

4-2019

Memory and Narrative in the Traumatic Mode: Interlocuting Trauma in William Faulkner and Toni Morrison

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MEMORY AND NARRATIVE IN THE TRAUMATIC MODE:
INTERLOCUTING TRAUMA IN WILLIAM FAULKNER AND
TONI MORRISON

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Class of 2019

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15 April 2019

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This project was only productive due in part to the patience and diligence of Harry Brown, Deborah Geis, Ted Bitner, and Audrey Miller for participating on my committee and providing their guidance through the writing process.

I would also like to acknowledge my former tutor, Dr. Tessa Roynon, for sharing her utmost care for and expertise on these authors as well as the literary study of trauma—and for her patience with the first drafts of some of the content within.

All my thanks and love to Dom for surviving with this project alongside me, start to finish.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the countless women who shared their stories with me as my students, clients, and friends.

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“the aching has hold of me O grievous daimon”

Teresa lived in a personal black cube.
I saw her hit the wall each way she moved.
she cursed her heart

which was, she said, rent
and her nose
which had been broken again and again.

Some people have to fight every moment of their lives
which God has lined with a burning animal—
I think because

God wants that animal kept alive.
With her nose Teresa questioned
this project of God's.

To her heart God sent answer.
The autopsy after her death revealed
it was indeed rent.

“Teresa of God,” Anne Carson

I want to open this project with a short explanation of why I chose to make trauma narratives the subject of my undergraduate capstone. Over the course of the past four years, I have spent many more hours thinking about the many ways life is lived than I have spent writing about the ways people have attempted to explain it. The project you see is the product of countless conversations, anecdotes, phone calls, and dreams about the way experiences of hurt and helplessness constitutes our world and the people we are, as well as the possibilities for recovery we allow and deny ourselves.

Before I ever began study of trauma on the page, I learned it in practice. My phone work as a crisis counselor for clients who were in the midst of dealing with domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse exposed me to a world where the way stories are told becomes a matter of justice and safety. My advocacy with rape survivors on campus showed me how stories in the right places can form communities and support networks where they are needed most.

I found that trauma problematizes dominant discourse on memory. The poles we imagine by *we forget what's irrelevant* and *we remember what's important* is wholly inaccurate to both biological and affective descriptions of memory. The women I spoke with often had trouble placing when in time, in what sequence, and for what reason

actions occurred. As a direct service worker, my job made their stories become damning check boxes on impersonal legal forms. I was asked, usually, to summarize an hour-long phone call into a few sentences for the purpose of triage. “His hands on my neck,” only became “strangulation,” which qualified the violence as a different bracket of impermissible, if one asked, “When his hands were on your neck, could you breathe?” Women who knew they were being beaten were not aware that they were being legally raped, and I was often in the position to find ways to break this news to someone. I once had a woman read me a poem over the phone about being on fire, and she was not just being poetic. Narratives included wanton violence against children, who were never minor characters in these stories, whose experiences I was contractually bound to anonymously relay to the Department of Child Services with full knowledge that this phone call could possibly put them in the system. These were stories with visceral power to save lives or utterly destroy them, made of words that reckoned with my faith in my fellow human being and the existence of truth and ethics in the lived world. When I claim later in this paper that trauma leads to a lasting disillusionment with a society of values, I mean that seriously.

My later work with students at the Indiana Women’s Prison introduced me to the ways people who have experienced, and continue to experience, dark, deep places are constantly finding ways of speaking and writing their way free. I earned much of my understanding of the co-dependence of life experience and written narrative while teaching in this maximum-security correctional facility, where lofty diatribes on the

“nature of law and order” and the “innate cooperation of man” go to die. The women I work with at the prison are engaged in personal and academic projects at all levels and against all odds. In my first course, I bridged the divide between teaching basic legal jargon, as the women could not read the legal narratives which had literally “sentenced” their lives, and children’s books, as many of the women wanted to be able to read to the children who waited years for them to return, and life writing, as the vast majority of the women there had experienced some form of life-altering trauma at the hands of their man or *the* man. My basic literacy syllabus focused on finding a way to put words to their life and reclaiming faith in a language which had betrayed them. In that semester we wrote advice columns to the students in the room across the hall about how to best quit a girlfriend in a 4-line kite (slang for a note passed between hands to its destination, usually a love interest), we proofread letters to families and lawyers, we had vocabulary tests on words like “prosecutor” and “testimony,” the words that defined their lives. We wrote about fears, about hopes, but mostly about change.

I learned foremost that when it comes to narrative, the matter of truth is a high-stakes case. It is a matter of what is said, who is saying it, why they might say it in the way they choose, and how those topics may be found significant or poetic. What I have chosen in my distinct lens has been the study of conflict, violence, trauma, and the ways in which we have chosen to represent these fundamental terrors in literature across time and place. But there is something more devious, more political and complicated afoot in

these representations, and it has less to do with the book itself but the world in which that book was born and lives and dies. This project is foremost about the ways we speak and the ways we are believed.

This is why I have, over the course of my undergraduate career, attempted to meet this literature halfway. I've found myself in some of the most tumultuous, complicated sites of violence and asked real people how they felt, learned their stories and watched them narrativize those grappling issues with as much grace and care as a seasoned poet and describe dynamics of strife and socioeconomic complexity with the dexterity of a sociologist. These experiences undergird how I inspect representations of conflict on the page and in the world, maintaining an effort to level the acclaimed expert and the mute victim as fundamentally co-dependent in our enterprise of describing trauma. In this project I had to make a difficult shift from the anecdotal to the literary—instead of speaking with people, I was working with texts. Significantly, the works I inspect involve worlds with which I am not intimately familiar as a white person, nor do I intend to imply that I have practical insight on their time periods. I shifted to a theoretical, textual world with entirely different tools of understanding and structure in order to make connections with worlds of experience for which I was an interlocutor.

The writings of Toni Morrison and William Faulkner show that trauma is not necessarily an individual pathology, or a result of a simple event, but rather structures a violent culture and the community's grappling to deal with what is not

really *unspeakable*, but at least hard to organize. Authors are, because they have to be, exceptionally creative with how structuring these narratives could be more or less compatible with certain formal strategies. In literature, we can assume to be free from check boxes and word limits, but not from the exigency of the content we speak. You can't assume that the words will come out right. They don't make sense and they're never enough. The shoe doesn't fit and there's psychological, cognitive, and ethical reasons for why, and how, and for what reason.

The project takes *Light in August* and *Jazz* as its case studies because the novels are *not* paradigmatic and involve perpetrators and perpetrating ideology. This is not some hokey pseudo-psychoanalysis, nor is this simply a poetic exercise; this project considers the ways in which trauma narratives can provide a groundwork for studying violence and history— which are *necessarily and irrevocably traumatic*. To understand why, and how, we remember and forget is to inspect how we as a culture decide which stories are significant and what falls away.

The paper takes its form as a series of discussions rather than as a multipart argument. The “theory piece” reviews my stance in a larger conceptual framework of trauma studies and literary criticism. The “terror piece” which follows gives an understanding of what trauma is in the brain and how it may require certain representational strategies. The “space piece” employs one of the factors of trauma, space and place, which is infrequently used to describe a traumatic text but proves as a remarkably constructive

lens for mapping collective trauma in novelistic context. The “tin ear piece” discusses in more detail the role of narrative authority in testimony and how the testimony should be used as an underlying framework for studying traumatic narrative, and the “killing piece” inspects how a narrative focal point, as well as the experimentation with the relationship between narrator, reader and text can account for the testimony. “Sight piece, speech piece” refers to the questions, “Who sees?” and “Who speaks?” which delineate focalization as a possible narratological tool for studying ethical questions in traumatic narrative; the piece includes a short case study of focalization in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* as well as discussion of Morrison’s *Beloved*. “Body piece” returns to the embodied experience of trauma and how it is employed as a constructive force on identity rather than a destructive one. “Recovery piece” concludes the project with a short reflection on how study of representations has bearing on the real and proposes how literature can serve as cultural post-traumatic growth.

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THEORY PIECE

Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.

Light in August 119

Trauma theory is an interdisciplinary approach to visual, musical, and literary texts alike. Over the past three decades, it has become one of the many tools of cultural studies to connect our understanding of linguistic and discursive organizations of meaning to the violence of society and order. In literary studies, theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Laurie Vickroy, Alan Gibbs, Mieke Bal, Michelle Balaev, and others have taken psychoanalytical, political, poetic, and otherwise interdisciplinary approaches to be useful lens for both “traumatic texts” and intertextual analysis. According to the Oxford Guide of Literary Theory and Criticism, trauma theory “reinscribes reference to the real, but in a way that does not abandon all the carefully gleaned insights of literary theory into the problematic nature of reference and representation” and therefore constitutes most fundamentally an inquiry into representation and the formation of narrative (Luckhurst 503). By foregrounding slippages between the real and the represented and the perceived and the believed, trauma theory has various disciplinary sources as well as methods of application.¹

¹ I will stop the reader here to point out, already, the strong implication made by the use of the word “real,” for the projects undertaken by trauma theorists most often focus on situations of injustice and

The power involved in the act of telling, whether conversational or literary, is addressed by Felman and Laub as a framework called *testimony*. According to the authors:

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance of the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *do novo*. 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. (in Crownshaw 167)

This power differential between speakers and listeners becomes politically complicated as a matter of historiography, but most simply sets a framework for traumatic narrative as having a speaker and an interlocutor. The traumatic content of a testimony, due to its sheer violence and gravity, challenges the expectations and ethical frameworks of a listener and therefore involves a question of epistemic justice, that is, a problem “in which someone is wronged specifically in their capacity as a knower, wronged therefore in a capacity essential to human value” (Fricker).

The focus of literary trauma theory has a slightly different view of testimony, because while the focus of early trauma theory was the dictated or written accounts of war, genocide, and sexual violence, fiction authors perform ontologically different duties and have different relationships with their texts. Literary theorists look towards a poetics or set of formal strategies for examining trauma, and particularly acknowledge the real

extreme violence and violation, and therefore must implicitly involve a study of structural and historical power in the construction of narrative.

power of narrative coherence in the representation of traumatic events: according to the entry on trauma in the *Glossary of Literary and Cultural Theory*, “Trauma narratives in literature, film, or other arts consequently assume diverse hybrid forms of narration or ‘presentation’ rather than ‘representation,’ marked by the symptoms of forgetting or repression, flashbacks, displacements and compulsive or deferred intermittent retelling” (*Glossary of Literary and Cultural Theory* 289). Overall, as a general trend in the study of traumatic literature, the boundaries between form and content often elide and are considered inseparable. My study will look directly at the role of narrators as contested or uneasy tellers and particularly the way testimony operates in certain texts to address trauma’s impact on the individual and their community. Therefore, while I will often describe features in the text as structural or formal qualities, do remember that this designation often remains “fuzzy” at best in the eyes of most trauma theorists and contemporary literary critics.

But what is a traumatic text? What are literary trauma theorists’ field of inquiry? This question is as complex as cultural studies itself, but it’s important to note that our conceptions of what “trauma” is and how it operates non-representationally has great bearing on methodology and has significantly changed even in the past decades.

Literary trauma theory truly found its first subjects in the American war memoirs of the Second World War and subsequently the Vietnam War, and found international attention in later European representations of the Holocaust. In terms of wider

American readership, traumatic representation probably has been most marketable as memoir, particularly post-conflict memoirs of the neocolonial engagement of the United States in Vietnam. Because the narrator and author have direct bearing on each other—and in this case, the author is an American serviceman—narrative authority was used in these representations as a creative, but relatively uncontested force.

As we'll discuss, one of the basic underlying dialectics of all trauma is the quality of narrative, which determines the account as an il/legitimate story or truth. Unlike in fictional works, authorial responsibility in a memoir is assumed to be 1-to-1 with narratorial fidelity—the narrator *is* the author, and the memoir is *claimed* to be true (Gibbs 69). If the reader believes the *author* to be reputable knower, then, to an extent their account inherits this epistemic value. This assumption is not as easily elided for all nonfiction trauma narratives, in fact, American combat memoirs seem to be an exception to the rule. The content of trauma narrative is often far outside the common or palatable experiences of the intended readership, so it is much harder for readers to conceptualize or believe. The role of the narrator is critically important for delegating authority to speakers, circumstances, and emotions in a story-world and reader-world which is incredible. The interlocutor's acceptance of truth is contested in traumatic testimony by virtue of its extreme content.

