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BREAKING SILENCE/BREAKING COMMUNICABILITY:

FIGURING INCESTUOUS ABUSE IN THE EARLY 1970s UNITED STATES

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by

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Abstract

Breaking Silence/Breaking Communicability:
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Tim Willcutts

My dissertation argues that the prohibition of incest is as much a prohibition of speech as it is a prohibition of behavior and that the suffering incest inflicts on survivors involves a crisis of representation that literary arts and literary criticism may help us understand. I consider figurations of incestuous abuse in the early 1970s United States, a historical moment when the Women's Liberation Movement had broken the silence on various forms of violence against women, enabling a public discussion of incestuous abuse more far-reaching than ever before. Through close-readings of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Roman Polanski's film *Chinatown* (1974), Anne Sexton's poetry, her play *Mercy Street* (1969), and records of Sexton's therapy sessions with psychiatrist Martin Orne, I conclude that the incest survivors in these works are doubly victimized by incest and the prohibition of incest – by a sexual assault and by a system of social relations that renders them blameworthy for undermining normative modes of kinship. I apply insights from anthropology, feminist studies, phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralist literary theory, and clinical research on family violence to argue that kinship – culturally prescribed relations within families and between families – loses its integrity in the face of incestuous violence and that this loss of integrity helps account for incest's injurious unspeakability.

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I could not have written this dissertation without the guidance of my advisor and dissertation chair, Professor Wlad Godzich, who taught me that a literature dissertation is built from "the middle out," with a close-reading that is tested by subsequent close-readings until a pattern emerges that admits a set of theoretical terms with real utility and critical purchase. Such intellectual integrity is especially crucial in addressing a topic as painful and consequential as incestuous abuse, and I thank Wlad for helping me focus on questions, rather than presuppositions, so that this work might stand a chance of helping real incest survivors. From our first conversations on Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, and Lévinas in 2011 to the very different direction my research took with this dissertation, Wlad's erudition, adventurous spirit, and generosity have been a rare privilege to encounter. My pursuit of this dissertation project emerged out of Wlad's seminar on Jacques Lacan in 2012, particularly his lecture on Lévi-Strauss, and the seminar paper I wrote that winter. Wlad's insights on memory, temporality, and "difference-sensitive theory" inform this dissertation at a deep level, and his mentorship – and our friendship – is one I will cherish the rest of my life.

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understanding that real physical and psychic pain lies behind the narratives and poems I close-read herein. Whenever my argument drifted into inchoate abstractions, Bettina directed me to historicize the issue at hand and engage more materialist readings. She did so with a blend of rigor and compassion I find quite rare in academia and which I admire tremendously. Working in such close proximity with someone as disarming as Bettina, it is easy to forget one is working with an iconic pioneer of both the Women's Liberation Movement and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Her long and thoughtful letters in response to each of these dissertation chapters reawakened in me a sense of lived history, a sense that scholarship is indeed a form of activism.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my sister Nora, and all her kin.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the work of three artists who gave voice to incestuous abuse in the early 1970s United States[1]. It is not an exhaustive study of incest literature, but an intensive one, close-reading Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Roman Polanski's film *Chinatown* (1974), and Anne Sexton's corpus for their figurations of a suffering that was entering public consciousness in radically new ways at that historical moment. At the simplest level, I wanted to understand how incest hurts and why it hurts that way. In the early 1970s, one could begin to ask this question openly, with a wider public reach than ever before. To be sure, incest is an ancient theme in literature, central to *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, the work of Shelley, Faulkner, and various elements of the early 20th century avant-garde, but the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s set the topic, and its representations, on a new course, by politicizing it, placing incest in the broader context of violence against women.

In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), clinical psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman argues that studies of psychological trauma have for over a hundred years required political movements to capture and maintain the public's attention. She links the study of hysteria in late 19th century France to the struggle for secular democracy, efforts on the parts of male clinicians, especially Jean-Martin Charcot, to displace

[1] It also examines work by Anne Sexton written some years before, as early as 1960.

church authority and superstitious explanations for the "motor paralyses, sensory losses, convulsions, and amnesias" their female patients were exhibiting. (11) In 1896, Sigmund Freud delivered his paper "Aetiology of Hysteria" which proposed that "at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood" (Freud, 203) The cultural climate, however, could not abide Freud's implicit indictment of bourgeois families, and the paper "was met with stony and universal silence among his elders and peers." (Herman, 18) Less than a year later, Freud disavowed his "Seduction Theory," replacing it with his more famous Oedipal theory, asserting that the women he treated could not possibly have suffered incest. For the next seventy years, psychoanalysis would mine fantasies of incest – rather than incest itself – for accounts of psychic pain and unconscious human drives.

Herman goes on to argue that the study of shell shock in the early 20th century required the activism of a large anti-war movement responding to the horrors of World War I, and that the study of domestic violence and post-traumatic stress in the late twentieth century required the consciousness-raising actions of second wave feminism. The traumas expressed by hysteria, shell shock, and domestic violence are all interlinked, Herman asserts.

> The hysteria of women and the combat neuroses of men are one. Recognizing the commonality of affliction may even make it possible at times to transcend the immense gulf that separates the public sphere of war and politics – the world of men – and the private sphere of domestic life – the world of women. (32)

Herman's invocation of a "commonality" joining these disparate forms of trauma is persuasive and forceful, but I would like to consider the process by which the trauma of incest came to be distinguished from these other phenomena. A chief contention of this dissertation is that the violence of incest is quite distinct from the violence of stranger-rape, extra-familial child abuse, and spousal abuse, not to mention combat neuroses. The texts I analyze appeared in a narrow window of time when the silence surrounding domestic abuse and sexual violence had been broken by second wave feminism but the silence surrounding incest had not yet been theorized and critically disentangled from these other forms of violence. Herman suggests that this disentangling did not happen overnight:

> As understanding deepened, the investigation of sexual exploitation progressed to encompass relationships of increasing complexity, in which violence and intimacy commingled. The initial focus on street rape, committed by strangers, led step by step to the exploration of acquaintance rape, date rape, and rape in marriage. The initial focus on rape as a form of violence against women led to the exploration of domestic battery and other forms of private coercion. And the initial focus on the rape of adults led inevitably to a rediscovery of the sexual abuse of children. (31)

By the early 1980s, incest solidified as an independent topic, separable from street rape and domestic battery. Among the leaders of this more focused analysis were Herman herself, who published the landmark study *Father/Daughter Incest* in 1981, and sociologist Diana Russell, who in 1983 conducted a detailed scientific study of incestuous abuse, including interviews with 930 women, concluding that

"incest occurs in 1 in 6 families in the United States." (Russell, 133) Emily Bazelon notes in a 2006 *New York Times* article that "until the mid-1970s, standard psychology textbooks . . . played down the effects of abuse and put the incidence of incest at one in a million."

A profound silence had been broken. Incestuous abuse had entered the mainstream of U.S. popular culture. In 1984, the TV movie *Something About Amelia* dramatized a disclosure of father/daughter incest in a middle-class American suburb. Starring Ted Danson and Glenn Close, the program, which proposed to dramatize "a therapeutic approach to the problem," became the most watched show the week ABC aired it, and Roxana Zal, the fourteen-year-old who played the incest survivor, won an Emmy for her performance, becoming the youngest actress ever to win the award. ("Something About Amelia . . .")

Over the next two decades, many other films, novels, and memoirs participated in a conversation that had only recently seemed impossible.[2] Discussions of incest proliferated on daytime talk shows, and public accusations of childhood incestuous abuse attracted wide media coverage. Comedian Roseanne Barr, for example, appeared on the cover of a 1991 issue of *People Magazine*, next to the

[2] A partial list of this output includes the novels *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982), *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley (1991), *Push* by Sapphire (1996), the play *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel (1997), the film *Nuts* by Martin Ritt (1987), the memoirs *The Kiss* by Kathryn Harrison (1997), *Memory Slips* by Linda Katherine Cutting (1997), *Intimate Politics* by Bettina Aptheker (2006); and various poems by Sharon Olds, including her collection *The Father* (1992)

headline "I Am An Incest Survivor."[3] In an episode of *60 Minutes*, Barr's parents and siblings disputed the charges. ("Child Abuse, False Memories . . .")

By the early 1990s, however, the public conversation on familial sexual abuse seemed to arrive at an impasse. The quantum leap from coerced silence in the 1950s and 60s to extreme media exposure in the 80s and 90s generated a backlash of skepticism. In 1992, Pamela and Peter Freyd founded The False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) shortly after their daughter Jennifer accused Peter of sexually molesting her in childhood. A political advocacy group for parents accused of abuse, the FMSF disputes the veracity of repressed memories recovered through hypnosis, free association, and other modes of curative dialogue in therapy sessions. Though the Freyds have no clinical expertise on recovered memory, a number of clinicians, experimental psychologists, and memory experts sit on the advisory board of the FMSF, including Elizabeth Loftus, a pioneer in the field of memory malleability. Nevertheless, "false memory syndrome" is itself a pseudo-scientific term, and has never been included in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (Park, 3; Bass, 477-531)

Several media outlets echoed the FMSF's concerns, declaring a recovered memory epidemic that threatened to destroy families and manipulate vulnerable

[3] *People Magazine*, October 7, 1991

young women.[4] One target of the 1990s "memory wars"[5] was Ellen Bass and Laura Davis' popular 1988 book *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, lambasted in *The New York Times* and elsewhere for providing a checklist of symptoms so broad – "Do you feel different from other people?", "Do you find it hard to trust your intuition?" – it could seemingly apply to anyone. One sentence received special condemnation: "If you feel you were sexually abused as a child by a parent, you probably were." (Bass, 15) In a revised and updated third edition of *The Courage to Heal*, published in 1994, Bass and Davis revised the sentence as follows: "If you genuinely think you were abused and your life shows the symptoms, there's a strong likelihood that you were." (15)

Bass and Davis responded to criticisms in a new chapter entitled "Honoring the Truth: A Response to the Backlash." In one passage, they suggest that standards of veracity must differ according to context, that memory is a different thing for survivors struggling to heal than it is for forensic investigators struggling to establish the facts of a crime:

> We need to differentiate more clearly between the legal arena and the private arenas of therapy and healing. The healing process has its own integrity, which should not be judged by forensic considerations. We need more

[4] A partial list of newspaper articles voicing these concerns includes: "Repressed Memories, Ruined Lives," *The San Jose Mercury News*, October 11, 1992; "Beware the Incest Survivor Machine," *The New York Times Book Review*, January 3, 1993; "When Memory Holds a Family Hostage," *The San Francisco Examiner*, April 4, 1993 (Bass, 477)

[5] The term "memory wars" became a catchphrase for this controversy after Frederick Crews and eighteen co-authors compiled essays on recovered memory therapy that had first appeared in 1993 and 1994 in *The New York Review of Books* in a collection entitled *The Memory Wars: Freud's Legacy in Dispute* (*New York Review of Books*: New York, 1995)

> research on memory, traumatic amnesia, and how best to treat people who've suffered trauma. We need to ensure that such research is not manipulated toward political ends but instead is rooted in open-mindedness and a genuine search for the truth. We must affirm that survivors of child sexual abuse are the true experts on their experience. Many professionals have spoken out eloquently on behalf of survivors – and many others have insulted, pathologized, or dismissed them. Yet in the midst of all this debate *about* survivors, we need to remember that our greatest understanding comes not in listening to professionals, but to the survivors themselves. (532)

This dissertation proposes one way out of the impasse marked by the memory wars of the 1990s. The standard of veracity that made *The Courage to Heal* laughable or offensive to skeptics overlooks a key aspect of incestuous abuse, an aspect of incest that Judith Lewis Herman and other heroic leaders of the incest survivor movement have also tended to overlook, by my humble lights: the fact that incest calls kinship into question. Kinship, our circumscribed relationship with family members upon which our connection to other families depends, loses its integrity in the face of incestuous violence. When their fathers take them for lovers, the young women in *The Bluest Eye, Chinatown*, and Anne Sexton's work register a disturbance in their broader social environment, beyond their local individual experience. Incest is a suffering that cannot belong to them personally, since it threatens the entire social order of which they are a part, and yet its not belonging to them is what hurts so terribly. They have been interpellated into a transgression that hurts anyone who draws within its orbit, making the transgression other people's business, no longer the business of the one who suffered the incest directly.

This dynamic bears important implications for accounts of subjectivity, and also, I will argue, for accounts of memory. “I couldn’t make all this up, or I don’t exist at all!” Anne Sexton tells her psychiatrist Dr. Orne in a recording of one of their therapy sessions, “Or do I make up a trauma to go with my symptoms?” (Middlebrook, 56) Sexton’s sense of self here depends on the reality of her incest-experience, but the incest-experience does not fit well into remembered time. In Chapter 3, I argue that the speakers in Sexton’s work experience incest as a renunciation of kinship and that the alternatives to kinship these speakers imagine fall outside an epistemology of recollection. Incest in Sexton’s work is kinship’s absence, a destabilizing force that can reemerge at any time and does not depend for its veracity on facts collected from the past.

One thinks here of the memory wars. Indeed, Sexton’s psychiatrist Martin Orne sat on the advisory board of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation until his death in 2000, and he always denied that Sexton could have been incestuously abused. Over his career, Orne testified in many court cases on the unreliability of recovered memories of abuse, a professional commitment we hear forming in his recorded therapy sessions with Sexton, a fascination with fantasy and metaphor wedded to refutations of uncorroborated claims. However, Sexton’s poetry and her play *Mercy Street*, as well as several of her statements to Orne and others in her life, invite a different interpretation, one that adds a useful inflection to that controversial sentence in *The Courage to Heal*: “If you feel you were sexually abused as a child by a parent, you probably were.” Sexton’s writing on incest expresses a present-moment

intensity, free of hindsight or appeals to empirical corroboration, that can easily be mistaken for the kind of naivete ascribed to *The Courage to Heal*. A consideration of kinship can help unveil the hidden logic of her poetic style, why the experience of incest in her work often involves an incredulous orientation to the past.

My dissertation returns us to the early 1970s so that we can more rigorously disentangle incestuous abuse from other forms of sexual violence. Judith Lewis Herman, and other clinicians and activists, placed incest in the broad context of violence against women, a vital step forward in our treatment of a crime that has been ignored and sidestepped and enabled for far too long. I do not dispute the courage and benefit and truth of this reframing. However, I think it would be fruitful to recognize its limitations. Not all violence against women transgresses the incest taboo. That distinction really matters. Part of the ambition of this dissertation is to refocus – without contradicting – the important insight Herman offered in her 1981 study *Father/Daughter Incest*, where she writes:

> We have found that a frankly feminist perspective offers the best explanation of the existing data. Without an understanding of male supremacy and female oppression, it is impossible to explain why the vast majority of incest perpetrators (uncles, older brothers, stepfathers, and fathers) are male, and why the majority of victims (nieces, younger sisters, and daughters) are female. Without a feminist analysis, one is at a loss to explain why the reality of incest was for so long suppressed by supposedly responsible professional investigators, why public discussion of the subject awaited the women's liberation movement, or why the recent apologists for incest have been

> popular men's magazines and the closely allied, all-male Institute for Sex Research. (3)[6]

Without diminishing Herman's critique of misogyny in the culture at large, I would like to consider ways in which the family context makes these acts of abuse unique. Identifying points of divergence between sexual abuse broadly construed and the sorts of dynamics that are unique to incest might help us understand the function of the taboo, how a prohibition on performing, speaking, or even cognizing a sex act might motivate and constitute the sex act itself and determine its specific injuriousness. This is not to deny patriarchy, of course, only to query its special force within a family system.

For her 1995 study "We Shared Something Special: The Moral Discourse of Incest Perpetrators," Jane F. Gilgun gathered testimonies from several male predators whose efforts to rationalize their behavior sometimes led them to distinguish the experience of incest from other kinds of sexual experience. Gilgun quotes one abusive father who claimed his daughter enjoyed the affection he gave her, even if she didn't like the sex:

> It was the love and affection she was getting from me is what she liked. It might have been the acts she didn't like . . . What was between Beth {not her

[6] I should note here that this dissertation – like Herman's *Father/Daughter Incest* – does not address the incestuous abuse of boys, an important topic that certainly merits research and analysis. I can only reiterate that this dissertation is an intensive study of the work of three artists crafting representations of incestuous abuse in the early 1970s, and that I do not claim to offer a comprehensive account of the topic. However, I would very much like to consider representations of the incestuous abuse of boys, perhaps for my next project.

> real name} and I was something real special, something that was just ours. (272)

The incest perpetrators in Gilgun's study employed all kinds of cunning tactics designed to make it seem like incest was the victim's choice – forcing children to act as "gatekeepers for the incestuous acts." One informant describes his strategy:

> She began to realize as she got older, how wrong it was, you know, and I had {done} a bad thing. I had told her, you know, that it come to a point where I was afraid that it was going to come to actual intercourse, and I told her at that time that if I made any advances to her that she was to reject them. (276)

I would like to consider a patent and complex point: sexual predators within families deploy kinship as a method of coercion. The predator exploits a trust and nurturance internal to the family system – private, deeply rooted dynamics that may evoke positive associations with other times and contexts – to harm the child. Linda Gordon observes such dynamics in her study of family violence in Boston between 1880 and 1960, *Heroes of Their Own Lives* (1988), ways in which preexisting bonds between fathers and daughters become coextensive with subsequent abuse. Incest is often uniquely painful, Gordon argues, because it "cannot be said to be motivated only by hostility or to be experienced simply as abuse." (209) In *Father/Daughter Incest*, Herman quotes a survivor who says, "I thought maybe, just maybe, this was my personal indoctrination into womanhood." (85)

I am not a clinician, and therefore do not propose any therapeutic protocol for addressing pathological family dynamics. However, as a literary critic, I read kinship

as a matrix of forces that underlie the suffering endured by the incest survivors in *The Bluest Eye*, *Chinatown*, and Anne Sexton's work. A touchstone for this interpretive mode is Claude Lévi-Strauss' 1949 anthropological study *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Amassing data from several continents, Lévi-Strauss describes a system of reciprocal exchanges between families governed by the prohibition of incest, marriage laws that forbid sexual unions within families so culture can emerge as an interlocking network of families that would otherwise be isolated from one another. I do not embrace Lévi-Strauss' work uncritically, but engage feminist responses to his account of daughters as currency, particularly Luce Irigaray's "Women on the Market." Always, the main evidence for my analyses derives from the primary literary artifacts I have selected: Morrison's novel, Polanski's film, and Sexton's poetry and drama, all of which describe women tormented by a transgression that calls into question the cultures to which they belong. Their personal suffering is, paradoxically, extra-personal, a threat to the wider community. It is this paradox that at times silences them and at other times compels them to articulate modes of knowledge that defy or escape the prevalent epistemologies their cultures make available to them.

In periodizing this project, I take some inspiration from Gillian Harkins' 2009 study *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America*, which argues that nascent articulations of incest survivorship in the 1970s were subsumed into neoliberal discourses of individual agency and self-empowerment in the 1980s and 90s. Harkins views this later focus on individual suffering and recovery as a kind

of missed opportunity, since the 1970s suggested alternative figurations. "Even emergent feminist accounts of sexual or domestic violence," she writes, "did not fully capture the potential radicalism of incest survivor articulation." (76) Harkins does not go on to examine 1970s literature but instead reads texts from the 1990s – Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie,* Kathryn Harrison's *Kiss*, and Sapphire's *Push* -- against the grain of neoliberal rhetoric. I take her formulation as an invitation to close-read early 1970s iterations of incestuous abuse for the challenges they pose to atomized accounts of suffering.

The justly maligned tendency to "blame the victim" signals much more, in my reading, than male privilege and "female responsibility for male sexual behavior." (Gilgun, 276) The victims in *The Bluest Eye, Chinatown*, and Anne Sexton's work become blame-worthy not just for the chauvinistic behavior of men, but for the collapse of a system that allows new families to form, a system that delineates boundaries between private familial life and public exchanges between families. To be sure, male chauvinism is a feature of this system, but restricting analyses of incest to misogyny elides the enormity of the transgression. Indeed, the system of marital exchange critiqued by Luce Irigaray, Gayle Rubin, and other feminist scholars is patriarchal. But if we want to honor the rigor of their analyses, we need to acknowledge that incest is not an extension of this patriarchal system but a subversion of it. Incest undermines patriarchy's normative machinations, often in radical defiance of a violence that preceded the abuse – the violence of kinship itself.

The Bluest Eye figures the incest taboo as a distillation of white supremacist coercions. "Ought to be a law," a neighbor says, after hearing that Cholly Breedlove has raped his daughter Pecola, "two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly." (189-190) Beauty and ugliness, racialized and disseminated by mass media, are the twin obsessions of Morrison's novel, prior to its dramatization of father/daughter incest. *The Bluest Eye* maps a marriage market that equates beauty with white skin and blue eyes, making kinship – mate selection and family formation – a largely racist enterprise. As a consequence, incest emerges in the novel as a defiance of white supremacist kinship. To be sure, this is no happy or liberating defiance. It is a rape. Pecola descends into psychosis, believing she's acquired the blue eyes she's been longing for, and Cholly "dies in the workhouse." *The Bluest Eye* does not celebrate incest. Rather, it offers an account of incestuous violence that is robustly cognizant of the power of the taboo. Incest is not wrong in this novel simply because it is perverse or unseemly or misogynist, though it may be all those things. More complexly, incest is wrong because it undermines the code these black characters are supposed to be following – a code that exaggerates their aversion to endogamy, to sameness, to their own skin and hair, making them exalt Shirly Temple, Greta Garbo, and Ginger Rogers as ideals of beauty and marriageability and, ultimately, of kinship formation.

Morrison identifies a cruel dialectic playing out between the incest taboo and the miscegenation taboo, a double-bind that tells these characters both to be more white and that they can never be other than what they are. Beyond Cholly and

Pecola, Morrison gives us characters who speak more directly to the incest/miscegenation dialectic: Geraldine, whose tireless effort to "get rid of the funkiness," to straighten her hair, tuck her behind in, and generally look and act more white, involves also an impulse to deny her son Junior any physical affection; and Soaphead Church, originally Elihue Whitcomb, whose British and West Indian ancestors consciously employed both incest and miscegenation, at different times, in order to "whiten the family line."

In order to establish a broader historical context for the coercive forms of kinship *The Bluest Eye* addresses, I consider Saidiya V. Hartman's analysis of Reconstruction Era Freedmen's manuals and other modes of policing the domestic sphere in the wake of U.S. slavery in her work *Scenes of Subjection*. I also engage Zanita E. Fenton's "An Essay on Slavery's Hidden Legacy: Social Hysteria and the Structural Condonation of Incest," an analysis of the "miscegenated incest/incestuous miscegeny" that occurred under slavery. Fenton suggests a lineage to the silencing and disavowal of incest victims traceable, in part, to a time when a white slave master's black daughter did not even count as a daughter in the first place.

Luce Irigaray's "Women on the Market" helps me establish the violence of the incest taboo, its role in commodifying women as a scarce resource circulated by men. While Irigaray provides a powerful corrective and complement to Lévi-Strauss' description of the incest taboo, she nowhere addresses the function of the taboo in determining the scene of actual incestuous abuse. So, I attempt to supplement and extend Irigaray's insights by examining the sexual marketplace at work in *The Bluest*

Eye. I turn also to the testimonies of incest perpetrators Jane F. Gilgun compiled in her aforementioned study and to Linda Gordon's historical analysis of family violence in *Heroes of Their Own Lives*.

Gradually, by synthesizing various treatments of the incest taboo with accounts of incest itself, I try to articulate in more prosaic and usefully straightforward language the peculiar suffering *The Bluest Eye*'s poetry gives voice to. I call Chapter One "Kinship in Relief: Incest and White Supremacy in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" because the sexual marketplace Morrison describes follows a racist logic that goes unnoticed or unacknowledged by most of the novel's adult characters until incest makes the stakes of kinship unavoidable. Only the children, particularly Claudia MacTeer, perceive the scandal of receiving white baby dolls as Christmas presents and watching Bojangles dance with Shirley Temple, emblems of white beauty that invade her private familial space, telling her how to be loved, how to find a lover and form a family one day.

Incest is injurious in *The Bluest Eye* because it brings kinship into relief, making its racist logic intolerably explicit. Cholly rapes Pecola amid a confused flurry of thoughts regarding his duties as a father. "How dare she love him?" he thinks, "What was he supposed to do? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How?" (161) Revulsion in the face of fatherly duties combined with memories of first meeting Pecola's mother Pauline compel Cholly towards "the doing of a wild and forbidden thing." (162) Pecola's immediate response to the incest is to visit Soaphead Church and ask for the blue eyes she has

been praying for since the beginning of the novel. What had been an impossible fantasy becomes a practical pursuit in the wake of the incest transgression.

At the novel's conclusion, Pecola becomes blame-worthy in the eyes of her community for the incest she has suffered. "She carry some of the blame," one neighbor says, "How come she didn't fight him?" (189) But Pecola mistakes the ostracism for jealousy. Believing she has blue eyes, Pecola imagines that the reason her mother and her neighbors avert their eyes from her is because they long to have blue eyes too. The last chapter of the novel presents a dialogue between Pecola and herself, a split-self that emerges in the wake of both the incest and the attainment of blue eyes, suggesting that those two events are synonymous in their destructivity. Pecola is so radically isolated from her community her subjectivity has been ruptured in the process. "*They are pretty, you know*," one side of Pecola's psyche says, commenting on the blue eyes. "I know," the other self responds, "He really did a good job. Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off." (195) An absurd miscegenation compulsion, the demand to look more white, gets exaggerated at the novel's conclusion in the face of its radical opposite: incest, sameness, enclosure within one's own despised and terrorized community.

The heightened exposure of kinship norms fractures Pecola's subjectivity at the end of *The Bluest Eye*, a violence we see refigured in *Chinatown* and Anne Sexton's work. A single person, these works tell us, cannot maintain the coherence and sovereignty of their selfhood in the face of a transgression that undermines the modus operandi of the culture to which they belong. Evelyn Mulwray (Faye

Dunaway), the incest survivor in *Chinatown*, undergoes such subjective fracturing at the beginning of Polanski's film, though not in the mode of personal psychosis, not through the kind of dialogue Pecola has with herself. Rather, the effacement of Evelyn's subjectivity occurs at the level of plot, through a series of substitutions and evasions that defer the truth of her experience till the last possible moment.

Before we meet Evelyn, we meet her imposter, Ida Sessions (Diane Ladd), who hires private detective Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) to spy on Evelyn's husband Hollis (Darrell Zwerling), chief engineer of the Department of Water and Power. *Chinatown*'s narrative is driven for its first twenty minutes by the disembodied signifier of "Evelyn Mulwray," a woman whose experience of incest gets figured in the film as an intolerable breakdown in the boundary between the public and private spheres of her southern California community.

My analysis of *Chinatown* begins with its "double plot," as Vernon Shetley calls it. The film unravels two narratives – the illicit privatization of southern California's public water supply and Evelyn's incestuous union with her father – in tandem and with such intricacy that the two plots become, at key moments, indistinguishable. Shetley's article "Incest and Capital in *Chinatown*" helps me identify a few of the more dazzling overlaps between the "water plot" and the "daughter plot," but Shetley is not as interested as I am in understanding the specific injuriousness of incest and he therefore does not ask what this narrative structure suggests about Evelyn's experience of abuse.

Both *The Bluest Eye* and *Chinatown* figure incest as a crime that not only occurs in the domestic sphere but also calls the domestic sphere into question, and is taboo, partly at least, for this reason. The more closely I looked at *Chinatown* – down to its verbal non-sequiturs, close-ups, angles, quick cuts, and other fine details – the more I detected how absolutely obsessed it is with the distinction between the public spaces of government, barbershop gossip, shared natural resources, media culture, etc.; and the private spaces of family, sexual trysts, as well as private property and industry. The film often caricatures this distinction, casting municipal bureaucrats as cartoonish bores, bespectacled and irascible pencil-pushers who cannot comprehend the wit and charm of Gittes, himself a trickster figure who makes his living invading people's privacy. These caricatures accrue throughout the film and serve an important purpose. *Chinatown* exposes the superficiality of the boundaries we erect – in rhetoric and custom – between the public and private spheres. Incest in *Chinatown*, I argue, represents the ultimate breakdown of these boundaries, and is violent for this reason.

I call Chapter Two "Neither Public Nor Private: Refractory Incest in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*," because Evelyn Mulwray's suffering stems from her inability to fit either of the categories – public or private – overdetermined so strenuously, often ridiculously, by the film's social world. Incest casts her somewhere else, outside the vocabulary and experiential purview of the culture in which she lives. Incest is refractory in *Chinatown* because it is never represented directly. There is no incest scene. Rather, the subject is endlessly deferred and deflected, a dance of

innuendo, verbal evasion, sighs, stammers, obscuring camera angles, coy cuts, and the "double-plot" itself that together come to describe the violence Evelyn suffers, the violence of having no language for one's experience. Why no language? To put it in the most determinate manner I can – a determinacy *Chinatown* avoids –, incest is the occasion by which the private sphere of the home is treated like a public marriage market, where daughters are kept private rather than made public, in defiance of the prevailing patriarchal system that demands daughters be "given away" as wives, exchanged for the daughters of other families. *Chinatown*'s narrative world does not permit a vocabulary for such a phenomenon.

Because incest in *Chinatown* emerges only as a filmic performance of unspeakability, I turn to Wlad Godzich's notion of "the Cry" from his collection of essays *The Culture of Literacy* in order to establish the force and efficacy of this anti-representational mode. The "cry of difference" registers the absent voices, the traces of affect and experience that must be excluded from a totalizing system of knowledge in order for that system to call itself totalizing. Kinship, the prohibition of incest, and a figuration of culture as divided between the public and private spheres all represent, I argue, totalizing systems of knowledge. The incest survivor is left out of such totalizations, and this exclusion – from representation, from epistemology – describes her suffering. Key to Godzich's account of "difference-sensitive theory" is his insistence that "the cry of difference" does not bring light to previously unknown realms of knowledge or experience. Rather than clarify what is obscure, "the Cry" makes totalizing systems of knowledge less clear, challenging their epistemological

transparency. This theoretical approach is thus, Godzich writes, "a labor of opacification." I find this formulation particularly useful in understanding *Chinatown*, because the film does not tell us what incest is. It does not clarify the phenomenon. Rather, it dramatizes the breakdown of a prevailing system of knowledge, making the public/private distinction increasingly opaque the closer Gittes gets to unravelling Evelyn Mulwray's secret trauma and the mysterious corruption in the Department of Water and Power.

I apply this "labor of opacification" to Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a canonical text on the public/private distinction as a category of the bourgeois imaginary, and to Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, using these texts as counterpoints to *Chinatown*'s deconstructive project, epistemological frameworks that cannot account for Evelyn Mulwray's experience of incest. I also consider Carol Hanisch's landmark feminist essay "The Personal is Political," which explores, among other topics, the mystery of so-called "apolitical" women who do not leave their homes to join feminist actions. Hanisch suggests these women are in fact "very political" and that feminist activists have yet to fully delineate the political nature of the private sphere. Thus, Hanisch speaks to the mysterious boundary between the public and the private which I explore in *Chinatown*, a boundary that is less stable than often presumed. Martin A. Nie's essay "Build It And They Will Come: A Reexamination of the California State Water Project" allows me to transfer the uncertainty of this boundary to a consideration of the largest public works project in the history of the United States, well underway

during *Chinatown*'s production and release and echoed in the film's account of private forces infiltrating and corrupting a nominally public redistribution of natural resources.

While Shetley suggests the incest in *Chinatown* is an allegory for illicit privatization, I argue that the film resists a clean allegorical correspondence between the water plot and the daughter plot. Rather, *Chinatown*'s narrative substitutions and deferrals convey an incommensurability that is crucial to its account of Evelyn Mulwray's suffering. The film's interest in incommensurability finds clearest expression in its deployment of orientalism, beginning with the film's title, which refers to Gittes' old beat as a police officer. Ill-equipped to read Chinese cultural codes, the police in Chinatown were advised to do "as little as possible" lest they make neighborhood conflicts worse through their misreadings and misprisions. Misreading is all Gittes can offer Evelyn Mulwray, ultimately, for her predicament is not reducible to simple exploitation. Much more complexly, her suffering involves the instability of the only categories Gittes has at his disposal to understand and help her. Adept at maneuvering between the public and private spheres, deciphering the codes of each, Gittes is completely unprepared for a phenomenon that flouts the public/private distinction altogether. His investigative competence is useless in the face of incest.

I also consider director Roman Polanski's rape of 13-year-old Samantha Gailey in 1977, a crime that complicates my reading of *Chinatown* as a valuable artifact for our understanding of incestuous abuse. Polanski's history as a sexual

predator invites distressing speculations regarding the content of his films and the motivation behind them, especially the ones – like *Repulsion*, *Rosemary's Baby*, and *Chinatown* – that seem so fascinated with the sexual exploitation of women. Nevertheless, *Chinatown* is a collaborative artistic effort, written by Robert Towne and performed by actors who make the unspeakability of incest sing in stutters, pauses, verbal switchbacks, and oblique physical gestures. All of these artists brought their impressions and understanding of incest to bear on a work constructed in the early 1970s United States, when incest was just beginning to enter public consciousness in radically new ways. Even if it were possible to draw meaningful connections between the crimes of Polanski's private life and the crimes in his films, such connections would still be valuable, I propose, to our understanding of sexual predation. As Jane F. Gilgun, Linda Gordon, and others have intimated in their research, a full understanding of sexual violence – and of incest in particular – must include an understanding of the rapist, what motivates them and how they rationalize their behavior, or voice regret for it. I include *Chinatown* in this dissertation not just because it is a rich and dynamic film, but also because it contributes to the diversity of perspectives I wanted to gather in my small sample of artifacts. As a film, it adds generic variety to my sample, which otherwise focuses on fiction, poetry, and drama, and its director is a man, where the other two artists I consider are women. Moreover, Polanski was a European expatriate at the time he directed the film, a key player in the production of U.S. popular art but one who approached the U.S. from the outside. The fact that Polanski is also a child-rapist sets him apart quite radically

from the other artists I examine, a position that merits much further reflection. My analysis of *Chinatown* is not determined by Polanski's biography, but I hope the insights I offer might help inform a more biographically-oriented reading. I leave such a query to others, or to a future project I might undertake one day.

