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Genre and Trauma: The Role of Form and the Shaping of Meaning in Women's Poetry of  
Violence

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
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by

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The Dissertation of Helen Marie Lovejoy is approved:

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Dedication

*For the spirited, strong-willed, and hardworking women in my family,  
my grandmother, my mother, and my sister,  
Mary, June, and Heidi,*

*and*

*for my own sweet baby girl,  
Lilybeth Mary—  
I hope you are just as stubborn as the rest of us.*

## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Genre and Trauma: The Role of Form and the Shaping of Meaning in Women's Poetry of Violence

by

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In "Trauma and Genre," I explore, through a series of close readings, the relationship between free verse poetry's generic structure and the narration of violent and traumatic events. As I argue, the disruptive, open, and experimental structure of free verse poems reflects the fragmented and fragmenting crisis of violent experience itself and also epitomizes the disjunctive and uneasy access victims have to traumatic memories, a disjuncture that problematizes any narration of the violent and traumatic. Ultimately, through my focus on free verse poetry, I pursue the question: how do specific conceptions and definitions of generic forms—as forms shaped by various literary, cultural, financial and political forces and institutions—influence and define how writers and readers portray and understand violence and trauma?

I situate my exploration and discussion within the late-twentieth century American feminist movement to reflect on how the movement's poets used the free verse form as a way to rethink, rewrite, and challenge the conventional, dominant narratives

that structured both public and private understandings of violence against women. The writers whose work I focus on include Judy Grahn, Ntozake Shange, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Dorothy Allison, and Laura Esparza.

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## Introduction

*“Love,” like “fire” and “falling,” is a placeholder for the unsayable.*

--Annie G. Rogers

The opening epigraph, taken from Rogers’s *The Unsayable: The Hidden Language of Trauma*, beautifully encapsulates the predominant tensions and questions found in contemporary studies of violence and trauma. Across a range of current disciplinary fields, from clinical psychology and English to philosophy and sociology, and despite the proliferation of texts on the topic, trauma remains the “unsayable,” the indescribable object, state of being, or event that language can never adequately express. For many trauma theorists, including Rogers, attempts at articulating trauma represent a failure of language. How, she asks, do we begin to speak about violence “[w]hen all the traces of history have been erased and the body itself is inscribed with an unknown language[?] . . . This thing—I’ll call it trauma—enters our speech as if by stealth . . . it sounds as though we are speaking in code to one another and to ourselves” (xiv). In a parallel description, Shoshana Felman, author of “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching” and co-author with Dori Laub of *Witnessing: Crises of Testimony in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, writes that trauma is an excess of language: the traumatic is composed “of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrances, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference” (“Education and Crisis” 16). Both Rogers and Felman

figure the traumatic as something disrupting and destroying the historical, cultural, and personal frameworks that would allow individuals and communities to address it. Felman refers to this disruption as a “crisis,” while Cathy Caruth, editor of *Trauma: Unclaimed Experience*, one of the foundational texts of contemporary trauma studies, refers to it as a “new ignorance,” a breaking of previous structures, contexts, and narratives. Traumatic events are described as erasing the possibility of stories and testimonies. The traumatic exists only in traces outside of a given culture’s understanding of history, time, subjectivity, and community.

My project was inspired by these questions, questions about language’s limits when we confront the expansive possibilities and void of speaking trauma. In order to enter into this discussion, I focus on one intervention into the silence as I explore through the genre of poetry the struggle of feminists and feminist-identified writers in coming to voice specifically so as to articulate violence and trauma. While a study of a genre, such as poetry, may not make trauma and violence any more transparent within language, a study of genre can reveal how narrativizing violence and trauma into specific forms and frames both validates and challenges how we communicate pain and grief. As the writers whom I focus on reveal, the speaking of violence is most often a political act, a challenge to dominating forces—to the institutions and people that seek to silence us. The women’s writing explores genre in a way that finds new forms and gives new meanings to the unspoken. As the poet Honor Moore states in the introduction to *Poems from the Women’s Movement*, during the movement, through poetry, “the inner lives of women came into language . . . manifested in poems that range from furious to contemplative,

outright funny to analytical, grief-stricken to visionary. A new language began—not a language that was linguistically new . . . but a language new to them” (xvi). Poetry, especially the free verse poetry often associated with the women’s movement, has an open and disruptive form that generated this “new” way of speaking, this metaphorical “new language.”

I have selected the work of feminists not only because contemporary writing by women is, simply enough, what I like to read best, but also, and more importantly to my intervention into questions around trauma and violence, I am taking this focus because these writers consciously and adamantly speak about violence and trauma in their writing. The writers whom I focus on—Judy Grahn, Ntozake Shange, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Dorothy Allison, and Laura Esparza—position their work as confronting national, cultural, and political archives that make violence against women “unsayable.” As I explore throughout my project, these writers understand their texts as pushing against how violence and trauma have been traditionally articulated; they hope to open up space for activism against women’s vulnerable and violated position within American society and to highlight the ways in which violence and trauma define a woman’s life. This invisibility of violence against women is continually reiterated by another key figure of the women’s movement, Judith Lewis Herman, author of *Father-Daughter Incest* and *Trauma and Recovery*, both works that have influenced my own. A feminist and anti-war activist as well as one of the early proponents for the clinical recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder, Herman famously claimed that women in violent relationships and homes can, like men returning from war, suffer from the

traumatic aftereffects of violence or from PTSD. Although she was later critiqued as universalizing women's experiences of violence, Herman's work validated and made more public those experiences, especially ones of sexual abuse and domestic violence.

All of these writers, as many of the women writing during the movement did, also contend with conceptions of testifying, witnessing, and autobiography—important speaking and writing strategies when thinking about the role of violence and trauma in our lives. What does it mean to speak of violence against our individual self? What does it mean to speak of violence against others? To speak communally? And, ultimately, how do we come to speak about ourselves when the violence we want to name represents simply an ignorance, invisibility, or lack within our nation and community, and in turn, within our own understandings of identity? How do we speak against something that has no public archive?

In order to answer these questions, I want to begin this project by defining several terms whose meanings are crucial to my textual readings. As my definitions will no doubt highlight, however, the meanings of these terms are themselves not very straightforward but shift according to varying social, political, and cultural climates. These crucial terms include *violence*, *trauma*, *autobiography*, *personal voice*, *genre*, and *poetry*.

### ***Violence and Trauma***

I take my most basic definitions of *violence* and *trauma* from sociologist Kai Erikson who, in "Notes on Trauma and Community," categorizes *trauma* as "*how people react*" to moments and/or experiences of violence "rather than *what* [those experiences] *are*" [emphasis in original] (184-185). Most basically, *violence* is the occurrence

initiating the pain, while *trauma* is the psychic and emotional scarring and response to the experience of violence. Trauma may be imagined as the way a culture and / or an individual comes to recognize, speak, or grapple with violence and the memories of that violence.

Violence usually takes one of two forms. First, it might be classified as an event, a moment marked by physical and / or psychic pain that devastates notions of normal, lived experience. Second, the violence may be one that is intricately knitted into normal, everyday patterns such as living with poverty, living as a marginalized citizen / non-citizen, and / or living in an environment of abuse. Poststructuralist theorist Ann Cvetkovich in *An Archive of Feelings* labels this second form of violence an “insidious form . . . all too often persistent and normalized” (32). Insidious violence is embedded within the very structures of society revealing itself through institutional, social and cultural racism, homophobia, sexism, and economic disempowerment. Such offenses and attitudes against marginalized subjects in part occur because of the very identity markers bringing about their marginalized status—their race, class, gender, and / or sexuality. As feminist therapist Laura S. Brown points out in “Not outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” the violence against disenfranchised subjects is “pervasive” throughout their daily existence and is usually propagated by the very modes through which “the dominant culture and its forms are expressed and perpetuated” (102). Insidious violence is intricately connected to a culture, society, and a nation’s self-definition, and national identity is in part developed because of the very conceptions of violence within that nation. In *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek introduces and theorizes what he

terms *objective violence*—an understanding of violence similar to Brown’s and Cvetkovich’s readings of insidious violence. Objective violence is “inherent to [the] ‘normal’ state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as . . . violent” (2). Objective violence remains invisible because it is naturalized. It both creates and is maintained by social structures, practices, and institutions. While insidious violence, on the one hand, is made visible through the oppression and “psychic scarring” it leaves on marginalized subjects, objective violence is defined as that which is so “‘normal’” it becomes unseen and unquestioned. It is the very basis of society, speaking to the commonness or mundane-nature of violence and violating discourses in our society. Žižek theorizes that because of its invisibility, objective violence is the deadliest form of violence, serving as a foundation for other forms.

While event forms of violence may be recognizable, nameable, and in turn punishable, insidious and objective violence is generally unnamed and unacknowledged by dominant and national institutions. While disenfranchised subjects may recognize the ways they are oppressed within a society—the “namelessness” which marks their lives—those in power may be blind to such violence or simply refuse to acknowledge and thus punish this form of violence against such “non-citizens.” Definitions of citizens and non-citizens, as well as of human and non-human (as Brown notes), are intimately connected to how we understand violence. Within national and public narratives of violence, violence is typically defined as that which occurs against “normalized” bodies: “The dominant . . . writes the diagnostic manuals and informs the public discourse, on which

we have built our images of ‘real’ trauma. ‘Real’ trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim” (Brown 102). Thus the archive of violence reflects the experiences of society’s dominant and most visible members. The “‘real’” trauma against these members includes things such as car accidents, natural disasters, and war—violent events that do not necessarily happen to individuals because of their subjectivity / identity markers. Such events seem to happen “‘accidentally’” to members of the dominant group and do not mark them as somehow pathological or wrong as such events occur outside of what is viewed as “the range of normal human experience” (Brown 110). Individuals who deal with forms of insidious violence everyday are as a consequence seen as less than human, as inherently pathological and victimized. Furthermore, violent acts against marginalized individuals may arise out of insidious violence. An individual’s vulnerable social position may make him or her more exposed to violent situations; individual traumas can thus be located inside of larger social mechanisms and paradigms.

This conception of insidious violence is important to my project not only because feminist writers often confront forms of insidious violence such as racism, sexism, and homophobia but also because insidious violence as a concept allows for a theorization of violence and trauma in relation to social and cultural forces. Insidious violence offers an important way of thinking about violence and trauma that is not necessarily tied to psychoanalysis and clinical therapy, fields where the study of trauma was originally based. Instead, insidious violence marks a need “to change social structures more broadly rather than just fix individual people” with psychoanalytic therapies (Cvetkovich 33). The

viewing of trauma and violence through the lens of the humanities, cultural studies and sociology will be particularly important to my project as I hope to think of violence and trauma in relation to social and cultural institutions and structures (in particular, the structure of genre) as opposed to through a predominantly psychoanalytic framework. I say this not to undermine the importance of psychoanalysis in trauma studies; like other theorists, including Brown and Cvetkovich, I want to both account for the social conditions of violence and trauma that the psychoanalytic framework alone does and can not address, but I want to acknowledge as well the power of psychoanalysis in giving definition to Western conceptions of violence. Trauma scholars often cite Sigmund Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," written in response to increased reports of war neuroses following WWI, as a foundational text for the field. In the text, Freud describes the traumatic as "excitations from the outside that are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" (607), a metaphorical border around the ego. He argues that traumatic neurosis is a psychosomatic response to this "break" that disrupts and fatigues mental capacities. Individuals become obsessed and fixated with the traumatic events, so much so that these events disrupt their dreams, and victims become "occupied in their waking lives" with not "thinking of [them]" (598). Individuals who suffer from traumatic neurosis are often obsessed with repeating the event in various forms and actions and, yet, with simultaneously avoiding and repressing these memories. This simultaneous return to and fleeing from the event, according to Freud, is the cure to the trauma but also a painful symptom. Contemporary scholars have critiqued Freud's arguments by claiming that psychoanalytical theories posit a universal, ahistorical picture of trauma based on an

individual's personal response to that violence, an ahistorical understanding that fails to account for the way social, medical, legal, literary, and cultural forces and discourses also influence a given society's definitions of and responses to violence and trauma. But threads of psychoanalysis still find their way into many sociological and cultural theories and discussions of violence as Freud's disjunctive, paradoxical picture of trauma continues to be an important part of the term's definition. Like Cvetkovich, I too adhere to the assertion that traumatic experiences can be known only through fragmented and disjunctive memories. If the traumatic could be articulated with ease, then the writers whom I review would not have struggled with form and language in order to confront, portray, and articulate painful memories.

Struggles with both event and insidious violence are prominent themes and topics consistently explored in the work of Grahn, Shange, Moraga, Anzaldúa, Allison, and Esparza. The women make visible issues of domestic violence, homophobia, racism, poverty, rape, physical assault, genocide, and historical erasure, among other things. Because women's experiences of violence and trauma have largely been erased from the American public archive and canon, their writing seeks to remedy this erasure by, in part, listing or naming the violence, speaking it "bluntly" and "plainly" as Allison states (*Two or Three* 42). For them, any understanding of the violence against themselves or their community can be linked to national narratives and myths that often negatively define them and their communities. As members of such disenfranchised communities, they are used to having their lives spoken for them, and so as these six women writers confront

violence and trauma in their work, they also struggle with giving personal and autobiographical voice to their individual and collective experiences.

### ***Autobiography and Personal Voice***

Violence and trauma complicate self-representation, a point reiterated and supported throughout my four chapters. In this introduction, I want simply to outline what I mean when I use the terms *autobiography* and *personal voice* (and most especially how these two terms interrelate). I also want to review here some of the key arguments associated with feminist autobiography theory. Of course, scholars of trauma have made their own interventions into self-narration, most clearly through discussions of testimony and witnessing, and I interweave these theories around testimony throughout my project as I think about the conflation of poetic and testimonial practices in the works reviewed. Consequently, my comments on testifying, trauma theory, and autobiography will be minimal in this introduction.

Conventional autobiographical texts arising out of European and American authorial practices are marked, as Georges Gusdorf records in his foundational piece on the genre, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” by the “autonomous adventure” of a “man [who] knows himself a responsible” and “essential agent” completing his life narrative as a “unity of [a] life across time” (31, 37). The traditional autobiography encompasses a humanist tendency that imagines the autobiographical speaker to be the director of his (and such speakers are typically male) world and narrative. The agent is the center from which all action and thought projects and he produces a cohesive and linear narrative crafted in a fashion he finds satisfying to the recollection and retelling of

his own life as he “search[es for] his self through his history” (39). This self both creates his own history and has a place in the larger social history. As feminist theorist and Native American scholar Hertha D. Sweet Wong notes, these standard autobiographies call “attention to one’s own accomplishments” and one’s importance within a society (169). The texts offer a “monolithic construction of identity” for an individual who is “unified, stable, autonomous, essential and representable” (Wong 169) or who is a singular, sovereign subject.

In a comprehensive study of feminist autobiography theory and its critique of dominant, Western understandings of autobiography and subjectivity, “Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices,” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write that feminist autobiography theory moved in two waves, a parsing out of the theory—and in turn understandings of women’s subjectivity / identity—that will prove important later in my project. First-wave feminist autobiography criticism often works through a “corrective” model, offering women’s autobiography as an alternative to the male-centered canon. First-wave theorists such as Susan Stanford Friedman author of “Women’s Autobiographical Selves” speculate that women’s experience of self, body, and identity are inherently or essentially different from men’s, and therefore women write from an alternative understanding of language. This essential female identity is formed, as Stanford Friedman argues, through “*identification, interdependence, and community*” [emphasis in original] (75). First-wave theorists often argue that women understand themselves only through their relationships with others as mothers, wives / sexual

partners, workers, and community members; this includes seeing themselves as part of a larger, feminist community, or to use a term from the movement, *sisterhood*.

Many second-wave critics question this image of the authentic, whole female self who seems to transcend historical and cultural particularities to speak as a communal, non-autonomous *Woman*. For such critics, this *Woman* does nothing to challenge dominant, Western discourses about identity as she becomes a universalized and normalized image of femininity. For second-wave theorists such as Leigh Gilmore, Joan Scott, Hertha D. Sweet Wong, Françoise Lionnet, and Carolyn Kay Steedman, women's self-representational writing breaks with the traditional bounds of autobiographical genre and becomes a site of resistance and agency both against the way women are marked and interpellated in society and against the image of the dominant subject as outlined by Gusdorf. Moreover, second-wave critics question the stance taken in many of these first-wave autobiographical discussions that a woman writing and speaking of herself becomes inherently political and resistant. Such an understanding of women's autobiographical texts only serves as a misreading of a woman speaking about herself. While this is an important and valid point, its application in my project is less significant as a theoretical intervention. While this might not be true of all their work, in the texts I focus on, Grahn, Shange, Moraga, Anzaldúa, Allison, and Esparza envision and posit their work as challenging and resistant; to view the poetry and texts as less than a political challenge against invisibility would be a misreading.

One of the key second-wave theorists of my project is Leigh Gilmore, and I want to take a moment here to focus on her arguments as I am so indebted to them. In her

*Autobiographics*, she argues through a Foucauldian and poststructuralist lens that we need to understand autobiography and the subject writing that autobiography as both creations of specific historical, cultural, political, and economic discourses. For Gilmore, understandings of autobiography are intimately linked to a society's understandings of categories like "truth," "gender" and "genre;" one's gender becomes linked to one's ability to speak representatively, and Gilmore hopes to denaturalize such concepts as discursive disciplinary techniques that control and define women's self-expression, subjectivity, and relationships to discourses about "truth" and power. Historically, as Gilmore points out, women's voices and texts have been appropriated by men, and women are viewed as unable to speak the truth about their own lives. One's ability to tell the truth, to have agency and to speak legitimately within traditional autobiographical formations is linked to whether or not one is male or female, and it is culturally and historically specific who may tell the truth and who may judge what the truth is. As men have greater access to representations of truth, for women gender is produced through a "rhetorical violence" (164) that will not allow them to speak for themselves or to possess subjectivity. Thus their gender bars them from access to genre, including autobiography, because they do not have access to "truth" and representation. Such understandings of truth, gender, and power parallel my previous discussion of insidious violence. Through defining what constitutes normal, valid, or to use Brown's term, *real*, experiences of violence, dominant powers and institutions shape understandings of the world and of truth. Not recognizing themselves and their experiences within public discourse about violence marked a "rhetorical violence" for women. In this way, Gilmore's book speaks

precisely to the way women have not been authorized to articulate personal and cultural histories of violence and trauma.

If, however, according to postmodern theorists such as Gilmore, subjectivity is a result of competing discourses and there is no true self at the center, then women may write themselves into discourse and become agents of self-creation. Autobiography becomes for women a moment in which they can name and represent themselves in relation to or against standards of truth. They can exchange a position of object for subjectivity or for an act that is a “self-remembering in which identity is preserved” and the self is maintained (Gilmore 40). Access to autobiography means an access to an identity. Women’s autobiography has the potential to create a crisis in discourses of gender and truth and of course to rupture and change notions of violence and trauma.

Thus, women have the power to autobiographically insert themselves into history, a call to voice and action that aligns with the politics of feminism. As African American feminist historian Winifred Breines documents in *The Trouble Between Us*, “One of the slogans associated with the radical women’s movement was ‘the personal is political’—the idea that individual lives were not simply personal and private but were shaped by society, politics, economics, and culture” (93). Part of feminism’s power was allowing women to see their everyday existence as a basis for political engagement and as a vehicle for larger social changes. Embedded within this slogan is the autobiographical imperative to be conscious of one’s own life and to situate that life within larger social frameworks, institutions, and practices. Consciousness-raising meetings and feminist activism often encouraged women to speak and act from their own experiences, and, as I

argue, such speaking was imagined as disrupting the archive or discourse around violence against women in America. Feminists believed and continual to believe that making women's experiences more visible is a way to rupture the status quo and accepted narrations of violence and trauma that allow forms of insidious violence to be perpetuated and that keep women locked into specific discourses of subjectivity and truth in America.

The poets whom I write about address these discourses of subjectivity, violence, and truth in various ways, and I want to conclude my discussion of the autobiographical by thinking of the poet's own positions within this genre. Throughout my review of the poems, I conflate the author writing the poem with the poem's narrator / speaker, and I want to acknowledge here that this is not a simple or straightforward assumption. It is impossible simply to collapse an author's subjectivity into a poem's speaker / narrator, even when the author is using the first person voice throughout the piece. Even when authors fully acknowledge their use of autobiographical voice, there still exists that gap, as Gilmore theorizes, between the author and the individual or self he or she describes in the text. Both the author and the "character" are separate subjects within shifting historical and cultural discourses. Needless to say, any autobiographical work performs the autobiographical only problematically. Yet I describe the poet as the one speaking in the poem throughout my project even though none of the poets actually label their pieces *autobiography* (although every piece I read, with the exception of Anzaldúa's "*El Sonavabitché*," is in the first person). I make this conflation because I am looking at poetry by writers who fully situate themselves within a feminist theory and project that links the personal to the political. These are poets who recognize and believe that

personal experiences are important for women to voice. Consequently, even if they are not describing events that actually happened to them, they may be using, as Tiffany Ana López argues, the personal for a springboard into critical engagement with violence and trauma. Personal experience may have led them to take up the subject, the affect, and responses to violence that they write about. Dorothy Allison calls such writing that engages with personal experience “condensed and reinvented experience” (*Trash* 7). This kind of writing takes the autobiographical and turns it into another story. What I am describing here is not so much the autobiographical then, as threads of the personal that exist in the writing.

This tension between speaking autobiographically and personally engaging with violence gestures toward another issue that often finds its way into narratives of trauma: the role of fantasy in the story of violence. As theorists such as Gilmore, Cvetkovich, and the poet and writer Gregory Orr argue, part of the power of speaking against violence is being able to position oneself against an event and against a discourse that turns an individual into a passive victim. Speaking autobiographically against violence is in part an act of fantasizing or imagining a life elsewhere away from violence because such speaking is an act of imagining a subjectivity that has not been historically erased from public discourses. Such autobiographical writing is an act of positioning oneself into a narrative. This slippage between the autobiographical and the fictional becomes an important one throughout my project because narratives of trauma are marked by a desire to imagine a new self and a life elsewhere, to imagine the self differently. Even writers like Allison and Esparza, who claim to be writing autobiographically, note the

problematics of such autobiographic claims in terms of the traumatic. As I write in Chapter Three, Allison claims that her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure* is not really autobiographical but actually presents, through the lens of her own family, a theory about how we speak of violence and how individuals and communities can change the lies and myths about themselves. In my fourth chapter, I look at Esparza's "I DisMember the Alamo," a piece that is positioned within the autobiographical but in which Esparza continually imagines herself as members of her family as she seeks to tell the story not just of herself but of a larger history. Both of these works rupture the borders of autobiography in important ways; for both Allison and Esparza, pushing against these borders opens up important spaces for how trauma can be articulated. As it does with everything else, trauma continually problematizes and blurs definitions of autobiography, fiction, personal voice, community, and narrative.

### ***Genre and Poetry / the Poetic***

Much like the other terms defined here, *genre*'s meaning is also shifting. As Marjorie Perloff argues in *Postmodern Genres*, a "genre, far from being a normative category, is always culture-specific and, to a high degree, historically determined" (7). No universal directive exists for the classification of literature; instead such categorizations are determined by a number of interconnected social, cultural, and historical meanings. The importance or the cultural and social value of a specific genre continually shifts in relation to literary canons. In *Kinds of Literature*, Alastair Fowler develops his theory of "generic mutability," arguing that no genre is fixed as "change in the population of an individual genre gradually alters its character" and one genre's "alteration disturbs the

interrelations of several whole genres” (11) so that the shifting borders of one genre can only be understood in relation to the shifting borders of all others. New texts continually test the definitions of a genre, a point taken up by Jacques Derrida in “The Law of Genre”: “there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (65). New texts disrupt the very genres they are placed within and because generic criterion is culturally, socially, and historically particular, discussions of genre often reflect how knowledge is transmitted and organized within any given time period and social setting.

Thus, despite its fluidity, part of any genre’s role is still to establish understandings of truth within its specific social setting as a generic form becomes the legitimate or recognized mode for describing, understanding, and relating to the world. As Celeste Schenck writes in “All of a Piece: Women’s Poetry and Autobiography,” despite the lack of interest in genres in recent literary scholarship and despite the proliferation of “[m]ixed, unclassifiable, blurred, or hybrid genres,” in general, generic categories “remain discrete and intact” (283). As a consequence, any review of genre must position itself between “norm and departure, between convention and confusion” (Schenck 283), acknowledging both the fluctuating nature of generic categorization but also the staying power of such categories. For Gilmore, the power of “genre” as a stable concept is the way it is “produced through a variety of discourses and practices that depict ‘the individual’ in relation to ‘truth,’ ‘the real,’ and ‘identity’” (*Autobiographics* 19). Genres are “policed, regulated, enforced;” they are “a technology that is read for truthfulness” (*Autobiographics* 19). By studying genres as sites that in part order “truth” and “reality”

within specific social contexts, it is possible to see how they reflect as well as affect the values and assumptions of those specific social and cultural contexts, a point that holds true for my own exploration into women's poetry of violence. A genre can work to create identifiable "truths" about violence and trauma in American literature, "truths" that authors may conform to or question through their adherence to or disruption of generic structure.

Part of what any text about trauma must confront is the way that violence and trauma rupture the victims' relations to "normalized" institutions and daily social, cultural, and political practices, including narrating, speaking, and writing; a victim's ability to enunciate experience within any genre is problematic because violence is such a disruptive force. Consequently, if violence and trauma continually disrupt generic classification, then how can I work to define something like *women's poetry of violence*? While such a category can no doubt have a variety of meanings and texts placed within it, for myself and for this project, there are two key features—apart from their association with the women's movement—that link together the very diverse set of writers and texts that I review. First, the pieces I look at place, as Jan Montefiore writes in *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*, "female experience at the centre of their aesthetic" (3). In other words, the poems I look at are about women's experiences; this experience is staged as autobiographical or as simply reflecting possible shared experiences of violence among a particular community of women. "Female experience," however, is always a problematic category. While early feminist writers largely and unquestioningly defined this experience in terms of gender oppression, the six

writers I focus on see it as a much broader, much more individualized and particular categorization. Every woman's experience of oppression is different, as is every woman's view of herself and her community in relation to categories such as *victim* and *survivor*. Throughout my project, I highlight women's personal and distinct conceptions of commonality, individuality, and violence.

The second feature of the poetry I review is innovative generic structure. Every piece I look at is a free verse poem with a form that defies readers' expectations of what and how to read poetry. Each woman's work is unique, and so it is hard to simply categorize every piece's innovative structure here. Ultimately, each poem, however, might be described by what Adrienne Rich says of her own poetry in "Poetry and Experience": "instead of poems *about* experience I am getting poems that are experiences" [emphasis in original] (90). In other words, through form, these poems actively engage readers to make and find meaning. As the readers "make" the poem, the authors hope the audience will move toward witnessing and activism against violence and trauma.

### **Project Summary**

Historically, my project spans from the early 1960s into the mid-1990s, very loosely following the late twentieth-century, American women's movement. Like many civil rights movements, the woman's movement was also a response to violence, and its historical rise in the early 1960s has been linked to other political and social movements occurring at the time, particularly the African American civil rights movement, the predominantly white New Left movement, the Chicano Movement, and the antiwar /

veteran support movements associated with Vietnam. All of these movements protested violence and oppression, whether the violence of racism and second-class citizenship, the violence of alienation and authoritarianism, the violence of poor working conditions and educational lack, or the violence of war and poor healthcare. Women took up these causes to varying degrees but, as has been well documented, were dissatisfied with the often-sexist practices of male leadership and fellow members.<sup>1</sup> The feminist movement was inspired not only by women's involvement with and disappointment in these other movements, but also by the activism and practices of early, twentieth-century suffragettes.<sup>2</sup> Throughout my project, I refer to this movement varyingly as the *women's movement*, *feminist movement*, and *women's liberation* to mark the general time period of women's activism. I recognize that this creates a broad, sweeping category that subsumes the variety and activism of many different women during the period. Such activism included not only speaking and raising awareness about gendered violence such as incest, domestic abuse, and sexist practices but also working to end racism, homophobia, poverty, work-place discrimination, environmental pollution, inadequate healthcare and childcare, and even confronting international issues, such as genocide, war, and colonialism. Moreover, for the six poets of this project, various forms of violence

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<sup>1</sup> As Rita J. Simon and Gloria Danziger write in *Women's Movements in America*, "The civil rights movement, worthy and noble as it was, would not work for [women]. The achievements and rewards of the movement would go to blacks and mostly to black men. The New Left was more concerned with a radical political agenda than it was with changing women's social status. As antiwar sentiments loomed larger and larger, women realized that it too would be a movement in which men would act and resist and women would, at best counsel and serve" (4).

