of the river, and this dress flows like raised dust behind her as she runs towards me and enfolds me in her smoke-light arms. Her face is like mine now, in fact it is the exact same long, three-different-shades-of-night face, and she is smiling a both-rows-of-teeth revealing smile.

‘I was saving my smile for when you needed it,’ she says, in a cheerful voice I do not remember, for she had always spoken so briefly and so sternly. ‘I didn’t want you to think that love was not scarce because it is, that it flowed freely from everywhere, or that it was something you could expect without price from everyone.’

‘And what of that time when I was dying and the doll came?’ I ask her. ‘Why did you not love me then?’

‘You were never truly dying, my precious imbecile,’ she says. ‘You were unbalanced in the head, as you are now. Your heart was racing and your blood on fire, as it is now. So you felt like you were dying but you were not. It was never as hot as you remember. It could not have been. I would not let it be.’

‘I will never be a whole woman,’ I say, ‘for the absence of your face.’

‘Your mother was never as far from you as you supposed,’ she says. ‘You were like my shadow. Always fled when I came to you and only followed when I left you alone. You will be well again, ma belle, Amabelle. I know this to be true. And how can you have ever doubted my love? You, my eternity.’”

Amabelle Narrates Her Parents' Deaths Later in Novel (pages 308-310)

“The day my parents drowned, I watched their faces as they bobbed up and down, in and out of the crest of the river. Together they were both trying to signal a message to me, but the force of the water would not let them. My mother, before she sank, raised her arm high, far above the pinnacle of the flood. The gesture was so desperate that it was hard to tell whether she wanted me to jump in with them or move farther away.

I thought that if I relived that moment often enough, the answer would become clear, that they had wanted either for us all to die together or for me to go on living, even if by myself. I also thought that if I came to the river on the right day, at the right hour, the surface of the water might provide the answer: a clearer sense of the moment, a stronger memory. But nature has no memory. And soon, perhaps, neither will I.

...

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the fog, the dense mist of sadness inside his head. Would the slaughter—the river—one day surrender to him his sanity the same way it had once snatched it away?

...I wanted to ask him, please, to gently raise my body and carry me into the river, into Sebastien's cave, my father's laughter, my mother's eternity. But he was gone now, disappeared into the night.

I removed my dress, folding it piece by piece and laying it on a large boulder on the riverbank. Unclothed, I slipped into the current.

The water was warm for October, warm and shallow, so shallow that I could lie on my back in it with my shoulders only half submerged, the current floating over me in a less than gentle caress, the pebbles in the riverbed scouring my back.

I looked to my dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow.

The professor turned to look down at me lying there, cradled by the current, paddling like a newborn in a washbasin. He turned around and walked away, his sandals flapping like two large birds fluttering damp wings, not so much to fly as to preen themselves. He, like me, was looking for the dawn.”

Appendix B

Chapter 2: *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Results and Passages

Fig. 2 LIWC2015 Results

<i>In the Time of the Butterflies</i> (page)	Analytic	Clout	Authenticity	Emotional Tone	I- words	Social Words	Positive Emotions	Negative Emotions	Cognitive Processes
Average for Personal Writing	44.88	37.02	76.01	38.60	8.70	8.69	2.57	2.12	12.52
Minerva Slapping Trujillo (100)	75.03	41.37	76.01	11.60	8.46	8.87	1.23	2.32	8.05
Patria's Watershed Moment in the Mountains (160)	74.92	64.59	76.38	12.54	6.86	10.72	1.50	2.49	7.73
María Teresa's Torture in Prison (254)	47.22	51.93	62.55	5.33	8.20	11.94	1.45	3.38	9.65
Dedé Seeing Her Sisters in the Morgue (307)	63.27	45.89	58.31	6.62	7.88	10.96	0.34	2.05	11.64
Dedé's Final Words (321)	63.68	37.50	84.42	9.92	9.24	8.60	1.59	2.87	10.51

Passages Analyzed

Minerva Slapping Trujillo (page 100)

“He seems surprised by my vehemence. After a long look, he smiles again. “Maybe I will keep it open if that will draw you to our side.” And then literally, he draws me to him, so close I can feel the hardness at his groin pressing against my dress.

I push just a little against him so he'll loosen his hold, but he pulls me tighter towards him. I feel my blood burning, my anger mounting. I push away, a little more decidedly, again he pulls me aggressively to his body. I push hard, and he finally must let me go.

“What is it?” His voice is indignant.

“Your medals,” I complain, pointing to the sash across his chest. “They are hurting me.” Too late, I recall his attachment to those *chapitas*.

He glares at me, and then slips the sash over his head and holds it out. An attendant quickly and reverently collects it. El Jefe smiles cynically. “Anything else bother you about my dress I could take off?” He yanks me by the wrist, thrusting his pelvis at me in a vulgar way, and I can see my hand in an endless slow motion rise—a mind all its own—and come down on the astonished, made-up face.

And then the rain comes down hard, slapping sheets of it. The tablecloths are blown off the tables, dashing their cargo onto the floor. The candles go out. There are squeals of surprise. Women hold their beaded evening bags over their heads, trying to protect their foundering hairdos.

In a minute, Manuel de Moya is at our side directing guards to escort El Jefe indoors. A tarp is extended over us. “*Que cosa, Jefe,*” Don Manuel laments, as if this inconvenience of nature were his fault.

El Jefe studies me as attendants dab at his dripping pancake. Annoyed, he pushes their hands away. I brace myself, waiting for him to give the order. *Take her away to La Fortaleza.* My fear is mixed oddly with excitement at the thought that I will get to see Lío if he, too, has been captured.