Pecola Breedlove and Evelyn Mulwray experience incest as a disruption to their broad social environment, a transgression that demands a reformulation of their subjectivities. They are not the selves they used to be, since the selves they used to be depended on a logic of social cohesion governed by the prohibition of incest. The question of the self is central also to the work of Anne Sexton, a poet who has become associated – sometimes disparagingly – with the mid-twentieth century poetry movement known as Confessionalism. In Chapter 3, I argue that Sexton's apparently confessional style involves much more than simple emotive self-expression. I read in Sexton's writing a desire to transcend a definition of selfhood constrained by ties with kin. The burden of kinship, of having to be someone's daughter, sister, mother, niece, or wife, emerges in Sexton's work as a stifling limitation, often claustrophobic in its intensity. The emotional pressure kinship exerts prevents the speakers in Sexton's writing from being the selves they long to be. The impossible selfhood they long for marks a sublime vanishing point in Sexton's writing. It also marks the site of incest.

Compelling testimony suggests that Sexton suffered incestuous abuse at the hands of her father, mother, and great-aunt, but many close to Sexton – including her psychiatrist Martin Orne, her biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook, and her family –

have persistently disputed the veracity of the incest-experiences Sexton described in therapy sessions with Orne. I argue that Sexton's poetic style does not treat her incest-experiences as memories either, but this need not mean the incest did not happen. Incest emerges in Sexton's writing as a phenomenon quite distinct from recollected fact. It emerges – as it did for Pecola Breedlove and Evelyn Mulwray – as a force that disrupts normative modes of subjectivity and epistemology. This is made especially explicit in the play *Mercy Street*, which relates kinship to heritage and genealogical time and portrays incest as a subversion of lineage. "She hurt time!" the character Aunt Amelia says of her niece Daisy, whom she witnesses in an incestuous embrace with Daisy's father Arthur. The play is as much about incest as it is about Daisy's nightmarish deliverance out of kinship into a quasi-religious ecstasy of isolation. Aunt Amelia no longer recognizes her niece, and Daisy imagines she has abandoned her family in a housefire, murdering all of them. "I am no more a woman than Christ was a man," she declares, on a stage that adorns a psychiatrist's office with the trappings of a Catholic or Anglican mass.

Incest is a religious force in the few poems by Sexton that directly engage the topic. She invokes Allah in "The Moss of His Skin," an account of a father lying down in bed with his daughter, an intimacy that cuts the speaker off from her mother and her sisters. A religious element enters also the poems that do not describe incest directly but only trace the dream of escaping kinship's fetters. In "Hurry Up, Please It's Time," she begs God's forgiveness for losing access to pre-natal knowledge, the ground-level of meaning that precedes breast-feeding, language acquisition, child-

rearing, and kinship. The more I examined Sexton's oeuvre the more I found that the omnipresent burden of kinship in her work bears an essential relationship to those exceptional moments when incest punctures the scene.

I turn to philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' essay *Time and the Other* in order to suggest, by way of analogy, a phenomenological account of the relationship between incest and kinship in Sexton's work. Though Levinas never addresses incest, his account of the relationship between being and death proved useful for me in establishing my reading of the relationship between kinship and incest. Approaching death, Levinas argues, being does not fade away or become more fragile. Rather, the inescapability of being, the claustrophobic sense that there is nothing outside of existence, grows clearer and more intense as one faces death in a state of suffering. Unlike Martin Heidegger, who describes "Being-towards-death" as "the possibility of having no possibilities," "a possibility that cannot be outstripped by the possibility of other Daseins," (Heidegger, 294), that is, an upward limit of subjective experience that emboldens and individuates human being-in-the-world, Levinas characterizes dying as a helpless concession to the impossibility of death, the suffocating realization that being is all there is.

Incest in Sexton's work goes unremembered, I argue, because it is impossible in much the way Levinas calls death impossible. What is remembered is kinship, almost a ubiquitous theme in Sexton's writing. Her speakers experience their relationship with family members as a force that bears down upon them with greater and greater intensity, impossible to escape except by recourse to religious reverie or

magical thinking. They dream of transcending a circumstance that admits no empirical alternative. Incest appears in Sexton's work as the fulfillment of this impossible dream. As in *The Bluest Eye*, incest emerges as a radical defiance of an oppressive, omnipresent system of social relations. Again, this is no happy or liberating defiance. For both Morrison and Sexton, the suffering of incest involves an outcry against a prior suffering, the suffering of kinship. As with Evelyn Mulwray in *Chinatown*, incest casts Sexton's speakers outside legible modes of knowledge. Private investigator Gittes reads Evelyn Mulwray's distress as well as he can up to the vanishing point of incest, which he cannot read. The same might be said for Martin Orne and other investigators of Sexton's life.

It is curious that Diane Wood Middlebrook doubts Sexton could have experienced incest and yet still admits "that Sexton's physical boundaries were repeatedly trespassed by the adults in her family in ways that disturbed her emotional life from girlhood onward." (59) What is the difference between incest and the trespassing of physical boundaries by family members? Middlebrook does not clarify the distinction, but it seems to speak to the fact that kinship already involves a closeness and intimacy that is culturally sanctioned and legible. Kinship can be more or less healthy. Orne and Middlebrook are capable of acknowledging that a parent might draw too close to a child or be too remote, but rather mysteriously, they will not go so far as to say incest occurred. Again, Levinas is helpful here. Being and death are not separated by a clear boundary, he argues. Rather, being is all we can know and it can become as intolerable as we might imagine. Death only ever appears

to our first-person subjective experience as an impossibility. The same might be said of incest's phenomenology, despite all the silences that have been broken over the past forty or so years.

Incest is not just an unfortunate event, a tragedy families may openly lament, like the death of a loved one. It is an event that officially does not happen. Our culture and sense of self depend on it not happening. And yet we know that it does happen, with shocking frequency. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl goes so far as to say the prohibition does not exist. For an act so unspeakable, how could one even voice a prohibition?

> The prohibition does not exist . . . There is no consideration given to prohibiting it. It is something that does not occur, or, if by some impossibility it does occur, it is unparalleled, a *monstrum*, a transgression spreading horror and fear. (Levi-Strauss, 10-11)

When something that is constitutionally not supposed to happen in fact happens, there is little to guide families' efforts to speak about it. In the last few decades, these cases of abuse have received more attention. A public conversation has emerged – along with various representations in film and literature –, but it is still a nascent conversation. I hope this dissertation can help deepen our analyses of incestuous abuse, at least as it is figured in artistic expression and popular culture. Figuration is of the essence of the violence, I would argue, because incest is a violence that resists representation. Talking about it at greater length, producing TV movies, and printing the word "incest" on the cover of magazines does not guarantee a deeper

understanding. Breaking the silence on incestuous abuse was a momentous, heroic step in survivors' struggle for justice and recovery, but understanding what this broken silence means is an ongoing project.

Cathy Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience* that "the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all." (8) Anne Sexton's work suggests that the "inherent forgetting" of incestuous trauma involves its subversion of kinship. Togetherness with kin is at once a togetherness with other points in time, a temporality of heritage, lineage, and genealogical time that is undermined by incestuous violence. The speakers in Sexton's poetry, in *Mercy Street*, as well as her own testimony in therapy sessions with Orne, confront incest with an incredulity that need not cast doubt on the reality of the incest. Rather, their incredulity seems to cast doubt on the viability of linear remembered time. Incest seems to emerge as a present-moment intensity free of hindsight, its violence in some way a violence against the coherence of memory. If so, Sexton's figuration of incestuous violence might contribute valuably to our understanding of the memory wars of the 1990s, the backlash against recovered memories of abuse and the False Memory Syndrome Foundation's contention that experiences of past events that seem inconsistent with normative modes of recall must necessarily cast doubt on the veracity of the events themselves.

In my Afterword, I consider Dorothy Allison's 1992 novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, written roughly twenty years after the texts I examine in the main body of

the dissertation. Allison's novel differs from *The Bluest Eye*, *Chinatown*, and Anne Sexton's work in several important ways. Bone Boatwright, the story's protagonist, suffers incestuous abuse at the hands of a stepfather, not a biological parent, a fact that alters the novel's figuration of kinship. Abandoned by her biological father at birth, Bone is "certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina" (3) in the novel's opening pages, a mark of class-based shame that haunts her mother Anney for the remainder of the narrative. Anney is determined to restore legitimacy to her daughter by any means necessary, a desire that compels her to bring stepfather Daddy Glen Waddell into the family's life and to tolerate his open beatings of Bone. The pressures of kinship are imposed on Bone from outside the original family unit. Whereas Pecola Breedlove, Evelyn Mulwray, and the speakers in Sexton's work experience kinship as an inescapable force that regulates the boundary between their domestic lives and the world outside, Bone experiences kinship as something artificially constructed, contrived and tested, beaten into shape even as it fails again and again to meet its promise. The incest transgression therefore means something different in this novel. Daddy Glen's molestations and eventual rape of Bone gives the lie to a familial structure that was never authentic in the first place, as much as Anney hoped to make it so.

I examine Bone's mode of survival in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, her gradual ability to transform the inescapability of Daddy Glen's tyranny over her into something entirely escapable. Early in the novel, she entertains alternative modes of kinship, ways of seeing the world and her place in it as separable from her familial

bondedness to Daddy Glen. She longs for her Cherokee roots, a dimly acknowledged corner of her family tree reflected – her beloved cousins tell her – in her darker features, her black hair and the extra color in her skin. Throughout the novel, she expresses a preference for her extended family – a network of cousins that live nearby – over the constrained nuclear family Anney is bent on cultivating for its appearance of bourgeois respectability. Daddy Glen himself comes from a wealthier family, and his deep malice and anger stems in part from his inability to match the success of his family of origin. His father runs a prominent dairy business and his brothers are lawyers and doctors, but Glen cannot control his temper long enough to hold even a menial job for more than a few weeks at a time. His marriage to Anney places him among the working class, the "trash" of Greenville, South Carolina, a mark of shame his father and brothers will not let him forget. He believes that conceiving a son with Anney will deliver him out of this shame, but when the son is still-born and Anney becomes infertile, he is left only with his stepdaughters. His first molestation of Bone occurs in the parking lot of the hospital where the son he conceived with Anney dies. The novel suggests that Glen's subsequent beatings and groping of Bone function as a kind of compensation for the loss of the real, biological kinship he desired. He often defends his abuse of Bone by saying he wants to improve her, to make her good. She is constitutionally lacking for Glen, because nothing she does can make her more than a stepdaughter. She cannot give him the kinship he desires, and she is punished endlessly for this ineffaceable fact.

Thus, *Bastard Out of Carolina* engages the pretense of kinship, the desire for a bond that is not really there, not there in quite the same way it is for the incest survivors in *The Bluest Eye*, *Chinatown*, and Sexton's work. As a prepubescent child, Bone submits headlong to Daddy Glen's denigration of her. "I knew, I knew I was the most disgusting person on earth," she tells herself, "I didn't deserve to live another day." (135) However, over the course of the novel, she discovers artistic and rhetorical strategies by which to turn self-loathing into an opportunity for grace, self-transcendence, and survival.

I call the Afterword "The Paradox of Survival" because Bone traces a path toward self-love and self-acceptance in the absence of any voices that can tell her the incest is not her fault, that she is not "the most disgusting person on earth," that the hatred Daddy Glenn directs at her is not just or deserved. Not until the end of the novel are any of the loving adults in Bone's community even aware of the abuse she is suffering. Anney has some awareness, having witnessed several beatings and seen bruises on her daughter, but she is so blinkered by her determination to cultivate a legitimate nuclear family she manages to justify to herself the horror Bone is enduring. In the meantime, Bone must use any resources at her disposal to transform self-loathing into spiritual nourishment. Various figurations of paradox, I argue, allow Bone to survive. She finds it first in gospel music, which has the power, she explains, to "make you hate and love yourself at the same time, make you ashamed and glorified." (136) The sustaining force of paradox appears for her again in the mystery of Christian redemption, especially as understood by her delinquent Uncle

Earle, who refuses to join his local congregation because he understands the congregants will love him more if he remains a sinner.

Bone's friendship with Shannon Pearl, a bitter albino girl who hates the world as much as Bone does because the world finds her so ugly, inspires in Bone an experience of beauty that transcends Shannon's obvious physical ugliness and an experience of love that belies Shannon's constant expressions of hatred. Just as Bone begins to resign herself to the dim prospects of the impoverished adulthood ahead of her, her Aunt Raylene teaches her that "trash rises." Raylene, a reclusive secret lesbian who lives by the river, away from the other cousins, shows her niece how to dredge abandoned items out of the river and to discover how such detritus can be transformed into currency. When Bone finds a pair of trawling hooks in the water, she uses them to propel herself into the sky, scaling the walls of Woolworth's so she can break in, rob the store, and avenge herself on the wealthy managers who have sneered at her all her life.

By the end of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone's growing capacity to catalyze paradox into a self-sustaining force endows her with the strength and resilience to identify Daddy Glen's false claims on kinship, the emptiness of the obligations and liabilities he forces onto her. Bone tells Anney that she "won't go back" to Daddy Glen but that Anney may go back to him and she will love her mother all the same. This assertion of independence is intolerable to Anney, who cannot distinguish it from hatred. "I can't have you hating me!" her mother says. (276) Bone's self-assertion also places her in grave danger, for it enrages Daddy Glen, leading

ultimately to his violent rape of his stepdaughter in the novel's climactic scene. In the end, Anney chooses Daddy Glen over her daughter, but leaves Bone with a parting gift: a new birth certificate that declares Bone legitimate for the first time.

Bastard Out of Carolina brings this dissertation's central concerns into useful relief, for it foregrounds kinship as an artificial construction, one which its adult characters are deeply, violently invested in sustaining. Kinship is perhaps always an artificial construction, to some extent, even in families moored by biological lineage. The suffering of incest in *The Bluest Eye*, *Chinatown*, and Sexton's work involves the transgression of norms that seem immutable, encoded in our DNA and in the deepest foundations of our cultures. *Bastard Out of Carolina* offers hope that survival from incest might involve articulating how these norms are not so intractable, not natural or inevitable. This is to say survival from incest may involve the power of figuration, the power that literary arts can offer us.

CHAPTER ONE

Kinship in Relief:
Incest and White Supremacy in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye places father/daughter incest at the center of a narrative more ostensibly concerned with white supremacy, white standards of beauty, and racialized self-loathing. The relationship between racism and incest in this novel suggests the broader function of the incest taboo, how it interfaces with systems of domination embedded in the very structures of kinship and familial relations it polices. In this chapter, I consider Morrison's staging of this interface, how and why the social transgression at the heart of her novel so effectively exposes the violence of class difference, white supremacy, and patriarchy in the 1940s Lorain, Ohio community she describes. Conversely, what can this "power to expose" teach us about the unique violence of incest itself?

Pecola Breedlove's violation at the hands of her father Cholly is more than a single act of sexual violence. Beyond condemning this act, the novel condemns a public sphere – a phantasmagoria of white film actresses, white baby dolls, sartorial prescriptions, and other racially coded market forces[7] – that inform and deform the

[7] In his article "Toni Morrison's 'Allegory of the Cave': Movies, Consumption, and Platonic Realism in *The Bluest Eye*," Thomas H. Fick argues that the advertising industry and cinema in particular comprise the site of a "complicity between Platonic realism, racism, and a culture of consumption" in this novel. (20) He writes, "Finally, as labor laws progressively eliminated the conditions Stowe and Melville wrote about advertising stepped in, blurring the line between 'captivity' and 'captivating' by

familial. My reading of *The Bluest Eye* contends that the violence of incest and the violence of its prohibition are mutually constitutive, insofar that the incest taboo in this novel is inextricably tied to the coercions of a white supremacist state and marketplace. In the families and communities Morrison describes, the prohibition of incest is not a static or inert law that one can easily identify and contain but a dynamic force that operates along a continuum. It is not simply a commandment not to have sex with a family member but a policing of all modes of familial affection. Understood this way, the law is everywhere in *The Bluest Eye*, and it is an instrument of white supremacy not because whites invented the incest taboo – of course they didn't – but rather, because the domestic sphere in this novel operates according to definitions of beauty, affection, duty, loyalty and sexual expression imposed – to varying degrees, depending on the family in question – by a white supremacist social order. I draw some support for this argument from Saidiya V. Hartman's analysis of Reconstruction Era freedmen's manuals and home visitors in her study *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. The so-called "friends of the Negro" who surveilled the homes of blacks in the wake of slavery coerced a definition of the familial that served the market interests of a state anxious to contain the recently freed, discouraging mobility, favoring individualistic over collective modes of identity, and limiting freedom. How these coercions developed in the period between Reconstruction, the time of the narrative (1940-41),

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internalizing the means of bondage for blacks and whites." (28) (*Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*, Bloom's Literary Criticism: New York, 2007)

and the time of the novel's publication (1970) – from the rampant lynching of black men to the rise of advertising and mass consumer culture to the Moynihan Report's denigrating assessment of the matriarchal structure of black families[8] – comprises an ideological trajectory this novel explores and unravels, as it travels generationally from the early 1800s Caribbean to the knowing retrospection of the adult Claudia MacTeer.

The Bluest Eye also places the incest prohibition in dialogue with a miscegenation taboo that imposed limits on exogamy even as it relegated the prerogative of miscegenous rape to white slave masters. Zanita E. Fenton's study "An Essay on Slavery's Hidden Legacy: Social Hysteria and Structural Condonation of Incest" provides helpful context for the ways in which anti-miscegenation statutes belied the widespread incidence of miscegenation on plantations, how the silence surrounding this sexual exploitation created a situation in which incest could also occur with impunity, and how the silence surrounding incestuous abuse – to this day, in both white and black families – bears historical traces of the silence surrounding sexual violence under slavery.

[8] Jennifer Gillan argues that *The Bluest Eye* contests the Moynihan Report's critique of matriarchy in its depiction of Cholly's "mutually nurturing" upbringing in his Aunt Jimmy's matriarchal household. Cholly's personal dissolution occurs, rather, as a result of invasive white patriarchal norms: "The brutishness Cholly has developed is a product of his experiences trying to assimilate into the consumer culture of the North and has nothing to do with any sense of impotence caused by his family's matriarchal structure." (Gillan, Jennifer. "Focusing on the Wrong Front: Historical Displacement, the Maginot Line, and *The Bluest* Eye." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*, Bloom's Literary Criticism: New York, 2007. p. 172)

Even outside a climate of white supremacy, the incest taboo would already establish property norms through family inheritance and – following a Marxist-feminist reading applied by Luce Irigaray and others – commodify women according to marriage laws. Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous structural anthropological account describes the prohibition of incest as the universal, transcultural linchpin that ensures intermarriage between families and communities, the exchange of daughters and the exchange of culture, marking the transition from nature to culture. Irigaray reads Lévi-Strauss's account as the articulation of a symbolic order constructed by and for men, circulating women within a system of exchange that women cannot engage in or benefit from, even though they make it possible.

This is to say that the complexity of the violence Morrison addresses in *The Bluest Eye* is overwhelming in its omnipresence and obliqueness, so intimate it can be difficult to see. The violence is encoded in the formation of families. While acknowledging other important readings of this novel, I want to propose an interpretive mode that might be especially useful to our understanding of incestuous abuse and the representational crisis it unleashes. What if we read every – or nearly every – affective, social, and political force in *The Bluest Eye* as an instrument of kinship? I do not contend that this is the only or "best" way to read the novel, but it is an interpretive mode that may offer the most detailed and rigorous account of what incestuous abuse and the prohibition of incest mean in this narrative world – and perhaps in the world outside this novel. So, for example, the notion of physical beauty which gives the novel its title – beauty equated with whiteness and blue eyes –

is also an instrument of kinship insofar that beauty is currency on the marriage market and constitutive of family formation. The prohibition of incest – a law so profound it goes without saying – makes kinship unproblematic, invisible, natural-seeming. Incest itself, I will argue, brings kinship into relief. In the case of *The Bluest Eye*, this means bringing a particularly insidious form of white supremacy into relief as well.

My ultimate hope is that understanding the representational crisis incest unleashes in this novel – and in other novels, films, and poetry – may contribute to a more robust understanding of actual incest, the meaning of the representational crisis clinical records already address to varying degrees, in the work of Judith Lewis Herman, Linda Gordon, Jane F. Gilgun, and others.

*

Set in Lorain, Ohio over the course of a single year, fall 1940 to fall 1941, *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl so convinced of her own ugliness, so enamored with a white supremacist account of physical beauty and personal worth – exemplified in the figures of Shirley Temple and the white "Mary Jane" candies she relishes – that she dreams of acquiring blue eyes. She lives in an abandoned storefront with her father Cholly, an alcoholic out-of-work steel worker, her mother Pauline, a maid in the white Fisher family's home, and her brother Sammy, who repeatedly runs away. The parents endure a loveless marriage, prone to

violent outbursts and dispassionate sex, and pay little heed to their children. When Cholly sets the apartment on fire, Pecola is sent to live for a while with the MacTeer family, where she befriends Claudia and Frieda, two girls close in age to her. The only other friends Pecola has are the three prostitutes – Marie, China, and Poland – who live upstairs from her apartment and show Pecola more affection and respect than any other adults in the novel, making her laugh with crude and sensational tales from their past.

In the novel's opening pages, Claudia – an adult reflecting on her childhood – tells us that Cholly impregnated Pecola and that, despite the efforts of Claudia and Frieda to save the unborn baby by planting marigold seeds and speaking magic words over them, the baby did not live. But these events do not transpire until much later in the novel, near the end. Claudia has just given us a bit of foreknowledge, a rationale for the tale she is about to tell. First, we must watch Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola – three girls on the cusp of puberty – negotiate a cultural landscape that is only partly legible to them, that has not yet congealed into shared norms, but which is unmistakably hostile, circumscribed by white supremacy. They discover natural processes – menstruation, sexual contact, pregnancy, and others – and are not sure what cultural significance they should attach to these immediate sensations.[9] Cultural

[9] Jane Kuenz argues that Claudia "though she is catching on quickly . . . has yet to experience her body as {an} alienated entity . . . She is still at the level of sensation, not prohibition or enforced definition: Instead of 'asking the right questions' about her sister's near molestation, for example, Claudia wants to know what it feels like to have breasts worth touching and to have them touched (79)" (Kuenz, Jane. "*The Bluest Eye*: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity" Bloom's *Modern Critical Interpretations*, Bloom's Literary Criticism: New York, 2007, p. 100)

cues abound – in white baby dolls and the maddening adoration bestowed on their light-skinned classmate Maureen Peel –, but the girls negotiate these cues differently. While Pecola submits headlong to the master script of white supremacy, Claudia resists it with "disinterested violence," (15) dismembering the white baby dolls her parents give her for Christmas and taunting Maureen Peel, a defiance she is unable to sustain and eventually abandons, she admits. To a large extent, then, *The Bluest Eye* is a novel about acquiring norms – through immediate submission or failed resistance. Hovering above these negotiations is the knowledge that a particularly powerful norm, the prohibition of incest, is going to be transgressed, that in fact the entire story is an effort to explain how this could happen. Claudia announces at the novel's opening: "*There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since* why *is so difficult to handle, one must take refuge in* how." (3)

Morrison divides *The Bluest Eye* between two narrators – Claudia MacTeer and an anonymous, relatively omniscient narrator, able to grant access to deeper pasts and wider spaces, outside Claudia's purview[10]. This narrator can see into Cholly and Pauline's childhoods, and much further, into the complicated miscegenated ancestry of Soaphead Church, the reclusive West Indian soothsayer and pedophile who appears near the novel's end promising to grant Pecola her wish for blue eyes. This

[10] Carl D. Malmgren argues "(*pace* Morrison) that strong evidence, textual and biographical, exists to suggest that a single narrator, Claudia MacTeer, has composed the texts and created the voices." (Malmgren, Carl D. "Texts, Primers, and Voices in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*, Bloom's Literary Criticism: New York, 2007. p. 147) Malmgren's argument relies on a kind of biographical determinism – conflating Claudia MacTeer with Toni Morrison herself – that I do not find persuasive or particularly useful.

two-pronged narration allows *The Bluest Eye* to blend a child's account of acquiring norms – racist norms, sexual norms – with a more detached account of how those norms have developed and operated transgenerationally and across various regions, as far back as the early 1800s, and as far away as the Caribbean. It combines the liminality of childhood perception – where Claudia can despise Shirley Temple before learning to love her – with the diachronic march of history. It can also combine a panoramic view of kinship – through successive generations – with the affective absorption of kinship structures at a deeply personal level, through the force of the prohibition of incest.

We learn that Cholly's first sexual experience – a tender episode with a young woman named Darlene – was interrupted and perverted by two armed white men shining a flashlight on him, commanding him to "Get on wid it, nigger." (116) A sexual act that began in playful innocence and privacy must be completed under the surveillance of white supremacists – an exquisite synecdoche for the public sphere that infiltrates the homes of black families throughout the novel. The immediate consequence is Cholly's hatred for Darlene, "the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. The hee-hee-hee's." (118) Cholly cannot bear to direct his hatred at the white men, for "such an emotion would have destroyed him," so he directs it onto Darlene, the witness and co-victim whom he can bear to hate, because she poses no threat to him other than the threat of a moral accusation, an indictment of his failure to protect her.

Much later, before Cholly rapes Pecola, he feels a similar revulsion for his daughter's "young, helpless, hopeless presence," and his inability to help her, which also feels to him like an "accusation." (127) Often in this novel, the immediate violence of white supremacy – too lethal and ubiquitous to face directly – gets transposed onto norms, images, and behaviors that comprise a manageable field of contestation. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Cholly's rape of Pecola compels two divergent responses in *The Bluest Eye*: Claudia and Frieda's concern for Pecola's well-being and the health of her unborn baby; and the adults' revulsion at the transgression of a social norm, to the point of blaming Pecola and wishing the unborn baby dead. The children are ignorant of the incest taboo, but curiously, this ignorance makes them more compassionate towards Pecola. Part of the program of *The Bluest Eye*, it seems, is to show how norms that mediate violence – ostensibly to lessen or contain it – make the violence worse. Before and after Pecola is a victim of incest, she is a victim of the prohibition of incest.

The omniscient narrator also provides Pauline's backstory, which – somewhat like Cholly's – traces a path of increasing alienation from one's physical self and immediate sensations, as norms and abstract categories infiltrate the psyche.[11] From the age of two, when a rusty nail cut through her foot, Pauline has walked with a

[11] I have to credit Jane Kuenz's article "*The Bluest Eye*: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity" for helping me think through the ways alienation from the immediate sensations of one's body and one's culture – vis-à-vis a white commodity culture – works in this novel. Kuenz writes, ". . . economic, racial, and ethnic difference is erased and replaced by a purportedly equal ability to consume, even though what is consumed are more or less competing versions of the same white image." (*Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*, Bloom's Literary Criticism: New York, 2007, p. 98)

limp, but the physical deformity – far from being a hindrance to affection and sexual appeal -- endears Cholly to her, becoming the focus of his courtship. The first time the young couple meet, before Cholly even sees her face – and can appraise Pauline by more conventional notions of beauty –, he approaches her from behind, tickles her foot and kisses her leg, eliciting Pauline's delirious laughter. It is only later – after Cholly and Pauline marry and migrate from rural Kentucky to the North, for industrial work – that the couple begin to dissociate from these simple physical delights. Pauline starts going to the movies, where she acquires from Hollywood two particularly toxic norms:

> Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lover and seeking to imprison the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way. (95)

Pauline's passage from "simple caring for" to "equating physical beauty with virtue" – which I read as two distinct modes of kinship – also marks the disintegration of her marriage. In the more racially integrated but less neighborly North – where blacks are "*no better than whites for meanness*" (91) – , Cholly becomes bored with the routines of marriage, starts drinking and carousing outside the home, and eventually loses his job. Having children briefly draws the couple closer together, but the sense of alienation only returns with greater intensity. Pauline's few

acquaintances are "amused by her because she did not straighten her hair" and make fun of her Southern accent. (92) She takes refuge in the movie theatre, where her notion of sexuality and human closeness – once consistent with a disfigured foot – narrows and flattens to the replicable strictures of mass consumer culture, embodied in Jean Harlow and Clark Gable. She begins working in white households, caring for children who call her "Polly" even as her own daughter calls her "Mrs. Breedlove," and she cultivates a new sense of morality, attending church groups and avenging herself on Cholly by "forcing him to indulge in the weaknesses" she despises. (98) At several moments in *The Bluest Eye*, characters who migrate from the rural South to the industrial North encounter an almost unbearable culture shock, as the spectacle of materialism and fashion replaces connection to land and black communities that, though segregated and terrorized, were bound by a solidarity that did not draw its meaning so thoroughly from mass produced images.

In drawing a parallel between Pauline's education in "beauty" and "romantic love" and the implosion of her marriage and family, Morrison maps a deformation of kinship. Rather than echo the slogan "Black is beautiful," *The Bluest Eye* performs a more radical gesture, declaring that beauty itself – far from being a natural and immediate sensation – is a brutal artifice that makes racism possible.[12] There are

[12] In a 2004 interview with the National Visionary Leadership Project, Morrison discussed the "Black is beautiful" slogan in light of her composition of *The Bluest Eye* during the 1960s: "Before we all decide that we are all beautiful and have always been beautiful, let me speak for just a moment here for some of us who didn't get that right away. (laughter) So I was deeply concerned about the feelings of being ugly." (Visionary Project. "Toni Morrison Talks About Her Motivation For Writing." Online Video Clip. *YouTube*. YouTube 8 Dec. 2008. Web. 28 Sept. 20015) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Zgu2hrs2k

other modes by which to love and care for human beings, this novel tells us, but because these alternative modes are so difficult to imagine in a culture inundated with the apparent truth of beauty – circulated in inescapable images and gestures – the violence of white supremacy embeds itself in the most intimate recesses of life: in the supposedly private sphere of the family. Indeed, the Breedlove's home is an abandoned storefront, an exquisite figure for the interpenetration of the private and public spheres, the outside breaking in. This blurring together of the public and private informs the representation of incest in this novel. The mode of kinship Cholly violates in raping Pecola was already an instrument of violence, informed by notions of "beauty" and "romantic love" that were already destroying the Breedlove family.

The Bluest Eye opens with two short vignettes that set in motion its narrative architecture, its division into seven chapters referencing the first vignette and four larger sections referencing the second vignette. The first vignette, which Morrison refers to in her 1993 afterword as "the incompatible and barren white family primer" (172), is a string of short generic sentences describing a template of idyllic family life: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy" (1) and so on. Morrison repeats this passage three times, setting the letters closer together with each incarnation, until, in the third, there is virtually no space between the letters or words and one must strain to read the text, a typographical mutilation that transforms the dull obviousness of the "white family primer" into something opaque, unsettling, and open to multiple readings as one

combines the meshed letters in new ways.[13] Morrison recycles portions of this mangled text as chapter headings, mangling the typography further through repetition, so that the chapter on Cholly bears the heading:

"SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONGFATHERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANEFATH

ERISSMILINGSMILEFATHERSMILESMILE." (103)

Morrison's "white family primer" recalls the Reconstruction era "instructive handbooks for the freed" Saidiya V. Hartman analyzes in *Scenes of Subjection* (121). These templates of domesticity and working life, written by "missionaries, schoolteachers, entrepreneurs, and other self-proclaimed 'friends of the Negro'" encouraged "responsible," self-possessed, stationary, willful, hardworking individualism and criminalized vagrancy, mobility, and other means of evading participation in the market (128). Some of them, like Bell Waterbury's *Friendly Counsels for Freedmen*, homed in on the site of the family, which, Hartman explains, "was a threshold between the public and private spheres rather than a fortified private sphere." Families were regularly inspected by "the home visitor . . . the predecessor

[13] Critics differ widely in their reading of the opening vignette. While Jane Kuenz and Debra T. Werrlein consider it a subversive appropriation of William Elson and William Gray's popular grade school readers, signaling for Kuenz the alienating commodification of learning and for Werrlein an invocation of the trope of childhood innocence as a metaphor for an amnesiac nation, Shelley Wong reads Morrrion's typographical experiment as an invitation to resignify, to put back together received and damaged signs in a mode of "reader response." (Kuenz,"*The Bluest Eye*: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity," Werrlein, "Not so Fast Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*," Wong, "Transgression as Poesis in *The Bluest Eye*," *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*, Bloom's Literary Criticism: New York, 2007) For my reading, I am more interested in the way it presents, then mangles a normative and hegemonic formulation of kinship and family life.

of the social worker," who "dispensed household advice and assessed the character and development of the freed." (160) Hartman writes:

> The domestic was the ultimate scene of surveillance; a fence in need of white-washing, a dusty house, or a nonobedient child thus invited punitive judgments. The description of the good life, although purportedly about the pleasures afforded by a well-managed domestic sphere, actually authorized the normalizing gaze, which, by detailed observation of all areas of life, judged the suitedness of the formerly enslaved to freedom and their conformity to the rules of household management. As *Friendly Counsels* advised:
>
> > Make things as pleasant as you can in and around your house. What a difference there is! . . . Now, when a stranger approaches your house, let him notice a pretty gardenspot, with flowers and vegetables, all well kept . . . As he glances around, it would be pleasing if he could see a little picture here and there hanging on the wall, or a flower-pot with a pretty pink or rose blooming in it, showing that you have a liking for such things. He would say, 'Well this looks like freedom. I think you must be quite a happy family.' It will be a very pretty picture to show some who maintain that it is useless to attempt to elevate or to improve the condition of the colored race."
>
> (160-161)

Read in light of such coercive manuals, the schema with which Morrison opens *The Bluest Eye* may be a figure of false privacy, the "normalizing gaze" of the public masquerading as private family life. In mangling this primer typographically, Morrison suggests the opacity and violence of a zone that is neither public nor private[14], a place where these forces impinge on one another. It may be a "ghostly" place, to borrow Avery Gordon's terminology, in that it exceeds any documented

[14] "Neither Public Nor Private" is the title of Chapter 2 of this dissertation, where I extend further the notion that incest marks a category in defiance of the supposed public/private distinction. The film *Chinatown* addresses this phenomenon directly.

history of either the private or the public, belonging to neither, defying such categories.