<sup>2</sup> For more on the history of this movement, please see the introduction to Simon and Danziger's book, "Women's Movements: An Overview."

intersect in ways that cannot be parsed out or separated; different forms of violence inform others. Consequently, while I sometimes use the labels for the women's liberation movement broadly and interchangeably, in my discussion of individual poets, I identify how each writer positions her work in relation to various forms of activism and to violence and trauma. Overall, I am interested in the way that the six women writers confront issues of violence and trauma and how this confrontation was in part fueled by late twentieth-century feminist activism, practices, and political goals. I also want to think about how they used poetry as a genre to stage their engagement with various forms of pain and grief. In my first two chapters, I focus most closely on the movement: in Chapter One I align early women's poetry with practices of consciousness-raising, and in my second chapter I look at the publishing of women's poetry collections and multi-genre anthologies that arose out of feminism. In my final two chapters, I look predominantly at the work of Allison, Anzaldúa and Esparza, three women clearly associated with the movement, though not always working toward the same political goals. These last two chapters do present, however, a more intensive or attentive reading of genres, and so my discussion of the movement is less detailed within them.

Throughout my project I rely on a number of critics and scholars to support and make my argument, but there are three whom I was greatly influenced by and I want to acknowledge that here. Leigh Gilmore, Ann Cvetkovich, and Diana Taylor, in their respective works, document the meanings of violence and trauma, the cultural modes of expression available for articulating it, and the variety of social responses and readings of works about violence. As I have already highlighted above, Gilmore offers important

interventions not only into our understandings of autobiography but into more fundamental concepts such as gender, truth, and genre. How we speak about ourselves cannot be parsed out from these conceptions. In *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich explores how artwork, books, and performative pieces by lesbian artists engage with violence and trauma to form an alternative public archive around violence; for Cvetkovich, such artworks remember violence and pain in different and productive ways. Taylor, in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, looks through the lens of performance studies at articulations and performances of trauma in Peru, Argentina, and the United States. Each of the women is an important and necessary voice in the scholarly conversation around violence and trauma, as I hope to highlight throughout my project.

It is through my focus on poetry that I expand on the works of the three women listed above. For me, women's innovative, free verse poetry continually challenges the archive of violence and trauma within American literature. By looking closely at specific texts, I argue that poetry can be a performative act that through its open form embodies the ritual of testifying and, important for the feminist movement, consciousness-raising. I establish this relationship between testifying, performance, the archive, and free verse poetry in chapter one, "Feminist Free Verse Poetry and the Archive and the Repertoire of Violence." In this chapter, I revise the way we understand poetry, thinking of its possibility as both an archival, closed object as well as a performative piece that challenges the way we think about the writing and speaking of violence. For women during the feminist movement, poetry served as a way to list or insert women's experiences of violence into the American public archive. But poetry also represented an

act; it was a way to testify to one's embodied survival—to one's position as a witness of the self—and to perform a ritual that linked one to other women. To make my argument in Chapter One, I draw a parallel between free-verse poetry and consciousness-raising practices, thinking about them as similar spaces of activism as I map a history of feminist poetry beginning with that written during the consciousness-raising (C-R) meetings of the 1960's women's movement. In these meetings, women who had previously not understood their position within larger social structures or who had never given voice to experiences of violence, found a forum for personal testimony, for engaging with political discourses, and for beginning activist endeavors. C-R meetings also served as writing workshops, and women often wrote poetry during these meetings. I conclude this chapter with two close readings: one of Judy Grahn's *A Woman is Talking to Death*, a long poem with a very distinct history in relation to women's C-R practices, and Ntozake Shange's "with no immediate cause," an experimental piece that demonstrates the relationship between feminist activism, violence, and poetry that I work to establish throughout the chapter.

With my second chapter, I move into the rest of the project in which I think about poetry as a genre in relationship to other genres. Thinking about poetry in relation to other texts only highlights its role in creating narratives and meaning around violence and trauma and it helps us to think of other spaces in the articulation of violent events and situations. In Chapter Two, "The Anthology as Autobiography: Understanding the Feminist Public Archive," I review several poetry anthologies that arose out women's liberation. I think about these collections as spaces where the editors staged changing

conceptions of women's subjectivity, community, and violence. As I argue, editors envisioned these anthologies as autobiographical spaces that called women together to create a communal "we." How this "we" is envisioned shifts between anthologies and reflects changing conceptions of women's subjectivity within national, cultural, and political discourses. The anthology, a genre that often finds its way into university classrooms and serves to uphold the literary canon, has a unique position within the nation-state as the anthology serves to house and transmit narratives of shared national identity. The anthology's role within dominant discourses thus makes for an interesting discussion of its role in a movement that seeks to challenge the nation-state and its controlling discourses. Moreover, not only do these feminist poetry anthologies highlight the importance of poetry for feminism, but they also reflect the troubling racism that plagued the movement. As women gave voice to oppression and violence, they did not always do so in ways that created open discourse and acceptance. Just as the anthology can be a space of openness and inclusion, it can simultaneously be a closed, hegemonic space.

From my second chapter, I move into more detailed readings of specific writers as I focus, in my last two chapters, on the work of Dorothy Allison, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Laura Esparza. Chapter Three, "A *Bastard's* Genealogy: Trauma, Poetry, and the 'Trouble' of Dorothy Allison," focuses solely on Allison, a writer who is unique in that through a variety of genres, including poetry, she tells a repeated story of violence. Allison is also a writer who acknowledges that poetry plays a pivotal or foundational role in all of her work, including her most famous work, the novel *Bastard out of Carolina*. I

look at four of Allison's works—the free verse poem “upcountry,” the short story “A River of Names,” *Bastard*, and her experimental memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*—to think about what it means to move a story of trauma from a very disjunctive narrative form to a more “controlled” or structured story with a clearly defined narrative arch and then back again into an experimental testimony that defies generic categorization. As I argue, through this movement, we can see how writers might shift from the “crisis” of violence into a control over violence that allows for a rewriting of the story. In Chapter Three, I also explore questions around autobiography and personal voice that inevitably arise in relation to Allison's work.

In Chapter Four, “The ‘emotional residue of an unnatural boundary’: Gloria Anzaldúa's and Laura Esparza's Experimental, Hybrid Testimonies,” I look at two texts which tie poetry and other genres together in an intimate form. Anzaldúa places poetry within theory and prose, and Esparza literally makes the poetic performative, opening up interesting questions about the role of the actual, surviving body within poetry. In their respective works, Anzaldúa and Esparza both address the violence of borderland subjectivity and the violence of living as a Chicana woman in a racist and sexist American nation-state. Moreover, both reach back into history to rewrite the archived and official narrative of the Mexican-American border. Within both of their works, testimony and poetry become “discursive practices of performativity” (Arrizón, *Queering Mestizaje* 51) that encapsulate the tension between the archive and the repertoire in ways that reach back into my first chapter, and thus serve as an insightful conclusion to the project as I

continually confront the kinds of “rhetorical violence” and archival erasure that has structured women’s narratives of violence and trauma.

I thus begin my project with a history of feminist poetry about violence, to reflect on how feminists worked to make the writing, speaking, and sharing of poetry a political act for women. Their writing had to confront previous narratives about violence in women’s lives: juridical, medical, and cultural understandings of violence that continually foreclosed and denied a woman’s ability to name or to recognize what was happening to her. Through poetry, women began to make the “personal political,” and they began to make the personal communal in ways that were both productive and problematic. As Grahn and Allison argue through their work, these writers refuse to continually reiterate dominant constructions of women’s lives and experiences of violence. Through its disruptive and fragmented generic structure, poetry became an apt mode for such a testimonial project. Testimony, a genre that has traditionally been used within the West to express violent experiences, signals a necessary beginning for any discussion of genre and trauma, and so I open my project by situating the poetic in terms of the testimonial, aligning these two forms’ generic demands and structures. After this opening focus on poetry, I move into discussions of how the poetic intersects with other genres in the archiving and performing of violence. In order to voice the unsayable, a variety of modes and transmissions is needed, an argument that easily aligns with ones made by Gilmore, Cvetkovich, and Taylor. As my close look at Dorothy Allison’s oeuvre reveals, shaping a violent experience into a clearly defined and realist narrative is in itself a disjunctive, nonlinear process that often begins with the poetic.

Throughout this project, I move through a series of close readings as I look at each of the women's texts. While close reading may seem to be the obvious strategy for the reading of poetry (a genre that highlights words' relationships to one another), in my focus on genre, the methodology of close reading becomes a necessary way to assert my thesis. My goal for this project is to explore how poetic form creates a space for traumatic articulations and representations. Thus, I pursue the question, what exactly can the poetic teach us about the traumatic? What can it allow us to say about events that continually seem to defy language itself? In order to answer these questions, I need to review exactly how each of the writers takes up the poetic form against violence. What does each woman expect the poetic to do? While poetic form in and of itself may not seem particularly radical or political, the writers I discuss turn form itself into another way to give voice to the inexpressible, and in this way, they make radical interventions through genre. It is through the rupturing of language and form into poetic verse that these women find the means to articulate their experiences of violence. By making generic interventions, these women begin to establish alternative and empowering histories of themselves. "There was just no language," claimed Allison (Interview with Anderson 9), and so, like the other writers, she went searching for one.

## Chapter One:

### Feminist Free Verse Poetry and the Archive and Repertoire of Violence

*So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive*

--Audre Lorde

*A poem can't free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and  
appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives . . .*

--Adrienne Rich

The poet Honor Moore opens her anthology *Poems from the Women's Movement* with the claim that ““The women’s movement *was* poetry” [emphasis in original] (xv), thus acknowledging the genre's powerful role within late twentieth-century American feminism. During this period, as Laura Chester and Sharon Barba state in their own anthology, *Rising Tides*, poetry served to “illuminate common ground for those of many different orientations and attitudes” (xxv) and consequently generated cohesion in an often diverse movement. Ruth Rosen makes a similar assertion in *The World Split Open*, citing poetry readings as one avenue in the “creation of a vibrant women’s culture, which invented new traditions and constructed a usable history which helped activists bring the past to bear on the present. This women’s culture offered feminists a safe refuge from which to express new artistic visions” (217). Poetry brought women together, opening up spaces for the sharing of ideas and the forming of political alliances, not only in local settings but around the country as the writing appeared on the pages of influential feminist publications such as *Ms.*, *Rat*, *Off Our Backs*, and *Moving Out*. Women also began small publishing presses, including the Shameless Hussy Press—founded in 1968

by the poet Alta who famously published the first edition of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, When the Rainbow is Enuf*—and the WPC or Women's Press Collective founded in 1969 by Judy Grahn, who used the press to publish her famous early works including *A Woman is Talking to Death*, as well as the work of African American poet Pat Parker and Korean American poet Willyce Kim. This poetry movement, “Poetry, Witness, Feminism” author Harriet Davidson writes, created a feminist or woman-centered “counter-public sphere of discourse” (155). Poetry, a genre that is not inherently political or activist in and of itself, came to function for feminists as an alternative and revolutionary speech act—it helped to create an alternative site / “sphere” and vocabulary for feminist practices and ideologies. As the feminist writer Susan Griffin remembers about readings she attended: “Each person would go up and read and the audience would go wild, laugh, and scream and yell” (qtd in Rosen: 218), an image highlighting the search for voice that poetry writing, reading, and speaking came to embody for many women.

But what is it about poetry that made it such an apt mode or genre for expressing the goals of the feminist movement? How did poetry help not only feminists but women more generally create the kinds of anti-violence rhetoric central to feminism and to the emerging trauma culture and discourses of this period<sup>3</sup>? To begin to answer these

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3 As Roger Luckhurst writes of this time period in *The Trauma Question*, late twentieth century / early twenty first century understandings of trauma and the psychosomatic aftermath of violent events, have been influenced by medical, social, political, and cultural responses to Vietnam War veterans: “The Vietnam veteran was a trauma icon” who came to epitomize the symptoms of PTSD; “veterans and their psychiatrists described persistent symptoms of insomnia, hyper-vigilance, startle reactions, alcohol and drug addiction, terror, paranoia and nightmares” (59). Along with confronting the war's horror, American society at the end of the twentieth century was marked by a cultural pervasiveness of violence; the general

questions, I've opened this chapter with two epigraphs from the foundational, feminist poets Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, both of whom believed in the potential power and simple energy of poetry to inspire women towards personal change and communal political action. Reflecting on poetry's revolutionary role, Rich writes in *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* that "a property of poetry" is "to engage with states that themselves would deprive us of language and reduce us to passive sufferers" (10). Poetry, in this configuration, becomes a site of active commitment rather than of passivity, inactivity, and of a compliant acceptance of social structures and norms. In "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Lorde envisions the poetic as a "revelatory distillation of experience" that can be for women "the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless" (37). Lorde sees poetic language as the most nascent form of political activism; speaking and writing in poetry becomes the first moment of voice against silence, bringing to light undisclosed and unknown desires and repressed pain, anger, and traumas. Poetry is a "revolutionary demand" for transformation and concrete action against "structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization" (Lorde 38). Lorde calls poetry forward as the language of revolution, in particular against the "white father" (39) of European / Western patriarchal power, a figure that both symbolizes and makes

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public was more aware of "the psychological reactions of those who survived the Hiroshima bombing, the victims of Nazi persecution, the consequences of slavery and segregation on African-American identity, and women who had suffered incest or rape trauma, and whose experiences were only just beginning to be articulated by the feminist movement. Workers in these distinct areas mutually reinforced each other; what emerged was a general category of 'the survivor' that strongly linked trauma to identity politics" (61-62).

literal imperialistic nation-states, capitalistic corporations, and other oppressive Western cultural, social, and political organizations and practices. The role Lorde and Rich imagine for poetry is thus one of testimony: the act of voicing a traumatic experience with the intent of having that act witnessed or made visible to others. Such poetry is voiced with the hope that others will be inspired to act against violence and to initiate change in the world. Grahn opens her most well-known piece, the long poem *A Woman is Talking to Death*, with the line “Testimony in trials that never got heard” (76), likewise situating her poetry in opposition to legal, political, cultural, and social structures that refuse women’s voices and experiences.

But poets themselves were not alone in recognizing the genre's role in creating an anti-violence rhetoric. Judith Lewis Herman, the feminist therapist, recognizes poetry's role in forming that counter-public sphere. Herman's acknowledgement of poetry's role moves the genre from the political and literary spheres and places it within a therapeutic context, a move highlighting the way discourses about violence during this period came to circulate in multiple realms and disciplines.<sup>4</sup> Herman cites a short poem by the feminist author Jean Tepperman as a clarion call epitomizing the power women felt in discussing their lives and finding witnesses through poetry:

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4 Because of its multidisciplinary nature, Luckhurst views “trauma as one of those distinctive ‘hybrid assemblages’ that [Bruno] Latour suggests confront us in the contemporary world. Increasingly, we have to deal with ‘tangled objects’, imbroglios that mess up our fundamental categories of subject and object, human and non-human, society and nature” (14-15). Such a view of trauma, accounts for the ways in which a society's understanding of violence is influenced by multiple disciplines, conversations, and fields. Latour's conception of “hybrid assemblages” does not place knowledge into hierarchies, but instead imagines such knowledges and practices as a complicated network. Viewing trauma in this way, Luckhurst claims, does not allow for “an unappetizing competition between disciplines to impose their specific conception of trauma” (14) and thus allows for a more complicated and richer conception of violence, trauma, and of social, cultural, political, and other responses to pain and horror.

In the protected environment of consciousness-raising groups, women spoke of rape and other women believed them. . . .

*Today  
in my small natural body  
I sit and learn—  
my woman's body  
like yours  
target on any street  
taken from me  
at the age of twelve . . .  
I watch a woman dare  
I dare to watch a woman  
we dare to raise our voices. (Trauma and Recovery 29)*

Tepperman's poem builds community, a community that is notably based on shared experiences of violence. The poem is not simply about the self but about her relationships with other women and women's right to identify or recognize one another as opposed to simply being the objects of male desire. Tepperman's use of repetition—including the repetition of *body* and *dare*—creates this community as the repeated words weave the poem together, creating a sense of coherency and togetherness. While Tepperman asks women to feel empowered, she also acknowledges women's shared positions as victims or “targets.”<sup>5</sup> Within the poem she hopes to create a new space / sphere for women separate from the denied public spaces, such as “*any street / taken from me.*”

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<sup>5</sup> Tepperman's piece also raises (perhaps unintentionally) a debate within women's literature of violence and feminism more generally: woman defined as victims (an issue I address in part in my second chapter). In the poem, Tepperman writes, “my woman's body / like yours / target on the street.” Thus, along with identification through gender, she invites women to identify with one another through their shared position as a “target” or as a violated body. The poem creates a parallel between womanhood and victimhood. Such parallelisms open up a tricky space in feminism: on one hand, part of the political momentum behind feminism was to allow women to give voice to their suffering and demand an end to and redress for violence under patriarchal and racist social structures. Many women had a real need for and desire to understand themselves as victims. On the other hand, as feminists such as Linda Kauffman, Janice Haaken, and more broadly Wendy Brown have asserted, there is a real danger in women always being positioned as victims. Through the equation of woman with victim, women remain objects, never becoming

These tensions around space are a common theme of feminist poetry. Part of feminism's desire for a counter-public sphere of women's discourse was the need to create what Herman called the “protected environment of consciousness-raising groups,” or a space for women to speak freely. First- and second-wave American feminism has a long history of using consciousness-raising groups and speak-outs to create a safe space for women, to inspire activism, and to build women's communities<sup>6</sup>. As documented by literary critic Kim Whitehead in *The Feminist Poetry Movement*, consciousness-raising (C-R) groups and workshops were “primary organizing unit[s] of the women's liberation movement”: C-R meetings “involved women coming to understand their own experiences as representative of social problems that result from gender oppression. . . . Many women found this process deeply transformative of their self-conceptions and through it formed lasting feminist commitments” (24). Whitehead specifically locates greater awareness of gender oppression as being a key goal of the groups, but discussions of race, class, and sexuality found their way into these meetings. These C-R meetings usually took the form of informal conversations, and women spoke openly and

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social subjects. Ultimately as Luckhurst states, although notions of “survivor identity” did not originate with feminism, because of the women's movement “survivor identity has become closely linked to gender politics” (71). Luckhurst highlights how notions of feminism, violation, and survivorship have become interlinked within neo-liberal culture and discourses, a problematic linking, to say the least.

<sup>6</sup> This division of feminist activism and thought into waves is less important for my project, but I do want to acknowledge my understanding of it. Some feminists critique the hierarchical division and ranking of feminism into separate and disparate generations, arguing that such divisions undermine larger feminist project (see Hogeland, “Against Generational Thinking”). In *Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, Rebecca Walker states that first-wave feminists believed in a universal and ahistorical female identity based upon shared gender identification markers—markers that created a “unity” among all women—and second-wave feminists, by contrast, understood identity as “messy, contradictory, and multifaced;” women have complex identities based on “a number of identity factors (race, class, sexuality, ethnicity) that seem just as important as gender” (20). Hence, second-wave feminism “accommodate[s] ambiguity” and “multiple positionalities” (22).

comfortably with one another. As Roger Luckhurst writes in *The Trauma Question*, the C-R meetings that developed out of radical, 1960s feminism found their predecessor in the rap sessions (famously developed by American psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton) of Vietnam War vets: “An essential early part . . . of the women's movement was to articulate the suppressed or silenced parts of women's experience . . . 'consciousness-raising' developed in 1967, when women-only cadres would split away from Vietnam marches and other civil rights meetings to discuss their own alienation” (71). Luckhurst highlights the sense of separatism and control women sought around discourses of violence, and as Herman argues, “In the protected environment of the consulting room, women had dared to speak of rape, but the learned men of science did not believe them. In the protected environment of consciousness-raising groups, women spoke of rape and women believed them” (*Trauma and Recovery* 29). Herman's parallelism here establishes a stark contrast between the women-centered space of the C-R groups and the medicalized, sterilized doctor's office. As Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook write in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, involvement in C-R meetings generally had three important personal and communal outcomes for women: “an emotional catharsis . . . ; an academic insight and resulting intellectual product; and increased politicization and corresponding activism” (3). C-R groups were places for women to explore both personal and political commitments and personal emotions. The outcomes listed by Fonow and Cook highlight how these groups were places for giving testimony, for witnessing and for being witnessed—in other words, for the sharing of ideas and experiences that could lead to healing and to greater speech,

action, and change. Feminist organizers and activists believed that these small, grassroots meetings could serve to inspire activism; as Lisa Maria Hogeland writes in “Against Generational Thinking,” C-R groups were meant to bridge the gap between “theory and action”: “personal changes effect individuals, who in turn effect other individuals, . . . [a]t some point (somehow), there will be a critical mass of small changes, that will lead to (or will constitute) large-scale social change;” C-R meetings thus served as a “recruitment device for a mass movement” (113, 108).

While Fonow, Cook, and Hogeland may describe the larger reasoning behind C-R meetings, many feminists have critiqued the consciousness-raising project's inability to actually lead to any real social change. C-R meetings can also be seen as a form of narcissistic, navel-gazing on the part of privileged white feminists who had the time, the money, and the space, and in turn, the access to such meetings. As the feminist writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim has said of C-R meetings, one needed “social capital” in order to participate: ““By social capital I mean the old-girls network, the same-o, same-o circles, telephone trees, college connections.’ . . . Women of color, immigrant women, and blue-color women did not have the time to participate in consciousness-raising groups and were not comfortable sharing intimate details about their lives” (Breines 94). Lim’s anger over the privilege required to participate in some forms of feminist activism was reflected in the work of other authors; Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa have acknowledged that their important anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, arose in part from their ostracization and dissatisfaction with more mainstream feminist movements. Moreover, as other critics of C-R practices have highlighted, a link does not necessarily exist

between giving personal testimony and making tangible social change, though of course such a connection may be possible. No doubt feminism's and other civil rights movements' rupturing and questioning of the status quo occurred through a variety of complex and integrated techniques, some of which proved more useful than others, and for some women, including women of color and working-class women, C-R meetings did prove successful. The feminist historian Ann Popkin states that in C-R meetings ““We shared the hurt, confusion, and anger that each of us harbored inside, and the excitement and relief that came with the act of sharing. Time and again we said, “You too? Whew! I thought it was just me!””” (qtd. in Breines: 92). Dorothy Allison offers a parallel image, arguing that these meetings became life “changing” and “life rafts,” locations where women could dare to speak. In an interview with Kelly Anderson for Smith College’s *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project*, Allison describes a woman participating in a C-R meeting:

[I]t was one of the secretary-looking women—very well dressed, lots of makeup— . . . started talking almost immediately about, she needed help because, you know, she looked good, she was in control, everything was working. But she woke up in the middle of the night every night—every fucking night—wanting to get up and go drive to Georgia and kill her father. And then she said why. And no person in my life or anywhere in my imagination ever said it out loud. I didn’t think you could say it loud and still live . . . it was like, I am not ready to talk about this, but I’m going to keep coming back and figure out how to talk about this, and how to make a difference. . . . There was just no language. (8-9)

Allison’s story characterizes the desperation women brought into C-R meetings. As she describes, this misery and anxiety was hidden behind controlled and socially approved façades such as the “secretary” and “make-up,” and women themselves internalized this

compulsion, consciously and unconsciously accepting a directive not to speak of sexual abuse. Instead, memories of violence overwhelmed women “in the middle of the night,” taking the form of unconscious, overwhelming flashbacks that trauma victims frequently experience. The space of the C-R meetings defied such unstated, social decrees, and Allison recalls being taken aback by the woman’s candidness. This woman’s ability to speak inspired Allison’s own desire for language and voice, an inspiration that was part of the C-R meeting’s purpose.

Notably, however, Allison doesn’t actually describe in this section what the woman’s father did, a decision that exemplifies the kinds of apprehensions women felt about “say[ing] it loud.” So much pain, misery, and grief is expressed within that unsayable “it,” and as Allison testifies, “[t]here was just no language” for such experiences and so women began to search. Consequently, along with initiating moments of speech and witnessing, consciousness-raising group participants also recognized the importance of writing and exploring language in healing trauma: “In order to facilitate the self-expression necessary to both autobiographical and political discovery” that often occurred at the meetings, “many consciousness-raising groups doubled as writing workshops” (Whitehead 24). In particular, feminist writers made use of free verse or “open poetic modes”: feminist writers wanted “a poetry in which [women] could name the experiences that societal . . . taboos had previously kept them from expressing, in which they could make the hidden known. As a result, they turned to more open poetic modes, seeking to strip language and form of excess flourish and meaning” (Whitehead xix). Free verse or “open” poetry lacks the standardized qualifications for meter, rhyme,

or line and stanza length and number. As the African American feminist and civil rights poet Gwendolyn Brooks has said of using the form, “I’m not writing sonnets, and I probably won’t, because, as I’ve said many times, this does not seem to me to be a sonnet time. It seems to be a free verse time, because this is a raw, ragged, uneven time” (2). Brooks’s description of “free verse time” as “raw, ragged, and uneven” likens the poetic form to a wound, and with its open structure, the body of a free verse poem mirrors the coarse and jagged edges of an injury. Yet, while the form may mimic the chaos of violence, it can simultaneously be a site of creation: because no structure guides readers, audience expectations for the meaning and rhythm of such a poem are disrupted, and free verse poetry serves as a site of conception and transformation as it offers a new form and consequently a new way of viewing the world, a way that is “raw,” dynamic and in turn, potentially, activist. Because of this lack of formality and consistency, free verse poetry defies readers’ expectations for patterns and meaning; writers are afforded the freedom to create language as they see fit. This lack of formality reflected in the open structure of the C-R meetings, as one individual’s testifying was meant to organically inspire another woman’s speech. More practically, free verse poetry could be composed quickly during the meetings, and the poetry’s shorter form made it easier to publish in the cheaply-produced magazines and chapbooks that appeared out of C-R meetings and women’s presses.

Despite the above comments, however, I want to highlight that I do not believe poetry, free verse or otherwise, is some kind of utopian act or space that led to women’s liberation, their political activism, or their speaking more openly against violence. Much

like C-R meetings, poetry is not some easy answer for the silence that surrounded women's experiences of violence. Instead, free verse poetry, because of its generic markers, became *a tool or means* for articulating women's experiences of violence and for establishing a feminist archive and vocabulary for that violence. Free verse poetry's formalistic traits aided in the revealing, conceptualizing, defining, and processing of insidious traumas that women suffered under patriarchy and Western culture—those daily and often unnamed moments of sexual, racial, and financial violence that structure and define women's lives. As I want to argue, free verse poetry—in both its form and in the common themes feminists highlighted—was about the creation of a community space around violence: whether that space was the performative, testimonial space of the C-R meetings; the archival space of the many anthologies of women's poetry published during and following the women's movement; or the metaphorical space that women's poetry opened up for other women to speak about violence—the continual naming of trauma that these poets practiced. Poetry occupied both the space of the archive and the space of the repertoire for feminists as they sought to articulate violent and traumatic experiences.

Diana Taylor defines the archive in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* as

documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change. . . . [W]e might conclude that the archival, from the beginning, sustains power. Archival memory works across distance, over time and space. . . . What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items get interpreted, even embodied. . . . What makes an object archival is the process whereby it is selected, classified and presented for analysis. (19)

Archival objects exist across time, space, and distance; part of an archive's power rests in how its objects seem to last despite historical, political, and technological changes, becoming “stable signifier[s]” of cultural meaning (19). This “sustained” existence causes the archive to seem like a naturalized body of meaning—an archive's seeming permanence can make it appear beyond history and transformation, even though its texts and objects very much reflect specific cultural, political, and social interactions and power structures. While its sense of permanence contributes to the power an archive possesses, it does not, however, make the archive ahistorical or apolitical. The way in which objects are stored, the way in which they are named in relationship to one another, the kinds of decisions about what goes into an archive and what is erased all represent specific and powerful choices, defining how cultures, communities, and individuals understand the world and their relationship to the world.