But El Jefe has other plans for me. “A mind of her own, this little *cibaeña!*” He smirks, rubbing his cheek, then turns to Don Manuel. “Yes, yes, we will adjourn indoors. Make an announcement.” As his private guards close around him, I break away, struggling against the sea of guests rushing indoors out of the rain. Ahead, Dedé and Patria are turning in all directions like lookouts on the mast of a ship....

We make a dash for the covered entryway, passing a table with a caravel still standing. No one will miss it, I think, hiding the little ship in the folds of my skirt. That’s when I remember, “Ay, Patria, my purse. I left it at the table.”

We run back to get it, but can’t find it anywhere. “Probably somebody already took it in. They’ll send it to you. Nobody is going to steal from El Jefe’s house,” Patria reminds me. The caravel goes heavy in my hand.

By the time we run back to the entryway, the Ford is idling at the door and the others are already inside. Out on the highway, I recall the slap with mounting fear. No one has mentioned it, so I’m sure they didn’t see it. Given everyone’s nerves already, I decide not to worry them with the story. Instead, to distract myself—*One nail takes out another*—I go over the contents of my purse, trying to assess exactly what I’ve lost: my old wallet with a couple pesos; my *cédula*, which I will have to report; a bright red Revlon lipstick I bought at El Gallo; a little Nivea tin Lío gave me with ashes of the Luperón martyrs not killed at sea.

And then, I remember them in the pocket of the lining, Lío’s letters!

All the way home, I keep going over and over them as if I were an intelligence officer marking all the incriminating passages. On either side of me, my sisters are snoring away. When I lean on Patria, wanting the release of sleep, I feel something hard against my leg. A rush of hope goes through me that my purse is not lost after all. But reaching down, I discover the little caravel sunk in the folds of my damp dress.”

“It happened on the last day of our retreat.

The fourteenth of June: how can I ever forget that day!

We were all in that big room having our midafternoon cursillo. Brother Daniel was talking of the last moment he knew of in Mary's human life, her Assumption. Our Blessed Mother had been taken up into heaven, body and soul. What did we think of that? We went around the room, everyone declaring it was an honor for a mere mortal. When it came my turn, I said it was only fair. If our souls could go to eternal glory, our hardworking motherbodies surely deserved more. I patted my belly and thought of the little ghost of a being folded in the soft tissues of my womb. My son, Raulito. I ached for him even more without Manolito in my arms to staunch the yearning.

Next thing I knew, His Kingdom was coming down upon the very roof of that retreat house. Explosion after explosion ripped the air. The house shook to its very foundation. Windows shattered, smoke poured in with a horrible smell. Brother Daniel was shouting, “Fall to the ground, ladies, cover your heads with your folding chairs!” Of course, all I was thinking of was protecting my unborn child. I scrambled to a little niche where a statue of the Virgencita was standing, and begging her pardon, I knocked her and her pedestal over. The crash was drowned out by the thunderous blast outside. Then I crawled in and held my folding chair in front of me, closing the opening, and praying all the while that the Lord not test me with the loss of my child.

The shelling happened in a flash, but it seemed the chaos went on for hours. I heard moans, but when I lowered my chair, I could make out nothing in the smoke-filled room. My eyes stung, and I realized that in my fear I had wet my pants. When the air finally cleared, I saw a mess of glass and rubble on the floor, bodies huddled everywhere. A wall had tumbled down and the tile floor was all torn up. Beyond, through the jagged hole where the window had been, the closest mountainside was a raging inferno.

Finally, there was an eerie silence, interrupted only by the sound of far-off gunfire and the nearby trickle of plaster from the ceiling. Padre de Jesus gathered us in the most sheltered corner, where we assessed our damages. The injuries turned out to look worse than they were, minor cuts from flying glass, thank the Lord. We ripped up our slips and bandaged the worst. Then for spiritual comfort, Brother Daniel led us through a rosary. When we heard gunfire coming close again, we kept right on praying.

There were shouts, and four, then five, men in camouflage were running across the grounds towards us. Behind them, the same *campesinos* we'd seen on our walk and a dozen more *guardias* were advancing, armed with machetes and machine guns. The hunted men couched and careened this way and that as they headed towards the cover of the motherhouse.

They made it to the outdoor deck. I could see them clearly, their faces bloodied and frantic. One of them was badly wounded and hobbling, another had a kerchief tied around his forehead. A third was shouting to two others to stay down, and one of them obeyed and threw himself on the deck.

But the other must not have heard him for he kept on running towards us. I looked in his face. He was a boy no older than Noris. Maybe that's why I cried out, “Get down, son! Get down!” His eyes found mine just as the shot hit him square in the back. I saw the wonder on his young face as the life drained out from him, and I thought, Oh my God, he's one of mine!

Coming down that mountain, I was a changed woman. I may have worn the same sweet face, but now I was carrying not just my child but that dead boy as well.

My stillborn of thirteen years ago. My murdered son of a few hours ago.

I cried all the way down that mountain. I looked out the spider-webbed window of that bullet-riddled car at brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, one and all, my human family. Then I tried looking up at our Father, but I couldn't see His Face for the dark smoke hiding the tops of those mountains.

I made myself pray so I wouldn't cry. But my prayers sounded more like I was trying to pick a fight.

I'm not going to sit back and watch my babies die, Lord, even if that's what You in Your great wisdom decide."

María Teresa's Torture in Prison (page 254)

"For the OAS Committee investigating Human Rights Abuses.

This is a journal entry of what occurred at La 40 on Monday, April 11th, 1960, to me, a female political prisoner. I'd rather not put my name. Also, I have blotted out some names as I am afraid of getting innocent people in trouble.

Please don't put in the papers either, as I am concerned for my privacy.

When they came for me that morning, I thought that maybe I was being taken to the officers' lounge for questioning.

But instead, Bloody Juan escorted me down the stairs and outside. There was a wagon waiting. It took me only a minute to realize where we were going.