How does the prohibition of incest police such a zone? On the very next page, Claudia MacTeer announces the event of incest in the second of the two vignettes with which Morrison opens her novel. The second vignette strikes me as a kind of translation of the first, for it also undermines a vision of familial normativity, but it does so by transgressing the taboo of speaking incest. Claudia, an adult reflecting on her childhood – and recapturing the logic and voice of her child-self – cannot speak of the incest without speaking of marigolds and silence: "*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow*." (3) The line between nature and culture – or the effacement of such a line – guides Claudia's effort to understand the meaning of Pecola's pregnancy, why it is wrong and why it seems to bear an essential relationship to silence. She confronts this line with a crude analogy, comparing Cholly's semen to marigold seeds and Pecola to black dirt: "*We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair*." (3) She and her sister Frieda believed they could save Pecola's baby – whom the adults told them would not live – if they planted marigold seeds and spoke magic words over them. Claudia compares this failed ritual to the incest itself and, by analogy, places herself in the position of the father-rapist. The two acts are similar, she suggests, in being unproductive. While

the adults view incest as a social scandal, Claudia sees it as a failure of generation and a tragedy for Pecola. Pecola bears absolutely no blame in Claudia's account, while the adults wonder – in a later passage – "How come she didn't fight him?" (149)

The dialectic of nature and culture Morrison introduces in these opening pages – the first vignette being nothing but a cultural construct, a bare template of what a happy nuclear family is supposed to be, following the logic of Reconstruction era freedmen's manuals; and the second vignette being so steeped in distinctions between botanical and human reproduction, the horticultural and the familial – is not an isolated figure but a synecdoche for the narrative architecture of *The Bluest Eye*, which is – as Morrison explains in her afterword – "held together by seasons in child time and commenting at every turn on the incompatible and barren white family primer." (172)[15] The novel is divided into four main sections, entitled "Autumn," "Winter," Spring," and "Summer." Within this superstructure invoking "nature" are seven chapters that draw their titles from the mangled typography of the first vignette, the unravelling of the "cultural": "HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITE . . .," "HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHERDICK . . .," "SEETHECATITGOESMEOWMEOW . . .," "SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICE . . .," "SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONG . . .," "SEETHEDOGBOWBOWGOESTHEDOG . . .," and "LOOKLOOKHERECOMESAFRIEND . . ."

[15] Dorothy L. Hurley and E. Anthony Hurley also focus on the nature/culture distinction with regard both to incest and racism: "Incest is presented, not only as a social malaise but even more importantly as a deformation of nature, much as is race in the U.S., manifested in the ideology of white supremacy, in the devaluation of African-heritage Blacks and blackness, and in the internalization of white values of beauty by Blacks themselves."(*Constructing Incest Stories: Black Women's Voices in Fact and Fiction*. African World Press: Trenton, NJ, 2009. p. 148)

In addition, there are interstitial passages that have no titles, though they fall within one of the four main "season" sections.

The Bluest Eye exposes the racist underpinnings of the familial by interrogating the distinction between nature and culture, for where the nature/culture line is drawn hegemony also gets articulated, quite concretely, in the demand to straighten one's hair, pull in one's hips, and "get rid of the funkiness. . .the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" in favor of an order and cleanliness "suited" to freedom. (64)[16] Part of what makes culture so violent in this climate is its ready, almost reflexive figuration as "natural." This is most apparent in the characterization of Pecola, whose faith in her own ugliness and dream of having blue eyes gives the novel its title. Claudia, by contrast, defies the cultural cues that tell her black skin is ugly. She despises Shirley Temple, rips apart the white baby dolls her family gives her for Christmas, and then transfers "the same impulses to little white girls" (15). But even Claudia cannot maintain her defiance of racist norms, because the energy it awakens in her smacks too much of cruelty and makes her feel ashamed:

> When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to

[16] It is curious to note in this context how important the nature/culture distinction was to Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous account of the incest taboo, which he defined as "the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished." (Claude Lévi-Strauss. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham. Beacon Press Books. Boston: 1969, p. 24)

> fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement. (15-16)

Unlike Claudia, Pecola takes white standards of beauty as facts of nature. Her timidity, alienation, and adoration of various figures of whiteness – the smiling white Mary Jane candies she eats ecstatically, the milk she gulps in excess out of a Shirley Temple cup "just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (16) – distinguish her from Claudia, suggesting that cultural norms are somewhat up for grabs in this childhood world, interpreted variably by different child characters, as they compete for knowledge of the adult world. Pecola's early indoctrination in self-hatred follows a script her entire family has learned and passed on to her.

> It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." (28)

So, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola learn about their bodies, the prospect of love, the rules of beauty and sexual attraction through the mediating force of white supremacy. Their understanding of their bodies is subject to ready-made interpretations from the wider culture – but not completely. Morrison keeps a space open in *The Bluest Eye* – a fleeting fragile space – where children can understand their bodies differently than the culture tells them to. Evidence of this is the "pristine

sadism" Claudia briefly indulges but cannot sustain, mutilating not just white baby dolls, of course, but the norms they represent. She can only see her rejection of norms as violence and cruelty. There are no messages to affirm, because no messages affirm her body. So she can only take refuge finally in "fraudulent love," which is only "adjustment," not "improvement." It is in the context of this cultural violence that Claudia and Frieda confront the fact of incest – the knowledge that Pecola and her father have had sex. And here, something different happens. They are not tugged inevitably to the ready-made interpretations provided by the wider culture – as they are with respect to white baby dolls and Shirley Temple, for instance. Rather, they are faced with an event that is only figured as aberration. It is a space beyond norms. Incest is not something to learn. It is something to sidestep. The lesson is radically different here. Claudia recalls:

> And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, 'Poor little girl,' or, 'Poor baby,' but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils. (149)

Claudia and Frieda do not find ideas about incest "leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance." The adults do not offer any cues for how to actively engage with the subject – no eyes, "only veils," only a covering over of perception and understanding. The reaction they model is less a reaction than a withdrawal – not total silence, but highly constrained speech, ranging confusedly from repulsion to titillation. There is no empathy for the victim, because the entire

act must be disavowed wholesale. One's position in the incident – as victim or perpetrator – is less important than the repulsiveness of the act itself.

It is striking to me that a novel so overloaded with cultural messages places an event at its center that is a kind of anti-message, a field of refraction around which the other messages swirl. *The Bluest Eye* clearly distinguishes incest from other forms of sexual abuse. When Frieda is molested by Mr. Henry, "the roomer" in her family's home, her father attacks him and chases him off the property, and the adults rally to Frieda's aid. There is shame and talk of Frieda being "ruined," but not the radical withdrawal that manifests in the face of incest. Incest is of a different order, both as an event in the novel and a determinant of narrative structure, but why? The passage in which Cholly rapes Pecola includes also a meditation on the meaning of the father/daughter relationship. He sees before him not just his physical daughter but also the cultural schema of a relationship that seems rigged against him. In his drunken stupor, he considers his own inadequacy as a father:

> How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? (127)

Cholly's defiance of normative fatherly duties, what he imagines Pecola expects from him, expectations echoing "the white family primer" at the novel's opening – to return love, to make her smile, to teach – drives him to nausea and a seething hatred for his daughter. But just before he vomits, Pecola stands on one foot and scratches

her calf with her toe in a gesture resembling the one her mother performed the first time Cholly laid eyes on her. And here Cholly's nausea gives way to lust, but "not the usual lust":

> The timid, tucked-in look of the scratching toe – that was what Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky. Leaning over a fence staring at nothing in particular. The creamy toe of her bare foot scratching a velvety leg. It was such a small and simple gesture, but it filled him then with a wonderful softness. Not the usual lust to part tight legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness. A desire to cover her foot with his hand and gently nibble away the itch from the calf with his teeth. He did it then, and startled Pauline into laughter. He did it now. (127-128)

Mother and daughter, past and present, blur together in this passage, occupying the same moment of Cholly's perception, as he shifts from failed father-archetype to perpetrator of incest. The passage at once captures the innocence and good will of Cholly's first encounter with Pauline – admiring her injured foot, the deformity that follows her through her life, before he even sees her face – and an impulse for "tenderness, a protectiveness" that he transposes onto Pecola, imagining a noble motive for the rape he is about to commit.

This aspect of Morrison's prose echoes a good deal of the clinical literature on incestuous abuse – the sorts of figurations perpetrators express in an effort to distinguish their behavior from ordinary rape or even ordinary sex. Jane F. Gilgun gathered such testimonies for her 1995 article "We Shared Something Special: The Moral Discourse of Incest Perpetrators." In one, a father who abused his 13-year-old daughter tries to deny that what he experienced with her was actually an orgasm:

> To me, it's not the same as having an orgasm. I mean, it was thrilling, and it was exciting, but it wasn't what I was looking for . . . Bliss is the word that I would identify with that. There's a really satisfying feeling of everything is kind of relaxed. There doesn't seem to be any pressure. It's a real nice place to be. (271)

Another father insists that what he shared with his daughter – whom he began abusing when she was only 3-years-old – was not a feeling, but a thought. And this thought somehow represented an extraordinary connection with his daughter, something he felt compelled to make her "understand." Does the strange connection he experienced stem from the fact that it allegedly came to him as a thought and not a feeling?

> The feeling was, it's not a feeling – it's a thought. The thought was so doggone strong about making that connection with my daughter, that she understand that this is love . . . Wow. It was strong . . . I meant it with every fiber in my body. It was really important that she understand, and I make some connection from her to me, too. (271)

Gilgun notes that "afterward, but not during the incest, he reported feeling confused and scared about these feelings." (271)

Cholly's initial revulsion at the sight of his daughter stems from a feeling that he cannot possibly conform to some prescribed father archetype, and in the context of *The Bluest Eye*, it is hard not to associate such an archetype with the "white family primer" of the novel's opening, a hegemonic formulation of the familial as freedom and whiteness – and as culture defined in opposition to uncouth or abject "nature." His first thought – "How dare she love him?" – is an extreme articulation of the prohibition of incest, a resounding "No" to the prospect of a daughter's love, where

that love invests itself in the archetype he cannot match. In voicing the incest taboo immediately before its transgression, Morrison identifies the violence of both – the violence of affection suppressed in service of the "normalizing gaze" of the white public sphere, a suppression that has isolated Pecola from her mother and father throughout the novel, and the violence of a rape which the rapist enjoys precisely because it appears to break free of the other violence, the suppressed affection. Cholly revels in "a wonderful softness," and like the incest perpetrators Gilgun interviewed for her study, he distinguishes his lust for his daughter from other kinds of lust: "Not the usual lust to part tight legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness." (128) The liberation he experiences in his drunken stupor is also a liberation from kinship distinctions. He conflates his daughter with his wife. Moreover, it is a temporal liberation, for he also conflates the past (of his young wife) with the present (of his daughter). The typographical mangling of the white family primer Morrison performs at the novel's opening becomes a kind of narratological and ontological mangling in the incest scene.

This passage belongs largely to Cholly, in a chapter devoted to his biography. We see and hear comparatively little of Pecola: "the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made – a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon." (128) Does Pecola's negligible role here – a figure of negation, a quick loss of air – speak to the regret Morrison expressed in her 1993 afterword, that she did "not effectively handle the

silence" at the center of her novel? (172) What are the precise obstacles to Pecola's representation in this scene?[17]

On one hand, the rape scene echoes aspects of Cholly's first sexual encounter with Darlene – consummated at the behest of two armed white men – in the sense that Cholly feels revolted by Pecola, accused by her, and coerced by expectations coming from the outside. I am equating here the literal coercions of the white hunters – "Get on wid it, nigger!" – with the abstract coercions passing through Cholly's head as he regards his daughter, the double bind that tells him he needs to teach her and that he has nothing to teach her. These coercions are of a piece with the other cultural cues – white baby dolls, white film actresses, straightened hair – that tell the novel's characters at one and the same time "be this" and "you can never be this." Pecola may be the novel's least hypocritical character in that she follows this double-bind to its logical absurdity: in her impossible dream of attaining blue eyes, of shedding her natural body altogether so she can don the cultural ideal communicated to her from every direction.

If I am justified in likening this portion of the rape scene to Cholly's coerced union with Darlene – his revulsion for Darlene echoed in his revulsion for Pecola –, it is important to note that this portion is marked by the prohibition of incest. "How dare she love him?" Cholly thinks to himself. He is very far from wanting to violate

[17] Janice Doane and Devon Hodges read the incest scene in *The Bluest Eye* as a response to the Trueblood incest scene in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. While the characters in Ellison's novel find "in the incest story, and the daughter's subjugation, a fantasy of freedom of restraint," *The Bluest Eye* attempts to direct proper focus to the daughter/victim's experience. (Janice Doane and Devon Hodges. *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to* Sapphire. The University of Michigan Press: 2001, p. 37)

his daughter at this moment. He is, in fact, on the verge of vomiting. The transition from enforced prohibition to transgression – the rape itself – occurs with his memory of Pauline, which stands in stark contrast to the humiliating episode with Darlene. Not only is Cholly's encounter with Pauline not coerced in a literal sense – not egged on by armed white men –, but it also occurs largely outside the determinate visual register that coerces notions of beauty, affection, and sexual appeal almost everywhere else in the novel. Pauline's back is turned to Cholly when he first approaches her. She only hears his whistle and lets it "pull her lips into a smile." (89) Then she feels Cholly tickle her foot, laughs, and finally turns around. When the visual register does enter this scene, it does not describe chiseled faces and straight hair, none of the Hollywood glamor that places human beings on a hierarchy of beauty. Cholly embodies a fantasy Pauline has harbored for some time: "the someone had no face, no form, no voice, no odor. He was a simple Presence, an all-embracing tenderness with strength and a promise of rest." (88) When Cholly arrives to fulfill Pauline's yearning for this presence, she describes how this manifests visually:

> *When I first seed Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that time down home when all us chil'ren went berry picking after a funeral and I put some in the pocket of my Sunday dress, and they mashed up and stained my hips. My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. I could feel that purple deep inside me. And that lemonade Mama used to make when Pap came in out the fields. It be cool and yellowish, with seeds floating near the bottom. And that streak of green them june bugs made on the trees the night we left from down home. All of them colors was in me. Just sitting there. So when Cholly come up and tickled my foot, it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together. Cholly was thin then, with real light eyes. He used to whistle, and when I heerd him, shivers come on my skin.* (90)

Sight is not associated with objects here but with experiences. Cholly does not look like Clark Gable. His presence is like the colors of berries, lemonade, june bug streaks, all blended together. Pauline's visual reception of Cholly echoes Claudia's desire for a fulfilling Christmas day – one filled not with presents to own but with experiences to feel:

> Had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been, "Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?" I could have spoken up, "I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone." The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward. (15)

Instead, Claudia's family gives her white baby dolls, which she proceeds to mutilate, much to everyone's bafflement. Ownership and visual objectification work in tandem in this novel, expressions of white supremacy and of modes of being in the world that have infiltrated black homes and families. These forces envelope Cholly's first sexual experience with Darlene, under the voyeuristic beam of the hunters' flashlight, and they drive Pecola on her quest to attain blue eyes, as if one's own body could be swapped for a valorizing jewel – in Pecola's case, the visual organ itself. But as noted above, Morrison describes alternative modes of being in the world, imagined fleetingly by Pauline, Claudia, and others – a way of feeling rather than owning, of seeing colors as experiences, not as surfaces of owned objects. If the rape scene in *The Bluest Eye* describes Cholly's mental and affective passage from a revolting

memory of visual objectification – the flashlight shone on him and Darlene – to a delightful medley of sensations free from objectifying determinations – his first encounter with Pauline –, how should this guide our understanding of Pecola's victimization? I do not believe *The Bluest Eye* is in any sense an apology or defense of incest, but I do believe it treats the prohibition of incest as coextensive with a system of coercions that are themselves violent and make the incest Pecola suffers doubly violent.

To make this complicated point clearer, it will be helpful to consider another chapter in the novel, "SEETHECATITGOESMEOWMEOWCOMEANDPLAYCOM EPLAYWITHJANETHEKITTENWILLNOTPLAYPLAYPLAYPLA," where a mother's effort to "get rid of the funkiness" by conforming to white standards of decorum manifests in her emotional and physical distance from her son, her withholding of affection from him. In place of her son, she directs her affection onto a black cat with blue eyes, which becomes a kind of Lacanian *objét petit-a* for the son, a figure for the prohibition of incest – the mother's inaccessible desires and withheld affection. When Pecola enters this domestic scene, the interface between the incest taboo and white supremacy boils to a fever pitch, expressed in a profound enmity between propertied and renting blacks. Thus, the chapter employs the incest taboo as a cipher and a catalyst for animosities embedded at the intersection of race, class, and gender.

The omniscient narrator gives us the story of Geraldine, but for several pages before we learn her name she is only an anonymous type, "one such girl from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken who did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs, who

smelled of wood and vanilla, who had made soufflés in the Home Economics Department" – just one of many Southern black women who move to the North to establish homes scrubbed clean of sensuality, a certain bourgeois "type," a particular representative of a broader mode of propertied domesticity. (67) Morrison employs this narrative strategy several times throughout *The Bluest Eye*, a movement from generality to particularity, anonymous typology to detailed character study, and in this chapter the narrative strategy reflects Geraldine's personality, for she is abstracted from herself, detached – through sexual repression – from her own body. In some sense, she is a person who has become a type. Moreover, the chapter comes full circle, for at its conclusion Geraldine turns Pecola into an anonymous type – a representative of all the poor unkempt black girls Geraldine had seen and despised "all of her life." (71)

Although the narrator will eventually describe the ways in which these Southern women suppress their sexuality, the opening paragraphs suggest otherwise: "When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say 'Mobile' and you think you've been kissed." (63) Morrison performs a rhetorical slippage in these opening pages, whereby the semblance of sexual liberty gradually reveals itself to be a thin – a complexly thin – facade. It turns out the apparent sensuality of these women's speech and swagger hinges on their superior sense of the domestic:

> Meridian. The sound of it opens the windows of a room like the first four notes of a hymn. Few people can say the names of their home towns with such sly affection. Perhaps because they don't have home towns, just places where they were born. But these girls soak up the juice of their home towns, and it never leaves them. (63)

While some people just have places "where they were born," these women have home towns. The difference is profound for the narrator and will come to distinguish Geraldine from Pecola, a woman with property from a young girl whose family rents an abandoned storefront, whose father sends them "outdoors" – "the real terror of life," Claudia has explained – by setting their storefront home on fire. (11) The difference marks a locus of deep hostility and class resentment. Gradually, the narrator's account of the domestic sphere shifts from airy freeness to increasingly determinate figurations, and finally, to explicit forms of repression. Morrison crafts a slippery slope in her figuring of the domestic, to show how subtly oppression can conceal itself wherever the familial is articulated:

> Such girls live in quiet black neighborhoods where everybody is gainfully employed. Where there are porch swings hanging from chains. Where the grass is cut with a scythe, where rooster combs and sunflowers grow in the yards, and pots of bleeding heart, ivy, and mother-in-law tongue line the steps and windowsills . . . These particular brown girls from Mobile and Aiken are not like some of their sisters. They are not fretful, nervous, or shrill; they do not have lovely black necks that stretch as though against an invisible collar; their eyes do not bite. These sugar-brown Mobile girls move through the streets without a stir (63-64)

The suspect innocence and ecstasy of the chapter's opening sentences breaks apart here with the first emergence of discriminations and values. No longer simply one with the hollyhocks, these women are now distinguished from their "fretful, nervous, or shrill" sisters and have settled in neighborhoods characterized by gainful employment, neatness, and order. One senses the subtle encroachment of the "white family primer" and the prescriptions for tidiness, stability, and market participation

found in the freedmen's manuals. It is as if Morrison performs a sly fall from grace at the outset of this chapter, in order to dramatize how convincing the pretense of freedom can be, how easily the notion of sublime "nature" can shift into domestic coercion. We now have a highly determinate vision of the domestic, and those less appealing "fretful, nervous . . . shrill" sisters of these enchanting women will come to comprise Geraldine's definition of a "nigger" – defined in opposition to upstanding "colored people." Pecola, we come to learn in this chapter, embodies the figure of the "nigger" when she enters Geraldine's home. But she is also used by Junior to enact a revenge on his distant mother – the murder of the cat Geraldine loves instead of him. Put differently, Junior uses Pecola to defy the prohibition of incest, which is the force, I argue, that separates him from his mother and enrages him so. The fact that it requires a so-called "nigger" to disrupt this family system reveals the interface of white supremacy and the incest taboo in *The Bluest Eye*, for the specific version of the prohibition of incest that Geraldine inflicts on Junior is designed to maintain this sublimely ordered home the narrator has gone to such lengths to romanticize. But before we turn to Geraldine and Junior, we should dwell a bit longer on Morrison's more generalized account of the upstanding Southern women that have come to settle in Lorain, Ohio:

> They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with the porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful

> funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair. (64)

Serving the white man well – attaining that standard of beauty and decorum – demands a litany of prohibitions restricting one's laughter, speech, gestures, buttocks, lips, and hair. The "Funk" that must be policed stands here in stark opposition to those comparatively ethereal emblems of nature with which the chapter opened – the "white butterfly" glancing "off a fence with a torn wing," those disembodied kisses, those blossoms nodding in the wind. (63) Morrison's account of the "Funk" promptly disabuses us of such pseudo-nature. The nature at issue in this domestic formation "crusts," "drips," "flowers," and "clings." It is unadulterated, up-close, intimately embodied, and it has no place in the homes of these women. It is also sexual, and in this way, the prohibition of "funkiness" becomes a figure for the prohibition of incest – a version of the incest taboo shaped in accordance with white supremacist coercions. These women never have boyfriends, we are told, but they always marry; and their scrupulous maintenance of a clean home is of a piece with their extreme propriety in the bedroom. Their husbands – initially excited to enjoy a clean ordered home with a beautiful woman – must face disappointment in the sexual sphere:

> Nor do they know that she will give him her body sparingly and partially. He must enter her surreptitiously, lifting the hem of her nightgown only to her navel. He must rest his weight on his elbows when they make love, ostensibly to avoid hurting her breasts but actually to keep her from having to touch or

> feel too much of him. While he moves inside her, she will wonder why they didn't put the necessary but private parts of the body in some more convenient place – like the armpit, for example, or the palm of the hand. Someplace one could get to easily, and quickly, without undressing . . . When she senses some spasm about to grip him, she will make rapid movements with her hips, press her fingernails into his back, suck in her breath, and pretend she is having an orgasm. She might wonder again, for the six hundredth time, what it would be like to have *that* feeling while her husband's penis is inside her. The closest thing to it was the time she was walking down the street and her napkin slipped free of her sanitary belt. It moved gently between her legs as she walked. Gently, ever so gently. And then a slight and distinctly delicious sensation collected in her crotch. (65-66)

In lieu of climaxing with their husbands – too unseemly for their ideal home –, these women take pleasure in incidental masturbation, which is perfected in rubbing against a household cat, "who will love her order, precision, and constancy; who will be as clean and quiet as she is." (66) At this point in the narrative, we are finally introduced to Geraldine, as if the delineation of proper coitus in this domestic zone enables the emergence of a singular character, the one particular mother who embodies all these more general social forces:

> The cat will always know that he is first in her affections. Even after she bears a child. For she does bear – easily, and painlessly. But only one. A son. Named Junior. One such girl from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken who did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs, who smelled of wood and vanilla, who had made soufflés in the Home Economics Department, moved with her husband, Louis, to Lorain, Ohio. Her name was Geraldine.
> There she built her nest, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, played with her cat, and birthed Louis Junior (67)

Obviously, withholding sexual affection from one's husband is not exactly a function of the prohibition of incest, but again, I would like to consider the incest taboo in *The Bluest Eye* as operating along a continuum of sanctioned familial affection. Geraldine's broad effort to "get rid of the funkiness" by suppressing such affectionate

impulses also governs her relationship with her son, Junior, and in ways that compel a psychoanalytic reading of this chapter. Junior's frustrated desire for his mother – a desire frustrated as an explicit function of white supremacy, vis-a-vis Geraldine's suppression of "the Funk" – echoes Freud's account of the Oedipus Complex and Lacan's account of *das Ding* but with an account of racism that neither Freud nor Lacan ever brought to their descriptions of the unconscious. Morrison complicates and deepens the function of the incest taboo by politicizing it.

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,* Lacan, synthesizing his readings of Lévi-Strauss and Freud, identifies the mother as occupying the place of *das Ding* – an absence eluding the signifiers that compose our unconscious but an absence towards which these signifiers are constitutively oriented. We cannot say anything about it (her), but our representations swirl around this desire for the mother, this lack, which Bruce Fink, in his reading of Lacan, traces to that moment when the child learns that the mother has her own desires, quite distinct from those of the child and completely mysterious. (59) "The desire for the mother," Lacan writes, "cannot be satisfied because it is the end, the terminal point, the abolition of the whole world of demand, which is the one that at its deepest level structures man's unconscious." (82) For Lacan, the prohibition of incest – "the law of which all other cultural developments are no more than the consequences and ramifications" – is the prohibition of our fundamental desire for the mother. (82) Richard Boothby, in his study of Lacan, describes *das Ding* as "a pure posit, an empty and ideal locus of being amid a shifting whirl of other aspects of the perceptual complex that are more familiar to memory."

(210) What happens when the mother's desires – directed away from the child, inaccessible and mysterious to him – are directed towards white supremacist imperatives and coercions? In this chapter, Morrison poses this difficult question.

Morrison traces for us the moment when Junior realizes his mother has her own desires, independent of any desire for him – and quite distinct from his own desires and needs. Morrison's account of this event is different from Lacan's in that the true object of Geraldine's desire – the black cat – is concretized quite clearly for Junior, and he has direct access to it.

> Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them – comfort and satiety. He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod. Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled. It was not long before the child discovered the difference in his mother's behavior to himself and the cat. As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer. The cat survived, because Geraldine was seldom away from home, and could effectively soothe the animal when Junior abused him. (67)

At the same time that Junior learns to hate and torture the cat, he learns to distinguish between different kinds of black people. Geraldine explains to him "the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and trousers." (67) In Morrison's telling, this prescribed discrimination is of a piece with the incest taboo. Junior's frustrated desire for his mother involves another frustrated desire – his desire to play with all the black boys, including the rough-and-tumble ones, the so-called "niggers." Both desires are thwarted by the same racist logic – again, Geraldine's compulsion to get rid of the

"funkiness" of life. In this sense, the incest taboo does not seem easily separable from racism in this chapter. They are inextricably connected. The site of kinship is the site of white supremacy. To complicate matters, Junior's sublimation of these frustrated desires has a way of increasing his propensity for violence towards girls outside his home, including Pecola. Just as he redirects his hatred of his mother onto the black cat, he learns to disavow the rowdier black boys by taking out his aggression on little girls.

> Junior used to long to play with the black boys. More than anything in the world he wanted to play King of the Mountain and have them push him down the mound of dirt and roll over him. He wanted to feel their hardness pressing on him, smell their wild blackness, and say "Fuck you" with that lovely casualness. He wanted to sit with them on curbstones and compare the sharpness of jackknives, the distance and arcs of spitting. In the toilet he wanted to share with them the laurels of being able to pee far and long. Bay Boy and P.L. had at one time been his idols. Gradually he came to agree with his mother that neither Bay Boy nor P.L. was good enough for him. He played only with Ralph Nisensky, who was two years younger, wore glasses, and didn't want to *do* anything. More and more Junior enjoyed bullying girls. It was easy making them scream and run. How he laughed when they fell down and their bloomers showed. (67-68)

One day, Junior lures Pecola into his house, promising to show her kittens. Upon entering their pristine home, full of doilies and plants, Pecola is captivated. "She wanted to see everything slowly, slowly." (70) Her reaction echoes the way she took her time in the candy shop to savor white Mary Jane candies and, in Claudia and Frieda's house, to sip milk from the Shirley Temple cup, slowing down to absorb a certain experience of whiteness. Geraldine's home conveys such whiteness – defined by the novel already as a suppression of "funk" and a valorization of ownership, property, and visual objectification. Then, Junior throws the black cat in her face and

locks Pecola in the room with it. "You can't get out. You're my prisoner," he says. (70) The cat scratches Pecola, and she cries.

Junior's malice and fun is threatened when Pecola finally gets a good look at the cat and develops an affection for it. The cat bears the body Pecola has wished for herself – black with blue eyes – and in this way it is the extreme perverted symbol of the racialized self-loathing at the heart of *The Bluest Eye*, a figure of what such self-loathing might look like if it were fulfilled and perfected. Alone in the room with the cat, locked out by Junior, Pecola grows silent, petting the cat and staring into its blue eyes. "The blue eyes in the black face held her." (70) The cat is also, I have argued, a figure for the prohibition of incest. It is where Geraldine directs her love when she will not direct it towards Junior. It is where Junior directs his hatred when he will not direct it at Geraldine. This animal both marks the distance between mother and son – something like the Lacanian *das Ding*, perhaps, though in determinate form – and captures the epitome of Pecola's self-hatred. It thus exquisitely figures the interface of the prohibition of incest with white supremacy – the interface I have been trying to articulate throughout this chapter. What can this teach us about the violence Pecola suffers? Whereas other characters are guided by regulative norms and coercive mass-produced images without explicitly acknowledging the coercion – the Shirley Temples, the Clark Gables, the prohibition of "funkiness," which for the most part go without saying –, Pecola stands out as a character because she looks these coercions squarely in the face and says, "Yes . . . you are right." (28) Pecola is a character who surpasses the mediations that filter white supremacy in order to embrace white

supremacy directly, submitting herself to a perfection of self-loathing. This mode of being is consistent with the violence incest enacts insofar that incest surpasses and circumvents a powerful norm – the prohibition of incest – which in this novel also functions, I have argued, as a mediator of white supremacy. Read this way, *The Bluest Eye* employs incest to explore what racist violence looks like when the norms that mediate it are completely removed.

When Junior walks back in the room and sees the cat "stretching its head and flattening its eyes" in response to Pecola's touch, much the way it had responded to his mother's touch, he is enraged. He begins swinging the cat in circles by its leg. When Pecola tries to reach for Junior's hand, they both fall, and the cat smashes against the window and dies. Geraldine walks in, and Junior blames Pecola for the death of the cat. "He pointed to the radiator, where the cat lay, its blue eyes closed, leaving only an empty, black, and helpless face." (71) In death, the cat is only black, so the death is in some way a death of Pecola's perverse dream of beauty. Without the blue eyes, its face is empty and helpless.

When Geraldine looks at Pecola, she sees not only the girl who killed her beloved cat, but a certain type of black girl, an emblem of the kind of black person Geraldine has worked very hard not to be. The chapter closes much the way it opened, but in reverse, moving from the particularity of one black girl, Pecola, to an anonymous typology of black girls. This time, though, the typology does not comprise ethereally prim and proper Southern beauties but the poor and destitute, the

disordered, the sloppy, those who – far from getting rid of the "funkiness" – have sunk deep into it. The narrator assumes Geraldine's perspective:

> She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying "Shet up!" Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt . . . They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream . . . They lived on cold black-eyed peas and orange pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house. Up over the hump of the cat's back she looked.
>
> "Get out," she said, her voice quiet. "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house."
>
> The cat shuddered and flicked his tail. (72)

The episode with Geraldine, Junior, Pecola, and the Cat provides an allegory for the prohibition of incest – and its allegorical transgression, in the murder of the cat – that can help explain the literal incest that occurs later in the novel – Cholly's rape of Pecola. As we have seen, the incest taboo does not simply protect Junior from being sexually abused by his mother, in the manner of some benevolent social regulation. Morrison makes clear in this chapter that the prohibition is itself violent. It isolates Junior from his mother and from other black boys he would love to befriend – poorer boys who fail to suppress a certain sensuality and zest for life. It makes him resentful and violent towards other girls, and it stifles his mother's capacity for sexual expression and satisfaction with her husband. So, when Cholly rapes Pecola, the novel has already given us reason to view this undeniably despicable act – an act that drives Pecola into a state of insanity from which she never recovers – as simultaneously an act of resistance to white supremacist coercions.

How are we to make sense of this? *The Bluest Eye* provides an especially potent account of incestuous abuse, I believe, because it does not shrink from these uncomfortable and risky questions. Moreover, much of the clinical and sociological literature on incestuous abuse – published, in most cases, several years after the publication of *The Bluest Eye* – asks similarly unsettling questions, but without the benefit of Morrison's lyrical prose, command of allegory, and deft counterpoising of multiple narrative perspectives.

For example, Linda Gordon – in her study of family violence in Boston between 1880 and 1960, *Heroes of Their Own Lives* – argues that disentangling paternal affection from sexual gratification in accounts of incestuous abuse is often not as easy as one would hope. The mutual imbrication or blurring of these two affective modes may mark the distinguishing violence of incest, and help explain the powerful speech prohibition attending it. Gordon writes:

> One of the most complicated, and painful, aspects of incestuous sex – and all child sexual abuse, for that matter – is that it cannot be said to be motivated only by hostility or to be experienced simply as abuse. Understanding incest requires accepting ambiguity. The very definitions of acquiescence and resistance will be challenged, blurred, and perhaps reformulated in looking at particular cases. (209)

Sexual predators within families have at their disposal methods of coercion that are coextensive with otherwise "healthy" – or at least normative – modes of familial affection, behavior that may even evoke positive associations with other times and places – a game, a back rub – before it crosses a line into molestation, rape, and other

forms of predation.[18] Many testimonies of incestuous abuse suggest that speaking incest is not simply the breaking of a silence but the emergence of a sort of semiotic vertigo, a new and mysterious break-down in communicability. In other words, describing the act in empirical or clinical terms does not guarantee the legibility of the act's content or meaning. *The Bluest Eye* – by delineating normative modes of kinship and familial affection before describing their transgression – helps us to imagine the meaning and stakes of this semiotic vertigo, how Cholly's pernicious act could also involve a desperate effort to overcome a debilitating past and how Pecola's victimization could dovetail with her desire for blue eyes.

After she is raped, beaten by her mother, and taken out of school, Pecola's immediate impulse is to visit Soaphead Church, the reclusive pedophile and misanthrope who earns a living as a "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams" (130-131). She asks him for blue eyes, as if blue eyes would cleanse her of the violation she has just endured and the ostracism that attends it. The fantasy Pecola has harbored all throughout the novel acquires a new level of urgency at this moment, becoming actionable. "I can't go to school no more," she tells Soaphead. "And I thought maybe you could help me . . . My eyes . . . I want them blue." (138)

[18] In *Intimate Politics*, Bettina Aptheker describes one such "game" that provided the context for incestuous abuse: "I was three or four years old when we began playing 'choo-choo train.' ... My father was behind me, and then the train arrived 'at the station,' and we had to wait for the 'passengers' to get off and on. Our train rocked back and forth, back and forth, and my father had his right arm tightly around me. He was the 'locomotive' even though he was behind me. Our train shuddered just before it was supposed to leave 'the station,' except it didn't leave. ... And then he stood me up and we went into the bathroom and he washed me off, very gently. It didn't hurt. He never hurt me. And I knew not to tell." (Bettina F. Aptheker. *Intimate Politics: How I Grew Up Red, Fought for Free Speech, and Became a Feminist Rebel*. Seal Press: Berkeley, 2006. p. 12 – 13)

Morrison sets up a curious causal relationship here, in Pecola's imagination as well as Soaphead's, between miscegenation – a transgenerational process Pecola seeks to achieve for herself in one miraculous instant, by attaining blue eyes – and the washing away of the catastrophic shame attached to incest. The name "Soaphead," of course, captures this drive for cleansing.