For feminist activists and scholars, a problem with the traditional, Western archive<sup>7</sup> is the exclusion of women's experiences—a problem epitomized by the unarchived or mis-archived history of incest. As Herman writes in *Father-Daughter Incest*, a crime like incest, which occurs predominantly within the private, domestic sphere, “was publicly invisible” and yet was an “endemic in our society. Against the evidence of . . . personal testimony, we encountered a suffocating array of denials, rationalizations, and excuses that passed for authoritative wisdom in literature, social science, medicine, and law” (219). Herman's use of “authoritative” speaks directly to the

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<sup>7</sup> When I refer to the archive here, I do not mean a specific, locatable archive or collection but instead a more general, social response to specific texts and to the way certain texts, stories, and documents are made “authoritative” while others are silenced, erased, or undocumented. In other words, I am not referencing a specific archival collection of texts about incest.

power of the archive and the way in which official stories of crimes like incest become revised into acceptable narratives; the authoritative discourse of “literature, social science, medicine, and law” contrasts with the unpublished and consequently fleeting personal testimonies of violated women, men and children. The example of incest epitomizes for Herman the notion that a man / father has a “right to use female members of his family . . . as he sees fit” (49) and that society and its archival representations of incest support such a hierarchy of relationships. The incest archive works to deny women's and children's experiences of violence, reframing such narratives so that sexual crimes and abuse become the result of “the overactive imaginations of women and children” (219), and the victims are blamed for the perpetrators' actions. Herman turns to Freud for an example of such an incest narrative, arguing that Freud “rewrote” his own story of patriarchal incest: In 1896, with the publication of *The Aetiology of Hysteria* and *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud “announced that he had solved the mystery of the female neurosis. At the origin of every case of hysteria, Freud asserted, was a childhood sexual trauma;” uncomfortable with these findings and what they revealed about the life and the men of the European bourgeois family, Freud eventually denied his own research: “he remained so distressed by his seduction theory that within a year he repudiated it entirely. He concluded that his patients' numerous reports of sexual abuse were untrue” (Herman 8-9). Freud's backtracking represents for Herman the kind of control a man in a position of authority can have over a narrative, and Freud's story also serves as a very tangible example of how a narrative and an archive can change our understanding of events, histories, and crimes.

But just as the archive may be a site of historical erasure and revision for some stories, individuals, and communities, it can simultaneously be a place of reinsertion into history. Taylor emphasizes that an archive—despite its appearance of immutableness—is open for “revision and reinterpretation” (191); the archive can reflect a changing cultural and political climate. The move by early feminist literary scholars to rewrite the Western literary canon to include more women’s works is an example of such a change. Their move, however, has been justly critiqued as reactionary and conservative; instead of changing definitions of the canon and altering readers’ relationships to texts, many of these feminist scholars simply inserted women (and predominantly white women) into a Westernized, patriarchal framework, reiterating and reinvigorating Western ideologies by repeating and upholding the canon. A restructuring of the canon / archive, is not necessarily radical or avant-garde, and it is not necessarily revolutionary. But this does not mean that the archive cannot be a space for revolution, and for Taylor, an archive can hold an empowering potential, most specifically when it “can contain the grisly record of criminal violence—the documents, photographs and remains that tell of disappearances” (193). An archive can serve as a literal, tangible record to crime, as it may be a way to refuse the crime's disappearance. Just as it can be a site of authority, the archive also encompasses within itself the potential to disrupt other authoritative discourses. Consequently, while an archive always contains a conservative potential, it simultaneously offers the means for a transformation or upheaval of history. Part of the power of the women’s movement’s literature was the way it allowed women to create and imagine an alternative archive around violence. Leigh Gilmore makes a similar argument

in *The Limits of Autobiography*, noting that twentieth-century social and historical events like the Holocaust, uprisings against colonial states, and civil rights movements inspired many “self-authored, first-person representations of trauma . . . the new ways of representing the individual in relation to personal and collective histories of abuse . . . are becoming possible” (48). Speaking against violence makes possible not only a new archive but also, as Gilmore implies, opens up new autobiographic genres and spaces and helps writers and readers to re-imagine the roles and potentials of established genres, such as free verse poetry.

Poetry also served as a repertoire for women, and in their traditional conceptions, the archive and the repertoire are viewed as opposites: the repertoire's texts / rituals counter and elude the tangible, permanent or controlled archives. Taylor claims that the repertoire

enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. . . . The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there,” being part of the transmission. . . . embodied acts are always present, though in a constant state of againness. They reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. (20-21)

Unlike the archive, the repertoire is fluid and open. The repertoire's acts and rituals are stored on the body, passed from one body to another, from generation to generation, and the repertoire exists because of an embodied survival, because individuals are able to pass on knowledge. The repertoire represents a visibility, a “being there,” that marginalized communities may be denied in relation to the archive. The repertoire is also more elusive

and ephemeral, refusing the kind of naming or definition that constitutes the archive. An archive can never fully “capture,” control, and thus own the embodied acts of the repertoire (20): a video of a performance moves out of the repertoire into archive, becoming a historical text.

Because of its lack of the tangible, historically the repertoire has been devalued in Western cultures. Taylor situates her discussion of the archive and the repertoire in the European conquest and colonization of Latin America, stating that “. . .writing has paradoxically come to stand in for and against embodiment. When the friars arrived in the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries . . . they claimed that the indigenous peoples' past—and the ‘lives they lived’—had disappeared because they had no writing” (16). The colonizers claimed the Mesoamericans were devoid of history and communal memories and that their lives as a consequence had less value; without records, the colonizers believed the indigenous peoples could be more easily erased. The civil and religious officials of the imperialist project did not recognize the Mesoamericans' “performed utterance” as a valued way to transmit knowledge and traditions. Following this example, Taylor reads a difference between the archive and the repertoire as the “written and the archival constituting hegemonic power and the repertoire provid[ing] the anti-hegemonic challenge” (22). Practices, rituals and other performances housed under the repertoire become sites of protest and difference, refusing the dominant discourses an archive may represent. Taylor's reading of the repertoire can be extended by turning to Ann Cvetkovich who argues that conceptions of an undefinable, ephemeral “text” fit well within contemporary conceptions of trauma:

trauma challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive. Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. (7)

Due to violence's nature, it leaves victims unable to completely comprehend the event or violent history. Survivors may suffer from displacement, dissociation, and flashbacks, all coping mechanisms that make a complete, articulate telling or testifying impossible. Or victims may have been annihilated, disfigured, or rendered unable to speak making the telling of the event literally impossible for them; they may need to rely on witnesses who only have a second-hand or incomplete understanding of the event. Because of the inability to textually contain trauma, trauma creates “unorthodox archives” (Cvetkovich 8) that must account for new modes of expression, such as ritual, performance, or transitory and volatile memory—both collective and individual—that do not comfortably fit into an archive or into Western conceptions of texts and documentation. As Taylor asks, “How . . . do we think about trauma, anti-archival by definition? Its very nature 'precludes its registration,' leaving no trace because 'a record has yet to be made'” (193). Taylor and Cvetkovich's understanding of trauma as “anti-archival” arises out of psychoanalysis. Taking her lead from Freud, Cathy Caruth argues in the introduction to *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* that the traumatic is “an impossible history . . . a history [victims] cannot entirely possess” (5). Traumatic memories encompass the paradox of an “impossible history” as they are simultaneously beyond comprehension but are also ever

present and intricately connected with an individual's life, sometimes defining that existence. Ultimately, as I argue throughout this project, in order to speak of trauma and violence, women need texts that embody both the archive and the repertoire—texts that change the discourse of history but that simultaneously account for their embodied survival against violence.

The poetic practices and C-R meetings opened up such a space for feminists. Taking place in makeshift spaces and formed around alternative narratives, consciousness-raising meetings constituted an alternative to typical Western spaces for articulating violence and not simply because they opened up a site for marginalized individuals to speak. C-R meetings represented a repertoire for the feminist movement; these meetings became cultural and political rituals and reiterated testimonial behaviors around violence and trauma that shifted from meeting to meeting and from one woman's experience to another. No two meetings were ever the same, and yet every meeting held traces of the others. And as women wrote poetry in these meetings, this free verse poetry came to bridge the gap between the archive and the repertoire. The pieces, because of their generic nature, are performative, dynamic and testimonial; they in part are a repertoire, a performed ritual that pieced together a feminist community. Yet such poetry established a feminist archive that created new forms of documentation for women's violent experiences. In this way, poetry helped women to create an archive around incest, domestic abuse, racism, homophobia, and other forms of both insidious and event violence. Between the performative nature of the free verse poetry, the testifying in the C-R groups and the archival space of anthologized feminist poems, women created a

rhetorics around violence. In the formation of a rhetoric of violence, feminists thus turned to both archival and performative practices. The archive and the repertoire act together to create the discourses, practices, social structures and “other systems of transmission” (Taylor 21) that helped give voice to violence within the late twentieth-century feminist community.

### **I. “Open Verse Poetry” and Feminist Consciousness-Raising**

In this section, I lay out more specifically how free verse poetry, as a testimonial genre, enacted both the archive and the repertoire. Much like the generic structure of free verse poetry, the relationship a violated individual has with language is marked by blank spaces or what the poet Janice Mirikitani calls “strange wasteland[s]” (114), sites where language seems to fail, and where writers and readers—or survivors and witnesses—are faced with the persistent tension between knowing and not knowing. In a parallel description, poetry, as literary theorist Susan McCabe writes in *Elizabeth Bishop: Her Poetics of Loss*, works through “an unsettling process” as it “insists upon presence but always keeps loss in sight through its movement . . . The poem does not resolve itself or find closure; [it is] in a continuing process of coming to terms with our history” (33, 30). Poetry moves through line breaks that create multiple sites of connection and disconnection. In its continual movement from the break of one line to the start of the next, poetry makes a passage from “presence,” knowing and understanding to “loss” and unawareness. Poetry enacts its own “impossible history” as it continually shifts from a potentially knowable narration to the unknowable, to blank spaces and wastelands. Because free verse poetry specifically has no set pattern or meter, the lines' movements

become even more disconnected and fragmented. Shoshana Felman establishes a link between the language of trauma and free verse poetry when she uses the form as an example of a “fundamental crisis;” for her, the genre represents a “disruption and shattering” that “reaches out for what precisely *cannot be anticipated*” [emphasis in original] (27-28). Free verse poetry represents a continual movement away from itself, and she describes its line breaks as “rhythmical unpredictability . . . unsettling the predictability—the formal structure of anticipation” (27). By defying typical lyrical patterns, free verse lines disrupt formulaic “anticipation” and therefore work against expected structures and narratives to imagine a form and consequently, a speaking mode, differently. Through this structural disruption, such poems call into question their own generic models and in turn their own formations in ways that mimic the effects violence has on language. A poem’s structural disruption and fragmentation become ways to configure words so that form mimics the continual fleeing from and return to experiences of violence that victims / survivors suffer from. This struggle for language is “implicated in the act of narration itself” (Beverly 94) as free verse poetry represents an exploration within language that, much like violence and trauma, does not give readers easy access to the narration. Within the free verse poem, there is no clearly defined story-arch or straightforward act of narration.

Free verse poetry may also be an appropriate mode for speaking of violence and trauma because of the way it mimics testimonial speech-acts<sup>8</sup> or performed utterances.

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<sup>8</sup> Historically, the concept or act of performing testimony is based within legal discourses where it signifies a speaking of “truth” under oath, usually during a trial, as an offering of evidence and fact. In this sense,

Like testimony, free verse “does not offer” what Felman calls, “a completed statement, a totalizable account of . . . events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it

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testimony signifies a legal performance in which a coherent and accurate narrative is demanded as proof of trauma and violation; victims must demonstrate that they have been violated and violated in the way they claim. Testimony “in its more traditional, routine use in the legal context—in the courtroom situation,” writes Felman “is provided, and called for, when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt, and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question” (“Education and Crisis” 17). Traditionally, testimony is seen as a speech of truth, with proof existing somewhere in the real world to validate what is said under oath. Testimony confers rights or personhood onto the violated party as it recognizes how his or her subjectivity and citizenship have been denied; the state sees or acknowledges the victim as someone deserving of recognition and reconciliation after a crime. He or she is allowed to name the crime against him/herself and in turn claim subjectivity. Testimony, in its juridical sense, is intimately tied to ideas about citizenship and nationality. The individual who can testify in a court has the power to speak and to be seen by the state. He or she has not been erased or made invisible; the state has called this person into being, to give evidence of survival or perhaps to stand in for another victim whose life has been literally erased. In “Sacred Secrets: A Strategy for Survival,” Doris Sommer links testimony as a “kind of juridically oriented narrative” to a “Christian’s obligation. . . [F]rom the moment God appeared directly to human beings, testimony has implied an investment of absolute value in historical, contingent events” (203). Testimony is traditionally associated with a truth that is obligatory according to both juridical and religious speech. The testifier is historically figured as one who speaks the truth and can thus be validated in both the eyes of the law and of God. Testimony, when characterized this way, is an authenticating discourse and is in contrast to what Lisa Lowe describes in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* as a “historical alienation” by which certain identities are “refracted through images, memories, and narratives—submerged, fragmented, and sedimented in a historical ‘unconscious’” (12). Marginalized identities, such as those of Asian Americans and other racialized bodies, have their identities erased and repressed from official histories in a way that denies these stories and identities. Such non-citizens are not permitted to testify but are instead “fragmented” and destroyed. Within contemporary trauma and autobiography studies, the above definition is complicated by testimony’s re-appropriation as a strategy of declaring and validating marginalized and erased identity through the literal act of speaking. While the juridical understanding of testimony calls forth victims and survivors by the state, the redefinition involves the speaking against the state by a subject who has been violated by that very government. This redefinition arises out of two main historical occasions: the narratives of Holocaust survivors and the *testimonios* or “resistance literature” from victims of military-controlled nations in Latin America, such as Guatemala, Bolivia, and Nicaragua. This redefinition is theorized as arising out of an urgency or need to speak, usually following a violent experience—thus its historical base in the Holocaust and in military regimes. As John Beverly outlines in “The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative),” testimony comes out of “a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, [and/or] struggle for survival” that is “implicated in the act of narration itself” (94). Beverly’s description highlights how this redefinition is connected to experiences of insidious violence, to the everyday “struggle for survival” that occurs when one’s subjectivity is viewed as valueless. Such individuals may not be able to turn to the state for protection but instead turn to this “act of narration” as a form of agency and self-assertion; survival is not gauged by the response the nation will make in offering the victim reconciliation and restitution, but instead it comes from visibility against historical erasure. Testimony becomes a genre for those who have historically been spoken for: women, children, raced individuals, the working-class, the sexually marginalized, the disabled, and “criminals”—all individuals usually excluded from centers of power and language. Testimony may be imagined as a language for speaking by the repressed subjects of a nation-state, those hidden bodies never visible within dominant narratives. Testimony is “a desire to impose oneself on an institution of power” (Beverly 96) and in turn to rupture that power’s authority.

does not possess itself as a conclusion. . . . To *testify* . . . is to accomplish a *speech act*” [emphasis in original] (16-17). Because of the difficult articulation of often repressed or unspeakable traumas, testimony acts as an uncovering or gradual comprehension of violence. In contrast to a finished text, testimony works through an imaginative and exploratory process and is “a discursive *practice*, as opposed to a pure *theory*—to *vow to tell*, to *promise*” [emphasis in original] (Felman 17). Testimony lacks closure and in its exploratory potential, it pushes against generic containment in the way other performative acts of the repertoire do. Generically, testimony is a text lacking closure as it embodies the sense of movement necessary to performance. As Doris Sommer writes in “‘Not Just a Personal Story’: Women’s *Testimonios* and the Plural Self,” speaking about violence “move[s] about in a largely unmapped space” (120) where traditional generic formulas do not apply and where language is exploratory and imaginative. Testimony, John Beverly states in “The Margin at the Center,” is a “protean and demotic form not yet subject to legislation by [the] normative literary establishment,” and it exists “at the margin of literature, representing in particular those subjects . . . excluded from authorized representation when it [i]s a question of speaking and writing for themselves rather than being spoken for” (93). Testimony, such as that given in C-R meetings, thus embodies the repertoire; testimony is what Taylor labels “a performatic repeat” (209), a re-enacting of the violence through its retelling. Testimony is an act that refuses the archival and continually reinvents and questions such closed histories.

The same can be said of free verse poetry. As Marxist literary critic James Scully argues in “Line Break,” an essay exploring unstructured postmodern poetry, “line breaks,

as poetic practice, threaten to rupture the ideological prophylaxis imposed on all production or potential production by routine behavior, routine 'perceptions,' and routine 'truth;' such line breaks are not boundaries, but areas of engagement” (98-99). Through line breaks, poetry refuses standard forms of creation and experience. As poetry restructures itself, it in turn questions conventional “‘truth,’” knowledge, and ways of ordering the world. Line breaks do not constitute finalized boundaries but denote change, questioning and “engagement.” Free verse poetry, like testimony, can be viewed as a process of continually imagining other spaces.

While Taylor and Cvetkovich do not seem to have a generic form such as poetry in mind when they discuss the repertoire, my above formulation of free verse poetry implies its potential to take part in acts that constitute the ever-shifting repertoire. A free verse poem's form can be elusive and undefinable, thus refusing and denying readers' desires to completely understand it and yet simultaneously, such a poem is a document which can be published, shared, collected, and stored or archived. Free verse poetry exists in the gap between the archive and the repertoire, constituting a new way to understand, translate, and think about violent experiences. It disrupts both the bounds of the archive and of the repertoire, creating an alternative space and way not only for feminists but for all writers and scholars to think about violence and trauma.

## **II. “some woman's innocence / rushes to her cheeks / pours from her mouth”:**

### **Versing the Archive and the Repertoire**

I want to now look at two free verse poems by feminist writers, using close readings as a way into the theory I've articulated above around the form. I begin with

white, lesbian writer Judy Grahn's *A Woman is Talking to Death*, published in 1974, and then look at a 1976 piece by the black playwright and poet Ntozake Shange: “with no immediate cause” from her collection *Nappy Edges*. I selected these two poems for several reasons: first, both pieces have been anthologized or reproduced extensively. While neither piece has been popular in terms of critical responses—in other words, there is not a lot of criticism associated with the pieces either by literary or feminist scholars—both pieces have a wide circulation and consequently, they are situated squarely within a feminist discourse and genealogy around violence. Before being published, Grahn's poem circulated in women's C-R meetings around the country (Whitehead 56). Shange's poem continues to be popular, finding its way both into anthologies and onto multiple blogs and websites by survivors or by anti-rape and violence groups such as *UBUNTU*, the website for women of color abuse survivors, and the human rights blog, *Silent All These Years*. Shange's piece inspired Sherry Holmes's “Another Way to See the World,” and Grahn continues to remain an icon, once serving as the opening act for the feminist rockstar Ani DiFranco, who cited *A Woman Is Talking to Death* as one of her favorite poems. Both women are associated with a second-wave feminist literary culture and history, and, in fact, Grahn and Shange also have a common connection and friendship: in the introduction to *for colored girls*, Shange notes that in 1974 she began “a series of seven poems, modeled on Judy Grahn's *The Common Woman*, which were to explore the realities of seven different kinds of women. . . . The first of the series is the poem 'one' . . . which prompted the title & *this is for colored girls who have considered suicide . . .*”

(xii). Grahn's own piece thus inspired Shange's most famous work and so the pair represents a short albeit vital feminist genealogy.

Both pieces also address violence within women's lives but in particular ways: they draw attention to the discourses that exist around women's experiences of violence, expressly the way legal and social forces and publications made invisible those violences; both poets do this in hopes of calling witnesses and inspiring changes. Shange and Grahn hope to inspire readers to what literary scholar Tiffany Ana López defines in her article “Critical Witnessing in Latina/o and African American Prison Narratives” as *critical witnessing*: “the process of being so moved by a reading experience as to engage in a specific action intended to forge a path toward change. . . . [W]itnesses understand themselves to be distinctly implicated in the fate of the person or persons” whose stories have been told to and absorbed by audience members (64, 76). In an act of critical witnessing, the audience is removed from being an abstract observer and becomes connected to and involved with the life of the speaker / narrator / writer. Critical witnessing ruptures any comfortable distance an audience member may have from a text and the events of a text by demanding and calling for audience participation. This powerful call for a witness and the reaction to the testimony or story moves the audience member towards political and social activism. The viewer / listener becomes aware of him or herself as a witness and in turn begins to act against violence and work towards material changes in the world. In their poems, Shange and Grahn explore poetic structure, disrupting typical forms just as they disrupt typical understandings of violence, space, and documentation. Shange calls her works “informal & improvised” (*For colored girls*

xiii) as the pieces continually offer new and dynamic reinterpretations of violence, thus unsettling the way an audience can access a text and respond to it. Grahn and Shange demand the reader interact with their poems, forming meaning as they attempt to connect disparate lines and images to create a new story of violence. Through this dynamic repertoire, these two writers hope to call up critical witnesses and inspire activism.

For Grahn, a self-described “militant” working-class lesbian and one of the early proponents of feminist separatism, poetry constitutes a “public ritual” (93) for women with the potential to open up a space for coalitional discussions, interaction, activism, and to ultimately inspire critical witnessing. In fact, as Elly Bulkin notes in the introduction to *Lesbian Poetry*, in her work Grahn uses a “direct, everyday language with a rhetorical drive [that] draws on oral traditions of poetry—biblical, Black, beat, protesting—and seems meant to be read aloud at women’s meetings” (xxvi). Grahn creates a rhythm in her poetry that works toward performance and movement. For her, poetry becomes a public site where a collective witnessing and protesting can take place. This idea is enacted by *A Woman Is Talking to Death*, an autobiographical poem broken into eight sections that tell interlinking stories of violence: the story of Grahn and her lover witnessing a fatal car accident for which a black man is unjustly blamed and punished; of Grahn finding a Asian immigrant in the snow who has been raped and abandoned; and of Grahn being put on trial and expelled from the Air Force due to her sexuality. The poem addresses not simply Grahn's lack of public space as a woman and as a lesbian, but also the way other marked bodies, particularly racialized bodies, have been denied access to this space. Grahn wants to make visible forgotten and erased histories that have not been

voiced in national spaces and to open up alternative spaces for ostracized communities. Grahn testifies in spite of the ways various insidious traumas have silenced her. As a lesbian, she has been denied a place in the public and national culture, as she states in the poem:

When I was arrested and being thrown out  
of the military, the order went out: dont anybody  
speak to this woman. (27)

In contrast to this mandate, Grahn imagines her poem as a space of radical and experimental speech in a manner that parallels the C-R meetings. Much like a C-R meeting, the poem is based around a series of conversations, and in the poem's fourth section, Grahn develops "A Mock Interrogation" in which an unnamed interrogator standing in for the nation questions her about her sexuality, and Grahn refuses to speak within official narratives. She is asked, "Have you ever held hands with a woman? . . . What about kissing? Have you kissed any women? . . . Have you ever committed any indecent acts with women?" (28-29). Grahn response is both heartbreaking and beautiful:

Yes, many. I am guilty of allowing suicidal women to die before my eyes or in my ears or under my hands because I thought I could do nothing, I am guilty of leaving a prostitute who held a knife to my friend's throat to keep us from leaving, because we would not sleep with her, we thought she was old and fat and ugly; I am guilty of not loving her who needed me; I regret all the women I have not slept with or comforted, who pulled themselves away from me for lack of something I had not the courage to fight for, for us, our life, our planet, our city, our meat and potatoes, our love. These are indecent acts, lacking courage, lacking a certain fire behind the eyes, which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistance that tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra. Yes, I have committed acts of indecency with women and most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly. (29-30)

Grahn refuses the kind of voyeurism embodied in the institution's questions, questions that would turn Grahn's love of women into an abject and obscene act. Instead of listing the details of a love affair, Grahn turns the question upon its head, rethinking what it means to commit an indecent act with a woman. For her, these acts ultimately represent a silence and refusal to act. Although the questions of the interrogator may seem to place Grahn within a specific site / narrative as a lesbian, she playfully and ironically counters this narrative with her answers. Grahn spins around understandings of official narratives, and again, archival discourses, a movement made throughout her important poem. Her stream-of-consciousness form here also disrupts the interrogator's questions. Instead of offering a straightforward answer, she seems to inundate the interrogator with words, drowning out his question with the power of her own response. Again, she refuses any kind of direct, linear answer that would place her narrative and subjectivity into an already existing discourse about violence and sexuality.

Many people speak throughout the piece, but only the traumatized have their speech in quotation marks highlighting how Grahn is creating an alternative "official" discourse—their words become recognized and validated in her work; the speech of the marginalized becomes standardized and archived. In much of the poem, however, capitalization and punctuation are used sporadically so that Grahn continually both denies and returns to readers' expectations about syntax in a way that mocks such official discourse; ultimately all discourse becomes elusive in the piece. Grahn also ruptures traditional poetic rhythm through the use of end-line enjambment, a poetic technique in

which a line ends at a disjunctive, unexpected, and often-awkward place. To quote one long section from Grahn,

One Christmas eve my lovers and I  
we left the bar, driving home slow  
there was a woman lying in the snow  
by the side of the road. She was wearing  
a bathrobe and no shoes, where were  
her shoes? she had turned the snow  
pink, under her feet. she was an Asian  
woman, didnt speak much English, but  
she said a taxi driver beat her up  
and raped her, throwing her out of his  
care.  
what on earth was she doing there  
on a street she helped to pay for  
but doesn't own?  
doesn't she know to stay home?

I am a pervert, therefore I've learned  
to keep my hands to myself in public  
but I was so drunk that night,  
I actually did something loving  
I took her in my arms, this woman,  
until she could breathe right, and  
my friends who are perverts too  
they touched her too  
we all touched her.  
"You're going to be all right" (32)

Her use of end-line enjambment occurs in such moments as the ending of a line suddenly on the possessive pronoun "his" or the sudden ending of a line at the preposition "for." Such breaks give the poem a cumbersome and unexpected rhythm, so that readers are denied easy access into the narrative, just as Grahn has been denied easy entrance into a national narrative. Grahn makes use of other disruptive strategies as well; this section contains no set metrical pattern, and while it does have one prominent rhyming pair, *slow*

and *snow*, most of the rhymes are slant rhymes, such as *wearing* and *were*, *home* and *own*, and *but* and *up*, all rhymes that establish again an unexpected rhythm, seeming to give the promise of a rhyme but never fulfilling that anticipated rhythm.

This disjunctive form ultimately creates a new space for women's speech, denying the traditional narratives that structure their lives. For example, Grahn addresses here the narrative that women are responsible for their own victimization when the speaker asks at the end of the first stanza, "doesn't she know to stay home?" This narrative of female disempowerment and also of racism emphasizes how this immigrant woman has no right to the streets or public spaces of her city and adopted nation; the consequences of mobility are a violent chastisement. Grahn stresses as well throughout the poem how lesbians have been labeled *perverts* within the homophobic society. While calling attention to this kind of official discourse about gays and lesbians, she also disrupts this label as the women's act of "perversion" is to "lovingly" comfort another in need, a play on language that is common throughout Grahn's writing as she works to deny archived, official narratives. This gathering of women to aid the rape victim becomes an alternative and radical space of healing against the violence of the nation and of patriarchy, a goal not only of the feminist movement, but as Cvetkovich has argued, of gay and lesbian communities as well:

. . . trauma resembles gay and lesbian cultures, which have had to struggle to preserve their histories. In the face of institutional neglect, along with erased and invisible histories, gay and lesbian archives have been formed through grassroots efforts . . . Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the

absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource. (8)

As Cvetkovich summarizes, without institutional documentation or a public, visible voice, gays and lesbians lack, oppose, and deny the kinds of authorized discourses and official histories that typically call individuals into citizenship and into the nation-state. Gays and lesbians have made their own “ephemeral” history, a repertoire encoded through memories, sexuality, and acts of intimacy—all acts passed through and remembered from body to body. These acts leave “unusual traces” that parallel unorthodox and anti-archival traumatic histories and memories, such as the one embodied in Grahn and her friends' reaching out to the woman:

I am a pervert, therefore I've learned  
to keep my hands to myself in public  
.....  
my friends who are perverts too  
they touched her too  
we all touched her (32)

Such an act creates a physical intimacy against violence, a new way of formulating a response to violence. The women have fashioned their own ritual and their own communal experience.