I kept looking out the window, hoping I'd be seen by someone who might recognize me and tell my family they had spotted me in a police wagon headed toward La 40. How strange that the sun was shining so innocently. That people were walking around as if there was no such thing in the world as poor souls in my predicament.

I tried getting some explanation as to why I was being taken in. But Bloody Juan is not one to explain things.

By the time we got to La 40, I was shaking so bad I couldn't get out of the wagon. I felt ashamed they had to carry me in like a sack of beans.

There was a bunch of them already waiting in the interrogation room, tall fat Johnny with his Hitler mustache. The one called Candido with the curly hair. Then a bug-eyed one that kept cracking his knuckles to make the sound of breaking bones.

They stripped me down to my slip and brassiere and made me lie down on this long metal table, but they didn't buckle the belts I saw dangling down the sides. I have never known such terror. My chest was so tight I could barely breathe.

Johnny said, Hey, pretty lady, don't get all excited.

We're not going to hurt you, the one called Candido said.

That made me shake all the more.

When the door opened, and _____ was brought in, I didn't immediately recognize him. A walking skeleton, that's what he looked like, shirtless, his back covered with blisters the size of dimes.

I sprang up, but Bloody Juan pushed me back down on the table. You lay down nice like you're in bed waiting for him, Bug Eye said. Then he said something gross about what torture does for the necessary organ. Johnny told him to shut up.

What do you want with her? _____ shouted. I could tell he was scared.

We want her to help us persuade you, Johnny said in a voice that was too calm and rational for this eerie place.

She has nothing to do with this, _____ cried.

Are you saying you've reconsidered, Johnny asked.

But _____ stood his ground. I'm not discussing that matter further unless you let her go.

That's when Bug Eye slammed him with a fist, knocking him down. How dare scum dictate terms to the captain! Then all of them joined in kicking _____ until he was writing in agony on the floor.

I was screaming for them to stop. It felt like my very own stomach was being punched, and that's when the pains as bad as contractions began.

Then Johnny asked me if I couldn't persuade _____. After all, _____, _____, _____, _____, and _____ had all reconsidered.

I was so tempted to say, Ay, _____, save yourself, save us. But I couldn't. It was as if that would have been the real way to let them kill us.

So I told those monsters that I would never ask _____ to go against what his conscience told him was right.

Two of a kind, the one called Candido sad. We'll have to use stronger persuasions.

I guess, Johnny said. Tie her down.

Bug Eye stood before me, holding a rod with a little switch. When he touched me with it, my whole body jumped with exquisite pain. I felt my spirit snapping loose, soaring above my body and looking down at the scene. I was about to float off in a haze of brightness when _____ cried out, I'll do it, I'll do it!

And down I went, sucked back into the body like water down a drain.

Next thing I knew, _____ was calling out my name and shouting, Tell them I had to do it, as he was being dragged away.

Johnny seemed in a bad mood at all this commotion. Get him out of here, he said. Then to Bloody Juan, Get her dressed and take her back.

I was left alone in that room with a handful of guards. I could tell they were all ashamed of themselves, avoiding my eyes, quiet as if Johnny were still there. Then Bloody Juan gathered up my clothes, but I wouldn't let him help me. I dressed myself and walked out to the wagon on my own two feet."

Dedé Seeing Her Sisters in the Morgue (page 307)

"At first the guards posted outside the morgue did not want to let me in. I was not the closest living relative, they said. I said to the guards, "I'm going in there, even if I have to be the latest dead relative. Kill me, too, if you want. I don't care."

The guards stepped back. "Ay, Dede," the friends will say, "you should have seen yourself."

I cannot remember half the things I cried out when I saw them. Rufino and Minerva were on gurneys, Patria and Mate on mats on the floor. I was furious they didn't all have gurneys, as

if it should matter to them. I remember Jaimito trying to hush me, one of the doctors coming in with a sedative and a glass of water. I remember asking the men to leave while I washed up my girls, and dressed them. A nurse helped me, crying, too. She brought me some little scissors to cut off Mate's braid. I cannot imagine why in a place with so many sharp instruments for cutting bones and thick tissues, that woman brought me such teeny nail scissors. Maybe she was afraid what I would do with something sharper.

Then some friends who had heard the news appeared with four boxes, plain and simple pine without even a latch. The tops were just nailed down. Later, Don Gustavo at the funeral parlor wanted us to switch them into something fancy. For the girls, anyhow. Pine was appropriate enough for a chauffeur.

I remembered Papa's prediction, *Dede will bury us all in silk and pearls.*

But I said no. They all died the same, let them all be buried the same.

We stacked the four boxes in the back of the pickup."

Dede's Final Words (page 321)

"Usually at night, I hear them just as I'm falling asleep.

Sometimes, I lie at the very brink of forgetfulness, waiting, as if their arrival is my signal that I can fall asleep.

The settling of the wood floors, the wind astir in the jasmine, the deep released fragrance of the earth, the crow of an insomniac rooster.

Their soft spirit footsteps, so vague I could mistake them for my own breathing.

Their different treads, as if even as spirits they retained their personalities. Patria's sure and measured step, Minerva's quicksilver impatience, Mate's playful little skip. They linger and loiter over things. Tonight, no doubt, Minerva will sit a long while by her Minou and absorb the music of her breathing.

Some nights I'll be worrying about something, and I'll stay up past their approaching, and I'll hear something else. An eerie, hair-raising creaking of riding boots, a crop striking leather, a peremptory footstep that makes me shake myself awake and turn on lights all over the house. The only sure way to send the evil thing packing.

But tonight, it is quieter than I can remember.

Concentrate, Dede, I say. My hand worries the absence on my left side, a habitual gesture now. My pledge of allegiance, I call it, to all that is missing. Under my fingers, my heart is beating like a moth wile in a lamp shade. Dede, concentrate!