Before Pecola arrives at Soaphead's property, the omniscient narrator gives us a detailed account of Soaphead's mixed racial ancestry, traceable to the West Indies, where a British Sir Whitcomb "introduced the white strain into the family in the early 1800's" (132). Successive generations of Whitcombs attributed their academic success to the socially redeeming power of miscegenation, "lightening the family complexion," while acknowledging that incest was sometimes necessary to "maintain their whiteness," resulting now and then – for a few eccentric family members – in "a weakening of faculties" (133). Incest – an instrument of sameness – replaces miscegenation as the agent of the Whitcomb family's self-inflicted program of white supremacy once their complexion has lightened enough to make darkening – through miscegenation – the more urgent threat. Thus, this chapter treats incest and miscegenation as axes around which a racist model of kinship expresses itself, a see-saw of sameness and difference. Viewed diachronically, the Whitcomb family is neither white nor black, so the very notion of race – as a pseudo-biological category – is travestied in this chapter, but the ideological conviction driving the Whitcombs – their ascription to "De Gobineau's hypothesis that 'all civilizations derive from the

white race'" – translates into an inter-generational mode the racialized self-loathing that afflicts Pecola at the present time of the narrative. (133)

As the most recent product of the Whitcomb family line, Soaphead, "a cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin," embodies – through the carefully fashioned lines of kinship that precede him and which are reflected in his skin – the forces of white supremacy that subjugate Pecola. (132) He is the product of the miscegenation Pecola wishes for herself. That she approaches him immediately after being raped by her father invites an allegorical reading of this scene in its treatment of incest. Incest is figured in this chapter as interchangeable with miscegenation – only taboo if it conflicts with a program of racial self-improvement, of "lightening the family complexion." Otherwise, its status is arbitrary and purely relational, part of the Whitcomb family's see-saw of sameness and difference. This chapter treats incest less as a biological aberration than as an instrument of a cultural violence that encompasses both incest and miscegenation – both of which can be either taboo or legitimated, depending on the cultural context and who holds the sexual power. Morrison makes the meaning of Pecola's victimization even more complex and difficult to read than it had been prior to this point in the novel. She is the victim of a form of incest that is taboo, in part, because it has nothing to do with lightening the complexion of a family line, and yet her immediate response is to seek such lightening, to acquire blue eyes. It is as if the blue eyes would remove the

cultural taboo attached to the rape, turning the rape into a productive form of incest – or transforming the incest into miscegenation.[19]

As the Soaphead Church passage reminds us, the history of white supremacy is marked by sexual prohibitions and sexual privileges, making miscegenation – at various times and places – a taboo for some and an enticement to others. The same, it seems, is true of incest. In her 2012 article "An Essay on Slavery's Hidden Legacy: Social Hysteria and Structural Condonation of Incest," Zanita E. Fenton writes "in the United States, the silence surrounding incest ought to be understood in tandem with the silence pertaining to interracial relations from the era of anti-miscegenation" (321). Incest and miscegenation, both perpetrated violently under slavery and both subject to powerful speech prohibitions, also, Fenton argues, coincided in the same acts, were even – she goes so far as to say – "inseparable and socially and politically synonymous" (324). If this is so, the prohibition of speaking incest that I have been addressing would seem to be inextricably tied to this other prohibition, a taboo that found expression in the anti-miscegenation laws hovering over the narrative landscape of *The Bluest Eye*, but one which also concealed – or sought to conceal – the fact that white slave masters had been the chief and original agents of miscegenation, by ruthless force. It is worth quoting Fenton's argument at some length, because it is complex and provocative:

[19] I have to thank my colleague Heidi Morse for asking an astute question that pointed me in this direction: "Is it almost as though if she's been raped, well then she better have blue eyes to show for it?"

> Despite the imperative for racial purity, white men enjoyed a presumption of free access to slaves, as well as to freed women. Indeed, because acts of miscegenation were so common, as was their denial, they occurred in transparent obscurity. Further, this white, patriarchal, sexual prerogative was unfettered and all but unchallenged even when such access resulted in actual biological, incestuous coupling. Thus the convergence of the taboos, miscegenated incest/incestuous miscegeny, prompted the hidden exhibition of incest, first for relations between family members of 'opposite' races, but also for any correlate relations within a 'same' race family (320).

Part of what I find so compelling about Fenton's argument is her suggestion that the legacy of sexual violence under slavery has far reaching ramifications not only for black families, but for the meaning of incest and sexual abuse in general, cross-culturally, in all American families influenced by the norms, the transgressed taboos, and the speech prohibitions that developed under slavery. She goes on to say:

> Once there was silent condonation for the liaisons between a white father and his reflection in brown, it must have become more psychologically plausible that such liaisons could also occur, with impunity, with his reflection in white. The commonsense progression within this power dynamic includes the unchallenged access of these same fathers to their white children. (321)

Fenton's insistence that the silence surrounding incest ought to be thought in tandem with the silence surrounding miscegenation echoes the narrative logic of *The Bluest Eye*, which makes such a double-reading unavoidable. The racialized self-loathing Pecola suffers and Claudia more actively resists is a double-bind, a trap, a message that commands them to be more white while telling them they can never be other than they are, a kind of miscegenation compulsion combined with the miscegenation taboo. At the level of an individual character, it would be crude to equate anti-miscegenation with incest, but *The Bluest Eye* is not only interested in individual characters and individual lifespans but with multi-generational lines of kinship. And

it is not only interested in incest itself, but with the less readable power of its prohibition. These transgenerational forces – which affect every character to some degree – coalesce with particular violence around the character of Pecola. Soaphead empathizes with Pecola. He understands keenly her desire for blue eyes because he is a man also broken by a cultural logic that places human beings on a hierarchy of beauty and worth.

Born Elihue Micah Whitcomb, Soaphead is the great grandson of an incestuous union that produced "a religious fanatic who founded his own secret sect and fathered four sons," including Soaphead's own father, "a schoolmaster known for the precision of his justice and the control in his violence." (133-134) Just at Soaphead/Elihue's conception, the family line veers back towards miscegenation. We learn that Elihue's mother was "a sweet, indolent half-Chinese girl for whom the fatigue of bearing a son was too much. She died soon after childbirth." (134) Elihue is the product of both incest and miscegenation, but the real tragedy of his life stems from the cultural values encoded in these self-conscious kinship configurations. His father whips him and instills in him cultural predilections that will impoverish Elihue's experience of life – one might say the "funkiness" of life, the richness of immediate sensation –, destroying his chances at enjoying romantic love.

> Little Elihue learned everything he needed to know well, particularly the fine art of self-deception. He read greedily but understood selectively, choosing the bits and pieces of other men's ideas that supported whatever predilection he had at the moment. Thus he chose to remember Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia, but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene; Hamlet's frivolous politics, but not Christ's serious anarchy. He noticed Gibbon's acidity, but not his tolerance, Othello's love for the fair Desdemona, but not Iago's

> perverted love of Othello. The works he admired most were Dante's; those he despised most were Dostoyevsky's. For all his exposure to the best minds of the Western world, he allowed only the narrowest interpretation to touch him. He responded to his father's controlled violence by developing hard habits and a soft imagination. A hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder or decay. (134)

Morrison suggests here that the violence encoded in family formation – in the predilection for certain modes of kinship and for a white supremacist world view – is of a piece with an epistemological violence, reflected in Elihue's narrow reading of Western classics, his capacity to dismiss anarchy, mercy, compassion, and all the rich messiness of a Dostoevsky novel in favor of the rigid hierarchy of Dante's Hell.

This cold love of order costs Elihue the one love of his life, a vivacious and affectionate woman named Velma, who "found his fastidiousness and complete lack of humor touching, and longed to introduce him to the idea of delight." (134) They marry, but Velma soon discovers that she cannot wrest Elihue from his joylessness, that in fact he is "very interested in altering her joy to a more academic gloom," so she leaves him. "She had not lived by the sea all those years, listened to the wharfman's songs all that time, to spend her life in the soundless cave of Elihue's mind." (134-135) Elihue never recovers from Velma's abandonment, for "she was to have been the answer to his unstated, unacknowledged question – where was the life to counter the encroaching nonlife? Velma was to rescue him from the nonlife he had learned on the flat side of his father's belt." (135) The cultural violence at the heart of the Whitcomb family's scrupulously crafted genealogy ultimately ejects Elihue from kinship itself. He never remarries, never establishes a family of his own, never participates in kinship. He is farther from the "funkiness of life" than even Geraldine,

who could at least establish a family, albeit one stifled by a less extreme version of the orderliness that afflicts Elihue, the "nonlife" he can perceive without quite being able to name it – or to name the "life" that would replace it. A dead-end to the Whitcomb family line, he leaves the Caribbean and settles in Lorain, Ohio, where he molests little girls on occasion, fondling their breasts without going so far as to impregnate them. The women of Lorain are not "able to comprehend his rejection of them," so they decide he is supernatural. (135) Accepting this label, Elihue markets his feigned powers as a spiritual adviser. The townspeople name him "Soaphead Church" for "the tight, curly hair that took on and held a sheen and wave when pomaded with soap lather" and for his prior work as a preacher. (132). Elihue accepts this label as well.

The moment Pecola arrives, Soaphead sees in her the same ugliness Pecola sees in herself, finding her "pitifully unattractive." (137) They are kindred spirits in their total submission to white supremacist norms, so when she asks him for blue eyes, he understands her plight completely. He finds the request so touching and sensible it fills him with rage:

> He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him – money, love, revenge – this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. (138)

He is powerless to grant Pecola the lightened complexion his own family had achieved – through careful calculation – over the course of 100 or more years,

calculations that ultimately subjected Soaphead to the "nonlife he had learned on the flat side of his father's belt," calculations motivated by self-hatred and hostility to life. Morrison juxtaposes at this moment miscegenation as fantasy – Pecola's wish for blue eyes – with miscegenation as reality – the Whitcomb family line culminating in the tragic figure of Soaphead. The fantasy and the reality are indistinguishable in the violence they signify, and for this reason, Soaphead is able to grant Pecola blue eyes after all: "No one else will see her blue eyes. But *she* will. And she will live happily ever after." (144) The blue eyes Pecola acquires are pure violence, the complete internalization of the self-loathing that made her wish for blue eyes in the first place. Later, when townspeople avert their eyes from Pecola because she is a victim of incest and therefore abhorrent to them, Pecola believes they are just jealous of her blue eyes: "He really did a good job. Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off." (154)

Miscegenation and incest blur together at the end of the novel, as Pecola enters a state of psychosis that grips her – Claudia tell us – for the rest of her life. Pecola's experience of incest involves the delusion that she has achieved a magical instantaneous form of miscegenation. In this way, *The Bluest Eye* argues that incestuous abuse is violent – at least in part – because it brings to bear the violence of kinship itself, in this case a mode of kinship informed by white supremacist coercions. Just as the Whitcomb family pursued miscegenation and incest at different times, in its pursuit of a lightened complexion, just as Pauline learned from Hollywood to abandon "simple caring for" in favor of a mythic "physical beauty,"

just as Geraldine aspired to white standards of decorum by "suppressing the funkiness of life," alienating her son and husband in the process, the mode of kinship Cholly transgresses in raping Pecola was already an agent of violence. Pecola's experience of incest involves the heightened exposure of this prior violence – the violence of kinship and of the prohibition of incest. *The Bluest Eye* offers a model for understanding incest that is, of course, steeped in the violence of white supremacy – including the warping of familial norms Saidiya V. Hartman identifies in Reconstruction era programs of domestic surveillance –, but I would like to consider the possibility that this model is more or less applicable to different sorts of cultural contexts – not exclusively black families facing racist coercions. Generally speaking, incest is difficult to talk about because it represents the transgression of sacred and foundational norms. Perhaps it is also difficult to talk about because it brings these norms – patriarchal, capitalist, etc. – into uncomfortable relief and at a level of intimacy that resists interrogation. If so, an even more difficult question to ask is how the victim of incestuous abuse registers the heightened exposure of such norms affectively. *The Bluest Eye*, in its account of Pecola's psychological dissolution, her splitting into two selves, suggests that the heightened exposure of kinship norms inflicted through incestuous abuse ruptures subjectivity, a phenomenon I address more directly in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

Neither Public Nor Private: Refractory Incest in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*

The character Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) voices her experience of father/daughter incest near the end of Roman Polanski's 1974 film *Chinatown*. The experience she describes does not involve graphic details of sexual abuse. Evelyn suffers terribly through the confession, but the confession itself is of a peculiarly symbolic nature, little more than a description of kinship. Private investigator Jake "J.J." Gittes (Jack Nicholson) demands to know the identity of the young woman Evelyn has been guarding in her house. Gittes believes Evelyn has murdered her husband and that the young woman is a witness to the murder.

"Who is she?" Gittes says, "And don't give me that crap about your sister because you don't have a sister."

"I'll tell you—," Evelyn interrupts herself with a gasp. "I'll tell you the truth."

As the confession unfolds, Evelyn's body turns rigid and passive. Her eyes glaze over, so that she seems to stare through Gittes, not at him, and her voice shifts from its usual upper-class elegance to a series of staccato shrieks. Evelyn can barely believe what she is confessing. Faye Dunaway's performance of these lines sounds both automated and brittle, like she is spouting words that mean little but nonetheless

have the power to shatter her. Perhaps the emptiness of the words is what makes them so devastating.

"She's my daughter," Evelyn says.

Gittes slaps her hard across the face.

"I said I want the truth!" he shouts.

"She's my sister." He slaps her again.

"She's my daughter." Again he slaps her. The scene acquires a brutal rhythm. Every time Evelyn announces a tie of kinship to the young woman, Gittes hits her in the face for lying. The form of kinship Evelyn is at pains to articulate – one conceived through incestuous sex – has all the appearance of a lie. She can only express it through contradiction.

"My sister. My daughter."

"I said I want the truth!" Gittes throws Evelyn across the room. She crashes against the wall, hitting a table and a vase. Gittes' incredulity and violence in this scene captures *Chinatown*'s figuration of the incest taboo – a prohibition on speaking or even cognizing incest. I want to suggest that what is at stake here is a prevailing epistemological framework, the only "truth" sanctioned by the culture Evelyn inhabits. Incest in *Chinatown* threatens this mode of truth.

"She's my sister *and* my daughter!" Evelyn screams through tears. Her Chinese housekeeper Khan (James Hong) runs down the stairs to assist her, but Evelyn begs him to go back up and attend to her daughter/sister Katherine Cross (Belinda Palmer). "For God's sake, keep her upstairs," she tells him.

"My father and I . . ." Evelyn begins, regaining composure, turning her tear-soaked face towards Gittes with an air of sarcasm and sass, "Understand? Or is it too tough for you?"

Can the suffering *Chinatown* depicts tell us anything about actual incest, about the suffering described in clinical studies of abuse and survivors' memoirs? At the very least, *Chinatown* offers an account of unspeakability, and unspeakability is what we find in many first-hand testimonies. Judith Lewis Herman quotes several incest survivors in her 1981 study *Father/Daughter Incest*. The victims express a range of emotions – powerlessness, a terror of speaking out, confusion, shame, a sense of impossibility, guilty feelings of complicity in the act –, depending on who is speaking. One woman recalls:

> My head just died then. It was an impossible thing for me to handle, so I just didn't handle it. It's like it never happened. Every time I try to talk about it, my mind goes blank. It's like everything explodes in my head. (86)

Other survivors express confusion with regard to family roles, the kinds of duties and expectations one should ascribe to a father. One woman felt compelled to interpret the abuse as some mandatory rite of passage:

> As a child I thought, why would someone that I love and who loves me do anything wrong to me. There seemed to be no other answer but . . . this is natural, and this is the way it is. I thought maybe, just maybe, this was my personal indoctrination into womanhood. (85)

What one finds in many such testimonies are efforts to negotiate an insoluble paradox, that "someone that I love," a parent, a kin, would turn that love into a weapon, would employ kinship in a manner that undermines the meaning of kinship.

When the kinship tie that occasioned the sexual act turns out to have been fraudulent, what comes to replace it? Indeed, it is an "impossible thing" to speak the source of a violence that effaces its own source. One could even argue that this impossibility defines the violence of incest.

Chinatown was released in 1974, the height of both the Women's Liberation Movement and the implementation of the California State Water Project (SWP), two historical phenomena that may seem to bear little relationship to each other, though they are integral to the film's plot. As we will see, *Chinatown* describes a corrupt water project before it discloses Evelyn's experience of incest. Insofar that both the women's movement and SWP reshaped the boundaries between the public and private spheres, they do resonate with each other. Thinking them together, as *Chinatown* invites us to do, can help clarify the stakes of incestuous violence, though perhaps not in the ways we expect. In this chapter, I argue that incest is not just one more form of domestic violence brought to public light, but rather that the violence of incest, at least as it is portrayed in *Chinatown*, stems from the very undecidability of the public/private distinction.

"The personal is political," Carol Hanisch wrote in the title and argument of her 1969 essay, a formulation that remains an iconic slogan of second wave feminism, acknowledging the unremunerated labor women perform in the private space of the family, as well as the legal blind-spot of domestic abuse, marital rape, and other forms of violence hidden from public view. Hanisch's essay also touches

on another, perhaps more mysterious, question: Why do some women still not join the women's movement, and is it accurate to refer to these women as "apolitical"?

> I can't quite articulate it yet. I think "apolitical" women are not in the movement for very good reasons, and as long as we say "you have to think like us and live like us to join the charmed circle," we will fail. What I am trying to say is that there are things in the consciousness of "apolitical" women (I find them very political) that are as valid as any political consciousness we think we have. We should figure out why many women don't want to do action. Maybe there is something wrong with the action or something wrong with why we are doing the action or maybe the analysis of why the action is necessary is not clear enough in our minds. (5)

An instability in the supposed distinction between "apolitical" and "political" maps onto a corresponding instability in the distinction between "private and "public." This instability has a long history.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Jürgen Habermas offers an analysis of the category "private" that may help us understand the stakes of Evelyn's speechlessness in that climactic scene from *Chinatown*. With the expansion of mercantile capitalism through 18th century Europe, Habermas argues, the aristocracy and monarchies increasingly tolerated commodity exchange outside the family household economy. As a consequence, the term "private man" acquired a double-meaning – referring both to the owner of commodities and the patriarch of the conjugal family. This bifurcation in the term private also cultivated the self-understanding that would form the modern public sphere, by Habermas' account. He writes:

> The status of private man combined the role of owner of commodities with that of head of the family, that of property owner with that of 'human being'

> *per se*. The doubling of the private sphere on the higher plane of the intimate sphere (section 6) furnished the foundation for an identification of those two roles under the common title of the 'private'; ultimately, the political self-understanding of the bourgeois public originated there as well . . . To be sure, before the public sphere explicitly assumed political functions in the tension-charged field of state-society relations, the subjectivity originating in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family created, so to speak, its own public. Even before the control over the public sphere by public authority was contested and finally wrested away by the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues, there evolved under its cover a public sphere in apolitical form – the literary precursor of the public sphere operative in the political domain. It provided the training ground for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself – a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness. (1747)

An intimacy that originated in the family, Habermas argues, now belongs to the shared understanding of the modern public. Capitalist exchange brought the "private man" out into the streets as a private profiteer. A confusion between these two roles forms the central mystery of *Chinatown,* for Noah Cross, Evelyn's father, is both an "owner of commodities" and "head of household," and his exquisite villainy lies in his capacity to collapse these two notions of "private" together in the rape of his daughter. The pursuit of Evelyn's body becomes indistinguishable from his other private enterprises.

Carol Hanisch's suspicion that women outside the feminist movement have their own kind of politics, dimly understood, resonates with Habermas' formulation. Hanisch suggests that a form of consciousness her allies call "apolitical," because it is not organized or engaged publicly with other activists, may adhere to a different logic. If the public sphere is the venue for "the tension-charged field of state-society relations," as Habermas puts it, the private sphere may be the venue for a different form of engagement. The oblique suffering Evelyn Mulwray expresses throughout

Chinatown suggests the nature of such a non-public politics. Long before we learn the truth of her victimization, we see her caginess and intense spells of inarticulacy, all of which make Gittes suspicious of her motives. She is carrying a secret so explosive it would destabilize Gittes' relationship to knowledge if she ever disclosed it to him. It would radically alter the course of his investigation and threaten her carefully orchestrated plan to escape her father. This, of course, is exactly what happens when she voices the reality of incest. The disclosure sets the film's narrative on a path that leads directly to her own death. Gittes makes the mistake of thinking the police can protect Evelyn from her father. "He owns the police!" she tells him, shortly before a policeman's bullet takes her life. In the nightmare vision of *Chinatown*, nothing is really public. Noah Cross's evil is regressive, for he seeks to return all public goods and institutions and persons to a primordial state of privatization. Surreptitiously, he claims personal ownership over the southern California water supply, and over his daughter and daughter/granddaughter.

The largest public works project in the history of the United States – the California State Water Project (SWP) – was begun in 1961 under the leadership of Governor Edmund G. Brown, leading to the creation of a network of 23 dams and reservoirs, 22 pumping plants, 6 power plants, and 600 miles of canals, tunnels, and pipelines. The enormous influence corporate power exerted in state government at the time resonates in *Chinatown*'s depiction of private forces infiltrating municipal bodies, even though *Chinatown* is set in the 1930s and alludes to an earlier era of state water politics, the early 20th century "California Water Wars." Martin A. Nie

explains in his article "Build It And They Will Come: A Reexamination of the California State Water Project," how this nominally public project wildly improved the profit margins of Standard Oil, Kern County Land Company, and other large landowners.

> One reason the State Water Project was supported by the state's large landowners was it allowed them to circumvent the Bureau of Reclamation's 160-acre limitation created by the Reclamation Act of 1902 for those who use federal waters. Federal involvement would require holders of excess lands to sell these lands within ten years of first delivery and at a price that would not reflect the increase in value due to the availability of project water. The U.S Supreme Court had upheld this clause for the sole purpose of preventing land monopolization and speculation. Nonetheless, those that supported this view cited instances whereby the state had become a two-tiered agricultural society. In 1969, for example, a study of agricultural social stratification showed that California was composed of a 4.4 percent agricultural "upper class" and a 87.3 percent "mass of laborers." (78-79)

For the purposes of this essay, I want to focus here on the unstable figuration of the public/private distinction. When Standard Oil and Kern County Land Company endorse a public project because it extends their ability to capitalize on their privately owned land, while at the same time legislators promise California citizens a more efficient and equitable distribution of a public resource, it is not difficult to see the blurry distinction between public and private, cynical rhetorical maneuverers that are readily familiar, even banal, to us today. Assessing the epistemological ramifications of this dissonance, however, is a less straightforward project. Obviously, an entity can wear the label of "public" while private forces surreptitiously guide its path. What awaits further analysis, I suspect, is how this code-switching creates victims at an epistemic level. Beyond the material exploitation of small farmers in California,

or the physical abuse of a wife or daughter behind closed doors, how can we account for the violence committed by treating one understanding of the social world (a public understanding) as if it were another form of understanding (the private)? *Chinatown*, I propose, offers us such an analysis, and it uses the violence of incest to do so. Moreover, the film suggests that the violence of incestuous abuse is more or less synonymous with this interpenetration of the public and private spheres, this dissonance between them.

Throughout *Chinatown*, the integrity of the commons is always suspect. This is more than a political question. It is also an epistemological one. When an individual pretends to be a collective, when an intimacy pretends to be a generality, what is really happening is that one form of knowledge is masquerading as another. This is the dissonance that *Chinatown* explores. It may be a banal dissonance to us, familiar as we are with private interests and wealthy lobbying groups infiltrating our public institutions. What is not banal about *Chinatown*, what is original and illuminating, is its reference to incest as a particular expression of this dissonance. A father trades one epistemological position (head of family) for another (sexual profiteer). Rather than give his daughter away to an eligible bachelor on the public marriage market, the father assumes the role of that bachelor and takes his daughter for himself. I propose that Evelyn's paralysis in the face of that contradiction in terms – "My sister. My daughter" –, which she is trying to disclose for Gittes, is an expression of precisely this dissonance. Incest in the movie is neither public nor private.

What is missing from Habermas' analysis is an account of kinship. The system of marital exchange Claude Lévi-Strauss explicates in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, and which Luce Irigaray critiques in her essay "Women on the Market," describes an economy of human resources which can be understood in terms of the public/private distinction. In fact, an understanding of endogamy and exogamy would seem to demand such an accounting. Isolated clans, Lévi-Strauss argues, link up with other clans by exchanging daughters for wives, thereby developing community through the interlinking of these separate private families. Is this not analogous to creating a certain kind of public? Would not strict endogamy – or the most extreme and widespread incest – represent a renunciation of this public, of this formation of community that hinges on the movement out of one family and into another? *Chinatown* appears to treat incest in just this way, by associating it explicitly with the privatization of a public resource. Now we should turn more directly to the plot of the film, which many critics read as allegorical in its structure. I will examine the logic of this apparent allegory, and then suggest that *Chinatown* moves quite beyond allegory. Ultimately, *Chinatown* compels a post-structuralist reading, for the violence of incest in the film lies in incest's resistance to representation.

Chinatown's central allegory appears to link father/daughter incest to the illicit privatization of southern California's public water supply. Evelyn's father, Noah Cross, used to own all of the water in Los Angeles, together with his former business partner Hollis Mulwray. After the privately financed Van der Lip Dam

buckled under water pressure it could not withstand, killing over 500 people, Hollis fought to make the water public, ending his partnership with Noah to form the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, serving as chief engineer. At the same time, Hollis married Noah's daughter Evelyn, rescuing her from her father after their incestuous union conceived Evelyn's daughter/sister Katherine. At the present time of the film's narrative, the 1930s, Noah Cross schemes to privatize the city's water once again and – in a parallel plot – he seeks to reclaim Katherine for himself, continuing the cycle of incest and privatization.

Vernon Shetley, in his 1992 article "Incest and Capital in *Chinatown*," describes *Chinatown*'s narrative structure as a "double-plot," a story sewn together by "the water plot" and "the daughter plot." He suggests that one plot can be understood in terms of the other, writing:

> Noah Cross's incestuous acts and his land swindles turn on his desire to monopolize for himself the possibilities of life and fertility that water and daughters represent; in both cases, what ought to be exchanged is instead hoarded, what should circulate is instead entrapped and held back. (Shetley, 1098)

By Shetley's reading, incest in *Chinatown* privatizes a daughter who "ought to be exchanged," subjecting her to the monopoly of the father when she "should circulate" exogamously outside the home, among prospective husbands. Shetley ascribes to *Chinatown* a naïve recourse to the normativity of exchanging daughters, as if patriarchal exogamy were the unproblematic good threatened by Noah Cross's evil. I argue, however, that *Chinatown* offers a more radical critique, presenting incest as the

force that renders the familial and the extra-familial – and by allegorical extension, private commodities and public resources – indistinguishable.

I would like to consider *Chinatown*'s treatment of incest as something like Wlad Godzich's notion of "the cry" from his introduction to *The Culture of Literacy*. Godzich argues here that epistemological transparency comes at a price. What we know clearly, what functions as a "closed system of knowledge" and lends itself to representation, does so by occluding a "cry" that has no language, a "suffering" constituted by its exclusion from legibility and audibility:

> Difference-sensitive theory . . . is a philosophy of the cry, a cry constituted by difference in all of its avatars. Theory has taken upon itself to give a body of language to this cry, a cry that is linguistically disembodied, that has no access to language in the closed systems of knowledge, where it cannot state itself but can only sound and resound. The thought of difference tries to make audible all discourses rendered inaudible by Hegelianism, Statism, patriarchism, hegemonism, totalitarianism, and so on. It attempts to render visible all the language that has been erased by the imperatives of transparency, thus becoming a labor of opacification, of restoring opacity where it has been glossed over. (26)

A "labor of opacification" brought to bear on the prohibition of incest would attend closely to what this prohibition tries to make transparent: a certain distinction between nature and culture, in Lévi-Strauss' terms, an account of Oedipal drives in Freud's, or of *das Ding*, the Real as symbolic impossibility, in Lacan's discourse; and, in the case of *Chinatown* and other like-minded figurations, a sense of propriety that honors a sharp distinction between the public and private spheres. What kinds of knowledge and affect do these "imperatives of transparency" silence? To what extent is the experience of incest a "cry" "linguistically disembodied" from the all-important

clarity of its prohibition? *Chinatown* responds to this question by situating an incest survivor, Evelyn Mulwray, within a social order that depends on her voicelessness for its epistemological clarity.

Evelyn finds herself in the unspeakable position of having given birth to her own sister, a secret we do not learn until the end of the film, but the meaning of its unspeakability – the progeneration of lateral kin, the line of descent pointing backwards to one's family of origin, to endogamy – invokes an economic reading of the incest taboo that has a long and contentious history and provides a rich subtext to J.J. Gittes' investigation of financial intrigue. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Claude Lévi-Strauss characterizes a daughter as a gift between men, an almost empty coefficient whose sole purpose is to facilitate a system of exchanges between clans, making sociality – the transition from nature to culture – manifest. The purpose of the incest taboo then is not to protect children from harm – nor to foster a healthy family life – but to set the system of exchanges in motion. Lévi-Strauss writes:

> Speaking objectively, a woman, like the moiety from which she derives her civil status, has no specific or individual characteristics – totemic ancestor, or the origin of the blood in her veins – which makes her unfit for commerce with men bearing the same name. The sole reason is that she is *same* whereas she must (and therefore can) become *other*. Once she becomes *other* (by her allocation to men of the opposite moiety), she therefore becomes liable to play the same role, vis-à-vis the men of her own moiety, as she originally played to the men of the opposite moiety . . . All that is necessary on either side is the *sign of otherness*, which is the outcome of a certain position in a structure, and not of any innate characteristic. (114)

Feminist critics have perceived how this formulation divests women of any identity whatsoever, rendering them anonymous cogs in the wheels of patriarchy. According to Luce Irigaray, Lévi-Strauss's account of heteronormative marriage laws is ironically homosocial, since only men are assigning value to anything – and by terms which could not possibly have anything to do with women as such:

> It is thus not as 'women' that they are exchanged, but as women reduced to some common feature – their current price in gold, or phalluses – and of which they would represent a plus or minus quality. Not a plus or a minus of feminine qualities, obviously. (175-176)

Chinatown fills a bizarre lacuna in this discourse, for neither Lévi-Strauss nor Irigaray – nor most scholars of the structural function of the incest taboo, be they anthropologists, psychoanalysts, or feminists – address actual incest. They focus on the taboo, not the transgression.[20] The feminist clinicians and activists who did break

[20] I would be remiss not to acknowledge some important exceptions to this tendency, scholars who do draw connections between actual incest and the regulative function of the incest taboo – though I would insist that work of this sort (at least the work I am aware of) is engaged in different kinds of inquiries than my own. Anna Meigs and Kathleen Barlow, for example, in their 2002 article "Beyond the Taboo: Imagining Incest," argue that "Structuralist discussions, in failing to consider the importance of the incest taboo for protecting relationships based on primary attachment and trust, as between parents and children, neglect the psychological consequences of incest." (40) While I do not deny the importance of "primary attachment and trust," my research asks how the broader culture's investment in the incest taboo – for structuralist reasons – contributes to the suffering of victims. I ask how the regulative function of the taboo creates situations wherein the suffering of victims is deemed less important than the scandal of a social transgression. In the texts I examine, a compulsory dissociation from one's own suffering seems – in a paradoxical way – to define the suffering itself.

John Borneman, in his 2012 article "Incest, the Child, and the Despotic Father," takes a different tack, writing:

> As real incest is narrowed and subsumed into the discourse of child sexual abuse, it has become part of an imaginary complex that includes the figures of the child, adult male relatives, and the pedophile. While contemporary research in many fields confirms that most children subject to coercive intimate acts by close relatives suffer long-term psychological harm, the phenomenon of such sex is also subject to phantasmic investments that exaggerate the frequency and severity of the threat to society. (181)

the silence on incest in the 1970s and '80s – Judith Lewis Herman and Diana Russell, for example – tended to elide the structural efficacy of the taboo, focusing instead on incest as personal injury with little to distinguish it from extra-familial child abuse, patriarchal insofar that men disproportionately commit the crime but not patriarchal in the constitutive sense Irigaray ascribes to the taboo.[21] My broader project aims to bring these two sides of the conversation closer together, so that a more rigorous account of incestuous victimization can emerge. I have found that certain early 1970s texts – like *Chinatown*, *The Bluest Eye*, and Anne Sexton's poetry – already do much of this work.

Borneman does relate actual incest to the regulative function of the incest taboo, but in his case it is to suggest – following the insights of Foucault – that the function of the incest taboo today has less to do with kinship structures than with the broader topic of child sexual abuse. Thus, his argument presents a direct challenge to my own, since I want to distinguish incest from extra-familial child abuse, and he – in many respects – wants to do the opposite. Since his evidence is based on anthropological research and mine is based on literary analysis, responding to all his claims is beyond the scope of this chapter and also exceeds my training. I would just suggest, though, that if "the erosion of the incest taboo" (181) is a real phenomenon, I am sure Borneman would agree that it is a slow one, not bound to happen overnight. While it still carries force as a regulator of kinship structures, the old-fashioned incest taboo is worth examining as a potential source of opaque suffering – and at least in the world of *Chinatown* and other imaginative texts, this is certainly the case, as I hope this chapter will demonstrate.