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In a 1993 interview with *Poets & Writers*, Ntozake Shange formulates the poetic in a similar way, stating that poetry “is a collective experience” (2), something shared between writer and audience, an attitude toward the poetic that no doubt harkens back to her time writing with a San Francisco women's collective. Appropriately, in “with no immediate cause,” Shange reaches out to multiple women as she offers an alternative

discourse for addressing violence against women, women who have a disjunctive relationship with the juridical avenues for making abuse public and for remedying violence. The poem's title makes reference to the juridical provision of "immediate cause," which, within legal jargon, is "A final act in a series of provocations leading to a particular result or event, directly producing such result without the intervention of any further provocation." For example, if an intoxicated individual is killed after driving into a tree, the crash into the tree is labeled the *immediate cause* of death while the intoxication is a *proximate cause* ("Immediate Cause"). Shange plays on this understanding of *immediate cause* and *proximate cause* addressing the ways in which the real causes of violence against women are ignored, and responsibility is always transferred elsewhere, usually onto the woman:

i have to ask these obscene questions  
the authorities require me to  
establish  
immediate cause (320)

Victims are held responsible for the violence, so that it is impossible for the speaker to prove the perpetrators' culpability. A woman is abused "cuz she waz stupid;" a child is burned with "boiling coffee / cuz she cried too much" (319). The only public / official announcement in the poem is an indictment of the women:

"there is some concern  
that alleged battered women  
might start to murder their  
husbands & lovers with no  
immediate cause" [quotation marks in original] (319)

The women become refigured as violent, as capable of turning on their seemingly innocent “husbands & lovers” for no reason. Within America, black women, a community Shange often addresses and portrays in her work, have historically been made responsible for their own victimization. In *An Alchemy of Race and Rights*, the African American legal scholar Patricia J. Williams addresses this black-woman-as-perpetrator image: “black women are whores. . . . black women *whore* as a way of being, as an innateness of sootiness and contamination, as a sticky-sweet inherency of black womanhood . . . —so they whore . . . as easily as they will cut your throat . . . How can such a one be raped?” [emphasis in original] (175). This image of black women is, as Williams notes, intimately connected to the history of slavery that keeps alive the “projection onto blacks all criminality and all of society's ills” (61). The black community is perceived as having an “inherent” or “innate” tendency toward violence, deprivation, and pathology that makes it okay for black women to be denied rights; it is impossible for them to be “raped” or for such an injustice to happen against them because, as the essentializing discourse implies, they deserve and want it. Shange, therefore, cannot establish immediate cause because the victim herself has been the one made *naturally* responsible for the crimes.

Against such a social narrative, Shange’s poem, a piece that is painful to read because of the horrific images, is a long list of violent crimes against women that the speaker both imagines and remembers as she rides the New York subway, buys a newspaper, and has a cup of coffee in a restaurant. These are all seemingly mundane activities which quickly become nightmarish as every man that the speaker encounters on

this journey is a potential predator, enacting a violent crime against a girl or woman: “a lil girl is molested,” “an old man who / may have beaten his wife / . . . / he might have sodomized his daughter,” “held his old lady onto a hot pressing iron,” and “he catches lil girls in the / park & rips open their behinds / with steel rods” (318). As she moves through the terrifying city, each crime becomes more violent and Shange’s poem is marked by a paranoia that reflects the very real violence that women face daily. A woman has no safe public space, and the narrator always has the potential to become the next woman who “might not shut my door fast / enuf / push hard enuf” (318). This paranoia is embodied in the poem’s formatting and syntax; instead of a piece that follows very closely the demands of standardized syntax, punctuation, and grammar, Shange throws such conventions out. She replaces “and” with “&,” “couldn’t” with “cdnt,” “cause” with “cuz,” “enough” with “enuf,” and sporadically replaces “I” with “i.” These shorthand words, seemingly hastily written, give the poem urgency; the reader rushes through the piece, just as the poem’s speaker tries to rush through her own public outing to return to the safety (or at least the illusion of safety) at home. The free verse, experimental piece lacks any capitalization and punctuation, and, in fact, the lines themselves have no bounds at they bleed into one another. The lines enact the “wound” that Gwendolyn Brooks saw within the free verse poem. Shange continues:

every 3 minutes a woman is beaten  
every five minutes a  
woman is raped / every ten minutes  
a lil girl is molested  
yet i rode the subway today. (317-318)

The lines above blur into one another as represented by the slash in the third line. The poem also makes use of end-line enjambment, such as the awkward line break in the section above at “a.” The pause between “a” and “woman” adds suspense and anticipation, as well as creates silence in the poem. The poem collapses and refuses its very own standardizations as Shange switches between using a Roman numeral for the number, “3,” and writing out the word for the number, “five.” All of this shifting and dynamic formatting reflects the speaker's anger. She claims “I spit up                      i vomit  
i am screaming” [spaces in original] (319), an unrefined or unedited nature that reflects the kind of spewing forth of fear, anger, and trauma that the speaker encounters in her daily life. Her narrative continually slips the reader's grasp, performing and testifying. She asks readers to piece together the poem in a way that will make them critical witnesses and that will allow them to form the narrative around violence.

Shange and Grahn use poetry to create a new public discourse and memory around violence against women. Part of the power of these poems is not simply that they document rape and other crimes but that they emphasize the coming to voice against rape and violence. The two poems are about seeing and speaking or about witnessing and testifying to trauma. Moreover, these poems are not simply a reductive listing of violence against women, a generic formula that would place them squarely within the archive. Instead, these poems represent as well an act of speaking again after violence, of piecing together language to find voice. Just as the poets search for voice through the poem, so the readers are meant to do the same as they stand in as witnesses.

Ultimately, C-R meetings and the free verse poems of early feminists both represent diverging but linked tools in women's struggle to come to voice against violence. While the C-R meetings may represent a public repertoire or act, the free verse poems link the performative to the archival. These poems represent the authorization of the autobiographical or personal voice that becomes a political and social act towards change for women; the poems represent the ability to speak against violence. Women feel empowered to make the personal political, to speak and find language as they see fit about their experiences, even if this search for language represents a painful struggle. But just as these poems represent the struggle for language and voice, they also represent an alternative, archival history of feminism's struggle against violence, a point I explore more in the next chapter, where I pursue the question, how can we create new archives against violence?



witness to the pain of the older woman, and she imagines the community of women creating a space for accepting, healing, and nurturing.

Moraga's poem has always been one of my favorite pieces, and throughout my own research into trauma studies and the narratives of violence, I have often returned to this piece. I am drawn to its fragmented lines—its refusal to sit comfortably within readers' expectations of what a poem should look like and how it should be read. Like other readers, I always come upon the piece unexpectedly, folded between the more conventional essays and prose of *This Bridge* or of *Loving*, as if the poem itself works against being anthologized or archived, surprising readers as it refuses to be housed in the places we typically look for poetry. Readers meet it instead among theory and prose, and the poem seems to enact and make clear what more academic or abstract language so often refuses or cannot acknowledge: the continual messiness of violence and of speaking about violence. The poem is about the various violences and silencing mechanisms imposed on Moraga's mother, and it is not a typical memorial. The piece negates any kind of simple narrative about violence, a refusal made in the intricate interweaving of images of violence and hope, grief and love that make up the piece.

This poem can also be positioned in that space between the archive and the repertoire that I discussed in the first chapter, and so I feel it serves as an effective transition as I move from the previous chapter into this second one. The poem is about making a repertoire, of coming to a space where one can perform a ritualized healing. The act of witnessing is not static for Moraga but is a movement of the body, symbolized in the women's passing of the head. Moreover, the disruptive lines of the free verse piece,

as demonstrated in the short quote above, imply movement, and the body of the poem draws attention to itself as it enacts continual changes. Yet, the poem itself is an archival object, much like the clay head standing in for the mother. The poem has been saved and anthologized. It is locatable within a specific textual history as it enacts a politics of second-wave and Third World feminists: the coming together of women of color against violence and silence, the creating of a space for women of color to speak and act, and the imagining of a new subjectivity against conventional narratives of the self. In this second chapter, I move away from discussions of the performative and of the repertoire to think about the archiving of feminist poetry and to think about how feminists have situated and staged their subjectivities within collections of poetry.

The poem's structure and goals mimic the larger format and goals of Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking 1981 anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color*, a text whose structure and whose poetic playfulness create a new archive around feminist activism and layout a new affective and political response to violence. Much like Moraga's poem, *This Bridge* calls women together to speak for and of their lives and the lives of other women and to enact a witnessing that will become that "splitting open," that voice against violence. In this second chapter, I look at the anthologizing of women's and feminist poetry as a parallel desire to split open the American canon and to demand new ways for speaking of and understanding violence. Thinking about anthologies as public archives or vessels of traumatic memories, I pursue the question, how does the act of anthologizing women's poetry help us to think about the archiving of traumatic memories within a national,

communal, cultural, political, and personal space? As a genre, anthologies create a history—they bring together texts to create a narrative, often linear, about the meanings, ideologies, rituals, practices, and hermeneutics of a particular time and historical setting. The anthologies of the women’s movement were no different.

During the women’s movement, women’s poetry anthologies served as important documents and assemblages of that history and of women’s artistic prowess and talent. In fact, the anthologizing of poetry (much like the actual poems themselves) was an important component of the movement; an assertion underlined by the number of women’s poetry anthologies available during and shortly after the movement in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. In 1973, two foundational feminist poetry anthologies were published, paving the way for similar collections. As Elly Bulkin records in the introduction to the 1981 *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology*, “When commercial publishers decided several years ago that there was money in women’s poetry anthologies, two appeared. . . . The 1973 publication of *No More Masks!* [edited by Florence Howe and Ellen Bass] and *Rising Tides* [edited by Laura Chester and Sharon Barba] was tremendously important” (xxi). Following these two collections, there was a wave of others that presented works by contemporary feminists and works by earlier writers whom the anthology editors deemed empowering women poets, writers such as Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and Edna St. Vincent Millay among others; many of the anthologies I reviewed list Sylvia Plath as the first / earliest consciously feminist poet. Such anthologies emphasized, to varying degrees, the history and political power of women’s poetry. Along with the Howe and Bass and the Chester and Barba anthologies,

other popular anthologies published during or shortly after the movement included:

*Mountain Moving Day: Poems by Women* (1973) edited by Elaine Gill; *Psyche: The Feminine Poetic Consciousness* (1973) edited by Barbara Segnitz and Carol Rainey; *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1970* (1974) edited by Louise Bernikow; *Amazon Poetry* (1975) and *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology* (1981) both edited by Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin; *We Become New: Poems by Contemporary American Women* (1975) edited by Lucille Iverson and Kathryn Ruby; *Salt and Bitter and Good: Three Centuries of English and American Women Poets* (1975) edited by Cora Kaplan; and *Early Ripening: American Women's Poetry Now* (1987) edited by Marge Piercy.

But the above list marks mainly the history of publishing by white feminist academics and editors, and mostly the women published in these books were white with the occasional, usually black, woman of color serving as a “token.” During this same time period, however, women of color were also collecting works to be published in anthologies, although unfortunately such collections were markedly fewer. As Winifred Breines writes in *The Trouble Between Us*, a book that chronicles both the harmony and strife marking relationships between white women and women of color during the feminist movement, there was a

boom in writings by feminists of color in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Almost all of the writing presented a bitter and painful picture of the plight of women of color in American society. Several themes were common: the intersection of sex, race, and class as the only adequate way to analyze the situation of women of color; heterosexism; and the racism of the women's movement and the larger society . . . (171-172).

While these anthologies take up several themes (a variety that no doubt marks the individualized concerns of women and communities described by the term *women of color*), another notable marker of the books is that many of them are multi-genre, much like *This Bridge Called My Back*. Anthologies by women of color that feature poetry, among other genres, include Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970); Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983); the Asian Women United of California's *Making Waves: An Anthology by and about Asian American Women* (1989); and Anzaldúa's *Making Face, Making Soul/Aciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (1990).<sup>9</sup>

The reasons women of color tended to publish in multi-genre collections were numerous, and I can only speculate about some of those reasons. First, the venues for women and feminists of color to publish any kind of genre or text were much more limited. In order to have a variety of voices and authors made public, such multi-genre collection may have been necessary. White women had greater historical access to publishing avenues, and, as a consequence, already had a large body of work in print—works in a variety of genres. White women had access to more funds, more time, and more resources. By contrast, Moraga and Anzaldúa struggled to find a publisher for *This Bridge* after it went out of print at the white women's Persephone Press, Inc.<sup>10</sup> Balancing jobs as teachers and waitresses, the pair also worried over the time and money necessary

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<sup>9</sup> No doubt this list is not even exhaustive. Overall, however, I hope that both of the anthology lists emphasize the special place of anthologies in the women's movement.

<sup>10</sup> The text was later published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press of New York, making it a text "conceived of and produced entirely by women of color" (*This Bridge*).

to fund the book. As they state, “Both of us became expert jugglers of our energy and the few pennies in our piggybanks” (xxv). Such concerns rarely found their way into the mainstream anthologies noted above.

Another reason for *This Bridge*'s collecting of multiple genres, however, may have been the way all of the anthologies reflected different understandings of subjectivity and self-representational speaking. The important space of the anthology made it for the women publishing them not simply an archival collection of poems (and sometimes other genres), but, as I argue, such anthologies were often imagined and presented by editors as a staging of the autobiographical or personal voice against violence. These anthologies became communal, self-representational spaces. As Honor Moore notes in the introduction to *Poems from the Women's Movement*—a 2009 collection of poetry that looks back at the women's movement through poems—feminists “began to identify with one another as women, to be a ‘we’” (xvi) through their poetry and this communal, personal identity was embodied in the space of the anthologies. The poetry anthology is the ritual of coming together in much the way the women of “For the Color of My Mother” meet over the body of the mother. Poetry anthologies thus represented a reiteration of the self and a new engagement with subjectivity and politics for feminists. By reviewing the anthology as a genre and by looking at its varying forms during the women's movement, we can come to understand the shifting conceptions of subjectivity during the feminist movement. Earlier poetry anthologies reveal how white, middle- and upper-class feminists often used the anthology as a space to problematically unify women against gender oppression. Their understandings of the self oftentimes reiterated and

upheld dominant conceptions of gender identity and of the self in Western societies and discourses. By contrast, feminists such as Moraga and Anzaldúa saw the anthology as a space of more radical and profound possibility, as a text that can rupture our understandings of what an anthology is meant to do. For Moraga and Anzaldúa, the anthology became a place of “multilayered nesting” (Lionnet 331) where notions of subjectivity, of genre, and of speech act together in articulations against a wide-spectrum of violence. In this chapter, I begin with a review of more conventional or mainstream anthologies and then turn to *This Bridges* as a space of imagining the self and the archive differently. Throughout, I want to trace how anthologies configure changing conceptions of the self in women’s writing and in feminism more broadly, a conception of the self that was linked for many feminists to conceptions of violence and trauma.<sup>11</sup>

As a genre, anthologies have been mostly ignored within literary criticism and cultural studies. More often than not, the texts that have been anthologized receive more attention than the anthology itself. As literary critics Joe Lockard and Jillian Sandell argue in “National Narratives and the Politics of Inclusion,” anthologies “are taken for granted as an unremarkable feature of the publishing world. Yet this ‘taken for grantedness’ also masks their political and literary effects” (227). Their un-theorized position serves to naturalize and conceal how anthologies work in establishing a “normal” or legitimate narrative of national culture and identity; anthologies perform an

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<sup>11</sup> I want to highlight briefly that I do not mean to imply here that writing by women of color is somehow always and inherently radical and resistant. What I am arguing is simply that Moraga and Anzaldúa, through the very generic structure of their anthology, challenge dominant Western conceptions of subjectivity and texts. In this way, their particular work is, indeed, radical and resistant.

important role in canon formation as they define authentic or “true” literary discourses, setting up communal and cultural notions of value and educating individuals to those values. In *Innovative Women Poets*, editors Elisabeth A. Frost and Cynthia Hogue note that the “anthologization practices” of female poetry have traditionally emphasized three “values” for women’s writing:

Some anthologies include an exhaustive number of women writers of a given period (tending to privilege the already canonized); some emphasize feminist engagements and stylistic accessibility as primary criteria for inclusion (often underrepresenting formally challenging and analytical-political work on the basis of “inaccessibility”); and still other collections opt for a definition of “experimentation” that makes formal disruption the primary criterion of the work or artist (thus minimizing cultural contexts).  
(3)

First, Frost and Hogue argue that an anthology might account for the number of women writers during a particular time period. Such a move validates writers through quantity and offers a “corrective” model of anthologizing—the anthology will correct the existing canon by inserting women into it. Second, an anthology might emphasize women’s political engagement within something such as the feminist movement, validating women who engage with the movement’s goals but perhaps underemphasizing these women’s innovation or challenges to poetic form. In fact, as “stylistic accessibility” implies, these anthologies look for poetry with a clear or blunt message, the message of feminism. Finally, for some anthology editors, form does become important, but arguments about form have traditionally de-gendered and de-politicized writers, often separating avant-garde innovations from political goals. As Hogue and Frost imply, anthologies tended to emphasize only one of these three values, separating and distinguishing between the three

in women's writing. Thus women writers may be political but not necessarily innovative, or women poets may exist "in bulk" but this did not necessarily make them experimental or political or even "good."

However, I would argue that many of the anthologies associated with the feminist movement tend to emphasize a variety of values, especially when we situate them in terms of violence and trauma. Editors wanted to document that a lot of women were writing and that these women were politically engaged. Trying to create a discourse around violence and trauma is never easy, and so form, as I demonstrate in the previous chapter, was opened up in order to create new conversations and narratives and to rupture official / archived histories of women's lives, a move that is, in fact, political. As Moraga writes in the Forward to the second edition, *This Bridge* was inspired by questions such as "what are the particular conditions of oppression suffered by women of color in each of these situations? How has the special circumstances of her pain been overlooked by Third World movements, solidarity groups, 'international feminists?' . . . How do we organize ourselves to survive this war?" ("Forward to the Second Edition"). Moraga and Anzaldúa imagine their text as opening up political spaces other movements could not, and they see themselves as creating a "political vision" that is "subject to change" ("Forward to Second Edition"). In order to reveal this desire for change, Moraga and Anzaldúa create a hybrid, disjunctive book that, as it works toward changing the political landscape for women of color, simultaneously changes the generic landscape of anthologies.

Moreover, if the goal of a feminist poetry anthology is to re-create the canon, this is inevitably a political goal; the anthologies are meant to bring forth a woman's discourse. In *No More Masks!* Howe notes that part of her goal for the collection is to "review and write our history and restore our literature" (6). Howe hopes to create a historical narrative for women through their poetry and literature. In an introductory note to *Rising Tides*, Chester and Barba hope their book will similarly "stand as evidence that this century marks the beginning of a poetic renaissance for women" and that it will dispel the "tokenism" women were historically regulated to in poetry anthologies (xxiii).

But the kinds of corrective discourses imagined by editors like Howe, Bass, Chester, and Barba are most often exclusionary and they often reiterate the paradigms of dominant culture and literature as opposed to questioning them. As Paul Lauter, who refers to anthologies as "social institutions" (33), writes in "Taking Anthologies Seriously," traditional anthologies have worked through a vicious circular logic excluding marginalized writers: "that [minority writers] were not in the standard anthologies argued that they were not valuable; because they were not valued, they were not in the anthologies and thus not taught" (20). Lauter was a founding editor of the *Heath* anthology of American Literature, a text published in the late 1970s by the Reconstructing American Literature project and The Feminist Press, and whose goal was to enact "social change by altering *which* American literary texts were seen as important, and thus taught in classrooms;" by doing so the editors "hoped to change what people saw as significant in the wider society" [emphasis in original] (Lauter 29). In this statement, Lauter not only links anthologies and the canon to wider social, political, and

cultural discourses, but he also notes that the inclusion of selections by ostracized writers was meant to emphasize or make visible the lives of women and men usually ignored within larger public spaces, such as the university classroom. For Lauter, an anthology, just as it can work as a hegemonic force pulling seemingly diverse texts together to create the appearance or, to use a word from Lauren Berlant, “fantasy” of a cohesive whole, can also work as a “counter-hegemonic influence toward a better integrated education” (26). As a genre, an anthology can thus work doubly: it can act as an all inclusive archive that seemingly erases difference in order to create a picture or “fantasy” of similarity, or it can act as a text highlighting the differences and complexity of a national narrative; it can serve as a text that stresses the “counter-hegemonic” reality of national and public space, marking complex histories of violence, racism, sexism, and genocide. As with any archive, the documentation, storage and history that the anthology performs can be both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. As Jennifer Howard writes in “The Literary Anthology, Revised and Excised,” we may be experiencing a “postcanonical age,” in which “the old literary lions fight for space with hordes of once-neglected writers” (Howard). Anthologies can be a way to rework archives and to question political and staying power. The anthologies I review here work, albeit in different ways, to do just this.

Along with this making visible of once erased histories, for Lauter, anthologies perform another key function: they allow for the “viewing of texts and authors in relationship with one another, in time and over time” (20). Anthologies put writers into a discourse with one another, highlighting how their texts represent a historical, cultural,

and / or political conversation. In this way, anthologies form communities, a generic function which was very much in line with the women's movement; women hoped to articulate new conceptions of community and, in this way, offer a more diverse construction of identity against the way national and public citizens / bodies had been historically figured through literature. For women, anthologies were yet another space to "make the personal political" and articulate a community.

This was exactly the kind of goal Gill dreamt of for *Mountain Moving Day*. The collection's title is taken from a poem by the early twentieth-century Japanese feminist and pacifist Akiko Yosano. With such repeating lines as "All sleeping women now awake and move / All sleeping women now awake and move" and "All silent women scream in rage / All silent women scream in rage" (qtd. in Gill 3), "Mountain Moving Day" has an insistent rhythm and form that reflects Yosano's urgent desire to call women to action and voice. For her own part, Gill imagines in her introduction that the collection will help women awake to "an offensive against the oppressor, man" (7); women are called forth as a community in opposition to men / patriarchy. Gill asserts that the "Mountain Moving Day," the arising of a powerful female community, "is truly upon us—women are beginning to speak out with their own voices. They are beginning to sound like women, making their own projections" (7). In order to highlight this coming to voice, each of the women collected in Gill's anthology is introduced with a photo and a short, autobiographical statement, and the women situate themselves in varying degrees in relationship to the feminist movement and to the anthology's call to action. Pat Lowther, a Canadian writer who was, appallingly, murdered by her husband shortly after the

publication of *Mountain Moving Day*, states “I see the women’s revolution as part of a new outreach of consciousness. The liberation of women from imposed self-images *is* happening” [emphasis in original] (80). Lowther’s desire for “outreach” parallels the community-building demand that is embodied in Yosano’s piece. A founder of the Gay Liberation Front, Fran Winant writes in her statement that “Being in the women’s movement has made art and everything else in my life, meaningful to me. My writing is part of a dialog with other women” (116). Winant autobiographically situates herself in relation to others; an artist, her life and work gain meaning through her ability to participate in the community. But it is the poet, writer, and academic Marge Piercy who most closely embodies that “rage” found in Yosano’s lines. Piercy states,

I want to argue in defense equally of women who want to work to create a female culture and those who want to contribute to what has been a male culture and change it to a broader, less oppressive culture. . . . We have to thrust constantly forward to clear space for each other . . . We create each other. We make the space that other women will occupy. (###)

In her statement, Piercy uses verbs such as “fight,” “thrust,” “argue,” and “take,” language that mimics a rape. She militantly demands that women “take” their space from men or “change” it forcefully. For Piercy, women must do this together, acting as a sisterhood, and each woman’s personal voice is intricately and intimately linked to other women’s.

The women of *Mountain Moving Day* present a conception of female subjectivity that is what Felicity A. Nussbaum describes in “The Politics of Subjectivity,” as “a discursive subject placed in its historical specificity” (162). The anthologized women are writing themselves into history, imagining themselves as part of the revolution / growing

consciousness through their writing in ways that work to create community. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in “Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices,” early feminist theorists saw autobiographies as “stirring narratives of self-discovery that authorize new subjects who claim kinship in a literature of possibility. . . . women reading of other women’s autobiographical writings have experienced them as ‘mirrors’ of their own unvoiced aspirations” (5). Early theorists believed that women could see themselves reflected in the autobiographical writing of others, seeing themselves both connected to and as the autobiographical subject. These autobiographies represented an archiving against violence by describing a communal “we” and the experiences of that “we,” and it was the anthology, as a genre, that allowed for the staging of such a community. The anthology embodied the communal sense of self that early feminist anthologizers were conceiving of for women. This was in contrast to earlier conceptions of both the anthology and the autobiography. In “Women’s Autobiographical Selves,” Susan Stanford Friedman notes that historically autobiographies by men have placed “the emphasis on individualism;” such texts do “not take into account the importance of group identity for women and minorities. . . . individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities” (72). Stanford Friedman reads women’s and minorities’ autobiographies as presenting and positioning individuals who see themselves as ““very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community . . .’ *identification, interdependence, and community* . . . are key elements in the development of a woman’s identity” [emphasis in

original] (75). Thus women and other ostracized individuals possess an identity that is read as relational. Instead of having representative and distinct selves, they, as Stanford Friedman argues, are known only through “interdependence,” through community and family. According to Stanford Friedman’s argument, women can come out against violence through “a collective solidarity with other women—that is, a recognition that women as a *group* can develop an alternative way of seeing themselves by constructing a group identity based on their historical experience” [emphasis in original] (75). For many early feminists, this “historical experience” is violence, and female identity centers upon a victimized “we” that all women are viewed as identifying with. Women become a gendered community, one that stands against the male oppressor, as Gill asserts in *Mountain Moving Day*. A similar stance is taken by *Psyche*’s coeditors, Segnitz and Rainey, who state in their introduction that women are united against “an inscrutable symbol of power, with elusive control over [our] lives”: “Her oppressor is the unresponsive and authoritative male consciousness” (19, 21). Through their poetry, women can create an “intuitive blood tie between the victims of society which transcends other relationships” (19). Such a statement problematically places violence at the center of a woman’s identity and existence, and “blood ties” works to naturalize such an understanding of identity. For Segnitz and Rainey, a woman can “exert” herself through poetry; “she talks back” (25) and takes up the call to action. These anthologies very clearly staged women’s identity in terms of a gendered violence, and the editors expected women to easily identify themselves as part of this sisterhood. The anthologies proposed a new way for women to understand themselves and to relate to the world.

As a consequence, the problem with these early, mainstream feminist anthologies was the way they positioned female subjectivity and emphasized a first-world, privileged understanding of relationality and community. As is highlighted in the Gill and the Segnitz and Rainey anthologies, violence against women is articulated in these texts continually in terms of gendered oppression; women are understood only against a particularized and sexualized violence. Such anthologies uphold a national / public narrative of women as always being the victims (oppressed by male violence) who have the potential to become survivors (the ones who learn to “talk back” and express rage). Moraga and Anzaldúa address this critique in *This Bridge*: “In 1979, . . . feminism focused almost exclusively on relations between sexes, [and] *Bridge* intended to make a clean break from that phenomenon” (“Forward to Second Edition”). For Moraga and Anzaldúa, women were too often being defined by their relationship with and differences from men. The community imagined by the early anthologies is made even more problematic by the privileged position given to whiteness. While the anthologies often include women of color, these women are not made central and they are few and far between. In Howe and Bass’s *No More Masks!* black women are viewed primarily through their relationship to white women: “black tradition is distinct, and only in the recent poems of young white women have we begun to feel something of its effect” (27). Black women’s poetry is made important only because it means something to white women, and the work of Chicanas, Latinas, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Native Americans and other communities is largely ignored in *No More Masks!* The way these anthologies stage and archive violence and female identity for women creates a very

narrow sense of what it means to be a woman and what it means for that woman to confront violence. Women are viewed only in relationship to other women and to men in a way that reductively defines “womanhood” and the feminist movement.

In her “First-Person Plural,” Hertha D. Sweet Wong offers a critique of this communal model of selfhood deployed by the anthologies and theorized by Stanford Friedman. For Sweet Wong, this model is a first-world white model that suggests “a kind of universal female collectivity [that] exists despite our diverse social, economic, racial, cultural positionalities” (170). The continual theorizing of women as communal selves simply creates a “reductive oppositionality” (168)—on one side there is a radical yet harmonious sisterhood and on the other is the individualistic and solipsistic conception of self associated with masculinity, and this dichotomy has no space for other constructions of selfhood and community. Furthermore, while many early feminists may have wanted to imagine community as a more open, diverse construction within their anthologies, “community” simply becomes another monolithic category of identity; the community—though made up of many members—is ultimately a singular institution that works to erase differences, to subsume them under the monolithic category of *Woman* constructed in terms of gender oppression and in terms, as Howe seems to unintentionally demonstrate, of whiteness. Community becomes an under-theorized hegemonic space and it represents a relationship that forecloses some identities just as anthologies have historically left some voices out of the canon. While creating a fantasy of cohesiveness, this construction of community continually denies some inclusion.