But all I hear is my own breathing and the blessed silence of those cool, clear nights under the anacahuita tree before anyone breathes a word of the future. And I see them all there in my memory, as still as statues, Mama and Papa, and Minerva and Mate and Patria, and I'm thinking something is missing now. And I count them all twice before I realize—it's me, Dede, it's me, the one who survived to tell the story."

Appendix C
Chapter 3: *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver
Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Results and Passages

Fig. 3 LIWC2015 Results

<i>The Poisonwood Bible</i> (page)	Analytic	Clout	Authenticity	Emotional Tone	I- words	Social Words	Positive Emotions	Negative Emotions	Cognitive Processes
Average for Personal Writing	44.88	37.02	76.01	38.60	8.70	8.69	2.57	2.12	12.52
Leah Narrates Ant Swarm (299)	68.85	69.12	76.91	13.48	5.90	11.04	0.76	1.66	9.23
Rachel Narrates Ant Swarm (301)	51.66	23.37	95.77	25.77	9.69	6.59	1.88	1.88	11.71
Adah Narrates Ant Swarm (305)	52.95	26.78	95.86	9.46	10.77	9.14	0.88	2.21	9.59
Ruth May Narrates Ant Swarm (303)	23.10	60.01	74.20	3.54	7.38	11.39	0.84	3.16	9.92
Leah Narrates Ruth May's Death (363)	43.72	67.64	28.45	1.77	5.75	12.82	1.10	4.03	11.17
Adah Narrates Ruth May's Death (365)	88.42	58.08	82.17	37.82	2.38	8.16	1.70	1.02	9.18
Rachel Narrates Ruth May's Death (366)	24.94	79.27	62.26	13.71	3.55	13.83	1.55	2.48	17.91
Orleanna Narrates her Grief (381)	66.90	53.54	74.76	19.19	5.75	9.51	1.55	1.99	8.85

Passages Analyzed

Adah Narrates Ant Swarm Scene (page 305)

“Live was I ere I saw evil.

Now I am on the other side of that night and can tell the story, so perhaps I am still alive, though I feel no sign of it. And perhaps it was not evil I saw but merely the way of all hearts when fear has stripped off the husk of kind pretensions. Is it evil to look at your child, then heft something else in your arms and turn away?

Nod, nab, abandon.

Mother, I can read you backward and forward.

Live was I ere I saw evil.

I should have been devoured in my bed, for all I seem to be worth. In one moment alive, and in the next *left behind*. Tugged from our beds by someone or something, the ruckus, banging and shouting outside, my sisters leaped up screaming and were gone. I could not make a sound for the ants at my throat. I dragged myself out to the moonlight and found a nightmare vision of dark red, boiling ground. Nothing stood still, no man or beast, not even the grass that writhed beneath the shadow, dark and ravenous. Not even the startled grass.

Only my mother stood still. There she was, planted before me in the path, rising on thin legs out of the rootless devouring earth. In her arms, crosswise like a load of kindling, Ruth May.

I spoke out loud, the only time: help me.

“Your father...” she said. “I think he must have gone on ahead with Rachel. I wish he’d waited, honey, he’d carry you but Rachel was...I don’t know how she’ll get through this. Leah will, Leah can take care of herself.”

She can you can’t you can’t!

I spoke again: Please.

She studied me for a moment, weighing my life. Then nodded, shifted the load in her arms, turned away.

“Come on!” she commanded over her shoulder. I tried to stay close behind her, but even under the weight of Ruth May she was sinuous and quick in the crowd. My heels were nipped from behind by other feet. Stepped on, though I felt it vaguely, already numb from the burning ants. I knew when I went down. Someone’s bare foot was on my calf and then my back, and I was being trampled. A crush of feet on my chest. I rolled over again and again, covering my head with my arms. I found my way to my elbows and raised myself crying out loud—such a strange noise, as if it came from my hair and fingernails, and again and again I came up. Once I looked for my mother and saw her, far ahead. I followed, bent on my own rhythm. Curved into the permanent song of my body: *left...behind*.

I did not know who it was that lifted me over the crowd and set me down into the canoe with my mother. I had to turn quickly to see him as he retreated. It was Anatole. We crossed the river together, mother and daughter, facing each other, low in the boat’s quiet center. She tried to hold my hands but could not. For the breadth of a river we stared without speaking.

That night I could still wonder why she did not help me. *Live was I ere I saw evil*. Now I do not wonder at all. That night marks my life’s dark center, the moment when growing up ended and the long downward slope toward death began. The wonder to me now is that *I* thought myself worth saving. But I did. *I did, oho, did I!* I reached out and clung for life with

my good left hand like a claw, grasping at moving legs to raise myself from the dirt. Desperate to save myself in a river of people saving themselves. And if they chanced to look down and see me struggling underneath them, they saw that even the crooked girl believed her own life was precious. That is what it means to be a beast in the kingdom.”

Leah Narrates Ant Swarm Scene (page 299)

“This awful night is the worst we’ve ever known: the *nsongonya*. They came on us like a nightmare. Nelson bang-bang-banging on the back door got tangled up with my sleep, so that, even after I was awake, the next hours had the unsteady presence of a dream. Before I even knew where I was, I found myself pulled along by somebody’s hand in the dark and a horrible fiery sting sloshing up my calves. We were wading through very hot water, I thought, but it couldn’t be water, so I tried to ask the name of the burning liquid that had flooded our house—no, for we were already outside—that had flooded the whole world?