The formal and narrative choices made by authors of representations such as those identified in *Light in August* and *Jazz* are worthy of close examination for many reasons we'll discuss, but the most obvious is the fact that neither William Faulkner nor

Toni Morrison are characters, narrators, or even bystanders in their traumatic texts. In fact, the authors' life experiences have relatively little bearing on their content. Compare, for example, a paradigmatic "trauma text" such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). While the content of this trauma narrative is also fictional (even supernatural to the point of irony), the author did in fact experience the bombing of Dresden which is the focal event of the novel. The claims that are implicitly made to the reader by this alliance of authorial and narratorial similarity are absent for Morrison and Faulkner. The breadth of what can be considered "trauma narrative" is significant for framing the types of texts with which theorists are engaged. Are *Jazz* and *Light in August* a different sort of traumatic text than Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour Holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985), or Maya Angelou's critically acclaimed autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) because novels are fictional?²

The answer remains with how we choose to describe trauma. And these decisions are made by theorists in the outset of every study—demarcations must remain fluid and attentive to cultural context, analytical intention, and political sensitivity. In accordance with Dominick LaCapra's advice in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, this project treats trauma as a matter that links texts together (LaCapra ix), as a mode of inquiry into interdisciplinary problems, rather than a certain content, category, or cache of a set of texts. I make this distinction for discretionary purpose; to this point, much of trauma

² Gibbs writes on the establishment of paradigmatic texts, describing how "the study of traumatic representation has been consumed by a preoccupation with formal devices and established methods" (Gibbs 47) and therefore has reproduced a traumatic aesthetic (one writer even describes "trauma kitsch") particularly in memoir.

studies has been busied with the identification of traumatic content (a discrete event, which is considered *bad enough* to cause trauma), the relegation of a traumatic genre, or category (implying a classification of texts inside or outside a canon), or a collection of traumatic cache (by identifying certain textual features alone, such as “disassociation” or “time gaps”). By approaching trauma as a clinical aberration of a character, or worse, a property of the author, we would risk eliding the interpersonal and the intergenerational realities of what a traumatic society can produce, as well as a breadth of experience by authors outside the Western paradigm. By characterizing trauma as primarily a phenomenal exception, and individuals affected as indelibly pathological, we would in turn violently elide the normalizing function of violence and the collective burdens of colonialism and white supremacy. For the purposes of this piece, I hope to inspect how trauma can be represented in/as American culture and discourse through the form of testimony. In literature, this tends to involve manipulation of the dynamic of testimonial authority and through narratological experimentation of elements such as focalization.

TERROR PIECE

They have seen me and heard me, arraigned me in these fetters and received the evidence; I have cut up mine own anatomy, dissected myself, and they are gone to read upon me. O how manifold and perplexed a thing, nay, how wanton and various a thing, is ruin and destruction!

John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

At its most fundamental level, trauma involves both cognitive and affective realities of real people and communities. In the wake or presence of massively violent or shaming events, whether as a punctual action or a series of affronts, humans register, recall and represent terror and helplessness. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, since its publication in 1992, has completely revolutionized our understanding of how trauma affects the individual and their community by making the foremost conclusion that the symptoms recognized as shellshock, or "war fatigue," were also consistently recognized in the spoken accounts and clinical study of survivors of sexual and domestic violence, as well as early childhood abuse. By connecting the witness and perpetration of war violence with the ongoing experience of women and children at home, *Trauma and Recovery* rigorously argues the ways in which trauma could more broadly be described to include the experiences of marginalized populations and popular violence.³

³ For this reason, too, *Trauma and Recovery* recurs as a ubiquitous document for many trauma theorists; some accept the clinical findings as foundational and others resist certain readings as overly clinical.

Herman describes the metanarrative irony of studying the clinical history of trauma study, as psychologists' reception of patient testimony "repeatedly led into realms of the unthinkable and foundered on fundamental questions of belief," as in these cases it is often "morally impossible" to remain neutral or resist implicating larger organizing structures of power and violence (J. Herman 7). In short, patients' testimonies in therapy of abuse became so prevalent and graphic that their therapists began to doubt the veracity of their claims.⁴ Herman's work was influential in the American Psychological Association's move away from the requisite "experience outside the realm of usual human experience" as a qualifying symptom to be diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as it became quickly apparent that violence and violation were indeed overwhelmingly present in the vast majority of women's lives. And vitally, just as in the accounts of suffering soldiers, their accounts were unstable, unstuck, and fundamentally disorganized, making clinical treatment and the subject of justice even more difficult. In my study, I reinforce Herman's argument that for marginalized populations, particularly communities of color, trauma is often an unavoidable, constitutive force in American society and order.

⁴ There is a fascinating anecdote recalled in *Trauma and Recovery* about the repercussive influence of Sigmund Freud's disregard for his female "hysterical" clients. The development of his early models of sublimation and psychoanalysis in general were a result of the widespread reports of past sexual abuse by his female clients in therapy. Herman recounts how for a number of years the mounting evidence which Freud and his colleagues collected seemed to reveal the constant and inescapable abuse of women, but ultimately psychoanalysts decided that it was more likely for the women to be lying than for men to be so cruel. Ultimately, Freud attributed their vivid reliving of abuse to a suppressed libido.

The model of “oscillation,” according to Herman, between “opposing psychological states,” is probably the most descriptive clinical assessment of the effects of trauma (47). On a societal level, indeed, “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (1) for witnesses as well as victims. Because the most overwhelming feature of a traumatic event, which affects both sense of the self as well as one’s place in relation to others, is actually the terror of helplessness, inability to act or even remain a subject, followed irreparably by an inability to be regarded as a knower with regards to their own experience, trauma is both psychologically and socially shattering. And for listeners, “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable[...] Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried” (1).

This paper intends to conceive trauma as a social, collective affectation of systems of power and oppression, and its representations as having a strong investment in the underlying dynamics of narration and representation as testimony. In *Light in August* and *Jazz*, the characters do not necessarily experience life-shattering interpersonal violence such as other characters do in more paradigmatic trauma texts such as *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*. However, I intend to inspect the effects of a traumatic culture of racism and sexual dominance as a powerful dynamic of narration and characterization. How did Faulkner and Morrison choose to represent this

traumatic mode when their protagonists are often the ones perpetrating violence as well?

The most relevant features of trauma narrative which affect its compatibility with the standard narrative format—which is a clinical observation I propose we must reckon with in literary representation—lie in cognitive and affective realities for humans as perceiving and therefore narrative agents in their testimony. We can see in the current models for understanding trauma's effects on the brain and the social self as follows, bearing in mind that this division (self/social) is methodological and in fact these features are inter-constitutive. Herman describes the following manifestations of terror found in the individual in response to extreme events of helplessness and danger:

- Hyperarousal – the experience of persistent expectation of danger (inability to perceive, lack of agentive control)
- Intrusion – the incursive imprint of traumatic moments or “traumatic recall” (breakdown of time or causality)⁵
- Constriction – numbing response of surrender as extreme emotional states (inability to act, complete fear or total void)

⁵ I would say most representations of trauma focus on *intrusion* as the most remarkable, identifiable, and aesthetically replicable feature of trauma; the memory as the trope, almost a presence, when the hyperarousal and constriction are embedded as character (flaws?). See Footnote 1

But this set of traits is further diversified by what Herman designates as equally significant in the suffering endured by trauma survivors; these extreme individual states broadly overlap with the individual's abilities to perceive and act, but clearly these capacities are resultant of and even magnify their place in a social system or community. Therefore, Herman designates the equally stultifying manifestation of trauma as social states:

- Detachment (lack of intimate trusting relationships, effect of captivity)
- Lack of safety (vulnerability in social settings and within communities)
- Doublethink (affected sense of self, judgment of risk in social interactions)

In terms of emotional stability, factors of judgment and action, and relationships with others and a community of relationships and values, the traumatized individual is subject to any range and oscillation between the brain's reaction to extreme fear and helplessness. While "terror" as an emotional and metaphysical state has been studied in terms of the sublime and in the horror genre, trauma is used to describe the lasting experience of helplessness. By sublimation to the status of an object, void of all agentive effect on the present and future, the subject is ultimately compromised by trauma.

Herman describes these effects as having dual function with regards to the person-in-society: "Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity...the traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can *be oneself* in relation

to others” (J. Herman 53). This leads to a lasting disconnection with a society of values—often a community that was in some part responsible for the violent act or at least did not prevent the violent act—and therefore “The imagery of these events often crystallizes around a moment of betrayal, and it is this breach of trust which gives the intrusive images their intense emotional power” (55).

These experiences seek expression in literature because of their fundamental complexity and subjectivity. Indeed, many survivors of trauma find a great sense of organization and self-reclamation in the narrativization of their experiences, either as a written testimony or in conversation with a sympathetic listener. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, as a clinical term, has changed drastically over the course of the few decades of its recognition, in part because of the fact that trauma affects all individuals differently and therefore patients’ recovery is extremely difficult to gauge. According to David Herman in his cognitive study *Story Logic*, stories have a logic and *are* a logic, as they serve as a strategy for “making sense of the relation between mental and material domains” as well as enabling “tokens of remembered or imagined past to be registered interpreted and integrated into the framework of present experience” on a cognitive level (D. Herman 131). The study of narrative as the integration past and present induces its primary role in the construction of both memory and history, between which there is no decisive binary opposition in *Light in August* and *Jazz*—a relationship between history and memory is made ineffable by traumatic narrative. The key problem

is the ways in which to bear witness and how to construct testimony with respect to both the event and the living-through-it.

So, would it be possible or useful to, as literary critics rather than psychoanalysts, consider a fictional character “traumatized”? We understand that, in literature as in life, “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships...They shatter the construction of self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They shatter the belief systems that give meaning to human experience” (J. Herman 50). By challenging fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation, trauma has much to do with the way identity is formed and re-formed with relation to time and space. Clearly, for literary scholars, the safety of the world and its ethics, the meaningful order of creation, and the formation of the self and identity are what nearly *every* piece of literature discuss to some degree. Indeed, “[b]ecause post-traumatic symptoms are so persistent and so wide-ranging, they may be mistaken for enduring characteristics of the victim’s personality” (49). Herman, interestingly enough, uses a literary representation to bolster her claims in relation to clinical evidence; I think Herman’s description of Septimus, a suicidal World War I veteran in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, actually serves as a good example of what the average reader imagines as a “traumatized person”:

In the street, vans roared past [Septimus]; brutality blared out on placards; men were trapped in mines; women burnt alive; and once a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud), ambled and nodded

and grinned past him, in the Tottenham Court Road, each half apologetically, yet triumphantly, inflicting his hopeless woe. And would he go mad? (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* in J. Herman 34)

Septimus is pathologized because of his paradigmatic traumatized relationship with time and space as a constant returning to wartime scenes—he is driven completely unstuck in their suffering and recollection. Of him the narrator asks, “Would he go mad?” but the answer is clear—and his suicide is used to double and precipitate the modernist angst of the eponymous protagonist. This is an example of one of the readings against which I argue in critique of trauma. To view trauma as a disease or aberrance of an individual which much be contained and cured is both an unrealistic psychological framework as well as a model which dehumanizes its subjects in theory and practice.

The “pathological model” of trauma, or maybe the “Septimus” model in literary terms, is part of a larger shift in trauma studies broadly, which for clarity I diagram below:

OLDER MODELS	NEWER MODELS
“Warehouse” or monocular view of memory	Memory as a cultural practice, under constant revision
Trauma as unspeakable void	Contextualized, insidious trauma
Trauma-as-individual	Trauma as socialized, communal
Characters with pathology (PTSD; victim-perpetrator dichotomy)	Characters within violent structures (collective, identity-power struggles)
Symptomology aesthetic (stylistic cache)	Trauma as cultural object, dynamic (narratological frame)
*Recovery as an individual act of completion	*Space for ethics

My general, simplified overview of paradigm shifts in trauma studies.