Instead, for Sweet Wong, “a subject is not either individual or relational, but may be more or less individual or more or less relational in diverse contexts” (169). Sweet Wong imagines subjectivity as shifting between varying situations; the self is never completely communal nor completely individual and to account for such shifts, she proposes a new way of conceiving of the self’s position in relation to community and in relation to him or herself: a “nonoppositional relationality” (170). Nonoppositional relationality explains the ways “[e]ach individual participates in a variety of simultaneous and overlapping communities-social, political, linguistic, and religious” (172). The self cannot be subsumed simply into one group as context and group identification or disidentification continually alters the way selves are understood both to themselves and to others. “Nonoppositional” denies the binary categories of subject formation (male/female, self/community, strength/weakness, visible/invisible) that typically define individuals under Western epistemologies. In her essay, Sweet Wong parallels nonoppositional relationality to Iris Marion Young’s understanding of the community not as a monolithic, closed body but as an “unoppressive city” with an “openness to unassimilated otherness” (qtd in Sweet Wong, 172). For Young, the community is an unrestricted, receptive and amicable space that does not force subjects / citizens or non-citizens into a specific relation to national and public identities, discourses, and practices. As a metaphor of self and community, the “unoppressive city” allows for an openness of identity, symbolized by the city streets leading individuals freely into and out of the space.

In “The Politics and Aesthetics of *Métissage*,” Third-World feminist Françoise Lionnet offers another theorization of selfhood and community that does not simply fit into a Westernized, oppositional framework. Lionnet identifies the *métissage* or “the braiding of cultural forms through the simultaneous revalorization of oral traditions and reevaluation of Western concepts” (325). *Métissage* parallels Diana Taylor’s conception of the archive and the repertoire. The celebration of oral traditions and a questioning of Western thought speak to the tension between the closed archive and the open / performing repertoire that I addressed in the first chapter. For Lionnet, *métissage* likewise “is the site of undecidability and indeterminacy” (325); it is “an enabling metaphor of transculturation with revolutionary potential” (328). *Métissage* is a tool through which women might “rewrite the ‘feminine’ by showing the arbitrary nature of the images and values which Western culture constructs, distorts, and encodes as inferior by feminizing them” (326). Through its openness, the *métissage* offers a way to critique and question dominant constructions and simultaneously to see the self as “a sheltering site” of “multilayered nestings” (326, 331). Thus the self can be formed by a variety of identity markers and communities. Through the questioning embodied by *métissage*, women are able to dismantle the falsity of binary Western constructions that continually undermine female power.<sup>12</sup> And as each strand of the *métissage* or braid is separate, women retain their individuality and are not subsumed by the group. Much like the varied meaning that

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<sup>12</sup> Lionnet’s conception of *métissage* is very close to the concept of the *mestiza/mestizaje* developed by Anzaldúa in her *Borderlands/La Frontera*. For more on *Borderlands*, please see my fourth chapter.

Lionnet offers of *métissage*, *métissage* seems to be both a metaphor for self and community, as well as a strategy for relating to and critiquing the world.

Sweet Wong's, Young's, and Lionnet's theorizations of self and community can help shed light on the anthology I began this chapter with, *This Bridge Called My Back*, a text which deploys a similarly alternative conception of community and selfhood. For *This Bridge's* editors, the book addresses women autobiographically as a "we" but simultaneously acknowledges how each woman may be living with "particular conditions of oppression." Anzaldúa and Moraga work against readings that simply collapse all women of color into one uniform category, and they posit that women of color do not form a "'natural' affinity group" but instead are "women who have come together out of political necessity," while recognizing that "[t]here *are* many issues that divide us" [emphasis in original] ("Forward to Second Edition"). The pair does not assume to know their readers and their readers' lives in the way the earlier anthologies did. *This Bridge* offers the possibility that women might be "braided" together for political activism but they remain separate individuals (just as the individual strands of the braid / *métissage* do). There is no "'natural'" reason why women of color should form political alliances, though, as the book demonstrates, they may join forces for activism.<sup>13</sup> This refusal of naturalizing discourses celebrates women as individuals and also conceives of community as a space where women can work to achieve common goals. Much like Young's "unoppressive city," it is a space of moving alliances. As Anzaldúa states, "We

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<sup>13</sup> Such a positioning of relationships between women of color parallels Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism."

are each accountable for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea” (*This Bridge*, “Foreword”). She calls women together not simply against gender oppression but asks them to be “accountable” in a more expansive realm: “street,” “border,” “sea.” The community becomes not simply concerned with patriarchy but with transcultural issues as well. Anzaldúa continues this thread in *This Bridge We Call Home*, a 2002 follow-up to the earlier anthology, noting that with *This Bridge Called My Back*, she and Moraga “struggled with the recognition of difference within the context of commonality” (2). Such a statement highlights that conceptions of community within *This Bridge Called My Back* were never straightforward and easy.

How violence is situated and staged in the text reflects this kind of expansive and counter-hegemonic understanding of identity and community. Instead of focusing on a vary narrow understanding of violence against women, the authors of *This Bridge* are

. . . coming to grips with [violence’s] perversions—racism, prejudice, elitism, misogyny, homophobia, and murder. And coming to terms with the incorporation of disease, struggling to overthrow the internal colonial/pro-racist loyalties—color/hue/hair caste within the household, power perversities engaged in under the guise of ‘personal relationships,’ accommodation to and collaboration with self-ambush and amnesia and murder. (Bambara viii)

The text confronts multiple forms of violence, archiving and listing the way women of color have been ostracized and controlled by Western power structures—everything from their conceptions of their hair and “self-ambushing” or low self-esteem and internalized racism to erasure, “amnesia” and “murder.” This listing refuses the simple construction of violence imagined in the earlier anthologies and also highlights the way event and insidious violence interact to ostracize and damage individuals. “Murder” and “racism”

become linked in the list, and “pro-racist” loyalties and “caste[s] within the household” cannot be divided out from one another. Such a portrait of violence refuses the simple collapse of oppression into sexism that was staged in some of the earlier anthologies. Readers’ understanding of violence is further challenged in the book by statements such as “The day before, a 14-year-old black boy was shot in the head by a white cop. . . . I hear there are some women in this town plotting a *lesbian* revolution. What does this mean about the boy shot in the head is what I want to know. I am a lesbian” [emphasis in original] (Moraga xiv). Such a statement represents the problematics of identity and of violence. While a lesbian may be an ostracized subject within dominant culture, how might a “*lesbian* revolution” confront the violence of racism that leads to a child’s death? What will a lesbian revolution / protest do to end other violence—violence that occurs within the same community and therefore affects all women? How does one violence reach into and name another? *This Bridge* collects a history of trauma, and in its listing or archiving of multiple violences and traumas highlights the “normalcy” and the unexceptional nature of such violence in our century and in our lives. Just as *This Bridge* creates an uneasy and open portrait of identity, so it offers a problematic, unresolved portrait of violence.

The anthology’s structure reflects the editors’ multi-layered questioning of identity, community, and violence. Toni Cade Bambara calls *This Bridge* a “potent meshing” (vii), a term that can both refer to the re-conception of identity theorized above and to the text’s generic structure, that mixture of works: essays, letters, journal entries, interviews, myths, and, of course, poems. It is a “collection of cables, esoesses, conjurations and fusile

missles” and of “blueprints” (Bambara vi, viii), all objects that are transitory, unfinished, and imply movement and in turn openness. The cable can be both a short message as well as a linking, connecting cord, while the blueprint suggests a form that has not yet been finalized. As something with potentially shifting meanings, the blueprint also evokes a theory or a potential plan that can be put into practice. All of these images of connection and disconnection gesture towards the free verse poem’s form I theorized in my first chapter. Refusing to simply define how the texts and the women writers are meant to relate to one another, Anzaldúa and Moraga create an anthology with performative potential; they open the anthology up into a poetic space. Throughout *This Bridge*, Moraga and Anzaldúa think metacognitively about the text as an open, transformative document. As Anzaldúa states “*we have begun to break with routines and oppressive customs and to discard taboos; we have commensed to carry with pride the task of thawing hearts and changing consciousness . . . let’s look forward and open paths*” (“Foreword”). For Anzaldúa, the book is a call to action that will “break” and “change.” Moraga refers to the book as “my journey of struggle, growing consciousness, and subsequent politicization and vision as a woman of color” (xiii). She imagines the book as part of a changing struggle as opposed to an archived, finished object.

Throughout the book, the metaphor of the bridge helps to demonstrate this desire for change and openness. The bridge is a space that links and brings together two other spaces / communities. It is not a definitive space but an in-between space, much, I would argue, like the lines of a poem. And just like the meanings of poetic lines, the meaning of the bridge also continually shifts, again opening up a space for readers to make their own

connections and explore possible political alliances; Moraga and Anzaldúa imagine the anthology as a poetic space. In some places, the bridge is an empowering link between women: Anzaldúa states that “*there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks*” (“Foreword”). Such a statement again reveals the movement and change embodied in the text. Together, the women will create new links and communities with one another; they do not already exist within a “natural” community. Elsewhere, the bridge represents the physical pain of oppression or racism—the agony of having a bridge for a back. As Moraga writes, “‘A bridge gets walked over.’ Yes, over and over again. . . . I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection” between women of color and white women (xv). The bridge also represents the process of surviving: “the planks to cross over to a new place were stooped labor cramped quartered down pressed and caged up combatants can straighten the spine and expand the lungs and make the vision manifest” (Bambara vi). In Bambara’s figuration, the bridge becomes a path to surviving and to action (the vision made “manifest”). The multiplicity of the bridge metaphor reflects the conception of identity, an understanding of identity that echoes what Sidonie Smith describes in “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” as “multiple calls [that] never align perfectly. Rather they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions” (110). Much like this conception of subjectivity, the text itself reflects the possibility of meaning and allows for multiple arguments and positions to be bridged or braided together. The staging of identity and community in *This Bridge* thus works beyond Western conceptions of self that continually posit only binaries and reactionary oppositions.

Instead, *This Bridge* offers an archive that is an open city, a space of movement and the poetic that can be positioned between the archive and the repertoire, that begins to imagine a new history for women.

As the anthologies archived memories within national, communal, cultural, political, and personal space, they became spaces to stage female identity, no matter how differently the editors may have conceived of this identity. Poetry became one possible way to give voice to this community and to share sometimes collective and individual experiences. These anthologies highlighted the importance of poetry and the poetic in the feminist movement, whether as poems by individual women that were meant to serve as a single voice within a collective identity—that were meant to represent community—or as a poetic strategy that disrupted the way we traditionally understand national narratives and identities, in the way Moraga and Anzaldúa imagine. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, the poetic is a strategy that ruptures previous ways of speaking and understanding the world, and imagines new ways for women to be represented upon the national stage.

I continue with this discussion of the national stage in my next chapter. While anthologies represented a way for feminists to reflect on community and identity, in the next chapter, I struggle with one woman's confrontation against and within her community's myths and stories, and her own struggle with changing the archive / narrative of her life. Dorothy Allison uses poetry, not to create community, but to begin her story. Yet both Allison's oeuvre and the anthologies ultimately lead toward the same thing: a way to make an entrance into voice against silence.

### Chapter Three:

#### A *Bastard's* Genealogy: Trauma, Poetry, and the “Trouble” of Dorothy Allison

*Its mode of transmission is the repeat, the reiteration, the yet again.*

--Diana Taylor

*When it comes to memoir, we want to catch the author in a lie. When we read fiction, we want to catch the author telling the truth.*

--Tayari Jones

The trouble with contemporary writer of the American South Dorothy Allison is that her stories never fit into expected or traditional narratives. Her body of work, as she summarizes in the essay “Believing in Literature,” is filled with stories that are “violent, distasteful, painful, stunning, and haunting” (*Skin* 166). Through each of her texts—the novels, *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992) and *Cavedweller* (1998); the poetry collection, *the women who hate . . . me: Poetry 1980-1990* (1991); the short story collection, *Trash* (1988); the essay collection, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (1994); and the experimental memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995)—Allison continually repeats, restructures, and re-imagines stories of violence: stories of debilitating poverty, of brutal sexual and physical abuse, and of the social, political, and cultural ostracization of being white trash and a lesbian. Her stories combine incest, masturbation, sexual and physical abuse, work, lesbian desire, feminist activism, storytelling, destitution, humiliation, strength and love in ways that continually push against the “caricatures” or “stock characters” (*Trash* 4) of working-class men and

women and of victims of sexual abuse. Allison refuses the “lying myths and easy moralities” (*Skin* 36) of the American archive or canon that wants to read stories like hers as either rags-to-riches “morality tale[s]” (*Skin* 24) or as so “shameful [and] contemptible” that they are “not on television, not in books, not even comic books” (*Trash* vii). How can she write a story about herself that is a story of incest and poverty that does not simply play into a terrible joke about poor white families: “‘What’s a South Carolina virgin?’ ‘At’s a ten-year-old can run fast’” (*Trash* 12)? How can she claim her sexuality in a way that does not continually link lesbianism back to childhood violence and rape? Her stories are a “tearing open” of older archives and the “opening up [of] scar tissue” (*Skin* 218) to explore how violence might be represented differently and to discover what might be spoken from within a wound.

But in the telling of violence and trauma, Allison also troubles another divide in the convention of storytelling, the line between autobiography and fiction, a division that is nicely articulated in the opening epigraph by the novelist Tayari Jones, whose own work deals with the violence’s aftermath (*Interview with All Things Considered*). Readers continually question the generic label given to works that deal with trauma, highlighting violence and trauma’s uneasy relationship to truth and fiction. For Allison, this blurred divide is complicated by many of her personal statements. Allison claims that “[t]ruth seemed to me a very dangerous, tricky concept,” and that within my “family it was astonishingly difficult to sort out the truth from the lies” (*Skin* 230-321), thus emphasizing the complex and often tricky difference between memories and fantasy. Elsewhere within *Skin* she expresses a feminist belief in “the importance of women

offering their own experience as wisdom . . . That's what I believe to be the importance of telling the truth, each of us writing out of the unique vision our lives have given us" (219), a sentiment supporting personal voice that aligns with the practices of C-R groups. Moreover, for Allison, "[t]here is no story in which my family is not background," and so everywhere in her work the autobiographical might be located. And yet, she paradoxically admits, "I don't think I'm capable of writing autobiography" (Interview with Birnbaum), undermining readers' desires to see her work as truthful. Allison asserts that her writing has allowed her to "claim my family, my true history, and to tell the truth . . . about who I was" (*Skin* 34) but that "it is not autobiography" (*Skin* 55). Such an authorial insistence on neither the truth nor lies of texts continually ruptures the ways readers access Allison's work, and feminist, cultural, and trauma study scholars, as well as literary critics, often read this division as productive. By refusing any kind of easy truth or lie about her family, her life and her story, Allison opens up a third space for understanding violence and trauma. Critics often turn specifically to Allison's most popular book *Bastard out of Carolina* as a text that borders the divide between fact and fiction and opens up new space for the way women self-represent about violence. Marketed as a "novel," the autobiographical threads seem obvious throughout *Bastard*. *Bastard* is about the troubled childhood of Bone, a girl who grows up in Greenville, SC, Allison's own childhood home. Bone's youthful experience mimics Allison's, most especially in their family's continual struggle with poverty, unemployment, inconsistent housing, and lack of education. Like Allison, Bone is raped and molested by her

stepfather and struggles with her mother's love and her mother's "betrayal" and helplessness when confronted with the violence of the stepfather.

Leigh Gilmore reads *Bastard* as a "limit case." Gilmore defines limit cases as texts that "confront how the limits of autobiography . . . might conspire to prevent some self-representational stories from being told;" these limit cases generically "cross a border" (*The Limits of Autobiography* 14, 46). Limit cases push against the generic laws of autobiography and offer texts that disrupt the form through the crossing of formulaic perimeters. Limit cases open up a space for other self-narratives to come into being. Because of the semi-autobiographical nature of the book, for Gilmore, *Bastard* "immediately confronts a limit: Where does autobiography end and fiction begin in an autobiographical novel? . . . [The novel] raises a larger question about how fiction and autobiography reach into each other . . . A limit, like the one between autobiography and fiction, is not a simple divide" (*Limits* 45). *Bastard*, in its continual crossing between fiction and autobiography / truth and lies, is an outlaw genre. It throws into crisis readers' expectations about texts as well as the legitimacy and trust they may place into genres; it denies any easy access into the narrative in a way that Gilmore finds productive for speaking of trauma and violence. Because violated and traumatized individuals become the object of another's control and/or social or cultural systems rendering them powerless, their lives can no longer form a unity after a traumatic experience and their stories may not fit simply into the traditional conceptions or forms of self-narrativization. As I've stated throughout this project, such individuals need a way to narrate differently.

For Gilmore, not only are women who write about violence distanced from traditional narrative forms, but, as she argues, part of the “problem” with women’s self-narration more generally is “not with writing but with the means of cultural expressivity, not, in short with production but with power . . . how do we re-member—which I take to imply both the act of memory and the restoration of erased persons and texts as bodies of evidence” (*Autobiographics* 27). When women, Gilmore argues, self-represent, they confront a historical lack of subjectivity, power, and speech within the canon and within society at large—within juridical, medical, and ecclesiastical discourses about truth, identity, community, the body, and violence. They lack those “mirrors” that that early feminists so desperately sought in confronting their archival absence. Ultimately, a woman “writing an autobiography [is] a political act because it asserts a right to speak rather than be spoken for” (Gilmore, *Autobiographics* 41). Women’s autobiography is a reconstitution of the self against silence; it is a reclaiming of speech and identity. Allison’s rupturing or troubling of autobiography and fiction and her refusal to straightforwardly write “truth” or “lies” usefully explores, for Gilmore, new, more productive ways for women to speak about violence. By questioning the border between autobiography and fiction, Allison seems to question larger social, cultural, and political structures.

This blurring of fiction and autobiography in *Bastard* has been thoroughly and effectively theorized, not only by Gilmore but also by Ann Cvetkovich<sup>14</sup>. Cvetkovich

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<sup>14</sup> The critical popularity of *Bastard* can be seen in the number of articles written by well-known (and lesser-known) scholars. The list below is not exhaustive, and the critics engage with *Bastard*,

reads *Bastard* much like Gilmore as an “oblique,” “imaginative work” that in its reimagining of the story of sexual abuse can “ultimately be more ‘healing’ than an explicit rendering of the event” (94). *Bastard* is read as a feminist “autobiography” that offers for women testimony through imagination and fiction; by reimagining the traumatic narrative, Allison is able to gain more control over it. When we translate chaotic and painful experiences into narrative, states poet Gregory Orr in *Poetry as Survival*, “First, we have shifted the crisis to a bearable distance from us: removed it to the symbolic but vivid world of language. Second, we have actively *made* and shaped this model of our situation rather than passively endured it as lived experience” [emphasis in original] (4-5). The re-working of the traumatic experience into narrative signifies for Orr a control over that experience. Through narrativization, violence becomes something viewed across time and stated in terms the victim finds appropriate. The violated individual moves from object into subject refusing to live “passively” with the violence. It is this kind of imaginative alteration that Cvetkovich and Gilmore feel Allison makes in

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autobiography, and fiction to varying degrees. But I want to include this list in part to highlight the importance and circulation of *Bastard*. The journal articles and book chapters include: Laurie Vickroy’s “Vengeance is Fleeting: Masculine Transgressions in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*” and “Elusive Redemptions: Trauma, Gender, and Violence in *Bastard out of Carolina* and Paco’s Story;” Gillian Harkin’s “Surviving the Family Romance? Southern Realism and the Labor of Incest,” later republished as “Surviving the Family Romance? The Realist Labor of Incest in *Bastard out of Carolina*;” Suzette Henke’s “‘A Child is Being Beaten’: Dorothy Allison’s Testimony of Trauma and Abuse in *Bastard out of Carolina*;” Tania Friedal’s “The Transformational Power of Shame: Masturbation, Religion, and White Trash Myths in *Bastard out of Carolina*;” Carolyn Kraus “*Bastard* Logic and the Epic of Female Illegitimacy;” Moira Baker’s “‘The Politics of They’: Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* as Critique of Class, Gender, and Sexual Ideologies” and “Dorothy Allison’s Topography of Resistance;” Tanya Horeck’s “‘Let Me Tell You a Story’: Writing the Fiction of Childhood in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*;” Katrina Iring’s “‘Writing It All Down So That It Would Be Real’: Narrative Strategies in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*;” and Jillian Sandell’s “‘Telling Stories of ‘Queer White Trash’: Race, Class, and Sexuality in the Works of Dorothy Allison.”

*Bastard*, and coming at trauma through this reworking is a productive way to articulate violent and traumatic experiences; such a rewriting is, indeed, empowering.

Consequently, I do not want to refute here the argument that *Bastard* is a productive site that imaginatively situates personal traumas within fiction. But Allison's novel is only one generic articulation of violence and trauma, and I do not believe that it is the most productive place in her oeuvre to explore her language and story of violence. *Bastard* is not the kind of groundbreaking "limit case" that Gilmore hopes it to be, but instead the novel represents a more linear and controlled narrative, one that offers a particular story of trauma, violence, and citizenship in America. As I argue, it is not in the novel that we can find Allison's most productive discussion of trauma, witnessing, the self, and the imagination but in her often-critically ignored poetry. Allison's poetry delves into the impossibility of speaking in a way that the novel, as a more linear and controlled narrative, does and cannot. It is through poetry that Allison illuminates the tense relationship between fact and fiction, between autobiography and fantasy, between the public and the private, and between self and community that she continually tries to work out in the rest of her oeuvre. As I assert, the poetry signifies more clearly autobiographical processes of coming into voice against violence and opens up more thoughtful questions about the bridge between genres such as autobiography and fiction.

Thus, in this chapter, I begin with a close reading of her poem "upcountry" to explore how poetry, as a genre, represents that coming to speak of violence is never a straightforward, direct process. Instead, like the poem itself, it is a shifting, disruptive, and divergent process, and we can see this deviating and contradictory process if we

follow the thread of Allison's work. Thus, following my close reading of "upcountry," I offer a reading of Allison's later short story, "A River of Names," a piece, as I argue, that links together or serves as a transition between Allison's poetry and novel. I then posit my own reading of *Bastard* as an alternative, queer *bildungsroman*, a novel that is about trauma, but not a text that explores and highlights the coming into voice against trauma in a way that mimics the traumatic experience or crisis itself. I want to highlight here that I am not arguing that *Bastard* fails as a text in its presentation and exploration of violent and traumatic effects and aftermath. What I am asserting is that it is not the kind of experimental, limit cases that Gilmore and Cvetkovich make it out to be, and that her poetry may offer a more interesting exploration of Allison's relationship to violence and trauma. Reading *Bastard* as a *bildungsroman*, reveals the text's clearly-defined story arch and linear narrative that situates violence and trauma in a way the poetry cannot. Finally, in this long chapter, I conclude with a close reading of Allison's experimental memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, a text that addresses the kinds of tensions around form, autobiography, and trauma that haunt her other texts.

When we move from Allison's poetry into her fiction and memoir, we see the process of a writer engaging with violence and trauma, moving from the poetic "crisis" of the event to control, linearity, speech, and then ultimately into her own theory of testimony and storytelling. What Allison teaches us when we follow her trajectory is that when a writer is in the middle of traumatic experience, trying to articulate a violence that he or she may have no language for, the narrative looks different. It looks like poetry.

#### **I. "Do you remember the screaming?": Allison and the Re-Membering of the Self**

*In the dirt country where I was born  
the words that named me were so terrible  
no one would speak them  
so always just over my head  
a silent language damned me.*

*I learned then that what no one would say  
was the thing about which nothing could be done.  
If they would not say Lesbian  
I could not say pride.  
If they would not say Queer  
I could not say courage.  
If they would not name me  
Bastard, worthless, stupid, whore  
I could not grab onto my own spoken language,  
My love for my kind, myself.*

Allison's "we all nourish truth with our tongues" is a poem embodying the struggle for language and the search for recognition that found its way into the work of many feminists. Faced with words about herself like "bastard," "worthless," "stupid," and "whore" and the fissure left by her community's refusal to say these words, let alone any positive labels of lesbian identity, Allison comes to constitute a lack or silence within that community and within the nation at large. In the piece, Allison is doubly damned: first, while a violating or offensive language to describe her as a lesbian exists, these words are never spoken; within the "dirt country," her sexuality is "[s]omething" that "hides . . . a secret thing shameful and complicated" (*the women* 25). This "secret shame," as Allison argues through the poem, is part of the horror of a violence like homophobia: the horror of being erased, of being valueless, and of being unseen.

Her erasure as a lesbian intersects with her erasure as white trash. *White trash* is "a marker of southern regionality and hence sub national identity" (Cvetkovich 116).

Allison's geographic and demographic position represents a negation or silencing within the American nation, and her subjectivity is dehumanized. In the essay, "The Transformational Power of Shame," Tania Friedel notes that

"White trash becomes a term which names what seems unnameable: a race (white) which means, in this instance, economic waste" . . . By way of rationalizing the state of economically impoverished whites, they are often said to be lazy (unable to keep a job) or stupid (incapable of getting a job). Sexual promiscuity is associated with the notion of having too many children, often illegitimately. (45-46)

White trash identity is naturalized through a discourse linking racial markers with class. Because of their status as "economic waste," impoverished whites become unworthy of the kind of centrality, power, and citizenship historically afforded to white identity / "whiteness" within Western epistemologies, practices, and institutions; they become disenfranchised from the nation. This group of particularized whites is marked as both unwilling and unable to work and is seen as a disease or a "waste" proliferating within the nation. *White trash*, Friedel notes, is also marked by an excessive sexuality. Allison describes this perception of white-trash sexuality in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*: "My cousins and I were never virgins, even when we were. . . . The football players behind the bleachers, the boys who went on to marry and do well. . . . [My cousins and I] were not beautiful. We were hard and ugly and trying to be proud of it. The poor are plain" (36-37). The women's bodies are always already<sup>15</sup> sexualized

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15 As Diana Fuss discusses in *Essentially Speaking*, the term "always already," from Derrida's *toujours déjà*, has become a divisive one in both contemporary poststructuralist and nonpoststructuralist theories alike. As Fuss notes, the term originates from deconstructive theory that attempts to undermine and destabilize notions of essentialism. However, Fuss sees "always already" as "a point of refuge for essentialism which otherwise . . . comes so consistently under attack. . . . The danger (and the usefulness) of 'always already' is that it *implies* essence, it hints at an irreducible core that requires no further

objects owned by male desire; they are “never virgins” because they do not have a right to their bodies. The “football players,” young men that the community glorifies as heroes, take the women “behind the bleachers,” a hidden site allowing the men to always deny the sexual acts they perform. Because they are “poor,” the women’s bodies are discarded as worthless by the men who go on to prosper and make publicly legitimate marriages. The women of Allison’s family and community cannot refuse this sexuality, just as Allison could not when she was raped by her stepfather:

It did not matter that what was being done to me was rape and that I had never asked for it. It did not matter because I was who I was, the child of my family, poor and notorious in the country where we lived, poor and helpless. . . . I was taught to be very quiet, very polite in public. . . . to work to get that scholarship and get the hell out of my home. . . . I convinced myself only poor men beat their daughters, only poor men rape their daughters, and only poor women let them. (*Skin* 52)

The designation of “rape” becomes meaningless for Allison because of her “poor and notorious” status; the rape “did not matter.” Instead of openly naming the violence against her body, Allison is encouraged to erase that body, to be “very quiet,” “very polite,” and to “get the hell out,” and thus to also erase herself from the community. If, as in the poem “we all nourish truth with our tongues,” the community cannot see Allison, then how can she “grab onto [her] own spoken language”? And why turn to poetry to make an intervention into such staggering silence?