“*Nsongonya*,” they kept shouting, “*Les fourmis! Un corps d’armee!*”

Ants. We were walking on, surrounded, enclosed, enveloped, being eaten by *ants*. Every surface was covered and boiling, and the path like black flowing lava in the moonlight. Dark, bulbous tree trunks seethed and bulged. The grass had become a field of dark daggers standing upright churning and crumpling in on themselves. We walked on ants and ran on them, releasing their vinegary smells to the weird, quiet night. Hardly anyone spoke. We just ran as fast as we could alongside our neighbors. Adults carried babies and goats; children carried pots of food and dogs and younger brothers and sisters, the whole village of Kilanga. I thought of Mama Mwanza: would her sluggish sons carry her? Crowded together we moved down the road like a rushing stream, ran till we reached the river, and there we stopped. All of us shifting from foot to foot, slapping, some people moaning in pain but only the babies shrieking and wailing out loud. Strong men sloshed in slow motion through waist-deep water, dragging their boats, while the rest of us waited our turn to get in someone’s canoe.

“Béene, where is your family?”

I jumped. The person beside me was Anatole.

“I don’t know. I don’t really know where anybody is. I just ran.” I was still waking up and it struck me now with force that I should have been looking out for my family. I’d thought to worry about Mama Mwanza but not my own crippled twin. A moan rose out of me: “Oh, God!”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know where they are. Oh, dear God. Adah will get eaten alive. Adah and Ruth May.”

His hand touched mine in the dark. “I’ll find them. Stay here until I come back for you.”

He spoke softly to someone next to me, then disappeared. It seemed impossible to stand still where the ground was black with ants, but there was nowhere else to go. *How could I leave Adah behind again?* Once in the womb, once to the lion, and now like Simon Peter I had denied her for the third time. I looked for her, or Mother or anyone, but only saw other mothers running into the water with small, sobbing children, trying to splash and rub their arms and legs and faces clean of ants. A few old people had waded out neck-deep. Far out in the river I could see the half-white, half-black head of balding old Mama Lalaba, who must have decided crocodiles were preferable to death by *nsongonya*. The rest of us waited in the shallows, where the water’s thick

shine was veiled with a dark lace of floating ants. *Father forgive me according to the multitude of thy mercies. I have done everything so wrong, and now there will be no escape for any of us.* An enormous moon trembled on the dark face of the Kwilu River. I stared hard at the ballooning pink reflection, believing this might be the last thing I would look upon before my eyes were chewed out of my skull. Though I didn't deserve it, I wanted to rise to heaven remembering something of beauty from the Congo."

Rachel Narrates Ant Swarm Scene (page 301)

"I thought I had died and gone to hell. But it's worse than that—I'm *alive* in hell.

While everybody was running from the house, I cast around in a frenzy trying to think what to save. It was so dark I could hardly see, but I had a very clear presence of mind. I only had time to save one precious thing. Something from home. Not my clothes, there wasn't time, and not the Bible—it didn't seem worth saving at that moment, so help me God. It had to be my mirror. Mother was screaming us out the door with the very force of her lungs, but I turned around and shoved straight past her and went back, knowing what I had to do. I grabbed my mirror. Simply broke the frame Nelson had made for it and tore it right down from the wall. Then I ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

Out in the road it was a melee of shoving, strangers touching and shoving at me. The night of ten thousand smells. The bugs were all over me, eating my skin, starting at my ankles and crawling up under my pajamas till they would end up only God knows where. Father was somewhere nearby, because I could hear him yelling about Moses and the Egyptians and the river running with blood and what not. I clasped my mirror to my chest so it wouldn't get lost or broken.

We were running for the river. At first, I didn't know why or where, but it didn't matter. You couldn't go anywhere else because the crowd just forced you along. It caused me to recall something I'd read once: if ever you're in a crowded theater and there's a fire, you should stick out your elbows and raise your feet. *How to Survive 101 Calamities* was the name of the book, which covered what to do in any dire situation—falling elevators, train wrecks, theater fires exetera. And thank goodness I'd read it because now I was in a jam and knew just what to do! I stuck my elbows very hard into the ribs of the people who were crushing in around me, and kind of wedged myself in. Then I just more or less picked up my feet and it worked like a charm. Instead of getting trampled I simply floated like a stick in a river, carried along on everyone else's power.

But as soon as we reached the river my world came crashing down. The rush came to a standstill, yet the ants were still swarming everywhere. The minute I stood up on the riverbank I got covered with them again, positively crawling. I couldn't bear it another second and wished I would die. They were in my hair. Never in my innocent childhood did I prepare for being in the Congo one dark night with ants tearing at my scalp. I might as well be cooked in a cannibal pot. My life has come to this.

It took me a moment to realize people were climbing into boats and escaping! I screamed to be put in a boat, but they all ignored me. No matter how hard I screamed. Father was over yonder trying to get people to pray for salvation, and no one listening to him either. Then I spotted Mama Mwanza being carried on her husband's back toward the boats. They went right past me! She did deserve help, poor thing, but I personal have a delicate constitution.

I waded out after her and tried to get in their family's boat. All the Mwanza children were still clambering in, and since I am their neighbor I thought surely they would want me with them, but I was suddenly thrown back by someone's arm across my face. Slam bang, thank you very much! I was thrown right into the mud. Before I even realized what had happened, my precious mirror had slipped from my hand and cracked against the side of the boat. I scooped it up quickly from the river's edge, but as soon as I stood up the pieces slid apart and fell like knives into the mud. I stood watching in shock as the boat sloshed away from the shore. They left me. And my mirror, strewn all around, reflecting moonlight in crazy shapes. Just left me flat, in the middle of all that bad luck and broken sky."

Ruth May Narrates Ant Swarm Scene (page 303)

"Everybody was whooping and hollowing and I kicked my legs to get down but I couldn't because Mama had a hold of me so tight it was hurting my arm. *Hush, little baby! Hush!* She was running along, so it kind of bounced when she said it. She used to sing to me: *Hush, little baby! Mama's going to buy you a looking glass!*

She was going to buy me every single thing, even if it got all broke or turned out wrong.