[21] As a fairly representative example of Herman's approach to the topic of father/daughter incestuous abuse, I offer the following excerpt from her important 1981 text *Father/Daughter Incest*, a work I applaud and am indebted to – even as I try to supplement its critical scope in this chapter:

> We have found that a frankly feminist perspective offers the best explanation of the existing data. Without an understanding of male supremacy and female oppression, it is impossible to explain why the vast majority of incest perpetrators (uncles, older brothers, stepfathers, and fathers) are male, and why the majority of victims (nieces, younger sisters, and daughters) are female. Without a feminist analysis, one is at a loss to explain why the reality of incest was for so long suppressed by supposedly responsible professional investigators, why public discussion of the subject awaited the women's liberation movement, or why the recent apologists for incest have been popular men's magazines and the closely allied, all-male Institute for Sex Research. (3)

When a woman claiming to be Evelyn Mulwray hires Gittes to confirm that her husband Hollis (Darrell Zwerling) is having an extramarital affair, Gittes soon learns that he has been set up. The woman who hired him was not Evelyn but her imposter Ida Sessions (Diane Ladd), and while Gittes does photograph Hollis embracing a younger woman, the more compelling findings of his investigation point not to adultery but to corruption in the water department. Los Angeles is supposed to be in a drought, but torrents of water keep flooding out of storm drains at discrete moments, wherever Gittes follows Hollis. When the real Evelyn Mulwray sues Gittes for spying on her husband and, shortly thereafter, Hollis shows up dead in a reservoir, Gittes commits himself to uncovering the ulterior motives that thrust this investigation upon him.

Gittes' detective work eventually leads him to the discovery that a syndicate of wealthy investors, led by Noah Cross, have infiltrated the water department in order to manufacture a drought, drying land in the Northwest Valley so that they can buy it up cheaply – under the names of deceased nursing home residents –, then incorporate the valley into the City of Los Angeles, irrigate it with the water they have hoarded, and sell the newly plush land at an enormous profit. This explains the water run-offs Gittes has observed and perhaps even the murder of Hollis Mulwray, but it does not explain Evelyn Mulwray's cagey behavior, her nervousness and broken speech, nor does it explain the young girl she is protecting – Katherine Cross – whom she claims is her sister. Gittes has no inkling of the family violence in Evelyn's past, and he treats her anxious behavior as evidence of malice or complicity

in the water department corruption. He eventually concludes that Evelyn must have murdered Hollis. Incest is nowhere on his mind, nor can he imagine that Evelyn might be acting on noble motives.

Evelyn Mulwray floats through the first twenty minutes of *Chinatown* as a disembodied signifier. Critics overlook the force of her absence in these scenes, the strange fact that her name is driving the plot even though her person has not yet appeared. Ventriloquized by her imposter Ida Sessions, Evelyn's name leads J.J. Gittes to the twilight regions where the public and the private meet, where the categorical sovereignty of each sphere falters. As a name, "Evelyn Mulwray" becomes synonymous with this categorical instability. What we witness throughout *Chinatown* is the subject formation of an incest survivor, Evelyn Mulwray's gradual entrance into a discourse that is designed to keep her out.

What is crucial to observe, in close-reading the first twenty minutes of *Chinatown*, is that Gittes will soon be held liable for what he is doing, and that liability will set the rest of the plot – Gittes' investigation proper – in motion. The transgression for which Gittes will be charged – chastised by a mortgage banker at the barber shop, sued by Evelyn Mulwray – is the crime of invading, of publicizing, Hollis Mulwray's private life. But before Gittes recognizes his transgression, he perceives it rather as a triumph of publicity. When his photographs of Hollis embracing a younger woman appear on the front page of the newspaper, he basks in newfound celebrity at the local barbershop. "When you get so much publicity," Barney the barber says, lathering Gittes' face with shaving cream, "you gotta get

blasé about it. Face it, Jake, you're practically a movie star." Moments later, however, Gittes' celebrity earns him remonstrations from the mortgage banker seated next to him. As the camera zooms in on Gittes' self-satisfied grin, we hear a voice off-camera muttering obliquely, "Fool's names and fool's faces." Gittes immediately detects a judgement directed at him.

> "What's that, pal?" Gittes asks.
>
> "Nothing," the man says. "You've got a hell of a way to make a living."
>
> "Oh yeah, and what do you do to make ends meet?"
>
> "First National Bank. Mortgage Department."
>
> "Tell me," Gittes says, "Did you foreclose on many families this week?"
>
> "We don't publish a record in the paper," the banker retorts, "I can tell you that."
>
> "Neither do I," Gittes says.
>
> "No, you have your press agent do it for you."

Gittes and the banker spar over the ethical boundaries of the private, whether it is worse to invade a family's privacy with a camera or take their home away from them when they cannot pay their mortgage. Notice how contentious the sanctity of the public/private divide becomes in this scene. Gittes does not disagree with the principle the banker espouses – that one should not publicize salacious details of other people's private lives. Rather, Gittes' rage stems from a feeling of being falsely

accused of this transgression. He takes such offense the exchange almost leads to physical violence. Jake jumps up from his barber chair and approaches the man.

> Who is this bimbo, Barney? Is he a regular customer or what? Listen Pal, I make an honest living. People only come to me when they're in a desperate situation. I help them out. I don't kick families out of their houses like you bums down at the mortgage department do. Ugh? Maybe you'd like to step down out of the barber chair, we can go outside and discuss it. What do you think? I don't know how that thing got in the newspaper. It was so quick I didn't even know it myself.

Gittes' defensiveness here is profound, and at odds with the joy he took in the publicity just a few moments before. It suggests that the transgression at issue – a figuration of incest, in my reading – is both pleasurable and intensely shameful. Even more curious is the rapidity with which Barney is able to cheer Gittes up again, and the strategy he employs to do this – telling Gittes a joke on the sexual habits of Chinese men.

Barney's joke, largely overlooked in the critical literature on *Chinatown*, is hugely important to understanding the film's narrative logic, for it marks Evelyn Mulwray's first appearance in *Chinatown*, her entrance into a diegetic space that had all along been responding only to her name. The joke is told twice, first introduced by Barney in the barbershop, then retold by Gittes, with tremendous exuberance, to his associates Duffy and Walsh, as the real Evelyn Mulwray quietly enters his office and stands behind Gittes, unbeknownst to him.

The joke has all the appearance of a non-sequitur, unless one pauses to consider its careful placement in the film and the emphasis it is given. "A guy gets tired of screwing his wife," Barney says, "so his friend says, 'Why don't you do it

like the Chinese do.'" The character in the joke takes his friend's advice, and proceeds to make love to his wife the way "the Chinese do," interrupting the sex again and again, taking breaks to "smoke a cigarette" or "read *Life Magazine*." The punchline to the joke comes with the wife's reaction: "Hey, what's the matter with you? You're screwing just like a Chinaman!" A joke on cultural difference in the most intimate recess of the domestic sphere – the conjugal bed – has the strange effect in *Chinatown* of resolving Gittes' altercation with the mortgage banker at the barbershop and also conjuring Evelyn Mulwray into the film's visual frame for the first time. It serves as a pivot in the film's plot, and also as a kind of cipher, a thematic touchstone that requires considerable untangling to make any sense of. But why? To answer this question, one must consider the transgressive nature of Gittes' investigation – his invasion of Hollis Mulwray's privacy – in light of the orientalism that runs through the film. *Chinatown* resorts to orientalism, I argue, to convey the illegibility of incest, which in this movie is no different than those shadow regions where the public/private distinction breaks down.

The title of *Chinatown* refers to Gittes' old beat as a police officer. The district attorney in Chinatown told the cops to "do as little as possible," since they were ill-equipped to read Chinese cultural cues and were likely to do more harm than good if they intervened in neighborhood conflicts. "You can't always tell what's going on," Gittes tells Evelyn late in the film, as they lie in bed together after sex, "Like with you." Gittes, we learn, failed to follow the DA's advice. "I was trying to keep someone from being hurt," he explains to her, "I ended up making sure that she

was hurt." Gittes' fatal misreading of an inscrutable cultural code foreshadows his unwitting part in Evelyn's death at the end of the film.[22] His hapless effort to indict Noah Cross and help Evelyn escape Los Angeles only ends up bringing father and daughter together in a final shoot-out with the police in – of all places – Chinatown. As Gittes stares at Evelyn's dead body, he whispers the DA's old advice: "as little as possible."

The repetition of the phrase "as little as possible" draws the connection between the illegibility of incest and the illegibility of cultural otherness, the dangers of intervening in matters one does not know how to read. Incest is a kind of language in *Chinatown*, or – more precisely – it represents the breakdown of a language Gittes does know how to read, an epistemology that serves him well in his detective work, so long as he does not trespass its outer limits. Gittes understands what is private and what is public under normal conditions. He makes his living spying on adulterous spouses, peering through their windows. What he does not understand is a

[22] Ewa Mazierska, in her study *Roman Polanski: The Cinema of a Cultural Traveler*, points out the role of repetition in *Chinatown*, how tragic events in the film are anticipated by tragedies in the past. This broad pattern of doubling and counter-pointing speaks to my point that the film doubles the enigma of incest onto an enigmatic kind of orientalism. Mazierska writes:

> Everything of importance that happens here is forecast either through a similar event that took place in different circumstances or by a material sign. An example of the first type of prognosis is Gittes' disappointing career as a policeman in Chinatown where he tried to save a woman but instead his assistance injured her, possibly fatally. The same happens to Evelyn, who also dies in Chinatown as a result of Gittes' misguided attempt to help her. Her death is announced by the sound of a car's horn, activated by her head hitting the steering wheel. She does it twice in the film, the first time serves as a premonition of the future, fatal event. Evelyn dies from a bullet in the head which penetrates her eye, the eye that has a birth defect – a flaw in the iris. (177)

phenomenon that render the public/private distinction moot and meaningless. He does not understand incest.

Chinese characters populate the film in minor roles – as gardeners, maids, and butlers on the Mulwray estate. While not central to the film's plot, these characters are crucial to the film's mood, forming a background of incomprehensibility to the confident investigation Gittes is carrying out. For example, Gittes mishears Evelyn's gardener early in the film, mistaking "grass" for "glass" in the statement "saltwater bad for grass." Like Barney's joke, this is more than a non-sequitur. The saltwater fountain in Evelyn's garden turns out to be the place where Noah Cross murdered Hollis Mulwray. The evidence for the crime is a pair of Cross' glasses. The truth Gittes is looking for, again and again, lies in these grey areas between codes. "Glass" is not the word the gardener meant to say, but glass is what Gittes glimpses in the fountain right after mishearing the man. A similar role is played by the film's Mexican characters, including the young boy Gittes see Hollis conversing with in the dry bedrock of the L.A. river. That this bone-dry river sometimes gushes with water is a strange fact known to this boy. There is no drought, Gittes gradually learns, only a covert effort to privatize, hoard, and conceal the city's water. *Chinatown* dramatizes this mystery through cultural and language barriers, emphasizing that what is at stake in the film is much more than water access. At stake is the integrity of knowledge. Gittes' investigation leads to tragedy not because he has the wrong facts, but because he has the wrong epistemology. He cannot see a world that defies

both the public and private spheres, that collapses them together, but this is the world that Noah Cross perpetrates and Evelyn Mulwray suffers.

Barney's joke about Chinese sex soothes the anxiety Gittes feels over his investigation, over the accusations the mortgage banker has just leveled against him. He does not want to be guilty of publicizing Hollis Mulwray's private affairs. He recognizes the shame in that transgression, and yet, just moments earlier, he took immense pleasure in the publicity this transgression generated for him. "Publicity" is a word oft-repeated in *Chinatown*. Evelyn Mulwray threatens Gittes with publicity in the very next scene. "I see you like publicity, Mr. Gittes," she says, "Well, you're going to get it." Her pithy formulation of the term echoes the profound ambivalence Gittes expresses in the barbershop. Publicity is both shameful and pleasurable. Only the irony and levity of a joke, one that explores the incommensurability of cultural difference, can lead Gittes out of this paradoxical union of shame and pleasure.

Watching Nicholson's physical performance in these scenes, one senses ambivalence gripping Gittes like a carnal force. He nearly lunges for the mortgage banker's throat before Barney leads him back to his chair. Retelling the joke back at his office, Gittes stomps his feet and bends over in a fit of hysterics. In a film that usually privileges Gittes' optical viewpoint, framing shots close to, if not identical with, his line of vision, it is remarkable that Evelyn Mulwray appears for the first time in the film behind Gittes, outside his optical command. She has arrived to take legal action against him for the very transgression Barney's joke had served to soften. Moreover, Gittes has just shamed himself before her, telling a joke we know he

considers inappropriate for women's ears, since he just sent his secretary Sophie (Nanu Hinds) out of the room before telling it.

"Mr. Gittes," Evelyn says

"Yes," Jake says

"Do you know me?"

"Well, uh – I think I would have remembered."

The camera zooms in slowly on Evelyn, our first close-up of her. Her face is almost ghostly pale.

"Have we ever met?"

The camera cuts to a close-up of Gittes, bemused and baffled.

"Well, no," he says.

"Never?"

"Never."

"That's what I thought," she says, "You see, I'm Mrs. Evelyn Mulwray. You know, Mr. Mulwray's wife."

"Not, uh, *that* Mulwray," Gittes says, gesturing towards the newspaper he has been holding in his hand throughout his telling of the joke.

"Yes, Mr. Gittes, *that* Mulwray. And since you agree with me that we've never met before, you must also agree with me that I've never hired you to do

anything, certainly not to spy on my husband. I see you like publicity, Mr. Gittes. Well, you're going to get it."

The absence of Evelyn Mulwray up to this moment in the film is crucial to understanding *Chinatown*'s figuration of incest survivorship. At stake in the transgression of incest is not simply an individual – the single victim – but an entire social order, a mode of knowledge premised on a sharp distinction between the familial and the extra-familial, between the private and the public. Such a figuration does not diminish Evelyn's individual suffering, of course, but rather amplifies it. Like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and the speakers in Anne Sexton's poems, Evelyn suffers a violence that destabilizes anyone who comes close to it. We see her suffering refracted through Gittes' confusion and shame, his own sense of having violated a sacred boundary between the public and the private. Understanding the position of the individual – as opposed to the broader culture – in accounts of incestuous violence is crucial also to periodizing the reception of incest in public discourse.

In her study *Everybody's Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* (2009), Gillian Harkins argues that women's incest narratives of the 1980s and 90s were instrumentalized by the cultural coercions of neoliberalism, their popularity depending on discourses of self-esteem, individualism, and a vague metaphoric of trauma that drew misleading equivalencies between incest and other traumatizing events, holding out the promise of individual redemption through the resolution of post-traumatic stress. Incest became a highly visible topic on the

daytime talk-show circuit – *Oprah*, *Dr. Phil*, etc. – but its articulation became homogenized, lacking the bite of earlier iterations, which are the focus of my research. Rather than call a whole social order into question, the reception of these later narratives – and it is important to distinguish reception from the narratives themselves – focused apolitically on the plight of individuals.

In the following excerpt, Harkins identifies early articulations of incest survivorship in the 1970s as a kind of missed opportunity, a potentially radical social formation later co-opted by neoliberal discourses of individual empowerment:

> The political mobilization of incest survivors had seemed potentially promising. As a 'class' without clear determining interests, survivors seemed poised to translate a key structure of feeling imminent in the radicalisms of the 1970s. They were not determined by any preestablished social processes or political analytic; Marxist accounts of historical materialism, liberal accounts of rights-bearing individuals, even emergent feminist accounts of sexual or domestic violence did not fully capture the potential radicalism of incest survivor articulation. But this imminent articulation was rapidly absorbed into the hegemonic processes of the 1980s. The so-called survivor movement never fully consolidated as a social formation . . . As was the case with other potentially radicalizing moments of the 1970s, over the course of the 1980s multiculturalism and a more discursive than materialist identity politics absorbed much of the energy of these incipient struggles.
>
> The structure of feeling that became incest survivorship was rapidly taken up and incorporated in new formations of the spectacle which bolstered emerging federal and nongovernmental administrations of the private, the aesthetic, and the natural. As the 1970s turned to the 1980s, conservative and liberal agendas were joined in a new mode of governmentality administering cultural technologies of the self. Neither a radically democratic nor a socially redistributive project, cultural logics of 'empowerment' focused on improving the 'self-esteem' of target populations in order to enhance their sense of agency. Across the 1980s, self-esteem movements made the dismantling of the welfare state seem like social justice. (76)

Harkin's analysis is useful to my interpretation of *Chinatown*, a 1970s text that does not, in my view, depict incest survivorship as a project of individual self-

empowerment. Rather, *Chinatown* may convey what Harkins calls "a structure of feeling imminent in the radicalisms of the 1970s," a mode of affect I would tentatively characterize as the obverse of the notion of individual autonomy Harkins perceives in the neo-liberal reception of incest narratives in the 1980s and '90s. In refracting normative understandings of the public and private, Evelyn Mulwray's experience of incest compels a radical redefinition of the individual and the social that I am still struggling to articulate.

Long before Gittes discovers what her father did to her, he suspects Evelyn of treachery. She is the pseudo-*femme fatale*, and her complicity with the incest taboo – her compulsion to conceal from Gittes her relationship with her father – convinces him that she must be guilty of something. He only gets the truth out of her – very late in the film – by slapping her repeatedly in the face, in between her screeching, tormented assertions of two contradictory positions in a kinship structure, as she tries to explain to him who Katherine Cross is: "She's my daughter" (slap) "She's my sister" (slap) "She's my daughter" (slap) "She's my sister" (slap). Evelyn embodies the toxic non-identity Luce Irigaray perceives in the system of reciprocal male exchanges governed by the incest taboo. But quite beyond anything Irigaray imagines, Evelyn also embodies the foreclosure of this system of exchanges. If the incest taboo already greases the wheels of patriarchy, what manner of exploitation emerges when these wheels are brought to a screeching halt? *Chinatown*'s most radical gesture is to imagine what happens when a father violates patriarchy in order

to assume a level of power that exceeds and defies patriarchy's normative machinations.

When Gittes asks Evelyn Mulwray her maiden name, her eyes glaze over and she can barely utter the "C" in "Cross." She repeats the same tic in a later scene, tripping over the "F" in "father," for these words do not refer to the domain they are supposed to refer to, what Gittes thinks they refer to. "Cross" is not simply her maiden name. It is also the name of the man whose child she bore. Similarly, the word "Father" deflects its referent, for in Evelyn's situation it denotes not only the departure point in a Lévi-Straussian system of reciprocal exchange – the man who should have given her away – but also its end-point, the short-circuiting of this exchange, the private made public, father made sexual partner.

Vernon Shetley's structuralist reading of *Chinatown* draws a compelling correlation between incest and privatization, a fruitful departure point for the post-structuralist analysis I am attempting here. Rather than read incest as an allegory for the rape of a public good and a natural resource, I read it as a phenomenon that has no place in the epistemological system *Chinatown* sets forth. Incest is the x-factor constitutively excluded from J.J. Gittes' horizon of imagining. I call it "refractory incest" because *Chinatown* deflects all attempts to interrogate it directly. At times, it is the cinematography that refracts our view of incest, cutting away from characters at key moments, as when Hollis seems on the verge of groping his stepdaughter Katherine, leaving the audience unsure if paternal affection has given way to sexual pursuit. At other moments, it is the performances – especially Faye Dunaway's

portrayal of Evelyn Mulwray – that do this work. Evelyn's crisp aristocratic diction devolves into stammers and sighs whenever Gittes raises the topic of her father. We witness the dismemberment of language whenever we are in proximity of incest.

An allegory is indeed at work in *Chinatown*, but not one that simply tells us what incest means. Rather, *Chinatown*'s "double-plot" is itself an instrument of refraction, allowing the film to discuss incest in terms of a water crisis and a water crisis in terms of incest, switching between "the water plot" and "the daughter plot" in such a way that incest becomes an ever-deferred object of representation, always other than itself – only traceable in its own effacement[23]. The camera cuts away, the story cuts away, Evelyn's speech falters, and the viewer is left with a sense that the film is always changing the subject. *Chinatown* never depicts incest. Rather, the violence it depicts is incest's resistance to representation.

In other words, *Chinatown* is more engaged with the prohibition of incest than with incest itself. Indeed -- like *The Bluest Eye* – it provides a forceful account of the violence wrought by the incest taboo, if the incest taboo is understood as a taboo on speech and representation and constitutive of the violence of incest. At the end of the film, we discover that incest has happened. But the entire film conveys the violence

[23] I invoke Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with this phrasing. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak refers to a "trace structure (effacement in disclosure)" (2207) to imagine how the subaltern may attain hegemony, how the subaltern may *speak* without speaking the oppressor's language. This poetics of resistance describes the victim as something other than an essentialized subject. My account of incestuous victimization in *Chinatown* attempts something similar, though referring more often to the work of Wlad Godzich.

of a prohibition that prevents incest from coming to light. *Chinatown*'s allegorical structure – its "double-plot" – is the shape this prohibition assumes.

Chinatown does not define the incest taboo simply as a commandment not to have sex with a family member. Rather, the prohibition of incest manifests in *Chinatown* as an injunction that the public and private spheres be kept separate. The taboo enforces a sharp distinction between the commons and the family and – in a curious slippage – between judicious public service and entrepreneurial bravado.[24] In my reading, the prohibition of incest appears wherever the boundary between the public and private spheres is threatened. When Northwest Valley shepherds stage a protest at a water department meeting, for example, and accuse Hollis Mulwray of taking pay-offs, of allowing private forces to infect the halls of public service, they are physically suppressed. When Gittes photographs a private moment of familial affection – an embrace between Hollis and Katherine – and the photographs shows up on the front page of the newspaper, he is reprimanded by the mortgage banker at the barbershop: "You've got a hell of a way to make a living." Such examples of physical and verbal violence, perhaps banal in and of themselves, accrue into a pattern. *Chinatown*'s cast of characters is split between the public and private spheres – the bespectacled, persnickety bureaucrats at the hall of records and the water department on the one hand; the suave bankers, dusty shepherds, and devious land

[24] Again, Jürgen Habermas is a useful reference here. Tracing this instability in the term "private" to the formation of the modern bourgeois public sphere in 18th century Europe, he writes: "To the degree to which commodity exchange burst out of the confines of the household economy, the sphere of the conjugal family became differentiated from the sphere of social reproduction." (1747)

syndicate on the other –, all of whom remain composed so long as their proper roles are preserved, so long as private interests (familial or entrepreneurial) are not ascribed to public service, or vice versa. Gittes is a constant threat to this composure, for by profession he flouts the boundary between the public and private spheres, peering into the homes of the adulterous, barging into municipal offices, neither a police officer nor a private citizen. Straddling this liminal space, Gittes is able to detect some vague corruption in the water department, even as literal incest eludes his imagination.

Chinatown builds an allegory that maps the private sphere onto the family of origin and the public sphere onto the family of marriage only to render the allegory meaningless in the face of incest – the force that blurs all these distinctions together. Evelyn is not just a daughter in one facet of her life and a sexual partner in another. She is both, at one and the same time, and with respect to the same man, Noah Cross. Likewise, Katherine is both a daughter and sister with respect to the same woman, Evelyn.

To ground this, perhaps, abstruse interpretation in more specific formal elements of *Chinatown*, I will now return to the beginning of the film and close-read the sequence of scenes that build up to Evelyn Mulwray's first appearance as a visible character. Close-reading these scenes is particularly useful because it allows us to see how *Chinatown* engages the suffering of incest even without the physical presence of the incest survivor. Indeed, Evelyn's absence from these scenes is constitutive of the

suffering *Chinatown* depicts. We witness a world that cannot abide the truth of her suffering, a world that must efface her from its purview.

At the outset of his investigation, Gittes follows Hollis Mulwray to city hall, where Mayor Bagby (Roy Roberts) voices an impassioned – but circular – plea for funds to build the Alto Vallejo dam and reservoir, a proposed solution to the drought. The opening wide angle shot of the hall sets the template for *Chinatown*'s representation of the public sphere. In the foreground, an anonymous councilman reads a comic strip, ignoring and dwarfing Bagby, who stands in the distant background of the frame. Bagby's amplified voice dissipates into a shapeless echo, bouncing off the high walls of the chamber. Visually and sonically, he is a diminutive figure, all bluster, his argument for the construction project amounting to an insistence that deserts are dry and water is wet: "We live on the edge of a desert! Los Angeles is a desert community." A giant photograph of F.D.R hangs in the far-right corner of the shot, while at a middle-distance Hollis Mulwray sits with his back turned to Bagby, his head bent down, two tense fingers pressed against his temple. The color scheme is decidedly muted – beige, brown, grey, and pea-green, making the purples and yellows of the foregrounded comic strip the most exciting splash of color in the frame. Throughout *Chinatown*, the public sphere is associated with tedium, inefficiency, and an overriding diffuseness: aspiring to serve everybody, pretending to hide nothing, municipal bodies speak to no one. Bagby's voice, collapsing under the weight of its own capaciousness, is a perfect figure for this

pattern, filling the hall so entirely it lands nowhere in particular. The commons are impersonal.

The camera cuts to a close-up of Gittes yawning, so bored is he with the proceedings. He turns his head to find two shepherds seated next to him, dressed in sun hats, suspenders, and matching white work shirts. These men are thoroughly engaged in Bagby's speech, their eyes fixated on him. Gittes, on the other hand, picks up a copy of *Racing Record* to read about Seabiscuit, "idol of racing fans." The difference between Gittes and the shepherds at this moment reflects the scene's gradual progression from boredom to outrage. When Hollis takes the stage, voicing his objection to the construction project, Gittes stirs to attention. "In case you've forgotten, gentlemen," Hollis says, "over 500 lives were lost when the Van der Lip Dam gave way . . . And now you propose yet another dirt-banked terminus dam with slopes of 2 ½ to 1, 112 feet high, and a 12,000-acre water surface. Well, it won't hold. I won't build it. It's that simple. I'm not going to make the same mistake twice." As soon as Hollis finishes his speech, whistles and boos fill the chamber, as shepherds from the Northwest Valley unleash their sheep down the center aisle. Beneath these tedious proceedings, we realize, a demonstration had all along been brewing.

With the eruption of protest, the visual and sonic scheme shifts. The demonstrators' voices are crisp and cutting – not diffused by Bagby and Mulwray's microphone. Gittes breaks into laughter, as the camera dips down to the level of the sheep. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" a councilman shouts, hammering

his gavel, "Get those goddamned things out of here!" A bailiff restrains one shepherd, who addresses Mulwray directly: "Where should I take them? You don't have an answer for that so quick, do you? You steal water from the valley, ruin the grazing, starve the livestock. Who's paying you to do that, Mr. Mulwray? That's what I want to know!"

The prohibition of incest, I contend, is the violence at work in this scene, the force that brings a sleepy public meeting to mayhem. It may sound strange to attach the incest taboo to a scene involving neither family nor sexuality, but we only need to recall *Chinatown*'s peculiar narrative logic, explicated at the outset of this chapter, to understand how this works. The Van der Lip Dam disaster Hollis invokes ended his professional partnership with Noah Cross, transferring their privately-owned water to public stewardship with the creation of the Department of Water and Power. But the disaster also coincided – temporally and metaphorically – with Noah's impregnation of Evelyn, the incestuous birth of Katherine Cross, and Hollis' marriage to Evelyn. The tragedy marks Evelyn's escape from her father just as her father sought to entrap her within the orbit of her family of origin. To put it crudely, Evelyn went from being a private commodity (a daughter) to a public resource (a wife). What is more, *Chinatown* makes it undecidable at various points whether Hollis and Noah are arguing over water or over Evelyn and Katherine. As Vernon Shetley notes, the two plots are often indistinguishable. [25]

[25] Shetley writes:

> This refusal to distinguish between water and daughter in Noah Cross's motivation for murder is only one of several moments in the film when these two plot strands intersect in a way that

What the two plots have in common, unmistakably, however, is a vision of a world divided between public and private zones. This is *Chinatown*'s manifest epistemology and the ethical bedrock of many of its characters. What counts as knowledge and clarity, as a navigable and respectable social path, is a world where public and private do not mix. Incest, I contend, is the force that mixes the public and private together or effaces the distinction entirely, transforming Evelyn – and the city's water – into an object of exploitation that is neither a private commodity nor a public resource, neither a daughter nor a wife, but something perversely in excess or defiance of these categories. The film leaves this "something else" undefinable, only traceable in its characters' violent reaction to the transgression. This is why Godzich's notion of "the cry" is such a useful way of approaching incest in *Chinatown*. The prohibition flares up in many scenes, but incest itself remains a "linguistically disembodied" phenomenon.

What we witness in the city hall scene is a narrative world that cannot abide the insinuation that the public and the private may blur together or lack categorical sovereignty. It is not just that the protestors object to the privatization of a public

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blurs the distinction between the two. Lunching with Jake, Cross substitutes girl for water when asked about his argument with Hollis. We know, retrospectively, that the argument was about water; Jake's "associate" Walsh overhears the words "apple core," a mistake for "Albacore," the name of the club through which the land syndicate is operating. Yet Cross tells Jake instead that it involved "the girl." Jake asks Evelyn Mulwray at one point whether the falling out that occurred between her father and her husband was over her or over the water, to which she replies, too hastily and insistently to be convincing, that it was over the water. And at the end of the film, when Jake questions him about his motives for murder and fraud, Cross's answer seems oddly to entangle the two strands of the plot. "The future, Mr. Gittes, the future!" he replies, but immediately he adds "Now where's the girl?", as if the daughter/granddaughter were an element of the "future" that has ostensibly motivated his real estate schemes. The film suggests a relationship of substitution, and thus of similarity between the objects of the two plots." (1097-1098)

resource – a scenario that might admit a more straightforward Marxist reading. Rather, the protestors themselves do not understand what they are protesting. The Alto Vallejo Dam Mayor Bagby and the shepherds so desperately want the city to build, we later learn, only appears to be a public project. If built, the Alto Vallejo would in fact be an instrument of privatization, enabling Noah Cross and his cabal of investors to irrigate the land they illegally purchased, the land they parched by diverting the city's water supply and manufacturing a pseudo-drought. In refusing to build the dam, Hollis Mulwray appears to the shepherds to be an agent of privatization, when he is in fact standing against Noah Cross's privatization scheme and protecting public safety. But even this is uncertain. Dead within the first 30 minutes of the film and with precious few lines of dialogue, Hollis' role in the water department remains mysterious, as does his relationship with his stepdaughter Katherine. Is he simply Katherine's protector – as many critics presume – or is he involved in an incestuous romance with her? The ambiguous embrace they share, photographed by Gittes and published in the newspaper, can be read as either paternal or erotic.

That these questions remain insoluble – even after multiple viewings of *Chinatown* – speaks to the illegibility, the "cry," lurking behind the film's manifest allegorical structure. A purely structuralist reading of *Chinatown* – like the one Vernon Shetley performs – can make a certain amount of sense of the relationship between privatization and sexual exploitation. A post-structuralistist reading – the

one I am attempting – can account for the irreducible registers of suffering *Chinatown* invites us to consider.

The camera cuts to a wide angle shot of a dry riverbed, the remnants of the L.A. River. In the distance, a black car drives across what looks like a desert, kicking up dust. An unmelodic tapping of piano notes – high, spare, in a minor key – descend upon the scene, followed by an ominous strum of harp strings as the camera pans to the right, revealing the perspective we have been inhabiting to be that of Jake Gittes, framed in a side-angle close-up.[26] Gittes walks backwards a few steps, cautiously, then lifts his binoculars to his eyes. Through twin lenses, we see Hollis Mulwray walking unsteadily and uncertainly, in search of something. He changes directions,

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[26] Dana Polan, in his essay "*Chinatown*: Politics as Perspective, Perspective as Politics," notes the near omni-presence of J.J. Gittes' optical perspective throughout *Chinatown*, while also addressing the ways in which Gittes' perspective is disrupted, complicated, or figured as unreliable. He pays particular attention to the scene I describe here – of Hollis in the dry bed of the L.A. River – in the following passage:

> For much of the film, Gittes looks out onto various realities and fits their individual meanings together into a larger logic: as he does so, the camera frequently takes up a position just alongside him (or just over his shoulder) as if to filter the knowledge Gittes is receiving and deliver it to the spectator at the same time. Paradigmatic of the film's marrying of the detective's perspective with that of the spectator is the first shot that follows when Gittes decides to take on the assignment of following (the fake) Mrs. Mulwray's husband and goes out into the field. The shot begins with a focus on Mulwray (Darrell Zwerling) out in the dry beds of Los Angeles and then the camera pulls back to reveal Gittes spying on him and settles on a position just behind Gittes's shoulder as if it were his partner in the uncovering of knowledge . . . . In such a shot, the viewer participates along with the detective in the additive process by which knowledge builds up, by application of inductive reasoning, into an ever more convincing and globalizing narrative. At the same time, however, it should be noted that this kind of recurrent shot – in which the spectator sees both Gittes looking *and* the reality he is looking at – also sets up the possibility of a disjunction between Gittes' perspective and the spectator's: as much as the reality he studies, Gittes becomes an object of study. This becomes significant for a narrative that is not only about what Gittes understands but also about what is beyond his understanding. The spectator is both with and beyond Gittes. (111)

Polan's analysis of the dissonance between optical truth and intellectual truth informs my decision to refer to incest in *Chinatown* as "refractory."

walks to his left. The binoculars swing to the right, locating Hollis's object of interest: a young Mexican boy on a horse. Hollis and the boy converse inaudibly. The camera cuts to a close-up of Gittes staring through the binoculars, then back – not to Hollis and the boy, we must observe – but to the interior of the binoculars, a perimeter of blackness surrounding two pinholes fixed on the pair in the riverbed. Hollis kneels down to examine the soil, as the boy on the horse trots away. Then, Hollis pulls a large folder out of his car and appears to write notes in it. For a couple of seconds, barely noticeable, the soundtrack shifts to the more uplifting romantic theme used in later scenes, like the scene where Evelyn and Gittes kiss – a bittersweet plucking of harp notes.

The term "refractory incest," which I include in the title of this chapter, is especially pertinent to this sequence of scenes where Gittes trails Hollis around L.A., for more often than not we see Hollis through lenses – binoculars, cameras, rear-view mirrors. We are two or three removes from events that are inscrutable to our protagonist: Hollis inspecting riverbeds and water run-offs, Hollis embracing a young woman who Gittes thinks is his mistress but turns out to be his stepdaughter – and may be both his mistress and his stepdaughter, for all we know.

That the mayhem at city hall is followed by an inaudible and highly mediated encounter with the Mexican boy speaks to *Chinatown*'s interest in illegibility – expressed through visual, linguistic, and cultural barriers. The opacification of public space – wrought by the protesters' charges of private corruption – is followed by a more direct cinematographic opacification at the L.A. River. Perhaps all good

detective stories and *film noir* narratives involve an element of refraction – the ultimate truth refracted through good and bad clues, red herrings and overlooked decoders. But in the case of *Chinatown*, this refraction speaks to the special suffering of incest. Recall that Evelyn Mulwray has not even made her first appearance in the film, and yet the stakes of incest – by *Chinatown*'s allegorical logic – are already in play.

