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## **Ineradicable Pasts: The Force of Historical Trauma in Robert Penn Warren's Flood and Bessie Head's A Question of Power**

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Ineradicable pasts: the force of historical trauma in Robert Penn Warren's *Flood* and  
Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

By

Lisa Rene Gooden-Hunley

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in English  
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This project examines how fiction writers of the U.S. South and South Africa have grappled with the negotiation of the after-effects of national and individual trauma and how their texts implicate the reader in the suffering being represented. Chapter I seeks to make a connection between the theories of Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra as they relate to narrative representation of trauma and the position of the reader. Chapter II discusses Robert Penn Warren's *Flood* through the lens of melancholia and trauma theory, showing how Warren depicts the elusive force of historical trauma through a protagonist charged with narrativizing an experience that resists articulation. Chapter III examines the notion of madness and the inward turning of suffering as discussed in scholarship on Head's *A Question of Power*, arguing that through a punctum-like element, Head shows the transmission of intergenerational trauma in spite of an inward turning of suffering.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Gregory Hunley, and son, Alex Hunley, whose patience and encouragement have made the completion of this project and the Master of Arts in English a meaningful endeavor.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

According to Michelle Durham and Sala Webb, authors of “Historical Trauma: A Panoramic Perspective,” historical trauma, also called intergenerational or transgenerational trauma, is a loss that occurs over the lifespan and across generations as the result of collective emotional and psychological injury (5). They add that “when [...] past trauma is unacknowledged or is not resolved, it gets passed on to the next generation and creates [ongoing] psychological loss.” This definition calls attention to the entanglement of psychic injury within and across generations due to the often inaccessible nature of the loss being shared. Because the narratives of the Global South tend to elucidate the complex entanglement of past and present that Durham and Webb’s definition alludes to, they also may serve as testimony to the insidious ways that the suffering borne of historical trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next, even across vastly different cultural and historical contexts.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this project is to examine representations of generational trauma in representative works of the U.S. South and South Africa. From both regions an abundance of testimony is available that demonstrates the tremendous consequence of historical violence and the legacy of

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<sup>1</sup> An underlying premise of this thesis is that boundaries of the Global South persist even within the regions of the Global North and vice-versa. I align my reading with the scholarship of Leigh Anne Duck, editor of *The Global South*, who argues that “the term Global South flaunts the impossibility of simple divisions, because the blunt instrument of the equator cannot pretend fully to map the planet's socioeconomic conditions.”

suffering that remains with the nations' peoples. Of particular interest are the ways in which fiction writers of both regions have grappled with the negotiation of the after-effects of national and individual trauma and the ability of their texts to implicate the reader in the suffering being represented.

While the historical traumas of the U.S. South and South Africa are both tied to race-related injustices against blacks, many would argue that the psychological wounds that pervade the narratives of the regions are eminent for all. For centuries the African slave trade shaped the cultural and economic climate of the U.S. South. Though the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery and the surrender of the South during the Civil War ended the Confederacy in 1865, suffering borne of the extreme inhumanity of slavery persisted as those unacknowledged cultural wounds manifested themselves among many white Southerners as a nostalgia for the Old South. Critics agree that Southern literature continues to demonstrate a legacy of the historical violence and the "lost cause" of the Confederate states.<sup>2</sup> In her essay on the recurrence of historical trauma in the literature of the U.S. South, Jenn Williamson argues that Southern literature demonstrates an inheritance of a shared historical and cultural experience that is plagued by burdens of guilt, melancholia, and identity fragmentation. She further argues that "explorations into the relationships between memory, history, and culture provide new ways to consider the recurring cultural wounds revealed in white Southern literature" (747). Williamson's argument suggests that even the nostalgic narratives of white

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<sup>2</sup> See Scott Romine's *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, especially Chapter 3, for an insightful history of the notion of nostalgia and the "lost cause" of the confederacy.

Southern literature, in the way that they are bound to memories, history, violence, and loss, serve as testimony to the tremendous consequence of historical violence.

In juxtaposition, South African literature contends with the more recent, but no less egregious, human rights abuses of apartheid. Implemented for nearly fifty years, this system of racial segregation caused violences and acts of hatred that have left the peoples of the region marked with ineradicable cultural wounds. In line with Jenn Williamson's claim about the literature of the U.S. South, Annie Gagiano, a scholar of South African literature, argues that because "contorted memory [...] succeeds trauma," South Africans who write about historical violence take on "the arduous process of somehow accommodating the supposedly past" and the "insistently 'self-presenting' suffering, which persists by means of ineradicable memories" (53, 43). Gagiano shows that memory plays a critical role in any attempt to represent apartheid-era suffering, and like Williamson she also suggests that memory has a key role in any attempt to disavow the cultural wounds that persist as a result of historical violence.