When we got down there where everybody was she put me over her shoulder and stepped in the boat sideways with somebody's hands holding me up and the boat was wobbly. We sat down. She made me get down. It hurt, the little ants were biting us all over bad and it burned. That time Leah fed one to the ant lion, Jesus saw that. Now his friends are all coming back to eat us up.

Then we saw Adah. Mama reached out to her and started to cry and talk loud, like crying-talking, and then somebody else had a hold of me. It was somebody Congolese and not even Mama anymore, so I cried too. Who will buy me a looking glass that gets broke and a mockingbird that won't sing? I kicked and kicked but he wouldn't put me down. I heard babies crying and women crying and I couldn't turn my head around to see. I was going away from Mama is all I knew.

Nelson says to think of a good place to go, so when it comes time to die I won't, I'll disappear and go to that place. He said think of that place every day and night so my spirit will know the way. But I hadn't been. I knew where was safe but after I got better I forgot to think about it anymore. But when Mama ran down the road with me I saw everybody was going to die. The whole world a-crying and yelling bad. So much noise. I put my fingers in my ears and tried to think of the safest place.

I know what it is: it's a green mamba snake away up in the tree. You don't have to be afraid of them anymore because you are one. They lie so still on the tree branch; they are the same everything as the tree. You could be right next to one and not even know. It's so quiet there. That's just exactly what I want to go and be, when I have to disappear. Your eyes will be little and round but you are so far up there you can look down and see the whole world, Mama and everybody. The tribes of Ham, Shem, and Japheth all together. Finally you are the highest one of all."

Adah Narrates Ruth May's Death (page 365)

“Because I could not stop for death—He kindly stopped for me.

I was not present at Ruth May's birth but I have seen it now, because I saw each step of it played out in reverse at the end of her life. The closing parenthesis, at the end of the palindrome that was Ruth May. Her final gulp of air as hungry as a baby's first breath. That last howling scream, exactly like the first, and then at the end a fixed, steadfast moving backward out of this world. After the howl, wide-eyed silence without breath. Her bluish face creased with a pressure closing in, the near proximity of the other-than-life that crowds down around the edges of living. Her eyes closed up tightly, and her swollen lips clamped shut. Her spine curved, and her limbs drew in more and more tightly until she seemed impossibly small. While we watched without comprehension, she moved away to where none of us wanted to follow. Ruth May shrank back through the narrow passage between this brief fabric of light and all the rest of what there is for us: the long waiting. Now she will wait the rest of the time. It will be exactly as long as the time that passed before she was born.

Because I could not stop for death he kindly stopped for me, or paused at least to strike a glancing blow with his sky-blue mouth as he passed. A lightning that cannot strike twice, our lesson learned in the hateful speed of light. A bite at light at Ruth a truth a sky-blue presentiment and oh how dear we are to ourselves when it comes, it comes, that long, long shadow in the grass.”

Leah Narrates Ruth May's Death (page 363)

“I only remember hearing a gulp and a sob and a scream all at once, the strangest cry, like a baby taking its first breath. We couldn't tell where it came from, but strangely enough, we all looked up at the treetops. A nervous wind stirred beneath its branches, but nothing more. Only silence fell down.

It's a very odd thing to recall, that we all looked up. Not one of us looked at Ruth May. I can't say that Ruth May was even there with us, in that instant. Just for the moment it was as if she'd disappeared, and her voice was thrown into the trees. Then she returned to us, but all that was left of her was an awful silence. The voiceless empty skin of my baby sister sitting quietly on the ground hugging herself.

“Ruth May, honey, it's all right,” I said. “The bad snake is gone.” I knelt down beside her, gently taking hold of her shoulder. “Don't be scared. It's gone.”

Nelson knelt too, putting his face close to hers. He opened his mouth to speak, to reassure her, I imagine, for he loved Ruth May. I know this. I've seen how he sings to her and protects her. But the terrible silence took hold of Nelson, too, and no words came. His eyes grew wide as we all watched her face change to a pale blue mask pulled down from her hairline to her swollen lips. No eyes. What I mean is that no one we recognized was looking out through her eyes.

“Ruth May, what is it? What! *What did you see?*” In my panic, I shook her hard, and I think I must have screamed those words at her. I can't change what I did: I shook her too hard, and screamed at her. Maybe that was the last thing she knew of her sister Leah.

Nelson shoved me away. He'd come to life again suddenly and spoke so fast in Kikongo I couldn't think how to understand. He tore her blouse open, just ripped it, and put his face

against her chest. Then drew back in horror. As we watched in dismay I remember thinking I should pay attention to where the buttons fell, so I could help her sew them back on later. Buttons are so precious here. The strangest things I thought of, so ridiculous. Because I couldn't look at what was in front of me.

"Midiki!" he screamed at me. I waited for the word to pierce my dumb, thick brain and begin to mean something. "Milk," he was shouting. "Get milk. Of a goat, a dog, any kind, to draw out the poison. Get Mama Nguza," he said, "she will know what to do, she saved her son from the green mamba once. Kakakaka, go!"

But I found I couldn't move. I felt hot and breathless and stung, like an antelope struck with an arrow. I could only stare at Ruth May's bare left shoulder, where two red puncture wounds stood out like red beads on her flesh. Two dots an inch apart, as small and tidy as punctuation marks at the end of a sentence none of us could read. The sentence would have started somewhere just above her heart."

Rachel Narrates Ruth May's Death (page 366)

"There's a strange moment in time, after something horrible happens, when you know it's true but you haven't told anyone yet. Of all things, that is what I remember most. It was so quiet. And I thought: Now we have to go in and tell Mother. That Ruth May is, oh sweet Jesus. Ruth May is gone. We had to tell our parents, and they were still in bed, asleep.