William Faulkner was no stranger to this model of the madman. Anyone who has studied Faulkner to any degree knows the joy with which critics have applied Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, the dominant psychological and theoretical frameworks known to Faulkner. His oeuvre is rife with some of the most interesting Freudian tropes:

primal scenes, familial murder, manifestation of internal characteristics on the body, vivid and meaningful dreamscapes and fantasy, characters with multiple personalities, and, of course, vibrant and perverse suppressed/enacted sexuality. Faulkner's personal writings, drafts, correspondence and literary influence embolden these claims of Freudian influence (Kartiganer 219) and to psychoanalyze Faulkner and his works has served critics for many decades. In light of our inquiry into trauma, however, our approach to these texts must stay sensitive to the ways the narrative of trauma has perhaps provided nuance to the Freudian assumptions of earlier critics.

Throughout *Light in August*, Joe Christmas's identity is formed through interaction and growth from trauma, which is, I argue, a framework even more ripe for study than the mere recognition of Freudian tropes. Rather than viewing Joe Christmas as a figure made mad along modernist lines by the desegregation of spaces and the anxiety of fragmentation, this project hopes to raise some questions about the reception of Faulkner as purely modernist or as a race critic. Indeed, his description of traumatized characters is almost persistently Freudian and end up as some evil-madman version of Woolf's Septimus, because his acts against Joanna are socially impermissible and are duly punished by lynching at the close of the novel. Stylistically, modernism's formal tropes seem to have similarities with the paradigmatic trauma text, including the inherent instability of narrative, an unstuckness in time which is vulnerable to flashbacks, the complete subjectivity of issues of justice, and epistemological gaps serving as formative places where ego is wrestled and re-written,

as well as the frequent use of experimental narrative styles like the stream of consciousness and the unreliable narrator. Because of its medicalization and pathology in representation, trauma is widely viewed as a property of stigmatized individuals, which is why the "half-black" protagonist in Faulkner's novel goes haywire and the narration spirals the reader toward a rape-murder which is never really a surprise. *Light in August* is considered a modernist novel with an antagonized-protagonist, but Christmas and his narration are rife with meaning beyond mental illness or evil. He is described as "carrying around" his blackness, or "invisible" stigma, while we can study key formative passages to show how focalization modulates our perceptions of his racial and sexual identity. I would say the "Septimus model" and many paradigmatic, modernist portrayals of trauma focus on one aspect of the cognitive effects of trauma, *Intrusion*, while my analysis intends to problematize this pathological assessment.

Theorists analyze trauma as a model by which individuals—and communities—adapt and interact in a traumatic landscape and history, both being shaped and shaping our national consciousness with regard to institutionalized racial and sexual trauma. Toni Morrison, writing decades after greater public acknowledgment of the effects of trauma and a legacy of racist violence, undoubtedly has a more nuanced understanding of Freud, or at least race and trauma, but she only writes this difference to a certain extent. The main character of *Jazz* also opens the book with a murder, and we have a working-backwards to how and why and for what purpose similar to *Light in August*, but the novel's conception of trauma operates differently-- nobody needs to have

witnessed an extreme, otherworldly event to harbor trauma, but the black community does bear this burden of violence and we can watch them evaluate, adapt, and often maladapt to that history. Morrison, across her career and in her explicit goals as a theorist, has addressed the legacy of American slavery and sexual abuse. In her 1989 interview for *Time Magazine* the author describes this endeavor as both a “national amnesia” and a “trauma” (Angelo and Morrison). Her novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* were groundbreaking in their representation of sexual violence and often serve as the primary texts for inspecting the effects and representation of racial trauma in the 20th century. She writes of racial history as a site for renegotiation and literature as where “the act of imagination is bound up with memory” (“The Site of Memory,” Morrison); for Morrison, pain and trauma are necessarily the burden of fiction writers in their relationship with American society and history. In explaining her choice of topics as complicated and dreadful as those in *Beloved*, Morrison replies, “I enjoy identifying the process by which one is victimized in order to point the finger to exits” (Angelo and Morrison). LaCapra recounts the difference, however, between writing about trauma and *writing trauma*:

[Writing about trauma] is an aspect of historiography related to the project of reconstructing a past as objectively as possible without necessarily going to the self-defeating extreme of single-minded objectification... [and writing trauma] is a metaphor in that writing indicates some distance from trauma (even when the experience of writing is itself intimately bound up with trauma), and there is no such thing as writing

trauma itself...because trauma...cannot be localized in terms of a discrete, dated experience. (La Capra 186)

In pursuit of the second function, Morrison writes fiction. She notes that while the majority of the Black American⁶ literature was primarily autobiographical, the interior lives of the race were lost to time because of the tendencies of sentimentalism in local literary markets (“The Site of Memory,” Morrison). To some degree, then, the triad *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* as historical fiction reconstructs the interiority of these communities who were responding to emancipation, the Great Migration, and the resettlement of the West respectively (Brax). Farrah J. Griffin’s “*Who Set You Flowin’?*” *The African-American Migration Narrative* examines *Beloved* and *Jazz* as migration narratives which sought to represent the dramatic social and individually complex movement of black communities in the United States. As a type of traumatic narrative, the requisite “event that propels the action northward” and “migrant’s attempt to negotiate [urban] landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization” can be seen as elements of trauma and recovery because of the ubiquitous and unrelenting violence of American life for people of color (Griffin 3). Simply, the catalyst for the physical movement as well as the identity upheaval experienced by these Black American migrants was founded on a widespread culture of violence and dispossession, attributed most exigently to dogmatic and dismembering south; while

⁶ Morrison uses the term “African-American” in the essay in question, “The Site of Memory,” and the editor could probably be responsible for the hyphenation, though more recently Morrison has elected to use the term “Black American” so I tend to follow suit.

urbanism is at once considered a “crisis of modernism” by whites and blacks alike, the modes of reconstruction and mourning which caused the migration exist in a culturally violent landscape that is construed as broadly traumatic. Unlike the pathological model of the traumatized Joe Christmas, the violent culture which drives the plot of *Jazz* gives way to a more sophisticated approach to trauma and perpetration. Morrison’s work is not without its modernist echoes and reliance on tropes of primal crimes and “crazy” women; however, the method of narration helps negotiate the way trauma is represented and received across the novel.

SPACE PIECE

Light in August and *Jazz* construct blackness but do so in space. While much of the study of trauma narratives' instability focuses on the element and mapping of time, Michelle Balaev shifts our focus to two alternative methods used to portray suffering: "the use of landscape imagery to convey the effects of trauma and remembering" and "the use of place as a site that shapes the protagonist's experience and perception of the world" (Balaev xi). In order to displace the dominance of purely negative or destructive value to trauma, Balaev reinforces how space and place can be used as an organizing principle in locating trauma in a text. Since "psychological models that propose remembering [as] a flexible, relational, and revisionary process call for a careful examination of the contextual factors and social dimensions of traumatic experience and memory in literary portrayals" (xi), the spaces and places involved in trauma and recovery can be inspected as formative in identity, rather than simply a setting for destruction.

The events of both novels overlap in time; *Jazz* takes place in the 1920s, so does *Light in August*, but their geographic positions are at extreme metaphorical odds. Both novels deal with the south and directly address the dogmatism of the jim crow period, presenting racism and race as involving classificatory verbiage and literal brutality. Across the oeuvres of these authors there is a broad conception that racial status is constructed by language as well as performed by social actors; in their critique of the

social function of race, *Jazz* and *Light in August* serve to combat race essentialism or claims of biological bases of race and identity. The United States is a territory rife with borders regarding race, where the Mason-Dixon line had only recently ceased to imply political enforcement of slavery. Race relations were, and indeed remain, mapped in the minds of people of all heritages in this country and racial formations can be studied with regard to conceived boundaries of north/south, urban/rural, and even explicitly white/black neighborhoods in these novels.

The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*'s entry on "space in narrative" defines the types of narrative distinctions of space, *Jazz* and *Light in August* seem for a very distinct reason to fall into the category of "texts with ontologically distinct spaces that do not allow communication, except through metalepsis (e.g., texts with embedded fictions)" (*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* 552). The reason is this: in these texts, and indeed in contemporary and modern American culture, race relations are addressed comparatively across the aforementioned spatial categories. Because race is a structuring category in the rural south and plays a violent, active role in the character's ability to act and exist as free agents over their fate and abilities both psychologically and logistically; the idea of the south becomes a distinct *place* for the characters. While the north and urban spaces are also irresolutely entrenched in racism, characters conceive of violence differently there. Namely, the perceived circumstances of racial relations in the south propels the major challenges the characters face: either in the case of Joe Christmas's alternate constriction to the town of Jefferson and his

wanderings to the urban centers of the north, or as the impetus for a great deal of the characters' migration in *Jazz*. The ascription of boundaries, as well as the relational foundation of race identity, is established primarily through metalepsis (described in this project as traumatic recall). Across both novels, space is racialized and performs a great deal of work in framing and modulating the identities of its inhabitants. I want to focus on the geographic and spatial element of race in these novels and how it can be used to construct and question ideas of hurt as conceived by the characters and their authors. Bouson writes that Morrison's intentions for *Jazz* included, "black migrants' newfound feelings of self-ownership and freedom" in the northern, urban space as well as representing "her characters as driven and determined, in large part, by their troubled pasts" in the southern country (Bouson 154).

The primary source from which I will discuss *Jazz* is Farrah Griffin's *The African-American Migration Narrative*, as the work itself uses *Jazz* as its extended case study in describing "new directions" for this narrative form. *Jazz* embodies post-WWI Harlem, "the City," and all it stands for as a cultural ideal as the promises it holds of a new beginning for Black Americans. Harlem's new possibilities were due in part to its urbanity and northernism, but primarily because of its freedom of blackness. The area's relative separation from the violence of white and desegregated communities was conceived to be safe, in a period when interaction with non-black people ensures violence, fear, and dispossession both psychically and corporeally. The City "makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it" (8) in definite opposition

to the oppressive and unjust way of living in the south. Joe and Violet, alongside most of the characters of *Jazz*, were victims of personal displacement and racial violence (Joe is an orphan and is a repeated victim of beatings by white men, Violet's family is dispossessed by white landowners, Dorcas's parents are killed in the East St. Louis race riots...) and Morrison contextualizes this history by placing these characters in the center of the Great Migration. Farrah Griffin describes this mass movement as "African-American artists' and intellectuals' attempt to come to terms with the massive dislocation of black peoples *following migration*" (Griffin 3, emphasis mine), emphasizing the use of these narratives to come to terms with life once arrived in the urban space. The narratives document the shift from a south that was both an "unsophisticated" "site of terror" with "immediate, identifiable and oppressive power" as well as a "site of the ancestor" and ancestral power and knowledge (5). By the ascription of both fear and power to the past place and alternate methods of living, hurting, and learning in the new place, *Jazz* maps trauma and recovery in space.

The opening "City" monologue epitomizes the optimism and trepidation with which the migratory movement placed hope for freedom from trauma in the northern, urban space. It's a place of great emotional release, "A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things," where "History is over. You all, and everything's ahead at last" and black people are finally thinking "future thoughts" (*Jazz* 7). The space is sparse and cruel in its color and architecture, the slanting "Daylight" upon concrete illuminates the

City “like a razor cutting the buildings in half” (7), but to the narrator, the vitality and organization of black people make accessible and part of the environment,

the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barbershops, the juke joints, the ice wagons, the rag collectors...and every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood, or association imaginable. (10)

Just as the south had dictated forms of social order, however, Joe and Violet soon learn that the city has racial rules as well. While “perfectly ordinary people can stand at the stop, get on the streetcar” (10), the streetcars are segregated and are the site of interracial violence as remarked by Alice Manfred, who has “begun to feel safe nowhere south of 110th Street” (54) after she experienced the racism so omnipresent outside of Harlem. It is both the confrontation of new violence in the urban landscape and the remembrance of the old hurt from the rural landscape that enriches *Jazz* as a migration narrative and a trauma text.

Joe and Violet experience disillusionment when a change in location does not provide them a radically new present: though they are in a black space, their experiences are still affected by “life before” and the echoes of racist violence and disenfranchisement frame their present selves. Violet comes to claim, “Before I came North I made sense and so did the world” (207) despite its fracturing lack of control. The local mythology of place, the myth of the “New Negro,” puts readers alongside the characters in their alternate feelings of belonging and unbelonging as migrants (7).