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investigation. In doing so, it frequently puts a stop to analysis” [emphasis in original] (15, 17). While I in no way want to imply through my use of “always already” that “white trash sexuality” is naturally or essentially promiscuous and pathological (and therefore the term does not warrant further study), I do use the term to imply that understandings of this sexuality exist in a state that is never “pure or uncoded” (Fuss 6). In other words, “white trash” sexuality is historically steeped in a complex matrix of race, class, and gender, so that Allison’s addressing of sexuality, if we are to speak of her work as addressing sexual traumas, must necessarily be read in relationship to this history of white trash, which “naturalized” and named her before her birth.

Much like the women writing in consciousness-raising groups, Allison acknowledges that her struggle to articulate a story of violence and trauma began with poetry. When asked by Carolyn E. Megan of the *Kenyon Review* if “*all [her] work begin[s] as poetry,*” Allison admits, “It’s what I always do. Almost everything I write begins in some lyric form. It’s how I began; it’s how I learned; it’s what I do” [emphasis in original] (71). Allison’s comments point to the nascent exploration of language that Lorde asserts the poetic fuels: “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless” and make a “revolutionary demand” for change (37-38). Allison has even admitted that her most famous work began as a poem and that “[t]here are places in *Bastard* that are tone poems that somehow survived the editing process” (Interview with Megan 71). In a later interview with Robert Birnbaum for the literary website *identitytheory*, Allison admits that she needs to “write a lot of bad poetry to get a good line of prose” and that poetry is “food that really feeds your muscle. . . . poetry really triggers writing in me” (Interview with Birnbaum). Such comments reveal that for Allison poetry represents a playfulness, openness, and easiness within language. The poetic demands a sudden and unexpected break with the way writers traditionally move through language. The poem makes room for potentialities and exploration.

“upcountry” is a poem about the struggle to be seen and to speak in spite of violence. Allison opens the piece addressing her “Rot-sweet, dull-eyed sister” who “took to fucking like I took to silence” (17). This description highlights the sisters' mutual blindness and the struggle for and of witnessing that Allison must confront; the sister’s “dull” eyes do not see and her sexuality is equated with Allison’s silence—both are

painful and oppressive. Throughout “upcountry,” there are countless references to looking, sight, and visibility: “I watched the neighbors squint their eyes” (10); “the sun, her eyes” (12); “the way she sometimes looked at you / seeing her son in the set of your shoulders” (12); “eyes like the glint of a shotgun sight” (12); “your hand / lifting the blanket / to see what I couldn’t” (15); and “eyes of glass that nothing lived behind” (17). The piece moves through recognition and a lack of recognition and through a continual declaration of self and a concurrent erasing of that self. This is a continual movement between the autobiographical / personal and a denial of that speaking self. The girls’ childhood home and community are sites of death and want where the recognition of the self in the eyes of others is marked by a lack or negation of identity, the erasure of the self that trauma victims must often confront. The sisters are “*no count*”:

the country of all my dreams, night terrors  
where your eyes were always growing dull  
and someone was always screaming

the country where we knew  
ourselves  
despised

.....

*You don’t know where she’s been.*

I know where I’ve been. [emphasis in original] (*hate me* 10-11)

The landscape of the poem is an embodiment of paradoxes, at once a place of “night terrors” but also one of “dreams.” The line breaks highlight this contradiction as Allison sets up the middle stanza to begin with “the country where we knew / ourselves,” allowing “the country” to become a place of self-affirmation and recognition that suddenly turns in the next line on “despised” to become a site of repudiation. She is both

claiming and then removing her identity, struggling over her desire for agency and power against the disenfranchisement enacted by the community, and the poem comes to represent a struggle for subjectivity and self against violence. In the above stanza, the quoted line “*You don’t know where she’s been*” equates her with a lost, dirty animal that the unnamed speaker (presumably someone from the community) does not want to touch, but the very next line, the first person “I know where I’ve been,” becomes this assertion of agency. In this continual shifting from agency to disempowerment as one line moves into the next, the form of the poem comes to reflect the continual struggle for the self against violence. This is the struggle for self-naming and self-determination that is simultaneously a struggle for a witness, for someone to see her.

As “upcountry” continues, Allison recalls and re-imagines her violent entrance into sexuality, being raped by her stepfather, as a fall onto the house’s porch:

Do you remember the screaming?  
The bushes where you hid  
our stepfather running after us  
caught me more often than you  
ran blood down my body?

Do you remember the porch?  
How I fell back onto the corner  
cut deep between my legs  
screamed for mama driving up  
catching my scream in the pit of her fear  
my blood in her hands  
my hands between my legs  
the scream dying in my throat. (14)

The opening questions, addressed to the sister, speak directly to the struggle for witnessing. Allison asks for the sister to perform the kinds of “re-membering” that

Gilmore says drive women's autobiography; Allison asks to be brought back into voice and community. Allison's body has been broken and bloodied, a point most easily highlighted through the fragmented body portrayed in these lines. Her body is not whole but in bits and pieces: "legs," "hands," "blood," "throat," even the deep "cut" and the "scream" portray the disjunction caused by violence. Allison portrays her vagina and in turn, her developing sexuality, as a new, "deep" wound that occurs literally on the body of the house, a place typically marked by security and nurture for children but which, as Allison has continually portrayed, may also hold danger and violence for them. While Allison imagines herself being injured by falling onto the house, she falls because of her "stepfather running after" her; she figures herself being wounded/raped "between [her] legs" by the dangerous home instead of by her stepfather. The house literally becomes his weapon. The home is "*disgusting*" (10), an ostracizing term that traditionally marks families of incest. As literature and feminist scholar Gillian Harkins argues in "Telling Fact from Fiction," "[i]ncest has historically been presumed to take place in degraded kinship forms . . . making disciplinary knowledge about the social reality of childhood incest part of the punitive regulation of socially stigmatized families" (287). Being a victim of incest becomes a pathological marker for families who already exist on the outskirts of social sanctions and protective measures. Not only are they marked as somehow inclined to commit acts of incest, but to demand justice and public acknowledgment of the incest may simply work to reaffirm these pejorative social views. If Allison refigures the rape into a fall on the porch, the new narrative works as a way to speak about the abuse that does not automatically mark her as "degraded." This new

narrative deflects the meaning of violence, just as the lines of poetry continually deflect and move the reader away from the poem's true meaning. While the retelling of the rape in the poem does not eradicate the stepfather's blame, this imaginative reworking does allow Allison to take power over the story in a way that does not automatically place her into the castigating or "disciplinary" narratives of incest. Thus the blurring of herself and the home in the poem allows for an imaginative and empowering story of violence that simultaneously reminds readers of the incestuous home's pathology.

After the fall/rape, Allison calls out for her mother—"screamed for mama driving up"—in a line that, like much of the poem, works doubly. First, it figures the screams of the child for "mama" as uncontrollable and primal; they "drive" up into her throat in a way she cannot contain. But the line also describes the mother's absence from the child; she is away but driving up to the house at the time of the incident. Because she is not present, she cannot protect the child from the fall / rape. The line "my blood in her hands" might also be read as "my blood on her hands," signifying the young girl's belief that the mother is also responsible for her pain. These two doubling lines—"my blood in her hands" and "scream for mama driving up"—work to distance and disconnect Allison from the experience because these lines may be misread. Their meaning is not fixed but fluid and slippery, defying conventional linear narratives.

When Allison is finally seen by her mother, this recognition occurs in the "pit of" her mother's "fear" and in Allison's childhood "blood." The identification of the child by the mother is thus one of horror and failure and leads the child not to feel healed through having her story witnessed but to feel betrayed and to become silent. The screams

disappear into her throat as the lines of the poem become shortened near the end of the stanza. Allison cradles her wound in her own hands, repressing the pain literally back into her body, hiding it in a way that the fall onto the porch is a way to hide the stepfather's guilt from the mother. As Allison's screams die, she has no expression for the pain. The piece moves from "my hands" and "my blood" into "the scream" signifying further "forgetting and dissociation" (Cvetkovich 7) as she moves from marking the experience with the first person possessive into the distancing and more objective third person. The mother cannot fully recognize her daughter and is unable to save her daughter. The daughter disappears as the lines at the end of the stanza shorten, and the stanza moves from the first person affirmation of identity into the third person denial.

All of this playing with language and the continual shifting in the poem of responsibility, agency, and power / powerlessness work doubly and may be viewed according to what psychologist and author of *Loss: Sadness and Depression* John Bowlby labels a technique of dissociation; this is a form of mourning and confronting violence by which a "subject might concentrate on the separation between his arm and his head [sic], or on imagining himself going away to the country where all is quiet. . . . [T]he findings show that the dissociative process segregates organized systems from one another" (57-58). This technique is an attempt to remove the pain and place it elsewhere and as a result control traumatic memories. Allison's reworking of the rape into the fall may not only be a simple way for her to gain power over the narration of the event, but readers may also see her transforming of the horrifying act of incestuous rape into the less stigmatizing fall as a way for her to deny the pain and alleviate the blame against the

stepfather. As Laurie Vickroy argues in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, an “abused child’s need to preserve faith in the parents, necessitat[es] strong defenses against awareness, such as dissociation, rationalization, or denial. . . . This exemplifies how seeking help for abuse may put victims at odds with others close to them” (149). Allison’s reworking of the rape may be a way to keep the family together and to protect her mother who loves the stepfather, thus to “rationalize” or “dissociate” the crimes against her. Dissociation is a process that fragments or “segregates” (Bowlby 58) the self just as violence does. The inability to fully acknowledge and confront the violence means the victim may never have the ability to feel in control over her life and to see this life as a linear narrative.

Ultimately, the refiguring of the rape into the fall may be read as both empowering and disempowering for Allison. The narrative of the poem shifts in a way that highlights the complex and difficult nature of confronting trauma, guilt, and responsibility. “upcountry” becomes a way of articulating a story of rape that works against traditional forms of talking about incest: “Stories of childhood sexual violation in the home are subject to intense scrutiny as their truth or falsehood are seen to legitimate the right of scientific, legal, and political authorities to recognize and regulate domestic affairs” (Harkins 283). For Allison, the fragmented or unexpected rhythm of the free verse poem allows for a narrative that does not fit smoothly into notions of “truth” and “legitimacy” but instead offers a story whose meanings may continually slip away even as she attempts to reconcile and confront the violence. This continual slipping forecloses and denies readers’ desire to fit her story into one of white trash sexuality and incest. This

struggle emphasizes the uneasy way victims may confront abuse, and the ambiguity in the narrative highlights the struggle for language to articulate violence and trauma, whether that language be autobiographical or not.

To conclude this section, I want to return to the porch, the place where Allison re-imagines her younger self being injured. The porch of the speaker's fall is a liminal space that is neither outside nor inside the home and is neither completely public nor completely private. The porch, much like Moraga and Anzaldúa's bridge, is an in-between space that represents space that is neither fiction nor autobiography. This is a space of ambiguity. This is the space of crisis where traumatic memories can be explored.

## **II. "making up words to the shouts around me": Narrating Violence in the Short Story**

Before moving into my discussion of *Bastard*, I want to review a text that seems to bridge the gap between the novel and the poetry, Allison's short story, "River of Names" from her collection of short stories, *Trash*<sup>16</sup>. In Allison's hands, the short story occupies a space between the possibility and openness of the poem and the linearity, structure, and control of the novel. Traditionally, short stories offer more room than poetry and are also more linear, but when compared to novels, in short stories authors have less room and time to develop literary aspects such as characters or settings.

Generically, short stories have fewer characters, cover a shorter period of time, and

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<sup>16</sup> The collection's title references, no doubt, *white trash* but may also refer to what Allison calls *trash fiction* in an interview for *The Progressive* with Minnie Bruce Pratt. Allison seems to imply that trash fiction is pulp fiction, or a genre that includes cheaply and quickly produced books such as romance and mystery novels. Thus her use of *trash* may refer not only to herself and her family as members of a disenfranchised community but may also imply that her text itself, which narrates the life of this community, is also somehow lesser an other fiction.

usually only have a single plotline and setting. A short story “concentrates on a unique or single effect . . . it may be concerned with a scene, an episode, an experience, an action, the exhibition of a character or characters, the day’s events, a meeting, a conversation;” “the forefathers of the short story . . . are myth, legend, parable, fairy tale, fable, anecdote” (Cuddon 816-817). Based in these kinds of traditional narrative forms, the short story may involve the teaching of a lesson, a moral questioning and exploration, or revolve around a symbolic narrative that offers a communal, national, or cultural understanding of the world. The concise structure of the short story may make it particularly useful in passing down the myths and legends that form a national narrative of identity.

For Allison, as she states in the introduction to *Trash*, short stories are also small, passionate, cathartic moments of energy and rage that mimic the poetic:

Writing it all down was purging. Putting those stories on paper took them out of the nightmare realm and made me almost love myself for being able to finally face them. . . . [A] night finally came when I woke up sweaty and angry and afraid I’d never go back to sleep again. All those stories were rising up in my throat. . . . It was a rough beginning—my own shout of life against death. . . . I write stories. . . . the condensed and reinvented experience of a cross-eyed, working-class lesbian, addicted to violence, language, and hope. (3, 6-7)

The stories offer a “purging” or an emotional release as well as an agency and sense of power over violence; the stories are no longer “nightmares” but become transformed into a self-affirming “love” and a voice “against death;” they are “reinvented experience.” Her description of writing them also reflects a kind of traumatic symptom, a flashback or a sudden, involuntary memory of violence that threatens to overwhelm a victim. Judith

Lewis Herman, writing in *Trauma and Recovery*, theorizes these types of flashbacks as “intrusion”: “Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. . . . Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (37-38). Victims lack control over memories that suddenly impose themselves on their consciousness and are felt psychosomatically. As Allison states, these memories become night sweats that seem to roughly force themselves out of her throat. These nightmares and “shouts” or sudden affective outbursts no doubt translate easily into the short story’s concise and quick structure.

“A River of Names,” a piece about the deaths of multiple children in her family, has this short form that reflects the anger and confusion Allison feels about their deaths and also mirrors the short and fleeting lives of the family members. The story’s formatting imitates a poem, as descriptions of each death are broken up into short sections that flow like stanzas across the page. The story is driven by the question, “Who are my people? We died so easily, disappear so completely—we/they, the poor and the queer” (*Skin* 13). Just as the children’s lives and deaths are underdeveloped in the story, so the story itself is underdeveloped, open, and poetic—no character’s / family member’s life is fully explained and examined:

I’ve these pictures my mama gave me—stained sepia prints of bare dirt yards, plank porches, and step after step of children—cousins, uncles, aunts; mysteries. The mystery is how many no one remembers. . . . I set my teeth at what I do not want to remember and cannot forget. We were so many we were without number and, like tadpoles, if there was one less from time to time, who counted? . . . They went on like multiplication tables. They died and were not missed. I come of an enormous family and

I cannot tell half their stories. . . . Perforations, lacerations, contusions, and bruises. (10-12)

In the description, the children's bodies blend in with the dilapidated house; both bodily and geographic spaces are marked by waste and lack. Many of the children are without identity and subjectivity and their deaths are not necessarily linked to causes; they simply die unrecorded. The description of them as tadpoles, mysteries, and as incalculable in number makes them amoebic and shapeless, lacking in individual subjectivity. They are story-less. In this way, they are seemingly always already dead as they lack personality and individualization. The mono-rhyme "Perforations, lacerations, contusions" stresses how even the manners of their deaths blend together, erasing the particularity of each death in order to make both life and death pointless. The mono-rhyme or repetition here also stresses the blandness of their deaths. Without the particularity of their lives and deaths, they are not grieved and are "not counted" either by their family or by their nation. As poststructuralist theorist Judith Butler states in the preface to her collection of essays *Precarious Life*,

certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable. . . . the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce . . . certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human. (xiv-xv)

While Butler is speaking here of war deaths, her comments also apply to the lack of "normalcy" in the children's lives. The lack of grief and recognition surrounding their deaths reflects their lack of humanity; they are subject-less and without citizenship. There are no markers for their existence, only the grisly moments of their deaths that are listed

or archived by Allison through the story. Even the metaphor in the story's title, the river, works to cover over their lives. Fluid, the separate parts of the water can never be parsed out and discretely identified. Allison states, "I've got a dust river in my head, a river of names endlessly repeating. That dirty water rises in me, all those children screaming out their lives in my memory" (*Trash* 18). She acknowledges her own inability to every fully articulate the deaths: "the liquid language of my own terror and rage" (13). This "liquid language" and the impossibility of speaking about violence is also symbolized in the story through the scream. Just as each life cannot be separated out of the river of names, so individual words cannot be parsed out of the "liquid" of the scream; the scream is simply that "terror and rage" blending together, and throughout the piece, people are constantly screaming: "Someone began to scream;" "I wake up in the night screaming" (13); "Uncle Matthew screamed like a pig coming up for slaughter" (14); "My sister was seven. She was screaming. . . . She just kept screaming" (15); "He was yelling, but there was so much noise in my ears I couldn't hear him" (15); ". . .two of the girls turned up in the weeds, screaming loud enough to be found in the dark. But one of the girls never came up out of the dark water" (17); "One night I came home to screaming—the baby, my sister, no one else was there. She was standing by the crib, bent over, screaming red-faced. 'Shut up! Shut up!' . . . She just kept shrieking. 'That little bastard just screams and screams. That little bastard. I'll kill him'" (17-18); and "'That dirty water rises in my head, all those children screaming out their lives in my memory'" (18). Through repetition, Allison highlights the unspeakability of trauma. No language exists for such pain. The repetition of "scream" draws attention to the word, highlighting the role and

power of a single word in much the way poetry does, further blurring the line between Allison's story and poem.

Fittingly, the constant screaming is contrasted throughout "River of Names" with an overwhelming silence: "I cannot say a word" (10); "I didn't cry. I almost never let myself cry" (12); "Pammy never spoke again" (12); "the one drank lye and died laughing soundlessly" (11); "Lucille climbed out the front window of Aunt Raylene's house and jumped. They said she jumped. No one said why" (14); "It was a long time before I realized that they never told anybody else what had happened to Bo" (14); and "I open my mouth, close it, can't speak. What could I say now?" (18). The speaking of trauma is about the finding of "all the words, big words, little words, words too terrible to understand" (12) and about "making up words to the shouts around me" (10). Through the short story, Allison takes up yet another form in her archive against violence. The short story comes to represent an urgent stream-of-consciousness that embodies Allison's exploration in language.

### **III. "a couple of ugly scars behind one ear that she wouldn't talk about": A Linear Narrative of Trauma**

For Gillian Harkins, writing in *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America*, critics' and audiences' desire to understand *Bastard* as autobiographical is, in part, fueled by an assimilationist slant: "The real value of the text is its lesson in social justice, a lesson available to us paradoxically only through fiction, where the authenticity of literary realism authorizes the authenticity of the 'minority' writer" (154-155). An assimilationist reading sees the realist tendencies of the novel as

driven by a minority or marginalized writer's desire to see her / himself as worthy of speaking to the nation. This kind of situating of *Bastard* within a national, realist discourse aligns, I would argue, with the way Allison wants the text to be read. Although I don't think Allison wants to be assimilated into any kind of national identity, she does want to position herself against, as I stated at the start of this chapter, the kind of national narrative of white trash identity that exists in this country's culture. In trying to position herself against the insidious violence that has continually named her and her family, she wants to write a narrative that does not play into the story already told about minorities and marginalized individuals—a story that somehow reifies existing stereotypes and myths about white trash identity—but she wants instead a story that corrects and denies dominant readings of bodies and identities such as hers. In this way, the writing of fiction is also the writing of a personal voice—it is the engagement with a very real and painful trauma.

Allison claims she wrote *Bastard out of Carolina* to in part offer a counter-narrative to traditional working class novels. She calls such texts “romantic,” believing that in these books poverty and the painful realities of economic destitution become “backdrop[s] for the story of how [they were] escaped” (*Skin* 17). The painful, everyday material reality of poverty is not, for Allison, what becomes highlighted in these working-class narratives as instead, within such texts, the individual lives through an idealized class mobility overcoming a poverty and lack of resources that may simply be insurmountable for some. The British writer Carolyn Kay Steedman makes a similar assertion in her experimental autobiography *Landscape for a Good Woman*, claiming that

because the standards of working-class narratives have been established by male writers, it is “difficult for women to make representation of such dislocation” as experienced in poverty: “The conventions of working-class autobiography, the positioning of an articulated solidarity (of family and friendship, of street and factory) against an external authority of school, the Guardians, the Assistance board, or the police, make it difficult to represent this dislocation of class . . . within the household” (74). Women's experiences of poverty are overlooked, in part because women are not figured as partaking in public spheres such as the “street” or “factory” and because they are not seen as being aggressive enough to take a stand against institutions of authority. Steedman claims her own autobiography is “outside the law” (67) of traditional working-class narratives and sanctioned / canonized stories of poverty, refusing the kinds of generic truths that usually structure readers’ understandings of texts. Allison's semi-autobiographical novel must also confront the conviction that her story is not worth telling; with her novel, Allison says she hopes “to recreate the family that [she] deeply loved and was not saved by, and to put in print everything [she] understood that happens in a violent family where incest is taking place . . . a story about a young girl who is slowly being convinced that she is a monster” (*Skin* 53-54). This is not the story of a young girl who triumphantly overcomes the pain of poverty and violence and who somehow receives justice and compensation for that pain.

In order to tell this story of violence and injustice, Allison writes what I would classify as a *bildungsroman*: the story of a person's arduous journey into maturity and self-knowledge, a journey that may be physical, psychological, and / or spiritual. The

*bildungsroman's* goal is a reconciliation between the protagonist and the community / nation.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of the text, the *bildungsroman's* protagonist often feels discord with the social, cultural, and political values and ideologies that dominate his or her community and family, and “the aim of this journey is reconciliation between the desire for individuation (self-fulfillment) and the demands of socialisation (adaptation to a given social reality)” (Rau). As Lisa Lowe writes in *Immigrant Acts*, *bildungsroman* texts work as “‘cultural institutions' of subject formation;” such texts police and normalize “formations of citizenship and the nation,” including shared understandings of gender and racial identities (98). By reading about and sharing in the journey of the protagonist's reconciliation with national values, readers come to identify themselves with the story and in turn with those national values. The *bildungsroman*

emerged as the primary form for narrating the development of the individual from youthful innocence to civilized maturity, the telos of which is the reconciliation of the individual with the social order. The novel of formation has a special status among the works selected for the canon, for it elicits the reader's identification with the *bildung* narrative of ethical formation, itself a narrative of the individual's relinquishing of particularity and difference through identification with an idealized “national” form of subjectivity. (Lowe 98)

Through the culturally-accepted texts of the canon, individual's learn to identify with national ideologies, morals, practices, and rituals and to identify and value the normative bodies and lifestyles of the nation (these are, of course, the bodies that become grievable

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<sup>17</sup> Perhaps part of the reason readers and critics are so uncomfortable with the rupture between autobiography and fiction in relation to *Bastard* is because of how easily the autobiography aligns generically with the *bildungsroman*. Both genres recount a life story. One text simply recounts a character's life while the other tells the story of the self (although, as Leigh Gilmore would no doubt argue, the self is a type of character in the autobiographical retelling of a life story). The reconciliation of the *bildungsroman's* protagonist parallels the community representativeness that the autobiographical speaker metaphorically embodies.

within the nation). The *bildungsroman* ends with a utopian image of the individual who has found him or herself safely within what Lauren Berlant calls in “National Brands / National Bodies,” the “prophylaxis” of the nation (113), the protection and welfare net afforded to the citizen.<sup>18</sup> Any differences between nation and individual of history, identity, background, beliefs, and politics must be denied, repressed, or changed as these national narratives define gender and racial relations, public and private life, and history itself, or more particular, national historical “truths.” Those who refuse this reconciliation or are unable to assimilate because of gender, racial, sexual, historical differences are “subjugated” or “erased” (Lowe 98)—much like the children of “A River of Names.” Thus a history of violence and trauma is one such irreconcilable difference.

*Bastard* begins with a distance between the protagonist and the values and identities of the nation state. As a bastard child, Bone has her birth certificate marked “in oversized red-inked letters . . . 'ILLEGITIMATE'” (*Bastard* 4) and consequently becomes a non-citizen who cannot call on the law for protection. The certificate “literally writ[es] over her existence, and in doing so, nullif[ies] it” (Friedel 46). The novel's plot is pushed forward as Anney, Bone's mother, attempts to have the stamp removed and to “deny what Greenville County wanted to name her” and in turn her daughter: “*No-good, lazy, shiftless*” [emphasis in original] (*Bastard* 3-4). In her hopes of escaping this narrative, Anney visits a lawyer who tells her

“The way the law stands there's nothing I could do for you. If I was to put it through, it would come back just like the one you got now. You just

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18 Berlant makes similar arguments about citizenship, identity, and national belonging in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (particularly in her first chapter).

wait a few years. Sooner or later they'll get rid of that damn ordinance. Mostly it's not enforced anymore anyway." "Then why," she asked him, "do they insist on enforcing it on me?" "Now, honey," he sighed, clearly embarrassed. . . . "You don't need me to tell you the answer to that. You've lived in this county all your life, and you know how things are." (9)

While the law and the stamp publicly make Bone illegitimate, the cultural and social setting of the South uphold an unvoiced directive to apply the meaningless and mostly forgotten law unjustly to Bone and her family. This unequal application speaks to the naturalized discourse of pathology or disease that defines white-trash families. Even when the courthouse burns down, destroying the hall of records, this erasure of the documents "is not an antidote to a legal culture that has already imposed a set of terms for self-knowledge"(Gilmore, *The Limits* 55). Thus this story for white trash identity already exists, circulating within the community and intrinsically understood by members of the ostracized community. A document or an archive is not necessary for the remembrance and enforcement of such a law / rule.

Bone's mark of illegitimacy begins the initial conflict of the *bildungsroman*, distancing Bone from a possible community. This lack of self that Bone constitutes results in a continual mis-seeing or mis-recognition within the community. Throughout the book, Bone must confront a world filled with men like her stepfather, Daddy Glen-- people who directly or indirectly violate her. As she says of the local sheriff, "His voice was calm, careful, friendly. He was Daddy Glen in uniform. The world was full of Daddy Glens. . . . I looked at him. . . . I hated people who looked at us like trash" (*Bastard* 296-297). The sheriff, along with the various institutions and power structures he represents, cannot see Bone but instead reads on her body only the stereotypes he already possesses

about white trash identity. In fact, when the Sheriff comes to take Bone's testimony at the end of the novel, after Daddy Glen has assaulted her one last time, Bone refuses to speak: "Honey,' the sheriff said . . . I hated him for calling me that. He didn't know me. 'We're gonna have to know everything that happened.' No. My tongue swelled in my mouth. . . . I couldn't tell this man anything. He didn't care about me" (297). Bone refuses to remain in the stereotypical narrative of incest, a narrative in which she is erased; she refuses to speak within discourses of power. As Vikki Bell writes in *Interrogating Incest*, "Within the parameters of the legal method, the law 'is able to refute and disregard alternative discourses and to claim a special place in the definition of events' . . . Frequently, other knowledge is heard only to the extent that it can be cast as pertinent to *legal* issues. If not, it is excluded" (10). Thus the law continually refuses certain ways of speaking about incest and sexual violence. The law refuses to witness the victims of such abuse if their speaking does not collaborate with the way incest, sexual abuse, and violence already circulate within the community and law.

Not only is Bone distanced from the law, Bone feels a distancing from her immediate family. This distance initially is not caused by Bone's ability to accept or reject community standards or to be rebellious and questioning as is often the case with the *bildungroman*'s young protagonists. This distancing instead is caused by the violence of the stepfather Glen and by the rupturing violence that poverty and incest create in their home. Because of this violence, Bone continually leaves or is forced from her home, and her journey becomes a haphazard migration from one family member to another marked by a continual desire to return home and to her mother. Along with her physical journey,

Bone also makes a psychological journey of self-discovery as she explores and discards various identities throughout the book. For brief periods, she becomes the thief, the pious gospel singer, and the studious and bright Roseanne. These identities allow Bone to envision a self who is approved within the social and cultural setting of the book, and a self who has not been made unacceptable and ultimately invisible by poverty, violence, and incest. These various selves have subjectivities that can move towards a seemingly utopian, national belonging. As Roseanne and the singer, Bone takes on selves who can assimilate into the social norms and who are visible: Roseanne is praised and exemplified for her good grades and model-behavior. The gospel singer is a visible body who commands an audience and who, in the congregation's eyes, is saved and holy. She travels the country, drawing people together with her song / voice and helping to create a community. By contrast, the thief, while her body is invisible, performs acts whose consequences are ultimately public. The thief possesses an agency that challenges and disrupts the social norms. As a criminal, a thief at least defies and dares social structures, unlike Bone who is continually "illegitimate" and invisible as a non-citizen. Moreover, the thief can be "brought to justice," rehabilitated for his or her crimes and wrapped back into the folds of the community and citizenship. The thief can be redeemed in a way that seems impossible for the erased Bone. Ultimately for Bone, each of these imagined identities command a witness or a visibility within the national.