I didn't cry at first, and then, I don't know why, but I fell apart when I thought of Mother in bed sleeping. Mother's dark hair would be all askew on the pillow and her face sweet and quiet. Her whole body just not knowing yet. Her body that had carried and given birth to Ruth May last of all. Mother asleep in her nightgown, still believing she had four living daughters. Now we were going to put one foot in front of the other, walk to the back door, go in the house, stand beside our parents' bed, wake up Mother, say to her the words *Ruth May*, say the word *dead*. Tell her, *Mother wake up!*

The whole world would change then, and nothing would ever be all right again. Not for our family. All the other people in the whole wide world might go about their business, but for us it would never be normal again.

I couldn't move. None of us could. We looked at each other because we knew someone should go but I think we all had the same strange idea that if we stood there without moving forever and ever, we could keep our family the way it was. We would not wake up from this nightmare to find out it was someone's real life, and for once that someone wasn't just a poor unlucky nobody in a shack you could forget about. It was *our* life, the only one we were going to have. The only Ruth May.

Until that moment I'd always believed I could still go home and pretend the Congo never happened. The misery, the hunt, the ants, the embarrassments of all we saw and endured—those were just stories I would tell someday with a laugh and toss of my hair, when Africa was faraway and make-believe like the people in history books. The tragedies that happened to Africa were not mine. We were different, not just because we were white and had our vaccinations, but because we were simply a much, much luckier kind of person. I would get back home to Bethlehem, Georgia, and be exactly the same Rachel as before. I'd grow up to be a carefree American wife, with nice things and a sensible way of life and three grown sisters to share my ideals and talk to on the phone from time to time. This is what I believed. I'd never

planned on being someone different. Never imagined I would be a girl they'd duck their eyes from and whisper about as tragic, for having suffered such a loss.

I think Leah and Adah also believed these things, in their own different ways, and that is why none of us moved. We thought we could freeze time for just one more minute, and one more after that. That if none of us confessed it, we could hold back the curse that was going to be our history.

Orleanna Narrates her Grief (page 381)

“As long as I kept moving, my grief streamed out behind me like a swimmer's long hair in water. I knew the weight was there but it didn't touch me. Only when I stopped did the slick dark stuff of it come floating around my face, catching my arms and throat till I began to drown. So I just didn't stop.

The substance of grief is not imaginary. It's as real as rope or the absence of air, and like both those things it can kill. My body understood there was no safe place for me to be.

A mother's body remembers her babies—the folds of soft flesh, the softly furred scalp against her nose. Each child has its own entreaties to body and soul. It's the last one, though, that overtakes you. I can't dare say I loved the others less, but my first three were all babies at once, and motherhood dismayed me entirely. The twins came just as Rachel was learning to walk. What came next I hardly remember, whole years when I battled through every single day of grasping hands and mouths until I could fall into bed for a few short hours and dream of being eaten alive in small pieces. I counted to one hundred as I rocked, contriving the patience to get one down in order to take up another. One mouth closed on a spoon meant two crying empty, feathers flying, so I dashed back and forth like a mother bird, flouting nature's maw with a brood too large. I couldn't count on survival until all three of them could stand alone. Together they were my first issue. I took one deep breath for every step they took away from me. That's how it is with the firstborn, no matter what kind of mother you are—rich, poor, frazzled half to death or sweetly content. A first child is your own best foot forward, and how you do cheer those little feet as they strike out. You examine every turn of flesh for precocity, and crow it to the world.

But the last one: the baby who trails her scent like a flag of surrender through your life when there will be no more coming after—oh, that's love by a different name. She is the babe you hold in your arms for an hour after she's gone to sleep. If you put her down in the crib, she might wake up changed and fly away. So instead you rock by the window, drinking the light from her skin, breathing her exhaled dreams. Your heart bays to the doubled crescent moons of closed lashes on her cheeks. She's the one you can't put down.”

Appendix D
Chapter 4: *The Rapture of Canaan* by Sheri Reynolds
Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Results and Passages

Fig. 4 LIWC2015 Results

<i>The Rapture of Canaan</i> (page)	Analytic	Clout	Authenticity	Emotional Tone	I- words	Social Words	Positive Emotions	Negative Emotions	Cognitive Processes
Average for Personal Writing	44.88	37.02	76.01	38.60	8.70	8.69	2.57	2.12	12.52
Ninah Narrates James's Suicide (171)	46.80	50.00	54.14	10.32	6.14	11.55	0.25	1.47	9.09
Ninah Narrates Her Dunking (195)	37.71	9.98	98.06	27.88	12.07	6.35	1.02	0.89	11.94
Ninah Narrates Cutting Canaan's Hands (314)	25.62	31.00	59.58	7.60	11.23	10.18	1.31	2.87	12.79

Passages Analyzed

Ninah Narrates James's Suicide (page 171)

“Finally we pulled a massive piece of tree out of the water, and as it surfaced, I could see a body tied to it.

‘Get the flashlight,’ I told Mustard. ‘It might not be him.’

But it was James. James and a big chunk of tree tied together like twins joined at the side. The rope was wrapped and knotted around his waist, and then knotted around the middle of the waterlogged tree. They were so twisted together that it looked like they’d grown that way, and a branch thinned narrow in four or five directions over his head.

I stood on the trunk looking down at James, his mouth gaping, and the water captured in my dress dripped down on him. I was suddenly cold and suddenly still, and I didn’t hear Mustard say, ‘Give me the rope,’ until he’d already pulled it from my hands.