In order to find cultural equilibrium, ultimately, Joe and Violet must reestablish community and a concomitant sense of identity as being connected both to the Old place and the New. The protagonists come to terms with their ability to rupture patterns of history and not be left rootless (or in Griffin's terms, without ancestral knowledge) in their migration to the City, as well as how their personal history has continuing relevance in performing a present self within the social and historical context of the Great Migration. *Jazz* improvises meaning out of an emergent, haunting past, neither as a fully new melody nor as a skipping broken record. No matter how often or genuinely the narrator refutes their authority across the text, its dynamic, meditating presence critically encapsulates the role of the reader as necessarily conscious to the influences of time, space, memory, and perception over the quality of storytelling.

Violet's theft of the baby is narrated in the gossip style that comes to characterize *Jazz*. This scene serves a number of purposes in its placement and context in the novel in developing Violet's traumatic processing as well as locating her within larger social structures, faculties made possible by the narrator's heteroglossic positioning. Immediately preceding this incident, Violet's profession of hairdressing is linked to her lingering obsession with Golden Gray, her grandmother's white ward named after his blond hair; her admiration of her grandmother's blind love and affection for a child draws stark contrast with her own loss of her mother to suicide, and the satisfaction of a coherent family relationship is caught up in those "Baltimore stories" (17) which in turn eulogize progressive, urban life. These are associations with transferrable time, place,

and intimacy, and are emotional resources Violet must draw on to make meaning of her desire for security in a vastly different environment. When Violet washes her clients' hair, it is "soft and interesting" but "*not the kind of hair* her grandmother had soaped and played with and remembered for forty years" (17 emphasis mine). According to the narrator, Violet subconsciously participates in those "Baltimore stories" through hairdressing. In comparison with True Belle's commemorated care, the "baby hair" Violet washes is that of a garrulous and internally divided black migrant community; the neighbors shatter her "Baltimore" illusion that the women are "graceful, citified ladies" and instead just "trying to sound like they ain't from Cottown" (17-19). There is no total escape from rural Cottown, if these women are any example, framing Violet's conflict within the migrant community of the City.

The "public craziness" (22) that precludes her attempt to eviscerate Dorcas's corpse is what initially socially marginalizes Violet and later sways her peers to "[leave] Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it" (4). The narrator presents a choral commentary of the gathering crowd's reception of the events: "quiet as it's kept she did try and steal that baby although there is no way to prove it" (17) mediating a conflict between those who label her "sneak-thief woman" and "kindhearted innocent woman" (20). How Violet is constructed socially depends on her attitude, her lack of social integration, and the degree to which the observer "knows" her, in addition to the "proof of her innocence...in the bag of hairdressing utensils" (21).

Across time and age, place and borders, and circumstance and societal milieu, Violet's traumatic isolation recurs and is transposed according to the immediate stress factors of her environment. The narrator arbitrates these factors as both a peer member of that time, place and circumstance as well as a doubtful, extradiegetic constructor of her interiority. The narrator provides further context, constructing and assuming her interiority; to say, if the other characters knew Violet how the narrator knows Violet (and now, how the reader knows Violet) the narrative would be coherent or intentional. Morrison herself sums up this yearning: "The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again" (Taylor-Guthrie 241). Joe and Violet think the north or the urban space allows them agency and freedom, but perhaps their inability to do so merely because of the geographic/logistical conditions has deeper implications about how race and racism form an interior reality than can span both time and place. *Jazz*, Bouson writes, "focuses attention on the traumatic and humiliated memories that are part of the black cultural memory" in its movement and dislocation, as well as its historical reestablishments and reincarnations (Bouson 169). By focusing on the growing and ebbing coherence of Violet as a migrant, we are able to map this traumatic history in space and the ways in which *Jazz* represents "a people in the midst of self-creation, a document of what they created and what they lost along the way" (Griffin 197).

Light in August has suffered from a lack of scholarship in its discussion of racialized space beyond acknowledgment of its rurality, but I argue that Christmas's race is defined spatially because of the segregation of Jefferson and the south according to race. *Light in August* has a very different approach to both race and place to *Jazz*: most obviously, almost all of the characters are white and subscribe to the local ideological structuring of race as ontologically definite. Their challenges or reestablishments of these local norms and the community's subsequent backlash to perceived racial threats are what propels the main development and action of the novel as a whole. Joe Christmas's indeterminate heritage and therefore his race propel his subscription to and challenge of the existing bipolar race structure; this oscillation causes him intense psychological and social estrangement and is described as motivating his violent acts.

Significantly, Christmas's heritage is not the impetus of his fragmentation, but the community's stagnant, unrelenting and unquestioning defense of racial hierarchy weaponizes this indeterminacy. Unlike *Jazz*, *Light in August* situates its protagonists as marginal to the hegemonic racial ideology and frames their actions as resistant. Joe Christmas, Lena Grove, Joanna, Reverend Gail Hightower, and even Byron Bunch are outsiders to a nuclear, unchanging and self-regulating rural southern society defined by their local history and memory of the Civil War. According to Byron, the proximity and confines of rural culture produce a dogmatic logic of gossip which can make and break lives. In response to Hightower's story of his exile because of his attitude towards Blacks:

And that's all it took; all that was lacking...people everywhere are about the same, but that it did seem that in a small town, where evil is harder to accomplish, where opportunities for privacy are scarcer, that people can invent more of it in other people's names. Because that was all it required: that idea, that single idle word blown from mind to mind. (*Light in August* 71)

In turn, the "single idle word" of epithet ascribes Christmas's race, or rather his racial exclusion. His marginality is enforced by his location in Joanna's "dark house" (229) on the edge of town; local mythology engulfs Joanna's family because of their sympathy with Blacks. The association between races condemns white characters to marginal location and questionable ethical standing in the community; racial order is violently maintained by spatial segregation.

The black characters of *Light in August* create and surround the environment, their presence literally drives the conflict, but their actions affect nothing. Indeed, as Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, "Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature... reproduc[ing] the necessity for codes and restrictions" (*Playing* 6) of space and representation. The mapping of civilization and local power is a very specifically cordoned set of white and black spaces in *Light in August*. Blackness, for Jefferson, is the darkness on the edge of town and the desolate road; Blacks' presence rather than their action produces the racial tension as enacted by the white characters. For these white characters, the constraint

and specter of black spaces “provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (*Playing* 7). Joanna describes her attitude as seeing “the black shadow in the shape of a cross” according to which she defines her ethics, black people being “not people, but a thing...a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people” (*Light in August* 253).

Of course, the threat of blackness to Christmas begins in his relocation to a colored orphanage; his inability to blend into either population is the initial impetus for his fractured identity. The segregation of space is not simply fragmenting, however. Faulkner’s depictions of black spaces serve as liminal worlds which Christmas un/freely enters and leaves in his negotiation of identity. Christmas traverses into “Freedman’s Town” in the hours before he murders Joanna, experiencing transformation through his oscillation between engulfment and exclusion. As he walks through white Jefferson to towards the insular city blocks that make up Freedman’s Town, he glides “between the homes of white people” with his body speckled with the passing shadows of leaves from the trees above “sliding like scraps of black velvet across his white shirt” (114). His body, phantomlike and both colors, “strayed out of its own world,” and is “lost” until crossing the artificial white-black border: “Then he found himself” (114). His body is enclosed by sensory affectations of blackness, “surrounded by the summer smell and the summer voices of invisible negros” which are not people but made an ornamentation of this distinct space; the “bodiless voices murmuring talking laughing in a language not his”

alienate Christmas despite the fact that no actual subject is interacting with him, as the blackness of the space supersedes the existence of black characters (114).

The image of blackness produced in contrast conjures this scene, and places Christmas as psychologically enclosed at “the bottom of a thick black pit” between streetlamps, which are (or seem to be) more sparsely placed in Freedman’s Town as opposed to the brightly lit Jefferson surrounding it. Then the subjects emerge, “On all sides, even within him, the bodiless fecundmellow voices of negro women murmured” and seem to chase Christmas out; he runs breathless to the “cold hard air of white people” in the crest overlooking the hellish scene below him (115). Christmas figures this scene as an escape from an underworld of “the negro smell, the negro voices” and its crisp sensory contrast with the world “above” where he can map out “the street down which he had come” as opposed to “the one which had almost betrayed him” by exposing his racial indefiniteness (116). Freedman’s Town is finally explicitly equated to the pit of Chaos of Greek myth: “It might have been the original quarry, abyss itself” (116). To escape blackness and come out untarnished on the other side is Christmas’s requisite journey in preparation for his murder of Joanna, made final in his encounter with a black man who only remarks, “It’s a white man” (117).

The marginalization of black spaces is ultimately allegorical to the novel’s mapping of black subjects in the scheme of the dominant discourse, even the dominant discourse on race. “To enforce [race’s] invisibility through silence,” writes Morrison, “is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” and enforce

acceptable modes of interpretation of race (*Playing 10*). Faulkner's narrative goals, then, include race as one of many ideological and ontological categories as regulated and enforced by society and by social subjects themselves such as Protestant morality and gender relations. This may explain why he doesn't have black characters: to Faulkner, race is a construction of white characters and is not speakable by the black subject. In *Light in August*, Blackness is evoked as a *setting* for the construction of whiteness rather than as room for black subjectivity, as the focal crime is committed "not by a negro but Negro" (288).

TIN EAR PIECE

“Sustained grief is particularly disturbing in a culture that offers a quick fix for pain. Sometimes it amazes me to know intuitively that the grieving are all around us yet we do not see any overt signs of their anguished spirits. We are taught to feel shame about grief that lingers. Like a stain on our clothes, it marks us as flawed, imperfect. To cling to grief, to desire its expression, is to be out of sync with modern life, where the hip do not get bogged down in mourning.”

All About Love, bell hooks

Particularly in Western tradition, we conceive of a standard story structure as being linear. According to our conception of time, readers accept that effects are begot by causes; it's a comforting and rational underpinning to our understanding of the universe. Events are ordered from beginning to end, and in literature, while the actual sequence chosen by the author may be inventive or poetic, we tend to imagine plot as having an ontologically solid linear backbone. Think about it: casual and academic readers alike tend to make sense of works such as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* by putting them on an “objective” timeline. It's the “Shakespeare in Plain English” of plot: critics correct and realign scattered narrative into a neat chronology because it simply aids reading. According to narratologists and cognitive scientists, this tendency replicates the way time makes sense to our brains and therefore the way that plot and drama have long been constructed; indeed, “trauma reveals the ways in which one's ability to feel at home in the world [and in truth] is as

much a physical as an epistemological accomplishment” (*Acts of Memory* 44). For this reason, rationality and veracity, accuracy and simplicity, are culturally legitimized forms of speaking truth and representing history. - *X happened so then, Y happened? - Yes, that makes sense.* But representing trauma requires both a different method of recording sequence, time, and meaning-making as well as a confronting the fact that this experience of time, and therefore this way of framing experience, is culturally illegitimate.

This problem of authority in recorded experience has been exhaustively studied by cultural theorists, historians and politicians, intellectuals in peace and conflict studies, sociologists, and activists in search of justice following atrocity. Whether in search of a reparative history or policy solution, mapping the asymmetry of history and memory in our public recognition of truth is an ongoing project. Nora Strejilevich writes as a scholar of human rights in her “Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth” on the processes by which the immense and complex suffering of Holocaust victims were recorded; the title of the article itself refers to a struggle of testimony in its negotiation of “the language of truth.” The problem of narrative authority lies, as I have indicated, in the dense affective and political existence of profound suffering in social context. Strejilevich describes a necessary process of narrativization as a translation between “the language of the concentration camp” and “the language of the ‘outside’ world to which [the victims] have been thrown again, and where they actually want to return” (Strejilevich 702). I’m hesitant to describe this process as translation in a strict sense,

but the gesture towards the limits of quotidian language is useful. Strejilevich refers to a process by which “a distance between the way testimonies demand to voice their truth and *the expectations readers or listeners have regarding what truth means and how it should be voiced*” may be bridged (703, italics mine); the distance implies both an obvious formal implication as well as an ethical one. The question in this case is how testimony can be effective in providing a subjective dimension to collective trauma without being subject to normalization which renders the testimony as merely evidence, to be proven epistemically true or false. Testimony, to summarize, is socially condemned because of its traumatic tendency to contain “disruptive memories, discontinuities, blanks, silences and ambiguities” (704) as well as its inherent challenge to existing power structures.