But poverty and violence continually disrupt the ability of Bone to fully inhabit the role of citizen and by the novel's end, she instead chooses an illegitimate and queered space and subjectivity, refusing the traditional *bildungsroman*'s narrative of

reconciliation with nation / community. The novel ends, not with Bone's return to her home or nation but to her Aunt Raylene's home. Raylene is a queer subject who offers Bone an alternative conception of femininity and citizenship: “. . . a girl couldn't go roaming so easily. But Raylene had done it, and I loved to think how I might too. If I cut my hair real short, learned to smoke and talk rough, maybe I could. Still, Aunt Raylene had a couple of ugly scars behind one ear that she wouldn't talk about” (*Bastard* 179). Raylene refuses the stereotypical and expected narrative of white-trash femininity—the multiple children and life of poverty—for an alternative identity that encompasses freedom and agency but also the messy borders of danger and trauma (as symbolized by the scars). Raylene's identity does not foreclose or erase difference.

Raylene survives and thrives in the book by dragging up trash from the river:

Aunt Raylene's house was scrubbed clean, but her walls were lined with shelves full of oddities, old tools and bird nests, rare dishes and peculiarly shaped rocks. An amazing collection of things accumulated on the river bank below her house. People from Greenville tossed their garbage off the highway a few miles up the river. There it would sink out of sight in the mud and eventually work its way down to Aunt Raylene's, where the river turned, then rise to get caught in the roots of the big trees along the bank. . . . Every day I dragged stuff up from the river—baby-carriage covers, tricycle wheels, shoes, plastic dishes, jump-rope handles, ragged clothes, and once the headlight of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. “This is good stuff,” Aunt Raylene usually said. “You got an eye for things, girl.” (*Bastard* 181-182)

Raylene embodies the “trash” of this white-trash identity, celebrating her difference and distance from a community that has thrown her away. She salvages an identity from what the community has refused. Cvetkovich reads a white-trash identity marker as a “queer category” (115), a subjectivity separated from dominant narratives but with the potential

for its own “amazing peculiarities” and ““good stuff.”” Raylene re-members the community’s trash, finding a new space for it. Her renaming of trash as beauty is an empowering move.

At the end of the novel, Bone and Raylene find a mutual witnessing as Bone refuses the narratives of lack and pathology about herself to create this different community. While Bone may not have a national belonging in the way protagonists usually do at the end of *bildungsromans*, she does have an alternative conception of identity and community, one that is empowering, comforting, and healing: “When Raylene came to me, I let her touch my shoulder, let my head tilt against her, trusting her arm and her love. I was going to be, someone like her, like Mama, a Boatwright woman. I wrapped my fingers in Raylene's” (*Bastard* 309). *Bastard's* concluding image moves in a direction opposite of the fragmenting experience of “upcountry” and the painful listing / archiving of “A River of Names.” Instead of being broken and disjointed, the protagonist becomes a whole, possible self, who has reconceived what reconciliation and speaking about violence mean, and thus the novel exists in relationship to violence in a way the poetry does not. Through this alternative *bildungsroman*, Allison offers Bone a control and power over violence that may not be possible for victims of violence. *Bastard* is a structured story that follows a narrative track not recognizable to most victims of violence. Through this imaginative reworking of the story, Allison offers Bone, her community, and her readers a new understanding of subjectivity.

But why does Allison continually tell similar stories in her texts? This repetition no doubt upholds the need for audiences to give her texts an autobiographical reading—

Allison must continually repeat her own story of violence in order to work through that violence and trauma. The story of trauma, as Diana Taylor has acknowledged, is “the repeat, the reiteration, the yet again,” and so, as readers we must visit Allison’s story one last time.

#### **IV. Speaking the “unmapped space” of Trauma: The Experimental Memoir**

In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Allison continues this traumatic reiteration, repeatedly asking her audience to “[l]et me tell you a story;” in this story, she wants “to prove I was meant to survive. . . . What I am here for is to claim my life, my mama’s death, our losses and our triumphs, to name them for myself” (51-52). As part of the memoir genre, her story is meant to stand as an embodied account of her survival, but Allison is haunted in *Two or Three Things* by “silence, years of silence” (39). This silence is literal and is also the silence of being forced to speak a story that does not “claim” or assert her life in a way Allison finds true to her own memories. She does not want a story narrated by tradition or within the “proper,” generic literary modes: “I’m only supposed to tell one story at a time, one story. Every writing course I ever heard of said the same thing. Take one story, follow it through, beginning, middle, end. I don’t do that. I never do” (*Two* 39). Consequently, Allison’s oeuvre is a continual search for a story that not only allows her to name her life on her own terms but also a story which is told against the hegemonic, dominant narratives she has been taught in “writing course.” She needs to imagine another way of speaking. Allison needs a story that “changes” (*Two* 44), a story open both to the multiple ways she hopes to articulate her traumatic experiences and also to the way she hopes this story will change the literal and material

facts of her life. Her experimental memoir opens up just this space. Yet, while *Two or Three Things* is marketed as a memoir, Allison has contested this label, maintaining that “it’s not really a memoir. It’s a theory piece about storytelling” (Interview with Birnbaum). Once again, Allison troubles readers’ access to the text, and she seems to invite us to view the text in two ways: both as a memoir and as a text that teaches readers what it means for Allison, ultimately, to speak of trauma.

Throughout *Two or Three Things*, Allison abandons conventional ways of speaking for the exploratory and open or performative search. For Allison, the tools or language for her experiences do not already exist in theory, but instead victims like her “have to invent them for ourselves, make them up as we go along. One of the reasons I write is to make up my own rules, discover my own tools” (*Skin* 56). *Two or Three Things* enacts the performed testimony and search for new tools as it “was originally presented as a performance” that “testif[ied] to [Allison’s] embodied survival” (Cvetkovich 109), and thus, as an oral presentation, was a text serving to mark her visible endurance. The structure of the published work continues to highlight the performative or testimonial nature of the narrative—consequently positioning itself between the archive and the repertoire—as Allison repeats the present tense statement “let me tell you a story” throughout the book. The use of “you” draws the reader in as a witness and highlights the need in testimony for the victim to be literally seen as proof of survival. Allison hopes the audience will see and understand the violence in her life, including her incestuous rape by her stepfather:

The man raped me. It's the truth. It's a fact. . . . That's how I began to talk about it—when I finally did begin to talk about it. . . . I'd march the words out—all the old tearing awful words. . . . I started saying those words to get that release, that feeling of letting go, of setting loose both the hatred and the fear. The need to tell my story was terrible and persistent, and I needed to say it bluntly and cruelly, to use all those words, those awful tearing words. I need to be a woman who can talk about rape plainly, without being hesitant or self-conscious. (*Two or Three Things* 41-42)

Allison's story here highlights the urgency embedded within a testimonial act. She twice calls the language "tearing" and "awful," a repetition that emphasizes how she must confront a violent event that will not enter easily into language. These words also invoke the rape, and having to tell the story of her violence and trauma in part becomes a repetition of the rape itself. Despite the difficulty of the speech act, she needs this record of survival in order to be a woman "who can talk." Yet, while she desires to speak "plainly" or clearly (both words which imply sight and witnessing), she acknowledges the difficulty as words are "marched" out. The performativity of the act is stressed through the repetition of "talk," "say," and "tell," all active verbs used by an individual seeking to become the subject of her own autobiographical narrative. She also acknowledges the cathartic nature of speaking, the "release" and the "letting go," both of which emphasize how the violence no longer has a hold on her.

Like many testifiers, Allison hopes her own story will enact changes not only for herself but for her community as well. She speaks to her young niece out of a hope that the girl will imagine a life away from poverty: "Let me tell you a story.' . . . Oh, I wanted to take her, steal her, run with her a thousand miles away. . . . I wanted to save her. . . . For one moment, this moment leading to the next, the act of storytelling

connecting to the life that might be possible . . .” (84). Allison’s storytelling is linked directly to images of movement—of “taking,” “stealing,” and “running.” These verbs mark an urgency and desperation within the speech act that is typically found in testimonial speaking. There is a real desire and need for change through this performative speech that “runs,” “steals,” and “takes.” This language also mimics that used to describe a rape, the very thing Allison fears for her niece, and the author re-appropriates the language of the predator. Allison wants her niece to witness the story and make a tangible, drastic change in her life. “[T]his moment” delineates the present tense and consequently the moment of process and action often associated with testimony and witnessing. Images of movement, storytelling and the “possible” all get aligned within the scene as means to work towards an ulterior life.

This emphasis on a story’s ability to imagine a life elsewhere leads to a key tension in the narrative which may help us explore the tension between autobiography and fiction: the contradiction between Allison’s need for a story with unambiguous, clear language but also the equal need for an inventive, exploratory search within a sometimes metaphorical and figurative language. At many points in *Two or Three Things*, Allison calls for an unambiguous language, wanting to “learn how to say [her story] adamant, unafraid, unashamed, every time . . . My theory is that talking about it makes a difference. . . . So let me say it” (43-44). Thus, to a certain extent, her testimony rests in language theories that posit a word as being able to clearly stand in for the thing it names. This belief in a referential relationship between word and object holds weight for two reasons within a testimony. First, if language is able to “adamantly” bring forward the

truth or “truth” of the event according to the social, political, and cultural understandings of violence, then the victim’s experience can also be brought forward “unashamed,” “unafraid,” and visibly. A very necessary urgency exists for language to make things clear. If the victim cannot control the language of the event and thus believe in the power of spoken words, the victim may continue to exist in a position of vulnerability. Second, because it is imagined that the language and speech act will make a “real,” material difference in the lives of the traumatized, the language must also be able to call forth and give evidence to the “real,” material violence. Language must have an intimate relationship with the “real,” because “[i]n testimonials too much hangs on the reality to which the words refer for meaning to be indefinitely delayed. . . . To doubt referentiality in testimonials would be an irresponsible luxury, given the urgency to the call to action” (Sommer, “Not Just a Personal Story” 120). Thus Allison has to address the urgent desire for “real,” material life changes. Yet, the power of any testimony hinges on the belief that language, rather referential or figurative, will in the end have a “reality effect” (Beverly 102) for the victim—that it will produce positive and life-altering changes in the material world.

Consequently, the way in which testimony searches to speak the “unexplainable” gives it an intimate relationship with a figurative language. This language is poetic as it seeks to discover the tools of change through an imaginative discursive practice. The power of testimony hinges on the belief that language, referential and figurative, will in the end have a “reality effect” (Beverly 102) for the victim—that it will produce positive and life-altering changes in the material world. As Gilmore, Cvetkovich and Orr

have argued, the figurative qualities of language and the ability of a speaker to use his or her imagination in testimony may not necessarily work against the desire for clarity that a victim seeks but may instead be one way to grasp at the unrepresentable qualities of trauma. Figurative language does not always work against the “facts of a violent experience. Memories themselves may be incomplete and fragmentary, and so invention and imagination can act as way to make the experience ‘more real;’” As Kalí Tal argues in *Worlds of Hurt*, speaking about violence “holds at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience” (17). Violence is articulated only as a reconstruction of itself.

Allison addresses the tension between truth and fiction and the possibility for using language to create a material change in the world throughout *Two or Three Things*; as she states near the start of the text,

I’ll tell you a story and maybe you’ll believe me. There’s a laboratory in the basement of the Greenville County General Hospital, I told my sisters. They take the babies down there. If you’re poor—from the wrong family, the wrong color, the wrong side of town—they mess with you, alter your brain. That was what happened. That was it. You believe me? I’m a storyteller. I’ll work to make you believe me. Throw in some real stuff, change a few details, add the certainty of outrage. I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth. The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have—that story can become a curtain drawn shut, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes every time it is used and sometimes becomes something other than we intended. The story becomes the thing needed. (3)

Allison’s story about the babies in the hospital basement becomes an allegory for her own position as a marginalized subject living with the trauma of insidious violence. The vulnerable and “wrong” babies are subjected to experiments in the “basement,” a hidden

space symbolizing the invisible crimes against them. This story affords Allison and her sisters some distance from the real trauma marking their lives as the tale denaturalizes the pathology usually associated with “white trash” identity from the identities of the children. Allison offers a new narrative about why her and her sisters’ lives are marginalized, a story that does not blame the girls themselves but instead their unlucky circumstances and the cruel doctors. The story, as a “harder piece of truth,” “disguises” and “insulates” the lived helplessness of the young girls; it becomes a moment of agency and a challenge to her audience to see her life and the lives of her sisters differently, to understand the world differently. The story of the hospital thus parallels the story of the fall onto the porch in “upcountry,” and thus *Two or Three Things* engages with the imaginative in much the same way the poem does.

Finally, *Two or Three Things* has an alternative form, a structure—or a lack of structure—that flows organically from the text’s relationship with trauma. As Gillian Harkins writes in “Telling Fact from Fiction,”

Many trauma theorists privilege . . . postmodern over ‘realist’ forms . . . ‘one understands the urge to represent the past with details and artifacts intact,’ . . . but ‘the irony of fictionalized or reenacted representations of incest is that these strategies can offer absolute visual and even retrospective confirmation of that which in real life would be mediated by memory and our imperfect access to facts of the past.’ . . . antirealist forms better mime the disruptive reality of traumatic experience. (Note 10)

Trauma writers create more disjunctive and experimental texts to capture the elusive event or condition of violence. Experimental forms match the context or story of violence and trauma, drawing attention to the relationship between trauma and language itself, more specifically language’s failure in relation to trauma. Experimental forms make use

of gaps, disjunctions, pauses, blank spaces, and playful uses of language in ways that mimic how trauma is brought into speech. As Cathy Caruth writes in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, trauma “represents a ‘fundamental dislocation,’ which challenges our received notions of memory, experience, and even the event itself” (189). Trauma creates a parallel “‘dislocation’” of genre.<sup>19</sup>

*Two or Three Things* encompasses this experimental nature as Allison puts forth her testimonial theory. The short book continually defies generic categorization, blurring the lines between memoir, poetry, and drama. Allison's book is written mostly in dialogue and the sharing of stories between women as it fulfills Allison's directive to “‘Talk to me. Tell me who you are, what you want, what you've never had, the story you've always been afraid to tell’” (54). In this performative structure, the text mimics drama as the repeated use of the present tense draws the reader in in real time. Much as in drama, the book moves forward because of dialogue. Throughout the book, Allison also includes family photos as evidence of this lived existence and to make more valid or

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19 As is highlighted in Harkins's quote, these discussions of an experimental, traumatic genre parallel theorizations of postmodern genre and raise the question, to what extent do testimonial texts participate in a postmodern aesthetics? As Marjorie Perloff argues in the introduction to her collection *Postmodern Genres*, postmodern texts are often marked by “*violation, disruption, dislocation, decentering, contradiction, confrontation, multiplicity, and indeterminacy*. Postmodern texts are regularly seen as *problematizing* prior forms, as installing one mode only to contest it, as exploiting the space between, say ‘novel’ and ‘history,’ between representation and invention, . . . between the verbal and the visual” [emphasis in original] (7-8). Testimonial texts enact a parallel dislocation of literature as the speaking subject is similarly disrupted and decentered by violence. Violence serves to breakdown the borders of how speech is understood. Postmodern literature “tends to be non-traditional and against authority and signification” (Cuddon 690). This comparison between postmodernist and testimonial literatures may also be appropriate because postmodernism itself was conceived out of violence and a sense of personal alienation that resulted from the increased use of technology: “the beginning of the postmodern era corresponds to the use of atomic weapons and the rapid development of technology that followed” (Childers and Hentzi 234). A postmodernism aesthetics also includes the fragmentation of life, a conception of reality in opposition to the coherent narrative of history modernism strives for; this fragmentation mimics that of trauma as well.

tangible their corporeal presence. Allison also employs poetic devices to create a more disjunctive text. Throughout the book, the phrase “Two or three things I know for sure,” is repeated, always with slight modifications, to create a kind of poetic repetend.<sup>20</sup>

*Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is what it means to have no loved version of your life but the one you make. . . . Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is just this—if we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as seed in a wind. . . . Two or three things I know for sure, but none of them is why a man would rape a child, why a man would beat a child. . . . Two or three things I know for sure, and one is that I would rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me. [emphasis in original] (3, 12, 43, 71)*

This repetition ties the piece together, but the unexpected repetition of the lines gives the poem / testimony an uneasy pattern. These lines also occur at points that help to summarize the meaning of the narrative coming before, as if Allison is pausing at each point to reflect on the meaning of the story.

Perhaps one of the most important factors of an experimental form is the way it leads to a new conception of the world; through the experimental, the author and the reader are able to imagine the life and themselves differently. In the essay “Believing in Literature,” Allison reflects on why she so often turns in her writing to her own experiences to critically engage with violence, even if she does not always tell this story autobiographically: “I wanted . . . for the world to break open in response to my story. I wanted to be understood finally for who I believe myself to be, for the difficulty and grief of using my own pain to be justified. I wanted my story to be unique and yet part of

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<sup>20</sup> Cuddon defines a repetend in *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* as “[a] repeated element in a poem; a word, a phrase or a line. . . . a repetend is usually more varied than a refrain and occurs at different and unexpected points” (742).

something greater than myself” (*Skin* 180). Allison expresses a belief in the power of the testimonial story to not only stand in for and validate her life but to become a form of activism, a tool for “break[ing] open” and changing the world. Taking a parallel stance, Felman states that trauma narratives enact a “*crisis of truth*” [emphasis in original] (“Education” 17) that dislocates and shatters common ideologies and beliefs. Throughout *Two or Three Things*, Allison finds the strength to speak about her life differently. For example, she is able to speak about her sexuality in a way that works against dominant formulations of female desire. She writes: “I know. I’m not supposed to talk about sex like that, not about weapons or hatred or violence, and never to put them in the context of sexual desire. . . . I’m not supposed to talk about how good anger can feel” (*Two* 47). Allison places her desire next to images of danger and violence, yet highlights the pleasure such a form of sexuality gives her. Although she recognizes that within traditional discourses, such a sexual identity would not be accepted, within the space she has created for her own narrative, she may express pleasure as she likes. As Cvetkovich has argued:

Sexual discourses that fearlessly and shamelessly explore the imbrications of pleasure and danger in sexual practice provide a model for approaches to trauma that resist anthologizing judgments. . . . Allison refuses . . . to erase the rough edges from her experience. She offers an uncompromising picture of how her history of sexual abuse is inseparable from her southern white trash origins, and her experience of lesbian butch-femme culture informs her willingness to represent sexuality that incorporates danger, anger, and revenge without fearing it as trauma’s pathological symptom. (35)

For Allison, the testimonial act allows for a creative and unpredictable storytelling thus opening up room for potential imaginative narratives. The emphasis on speech acts both

stands for her embodied survival against the way insidious and event violence work to erase her and also works towards the life she imagines finally naming for herself.

Given the multiple and often contradictory elements that come into play in Allison's *Two or Three Things*, her book is not so much a memoir as it might be what I would label *testimonial fiction*, a text that arises out of a tension between truth and fantasy, between the referential and the experimental in narratives of violence. *Two or Three Things* seeks the healing and redressing of past wrongs but also searches for a way of speaking that imagines life anew. While Felman labels such a search and disruption the "crisis," Allison's testimonial fiction might also be labeled a "future of radical transformation" (Moraga, *Loving* 115) as it moves towards changed life experiences. The concept of testimonial fiction also accounts for how Allison positions *Two or Three Things* between memoir and theory; testimonial fiction is both based in the "reality" of an event, but continually reaches beyond our understanding and memories of events to offer a new way to view, imagine, or theorize the world.<sup>21</sup>

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21 Allison's *Two or Three Things* is merely one example of testimonial fiction, and so we might locate others. Inside of this testimonial genre I would place such texts as Theresa Hak Kung Cha's *Dictee*, which brings together several disjunctive and experimental elements to articulate a story of intergenerational traumas including the oppression of imperialism, separated families, execution, and the violence of being forced to speak the colonizer's language. *Dictee* is an unstructured narrative that weaves together the story of multiple women's lives. In the text, Cha includes uncaptioned photos, grammar and diction exercises, the use of four different languages (English, French, Japanese, Korean), stories of the lives of the saints, news reports, and letters to create a text that is in process and that struggles to reveal a past that has been erased. Carla Trujillo's stream-of-consciousness story *What Night Brings*, a fictional narrative describing the abusive childhood of two young Latina girls is situated in the very real social and economic violence experienced by Mexican American communities in the U.S. Told from a young girl's viewpoint, the text shifts back and forth in time and also engages with the audience, calling them into the position of critical witnesses through the use of an informal diction and also through the use of questions. Texts by men who belong to disenfranchised communities might also be placed within this genre. For example, Tomás Rivera's . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra . . . and the earth did not devour them* is novel composed of vignettes, prayers, and dialogue that tells the narrator's life growing up on the outskirts of society with two parents who are migrant workers. Other texts include Elia Arce's "My Grandmother Never Passes Away"

What does it mean to arrive, finally, in Allison's personal journey of articulating violence at *Two or Three Things*, a journey that began with the poetic, and how does her "memoir" speak to the tensions that opened this chapter? The memoir brings together the ways in which the autobiographic, the poetic, the fictional, and the experimental may all be necessary parts in speaking of trauma. While the text may not be completely autobiographical, Allison uses personal voice and experiences to explore the messiness of the traumatic. Her oeuvre represents how the traumatic interacts with and threads its way through multiple genres as each genre offers a different way to organize and display the traumatic and the self. In the struggle against silence, many generic forms may be necessary, and new, experimental forms may always be needed, a point I explore further in the final chapter.

## Chapter Four:

### The “emotional residue of an unnatural boundary”: Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Laura Esparza’s Experimental, Hybrid Poetics

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and Laura Esparza’s “I DisMember the Alamo: A Long Poem for Performance” are texts that rework, disrupt, and question genre to create what Diane Freedman calls a “hybrid of [the] feminist-autobiographical-anthropological . . . a powerful, poetic hybrid where the personal, poetic, and political are joined” (Freedman). These hybrid texts enact a new kind of poetic testimony as they combine poetry with other genres such as theory, prose, and performance, to articulate violence. Anzaldúa and Esparza address similar forms of violence in their works: the violence of a border subjectivity that has been both created and erased by America’s violent and racist land-grabbing and capitalistic policies along the Mexican border. Anzaldúa and Esparza look simultaneously into the past and into the future to articulate a testimony for themselves, their family, and their community, and as they highlight interactions between poetry and other genres, they also demonstrate ways that the poetic can perform differently in relation to violence and to speaking autobiographically. They ask, what does it mean to insert a historically erased body into the poem? And what does it mean to In order to answer this question and to conclude my project, I offer a close reading of each piece to reflect on how poetry’s interaction with other genres opens up new space for reflecting on violence and trauma.

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For Anzaldúa, this rethinking of form, violence, and testimony begins by engaging with history and disrupting the dominant Western archive around marginalized identities. Perhaps one of the most famous texts of second-wave American feminism and of U.S. Third World feminism, Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera* (1987) is formed by two sections—a first section made up mostly of essays and a second of poems—that rewrites, re-imagines, and reclaims the history of Chicana women by articulating a Chicana/mestiza feminism. This *mestiza consciousness* accounts for the “multiple subjectivities” (Saldívar-Hull 7) of those occupying physically, linguistically and spiritually the borders and borderlands between Mexico and America. The mestiza's home is “this thin edge of / barbwire” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 35) that marks the physical, psychological, cultural, and metaphorical border between the two countries. Anzaldúa's use of “barbwire” gestures towards the violence enacted upon those who occupy this margin: the border space belongs to the “prohibited and forbidden . . . the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 25). The borderland is a site that both ruptures and moves away from violence but is also one that continually accounts for and testifies to the pain of those occupying it; the borderland is a wound. As Tiffany Ana López and Phillip Serrato write in “A New *Mestiza* Primer,” Anzaldúa figures “the U.S.-Mexico border as an unhealed *herida abierta*, a '1,950 mile-long wound . . .' Physical wounds signify the larger ruptures that exist within the Chicano/Mexicano social body, the intercultural divisions between Chicano/Mexicano, legal citizen/illegal alien, boy/girl” (208). This dividing of self and community is part of the violence of the

margins, and Anzaldúa articulates these “divisions” throughout *Borderlands*, accounting for and celebrating those who have traditionally been illegitimized within American culture, who seem to belong neither to Mexico or America. This borderland subject, the mestiza, is a dynamic shape-shifter whose marginalized position is both “a source of intense pain” but also a site of “continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 102). A complex figure, the mestiza embodies hope, change, and possibility but simultaneously holds within herself the history and scars of violence. The mestiza is a figure of both the archive, a collector and storer, and a figure of the repertoire, embodying a performative “shifting of socio-political [and] aesthetic borders” (Taylor 61) as she continually questions dominant narratives. As Alicia Arrizón writes in *Queering Mestizaje*, “Through its racialized and gendered identity, the mestiza body transcends space and time, enacting the site of difference where the discursive practices of performativity are imagined” (62). Like the indeterminate border space, the mestiza represents an “amorphous and porous third entity, where the concept of nation-state is redefined” (Arrizón 51). The mestiza breaks with public, accepted and official understandings of subjectivity, nationality, and citizenship, and her tumultuous, performative nature is reflected by *Borderlands's* generic structure; this structure helps Anzaldúa articulate these dynamic, aesthetic border crossings. Paola Bacchetta celebrates Anzaldúa's disruptive genre in the elegiac essay, “Circulations: Thinking with Gloria Anzaldúa in Paris”: Anzaldúa's book “unravels and displaces the official archives of her history. She seeks what is submerged under official narratives. She constructs a different understanding of herself, mentally and emotionally

elsewhere. . . an elsewhere, where an unshackled, new subject-in-process can come into existence” (Bacchetta). Anzaldúa's playful use of genre mimics the kinds of fluid borderlands that she discusses throughout her text, and her “unshackled” structure opens up the kind of exploration within subjectivity and history that questions trauma and violence and imagines the possibility for a life “elsewhere.”

*Borderlands*'s important legacy as a text that speaks to and inspires a community is made obvious in the third edition's introduction, where notable Chicana writers and activists like Norma Alarcón, Julia Alvarez, and Sandra Cisneros, among others, eulogize Anzaldúa, describing her work as “prophetic” and voice giving (Alvarez), as “intense” and “meaningful” (Bacchetta), and as an inspired work that was “exactly what I needed” (Cantú). Part of *Borderlands*'s staying power may be the way its open, crisis-causing genre encourages multiple readings and interactions between text and readers. As a testimonial text, it has an open, performative structure that calls upon readers to be active in their interpretations, a textual demand that blurs the boundary between reader and witness, between passive receiver of knowledge and active participant in knowledge making. Part of *Borderlands*'s innovation is the way it is both a cohesive document and a chaotic or disordered grouping of various genres. The use of multiple genres (poetry, essays, fiction, non-fiction, autobiography) along with Anzaldúa's interweaving, or what Walter Mignolo calls “entangling” (qtd in Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 9) of languages—Spanish, English, and Nahuatl—creates a disruptive text that continually challenges audience's reading practices and expectations. Throughout *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa's presentation of language parallels the braiding together of disparate parts that Lionnet

imagined made up the *mestissage*. Each language works with the others to create meaning, but they each remain separate. Anzaldúa's use of multiple languages creates an incessantly fluctuating, kaleidoscopic work that forces readers to question their relationship to language. Anzaldúa offers the book as a "porous rock" (*Borderlands* 103), a text that permits different interpretations as opposed to being a solid, closed and archival object or tome. As Anzaldúa states in "To(o) Queer the Writer," "[m]aking meaning is a collaborative affair" and "the reader is becoming as important if not more important than the author" in the creation of a work (269); these statements speak to the performative, interpretative drive of the book, a drive that is, for Anzaldúa, intrinsically poetic and that asks readers to make meaning not only across the breaks of poetic lines but also across languages. *Borderlands*'s poetics—the playfulness and strangeness of language—help elucidate for readers Anzaldúa's feminist testimony, witnessing, and activism and help to open up the text as a space for a variety of readings. In "Northamerican Silences," literary scholar Kate Adams observes how Anzaldúa "begins and ends with poetry, allows poetry to interrupt prose, to illuminate it, to introduce it" (134). As I hope to prove below, it is through the prose that Anzaldúa outlines her theory for reacting to violence, but in the poetry she demonstrates such action being put into practice, translating her theory from prose into the poetic.