Evelyn's absence is essential to the violence *Chinatown* is depicting. As in *The Bluest Eye*, the incest taboo is so pervasive, so constitutive of every character's social existence, its transgression – incest itself – is felt as a violation not of a person but of a social order. By this schema, the individual victim becomes blame-worthy for the transgression. As will become apparent through the rest of the film, the signature and paradoxical violence of incest is that the victim is not allowed to lay claim to her own suffering. Evelyn's suffering cannot belong to her, tragically, because it constitutively draws all the other characters into its fold, shattering the public/private boundary that makes their world legible and tenable. Its not belonging to her queerly defines "her" suffering of incest – as outside of her, as radically disruptive of subjectivity. *Chinatown*'s account of individual suffering places the individual under erasure, locating the suffering elsewhere – in disputes between public and private forces, between the water department and Northwest Valley shepherds, between Gittes and a mortgage banker at the barbershop, and so on. Incest is not really any of Evelyn's business, this cultural logic insists, because the incest

taboo is most precious to society at large. Well before we meet Evelyn, we meet her imposter. Evelyn is effaced before she emerges as a character.

Godzich explains how the victim of closed systems of knowledge is not a being, but an activity. This sense of "victim" is a helpful way to understand Evelyn Mulwray's effacement in *Chinatown,* the ways in which her personal experience of incest gets subsumed into a robust – and desexualized – allegory about privatization. A system of knowledge that claims hegemony over an entire social order commits violence in its exclusion of other, unvalorized ranges of knowledge. What remains incommunicable within the scope of such an epistemological framework is the "victim" as "activity" Godzich explicates:

> One must be tempted at this point to say: but who is this crying victim? The question does not make any sense, for it presupposes an ontological answer. The victim cannot be designated by a being, but by an activity, by its efficacy. Theory could be taken as a way of coming to terms with the proposition that the concept generates victims. The term 'victim' is meant to bring to mind registers of suffering, of enduring, of coercion, and the work of theory must begin with the victim – how to pay attention to the victim when dealing with a system that knows how to make it disappear. One cannot proceed by means of juridical thought, which originates in the system. (28)

The victim-generating concept I explicate in this chapter – the "system that knows how to make" the victim "disappear" – is the sovereignty of the public and private spheres, inseparable in *Chinatown* from the prohibition of incest. As Gittes trails Hollis around L.A., peeping through various lenses at this alleged adulterer and water-thief, *Chinatown* challenges us to "pay attention" to a kind of victim that will elude us on first viewing the film – and maybe even on a second and third viewing. But when we return to *Chinatown* with the knowledge that Evelyn is an incest

survivor – with all the allegorical resonance this position implies in the context of *Chinatown*'s narrative world –, we sense in these high-angle shots of Hollis Mulwray a manner of experience that is not allowed to come to light. Hollis's taciturn expression as water gushes out of a storm drain into the Pacific Ocean, his muffled dialogue with Katherine Cross, partly in Spanish, the indecisive soundtrack, and all the moments when the camera chooses to cut away, denying us any conclusive sense of the situation, suggest what Evelyn's suffering entails: illicit knowledge that threatens an entire community.

When one of Gittes' operatives discovers Hollis in a rowboat with a much younger woman, presumably the alleged mistress, Gittes follows the couple back to their hideaway at the El Macondo[27] apartments and, perched on a roof overlooking a courtyard, takes photos of them embracing ambiguously. The woman, we later learn, is Katherine Cross, Evelyn's daughter/sister and Hollis' stepdaughter. Thus, this scene flirts with a kind of incest more overtly than any other scene in the film. After Hollis greets Katherine with a light peck on the cheek, she leans into him for what appears to be the beginning of a deeper kiss, but we never get to see this. Gittes knocks over a roof tile, startling the couple and interrupting our view as the camera pans away from its high angle on the courtyard and cuts to Gittes' scurrying feet – a visual irruption as startling to us as the clang of the roof tile is to the couple. The true nature of Katherine and Hollis's relationship remains undecidable for the rest of the

[27] One must note the reference here to the town of "El Macondo" in Gabriel García Márquez's novel *Cien Años de Soledad*, which also deals extensively with incest (though cousin-incest, and apparently not abusive).

film. As it happens, what little we saw of their embrace lay reflected, for the most part, in Gittes' camera lens – one of many meta-filmic gestures that coincide with a moment of refraction in the film's plot. Critics have noted – and Polanski himself has regretted – that the reflection of the couple in the camera lens is right-side-up when it should be upside down, if technical realism were the aim.[28] But perhaps this flouting of realism is another facet of the scene's performance of refraction, of the resistance Hollis and Katherine's relationship poses to direct representation, a formal instantiation of the incest taboo.

At a meta-filmic level, Gittes is an agent of a kind of narrative-incest, for when he comes too close to unravelling the film's central mysteries – examining water run-offs late at night – director Roman Polanski intrudes the film's diegetic space to stick a knife in his nose, a gesture eerily suggestive of genital penetration, the film's creator and father-figure breaking the hymen of his child-protagonist as blood pours forth from Gittes' nostrils. It is not only Gittes' nose that is punctured in

[28] Though Roman Polanski refers directly to this technical glitch in an interview included on the DVD bonus features of *Chinatown*, I have to credit Vernon Shetley's more in depth analysis of its possible thematic implications, which I quote below:

> A peculiar detail, that might at first seem merely an error, has the effect of powerfully underlining this sense of the fallibility of Jake's vision. As Jake is photographing Katherine and Hollis at the El Macondo, we are given an over-the-shoulder shot of Jake looking down at the couple, a reverse shot close-up of Jake taking photographs, with the couple reflected on the lens, followed by a return to the over-the-shoulder shot of the couple. But in the reverse shot, showing the reflection on the camera lens, Katherine and Hollis remain in the same positions relative to the screen. They should be reversed, because they are being seen in reflection, but are instead shown not as they would appear to someone seeing their reflection in Jake's lens, but rather as they must appear to Jake himself as he looks through the camera. This reminds us, in an extremely subtle way, of course, that the shot is a composite, a special effect, but it also cautions us against trusting what we see, and by replacing what a real observer would see with what Jake sees, it reminds us of the distortions associated with Jake's perspective. (1101-1102)

this scene, but the visual field of the film itself. For the remainder of *Chinatown,* we must stare at a white bandage wrapped around the middle of our protagonist's face, a constant reminder of the mark Polanski – cast as an anonymous henchman for the land syndicate that is stealing water from the city – has left on his creation.

Incest, this is to say, marks an epistemological crisis in *Chinatown* that exceeds the level of mere plot. We might assign its function to at least three registers: 1.) the literal incestuous relationship between Evelyn Mulwray and Noah Cross; 2.) the destabilization that occurs when private interests are ascribed to municipal offices, or when family matters are aired in the public square; and 3.) the meta-filmic gestures and formal experiments by which the film comments on its own tentative claims to knowledge, gesturing towards the non-diegetic spaces outside its purview, the sources of its own creation. The casting of John Huston – director of *The Maltese Falcon,* a canonical bedrock of *film noir* – as father-villain Noah Cross seems more than a cheeky joke. *Chinatown* is popularly understood – and quite self-consciously crafted – as a work of *neo-noir,* a 1970s throwback to the golden age of the genre in the 1940s. The presence of its generic forefather within the film – playing a father who commits incest – thus signals an intertextual incest, a self-enveloping gesture that reverberates through the plot and beyond it. The incest is structural. *Chinatown*'s crisis of knowing is a function of the uncertain relationship between inside and outside – inside or outside the family, the public, and even the film itself. This liminality, I argue, constitutes the violence Evelyn Mulwray suffers, in much the way

Pecola Breedlove's psychological dissolution in *The Bluest Eye* involves an inability to distinguish between the inside and outside of herself.

Roman Polanski, it must be noted, would be charged with five counts of sexual assault against a thirteen-year-old girl, Samantha Gailey, only three years after *Chinatown*'s production and release. This crime has to factor into my analysis, notwithstanding the risks of conflating a director's biography with the narrative logic of a collaborative artistic effort. My first comment on this issue is to say that screenwriter Robert Towne deserves credit for the narrative outline of *Chinatown*. It was he – not Polanski – who imagined incest as an effective allegory for corrupting private interests in the Water Department, and Towne has no record of committing sexual assault. On the other hand, Polanski revised the ending of Towne's script – after much acrimony between the two men behind the scenes – to ensure that the incest perpetrator, Noah Cross, is triumphant in his efforts to reclaim his daughter/granddaughter Katherine. Towne envisioned a happy ending, where Evelyn, Gittes, and Katherine escape Los Angeles together. Polanski decided that Evelyn should die. "The film could have no meaning," Polanski asserts in an interview, without this tragic ending. "I think it was important. If you're telling a story of corruption, of evil, you have to show the results of the evil." (*Chinatown*)

Several of Polanski's films – *Repulsion* and *Rosemary's Baby*, for instance – explore violence against women, often in graphic, sinister detail, and the male perpetrators usually get away with their crimes. It is difficult to draw a correlation between this pattern in Polanski's story-telling and the crimes he himself committed.

Needless to say, *Chinatown* is not the work of a female incest survivor. Anne Sexton's poetry and Dorothy Allison's work may inspire more sociological interest, since these authors have first-hand experience with father/daughter incest. Nevertheless, to understand why victims are silenced, we need to understand the wide-ranging impact of the incest taboo, its figuration in the culture at large. This entails listening to non-victims, listening even to rapists, because the incest taboo regulates everyone's lives. Police officers, judges, social workers, therapists, and all others who may intervene in the life of an incest survivor are themselves subject to the force of the prohibition of incest, a force that can stifle speech and skew representation. *Chinatown* is a valuable artifact because it explores the coercive nature of the incest taboo, its power to refract direct experiences of violence through cultural filters that cannot abide the truth of the original experience.

Samantha Gailey, Polanski's victim, declared in an interview with the BBC that her grand jury testimony was more painful than the rape. "The rape was ten minutes," she said, "The grand jury testimony was all day." (BBC HardTalk) Of course, Gailey does not speak for all rape survivors, but her comments are instructive nonetheless. Much of the violence of incest, and of rape in general, involves the crisis of representation that it provokes, its volatile status as a taboo subject for speech. Anyone in touch with the force of this taboo may be well disposed to explore its parameters artistically.

In seeking to expose private corruption in the Water Department and to publicize the abusive nature of the Cross household, Gittes delivers Evelyn and

Katherine to forces that will not abide such exposure. Polanski's revision of Towne's script, his insistence on this tragic ending, expresses his view that the film needed to convey the inescapability of the social order Noah Cross represents. With Noah Cross's sinister triumph, the façade of the public/private distinction – which in my reading of *Chinatown* is equivalent to the prohibition of incest – also triumphs, and the reigning order of Los Angeles is restored.

Chinatown does not characterize incest as equivalent to any and all rape. Rather, the same privacy at issue in Gittes' argument with the mortgage banker in the barbershop, in the shepherds' demonstration at city hall, informs Evelyn's dissolution into stammers, sighs, and distractibility whenever she is reminded of the fact that Noah Cross is both her own father and the father of her daughter. Incest renders the category of the "private" opaque, infecting familial privacy with the public quality of a marriage market, turning daughters into endogamous wives. I am arguing that the breakdown in Evelyn's speech and composure throughout *Chinatown* does not simply represent heightened pain. More directly, it signals that there are no words for the phenomenon she has experienced. The public and the private are only legible in *Chinatown* when they are separate and sovereign. When the two realms are confused, characters lose their faculties of speech, or resort to physical or verbal violence, while the formal qualities of the film resort to tactics of refraction and evasion. Orientalism and various tropes of cultural and linguistic difference also tend to surface at such moments.

"You may think you know what you're dealing with," Noah Cross tells Gittes when they first meet, "but believe me, you don't." The same could be said of first-time viewers of *Chinatown*. Limited, for the most part, to Gittes' visual perspective and an investigative approach that is utterly competent until it touches the outer edges of the incest taboo, audiences are led closer and closer to truths that are not true enough.

Chinatown's displacement of incestuous violence onto a quasi-allegorical narrative is itself a comment on incest's unspeakability, an interrogation of the symbolic stakes at work in the testimonies Judith Lewis Herman and other clinicians provide – a symbolic order which encrypts Evelyn Mulwray's suffering.

Chapter Three

Other Than Kinship:
Incest as Impossible Selfhood in Anne Sexton's Life and Work

Anne Sexton described experiences of childhood incest – at the hands of her father, great aunt, and mother – in therapy sessions with Dr. Martin Orne, in poetry famed for being "confessional," and in the play *Mercy Street* (1969). However, she herself could never say with certainty that the incest occurred. Guided by a therapist steeped in Freudian theories of female hysteria and oedipal fantasy, Sexton understood her poetry to be less simplistically confessional than engaged in emergent identity formation.[29] A powerful intuition of a transgressive adult hovers over many of her poems, but Sexton often understood this smothering parent to be a kind of icon – a figure for patriarchal coercions that transcended her own life experiences. In this chapter, I do not attempt to resolve the mystery of Sexton's apparent childhood trauma, to determine whether or not her experience of incest was factually true. Rather, I treat the undecidability of memory as part of the suffering incest might

[29] In a 1958 letter to Dr. Orne, Sexton insists that poetic language does not correlate with identity: "Of course I KNOW that words are just a counting game, I know this until the words start to arrange themselves and write something better than *I* would ever know. {. . .} I don't really believe the poem, but the name is surely mine so I must belong to the poem. So I must be real . . . When you say 'words mean nothing' then it means that the real me is nothing. All I am is the trick of words writing themselves." (Middlebrook, 82) Years later, in a 1972 lecture she delivered at Colgate University, Sexton explained to her students the difference between autobiography and poetic persona: "I use the personal when I am applying a mask to my face [. . .} like a rubber mask that the robber wears." (Middlebrook, 359)

entail. More centrally, I examine Sexton's representation of kinship, which functions, I will show, in much the same way it does in *The Bluest Eye* and *Chinatown*: as a force that exerts its own kind of violence, without which the violence of incest can make no sense.

Kinship does not come easily to the speakers in Sexton's poems. All its configurations – as daughter, niece, mother, wife, sister – are fraught with a pain that is only partly attributable to the behavior of the kin in question. More often, it is the tie of kinship itself – the duties it implies, the pressure it exerts, the liberties it precludes, its existential inescapability – that comprises the suffering in these poems. While explicit incest surfaces here and there in Sexton's oeuvre, kinship is nearly ubiquitous as a theme, and it is rarely a happy one.

One could read both Sexton's poetry and her biography as a series of efforts to escape the pressures of kinship.[30] By her own account, Sexton found marital and

[30] One might object that Sexton's poetry resists patriarchy, not kinship. In using the genderless term "kinship," I do not discount Sexton's role as an icon of the Women's Liberation Movement. Rather, since Sexton's critiques of sexist double standards have already been analyzed at length by other scholars, I introduce the term "kinship" in order to focus more narrowly on the transgression incest signifies in her work. Incest violates kinship at the most fundamental level, making Sexton's treatment of kinship enormously relevant to the meaning of incest in her work. That said, let us pause here to consider Sexton's complicated relationship to second wave feminism, as expressed in her own words and the words of her friend, poet Maxine Kumin. In her forward to Sexton's *The Complete Poems*, Kumin writes:

> Freed by that cataclysm from their clichéd roles as goddesses of hearth and bedroom, women began to write openly out of their own experiences. Before there was a Women's Movement, the underground river was already flowing, carrying such diverse cargoes as the poems of Bogan, Levertov, Rukeyser, Swenson, Plath, Rich, and Sexton . . . {Sexton} wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry. Today, the remonstrances seem almost quaint. Anne delineated the problematic position of women – the neurotic reality of the time – though she was not able to cope in her own life with the personal trouble it created. (xxxiii - xxxiv)

maternal obligations debilitating. The pressures drove her to a string of suicide attempts and hospitalizations, where – under the guidance of Dr. Orne – she identified the source of this distress in pathological forms of kinship from childhood. Throughout her marriage to Kayo Sexton, she engaged in numerous extramarital affairs – with the poets James Wright, George Starbuck, and others. Adultery and seclusion in mental hospitals – at least as they are imagined in Sexton's poetry – comprised detours from kinship. Sexton often wrote about her time in institutions in terms of her absence from family, the time she missed spending with her daughters and husband. The experience is painful but also lyrical, expressing an ambivalence and desire that are central to her work: a reaching beyond the strictures of kinship, an effort to imagine what identity would mean if it were freed from kin. In the 1960 poem "The Double Image," for example, she writes of her daughter Joyce:

> Today, my small child, Joyce,

Sexton's own comments on feminism are somewhat more ambivalent. Asked by her Japanese translator Yorifumi Yagachi if she is a feminist, Sexton responded, "I suppose there is social criticism in my poems. I don't know. I try to write true to life." When Nancy Taylor asked for advice on creating a women's studies course, Sexton said, "Just remember that women are human first." And to Steve Neilly, she remarked "I have always tried to be human but the voice is a woman's and was from the beginning, intimate and female." (Middlebrook, 365) On the other hand, several of her poems, as well as her play *Mercy Street*, envision an ecstatic liberation from gender roles. "I'm tired of trying to be a woman," the character Daisy declares near the end of *Mercy Street*, "tired of the spoons, and the pots, tired of my mouth and my breasts, tired of the cosmetics and the silk dresses. I'm even tired of my father with his white bone . . . I'm tired of the gender of things." (37) Daisy is an incest survivor who concludes, after an agonizing effort to free herself of the guilt she feels for having been sexually intimate with her father, "I am no more a woman than Christ was a man." (38) The burden of prescribed gender roles and the burden of kinship ties are closely linked in Sexton's oeuvre, and I will work to distinguish between these burdens carefully throughout this chapter.

love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. (36)

A God figure recurs throughout Sexton's poetry as the ultimate governing patriarch, but in this poem his absence is linked to the absence of a mother/daughter relationship. In place of God, the speaker suggests a "self's self" that Joyce may love. The speaker finds it tragic that she was not present to watch her daughter grow, but she also figures this absence of kinship as the key to her daughter's autonomy.

Sexton employs similar logic repeatedly, and not only with reference to her time spent in mental hospitals away from her family. Even when she is with her family, a kind of absent presence emerges, a denial of kinship when the speaker is most intensely in kinship's throes. Consider the final lines from her 1963 poem "Those Times . . .":

I did not know that my life, in the end,
Would run over my mother's like a truck
and all that would remain
from the year I was six
was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,
so that I might hear
the unsaid more clearly. (121)

The sublime "unsaid" Sexton invokes in this poem will comprise the central focus of this chapter, for it resurfaces continually throughout her oeuvre as an aspiration to transcend kinship, to embody an identity free of such ties. What sort of "I" is Sexton's confessionalism at pains to articulate? One, it would seem, that is silenced by kinship. But what are the alternatives to kinship? And what is the role of incest in such a conversation? How does the suffering of incest relate to this more widespread suffering, the terror Sexton's speakers feel in simply being a mother, a sister, a daughter, a niece, a wife?

Let us return to the beginning of "Those Times . . ." and examine the poem as a whole, for it provides a useful springboard into Sexton's more explicit descriptions of incest. An account of an alienated childhood, "Those Times . . ." characterizes kinship as a trap and a mistake, something so suffocating one cannot help but look for alternatives. It is important to note the prosody of Sexton's work, its formal brittleness, how tightly wound together the half rhymes and internal rhymes can be, for example – and how this reflects the brittleness of the speaker's identity. One effect of Sexton's formal scrupulousness here is that the fractures – the exceptions to formal regularity – stand out in pained relief. They are breaking points in the poem's form and, implicitly, in the speaker's psyche. On the other hand, when the meter and syllable count is mostly irregular, the few moments of regularity also stand out in relief, as they do in the opening stanza.

At six
I lived in a graveyard full of dolls,
avoiding myself,
my body, the suspect
in its grotesque house.
I was locked in my room all day behind a gate,
a prison cell.
I was the exile
who sat all day in a knot.

The "knot" at the bottom of the stanza describes the stanza well, both in its tangled distribution of stressed syllables and the speaker's dissociation from herself, the movement from "my" to "its," her objectification as mere body. The poem opens iambically with "at six" and continues the iambic rhythm into the next line with "I lived," at which point it cascades into anapests – "in a grave-," "full of dolls." The graveyard this six-year old inhabits is one of self-avoidance, where self is opposed to inanimate corporeality – "dolls," "body." The meter reverses direction, turning trochaic – "suspect/in its grotesque house" – just as the speaker equates her corporeality with criminal guilt, and just before she applies the neuter pronoun "it" to herself. In subsequent stanzas, we will see that this muffled self, this self aching to be free, is muffled precisely by kinship, by her specific position in a family structure. The next stanza announces this structure:

I will speak of the little childhood cruelties,
being a third child,
the last given
and the last taken –
of the nightly humiliations when Mother undressed me,
of the life of the daytime, locked in my room –
being the unwanted, the mistake
that Mother used to keep Father
from his divorce.
Divorce!
The romantic's friend,
romantics who fly into maps
of other countries,
hips and noses and mountains,
into Asia or the Black Forest,
or caught by 1928,
the year of the *me*,
by mistake,
not for divorce
but instead.

The speaker was born, we learn, to prevent a divorce. It becomes clear in this stanza what kind of self her existence precludes – a "romantic's" self, a self liberated by "Divorce!", free to roam the globe. This romantic globe-trotting is the alternative to kinship, and the speaker's sense of self is inseparable from kinship's fetters – "caught

by 1928 / the year of the *me*." This little girl, confined in kinship, does not take to kinship easily. She turns to the dolls, which provide her a vision of liberation and expanded horizons ironically similar to the freedom imagined by her would-be divorcé father.

> The me who refused to suck on breasts
> she couldn't please,
> the me whose body grew unsurely,
> the me who stepped on the noses of dolls
> she couldn't break.
> I think of the dolls,
> so well made,
> so perfectly put together
> as I pressed them against me,
> kissing their little imaginary mouths.
> I remember their smooth skin,
> those newly delivered,
> the pink skin and the serious China-blue eyes.
> They came from a mysterious country
> without the pang of birth,
> born quietly and well.
> When I wanted to visit,
> the closet is where I rehearsed my life,
> all day among shoes,
> away from the glare of the bulb in the ceiling,

away from the bed and the heavy table
and the same terrible rose repeating on the walls. (119)

The dolls are unborn and foreign made, free the way the divorcé is free, traveling from "a mysterious country," cut loose from kinship. Enjambment is a key feature of this stanza, qualifying the negation in one line with a more complicated negation in the next, revealing the failure of kinship in this unhappy childhood to be a complicated matter, more complicated than first appearances can communicate. For example, the first line – "The me who refused to suck on breasts" – suggests that the speaker was a difficult child, resisting both her own nourishment and a libidinal connection with her mother. However, the next line – "she couldn't please" – relocates the resistance in the mother. The child would have sucked on breasts if she could have pleased them, but the mother, we are to understand, would not respond with pleasure. The prohibition of incest announces itself at this moment, in a subtle way, providing a hint of what incest might mean in Sexton's oeuvre at large. Though incest will be painful in other poems – "The Death of the Fathers," "The Moss of His Skin," "Briar Rose," and others – and abusive as well in the play *Mercy Street*, the denial of incest is also painful. As I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, the denial of incest is the essence of kinship – the force that distinguishes endogamy from exogamy, one's blood relatives from one's sexual partners. The injuriousness of incestuous abuse, I have argued, must involve this more general force, the prohibition that, for the most part, goes without saying. Like Junior in *The Bluest Eye*, who could garner no affection from his mother Geraldine, the speaker in "Those Times . . ."

seeks proxies for the affection denied her, and she finds this proxy in the dolls, whose company in the seclusion of her closet is like the divorcé's romantic journey.

A similar use of enjambment establishes the dolls as a counterpoint to the breasts. The fourth line – "the me who stepped on the noses of dolls" – suggests anger, violence, and, presumably, the destruction of the dolls, but the line after the enjambment – "she couldn't break" – reveals the dolls to be indestructible; and all subsequent lines convey the speaker's intense affection for these "perfectly made" beings she cannot break. The element of surprise Sexton generates through enjambment – the emotional twists and turns of our real-time reading experience – captures the ambivalence of a speaker who withholds affection from beings who do not receive affection well (the mother's breasts) and lavishes affection on other beings (the dolls) who can withstand any beating. The parallel structure joining breasts and dolls suggests a dichotomy between incest and its prohibition: the possibility of libidinal connection inherent in breastfeeding and its inhuman substitute in the "imaginary mouths" of the dolls. As the poem progresses, the closet of dolls comes to represent for the speaker an upward path to womanhood.

> I did not question it.
> I hid in the closet as one hides in a tree.
> I grew into it like a root
> and yet I planned such plans of flight,
> believing I would take my body into the sky,

dragging it with me like a large bed.
And although I was unskilled
I was sure to get there or at least
to move up like an elevator.
With such dreams,
storing their energy like a bull,
I planned my growth and my womanhood
as one choreographs a dance.

I knew that if I waited among shoes
I was sure to outgrow them,
the heavy oxfords, the thick execution reds,
shoes that lay together like partners,
the sneakers thick with Griffin eyewash
and then the dresses swinging above me,
always above me, empty and sensible
with sashes and puffs,
with collars and two-inch hems
and evil fortunes in their belts.

Clothing, like the dolls, offers a reassuring detour from family relations the speaker can barely endure. She will outgrow these stagnant things, attaining a dominance over them she can never hope to attain over her parents. She can rise "like an elevator," an inhuman ascent, positing an identity separate from her physical body. She will drag her body with her "like a large bed," while her real self – whatever that

is – floats above it. The rhyming parallel structure of "I did not question it" and "I hid in the closet" links acceptance and ignorance with all the closet has to offer. Like Claudia MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*, who learns to love the white baby dolls, emblems of racist self-loathing, after struggling to mutilate them, the speaker in "Those Times . . ." accepts all these inanimate fashion signifiers as the only available codes to womanhood and, ultimately, to kinship. Her attitude is not identical to Claudia's, of course, for she is not negotiating white supremacy as a feature of kinship – white beauty as currency on the marriage market –, but the similarity between the two young girls is nonetheless worth considering. They are both learning the rules of kinship through inanimate proxies, and they both come to accept these proxies after failing to destroy them, stepping on their noses in Sexton's case and dismembering them limb by limb in Claudia's. More to the point, incestuous abuse hovers over these activities in both texts, compelling an analysis of the relationship between incest and kinship, between sexually tyrannical parents and the rules to success on a marriage market these girls are about to enter. Kinship functions, anthropologists tell us, through incest's prohibition. But in the world of Sexton's poetry, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown,* we see a manner of kinship warped and deformed by incest's background presence.

The speaker in Sexton's poem may bear a more obvious resemblance to Evelyn Mulwray in *Chinatown,* whose coiffed apparel and impeccable diction brings to mind the "empty and sensible" dresses in Sexton's closet. Recall that Evelyn's pristine elegance falls apart whenever private investigator Jake Gittes raises the topic

of her father, bringing the incest to mind. Her cultivated speech and fashion sense represents the triumph of normative kinship, making her a prized commodity on the marriage market and an effective seductress of Gittes, but the mere mention of incest – or simply of the man who perpetrated it – provokes the dissolution of kinship's stylish trappings into stammers, sighs, and sloppiness. The latter half of Sexton's "Those Times . . ." brings the speaker's mother back into the scene and describes violations of the speaker's personal space and body that, though ambiguous, have the appearance of incest itself.

I sat all day
stuffing my heart into a shoe box,
avoiding the precious window
as if it were an ugly eye
through which birds coughed,
chained to the heaving trees;
avoiding the wallpaper of the room
where tongues bloomed over and over,
bursting from lips like sea flowers –
and in this way I waited out the day
until my mother,
the large one,
came to force me to undress.
I lay there silently,
hoarding my small dignity.

I did not ask about the gate or the closet.
I did not question the bedtime ritual
where, on the cold bathroom tiles,
I was spread out daily
and examined for flaws.

The exterior of the speaker's house is not a space of freedom, not a public sphere to which she might escape, as the divorcee of the second stanza dreamed of escaping into "Asia or the Black Forest." In fact, the outside is so oppressive the speaker cannot bear to look at it. Birds are chained to trees and cough through her window. It is inside the house where sensuality lives, the many-tongued wallpaper, "the lips like sea flowers," but the speaker avoids the inside too. Claustrophobia prevails, only a "shoebox" left for her heart, amid the dolls, shoes, and dresses. The mother, "the large one," forces her to undress and examines her for flaws. Is this incest? What can we make of the speaker's silence and the "small dignity" she hoards while her mother examines her?

There is biographical evidence for a quasi-incestuous relationship between Sexton and her mother Mary Gray Staples Harvey, or at least of troubling and too frequent invasions of young Sexton's personal space, genital inspections that humiliated her. Sexton recalled her mother examining her vulva on the bathroom floor, "looking at me and saying how we had to keep it clean and mustn't touch – there was something she looked at and it was growing, and I know – I don't remember, I know – I had a little cyst – they had to operate and take it off."

(Middlebrook, 59) Orne reported that "in many ways, her mother was the dangerous relationship." (59) It is curious that Sexton distinguishes knowing from remembering in the comment quoted above, a rhetorical gesture she repeats many times in her therapy sessions with Orne, expressing a sense that certain events must be real even if she cannot, strictly speaking, remember them. "I couldn't make all this up, or I don't exist at all!" she says in another session, referring to her father's apparent molestation of her. (56) As I progress in my close-reading of Sexton's poetry, I will argue that this sense of knowing without remembering – "I don't remember, I know" – forms a key part of Sexton's phenomenology of incest, a "presentness" free of hindsight, a past moment that is experienced without being recalled, experienced as a present moment. This orientation towards the past is discernible both in her poetry and in records of her therapy sessions, compelling an analysis that integrates her poetry with her biographical testimony.

Returning to my broad interpretation of Sexton's work, I propose that the speaker in "Those Times . . ." is attempting to carve out a very small space – between the inside and the outside, between her mother and the dolls – where an identity free from kinship might be allowed to live. This space is no larger than the shoebox in which she stuffs her heart.

I did not know
that my bones,
those solids, those pieces of sculpture

would not splinter.

The speaker likens her body, exposed before her mother, to the dolls she failed to break. She expects her body to splinter, but it does not. Instead, she grows, becomes a woman, menstruates, and gives birth to two children, eclipsing her mother's life through this process of maturation. Time accelerates in the final stanza of "Those Times . . .," its rapid description of growth suggesting, by way of contrast with earlier stanzas, that the poem's title refers to the slowness of childhood, an experience of childhood as never-ending and inescapable.

I did not know the woman I would be
nor that blood would bloom in me
each month like an exotic flower,
nor that children,
two monuments,
would break from between my legs
two cramped girls breathing carelessly,
each asleep in her tiny beauty.
I did not know that my life, in the end,
would run over my mother's like a truck
and all that would remain
from the year I was six
was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,
so that I might hear

the unsaid more clearly.

The naked child, examined for flaws by a cold and remote mother, cannot imagine that her body will not break under this pressure, that it will instead assume the power and physical workings of her mother, giving birth to her own two children in a new configuration of kinship. To describe this dynamic more theoretically, I would say that the poem offers a present-moment phenomenology of kinship that is ignorant of the future – ignorant of other forms of kinship, unaware that this present-moment relation to the mother will change and end. The poem suggests that the speaker carries this present-moment knowledge with her into motherhood, in the form of "a deaf spot" through which she hears "the unsaid more clearly." Sexton's poetry often performs such a gesture – an effort to represent a past moment as it felt in its own present-moment intensity, without the interference of hindsight. The possibility of experiencing the "presentness" of the past is a key feature of the sublime "unsaid" I am attempting to characterize in this chapter. I have suggested before that this "unsaid" represents a reaching beyond kinship. But what, then, is the connection between "presentness" and a dream of escaping kinship? Answering this question will, I hope, elucidate what incest means in Sexton's work, what it feels like to undergo incestuous abuse, by Sexton's account. The speaker in "Those Times . . ." experiences the present moment of violation and claustrophobia, under the intrusive hands of her mother, as a sensation of imminent self-destruction. She "did not know" that her bones "would not splinter." When kinship feels most unbearable, most

impossible, Sexton's poetic imagination sneaks a peek beyond kinship. A similar dynamic occurs in several of her poems – a dialectic of presence and absence, existence and destruction, and, most concretely, kinship and incest.

Emmanuel Levinas – phenomenologist of ethical obligation – may aid our understanding here, even though his work never touches on the subject of incest. Let us, for the moment, consider death as phenomenological analogue to incest in Levinas' work. The analogy will, I believe, expand our understanding of Sexton's poetry. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas characterizes death as, strictly speaking, impossible to imagine. The notion of death presents itself to our minds as an impossible event, because Being is everywhere and there is no looking beyond it. Levinas' formulation here is a refutation of Martin Heidegger's account of "Being-towards-Death" in *Being and Time*. While Heidegger characterizes a proper orientation towards death as the key to existential authenticity, Levinas denies the possibility of any such orientation, because existence is full. Being is ubiquitous and inescapable. Therefore, when one approaches death, especially in a state of suffering, he or she experiences a sense of claustrophobia, an intensification of Being's inescapability. Levinas writes:

> The unknown of death, which is not given straight off as nothingness but is correlative to an experience of the impossibility of nothingness, signifies not that death is a region from which no one has returned and consequently remains unknown as a matter of fact; the unknown of death signifies that the very relationship with death cannot take place in the light, that the subject is in relationship with what does not come from itself. We could say it is in relationship with mystery. (69-70)

Precisely within this inescapability, however, one's solitude – one's selfhood – is challenged. Ethics begins for Levinas with the call of the "Other," but the term "Other" has a more technical meaning here than simply another person. It refers to the "relationship with mystery" mentioned above, a relationship with something not encompassed by Being. Levinas gives voice here to the religious element of his thinking, which is steeped in Judaic philosophy. Death is unimaginable because it refers to an "Other than Being." It is outside ontology. Levinas' "Ethics as first philosophy" asks what becomes of Being if we subordinate it to non-Being, if our absolute vulnerability and answerability to another person – with whom we are not joined in the kind of diffuse Being Heidegger describes – takes precedence over Being itself. Levinas' ethical system contests Heidegger's association of Being with power and knowledge. Instead, Levinas foregrounds unknowability and ethical obligation to an "Other" we do not know and cannot control. This rapid summary of Levinas' thought will have to suffice for our limited purposes in understanding Sexton.