Strejilevich describes testimony primarily in a legal, historical, and political context, and rightfully points to the manipulation testimony must undergo in order to “fit the requirements of the law, which demands precision” (704). But does literary expression necessarily maintain the same standards of truth and coherence? To a considerable degree, the way we experience non-literary narrative shapes our reception of even fictional texts which seek to find non-fictional resonance, but the slippage of a fictional basis is a space for inquiry. Strejilevich herself notes, “a truthful way of giving testimony...should become literary” (704). Dominick LaCapra entangles convention and readers’ expectation of “beginning-middle-end plot, which seeks resonant closure or uplift and tends to conflate absence with loss or lack,” (LaCapra 54) as a feature of both

literary and non-literary expression. In his view, there are forms that contest this asymmetry of testimony and fact; there are narratological strategies which probe how the nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas are called into existence. Coherence, even if not deliberately expressed in linear plot or conventional narrative, is a necessary coding of experience, but cannot be assumed as an organic feature of lived experience. Reconstruction and reevaluation, Strejilevich says, empower testimony as “a means for social and cultural resistance, which is necessary for the ethical recovery of a community” (Strejilevich 707). Alongside Hayden White’s claim that narrative gives form to events—that plot is imposed upon facts—Strejilevich’s ethical imperative frames my tethering of narratological/formal features of a text and the testimonial work performed by that text.

Wallace Martin makes the following connection about the nature of narrative from his study of memoir and the psychoanalytic “art of eliciting autobiography”: “If we concede that the ‘I’ of the present can differ from its previous manifestations, and that early experiences now have a different meaning than they did when they occurred, we tacitly accept a split in ourselves between a self who acts and an other who reflects, judges, and composes” (Wallace 78). We can relate this retroactive search for meaning to Morrison’s and Faulkner’s discussions of how representation is possible under the condition that a crucial event can fundamentally alter the possibilities, ethics, and attitudes of internal characters and external readers. In this project I hope to at least partially locate trauma in the narrative functioning, not in the characters’ supposed

psyches, as previous trauma theorists have already done. We can use the understandings of how direct victims and studies on these (such as *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Absalom Absalom!*) can serve as a useful component and comparison to the narrative worlds of *Light in August* and *Jazz*. Over the course of this project, I inspect the moves that these authors of fiction make *away* from our accepted, paradigmatic understandings of literature-in-time and time-in literature, as well as the specific moves they make *towards* a novel approach to narrating trauma. The reason I turn to Toni Morrison and William Faulkner is because they as authors consciously address time, memory, and the power dynamics inherent in narrative in their works.

KILLING PIECE

Perhaps this is the reason. Man knows so little about his fellows. In his eyes all men or women act upon what he believes would motivate him if he were mad enough to do what that other man or woman is doing.

Light in August 47

Joe Christmas of *Light in August* and Joe Trace of *Jazz* problematize the victim-perpetrator binary with which many theorists approach victimhood and violence. As murderers, both of whom commit their murders as enacting a psychological focal point in their novels, the protagonists participate in the cyclical model of abuse purported by sociologists and psychologists, but also according to a fairly standard literary model of crime and punishment. Broadly, the whole of both *Light in August* and *Jazz* present the scene of the murder first and then subsequently assume the structure of working backwards to answer the “why?” The narrators of these novels dictate the vindication or sublimation of these acts to crucially different ends and with dramatically contrasting narrative structure beyond the faintest sketches of plot. The topic of this piece is killing, but rather what it means to witness and narrate a killing as a focal point of a novel. This piece will serve to address how narrative conventions are subverted in both novels towards a particular end—explaining violence. I argue that Morrison and Faulkner interrogate the role of representing violence through structural choices and by undermining the expectations of narrators.

By choosing the novel form and then subverting the narratorial authority implicit in this form, *Jazz* and *Light in August* approach their cultures in ways that ultimately rely on testimonial knowledge rather than the strength of narrative authority alone. Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert, in her *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, reviews the narrative ingenuity among Morrison's novels and selects *Jazz* as a case study of the subtle ingenuity of the testifying narrator. According to Heinert, the most fundamental dynamic in *Jazz* is the fact that "much of the narrated story is imagined not only by the readers but also by the narrator itself" (Heinert 59) and the reader's realization that the pretension of narratorial authority is just that—a pretension. As a conversation of knowledge, fact, and truth, the narrator's omniscience is "a logical impossibility that we pretend to believe for the sake of the story" (Mayberry in Heinert 58) as well as a claim of the narrator themselves from the outset of the novel through the use of the narratorial "I" as well as the continual hedging ("(as it was to me)" *Jazz* 6, "I can't say" 5, "I suppose" 4, "Good luck and let me know" 5...). The claim of the final act in the book, "What turned out different was who shot whom" (6) is the most deliberately misleading feature of the narrator's conspiratorial tone, and they admit, "So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen" (220); indeed, "Because the narrator undermines itself, the authority of the text shifts from the 'conventional' narrator to the (heteroglossic) subjects of the text: its characters" (Heinert 57). Instead of simply being unreliable or subjective, the narrator performs a massive shift in power in their role of

the delegator and curator of truth in the novel, opening up considerable possibilities for interpretation of their speech. The major plot of the novel, the causes and consequences of Joe's murder, is framed as a means by which we examine truth and narrative authority.

Joe Trace's actions across the novel are socially embedded and re-defined by his performance of identity in the migrant Harlem scheme, since the narrator does not present a static or comprehensive judgment of his character beyond the words of his peers. Trace describes his infidelity to Malvonne, who allows him to meet Dorcas in privacy, as he self-defines: "I'm trying to lighten my life a little with a good lady, like a decent man would, that's all" (*Jazz* 49). Malvonne seems to buy this argument as long as Violet is not hurt—indeed, the ethical calculations of all of the minor characters are speculated and contrived— but Dorcas's adoptive mother has a much stronger description of Trace in specific context. She situates him within the larger threat of encroaching male violence that she sees in media: "One man. One defenseless girl. Death. A sample-case man. A nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-him man. A kind you let in your house because he was not dangerous...He knew wrong wasn't right, and did it anyway" (73-74). This seems to correspond strongly with her perception of wider violence against women, as his actions are characteristic of the headlines: "Man kills wife. Eight accused of rape dismissed. Woman and girl victims of...In jealous rage man" (74); within a community where oppression takes graphic form, Alice characterizes Trace as being among that brutal anonymous and unprovoked violence. The narrator, at

times, reiterates this trope, but also provides juxtaposing opinion from other minor characters' speech. Felice reminds us, "I think he likes women, and I don't know anybody like that...I really believe he likes his wife" (206) marking Trace as exceptional to locally standard cases. However, the narrator does not hold these opinions equally, and is biased in their recognition of contradictory claims of character, as "[Felice] makes me nervous...Now she is disturbing me, making me doubt my own self just looking at her" (198). It seems impossible for an exclusively intradiegetic narrator to construct a coherent picture of Trace and inspection into his interior is necessary beyond mediation of conflicting external sources. The reader, therefore, in a similar fashion to their judgment of Violet's mental and emotional exigency, is required to form their own opinions regarding the morality or justification of his actions against Dorcas. Instead of creating a finely controlled image of the killer and his motives, the narrator—like the other characters and the reader—is swayed by pretension, jealousy, adulation, or even hypocrisy of local knowledge and ethics.

The description of Trace's actions and thoughts is similar in pattern and resolve to Violet's desire to inhabit or redeem her lost mother; the tendency to psychoanalyze Trace for his crimes is attempted and foiled by narrative projection. When Trace sets out to track and murder Dorcas, we are allowed access to nearly incompatible descriptions: externally, he is composed and intentional in his hunt, "He felt at peace... a before-supper feeling" (184), while internally, he is awash with traumatic re-expedition in the form of dysphoric memory, "He is hunting for her, and while hunting a gun is a natural

companion” (180). Two separate facts of Trace’s childhood are said to dictate his behavior: the fact that his mother refused to recognize him as her son and the fact that his effective father willfully chose him as a son. Both of these fixations imply that Trace’s past is tied up with this present, as “choosing” a partner is his way of choosing a destiny, and being “chosen” is salvation from isolation. Even his motivation for pursuing Dorcas as a partner is part of his desire for control over who his family is; Hunter’s Hunter “chooses” him as the inheritor of his masculine performance of hunting: “But the big thing was, I was picked...He was the best in the county and he picked me” (125). Instead of remaining an orphan, the impact of being chosen allows him power to define and maintain strong and loving relationships with women. When he first encounters Dorcas, he reflects, “I chose you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that’s the one for you. I picked you out” (135), and when he grapples with her rejection, he is in disbelief that Dorcas would not choose “Just me. Nobody but me” (184). In a social landscape of severe and unrepentant racism and emasculation, his agency is restored in his relationships with women. The cultural methods of establishing agency are presented through the exposition of Joe’s “reasons why.”

In the anecdote, Trace’s internal dialogue and personal history are made allegorical by reference to the power endowed by his father’s “choice” and subsequent training as a hunter. This power has a specific spatial and temporal location that is destabilized as he grows older and migrates to the City. After Dorcas’s rejection, he must reenact the traumatic event; “Joe is wondering about all this on an icy day in January.

He is a long way from Virginia...[yet] he can practically feel Victory at his side when he sets out, armed, to find Dorcas” (180) as he searched for his mother. His masculinity and sexuality are tested in his reenactment of traumatic event, in which he is emasculated by rejection as well as his loss of hunting capacity in the socially oppressive urban environment. He begs of strangers, “I just want to see her” (180) a repetition of his plea to his mother to, “Let me see your hand” (178). His narrative of the hunt for Dorcas merges with the hunt for his mother, he transposes his body as masculinized hunter in search for belonging and refutation of rootlessness. The narrator—because they have decided to *explain* Trace in a way similar to the psychoanalysis of Christmas in *Light in August*, has the power to situate Trace in a migration narrative which is parsable for the reader. Yet, the narrator refutes their own authority: “Risky, I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind. But worth the trouble if you’re like me—curious, inventive, and well-informed. Joe acts like he knew...but he didn’t know. Neither do I, although it’s not hard to imagine what it might have been like” (137). The story, in all its complexity and self-reflection, in all its allegory and gravity, is only a possible means by which to explain a murder of a very young girl in a violent culture.

Another argument could be made that while Joe may have shot Dorcas, it was the City that killed her. There is a detail not to be overlooked in the relatively peaceful unifying ending of the novel, explained by Dorcas’s friend Felice as a passing comment after she has decided to speak with Joe and Violet Trace. The issue of blame is passed among the parties, Trace claiming his part without conceit and Felice wondering how

she could have acted to save her—the bargaining process of trauma and loss. Indeed, while Dorcas does refuse for an ambulance to be called to the scene of the shooting, Felice admits, “But I did it. Called the ambulance, I mean; but it didn’t come until morning after I had called twice. The ice, they said, but really because it was colored people calling. She bled to death” (210). The cruel racist justice of the City is, poetically, the reason Dorcas could not finally be saved. By decentering the only fact of the major plot—that Joe killed Dorcas—the narrator reveals that their “sweettooth” for pain, their ability to “break lives to prove I can mend them back again” is only the power and function of storytelling. The expectations of readers and conventions of narrative are challenged in order to reveal the fundamental relationship between the storyteller, their audience, and truth—a testimonial groundwork for narrative.

While both authors deal with narrative distance and the result in articulating an embodied experience, in *Light in August*, remembrance is a locally political act. Position within the dominant discourse sets these two novels at odds in its greater narrative intention in presenting the distance between personal memory and public history. *Light in August* lacks the narrative “I” and the monologue of a specified narrative personality, but too delegates power to a number of ethically contrasting characters to challenge assumptions of narrative authority. In order to study what is really an undertaking of the 507-page novel as a whole, I elect to use Joe’s color and race as a specimen of focalization because of its fundamental contestation as well as its instrumentality for

Christmas's killing as well as his fate. Color as a narrative trope presents the "juncture of visibility" between race and color as described by Ralph Ellison (Booth 690): "Color as a visible distinction between human beings, embedded in and given meaning by a particular American history, is the bearer of a past, and a reminder of it" (690-91). For Whites and Blacks both, James Baldwin says, color is a "force of circumstance... which cannot be overcome," something "carried, quite literally on his [the African-American's] brow" which makes visible the fact of injustice. Color, memory, and identity together belong to the struggle over racial justice in the United States, a battle in part to recognize the past, of which color is the *visible* reminder (Booth 684). Indeed, even Faulkner's use of lightness and darkness to describe landscape and facial expression intersect with the coloring of skin; Morrison writes, "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language" (*Playing* 12-13). As the central point of contention within the novel, purposefully obscured and subjective, Christmas's color serves to expose the workings of race and the machinations of testimonial justice in *Light in August*.