*Borderlands*'s fluid and shifting genre also reflects the mestiza consciousness, that fluid and shifting conception of identity. The figure of the dynamic mestiza continually splits and defies notions of subjectivity in relation to violence: from her wounded, but empowered position, the mestiza refuses to be completely the victim or

completely the survivor, thus refusing the conventional dichotomy of individuals in relation to violence. For Anzaldúa, being wounded and being powerful are not mutually exclusive, a point highlighted in her “cyber-*testimonio* [written] as part of a project that originated in Mexico in response to 9-11-01: ‘We are all wounded but we can connect through the wound that’s alienated us from others. When the wound forms a cicatrize, the scar can become a bridge linking people split apart’ (qtd. in Joysmith). In this way, the site of the wounding is also a site of empowerment, an authorizing and inspiring rethinking of violence intimately located within testimonial acts: the wounding becomes a location for change and a site for communal connections and representation. Again, Anzaldúa imagines violence in terms of space as the violent rupturing ultimately creates a new space: the scar that denotes a renewed and stronger bond between individuals and communities. Refiguring the wound and scar as empowering parallels David L. Eng and David Kazanjian’s theory on melancholia<sup>22</sup>:

the politics of mourning might be described as that creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history. . . . To impute to loss a creative instead of a negative quality may initially seem counterintuitive. We might say that as soon as the question “What is lost?” is posed, it invariably slips into the question “What remains?” That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how its remains are produced, read and sustained. . . . Such a perspective . . . animates history through the creation of bodies and subjects,

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Clark writes of Freud and melancholia: “Freud contends that the difference between mourning and melancholia is that in the former all that has been lost from consciousness and there is a necessarily painful withdrawal from what has been lost, but in the latter, melancholia, it is not clear what has been lost because the identification has involved unconscious components. Whatever was taken in from the deceased was taken into the unconscious, and its loss provokes a loss of self-regard and a sense that it is the ego which is empty” (Clark). Melancholia is thus characterized by an obsession with the lost object or loved one that is matched by a lack of interest in the outside world.

spaces and representations, ideals and knowledges. This attention to remains generates a politics of mourning that might be active rather than reactive. (2)

Eng and Kazanjian posit that we can only understand what we have lost by what is left behind, by the objects and people not engulfed by violence. What remains after the violence is a site or a means for inspiring creativity and activism and for beginning an intervention against that violence. Eng and Kazanjian's view gives voice to what violence could not undo, to the "bodies and subjects, space and representations" that remain in the aftermath as detritus.<sup>23</sup> Cvetkovich makes a similar assertion in *An Archive of Feelings*, noting that this act of remembering can "be a productive form of melancholy because mourning is not terminable when we keep the dead alive and with us. . . . melancholy can make loss a resource" (235). Part of what remains is of course the witness and the testimony/story of violence; testimony exemplifies the kinds of productive remaining Eng and Kazanjian theorize. Anzaldúa describes this potential productiveness in *Borderlands*'s seventh chapter "*La conciencia de la mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness*," when she figures the mestiza as performing a ritualized, testimonial act:

. . . the brown woman . . . decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of trees. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place. She goes through her backpack, keeps her journal and address book, throws away the muni-bart metromaps. The coins are heavy and they go next. . . . She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that

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<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that although the crisis or the moment of violence may constitute a site of possibility, we must not allow this potential for possibility or change to surpass or overtake the moment of crisis itself. As Dr. Tiffany Ana López stated during a roundtable discussion at the University of California, Riverside, activists and critical engagers with violence need to know that the violence can be "a place for springboarding activism," but we also have to be aware that within the crisis, we cannot merely see it as a good thing; to see violence only in a positive manner is to "simplify it in a way that is too reductive" (López, "States of Crisis"); it is to deny the very overwhelming nature of the event or crisis.

we as a race, as women, have been part of . . . this step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the dark-skinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. (104)

In this section, Anzaldúa focuses on what remains after the violence. The dynamic, future-oriented mestiza reaches into the past and simultaneously makes “new perspectives;” this is a “conscious rupture” or reshaping of history as she “decides” and “communicates” a new story of violence. Her ritual performance acts in much the same way testimony does, reshaping past events, and Anzaldúa appropriately uses the present tense here, highlighting the urgency or necessity of the ritual. The mestiza throws out the “heavy” coins, a symbol of capitalism's institutions and practices, and the “metromaps,” documents that archive the dividing, wounding, or cutting of the land. Such items represent the “lies” of “oppressive traditions,” while the bones (the “remains” of violence or mementos of ancestors lost and erased) and her journal (a metaphor for her own voice) mark a different history. Thus, in her marking of history, Anzaldúa signals the space of possibility born from violence but also the spaces of irrevocable loss and injury. Her consumption of both the land and her desire for the marrow mark a melancholic taking into herself of history. She devours what has been lost, and her revision of history is both communal and personal; the mestiza shifts through the past represented by the land—“in their burial place”—but also goes through her own items to locate this past. Anzaldúa calls on the mestiza to become simultaneously the witness to the past and the testifier to her own experience. She is to “be a crossroads” (217) within discourses of violence.

The mestiza's collecting of bones harkens back to an earlier *Borderlands's* section, a section in which Anzaldúa describes the fencing in of a cemetery plot where her paternal grandmother had hoped to be buried: "Mama Locha had asked that we bury her there beside her husband. *El cementerio estaba cercado*. But there was a fence around the cemetery, chained and padlocked by the ranch owners of the surrounding land. We couldn't even get in to visit the graves, much less bury her there" (30). The fencing in marks a rewriting of the family history by the ranch owners; this fencing is a dividing of land, a dividing of people, and a dividing of history. It is an amputation of the community's legacy.

These two stories of the bones highlight the mingling of fiction / mythmaking and autobiography throughout *Borderlands*. As Chicana literary critic Emma Pérez writes in "Gloria Anzaldúa: La Gran Nueva Mestiza Theorist, Activist, Writer-Scholar," Anzaldúa "leapt across borders between the real and imaginary because she knew that one could inhabit both at once" (Pérez). Because the very real Mama Locha could not gather the bones for herself, Anzaldúa reimagines the mestiza as a figure who can take up a new history. For Anzaldúa, "[w]hen you're working at creating a story, what happens to those people and the setting is just as *real* as what happens to your mother and your brother" (Interview with Keating 17). Thus the bones the mestiza reclaims may just as easily be the bones of the grandfather, and this kind of reimagining allows individuals to work outside of traditional narratives, to avoid the conservative, reactionary response to violence that Anzaldúa warns against:

. . . it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor—and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. . . All reaction is limited by, and dependent on what it is reacting against. . . it is not a way of life. (*Borderlands* 100)

This kind of “opposite bank” response simply repeats and upholds the narrative of oppression; it’s a rival stance reiterating power as it serves as a contrast to “patriarchal, white conventions.” As Audre Lorde so famously said, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (*This Bridge* 98). Simply responding within the narrative of “the cop and the criminal” erases individual and unique identity until “we are zero, nothing, no one” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 85). Instead “a wholly new and separate territory” (Anzaldúa 101) is needed. For Ian Barnard, writing in *The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, Anzaldúa’s text embodies a “multiple and enigmatic self-positioning and social relegation” (57) that continually offers new narratives, and Pérez describes the mestiza consciousness as “a mobile cultural identity that is always already transforming” (Pérez), that like the testimonial itself, continually demands transformation and revolution.

This theory for change that Anzaldúa lays out in *Borderlands*’s essays is most clearly enacted in her poetry, and I’ll focus here on the piece “*El sonavabitch*.” “*El sonavabitch*” is about a young, female school teacher who is also a mestiza figure, someone who borders two worlds: on one side, she circulates within dominant, white culture as she makes claims to the government; yet on the other side, she understands the life of the migrant laborer, an individual who is situated within the wound of the border,

unable to protect him or herself from the violating laws of the American government and from the often greedy capitalistic impulses of employers. In the poem, this teacher / mestiza metonymically stands in for a group of migrant labors when she critically witnesses the violence against the group. In the poem's narrative, she decides to confront a landowner who has been abusing illegal, migrant laborers and withholding their wages. The woman, after hearing about the workers' mistreatment, decides to act as the group's voice and demand the back-wages for the workers. She demands the "Sweat money . . . blood money, not my sweat, but same blood" (150), positioning herself not outside or above the community, but within it, intimately connected by race, blood, and an anger over injustice, to become someone who will speak. In a metonymic positioning, the mestizo "represents her group as a participant, rather than as an ideal and repeatable type" (Sommer, "Not Just a Personal Story" 129). In her speaking for the violated community, she does not try to subsume or deny their identities. She positions herself within the "we" that Anzaldúa theorizes earlier in the text: ". . . we demand the admission/acknowledgement/disclosure/testimony that they wound us, violate us, are afraid of us and our power . . . we demand acts" (106). In a later interview, Anzaldúa states, "So as a writer and as a reader I know that when I say 'we,' sometimes it's a singular 'we' that I use in order to make a connection with the readers. But sometimes it's a plural 'we.' . . . Speaking for them and with them" (Interview with Keating 24-25). When the teacher / mestiza speaks, she expresses her outrage for everyone in the community, but her own outrage does not subsume that of the community's.

Just as the woman acts as a witness to this community, Anzaldúa invites readers to also serve as witnesses. The disjunctive poem is layered with violence: the woman's recollection of her own traumatic past; the Chicano who describes the violence to the narrator is simultaneously abusing his young daughter; the inadequate conditions of the worker's camp where the open "sewage ditch near the huts" contaminates the children's play; and the gaze of the "big man" (149) or boss that cuts through the speaker, as he tries to read and name her. In the disjunctive, non-linear narrative of the poem, readers are invited to piece together the violent events and conditions and to witness each story. As the teacher / mestiza moves disjunctively from one narrative to another, how can readers see each event speaking to another? How can they witness one form of violence reaching into and shaping another? And, to reference again Eng and Kazanjian's theorization of melancholia, how can readers acknowledge the loss and violations while still finding the possibility of hope and change? For Anzaldúa, there is no easy answer to any of these questions as the violent and the traumatic intersect at multiple and complex points.

Anzaldúa's readers are asked to position themselves in relation to the poem much like the woman positions herself in relation to the community, as both a spectator and an actor. Throughout the poem there is an emphasis on active verbs such as "seeing" and "hearing": "I got to the farm / in time to hear the shots / . . . / in time to see tall men in uniforms" (146); "When I hear" (146); "I hear the tussling of bodies . . . I see that wide cavernous look of the hunted" (146-147); and "I turn to see a Chicano pushing / the head of his *muchachita*" (147). As she sees and hears, the woman takes into account the various crimes. The poem also contains a second testifier, the Chicano who describes the

experience of the newly arrived workers and their journey north during which one man was “smothered to death” (148); he tells the teacher / mestiza, “Miss, you should’ve seen them when they / stumbled out” and “You saw them, *la migra* came busting in” (148). Along with the layering of violence, the piece also contains a layering of witnesses, ultimately with the reader filling in as the third witness.

All of this witnessing or seeing is contrasted to the brutal gaze of the boss or the *sonavabitch* who tries to intimidate the narrator when she goes to demand the money: “He looks me over, opens his eyes wide,” “He studies me,” “his lidded eyes darken, I step back” (149), “Slitted eyes studied the card again,” and “His eyes were pin pricks” (150). His looking is a dangerous knowing and demanding. He tries to intimidate and silence her, and the woman must go from not being able to speak—“My throat so thick the words stick” and “the words swelling in my throat” (149)—to voice, to “No hoarseness, no trembling. / It startled both of us” (150). This is the movement from silence to witnessing and speech.

For Anzaldúa, the structure of the poem becomes the kind of crisis or borderland that she describes throughout her important text: “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (25). Much like the continually shifting and undetermined structure of a free verse poem, a border makes light of the “unnaturalness” imposed by genres / categorization. Poetry is often seen as “more 'vague and undetermined' than prose, at least conventional prose. . . . Like the mestiza, a poet is a 'crossroads,' linking literal to figurative . . . And borderlands, full as they are of the ambiguity of poetry, can yield a similar kind of transformative power”

(Freedman). Poetry possesses a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity that is essential to testifying, and Anzaldúa's use of poetry in her genre / border crossing text, speaks to the kind of transformative potential of the poetic that can be found in testimony. The text refuses to sit easily within any genre, within any paradigm and expectation. In its continual refusal of old narratives, of old conceptions of subjectivity, it takes up the power of the testimonial—the hope and movement towards the future and the desire for a new consciousness. It is fitting that near the end of my project, I return to the concept of “consciousness.” Consciousness is ultimately a way to gain subjectivity, to speak for the self, to be aware of the self. This kind of consciousness could “bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 102). As Adams states, the conception of the mestiza identity is not simply a new history for the Chicana experience, it is a new consciousness for us all: “we are witnessing as well our own history reconstructed and the foundations of our identities challenged and changed” (140). Acts of testimony continually open up new spaces and ways to understand the self.

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Laura Esparza's free verse, one woman performance piece “I DisMember the Alamo: A Long Poem for Performance” is, much like Anzaldúa's work, a text that embodies two generic locations. In this case, it is both a performance and a poem, and the work arises out of a similar desire to combat historical, communal, and personal erasure. Throughout her text, Esparza confronts the same sense of ostracization and fear that Anzaldúa describes for Chicanas. Discussing her childhood in an interview, Esparza claims that “part of the struggle of the early part of my life was getting over being a

victim or feeling like a victim because I was a member of a minority group in relation to the United States culture. . . . I grew up feeling that I didn't have a right to be in the world" (Interview with Waller 253). As a marginalized subject within the US, young Esparza could not see herself within "the world" of the American nation-state; within its dominant narratives and cultural discourses, there was no identity or subject position that reflected or validated her own, and thus she felt herself to be invisible. Esparza confronts not only the racism that has erased and denied her and her family's history, but she also addresses a form of psychic scarring known as intergenerational trauma.

Intergenerational trauma is defined by Annie G. Rogers in *The Unsayable* as the "hole left by the previous generation" (204) that continues to name and define the lives of proceeding generations. Thus the violent events that may have fragmented, destroyed, and denied the lives of one generation continue to haunt the lives of the next; coming generations must continue to confront the "hole" left by violence and trauma.

In "I DisMember the Alamo" this "hole" Esparza confronts is the 1836 battle of the Alamo, a historical event that, as Alicia Arrizón asserts in *Latina Performance*, has "glorified the Anglo American settler who wrested Texas from Mexico" (85). This glorification of the white victors erases the narrative of the Mexicans who also participated, fought, and died within the battle. This myth of the Alamo illustrates the ways that such stories perpetuate and fortify insidious trauma. Esparza confronts this erasure in order to create a cultural narrative that will "claim 'herstory,' the history of the Alamo, which defines her identity in relation to her ancestors and reaffirms her subjectivity in an ethnic collectivity" (Arrizón 85). In addition to this historical narrative

and trauma that seek to erase her family's survival, Esparza must confront an insidious violence that marginalizes her as a woman and as a "brown" body. The telling of her family's erasure and disenfranchisement is intimately the telling of her own story. This rewriting marks a refusal, on Esparza's part, to allow her family and herself to be erased from history, and the story of the Alamo becomes her "familial history," a story she has to tell because "you know because it was never found in history books . . . never see[n] in the movies" (71-73). Esparza ultimately refuses the ways in which she has been interpellated and defined through the trauma and violence marking not only herself but also multiple generations of her family. By making the violence and racism against her family and herself visible through her performance, Esparza disrupts this violence with a testimonial performance that speaks for a self who is both collective and multiple. Esparza's text ultimately offers a productive framework to think about how an individual body can testify to a collective subjectivity, and her poem as both a performance piece and a published text sits within the borders between the archive and the repertoire.

In my discussion of "I DisMember the Alamo," I will move back and forth between two versions of her piece: a published, print version and an October 1992 performance recorded by Alicia Arrizón at the University of California, Irvine. The differences between the archived, published, or finished piece and the spontaneity and informality of the performed piece highlight how diverging generic formulas open up or allow for different expressions of violent and traumatic events. In the published piece, Esparza's experimental form and her insistence on telling the history of her family against dominant narratives allows her to create an oppositional testimonial story, and the

piece's very publication allows her to offer her own archived document about the battle of the Alamo. In her performance piece, her literal body adds another form of resistance, demonstrating that like her body the story cannot be erased. Moreover, because the performance piece changes and mutates with each staging, the performance piece further disrupts the archival specificity of the published piece—the poem is never the same twice, and is therefore in continual process. The work is a piece of testimony in the way that it continually works towards rearticulation as Esparza explores new ways to name and enact trauma. In her discussion of performance, Diana Taylor writes that performance art is an especially productive paradigm for thinking about trauma because it can hold “tales of the survivors, their gestures, the traumatic flashbacks, repeats, and hallucinations—in short all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral and invalid forms of knowledge and evidence” (193). Performance works beyond language or without language in a way that may be especially productive for a victim of violence who cannot access words to acknowledge his / her experience but who may be able to convey that experience through gestures and other non-oral modes. By inserting her actual body into her narrative, Esparza may be able to convey feelings and experiences that words fail to communicate. A performance piece, as Arrizón argues “allows for agency, which opens the way for resistance and oppositional spectacle.’ . . . For Chicanas, the performative consists of the materialization of ‘acts’ which transgress normative epistemologies” (*Queering* 73-74). Arrizón continues with this thread in her *Queering Mestizaje* where she writes that “the performing body erases borders . . . performing identities delineate an unstable space, one that by definition is merged and mixed . . . Such performances

demarcate simultaneously the subject position of transgressive bodies, an unstable location, degrees of commodification, and contestation” (66). Within performance art, the body of the artist gains agency, voice, and presence in a way that is undeniable—the literal, corporeal body stands before the audience. This “materialization” of the artist’s body disrupts oppressive epistemologies, such as those of the American nation-state, that seek to make invisible the bodies of non-citizens. Performing bodies remove “borders” of dominant and oppressive categorizations of identity and subjectivity. Esparza’s Chicana body, by its very presence on the public space of the stage—a space that has typically been denied her—denies in turn the way in which her cultural and racial difference will continue to remain without agency and self-definition.

Ultimately, both published and performed piece offer different, albeit equal narrative strategies for giving voice to traumas. For example, in the published piece, Esparza is able to outline an intricate stage setting for the performance, a setting that may not actually be possible when the piece is performed. The listing of stage directions in a poem is already a disruption of traditional poetry. Esparza begins the poem: “*The theme music from John Wayne’s movie The Alamo plays in the pre-show ritual. The stage is delineated on three sides by a low, straight row of sandbags*” (70). The imagined staging is thus one of violence and occupation signified both by the sandbags, things used at sites of disaster or for building trenches in war, and by the narrative of American exceptionalism highlighted by the reference to Westerns such as those starring John Wayne. The very staging of her performance underlines the violence of her piece, both its

setting during war as well as the violence enacted against her family. Esparza is on the defensive against the violating American culture seeking to erase her family history.

Esparza continues with the stage directions:

*I am sitting behind a white rectangular screen, or in a white tent, or better yet a white 1950s refrigerator with two white wings, somewhat resembling the Alamo façade. A rectangular hole is cut in the center surface to expose only my eyes. Left and right, out of the holes in the screen/tent/refrigerator, my legs appear, spread-eagle, in black fishnet stockings. With the Alamo theme playing in the background, slides of my ancestors who lived in San Antonio near the time of the Alamo are projected over my eyes, as seen through the white screen/tent/refrigerator. (70)*

Here, Esparza combines the images of war, family, history, and violence with a nostalgic American domesticity, referenced by the 1950's refrigerator. The 1950's were an era of a more distinct gender division in the US as men left the home for the labor market while women stayed within the private sphere and cared for the family. By bringing this image of domesticity to the war front of the Alamo, Esparza disrupts the very notion of the American home as well as the ideal notions of gender associated with this home. Because only certain people are allowed to take part in this American domestic—typically Caucasian, heterosexual, middle-class family members—the image of the American home becomes an insidious violence against marginalized and disenfranchised subjectivities. These individuals are never invited into the metaphorical home of America. With the image of the refrigerator, Esparza brings the American domestic to the battlefield as another discourse she will disrupt with her body and testimony.

In the 1992 performance of the piece at UC Irvine, Esparza does not use a refrigerator but instead sits with her knees spread apart behind a large white sheet, held

up and fastened along a string of clothespins. This clothesline and sheet imply an image of domesticity that parallels that of the refrigerator. In this performance, Esparza also seeks to denaturalize constructions of the American home. At the bottom of the sheet, between her spread legs, is a large stain. The stain's shape gives the impression of a baby so that Esparza is birthing herself and her family against the backdrop of dominating and domesticating American history. She is telling "Our creation story" (72). Simultaneously, the large stain may be blood, alluding to the violence not only of the historical event of the Alamo battle, but also the violence of erasure experienced by Esparza and her family. In this conflated image of the stain, historical violence and birth / re-creation become intimately intertwined; through this connection of history / the past and birth / the future, Esparza touches again on intergenerational trauma—the violence may have occurred in the past, but it continues to haunt the present and the future. Furthermore, in this lack of a clear definition for the stain on the sheet, the meaning is in process or is fluid, a testimonial act that is forming itself but never fixed.

According to the stage directions in the published poem, Esparza sits behind the refrigerator/tent/sheet with her legs spread eagle, a body position that implies both birthing and seduction. As she sits behind the screen, images from the Alamo and pictures of her ancestors are projected onto the refrigerator / tent / sheet. This projection of the images onto the sheet offers, like much else in the poem, multiple readings. On one level, Esparza appears to be disrupting the glorified, Hollywood version of the Alamo with her body. She inserts herself into a history that has been denied her. As the theme music from the popular film *The Alamo* starring John Wayne plays in the background,

Esparza removes the audience's focus from this popular white American version of the story to her own body and her own "herstory." She places the dominant narrative literally in the background and places the marginal identities of her family into the center.

Simultaneously, this projection of images over her body (both as described in the published piece and in the 1992 performance) can be read as Esparza's entering into history. Her literal body begins to converge with the images of the past. She begins to enact both her own identity and also those of her family; they seem to become one. Ultimately, the ability of these projections to be read as both a disruption of history and a merging into history highlights the way that both performance and testimony are processes.

Finally, throughout the performance and the poem, Esparza herself takes on multiple identities. She is herself; her great, great, great grandmother Ana; an elderly, male relative, Francisco; and finally a character named "El Cholo" (85). This performing of multiple identities is particularly pronounced at the end of the piece when she lists the multiple ways she identifies herself.

I am this:  
an india  
inside a mestiza  
inside a chicana.  
I am all of these  
and my psyche is like a road map of Texas  
traversed by borders  
with never any peace at these borders.  
I am this:  
part india  
part mexicana  
part Spanish. (88-89)

In performing a Mestiza identity, Esparza testifies to a collective self. She refuses to be named in a way that the dominant narratives seek to mark her but instead engages in her own definition. During the 1992 performance at Irvine, Esparza walks around to members of the audience and tells them that “you have a story like this one” (Esparza, performance), that they too may have multiple identities they seek to address or violence and traumas to be made visible. She invites the audience to participate in their own testimonial act, their own revision of history. In this moment of audience participation, the testimonial act becomes even more collective, active, and performative. It is not only Esparza who will tell a story, but she invites the audience to continue to speak their stories, both within the performance and afterwards. As audience members continue to speak their own story, Esparza’s resistant testimonial act grows, disrupting moments of oppression, insidious violence, and intergenerational trauma beyond her specific act.

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I hope ultimately that Anzaldúa’s and Esparza’s pieces demonstrate what this project set out to do—to prove that the poetic so often works well in relation to the traumatic because of the disjunctive possibilities that poetry opens up. For both Anzaldúa and Esparza, the poetic represents not simply the physical body of the poem laid out on a page, but the poetic is also a strategy for tentatively and experimentally disrupting generic forms to change conventional ways of speaking about trauma. The poetic is an area of engagement, a configuring of poetry that threads its way through all the work discussed here.

## Conclusion: Disjunctive Paths and Uneasy Connections

This project began not at what might be the obvious place—with poetry—but instead it developed in a more roundabout way, starting with my introduction to trauma theory in a graduate seminar with Dr. Tiffany Ana López. Trauma theory offered a new way to view the texts by feminists that I was already interested in arise out of a paper I wrote for Dr. Traise Yamamoto on Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. That original paper, part of which can still be found in Chapter Three, inspired me to think about the relationship between genre and trauma and the relationship between women's writing and authorization, power, and autobiography. *Two or Three Things* speaks directly to the predominant question readers and writers confront in women's narrations of trauma: in speaking from a disempowered position about forms of violence that have historically been ignored or unarchived, what genre (or what accepted social structures and modes of speaking) is a woman authorized to possess? How can she talk about violence against herself when everywhere around her no language exists for such speaking? Because women have historically been denied the right to speak against violence, violence such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, and incest—all crimes that before the women's movement were often not even considered *crimes*—how are they meant to articulate the invisible? How can women speak testimony when no one cares to hear it or to recognize it?

With its uncomfortable classification, even within memoir (the genre it is marketed as), *Two or Three Things* led me to think about texts that are hybrid,

disjunctive, uneasy, and that always create only an incomplete picture of trauma and violence, and so I moved toward poetry. The poetry I explored in this project is just that: hybrid, disjunctive, uneasy, and always painting an incomplete and painful picture of the unsayable. Poetry is about piecing together language in a way that parallels how victims work to piece together memories of painful events to which they may not always have access. Poetry became a way for women to speak about the unspeakable and to struggle within discourses. From *Two Or Three Things*, I found Allison's "upcountry" and its disjunctive and painful narrative of rape and incest, a narrative that is incomplete and questioning. What do we really witness in "upcountry"? And what can Allison even speak of when she speaks of being raped by her stepfather as a child?

"upcountry" is included in an anthology edited by Karen Jacobsen McLennan, *Nature's Ban: Women's Incest Literature*, and it was in this anthology that I came across Ntozake Shange's "with no immediate cause," a poem whose form encompasses the terror of living with an insidious violence that is not recognized by public and official discourses. And from Shange, I found Judy Grahn and realized that there is a history of women struggling, through poetry, to articulate a violence that has for so long been denied, and for some women, including Grahn, Allison, and Adrienne Rich, this poetry began in the personal and in speaking within consciousness-raising meetings. And so my project began to take shape.

Along with this focus on poetry as a genre, the writers here confront myths about themselves as they challenge histories of trauma. This is another thread that can be located in all four chapters: a confrontation with myths, stereotypes, official narratives,

and the story that dominant culture was telling these women about themselves and about the things happening to them. As Allison highlights throughout *Two or Three Things*, a myth about poor white families and about poor women already existed in this country, and she had to confront this myth. Anzaldúa and Esparza confront the historical erasure of Mexican American communities along the border. They confront a history that has been written incorrectly within official history books. In the anthologies, editors hoped to stage a new narrative of women's poetic voice and to create communities that had not existed before. And in their confrontations of newspaper clippings, interrogators, and battered bodies, Grahn and Shange refused the understood or archived narrative of women's suffering.

In closing this project, I must finally ask myself, what would I add to if I had more time and energy? I would love to do more research, especially looking at small chapbooks and magazines published out of feminist presses to think more about the link of consciousness-raising practices and poetry. What might I find in exploring such an archive? What voices from the feminist movement have been erased from history and scholarship? What might such voices still have to say to us? Early in this project, I began a chapter on the incest poetry of Lucille Clifton and Linda McCarriston. Situating their texts in terms of the popularity of survivor literature, memoirs, and the rise of "victim" culture in the 1980s and 1990s, I wanted to know how their poetry remembered violence differently than the popular narratives at the time. I would love to return to this chapter / piece as the poems by Clifton and McCarriston are no less important than the works I did pursue here. Moreover, I could easily write a chapter on False-Memory Syndrome or on

the argument that the only valid women's writing is writing that deals with grief, that—in part because of feminism—“valid” or “worthy” women writers have been located squarely within the trauma genre. But these are just the beginnings of new questions, and ultimately, as so many of the poets, editors, and theorists I discuss here convey, in the pursuit of a language against violence and trauma, the questions and the answers are always disjunctive, and the paths to voice always look differently.

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