Kinship in Sexton's work, I propose, – like Being in Levinas' – is ubiquitous and inescapable, and painful for this reason. Only by recourse to a sublime "Other than Kinship," if the phrase be permitted, does Sexton gesture outside of it. This space beyond kinship is either a lyrical, fanciful space – "from a mysterious country/ without the pang of birth" – or the space of incest. It surfaces more often than not in the face of a smothering violation that is so intolerable the speaker is compelled to

wonder if there is an outside to what she is facing, if only an imaginary one, if only a "shoebox" in which to stuff her heart. Incest in Sexton's work is a present moment that has become intolerable, much like the proximity of death in Levinas' *Time and the Other*, a present with no view of the future, where the inescapability of kinship has reached a fever pitch and an "Other than Kinship" is both impossible and impossible not to hope for. Indeed, there is something religious about incest in Sexton's work. It represents the absolute breaking point of kinship, the point where a spiritual longing compels her speakers to make a leap of faith – impossibly – beyond kinship. Before I turn to Sexton's more explicit account of father/daughter incest, let us consider the implications this poetics bears for language itself.

In the poem "Hurry Up Please It's Time" from her 1974 collection *The Death Notebooks,* Sexton suggests more directly that a place beyond kinship is also a place beyond – or before – language.

> Learning to talk is a complex business.
> My daughter's first word was *utta*,
> meaning button.
> Before there are words
> do you dream?
> In utero
> do you dream?
> Who taught you to suck?
> And how come?

You don't need to be taught to cry.
The soul presses a button.
Is the cry saying something?
Does it mean *help*?
Or hello?
The cry of a gull is beautiful
and the cry of a crow is ugly
but what I want to know
is whether they mean the same thing.
Somewhere a man sits with indigestion
and he doesn't care.
A woman is in a store buying bracelets
and earrings and she doesn't care.
La de dah.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not. (393 – 394)

In imagining pre-linguistic communication, the poem makes fun of itself, mocking its own hopeless immersion in language. The speaker's daughter is trying to say "button" and the word "button" returns a few lines later to signify the pre-linguistic source of crying – "the soul presses a button." The sound the daughter makes, in attempting to say "button," is "*utta*," which resembles "utero," the site of the pre-linguistic, four lines later. The poem performs its own entrapment in language while also performing, implicitly, a linguistic subject's entrapment in the early familial bonds where language is acquired, and where we also learn to "suck." The speaker

wants to know if pre-linguistic utterances lend themselves to different significations. Does a cry mean "help" or "hello"? Do a crow and gull mean the same thing when they cry? In lieu of an answer to these questions, the speaker gives us accounts of adult indifference. The man with indigestion "doesn't care." The woman buying bracelets "doesn't care." The poem suggests that grown-ups – so far removed from the origins of language – have lost touch with the wonder of meaning at its source, and for this indifference – "La de dah" – they require a divine patriarch's forgiveness: "Forgive us, Father, for we know not."

It is apt that Sexton appeals to a father-figure for this forgiveness, for Sexton's poems about father/daughter incest often contain an element of the divine, a sense that the speaker is in touch with a raw kind of meaning, a jealous force that shuts out other kin. In her 1960 poem "Moss of His Skin," she invokes the Islamic deity in the same breath that she declares a separation from her sisters, a special exclusive relationship with the father who has joined her in her bed:

> I lay by the moss
> of his skin until
> it grew strange. My sisters
> will never know that I fall
> out of myself and pretend
> that Allah will not see
> how I hold my daddy
> like an old stone tree. (27)

The speaker's intimacy with her father turns the familiar – and the familial – "strange," so that it becomes something other than familial, something other than kinship. This transformation coincides with a rare instance of caesura – "it grew strange. My sisters" –, a cut in the poem's otherwise regular, almost rigid lineation, and it coincides with the speaker's self-transcendence, a falling out of herself that exceeds her sisters' power of knowing. She can only pretend, however, "that Allah will not see." What "Hurry Up Please It's Time" and "Moss of His Skin" have in common is a religious interpretation of overcoming kinship. While the former does not describe incest, its investigation of pre-linguistic meaning is at once an investigation of a meaning that precedes the cultural knowledge kinship imparts through child-rearing – "before there are words . . . in utero." My interest here, in drawing these parallels between the two poems, is to expand the meaning of incest in Sexton's oeuvre to include her broader, more frequent commentary on kinship. "The Moss of His Skin" describes incest as a breaking of ties with other kin – "to sink from the eyes of mother," to enter a sphere inaccessible to one's sisters. Kinship – normally impossible to escape – falls away in the event of incest, and it draws one closer to Allah.

The recurring line – "Forgive us, Father, for we know not" – in "Hurry Up Please It's Time" begs forgiveness for adults' indifference to bedrock meaning, the pre-linguistic soul's "button" that the grown man and woman in the poem overlook in favor of a banal, routine "La de dah." The father/daughter incest in "The Moss of His

Skin" also suggests an encounter with a rawer, more fundamental level of meaning, an impossibility rendered possible by the speaker's extraordinary encounter with her father. I do not mean to suggest that Sexton characterizes incest as a positive experience in this poem, but I am interested in sketching out the phenomenology of incest she develops throughout her poetic corpus – and the ways it relates to her discussions of incest in therapy sessions with Dr. Orne. In both cases, the experience exceeds normative modes of epistemology and memory.

Sexton first spoke openly about childhood incest after a series of psychological breakdowns and suicide attempts, beginning in 1955, culminated in her hospitalization at the Westwood and Glenside psychiatric hospitals and her long-term therapeutic relationship with Dr. Orne. According to Sexton's biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook, as well as various testimonies from Sexton and those close to her, the pressures of motherhood debilitated her. When her husband Kayo left for business trips, Sexton said she experienced terror and "terrible spells of depression" (Middlebrook, 31) at being left alone to care for her two-year old daughter Linda and her infant daughter Joy, born August 1955. She confessed to her family violent episodes, "in which she would seize Linda and begin choking or slapping her," (33) and recalled throwing her across the room one day for placing feces in a toy truck. "My feeling for my children does not surpass my desire to be free of their demands upon my emotions," she would later write to Orne, after more than a year of treatment. (Middlebrook, 37)

In therapy, Sexton traced her intolerance of maternal responsibility to overbearing adults from her own childhood, figures that gave her too little or too much love – or the wrong kind. She "gained insight into the ways in which most of her intimate relationships provoked feelings associated with her two 'mothers,' Mary Gray and Nana." (Middlebrook, 37) While Sexton described her mother as cold and remote, impossible to please, and physically invasive in an almost clinical manner – the nightly genital inspections –, her great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley ("Nana") transgressed physical boundaries in the opposite fashion, with a smothering affection, cuddling and exchanging back rubs with her grand-niece even as Sexton approached adolescence. "It is clear from many sources," Middlebrook writes, "that Sexton's physical boundaries were repeatedly trespassed by the adults in her family in ways that disturbed her emotional life from girlhood onward." (59).

In 1957, Sexton assumed a persona in therapy which she called "Elizabeth" and which led her – through a series of associations – to describe an incestuous encounter with her father Ralph Harvey. During one of Sexton's frequent dissociative trances, she associated the Elizabeth-persona with "a little bitch," an epithet her father would cast at her when he was drunk, commenting – in front of the rest of the family – on Sexton's pimples and budding sexuality. That Ralph Harvey verbally abused Sexton in this way is confirmed by her mother and others, but the reality of the incest Sexton described in therapy remains a subject of heated debate among her family, friends, biographers, and Dr. Orne himself. The following is a

transcript of Sexton's account, as recorded by Orne on therapy tapes that are now available at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard:

> A.S.: Father comes in drunk; wakes me up, saying "I just wanted to see where you were – your sister {Jane} is out letting someone feel her." And he says it again. Sits on the bed, takes a bottle out of his pocket and drinks. I asked where Mommy was: gone to bed and locked the door. He says, "Do you like me?"
>
> Dr.: What side of the bed is he sitting on?
>
> A.S.: {Points with finger.} He asks me if anybody ever felt me. I don't know what he means. I lay down and cuddle with Nana. I know that isn't good, I shouldn't.
>
> Dr.: Shouldn't what?
>
> A.S.: He is holding me. He says to press up against him, sort of wriggles and asks if I like it. And it feels good.
>
> Dr.: Does he say you are a good girl?
>
> A.S.: He puts his hand on me and asks if I – if I ever do this and did I ever do it.
>
> Dr.: What did you tell him?
>
> A.S.: [Shakes head.} He kissed me on the lips and he started to leave and I held on and didn't want him to go. Then he came back, left his bottle on the table. (56)

Orne's response to Sexton's testimony strikes me as glib and presumptuous, given that he never set foot in Sexton's childhood home. "It's not plausible the way she described it," he said, "and it wasn't the father's style when he was drinking. But it fit her feelings about her father having abused her, and since she sexualized everything, it would become the metaphor with which she would deal with it."

(Middlebrook, 58) His dismissal of Sexton's account suggests an investment in maintaining his pre-established therapeutic framework. But Orne was not alone in this appraisal. Not surprisingly, Sexton's mother and close relatives also denied the possibility that Ralph Harvey could have abused his daughter in this way – a denial which might simply attest to the speech prohibition I have been addressing throughout this dissertation, evidence that the incest taboo is most effectively a taboo on discussing incest or acknowledging its occurrence. Sexton's biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook also doubted the reality of the incest, noting that "the details of her reports of the scene varied a good deal, most significantly in dating the episode in her life anywhere from age five or six to age twelve or thirteen and in the role attributed to Nana, which changed from guilty point of reference . . . to actual witness." (57) It is perhaps more surprising that the poet Maxine Kumin, Sexton's close friend and feminist ally, "also doubted Sexton's credibility in this account." (58)

However, there are others who were convinced that the incest Sexton described was a reality. Sexton's long-time friend Lois Ames, a psychiatric social worker with experience supporting incest survivors, said, "I could never believe anything *but* that Anne was a victim of child sexual abuse by both Nana and her father." (58) Dawn M. Skorczewski, in her book-length study of Sexton's therapy tapes, *An Accident of Hope* (Routledge 2012), at first defers to the expert opinions of Orne and Middlebrook, "who knew her more intimately in person and in print than almost anyone . . . joined in their certainty that Sexton was not sexually abused, despite the evidence to the contrary." (34) Sworczewski acknowledges that Sexton

was at times a performer in therapy, "prone to storytelling" and eager to borrow the tragedies and pathologies of other patients she met in the hospital in order to impress her doctor with a compelling display of pseudo-symptoms and memories. On closer analysis of the recordings, however, Sworczewski reconsidered:

> But when I listened to one of the final tapes in the Schlesinger collection, recorded in late April 1964, I heard Sexton ask Orne if she *had* to tell her new therapist about "that other thing, that *might* have happened." Attentive to her uneasy, almost embarrassed tone, I found myself questioning what her uncertain voice was really saying. She did not seem proud of the possibility that she had been sexually abused. In fact, she wanted Orne to tell Duhl (her new doctor) about that for her. (34)

Sexton's own words on the topic are particularly relevant to my thesis in this chapter, because – quite beyond the question of empirical veracity – she is repeatedly concerned with the relationship between the reality of her selfhood and the reality of the incest, as if one cannot be real if the other is not also real. What is more, the kind of selfhood she is at pains to articulate in these testimonies is constrained by a very specific account of temporality. As I mentioned earlier, she is careful to distinguish memory from the kind of present moment intensity she experiences in trance states when the image of the incest scene returns to her. Perhaps the reason why she does not argue much with Orne and other naysayers regarding the veracity of the incest-memory is because she does not consider these experiences to be memories either. They are something else – an experience of time that has little do with memory but

everything to do with her sense of self. In one testimony, she describes her perception of the incest scene as follows:

> I have frozen that scene in time, made everyone stop moving. I thought I could stop this all from happening. That's what I want to believe – when I'm in that hard place – that's not what I believe now, just when I'm that child in trance. I can't grow up because then all these other things will happen. I want to turn around and start everything going backward. (Middlebrook, 59)

This way of experiencing a past traumatic event as intensely present – rather than straightforwardly recalled – is consistent with more recent scholarship on trauma, like Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature Psychoanalysis and History* (1992).[31] My intervention in this conversation is to consider the specific role kinship plays in the iteration of trauma stemming from incestuous abuse. In the poems I have analyzed so far, kinship appears as something that threatens and smothers, something that is impossible to escape except by recourse to a kind of magical thinking, where a self free from kinship emerges as an impossibility that can nonetheless be entertained poetically, often religiously. My more specific claim is that incest represents a special expression of this impossible self, of this self that has escaped the burdens of kinship. Incest defies kinship like no other force. Such is the essence of the incest taboo. In Sexton's work, I see evidence that the pain of incest

[31] Caruth goes so far as to argue that the traumatic event is always already forgotten, that the traumatized subject is repeatedly in search of an event that was never remembered in the first place. She writes, "the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all." (8)

involves the confused promise that one might be delivered out of kinship. The pain is confusing – the way double-binds tend to confuse – because escaping kinship is often precisely what Sexton's speakers most desire. The lasting trauma, then, would seem to involve the fulfillment of this very complicated desire.

In a subsequent conversation with Orne, Sexton emphasizes again that the reality of her own identity depends on the reality of the incest, yet she is still not sure that it happened. Interestingly, Orne turns the conversation back to Sexton's broader relationship with her father, that is, to kinship. Her relationship with her father – prior to any incestuous abuse – was already demeaning and stifling the way kinship often is in her poetry. While I draw my evidence mainly from the poems, it is worth considering in the following testimony how kinship is something a young Sexton would likely have wanted to escape.

> A.S: I couldn't make all this up, or I don't exist at all! Or do I make up a trauma to go with my symptoms?
>
> Dr.: There wasn't a simple cause; it's something that happened many times without its necessarily happening just this way. When your father was drinking he was communicating something to you.
>
> A.S.: Disgust.
>
> Dr.: Or attraction.
>
> A.S.: Sitting beside Daddy, his saying I can't eat when she's at the dinner table – I thought pimples were a sign of things inside that were showing.
>
> Dr.: Your feelings about him? (56-57)

Orne's insistence here that Ralph Harvey would have been communicating "attraction" to Sexton and that the "things inside" Sexton "that were showing" could have been "her feelings about him" is ironic, given Orne's adamant denial that the incest actually occurred. Perhaps he is exploring what he takes to be the "metaphor" Sexton uses to understand her relationship to her father. Sexton is much more focused in this dialogue on the "disgust" and physical ugliness that distanced her from her father emotionally, the pimples that provoked her father's beratement of her. Orne seems to want to ascribe incestuous motives to Sexton, while she has moved quite beyond the topic of incest, describing instead the everyday indignities of sharing a dinner table with a father who would make such cruel comments on her physical appearance. When Middlebrook quotes this passage from the recordings, she makes no acknowledgement of all these obvious ways in which Sexton and Orne are talking past one another, how Orne is bent on leading Sexton in a direction that fails to resonate with her own recollections and feelings. Their talking past one another resembles a moment early in Sexton's 1969 play *Mercy Street*, when the character Dr. Alex guides his patient Daisy through the process of selecting memories for their therapy session and will not let her choose the memories she wants.

> DR ALEX: We're running late. Daisy, think back over your life and pick, quite at random, some scene for your one remembrance scene. Some scene that was beautiful, but tense . . . a time that made life seem more real, yet close to death. It must be a recent scene and yet one of no importance . . . A scene that comes readily to mind.
>
> DAISY: Not Christ?

DR ALEX: No. Not Christ . . . a common seeming time.

DAISY: Not rocking the baby, for although children three, I have left everyone. Oh Christ, take care of them somehow . . .

DR ALEX: No time for that, here.

DAISY: Last July when my daughter Abigail won a silver cup at the horse show.

DR ALEX: Stop digressing. (8)

Daisy's desire to locate Christ in her past refers to the over-arching dramatic premise of *Mercy Street*, which casts the psychiatrist's office with the trappings of a Catholic or Anglican mass, with Dr. Alex in the role of priest and Daisy in the role of supplicant and confessor. But it is also consistent with my reading of Sexton's work thus far. The search for redemption is a search for an experience outside the "common seeming time" Dr. Alex prefers. Again, an idealized notion of identity and experience is for Sexton distinguished by its temporal dimensions. Indeed, a dispute over the nature of memory not only goes to the heart of the play's plot. A similar dispute also surfaced during the play's original production, under the title *Tell Me Your Answer True,* at the Charles Playhouse in Boston. Ben Shaktman, director of the experimental theatre, who advised Sexton through several revisions of the script, "wanted to ground the play in psychological realities, but Sexton wanted to probe the conflict between psychological explanations and the mysteries of meaning that cannot be approached through mere understanding." (Middlebrook, 228) Expressing this frustration to her agent, Sexton shed useful light on the philosophical questions that motivated her to write *Mercy Street*:

> Right now I'm beginning to doubt the whole basis of the play (One, that the inaccuracy of memory fools us all forever; two, that the idea of Christ fools us all, twisting life into little jigsaw patterns, leaving us all at the ever-resurrection terror of 'The Place.') (228)

Sexton's resignation to "the inaccuracy of memory" suggests why she would never assert that her experiences of childhood incest, conveyed so vividly in therapy and in writing, were grounded in empirical facts. On the other hand, her conception of Christ suggests a powerful alternative to conventional memory, an alternative that may have proven crucial to Sexton's negotiation of incest survivorship. At the very least, we can say that the mysteries of Christian redemption – "the ever-resurrection terror of 'the Place'" – guides *Mercy Street*'s protagonist Daisy Cullen through her experiences of incest more profoundly and satisfyingly than straightforward recollection, Dr. Alex's preferred strategy, ever could. To cope with incest, Daisy is compelled to envision a genderless, post-human identity. "I'm no more a woman than Christ was a man," she says near the end of the play. (38) To escape her feelings of guilt and terror, Daisy must leave the mortal, gendered world altogether. Sexton, it is worth recalling, committed suicide in 1974.

Written under various titles throughout the 1960s and performed at the American Place Theater in New York in 1969, *Mercy Street* deals with incest more explicitly and at greater length than any other work in Sexton's corpus. The play's autobiographical content is impossible to ignore, its configuration of characters corresponding almost seamlessly with key figures from Sexton's childhood,

particularly the triad of mother, father, and great-aunt, whose respective roles in the occurrence and aftermath of Daisy's victimization comprise the play's central conflict. Daisy's experience of father/daughter incest, witnessed and condemned by her Aunt Amelia, leads her to believe she has murdered her family by abandoning them in a housefire. Like Sexton's real-life "Nana," Aunt Amelia descends into insanity after the incest comes to light, and Daisy blames herself for her beloved aunt's decline.

In therapy with Dr. Alex, Daisy searches for Christ among the children she left behind when she was committed to the psychiatric hospital. Some vision of kinship has been punctured by Daisy's absence, and she looks to Christ, the figure for the extra-human in human form, to repair these damaged kinship ties. Dr. Alex tells Daisy to "stop digressing" whenever she tries to focus on the lives her young daughters are living without her. The doctor wants Daisy to choose a scene in which she is present, not one in which her kin are marked by her absence. But these fraught kinship ties are more real for Daisy than anything else. Straightforward recollection would confine her to memories in which she physically partook, but she is searching for an experience that exceeds conventional memory, looser affective connections, expressed well in mystical or religious terms.

The "scene" Daisy finally settles on is a trip she took to Venice with her husband the previous summer, wherein she sought to merge her identity with that of her Aunt Amelia. Aunt Amy also traveled to Venice, we learn, when she was a

young woman, back in 1889. Venice is where Amelia learned that the man she loved was already married, a devastating rejection that rendered her a virgin forever after. Daisy seeks to walk in her aunt's footprints, reading the letters Aunt Amelia wrote decades earlier, an effort that eventually leads her back to a childhood scene, and then to the scene of incest between Daisy and her father Arthur, witnessed by Aunt Amelia.

Before Daisy even settles on this scene, however, Amelia enters the drama as a living voice, leveling an accusation at Daisy: "She hurt time!" (8) Amelia refers literally to the time when Daisy was ten-years-old and broke her clock, but the metaphorical resonances of this accusation are extended throughout the rest of the play. Daisy is guilty of damaging a sense of temporality that is important to Amelia. The accusation seems clearly linked to, and perhaps synonymous with, the accusation Amy levels at Daisy a few pages later – that Daisy committed incest with her father, that she offered up her maidenhood to him "like a piece of chocolate." (13) The violation incest seems to represent in *Mercy Street* is a violation of genealogical time, of familial heritage and kinship. This odd formulation will, I hope, become clearer as I analyze the remainder of the play.

Throughout her recollections of Venice, Daisy longs to identify with her deceased aunt, to look like her and live like her, a prospect both exciting and frightening: "I looked just like her. I thought, I'm losing me! . . . A picture within a picture . . . namesakes with the same face." (9) However, the ghostly voice of Aunt

Amelia is always hovering close by, quick to squelch Daisy's efforts at identification: "With hair like that – never!" Amelia's ghost will not permit Daisy to identify with her, we soon learn, because Daisy's incestuous relationship with her father makes her ineligible for such relations, casting her outside the scope of intergenerational kinship ties.

At stake in *Mercy Street* are two different modes of relating to the past. Dr. Alex is interested in empirical events that can be recollected one fact at a time. But Daisy is in pursuit of a radically different experience – not the fact that she was in Venice, but the possibility of becoming Aunt Amelia; not concrete events but relationships that are felt even in the absence of the person in question. Daisy invokes the figure of Christ to express this experience of intimacy that exceeds and transcends the staleness of remembered facts. Dr. Alex characterizes his therapeutic protocol as an effort to remove Daisy from Christ: "Now we shall proceed to unlock you from your Christ. I am the surgeon of the psyche, and I have a swift hand." (4-5)

The force of kinship cannot be relegated to one point in time, recovered and reconstructed in a therapy session. For Daisy, this force spans generations with the insistence of a ghost. Incest emerges in *Mercy Street* as the transgression that cuts Daisy off from her Aunt Amelia.

> AMELIA: Why don't you stop playing ghosts! Since you seem to have hung me up in your mind so firmly ever since I died – a poor old lunatic woman –
>
> DAISY: Me, too, Aunt Amy – a crazy lunatic woman!

AMELIA: No one is a lunatic *here*. There is no room for such things, And further, since you've hung me up in your mind like a Virgin you had better understand what kind of a virgin I was and further, why! You couldn't have any comprehension of the word. As soon as you became aware of your maidenhood you offered it up to your father like a piece of chocolate.

ARTHUR: Shut up, for God's sake, make her shut up! (*He exits left*)

JUDITH: She's crazy: don't listen to her.

DAISY: Christ come back to me. I'm calling to you. Look down from your tree of nails and speak to me.

DR ALEX: Enough. Back in your places.

CHOIR: (*Tape*) And He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead.

DR ALEX: Daisy, Judith, Arthur, Amelia, that series of events that changed you.

DAISY: No event, no event at all . . . no fire, no desire. (13)

Daisy's insistence that the incest is "no event, no event at all," while Alex continues to refer to "that series of events," captures the fundamental disconnect in this patient/doctor dialogue, one which parallels Sexton's documented relationship with Orne – and speaks to the complex temporality of trauma she addresses in her writing. The voices of Daisy's parents – Judith and Arthur – enter the drama at the first mention of incest, embodying the prohibition on speaking this act. In the face of this crisis – the stakes of which are nothing less than the viability of kinship itself, the possibility of maintaining her relationship with these people – Daisy implores Christ to come down from his cross. The choir, identified both with the refrains of Christian liturgy and the refrains of a therapy tape, prophesy a final judgement, and Dr. Alex commands all the figures of Daisy's psyche to go "back in their places."

As the play progresses, we learn that Aunt Amelia had been the secret breadwinner of the family, bailing Arthur out of his financial failings, even selling off Judith's beloved cottage, a family inheritance. When Amelia appalls Judith with this information, Arthur takes his humiliation to his daughter's bedside, a bottle of liquor in his hand. It is in this emasculated state that Arthur commits incest with his adolescent daughter. The scene, like earlier passages in the play, bring Daisy and Amelia together, through the metonyms of their breasts and wombs. The violation of Daisy's body comes to distinguish her from Amelia, whose corporeality remains clean and virginal. When Amelia witnesses the incest, a powerful psychological bond between the aunt and the niece is severed.

> ARTHUR: . . . Lie down now and I'll give you a back rub the way Aunt Amy does. You have breasts, too, don't you. Nice little peachy breasts. Does it feel good?
>
> AMELIA: I am clean. I am sweeter than honeycomb and the bees buzz over my mouth.
>
> ARTHUR: Oh, Daisy, I'm so lonely. I need someone to love me.
>
> AMELIA: I will stroke my skin with cream and let the virgins admire me. I will build my womb like the ribs of a dory and when my little girl comes to me I will let her lie betwixt my breasts.
>
> ARTHUR: Daisy, lie close to me.
>
> DAISY: Yes, daddy, yes.
>
> AMELIA: (*crosses down left and discovers them*) Were you calling, Daisy? I thought I heard a voice – Arthur!
>
> ARTHUR: Amelia, I –
>
> AMELIA: Disgusting!

DAISY: Why do you cry, daddy?

AMELIA: Filthy . . . both of you! (29)

Shortly after discovering the incest, Aunt Amelia begins to lose her sanity, in much the way Sexton's own Nana lost her sanity in the dysfunctional atmosphere of the Sexton household, according to biographical records. "You make a double," Amelia says, describing her devolving mental health,

> a conversation that goes on between your two selves and then it starts . . . starts to scream obscene things and then it rolls down the hill and the other joins in, howling with laughter, calling off its own words, own signals, little plaything, away from itself . . . then these two are over, are dead . . . They are cast off, double trouble. (30)

When Daisy tries to approach Amelia after the incest is revealed, Amelia denies her recognition. "Who are you? I don't know you," she says, calling her "a fraudulent Daisy." (31) It is as if the "two selves" Amelia describes rolling down a hill and warring with each other are Daisy and herself, the severed union of kindred souls.

The incest in *Mercy Street* has the curious effect of individuating Daisy, by way of cutting her off from her Aunt Amelia. The remainder of the play explores Daisy's altered sense of self in the wake of these altered kinship ties. "O little mother," she says, "I am in my own mind. Wrong house. I am locked in the wrong house." (34) Her own mind is not where she belongs, Daisy suggests, because she belongs with her Aunt Amelia. The self freed from kin, which I posited at the

beginning of this chapter as a way of understanding incest's impact in Sexton's poems, surfaces here as a nightmare of isolation.

Daisy's recollections in Dr. Alex's office jump forward to her 27-year-old self, visiting her children on a trip home from the mental hospital. She cannot draw too close to these kin either. The play ends with a series of dream sequences in which Daisy describes her alienated identity in spiritual terms. "I'm no more a woman," she says, "than Christ was a man." (38) The incest has lifted her out of gender itself, individuating her to such a degree that she cannot identify with these categories. As in her poetry, Sexton ascribes a divine aspect to the terrible power of the incest transgression. Daisy exceeds womanhood the way Christ exceeds human mortality, leaving us to wonder what her peculiarly post-feminine divinity might comprise.

Critics of Sexton's so-called "confessional" mode of writing overlook the peculiar relationship between incest and selfhood in her work. Incest in Sexton's writing challenges a conception of self constituted by kinship, by togetherness with family members and continuity with other points in time, with heritage and genealogy. I close this chapter by suggesting how a closer consideration of incest in Sexton's work can challenge the popular – often dismissive – critical reception of her writing, charges of narcissism and lack of experimentation. To do this, I will return to the theoretical framework I proposed near the beginning of the chapter, reading Sexton's account of the "I" – especially as it manifests under the duress of incestuous abuse – through Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological account of self and other, as

they are experienced temporally and treated as the basis of ethics. But first, let us consider Jo Gill's account of Sexton's negative critical reception, and charges of narcissism that have been leveled against her. In a 2004 article that ultimately defends Sexton from these accusations and praises her formal experimentation, Gill writes:

> Confessional poetry, a mode that was prominent in the United States in the 1960s and early 70s, has, over time, come to be regarded as a regrettable, aberrant, and momentary spasm in the development of that nation's literature. . . Its chief impact is now understood as providing a foil against which to measure the sophistication and achievements of postconfessional writing - Language poetry, the New York school, and various other avant-garde and postmodern forms. As Alan Williamson suggests, "confessional poetry - almost from the moment that unfortunate term was coined - has been the whipping boy of half a dozen newer schools, New Surrealism, New Formalism, Language poetry ("Stories" (51))." . . . It is apparent from any survey of the criticism of confessional poetry that the mode is habitually and negatively associated with an authorial self-absorption verging on narcissism . . . Of the confessional poets of post-Second World War America, it has been said that none was 'more consistently and uniformly confessional than Anne Sexton [...] her name has almost become identified with the genre' (Lerner 52). And it is Sexton, more than any of her peers, who has been pronounced guilty of narcissism. As Joyce Carol Oates explains: 'Sexton has been criticized for the intensity of her preoccupations: always the self, the victimized, bullying, narcissistic self.' . . . As Alicia Ostriker concludes, 'Anne Sexton is the easiest poet in the world to condescend to. Critics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under N for Narcissist' ("That Story" 263). (59-61)

None of the critics Gill cites address Sexton's position as a possible incest survivor. When incest is mentioned in the context of Sexton's writing, it is usually lumped together with a slew of other provocative subjects Sexton addressed, as if provocation were her only point. I would argue, however, that incest deserves a

central place in any discussion of the meaning of Sexton's so-called confessionalism. Sexton did not flaunt her experience of incest as just one more unfortunate event that could lend her some glamorous victim-status. On the contrary, she could never decide for herself whether or not the incest even occurred, and yet this very undecidability of memory makes Sexton's work profoundly complicated in its treatment of identity, for when time and memory are uncertain, the self is uncertain as well. As I hope this chapter has shown, a deeper engagement with the meaning of incest in Sexton's work radically reorients and complicates the kind of self-hood she is at pains to express. Born into families, we develop our selves as kin with other people, but when this kinship is violated and undermined by the violence of incest, Sexton's work suggests, other versions of the self present themselves to the imagination.

Emmanuel Levinas' thought has much to tell us about mid-twentieth century "Confessional poetry" and the stakes of such confessionalism, which is nothing less than the stakes of the "I," of the problem – to use Levinas' phenomenological terminology – of being an "existent" amid "existence." I invoke Levinas partly to show that Sexton's poetry does not reflect rank narcissism – as some of her naysayers, or naysayers of confessionalism in general have charged –, but that it rather problematizes the meaning of the "I," of self-hood, in the context of family traumas that make the nature of the "I" not at all obvious. Incest, I argue, in its defiance of normative kinship, makes the nature of selfhood an especially vexed issue in Sexton's writing. Engaging Levinas's work, I do not intend to dispute the valuable

interventions of feminist and psychoanalytic critics into the topic of incest. Rather, I simply want to offer something new to the conversation – a way of engaging kinship in Sexton's work as an ontological category. The difference between incest and kinship is like the difference between solitude and plurality. Levinas writes:

> . . . the present is a way of accomplishing the 'starting out from itself' that is always an evanescence. If the present endured, it would have received its existence from something preceding. It would have benefited from a heritage. But it is something that comes from itself. One cannot come from oneself otherwise than by receiving nothing from the past. Evanescence would thus be the essential form of beginning. But how can this evanescence result in something? By a dialectical situation that describes rather than excludes a phenomenon that is called for now: the 'I.' . . . The paradox ceases when one understands that the 'I' is not initially an existent but a mode of existing itself, that properly speaking it does not exist. (53-54)

The self, for Levinas, is a temporal category. The present moment is the site of solitude, of the "I," because the present has no heritage or legacy. Considered strictly as the present and only the present, as "evanescence," it owes nothing to the past or the future. Community and plurality only emerge when one moves out of the present, when time is experienced as a progression from past to future. "She hurt time!" Aunt Amelia says to Daisy in *Mercy Street* (8). Incest in Sexton's work describes such an evanescence, a solitude that – paradoxically – includes other people, includes, in particular, the perpetrators of incest. Since these kin – Sexton's father Ralph Harvey or his fictional analogue, Arthur Cullen, in *Mercy Street* – have closed the gap between themselves and their daughters, the healthy distance that makes familial belonging legible and sustainable, their abused daughters are forced to

come up with a whole new conception of time in order to describe the phenomenon they have experienced. Incest is not just one more event from the past which these women can recall and catalogue alongside other events. Incest ruptures their experience of time. The abuse manifests not as memory but as a present-moment intensity that is essential to their sense of identity. "I don't remember – I know," Sexton told Orne when describing her mother's nightly inspections of her vulva. "I couldn't make all this up or I don't exist at all," she told him, when describing her father's violation of her body, "or do I make up a trauma to go with my symptoms?"

Of course, none of my speculations here can be taken as conclusive with regard to Sexton's own childhood traumas, but I am on somewhat firmer ground in analyzing a fictional literary character, like Daisy Cullen. In *Mercy Street*, Daisy does not simply recall incest as a matter of fact. She first looks for Christ as an emblem of redemption, a figure who might heal her severed ties with her children. Then, she seeks to merge her identity with her Aunt Amelia, longing to walk in the footsteps of her aunt. It is these efforts at identification and redemption – not simple recollection – that lead Daisy back to the scene of incest with her father. When the incest transpires, Daisy is cut off from her Aunt Amelia, who no longer recognizes her niece, and she then turns to visions of the afterlife for an adequate account of her identity, which has become impossible to read under the duress of incest. Daisy describes this vision in an extended dream sequence:

> I'm tired of the gender of things. Last night I had a dream and when I woke up I said 'You are the answer. You will outlive my husband and my father' . . . In that dream there was a city made of chains where Joan was put to death in man's clothes and the nature of the angels went unexplained, no two made in the same species. One had an ear in its hand! One was chewing a star and recording its orbit! They were all obeying themselves, performing God's functions. A people apart. 'You are the answer,' I said to them and then I entered, lying down on the gates of their city. Then chains were fastened around me and I lost my gender, my womanhood. Adam was on the left of me and Eve was on the right of me . . . both thoroughly inconsistent with the world of the reason." (37)

Incest, as represented in Sexton's oeuvre, is a phenomenon that demands extraordinary accounting. The "answer" Daisy seeks in this passage has to be "thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason," or else it is no answer at all. The answer cannot lie in empirical, clinical descriptions of abuse, in facts straightforwardly recalled from the past. The answer cannot lie in "the gender of things," in culturally conceived divisions between female and male. The answer, again and again in Anne Sexton's work, challenges normative modes of memory and epistemology, of gender construction and kinship ties. To know incest is to depart from a prevailing ontology that describes identity as a coherent series of points in time, strung together by memory. Daisy can no longer belong to her Aunt Amelia, because – through incest – she ceases to receive anything from the past; she cannot benefit from a heritage. With incest, Daisy turns to the metaphysical for the only viable account of what she has endured. I hope this chapter has helped to clarify the enormous challenges incest poses to representation in Sexton's work, so that her writing can be engaged as more than merely "confessional." With *The Bluest Eye*

and *Chinatown*, Sexton's writing plumbs the silenced voices of incest victims to identify the work this silence is doing, and what breaking the silence must entail.