Mathews writes that, "Faulkner imagines how the initial insult of reducing human beings to instruments of labor and commodities of exchange dooms a society to concussions of brutality, domination, and revenge" (in Vickroy 100); this is Faulkner's recurring conception of trauma: that Whites committed a primal crime and are paying for it in cultural decay.⁷ Viewing trauma as part of a racial ontology and a legacy of

⁷ The Burdens describe the black race as, "A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever.

camouflaged denigration and cultural destruction will deepen my inquiry into Faulkner's use of exclusively white characters to speak on blackness. In *Light in August*, Joe Christmas is most probably white until the moment of his death by lynching, and an analysis of the use of light and color as a trope as well as a matter of focalization can reveal how Faulkner both accepts and critiques bigoted racial formations. According to Vickroy, "Rigid designations of race and gender manifest and perpetuate trauma because they become the basis for destructive conceptions of truth and identity" in Faulkner's works (Vickroy 100). The overall structure of repeated narrative and shifts in focalization around the bodies and actions of white people leads to a narrative style which problematizes these designations.

Whiteness, and therefore dramatic focus, is a result of an encounter with the Other which reveals the emotional toll of their designs. Joe Christmas is portrayed by peers, himself, and the narrator as having a very wide range of colors, beginning with his "parchment" colored skin and foreign dress. His "dark, insufferable face" along with his "soiled city clothes" (*Light in August* 32) finds the ire of the townspeople; his Otherness is made starkly apparent in his physical description and his strange name is "somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read it in time" (33). Christmas's "augur" is a subject of communal debate, as we see in his internal monologues and past actions, but the knowledge and attitudes of the townspeople present our first look at the circumstances of his murder and eventual fate. Christmas operates "behind the veil, the

Mine...Yours...The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born. None can escape it" (252)

screen, of his negro's job" and later his role as a bootlegger (36) situating him, like the other protagonists (Hightower, Byron, even Lena) as an outsider to the town culture and gossip. But the term "gossip" is not a true representation of the power of communal knowledge, as we learn from Hightower's death threats from the "K.K.K." and the expulsion of Joanna's family; racial politics and assumptions can spell annihilation for members of the community suspected of acting in alliance with blackness. Byron describes the community's intentions in upholding racial order as having to do with their southern identity in the wake of the Civil War: "it is there, the descendants of both in their relationship to one another's ghosts, with between them the phantom of the old spilled blood and the old horror and anger and fear" (47).

The distinct narrative moves made to represent Joe Christmas through his otherness, his exclusion, and then finally his color speak to the perversity and power of racism as structuring knowledge for the community. His alliance with Joanna encapsulates him in the history which "still lingers about her and about that place," according to Byron, "something dark and outlandish and threatful" (47). It is ultimately Christmas's bootlegging partner, who seeks a cash reward for his capture after Joanna's murder, who encapsulates the tethering of color to the community's renegade justice which spells Christmas's death. Brown's testimony is only believed when he claims that Christmas is black:

Like he had knowed that if it came to a pinch, this would save [Brown], even if it was almost worse for a white man to admit what he would have to admit than to be accused

of the murder itself. 'That's right,' he says, 'Go on. Accuse me. Accuse the white man...and let the nigger go free. Let the nigger run. (97)

Race may not exist as an empirical reality for Faulkner—and its manifestation of color may be subjectively encoded among his characters—but its potential to construct local social reality in perception is very real and absolutely embodied. Being seen *as black* produces impetus in the community to see him lynched, “‘Well,’ the sheriff says, ‘I believe you are telling the truth at last’” (99) and Christmas’s blackness is used to explain and narrativize the crimes he has committed, as race is part of the local logic and ethics in the community. In the town and surrounding area, a spectacle foments; the white community “believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed *not by a negro but by Negro* and [they] knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward” (288 emphasis mine). The imagery of color throughout the novel is linked with seasonality and temperature, and Hightower describes the fervor of the lynching as “sweat, heat, mirage, all, rush fused into a finality which abrogates all logic and justification and obliterates it like fire would” (311). To the townspeople, the story has been written before and will be consummated again as lynching.

As a counterpoint, Christmas himself, at being caught, feels that with each breath he “diffuses in the neutral grayness, becoming one with loneliness and quiet that has never known fury or despair” (331) and finally he will be punished for the crime of “never act[ing] like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what make the

folks so mad” (350). Christmas’s life and exclusion as someone of indeterminate race will only be sealed by the only black act available to him—being lynched. The scene of Christmas’s death presents an interesting stalemate: his body is only described before death by its position in the room in relation to other things, not his color as throughout the book. His murderer castrates him in an act of renegade justice, to “preserve order” (451) beyond the capacity of due process; Grimm moves on “the Board” as if guided by a “Player” in “lean, swift, blind obedience” (462). Not when Grimm kills Christmas, but when he castrates him saying “Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell” (464), Christmas’s body suddenly transforms from “pent black blood” to “pale body” to a “black blast” (465). His color vacillates, his blood either black or white:

But his blood would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one or the other and let his body save itself. Because the *black blood* drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the *white blood* drove him out of there, as it was the *black blood* with snatched up the pistol and the *white blood* which would not let him fire it. And it was the *white blood* which sent him to the minister, which rising in him for the last and final time, sent him against all reason and all reality, into the embrace of a chimaera, a blind faith... (449 emphasis mine)

The racial logic, the local history, the manipulation of memory make Christmas kill and kill Christmas; the novel demonstrates how the violence is employed on color lines to make Christmas black because he kills, and ultimately kill him for his blackness. Narrative subjectivity limits and delegitimizes Faulkner’s narrators; the character’s embodied experience and emotional investment limit their capacity to produce an

account of the murder that is not *colored* by violent racism. Further, the purposes for the myth, myth-making, and narrative doubt are due to their location in the dominant paradigm.

SIGHT PIECE, SPEECH PIECE

Narrative theorists, or critics who examine how stories are told, have come up with tools for describing how storytelling is designed to shape reader's responses and illuminate contexts of trauma (Vickroy 26). A traumatic lens on narratology will incorporate our understanding of the structure and power of the testimony, as the testimony can characterize both a text's positionality as well as its internal narrative features. This study identifies the ways in which narrators stimulate readings—not simply simulate symptoms—of experience of trauma through working with readers' perceptual and ethical frameworks; as Ernst van Alphen writes in *Narrative Theory: Political Narratology*, “experience depends on factors that are fundamentally discursive” (Bal 119). Narrative strategies, which are the topoi of narratology, involve both a survey of formal acts in the text as well as a close study of their reception, convention, and flexibility. J. Alexander Bareis in his “Ethics, the Diachronization of Narratology, and the Margins of Unreliable Narration” dissuades us from the label “unreliable narrator” because of the term's lack of nuance in the relationship between the text, the reader, and truth (Bareis 43). Bareis relates Gérard Genette's distinction between the two narratological questions, “Who sees?” and “Who speaks?” as a suitable set of inquiry for establishing perspective and truth rather than the assignation of a complicated taxonomy of narrator. The shift from [fact and fiction] to one of [fact and truth] strikes me as an ethical question indeed.

Focalization is the use of a perceiving, directing consciousness to focus the reader's attention on an event or idea; in description or involvement with traumatic content, the subjectivity of human actors is intensely involved with ethics and power. According to Bal, focalization allows narratologists to more finely distinguish that objectivity can be a ("pointless") goal, but "reception, however, is a psychosomatic process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body" (142). By interpolating seers (ones who see), we can better describe "the relation between the vision and what is 'seen,' perceived" (146) rather than constructing a complex typology of the first/second/third person omniscient/reliable/unreliable Narrator who hovers nameless in a text. The application to literary and non-literary trauma narratives is obvious in its untethering of narration to factual report, as Bal writes, "focalization is the relationship between the 'vision,' the agent that sees, and that which is seen" and therefore "*that vision cannot be conflated with the events they focus, orient, interpret*" (146 emphasis mine). The notable collapse of the distinction between reliable and unreliable narration, in which all characters (one of which is the narrator) have ethical bearing on the way we approach narrative attributes agency and bias to *all* narrators.

A says that B sees what C is doing.

Focalization allows us to study a narrator as being one or multiple of subjects A, B, C.

If “[e]xperience is an integration of perception into mental schemes or constructs,” (Janet in Bal 120), it is legitimate to consider traumatic content as having impact on both the strategies employed and the implications made on readers. It is a foundation of narratology to examine cultural and personal memory as “enabled, shaped, and structured according to the parameters of available discourses” (Bal 119). Narratology, and in particular the study of narrative which contests and contains trauma, should be considered a discursive and therefore ethical project. Mieke Bal was among the first narratologists to make forays into the realm of traumatic fiction; in her multiple collected and singular volumes on political narratology, she dedicates discussion of techniques by which traumatic content can be seen as a unique, or otherwise revelatory, sample of how content can have great bearing on selected narrative form. In fact, in her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* Bal describes trauma narratives as “the best case for [using] focalization” (Bal 147) as a primary tool for describing narrative features.

Let’s test our chops with focalization as a narratological tool. The taxonomies of narration are unwieldy and even inaccurate with narratively complicated texts, such as Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, so the case for focalization lies in its use as a descriptive method. The novel *Absalom, Absalom!* is a thematic undertaking of r/Reconstruction, creating a body of a story from the bare and untrustworthy bones of memory and

retelling. Rosa Coldfield's framing of the rise and fall of Sutpen's Hundred magnifies and animates a space in which the mythology of the south can be cast and prove illusory, as her manner and structure of testimony is socially ingratiated. Particularly, her description of the point of contact established between herself and Clytie after Charles Bon's death provides a tableau of racial and sexual interaction, refracting the specific positions of the characters and modulating the events as memory in the method of *Absalom, Absalom!* as a whole:

'Dont you go up there, Rosa.' That was how she said it: that quiet, that still, and again it was though it had not been she who spoke but the house itself that said the words—the house which he had built, which some suppuration of himself had created about him as the sweat of his body might have produced some (even if invisible) cocoon-like and complementary shell in which Ellen had had to live and die a stranger, in which Henry and Judith would have to be victims and prisoners, or die. Because it was not the name, the word, the fact that she had called me Rosa. As children she had called me that, just as she had called Henry and Judith; I knew that even now she still called Judith (and Henry too when she spoke of him) by her given name. And she might very naturally have called me Rosa still, since to everyone else whom I knew I was still a child. But it was not that. That was not what she meant at all; in fact, during that instant while we stood face to face (that instant before my still advancing body should brush past her and reach the stair) she did me more grace and respect than anyone else I knew; I knew that from the instant I had entered that door, to her of all who knew me I was no child. 'Rosa?' I cried. 'To me? To my face?' Then she touched me, and then I did stop dead. Possibly even then my body did not stop, since I seemed to be aware of it thrusting blindly still against the solid yet imponderable weight (she not owner: instrument; I still say that) of that will to bar me from the stairs; possibly the sound of the other voice, the single word spoken from the stairhead above us, had already broken and parted us before it (my body) had even paused. I do not know. I know only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too soon and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage at that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh. Because there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp

and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both—touch and touch of that which is the citadel of the central I-Am’s private own: not spirit, soul; the liquorish and ungirdled mind is anyone’s to take in any darkened hallway of this earthly tenement. But let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too. Yes, I stopped dead—no woman’s hand, no negro’s hand, but bridle-curb to check and guide the furious and unbending will—I crying not to her, to it; speaking to it through the negro, the woman, only because of the shock which was not yet outrage because it would be terror soon, expecting and receiving no answer because we both knew it was not to her I spoke: “Take your hand off me, nigger!”

I got none. We just stood there—I motionless in the attitude and action of running, she rigid in that furious immobility, the two of us joined by that hand and arm which held us, like a fierce rigid umbilical cord, twin sistered to the fell darkness which had produced her.