In a review of the book *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II* by Douglas Blackmon, John Dally speaks on the notion of disavowing historical wounds. He writes "[t]he fact that white Americans are encouraged from birth to view their privilege as normative and thus invisible has broad implications ... the entire United States benefited from the repression of blacks throughout the country" (651). The privilege that Dally describes speaks not only to the inhumanities of American slavery but also to the consequent establishment of the Jim Crow system of segregation that allowed for continued abuse and degradation of blacks in the U.S. South for nearly a century after the abolition of slavery. As the height

of anti-black violence under Jim Crow segregation laws in the U.S. coincides directly with the inception of South Africa's anti-black apartheid regime, the narratives of both regions may be examined for commonalities regarding the intergenerational transmission of historical trauma.

Scholarship from both regions reveals not only the entanglement of the past and the present throughout but also alludes to the complex relationship between narrativization, witness, and the persistence of ongoing suffering. This project explores how narrative structure depicts the elusive force of ongoing suffering. To do so, this analysis draws on Sigmund Freud's concept of melancholia as it relates to the research of trauma theorists Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. I also draw on Roland Barthes to ask whether certain elements of narrative can stimulate the kind of readerly engagement that moves the reader from mere observer to the difficult position of witness.

Two seemingly disparate works of fiction, Robert Penn Warren's *Flood* and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, offer intriguing representations of how intergenerational trauma permeates narratives within multiple geographic borders.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, both novels represent the unique ways in which an author's craft serves to depict the experiences of trauma. In this analysis, which offers a juxtaposition of how the transmission of historical trauma from one generation to the next is represented in the fiction of the U.S. South and South Africa, I argue that the figure of the child emerges in both texts, giving voice to the violences of the past in the wake of new beginnings. In this way, the child character can be seen as an element of fiction that while disrupting

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<sup>3</sup> While most contemporary scholarship locates Bessie Head as a Botswanan writer, this project figures her through the country of her birth and original citizenship, South Africa.

narrative cohesion, compels the reader to engage empathically with the suffering being represented. In other words, the figure of the child in both novels prompts readerly engagement in a way that illuminates how the reader becomes implicated in the movement of suffering.

*Flood* is the tale of a screenwriter's return to his home in a small Southern town to capture the essence of the community in the wake of a government orchestrated flood. Though the government dam project was intended to bring progress to the region, the pending erasure of the town causes grief for the characters. When the protagonist, Bradwell Tolliver, returns to write the film script, he is overwhelmed by haunting memories and is compelled to reconcile the new progressive identity he has worked to develop against the troubled past that he fled. Of particular interest in this project is Brad Tolliver's childhood relationship with his abusive father, Lank Tolliver. Lank embodies the sense of melancholia and guilt that scholars argue pervades the fiction of white Southern writers of Robert Penn Warren's generation.

The relationship between Brad and Lank Tolliver, unfolding in the novel as burdensome flashbacks, is critical in my reading as it reveals how intergenerational trauma forcefully persists in spite of the protagonist's attempts to break from his Southern heritage. The flashback memories are beyond language, and yet bound to the history and the place that shape it. Through these unbidden memories and consequential narrative ruptures, the figure of Brad in his youth cries out in resistance to Brad's attempts to re-present the past through the film script. Through the self-reflexive experience of the protagonist and a sort of metanarration in which the speaker tells the story about the protagonist's failed attempts to recast a history, Warren shows the

impossibility of a disentangled past and present narrative for the U.S. South. In this way Warren figures the reader as a sort of witness to the protagonist's confrontations with historical trauma.

Like Warren's *Flood*, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* offers a portrait of generational suffering's repetition. In fact, much like Jenn Williamson's claims regarding Southern U.S. literature, African literary scholars have asserted that the suffering represented in Head's work is borne of an intergenerational haunting that is connected to a deeply imbricated cycle of violence. Head's reader witnesses the protagonist, Elizabeth, an exiled South African woman, who suffers isolation and profound mental anguish as a consequence of the political and social injustices of apartheid and its aftermath. Whereas *Flood* demonstrates the elusive nature of historical trauma and the condition of melancholia that persists, *A Question of Power* dramatizes unremitting violences on the psyche as a result of the inward turning of suffering. By narrating from the center of extreme psychosis, Head complicates Dominick LaCapra's notion of an empathic response in representation. In the way that her narration challenges cohesion, Head places the burden of empathy, or a true desire to understand the experience of the protagonist, on the reader.