Afterword: Twenty Years Later

The Paradox of Survival
in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* appeared twenty years after the texts I analyze in this dissertation, and differs from them in fundamental ways. Bone, the abused child at the heart of the novel, survives incestuous abuse in a way Pecola in *The Bluest Eye,* Evelyn Mulwray in *Chinatown*, and the speakers in Anne Sexton's work do not. The novel's depiction of sexual violence is more explicit, the abuse takes place over a much longer period of time, and yet, another energy coincides with the abuse, a resistance, a series of counter-narratives Bone employs to escape total psychic annihilation, or death. Bone's survival does not occur subsequent to the abuse, with the intervention of law enforcement or a heroic therapist. Rather, the abuse and the survival are simultaneous, a paradox that encapsulates Allison's narrative craft, for it is story-telling that saves Bone. "And how could I explain to anyone," Bone asks herself, "that I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the story I told myself about it?" (113) Story-telling and gospel music represent her suffering at a distance she can control and manipulate, so that the ugliness of what her stepfather Daddy Glen is doing to her – the beatings, the molestation, and ultimately, the rape – becomes beautiful in her imagination. The evil of the abuse becomes good in her own private telling of it. I devote this afterword to investigating the role of

paradox in *Bastard Out of Carolina,* for the novel extends the difficult articulation of incest achieved by Allison's predecessors in the 1970s – the vertiginous rending of kinship Morrison, Polanski, and Sexton describe – by turning the crisis of representation at the heart of incestuous violence into an advantage. Paradox, for Allison, opens the way to grace. To this extent, *Bastard Out of Carolina* helps us gauge the progress American literature has made, over twenty years, in treating the difficult topic of incestuous abuse.

Allison has made clear her indebtedness to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*:

> I don't think I would have ever written *Bastard* if I hadn't read *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. In fact, I know I wouldn't. It was like somebody cracked my world open when I read that book. (Bass)

The two novels have more in common than the topic of incest. Both are concerned with beauty and ugliness as forces that govern one's access to love, marriageability, procreation, and family formation – in short, to kinship. But whereas Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* accepts the racist determination that she is ugly, Bone Boatwright in *Bastard* discovers a prism through which she can interrogate her presumed ugliness from new and exciting angles. She discovers gospel music. The discovery changes everything.

> I knew, I knew I was the most disgusting person on earth. I didn't deserve to live another day. I started hiccupping and crying. 'I'm sorry. Jesus, I'm sorry.' How could I live with myself? How could God stand me? Was this why Jesus wouldn't speak to my heart? The music washed over me . . . *Softly*

> *and tenderly, Jesus is calling*. The music was a river trying to wash me clean . . . That was what gospel was meant to do—make you hate and love yourself at the same time, make you ashamed and glorified. It worked on me. It absolutely worked on me. (135-136)

Bone does not simply stop hating herself. Rather, she stumbles upon a bit of artistic magic that allows hate and love to coincide, making you "hate and love yourself at the same time." What else can she do? There are no adults to tell her she is not disgusting or evil, that she is not deserving of the beatings, gropings, and verbal attacks Daddy Glen brings down upon her. Her mother, Anney Boatwright, repeatedly enables Glen's behavior, asking Bone "Baby, what did you do? What did you do?" (107) after Glen beats her, placing the blame on Bone, even as she tries to comfort the child. At most, Anney scolds Glen and leaves him for a night or two, as she does after a doctor at the hospital discovers bruising on Bone's coccyx, but she always returns to Glen's arms, enjoying a respite of familial harmony before the cycle of abuse resumes. Even at the end of the novel, after Anney walks in on Glen raping Bone, she chooses her husband over her daughter, leaving Bone to live with her Aunt Raylene.

There are adults in *Bastard* who love and guide Bone – Aunt Raylene, Uncle Earle, and Aunt Ruth, especially –, but they are not aware of the abuse until Bone has already dealt with it on her own, for almost a decade. Bone is five-years-old when Glen first molests her, in the parking lot of the hospital where Anney is giving birth to their still-born son, a loss Glen never recovers from and for which he seems to blame Bone. She is almost thirteen when Glen rapes her at the end of the novel, and when

she finally breaks free from the family. During the years in between, she has no reason to believe the abuse is unjust. It is so intertwined with her identity she views the violence as fair punishment for her existence – not for any particular behavior, but for the fact of her being.[32] "I knew that it was nothing I had done that made him beat me," Bone says, "It was just me, the fact of my life, who I was in his eyes and mine. I was evil. Of course I was." (110) Gospel music – blending the mystery of Christian redemption with the vicissitudes of artistic representation – grants Bone the benefit of paradox. The utter depravity she ascribes to herself dovetails into utter holiness. She discovers this fruitful paradox in other places too – in story-telling, and in her relationships with certain cousins and friends --, but Allison foregrounds gospel. Bone's attraction to gospel music is an unspoken negotiation of the shame Daddy Glen has instilled in her, and it allows her to survive and triumph over intolerable circumstances.

When I taught *Bastard Out of Carolina* to students at California State University at Monterey Bay in spring 2017, I referred to Philip Sidney's 1579 treatise *Defence of Poesy* in order to identify and historicize the aspects of literary language

[32] The fact of her being is, for Glen, the fact of her illegitimacy – and the fact of his own illegitimacy with respect to her, being a mere stepfather with no child of his own. Most painfully for him, he has sired no son. Thus, the logic of incest in *Bastard* involves the stakes of kinship, as it did in the other texts I analyze in this dissertation. Glen's beatings and molestations of Bone can be read as compensations for the absence of a real kinship tie between them. "Call me Daddy," Glen says to Bone and her sister Reese early in the novel, before he marries Anney, "Call me Daddy 'cause I love your mama, 'cause I love you. I'm gonna treat you right. You'll see. You're mine, all of you, mine.'" (36) The anxiety expressed through his insistence here – the anxiety of being not quite a father, just a stepfather – extends through the rest of the novel, particularly the times when he abuses Bone. "She's my girl too," he tells Anney, after his first time beating Bone, "Someone's got to love her enough to care how she turns out." (107)

Dorothy Allison employs in her depiction of Bone's survival. Sidney defends poets against the accusation that they are liars, that literary language excites the passions and distances us from truth, a charge famously articulated in Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates proposes that poets be banned from his ideal polis. "The poet, he nothing affirmeth," Sidney counters, "and therefore never lieth." (85) Literary language reports neither history (true events) nor philosophy (pure ideas), he argues, but a combination of both, an entirely different kind of expression that is emotionally manipulative, yes, but can also move one to "virtuous action." Literature does not report what happened, but rather imagines what might be.

I asked my students to find examples in *Bastard Out of Carolina* of literary techniques – paradox, irony, parallelisms, and repetitions – that gather ideas into patterns and configurations that exceed a mere truth-telling function. My lecture, "The Music of Story-Telling in *Bastard Out of Carolina*," suggested that Allison's story-telling style shares some of the qualities of the gospel music Bone loves. Just as music involves a pattern and a divergence from that pattern, a rule and then an exception to the rule, Allison's use of paradox and irony and juxtaposition makes ideas -- even the cruelest ideas – sing beautifully, sing so that Bone can live with them. I asked my students to consider how this musical aspect of literary figuration helps Bone cope with the horrors in her life.

Allison is herself an outspoken incest survivor, and she has spoken at length about the role of story-telling in her own survival.

> It's really awkward to be essentially a writer, a novelist, a liar and at the same time be a feminist activist and an incest survivor, because one has to be extremely pragmatic, forthright and holding the world accountable, but the other, the storyteller, you know if it sounds good, if it sings on the page, baby I'll tell you lies. I'll tell you lies 'til I don't even know where the truth begins. (Bass)

The relationship between truth and representation – and especially between truth and memory – has been a contentious feature of the public conversation surrounding incestuous abuse for at least the last twenty-five years. The False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF), founded in 1992 by Pamela and Peter Freyd after their daughter Jennifer accused Peter of sexually abusing her in childhood,[33] claims that therapists plant false memories in the minds of their patients. Memories repressed for decades do sometimes emerge in therapy sessions, and while many clinicians view this delayed recall as a function of trauma, the FMSF views it as a conjuring trick used to destroy families. It is not my role, as a literary critic, to take sides in this clinical debate. Nevertheless, I want to highlight the unique power of literary language, as extolled by Sidney and practiced by Allison, to grapple with truths so horrible, so taboo and refractory to direct representation, that the survival of victims may depend on getting the representation right, on making the horror "sing on the page." Getting the representation "right" may not translate to empirical veracity, of the sort the FMSF holds sacred above all other expressive standards. When one's survival is at stake, an adequate representation may involve telling a story one can live with,

[33] http://www.fmsfonline.org/

inhabiting contradictions that would be hopelessly insoluble in any other representational mode. As I tried to convey in my chapter on Anne Sexton, the undecidability of memory became a crucial part of Sexton's poetic persona, to the point where the character Daisy Cullen in *Mercy Street* prefers to search for Christ in her past rather than simple empirical memories. Her experience of incest is so disruptive of her sense of self she chooses a religious mode of representation over a psychological one, to the chagrin of her therapist Dr. Alex.

Bone too finds solace in a Christian account of identity and experience. Along with her joyful discovery of gospel music, she discovers the paradox of Christian redemption – how sinners are better positioned than devotees to encounter grace. She overhears her Uncle Earle gripe about this incoherency, and is fascinated by his dilemma. Earle is a reprobate, an alcoholic and a womanizer who refuses to join his local congregation, and yet he recognizes that his refusal to join makes him more beloved by the congregants than he would be if he embraced their faith. So why not just remain a reprobate forever? "And you are never so valuable as when you stand outside the fold, the one God wants," he says, "Oh, don't I know! Don't I know? They want you, oh yes, they want you. Till they get you." (148) Only an outsider gets to be an insider, by this schema. Only the damned get to be saved. This paradox excites Bone every bit as much as the gospel music she dances to and tries desperately to sing.

> What I really liked was how he talked about Jesus. He talked about Jesus in a way I understood even when I couldn't put it together with all he said. He talked about Jesus like a man dying for need of him, but too stubborn to sit down to the meal spread within reach. Earle talked the language of gospel music, with its rhythms and intensity . . . It was just like Uncle Earle had told me: if you were not saved, not part of the congregation, you were all anyone could see at the invocation. There was something heady and enthralling about being the object of all that attention. It was like singing gospel on the television with the audience following your every breath. I could not resist it . . . I could not have explained, but it was not actually baptism I wanted, or welcome to the congregation . . . It was that moment of sitting on the line between salvation and damnation with the preacher and the old women pulling bodily at my poor darkened soul. (148, 151)

The shame Bone feels at being molested and beaten by her stepfather Daddy Glen, believing she deserves it, that she is evil, gets transposed here onto the notion of Christian damnation, but because not being saved grants you special attention in this Christian community, Bone is able to transform her shame into a "heady and enthralling" hope. Because she believes herself to be "the most disgusting person on earth," she is at once the person most eligible for salvation.

The middle portion of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is oddly joyful. Daddy Glen recedes from the narrative for over fifty pages, as Bone spends time at Aunt Raylene's house, finds a friend in a bitter albino girl named Shannon Pearl, and pursues her love of gospel music, struggling hopelessly to sing the songs of Kitty Wells and Patsy Cline, even though she cannot hold a note. Bone's inability to sing only emboldens her efforts, for her talentlessness strikes her as yet another paradox perfectly suitable to the spirit of gospel. A bad singer, she concludes, clearly belongs in a medium that lets you be "ashamed and glorified" at the same time.

We see Bone grow stronger in these pages, without ceasing to blame herself for the abuse. Again, she draws strength from her increasing ability to inhabit contradiction, to embrace paradox. Shannon Pearl enters the narrative as a physical manifestation of all the ugliness Bone feels inside herself. The sickly, half-blind albino girl, with pink eyes and bulging blue veins, turns people's stomachs, but her ugliness becomes for Bone a strange kind of beauty, a force so hateful it bursts into love.

> Looking back at me from between her mother's legs, Shannon was wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction. There had to be something wrong with me, I was sure, the way I went from awe to disgust where Shannon was concerned. When Shannon sat between her mama's legs or chewed licorice strings her daddy held out for her, I purely hated her. But when other people would look at her scornfully or the boys up at Lee Highway would call her Lard Eyes, I felt a fierce and protective love, as if she were more my sister than Reese. I felt as if I belonged to her in a funny kind of way, as if her 'affliction' put me deeply in her debt. It was a mystery, I guessed, a sign of grace like Aunt Maybelle was always talking about. Magic. (156)

Shannon and Bone are like photo negatives of each other, their rage at the world's mistreatment of them springing from inverted contexts. Shannon is rich, while Bone is poor. Shannon is visibly, unavoidably ugly, while Bone's ugliness is private and hidden, carried in her psyche, in her processing of Daddy's Glen's abuse of her. Bone tells violent, fantastical stories about children kidnapped by monstrous figures. Shannon tells stories plucked from newspaper headlines, real-life autopsy reports and grisly accounts of "little children who had fallen in the way of large machines." (158) Bone wants desperately to be a gospel singer, but knows she never can be, knows she

lacks the talent to sing ugliness into beauty, hate into love, even though she is convinced this is her calling. Shannon understands profoundly the injustice Bone feels.

> All I wanted, I whispered, all I wanted, was a piece, a piece, a little piece of it . . . Shannon overheard and looked at me sympathetically. She knows, I thought, she knows what it is to want what you are never going to have. I'd underestimated her. (168)

Together the two girls plot their vengeance on the world. "If there was justice, then Shannon and I would make them all burn . . . 'Someday,' Shannon whispered. 'Yeah,' I whispered back. 'Someday.'" (166) The incestuous abuse Bone has suffered and will continue to suffer does not become less shameful to her in these pages. Rather, her friendship with Shannon Pearl teaches her how to shift back and forth between disgust and beauty, hate and love. It is in her movement between these extremes that Bone acquires an emotional buoyancy, a resilience that arms her against Daddy Glen's advances in the later portions of the novel. One moment she is moved to nausea by "the smell of Shannon's hair" and a gospel song that is "a little too gimmicky." The next moment she is defending Shannon fiercely against a man who has called her "the ugliest thing I have ever seen." (165) "You think you so pretty," she yells at the man. Bone's ability to feel repulsed and inspired by Shannon, almost at the same moment, is the power to make sense of injustices that would otherwise make no sense at all. Bone vomits at Shannon's ugliness, but she cannot abide a stranger insulting Shannon for that same ugliness, for she looks in Shannon's face and

sees something heartbreaking, a cruelty so irrational and bottomless it fill her with love: “The hate in her face was terrible. For a moment I loved her with all my heart.” (166)

Bone’s friendship with Shannon does not last, however, and its ultimate demise signals a newfound ability to move beyond paradox, to identify what is properly ugly and properly beautiful, to make some hard distinctions. Dorothy Allison has said she needed “to get a little mean” in order to survive incest. (Rose) One could read the latter half of *Bastard Out of Carolina* as charting Bone’s education in a productive form of meanness. One day the girls walk by a congregation that is singing the best gospel Bone has heard in a long time, “gut-shaking, deep-bellied, powerful voices . . . the real stuff . . . the whiskey edge, the grief and holding on, the dark night terror and determination of real gospel.” (169) When Bone suggests that Shannon’s father book this group for one of the gospel performances he manages, Shannon retorts with disgust and anger that her father “don’t handle niggers.” (170) In voicing her racism, Shannon violates the implicit logic that had been sustaining her friendship with Bone, their unspoken agreement that what the world calls ugly they shall call beautiful, that what fills them with hate shall be transformed into love. At the sound of the word “nigger,” Bone is reminded of Shannon’s class privilege, all the ways her more affluent family have been looking down on Bone’s family. It also reminds Bone of Daddy Glen’s family, the lawyers and business owners who sneer at the lower-class people their son has married into.

In a flash, her self-loathing and her experience of being abused gets situated in a broader social context.

> The way Shannon said "nigger" tore at me, the tone pitched exactly like the echoing sound of Aunt Madeline sneering "trash" when she thought I wasn't close enough to hear her. (170)

Prejudices long suppressed burst into the open. Bone calls Shannon "crazy," and Shannon calls Bone's family "a bunch of drunks and thieves and bastards." (170) The girls fistfight, exchanging blows and slurs until Bone, crying and exhausted, resorts to the cruelest insult of all. She calls Shannon ugly, forgetting the grace and compassion this ugliness had inspired in her before. Bone frees herself to be just as cruel to Shannon as the whole world has been. The loving paradox has collapsed, and in its place a pristine meanness emerges.

> "You're ugly." I swallowed my tears and made myself speak very quietly. "You're God's own ugly child and you're gonna be an ugly woman. A lonely, ugly old woman." Shannon's lips started to tremble, poking out of her face so that she was uglier than I'd ever seen her, a doll carved out of cold grease melting in the heat. "You ugly thing," I went on. "You monster, you greasy cross-eyed stinking sweaty-faced ugly thing!" I pointed all my fingers at her and spit at her patent-leather shoes. "You so ugly your own mama don't even love you." Shannon backed off, turned around, and started running. (171-172)

Bone's treatment of Shannon may not be admirable at an interpersonal level, but it demonstrates a new willingness to follow cruelty to its logical extreme; and she does this in response to a form of cruelty Shannon had never expressed so brazenly before.

Through racism, Shannon has stepped outside of gospel, asserting a hierarchy of beauty where none had existed before, drawing distinctions where before paradox had effaced all distinctions. She has committed sacrilege against grace, against the means of Bone's survival. Shannon's betrayal politicizes Bone, for she begins to realize that grace and paradox are not free from the political inequities associated with words like "trash" and "nigger." She begins to take control of her own survival. Instead of accepting paradox in a mode of complacency, she begins to perform paradox as a form of resistance, fighting for self-affirmation in the face of forces that would otherwise stamp it out.

Bone adopts this new method of resistance in earnest after she gets to know her Aunt Raylene, the one member of her extended family who eschewed the well-trodden path of marriage, pregnancy, and spirit-crushing blue-collar work. Raylene is a secret lesbian who lives alone by the river, canning fruits and vegetables, and repurposing and reselling the refuse that floats by her yard. "Trash rises," she tells Bone, soliciting her niece's help dredging old furniture and household items out of the river. The phrase becomes a metaphor for Bone's new fighting spirit, her refusal to suffer the fate of most of her cousins. Before she meets Raylene, she can imagine no alternatives to the "white trash" script the world has written for her.

> Growing up was like falling into a hole. The boys would quit school and sooner or later go to jail for something silly. I might not quit school, not while Mama had any say in the matter, but what difference would that make? What was I going to do in five years? Work in the textile mill? Join Mama at the

> diner? It all looked bleak to me. No wonder people got crazy as they grew up. (178)

In the final sections of *Bastard*, paradox is the force that redirects what is falling and raises it into the sky. Down becomes up for Bone. The depths of poverty and Daddy Glen's denigration of her become springboards for Bone's resistance.

> I never imagined that out on the river I would suddenly find myself as fascinated with my reclusive old aunt as I had ever been with gospel music . . . "Trash rises," Aunt Raylene joked the first afternoon I spent with her. "Out here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time." (180)

When Bone and her cousins Gray and Garvey discover two large trawling hooks in the river behind Raylene's house, they argue over their purpose. Gray is convinced the hooks are for mountain climbing and, while Bone finds this idea ridiculous, she quickly discovers how perfectly suited the metal barbs are to the task of scaling trees and high walls. As with all the other trash in Raylene's back lot, the kids repurpose the hooks for a higher purpose. The tools used to dredge dead bodies out of the river become the tools that raise Bone into the sky, to the roof of Woolworth's, where she and Grey break into the department store in revenge for all the sneers and condescension the store's managers have inflicted on them all their lives. The robbery marks Bone's first serious venture into criminality, following in the footsteps of her beloved Uncle Earle and other delinquent kin. More importantly, the adventure at Woolworth's solidifies Bone's commitment to fight for her survival. No longer content to listen to gospel music so she can "love and hate herself at the same

time," Bone is ready to simply love herself, whatever violence such self-affirmation might entail.

The hooks become a figure for Bone's survival. She takes them to bed with her, masturbates with them between her legs, running the chain that links them together across her own body.

> I put my head back and smiled. The chain moved under the sheet. I was locked away and safe. What I really was could not be touched. What I really wanted was not yet imagined. Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me. (193)

Whereas at the beginning of the novel she masturbated to the stories she told herself about being beaten by Daddy Glen, now she masturbates to stories in which she is not being abused, where that screaming child is somewhere else, outside the new identity she is forging. When she returns home from her adventures with Shannon Pearl, Aunt Raylene, and her cousins, Bone looks at Daddy Glen in a new light. The old self-loathing courses through her, but she no longer needs to join it with self-love in a paradox of grace. Instead, she transforms the shame into anger and defiance.

> Everything felt hopeless. He looked at me and I was ashamed of myself. It was like sliding down an endless hole, seeing myself at the bottom, dirty, ragged, poor, stupid. But at the bottom, at the darkest point, my anger would come and I would know that he had no idea who I was, that he never saw me as the girl who worked hard for Aunt Raylene, who got good grades no matter how often I changed schools, who ran errands for Mama and took good care of Reese. I was not dirty, not stupid, and if I was poor, whose fault was that? (209)

Kinship, Bone discovers, is not a regime of unconditional moral debt. She has the right to reject people who are endangering her. She has the right to hurt kin, if her survival depends on it. The title of *Bastard Out of Carolina* refers to Bone's illegitimacy, her fatherlessness at the outset of the narrative, a mark of shame she feels the need – at Anney and Glen's behest – to overcome. At the end of the novel, however, illegitimacy becomes a mark of grace, pride, and survival. Illegitimacy comes to signal Bone's rejection of the kin that have failed her. She needs to become illegitimate in order to become herself, in order to live. Thus, the over-arching paradox in *Bastard* returns us to the central topic of this dissertation: kinship. The fatherlessness that brings incest into Bone's life – in the compensatory and pathological figure of stepfather Daddy Glenn – becomes the salvation to which Bone must return, embracing fatherlessness in order to know and love herself.

> I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn't matter. I didn't care anymore what might happen. I wouldn't hold still anymore. (282)

In the final pages of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, kinship hangs in the balance. After Bone's aunts and uncles discover marks of the abuse on Bone's thighs and buttocks, the uncles beat Daddy Glenn within inches of his life, forcing Anney to choose between her daughter and husband, a choice she insists on evading. Right to the end, Anney remains committed to the project of repairing her family, of building a home where Bone and Glen can coexist, where she can have both kin. Incest, Bone

understands, makes such a vision impossible. She struggles to explain to her mother that kinship is not always worth preserving, but Anney is incapable of distinguishing kinship from love. If Bone rejects the configuration of kinship expressed by their present nuclear family, Anney believes, then it must necessarily follow that Bone hates her. Bone tries to disabuse Anney of this formulation – that love is inseparable from kinship – but to no effect. Loving her mother while also defying kinship becomes the last, perhaps cruelest, paradox Bone must confront in the novel.

> "Bone, I couldn't stand it if you hated me," she said.
>
> "I couldn't hate you," I told her. "Mama, I couldn't hate you."
>
> "But you're sure I'm gonna go back to him."
>
> "Uh-huh." I coughed and cleared my throat.
>
> "Oh God, Bone! I can't just go back. I can't have you hating me."
>
> "I ain't never gonna hate you." I took a deep breath, and made myself speak with no intonation at all. "I know you love him. I know you need him. And he's good to you. He's good to Reese. He just . . ." I thought a minute. "I don't know." (275-276)

Anney proposes taking Glen to a doctor, to fix him, but the suggestion only makes Bone feel "tired, aching tired." Efforts at rehabilitation, at making kinship work, strike her as futile and quite beside the point. This premium placed on kinship, on legitimacy, on family loyalty, has tyrannized Bone all her life, from the moment she was born and the county clerk stamped the word "illegitimate" on her birth certificate, motivating Anney to restore legitimacy to her daughter's life, however catastrophic the means. Liberation, Bone realizes, does not hinge on fixing kinship. Survival

depends rather on rejecting kinship. Of course, such defiance represents a profound sacrilege, as it did in *The Bluest Eye*, in Anne Sexton's work, and in *Chinatown*. But it is important to distinguish between two forms of defiance at work here. Incest violates the taboo that governs kinship. Bone, however, commits a secondary taboo, in refusing to believe that kinship is worth restoring in the wake of incestuous abuse.

In one of the last pieces of dialogue between Bone and Anney, Anney lays out the conditions under which she would return to Daddy Glen. "I won't go back until I know you're gonna be safe," she says, "I promise you, Bone." Bone responds by repeating the first half of Anney's sentence, excising all her mother's conditions and equivocations, transforming the sentence into an unconditional statement of defiance: "I won't go back." This iterative maneuver brings mother and daughter close together on a linguistic level, speaking almost the same words, while at the same time opening a chasm between them. Bone immediately recognizes the rebellion embodied in her speech: "The words were so quiet, so flat, they didn't seem to have come out of me. But once they were said, some energy seemed to come back to me." (276) She is not speaking as a dutiful kin, but as a young woman fighting for her survival.

The utterance ultimately puts Bone in grave danger, for it forces Anney to choose unequivocally between her daughter and her husband, and it is the demand for such a decision that enrages Daddy Glen more than anything. Glen finds Bone at Aunt Alma's house one afternoon and demands that she make him a sandwich, that she resume the role of dutiful daughter. "It ain't right," he says, "It ain't right her

leaving me because of you. It ain't right." (283) A principle is at stake here, Glen suggests, a matter of right and wrong, something self-evident, something that goes without saying. As I have tried to convey throughout this dissertation, this principle that hardly need be spoken, ubiquitous and deep-rooted in its charge, is kinship. In order to protect herself from incest, Bone Boatwright must -- like Pecola Breedlove, Evelyn Mulwray, and the speakers in Sexton's work – suffer a reckoning with the awesome force of kinship, the unconditional loyalties it prescribes, its nearly inescapable gravitational pull.

Daddy Glen rapes Bone in Aunt Alma's kitchen, a venue worth considering. Aunt Alma has just been abandoned by her husband Wade, an injustice that drove her – in a preceding passage – to murderous rage, tearing her house apart and threatening to kill Wade with a razor blade. "Told him I wanted another girl," she had said, "Told him it wasn't gonna be all right until I had another baby." (270) In response, Wade called Alma "old and ugly and fat as a cow," said he would not touch her, then laughed and walked out. (272) While Glen and Alma may seem to have little in common, Bone identifies a similarity in their rage, moments before Glen rapes her.

> His voice got harder, hoarser but no louder, and it was the quiet that terrified me. It reminded me of Alma with the razor in her hand and madness in her eyes. Daddy Glen's eyes were just as crazy, more crazy. There was pain in them, deep pain, yes, but hate was the thing that made them burn. Suddenly his fist shot out like it was on a spring. His knuckles raked the side of my chin, and I fell back on the table. (283)

Aunt Alma and Daddy Glen both go crazy when kinship fails them. Both resort to violence when familial ties are in danger of being severed. Though Alma is guilty of none of the heinous crimes Glen has committed, Bone's insight here suggests that Glen suffers a madness similar to Alma's temporary madness, that his pathology is somehow wrapped up with the pressures and hopes of kinship. "A man should never put his ambition in a woman's belly," Uncle Beau warned early in the novel, when Glen seemed a little too excited over the prospects of conceiving a son with Anney. (44) The son, we recall, is still-born, and Anney can never have another baby. On that same night, Glen molests Bone for the first time. Joined in their illegitimacy, Bone without a real father, Glen without a son of his own, stepfather and stepdaughter enter a perverted realm outside kinship, a cycle of abuse that serves for Daddy Glen as some sick substitute for the kinship he desires and can never have. Bone becomes blame-worthy in Daddy Glen's eyes for failing to be the kin he believes the world owes him.

Anney walks into Aunt Alma's kitchen and finds Glen on the floor, on top of her daughter, thrusting his body into hers. She throws cans and plates at him, calls him a monster, carries Bone out of the house and into her car. Bone hopes and prays that they can kill Glen, perhaps with Uncle Travis' shotgun. Ironically, when Glen voices the same idea to Anney – "Kill me, Anney. Kill me" --, Anney relents, overcome with compassion for her husband, turning back to him, away from her daughter. (290) She holds Glen, consoling him, begging him to stop beating his head against the car. Another paradox occurs to Bone. "Could she love me and still hold

him like that?" she wonders. (291) But this paradox proves to be insoluble. In the end, Anney chooses Glen over Bone. She drops her daughter off at the hospital, leaves her with the nurses, the doctors, the newspaper reporters, and Sheriff Cole, "Daddy Glen in a uniform," until Aunt Raylene shows up to rescue the child from these public machinations. "There has to be a judgement day too," Raylene yells at Sheriff Cole, incensed that he has interrogated Bone without the presence of her family, "when God will judge us all. What you gonna tell him you did to this child when that day comes?" (298)

Raylene takes Bone back to her house, and tries to hold out hope that Anney will return: "Bone, no woman can stand to choose between her baby and her lover, between her child and her husband . . . Your mama loves you. Just hang on, girl. Just hang on. It'll be better in time, I promise you." (300-301) Anney arrives one day with a new birth certificate for Bone, one without the word "illegitimate" stamped at the bottom, her final gift to her daughter, legal proof of Bone's legitimacy. She tells Bone she loves her, then walks out the door and sets off to continue her life with Glen, leaving Bone behind.

In her memoir *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Dorothy Allison recounts her experience of incestuous abuse, while also insisting that she will not let herself be defined by it. Representation, story-telling, so crucial to Bone's survival, are also forces that an incest survivor like Bone, and Allison herself, feel compelled to overcome.

> When I finally got away, left home and looked back, I thought it was like that story in the Bible, that incest is a coat of many colors, some of them not visible to the human eye, but so vibrant, so powerful, people looking at you wearing it see only the coat. I did not want to wear that coat, to be told what it meant, to be told how it had changed the flesh beneath it, to let myself be made over into my rapist's creation. I will not wear that coat, not even if it is recut to a feminist pattern, a postmodern analysis . . . *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.* (70-71)

The essay I am writing may be the sort of "postmodern analysis" Allison refuses to "wear," an elaborate account of incest survivorship that imposes a closed theory onto an expansive life. I am sensitive to the dangers of schematizing incest in the ways I have done in this dissertation. I would also argue, however, that *Bastard Out of Carolina* is interesting and exciting largely because it wrestles with such dangers too, and it comes out the other side of its narrative voyage with a child-character who does not have to wear the "coat of many colors" incest once was for her. Early in the novel, Bone is at risk of being "made over into" her "rapist's creation," and for a while she inhabits the toxic representations Daddy Glen has dressed her up in. Gradually, however, she learns how to take the robe off, how to "go naked" of incest, naked even of kinship, a "bastard" who glories in being a bastard, self-valorized, her worth and self-love not dependent on restoring the legitimacy of illegitimate antecedents.

The multiple paradoxes Dorothy Allison captures in *Bastard Out of Carolina* give Bone a strength and resilience that elude the other characters I examine in this dissertation. Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is doubly victimized by kinship and

incest, by white supremacist beauty standards that govern a marriage market she cannot conceive of entering, and by the sexual transgression her father Cholly commits against her, a transgression that brings white supremacist kinship into relief. But it is up to the reader to recognize the paradoxical nature of her predicament, how she is hemmed in between the twin pressures of incest and the incest taboo, kinship and kinship's violation. Pecola does not herself recognize the paradox nor does she use it to her advantage. This is what distinguishes her from Bone.

Daisy Cullen in *Mercy Street* and the speakers in many of Sexton's poems also confront the hopeless catch-22 of incest, of being drawn together with kin in a form of intimacy that cancels the kinship out. But like Pecola, these characters are tragic because they remain trapped inside the double bind. They do not step beyond paradox. Daisy Cullen gives herself over to religious reverie, imagining an afterlife free of kinship, gender, and time. While illuminating, these fantasies differ crucially from Bone's strategy, which is to turn the absurdity of her circumstance around on itself, performing a succession of rhetorical and emotional gestures that begins with "loving and hating yourself at the same time" and ends with a generative meanness, a glorious self-bastardization that places love above kinship, finding grace in the desacralization of a seemingly intractable social norm.

In *Chinatown* too, Evelyn Mulwray inhabits paradox ("she's my sister she's my daughter") but her response to paradox is to keep it secret for as long as possible. When she finally voices it to Gittes, the disclosure leads directly to her death. Gittes

is inspired to intervene, which plunges Evelyn straight into the path of her father, and a policeman's bullet.

Bone stands apart from these characters in her love of gospel, the beauty she sees in Shannon Pearl's physical ugliness, the love she draws from Shannon's hatred, and the self-affirmation she dredges out of her own self-loathing. She is enthralled by paradox. Holding two contradictory views at the same time is like a drug to her. It is her art, her sense of adventure. Through a profound narrative alchemy, Dorothy Allison takes the absurdity of incest and translates it into a meditation on absurdity itself, a rhetorical and philosophical problem that guides Bone's young imagination until she can grow beyond it and save her own life.

I began this dissertation with the belief that incest involves a crisis of representation that literary art and literary criticism might be well-suited to explore and illuminate. Tracing the contours of this crisis has been a labyrinthine, often excruciating, project. Understanding incest as a tragedy and a crime that is mediated through rhetoric, notwithstanding its raw physical impact on the bodies of victims, raises both additional layers of violence and additional strategies for resistance. *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a valuable artifact because it focuses so radically on the latter – on incest's mediation as an opportunity for resistance, on story-telling as a mode of healing. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of *Bastard Out of Carolina* is its joyousness, the thrill of youth and self-discovery that belie the violence at the heart of the novel. Dorothy Allison transforms the paradoxes that had been strangling victims

of incest in earlier representations of incestuous abuse so that the paradoxes can sing a language of survival.

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