(*Absalom, Absalom!* 139-40, italics in original)

The scene is the dramatic climax of the sequence in which Rosa reveals her own motive as narrator alongside the exposition of the events of Bon’s death. Her role as one of the many narrators of the text is complex beyond labels of “unreliable” and “intradiegetic”; her social position and affective relationship with the event indubitably affect the way readers encounter the scene of Bon’s death. We turn to this passage for inspection because it employs Clytie as a uniquely constructive yet invisible extension of Rosa’s conflict with Sutpen. Though the encounter at the base of the stairs spans a number of pages, the exact moment of bodily contact between the women is the crucial flashpoint around which Rosa can revise and justify her narrative to portray events with intentionality in retelling. Rosa finds these events to be decisive in her positioning in the

family and within structures of gender and race, while in reality she does not even witness the critical murder itself.

In order to discern the significance of this passage to Rosa, the focalizer, we must first address her view of Clytie. Clytie is Sutpen's half-black daughter and slave, raised alongside Judith and Henry and excluded from her black mother's family; she is one of the most weathered residents of Sutpen's Hundred and is present for a vast majority of the events that occur in the house, yet is hardly ever described as speaking outside of this passage. Jealousy clouds Rosa's idea of Clytie's intentions, and these opinions help frame and shape her perceptions of Clytie in interaction and reflection. The first lines reiterate the tethering Rosa has established between Clytie's body, the physical "dark house" itself, a demonic and transgressive Sutpen, and Blackness; as "it had not been she who spoke but the house itself that said the words." Through Rosa's focalization, the dark, demonic elements of Sutpen's "blackness" and corruption are reiterated by her descriptions of and the existence of Clytie. Rosa is, as she often is in *Absalom, Absalom!*, a narrator who takes fragments of the actual and creates an atmosphere or motivation—a testimonial logic to cohere the narrative whole in retelling. The repeated evocation of the resentment of domestic desegregation and miscegenation seems to form a racialized fear of Clytie. As narrator, she assigns Clytie's motive; to Rosa, Clytie may know more than what would be realistically possible for the reader to believe.

The spatial layout of the tableau is crucial in Rosa's reconstruction of the sequence as imparted with dramatic, hyper-real precision. The two women's bodies—

face-to-face; one in motion and the other standing still; one white and one black; situated in the entryway of the mythologized and historical house; unseeing and unhearing of the violent scene above them—the confrontation takes on metaphysical scale in its narration. Rosa attempts to claim momentary equality and symmetry with the other's body in her recollection, but is shattered at the point of contact, stopping "dead" at Clytie's touch. At this moment of heightened drama and suspense, Rosa is suddenly made volitionless and violated, transformed from the active "still advancing body" to a "dead" ego.

Rosa reflects and reconstructs this single moment repeatedly in this passage, sometimes claiming that she "stopped dead," sometimes that her body continued to "advance" while her mind refrained, sometimes at "blind full tilt" and also "immobile" at the point of contact. Rosa hopes to capture in this retelling the shattering of her ego as something both emotional and corporeal, without a definitive or discernable statement of fact about the sequence of the events. Rosa both asks if Clytie challenges the ego ("To me?") and equalizes her differentiated white body ("To my face?") almost simultaneously; Clytie elects to equate their bodies by subsequently stopping the other with her hand, evacuating Rosa of life (stopping her "dead") as if this detention equaled death. It is with both Clytie and not-Clytie that Rosa wrestles: Clytie is an "instrument" of "imponderable weight" with power over fate and circumstance, yet still the owner of a black hand, impermissible on a white body. Rosa projects cataclysmic willpower into Clytie's body, but still constrains it to an objectionable black body. The will to bar Rosa

from the stairs is the intention and utility of Clytie's existence and embodiment, as her existence and blackness, according to Rosa, are another manifestation of Sutpen's sexual disregard for the racial order; Clytie is "not owner: instrument" of "that will to bar me from the stairs" and from engagement with the violent act itself.

Rosa is never able to locate sensory proof for the killing of Charles Bon, searching later for the "solid yet imponderable weight" in the carrying of his coffin. Clytie's touch prevents Rosa from hearing the hypothetical "sound of the other voice, the single word spoken from the stairhead" that would confirm the events as real, tangible and objective facts made visual or audible. That possibility has "already broken and parted us before it (my body) had even paused," Rosa admits, and her understanding of the events is approximate and deliberately constructed. She reiterates, her "entire being" moves toward the revelation what happened upstairs, to be suddenly and absolutely disassociated into the "monstrous and immobile" other, which is only monstrous because of Rosa's fear of blackness and only immobile because of Rosa's attempt to move it. The visual fact of the barrier is "black, arresting and untimorous," made an object attribute to no definite subject, prepositional and made objectionable in relation to the "white woman's flesh"; Rosa-as-subject assigns the (un)movement because of her intention to move it and transformed into a metaphysical barrier because of her authority in retelling.

The sensory fact of "flesh with flesh" serves to "abrogate" across "decorous ordering" of gender, class, and race in ways unacceptable and inviolable to Rosa and

therefore contribute to her focalization of the events. In evoking Rosa's own sexualized and racialized fear of Sutpen, bodily contact shatters local codes mandating separation between men and women, white and black; to Rosa, Clytie herself is the metonym of that violent miscegenation. The proof is in Clytie, and the intention and action of Clytie's body makes them both "lover and enemy" because of and through race and gender; Rosa's insecurity sees this body as "breaking" or "cutting" the barrier between white and black both in its existence in a mixed-race daughter and the "shocking impact" itself. That "touch" of the body unifies seamlessly with the touch of the "citadel I-Am" of the ego and identity in Clytie's flesh connection to destroy the delicate "eggshell shibboleth of all caste and color" made physical and metaphysical by Rosa's framing.

In Rosa's testimony, the unexplainable moment of the solidarity of first-names prevents her from constructing a narrative of total intention, yet the fact of their differentiated bodies is unsustainably filled with "shock...outrage...terror." Rosa "cries to *it*," the object of her will rather than a subject, which restrains her physically and ontologically from the fact of the violence upstairs; though the constructive goal of her focalization of this moment is vindication and confirmation of the fact, this contact relegates her to assumption and construction, for her own sake and for Quentin's. The "shock...outrage...terror" of the indescribable, ahistorical contact between white and black is made body and flesh and floorboard and roof and daughter and father and both white *and* black as Clytie through focalization.

And we must remind ourselves, what is the actual response Rosa gives to this metaphysical and ego-shattering contact with the other? “Take your hand off me, nigger!” The vindictive, yet relatively simple response begs the question of just how (un)aware Rosa was of the significance of this event when it occurred. In this sudden retreat back to racial dominance and epithet, Rosa doubles into ideology and fear, wholly rejecting Clytie’s admirable intention to spare a child from the fact of violence. The scene is perverted into a racial confrontation of slave and master, rather than corporeal bargaining with the super-racial as her lofty focalization implies. They are frozen in this paradigm, “[Rosa] motionless in attitude and action of running, [Clytie] rigid in that furious immobility” though nevertheless “joined by that hand and arm that held us.” As respective members of the racial hierarchy, their dominant-subordinate clasp of different holds them “like a fierce rigid umbilical cord”; they are “twin sistered” to this racial formation, the “fell darkness which had produced her” as simultaneous white and black, both daughter and slave. Vickroy writes of Rosa’s ensnarement in the narratives that shape southern life: “Rosa lives one of the profound paradoxes of trauma: that one can end up absorbed by perpetrators, or perpetrating systems,” rendering her focalization to be received as hysterical by the other characters, and very likely the reader (Vickroy 126). Rosa’s traumatic memory of the scene of Bon’s death is ultimately a reckoning with her existence as a white, female subject in a society where she has just been shown that those facts can mean utter annihilation.

This passage can be analyzed for the sheer density of its focalizing influence. Rosa's near hysterical retellings compensate for sensory proof as seen/heard by the body; Rosa's testimony is made high drama by its subjectivity. The "truth of the matter" upstairs, either manifest by the sight of the body itself or the audible "sound of other voice" is made as elusive as the mysteries Quentin and Shreve attempt to decipher; Rosa and Mr. Compson's retellings in *Absalom* have much to do with their intentions to uphold or inspect the racial formation and sexual propriety as manifest in Clytie. Rosa sees Clytie as the gatekeeper to the flesh reality of Bon's racial "reality" on the floor above, and therefore is ultimately unable to assimilate the constructed testimony with the events-as-real. This restricted attempt is continually rehashed throughout the narrative structure of *Absalom* as an untrustworthy, conflicting answer to the original dilemma, "What is the South like?"

This ethical complexity is often achieved by authors who challenge "narrative Western conceptions of individual free will and trait-driven behavior... [and therefore] concepts of a constituent or reliable personality, focusing instead of the situational" factors of perception and ethics (Vickroy 26) in their representation of trauma. Laurie Vickroy's work in her describes the narrative-ethical implications of the multiple portrayal of Sethe's infanticide in *Beloved* by using focalization to examine the relationships between the narrator, characters, and readers. The murderous premise of the novel, according to Vickroy, points to a larger project which "raises the possibility

that extreme circumstances undermine the capacity of the traumatized to behave ethically” along strictly conventional lines, or at least in comparison to the expectations of other characters in the text (Vickroy 26). The event’s description by multiple parties, each with their own subjectivity, altogether composes the entire novel’s emotional complexity and exigence, despite the fact that the actual *retelling* is brief and relatively unadorned.

Klaus Brax uses focalization to describe the narrative strategies of *Beloved* as well, but he focuses on the representations of scientific racism within the novel. For Brax, it is precisely the conflict *between* focalizing characters which reveals the greatest ethical disparity. The slow realization of the full gravity of the experimentation on the Sweet Home slaves is incongruent with the way the experimentation is described by the Schoolmaster. Paul D recalls the moment he resisted the dehumanization of the slaveowner’s experimentation, describing it as a matter of epistemic dominance: “Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined.” (*Beloved* 190). Those with power, and privilege of ability (literacy) are the definers in the dominant ideology of truth and meaning-making; the social framework enables and prevents meaning-making of certain subjects because of power imbalances. The knowledge produced by racial science is the direct target and a site for contestation across *Beloved* as traumatic and ultimately destructive to the agency of Black Americans repercussively: “Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle... but the more they used themselves up to

persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questions, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew" (*Beloved* 198). The racial ontology established by whites has inexorable influence on the Black sense of self, even after freedom is achieved in this novel and for the novel's seers and knowers. As writers of history, whites have power over more than just the social/public but also the interior lives of black people because of ongoing dehumanization and reminders of real violence and dismemberment; Paul D's recollection of the violence as a matter of knowledge, not just a matter of physical violence, presents an exposé on how competing narratives underpin conceptions of self.

Together, the use of focalization as a primary means of analyzing narratological strategy reaffirms that "a narrative is a rhetorical act" and inherits characters' and readers' ethics (Brax 254); focalization forms the basis of ethical discourse, as it comprises a dissolution of accepted definition of the narrator as authority. Just as *Beloved* "restores narratives which lacked interiority" (255) since "restoring testimonial authority [is] an ethical and political act" (254), all representations of trauma and all testimonies maintain this narratological complexity. Rabinowitz claims that "morality in fiction is closely tied to configuration; that is, ethical character...is often defined in terms of the kinds of actions we expect a character to perform in the future" (Rabinowitz 85). Study of narrative through focalization allows us to better inspect the features of

narration in works which deal with the nature of violence to leave indelible marks on the way humans operate cognitively and ethically.

BODY PIECE

Everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That's a trauma.

Toni Morrison, for *Time Magazine* 1989 (Angelo and Morrison)

“Well, here I am,” remarks the protagonist of *Light in August* as he witnesses sexual violence through a curtain, a scene that will ultimately frame his construction of self across the novel more broadly. Joe Christmas encounters and enacts sites of sexualized violence at critical identity-forming flashpoints across his child- and adulthood, putting him in conversation and congress with structures of misogyny and racism portrayed in the deep south. Trauma acts constructively in this text as Christmas performs contextual white masculinity in his graphic acts of violence, particularly against women, in an attempt to cohere a fragmented and multiple identity within a society of fixed and dogmatic systems of value and belief. As a man with troubled history and traumatic exposure to sexual relationships, as well as being of uncertain racial identity, his attempts and eventual inability to conform to these paradigms drive both his actions and his insecure sense of self. The exposition of Christmas's encounters with violence in *Light in August* presents the ways in which he situates himself within a larger social scheme of sexism and white supremacy, but ultimately further disarm and emasculate him, as his identity remains insoluble to their sharp divisions.