We towed him to the edge of the pond, and then Mustard heaved him onto the grass. I stayed on the bank with James while Mustard rode back to get help. I didn’t untie him from the thick piece of tree, or wipe away the algae draped over his ear and neck. I didn’t touch him. I

held the flashlight on him and studied the way he'd wrapped himself in rope and wood. I wondered if he'd known he would smell like a plant, so fibery, when he was pulled from the pond. I wondered what the rope was for—if he'd worried that no one would find him and he'd sink to the bottom, or if he'd worried that without it, he might change his mind. I imagined him fastening that knot around his waist, so tight it looked elastic around his thin middle. I imagined him swimming down, feeling for the thickest branch. I wondered if he'd died tying knots. I wondered how long it took his lungs to fill.

I held the rope in my hands and watched him, framed with cattails and reeds. And later when I heard voices shouting, voices screaming out as they came towards the pond, the sounds seemed so far away, like how voices from Hell must sound to God, so forgettable.

I'm not sure who cut the rope from his body or who cut the rope from the tree. But when Daddy led me home, I still had it in my hands, twisted around and around."

Ninah Narrates Her Dunking (page 195)

"And then I was dropping hard, and I kept my eyes open so I could see the water coming for me, getting closer and closer and closer until it was nothing by a shining, and I fell faster than the cage so that my skin pressed against it, and there was a cold wire barrier like a cross cutting between my nose and my mouth, and I felt like each of my breasts had slipped through a different hole.

When I hit, the water stunned me, not from the temperature but from the hardness of it. I felt like I'd hit a table or a floor, not water, and I didn't even realize I was sinking or that my mouth was full until my ears bubbled.

Before I knew I was under, I could feel myself pulled up, a foot at a time. My backside was in the air before my face was.

The praying continued as they raised me, bit by bit, and the water that had been on me dripped off—first like juice, then like seeds.

I wondered if I was as heavy as I felt. I looked out at the fallen tree across the pond and remembered that people weigh more when they're wet. I wondered if David and Everett's arms would give out.

But then I heard, 'Let her go,' and I fell again.

I tried to cover my face with my hands that time, but I couldn't make them let go of the cage, holding onto it like it was all they knew to grip.

Then underwater, I promised my lungs that I'd take in more air the next time. I let out a little air each time I felt them lifting me, but I couldn't tell how long it would be before I'd find air again. I couldn't tell how deep I was, and I didn't want to open my eyes.

When I was out of the water that time, I managed to tilt my head so that I could look at the congregation, and though I was too far away to see expressions, I could tell that the man who was walking away was Daddy.

I didn't care. It was Nanna I wanted to see, and she was there.

The third time before they dropped me, I sucked in so much air that it hurt, but I let it all out without meaning to when I spanked through the surface.

...

I wondered if they'd stop if I repented. I wondered if I cried out or prayed aloud or begged, if that would be enough.

But I didn't.

Up in the air, the cage rocked and swung. I wondered if they'd stop if I vomited.

Then in the water again, in the dirty water, I decided to breathe. Breathe like James, burst my lungs, and be done with the whole damned thing. I'd breathe he-ba-ma-shun-di, one syllable at a time, and by the time I was through I'd be in Heaven. And I almost did it, too, except I opened my eyes, for one last peek at the things we see alive, and I saw the bottom.

It was brown and soft, and there were pieces of sticks and logs, and there were moving shadows in the distance, maybe of fish, though my splashing kept them from swimming nearby. I wondered if James had opened his eyes.

There were things growing, even in autumn, even underwater, and as I got farther and farther away from them, as David and Everett heaved me up, it seemed like they were a miniature world, underwater, operating by different rules, knowing different things to be true, and thriving all the same.

Back in the air, suspended like a promise, I listened to them praying, hollering out, and I heard Grandpa Herman yell, 'Pull her up another five feet before you drop her again. She ain't getting much impact.'

But then Nanna said, 'She's had enough.'

The praying stopped. Everything stopped except the rain and the wind and my strong, strong heart.

'I said pull her up another five feet,' Grandpa hollered.

'And I said that's *enough*,' Nanna spoke.

I dallied over that pond for what seemed like a long time, crouched above the water, closer to Heaven than Grandpa, with all my doubts draining out. And if the rapture had happened right then, if I'd heard the trumpets, I knew that I'd have been the first one to get to see Jesus because David and Everett would be slowed down by the trees, but I'd lift right off, and plus, I wasn't as heavy as either of them, though I carried two souls."

Ninah Narrates Cutting Canaan's Hands (page 314)

I wanted to do it fast. First to him, and then to me. I wished I could do it to us both at the same time, but I only had one pair of scissors, and I'd need my spare hand to hold him still.

I took Canaan and the scissors and settled down on the tobacco sheets. The door was cracked, so there was a bit of light, but I didn't want it to be bright enough for him to see me. I didn't want him to think I'd hurt him for the sake of pain. Not ever.

A part of me wanted to hurry. But a part of me wanted to do it slow, the way I imagined James had done it, securing that knot around his middle. I wondered what thoughts had gone through his head that day. I wondered if he'd wished for a pocketknife in those last moments underwater. I wondered if he'd had more nerve than I did.

...

Then I held Canaan's hands in mine, my big big hands covering his small ones completely, and I hummed to him for a minute. I thought that if I could make him fall asleep, it'd be easier.

He didn't sleep. I didn't know how much time I had left. I listened for the voices calling out, but all I could hear was my own memories, Grandpa Herman shouting, "There shall be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth," and Nanna saying, "Sometimes you got to hold

onto a little bit of rage,” and James saying, “You’re doing real good. I can hear you when you pray.”

When I picked up the scissors, they seemed to act without me, in spite of me, and before I knew what I was doing, I had placed them between his palms and snipped, snipped, snipped his hands apart.

He cried so loudly that I knew I couldn’t hurt him any worse. He screamed and buried himself in my lap, his hollering mouth at the center of Nanna’s dress, between my breasts, so deafening that I knew it was killing all the kudzu in there and his little hands shaking on both sides, free and moving, spilling bits of blood all around us, flicking them onto my wet face.”