Christmas's first sexual encounters are inherently violent and power-based, and

introduce him to the intersections of gender-based, racial, and sexual hierarchies. This developmental challenge is both internally and socially motivated; he faces emotional turmoil in the “grey areas” of a strictly polarizing structures of gender and race, as well as social issues because of the attempts of other characters to “place” him in these ontological categories. His first exposure to sexuality (the dietician’s tryst) and his encounter with the unnamed black girl do not simply fragment his sense of identity, they intersect and enmesh Christmas in untenable sexual and racial structures.

Before the incident with the dietician at the age of five, his skin is described as “a dead level parchment color,” or “parchment-colored” (*Light in August* 34, 487), implying that he has no sense of race, racial differentiation, or how this might have anything to do with his identity. This parchment will be inscribed upon, however, after his first encounter with sexualized violence. As he watches the dietician and the intern through the curtain, whilst illicitly stealing toothpaste at risk of likely corporeal punishment, he does not either have an idea of sex or sexual mores, sensing shame only because of his own transgression of eating toothpaste. He cannot make sense of what he sees, only describing the words of the dietician, “No! No! Not here. Not now... No, Charley! Please!” and “I’m scared!” (488). While Christmas is not the victim of any violence, the description of the scene is heavily coded as primal and even traumatic. Subsequently, the submission and fear of a female, in addition to the connotations of haste and shame, are connected with sexual encounter, only further paralleled by the reaction of the dietician when his own fear and shame (of being discovered to be eating

toothpaste) are revealed. The words and actions of the male, the intern, are not documented except for their “ruthless” quality (488), further differentiating the experience and purpose of sex for men and women. The encoding of sexuality as violence is contingent on this traumatic memory. Christmas’s initial disassociation will recur throughout the novel: he “was not hearing anything now...He seemed to be turned in upon himself, watching himself sweating, watching himself” with an “astonished fatalism” which ties the bodily experiences of nausea and disassociation to these acts (489). While in the moment of trauma, he looks down upon himself as if disconnected from the reality of his indeterminate racial and gendered differentiation, as well as the societal structures that give sense and meaning to them, when he returns to his body and vomits, he inscribes race and gender onto his body’s “parchment” what he saw as real and tangible attributes of his identity even if they are not yet parsable. The dietician’s refusal to punish him along the standards he has come to expect for transgressions only heightens his alacrity, which she attributes to Blackness. He is cast out from his home on account of a racial claim, firmly connecting his racial identity with fear, shame, and loathing, compounded and inextricable with his ideas of sexuality and gender dynamics.

These reactions carry over significantly into his second sexual encounter, one that refrains and recalls the fragmentation caused previously. As a young teenager, he is presented with a heterosexual and homosocial encounter in which he may re-enact this

site of trauma and violence, but with a different position; according to social expectation, he attempts to rape a young black girl with a group of other white boys. In this scene, he is able to play the dominant role of the intern, subjugating the female dietician in this iteration of the original encounter. He does not yet experience or understand sexual desire, but “a terrible haste. There was something in him trying to get out, like when he had used to think of toothpaste” (156). Upon entering the shed to the young girl, his reactions, again, manifest as sensory and formless: he feels “enclosed by the womanshenegro,”⁸ noting the smell as connoting both her gender and race, and relives “the haste, driven, having to wait until she spoke” because he is still misunderstanding of his role in the interaction (514).

Christmas’s fear of sexual abnegation, along with the vivid recurrence of the fear and haste noted in his first encounter, cause him to become wildly violent; while he is expected to fill the role of the sexually and racially dominant aggressor in this encounter, he again becomes the dietician: fearful, racially insecure, and lacking control. He disassociates again, unable to place himself or the other actor in this iteration: “he kicked her hard, kicking into and through a choked wail of surprise and fear...striking at the voice, perhaps, feeling her flesh anyway, enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste” (514). The woman herself is collapsed into a void of ruthless, wordless sound;

⁸ The formal decision to collapse the gender and race of the young victim could write its own book—but I pause to remark on the way focalization centers subjectivity on white, male characters in this novel, indeed, all of Faulkner’s novels. In this passage specifically, interaction with the black woman is a feeling rather than a human other, collapsed to “womanshenegro,” an unknowable and an inseparable concept for Christmas.

once he touches her, he must shatter the recognition of fear immediately. Violence is the only option he has to reestablish the dynamic of aggression and dominance over the female, but it ultimately fails, yet again, to lead Christmas to any definitive understanding of his place in gender and racial hierarchies. He is not white, and he has not proved himself as a sexually dominant male, and therefore still cannot play his discursive part in this trope. Ironically, he only regains a sense of personhood after he returns home to McEachern who beats him viciously without proof or reason; the boy's body transforms in pain of "ecstasy and self-crucifixion" from "wood or stone" into "an eagle, hard, sufficient, potent, remorseless, strong" (517). In the natural order of Calvinist morality, order is tentatively, temporarily reestablished by corporal punishment. To me, Faulkner seems to align Christmas's search for a sense of self and identity as at least partially a moral or ethical project; the enforcement of subject roles comes from a society with particularly stringent and polarizing implication and ultimately drives Christmas's affectation. Trauma acts not necessarily to fragment the protagonist, but to link certain experiences together as formative and meaningful in recollection. The novel's structure as a whole replicates this recollection—we know he murders, and the novel is consumed with finding reasons why.

As Christmas grows older, however, the society's dogmatic set of beliefs regarding sin and authority reveals itself as insufficient. In his relationship with Bobbie, his formative sexual identity can be performed publicly and privately. He first notices not Bobbie, but the way men act toward Bobbie; he sardonically remarks, "I don't even

know that what they are saying to her is something that men do not say to a passing child” (529), though it is an obvious juxtaposition with the conduct between the devout and impersonal McEacherns. Having passed preadolescence, Christmas begins to recognize the patterns of cross-gender interaction in the diner and fuses this with the idea of Bobbie as a partner. Idealizing after watching the men, Christmas thinks, “there is already something for love to feed upon: that sleeping I know now why I struck refraining that negro girl three years ago and that she must know it too and be proud too, with waiting and pride” (529). His heterosexual infatuation with Bobbie is also a homosocial infatuation with the role of the men in watching her, and he projects that he can “correct” his sexual fragmentation by congress with her. When he first meets her alone, he calls himself “Joe Christmas” to renew and redeem himself from his traumatic history (534), positioning this relationship as one entirely crucial to his sense of identity. Rewriting his past, even at this young age, is presented as his act of self-reclamation and his act of naming. When Christmas finds that Bobbie has been unfaithful, however, she responds to his physical violence with “Not here!” directly replaying the shame and fear of the dietician’s plea (488, 545). He recognizes this as a manifestation of his emotional turmoil and reiteration of sexual dysfunction and voids himself again literally through the physiological reaction of nausea rather than ejaculation. Following this encounter, Christmas resolves to take up the habits, self-presentation, and gender performance of the men in the diner; this gendered play-acting allows him to “learn the ways of men” (546) and find comfort in the gender hierarchy despite his trauma and lack of

experience, as he seeks social validation to the point of even calling Bobbie “his whore” (545). The emotional sensitivity and trust that allowed their relationship to become remotely egalitarian is compromised by societal and internal expectations of gender roles and sexual conduct.

This conflict comes to a head in Bobbie’s betrayal after McEachern discovers their relationship. The violent encounters in this series of scenes are interrelated and sequential, beginning with McEachern’s Biblically dramatic entrance into the dance hall as if “guided and now propelled by some militant Michael Himself,” seeing in his adopted son “the face of Satan” transformed from the face of a child (549). At the fracture of his carefully constructed identity, Christmas disassociates once again, characterizing his relationship with his own body theatrically in the scene of conflict: “to Joe it all rushed away, roaring, dying, leaving him in the center of the floor, the shattered chair clutched in his hand” (550). Christmas is completely mentally absent at the moment of McEachern’s murder (prefiguring the narrative void of Joanna’s climactic murder) and his own body becomes disconnected from its motion and agency. In the subsequent conflict with Mrs. McEachern, his maternal figure, the description of his disassociation is visually striking in its coloration:

“He laughed back, into the lamp; he turned his head and his laughing, running on up the stairs, vanishing as he ran, vanishing upward from the head down as if he were running headfirst and laughing into something that way obliterating him like a picture in chalk being erased from a blackboard.” (552)

Stripped of his social ingratiation and emotionally compromised by attacks on his identity and his lover, the violence of the previous scene effaces Christmas's sense of self throughout the sequence. He intends to marry Bobbie and begin his life somewhere as an independent, socially sure white man, but the shattering of his social identity was tied to an axis of self-representation and performance of male identity that will no longer remain tenable. Bobbie is suddenly focalized as a lifeless, grotesque object: "her motionless hand looked as big and dead and pale as a piece of cooking meat" (558) as she betrays his trust in her vicious racial allegations, which Christmas focalizes as the gruesomely sexual "someone holding her as she struggled and shrieked, her hair wild with the jerking and tossing of her head; her face, even her mouth, in contrast to the hair as still as a dead mouth in a dead face" while he remains "just noise, not registering at all: just part of the long wind" (559). Bobbie's racial slur collapses his tenuous positioning within sexual and racial structures; Christmas's interaction and reenactment of the traumatic is fundamentally a reckoning with an incoherent self.

Consequently, Christmas springs numbly into the men who beat him, "There was nothing in his eyes at all, no pain, no surprise" as the men accordingly attempt to see "if his blood is black" (560). He feels nothing physiologically, but is able to move only to "lick his lip a little, somewhat as a child might lick a cooking spoon": his race makes him the target of emotional compromise and bodily obliteration, reverting him back to the infancy in which he was first labeled "black" (560) and evoking the role of the dietician as a constructor and destructor of identity, though formally enlisted to feed him. It is on

this platform that Joe Christmas constructs an identity wholly incompatible with the gender and racial dynamics of his surrounding society and enacts this fragmented identity through violence. His insecurity about his sexuality and race are constructed and performed in sites of violence, both allowing him and denying him access to the power-based differentiation exhibited by social positioning. On the parchment of his body, each violent and traumatic act re-writes his gender, sexual, and racial identity.

RECOVERY PIECE

“I’m me,” she whispered. “Me.”

Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. Back in bed with her discovery, she stared out the window at the dark leaves of the horse chestnut.

“Me,” she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, “I want.. I want to be... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful.”

Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Fiction authors’ endeavors to represent trauma are not useless, far from it—rather, their attempts very aptly characterize the ways humans deal with the very most terrifying and very most affective aspects of our existence. We want things to make sense. We want to say *yes, this happened, and I think I understand that now, and for your sake, or mine, here’s what it meant*. It’s not going to necessarily be accurate to our interiority nor to the outside world, nor will it even reach every reader in its rhetorical strategy. But the act of attempting to make sense of senseless things, with all of the flaws in that project, is the ritual we as individuals and cultures constantly undergo. The creation of narrative is a process used in clinical treatment of trauma, constituting a powerful connection between narrative form and the biological and psychological reality of subjects. The fundamental stages of recovery follow the subjectivity of the trauma’s development—

recovery is equally as varied, expansive, transgressive between subject, society, and space. But long-term recovery must always include, “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (J. Herman 3), and representations can serve a role in this process.

By addressing this process in both content in form, Toni Morrison and William Faulkner’s works do innovative things with our preconceptions on how history and memory operate on a literary level. When we acknowledge how literature functions as a part of our national consciousness, our interaction with trauma narrative makes us attentive to the functioning of testimony and the way society deals with pain. These novels serve a wider cultural function in a “catastrophic age,” an age which, it has been argued, trauma may “provide the very link between culture” (Caruth 11).

One of the fantastic and almost magical aspects of treating trauma as an illness is the fact that *narrativizing*, or organizing one’s experiences into a parsable, communicable storyline has proven therapeutic for those undergoing treatment. It might be useful to imagine that the process of the reader, in reading traumatic representation, participates in this process. One thing in common between these two authors’ oeuvres is the fact that they make their readers “do work.” Perhaps we can imagine this work to actually have some transferrable performative function, by making the reader assemble and parse these representations on their own. To some degree these novels help us talk-therapy our way through our own national history and cultural legacy of slavery, sexual exploitation, and bigoted stubbornness.

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