To better understand historical trauma in both novels, Freud's essay on the comparative relationship between mourning and melancholia is crucial. In his essay, Freud asserts that both conditions occur as a "reaction to the loss of a loved person or some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (243). However, in Freud's analysis the notion of the passage of time in the presence of loss and suffering is the crucial point of divergence between mourning

and the injurious state of melancholia. Mourning is a conscious process where a substitute for the lost object is actively pursued and developed. Over time the feelings of loss diminish and a return to reality happens. In melancholia, however, loss is often of an abstract kind where “the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost,” suggesting that “melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness” (245). The withdrawn nature of melancholia that Freud describes is in line with Durham’s description of the inaccessible psychic injuries of historical trauma. Both refer to the wounded state of the psyche in spite of an inability to name the source of the suffering. Therefore, Freud argues that melancholia must be seen as an elusive internal work. “The self-reproaches [of the melancholic] are reproaches against a loved-object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego” (248). The anger felt towards the loss is turned inward, and unlike in mourning, a detachment from the lost object and replacement of it with a new object never happens. Thus, melancholia presents as a perpetual state of discontentment and explains the persistence of suffering over time. In this way, both the U.S. South in its attempts to maintain a lost cultural identity in the aftermath of the Civil War and the displaced peoples of apartheid-era South Africa as they contend with the notion of national belonging can be seen as regions bound to a sense of loss and suffering. With examinations of both, a critical concern becomes the way in which suffering persists in relation to the passage of time.

When considered through Freud’s claims regarding melancholia, examinations of intergenerational trauma are advanced. I argue that even as they represent different national traumas, both *Flood* and *A Question of Power* depict the difficult task of working through historical violences internally. The authors show that for both

protagonists the desire to develop an identity outside of the land that they fled is complicated by a persistent and enigmatic sense of suffering. Through Freud's insights on melancholia and through the lens of trauma theory, it becomes clear that the suffering is a manifestation of an inherited loss that resists resolution. Whereas Warren's narrative shows how the persistent feelings of loss associated with melancholia may evade conscious perception, Head's narrative depicts the violent battle that may ensue when the historical loss is being worked out internally. Freud's theory further elucidates the internal struggles for reconciliation that characters in both texts contend with when he explains that "countless separate struggles are carried on over the [lost] object, in which hate and love contend with each other; the one seeks to detach [...] the other seeks to maintain the position" (257). Thus, the novels under consideration reveal how inescapable grooves of suffering develop.

Aside from his theories on melancholia, Freud has found fiction particularly useful in advancing the study of trauma. In "The Wound and The Voice," the introductory chapter of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth explores the connection that Freud makes regarding the relationship between literature and traumatic experience. Focusing on historical violence and the notion of traumatic recurrence, she writes, "Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, [...] because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing" (3). Therefore, literary representations of historical trauma may be examined not only for their potential to represent the violence of a particular cultural event, but also for their potential to represent the latent impact of the event on generations of survivors. A critical question that Caruth raises, therefore, is

how the wounds of trauma move or, more pointedly, how “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another [...] through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (9). Caruth’s question, like the questions of this project, is concerned with understanding how witness bearing becomes a shared experience through encounters with the literary.

To explain how literature functions to represent the transposition of trauma to a space of shared experience, Caruth discusses Freud’s findings during a reading of Tasso’s “La Gerusalemme Liberata,” a literary example of the repetitious nature of traumatic suffering in spite of non-instigation. Caruth explains that in Tasso’s epic poem the protagonist, Tancred, unwittingly kills his lover. Then, unbeknownst to him, his lover’s soul is imprisoned in a tree. When Tancred hears voices coming from the tree, he becomes spooked and stabs the tree. Thus, he unwittingly wounds his lover again (2). Caruth calls the “unwitting reenactment” of violence that Freud highlights a “repetition compulsion,” and argues that while this compulsory action is indeed a critical mode for understanding Tasso’s representation of trauma, the poem also calls attention to the “moving and sorrowful voice that cries out.” She argues that by addressing him through the tree, the voice of Tancred’s lover is transformed to the voice of a wound, thereby representing the suffering of not only the immediate victim of violence but also those who bear witness to the past. This thesis is to call attention to the “moving and sorrowful voice that cries out” in the literature of the U.S. South and South Africa, a cry that is arguably the result of repetitions of historical trauma.

Rejecting notions that trauma persists in isolation or that the reach of trauma is limited to the wounded psyche of the immediate victim only, Caruth writes “it is [also]

always the story of the wound that cries out [...] in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). With this claim Caruth suggests that literature not only serves to bridge the gap between knowing and not knowing as it pertains to the originary violences of historical trauma, but it also plays a critical role in understanding how witness is constructed out of belated experience. Caruth believes that while the wound itself cannot fully be known, the voice of the wound appears as “an address that remains enigmatic yet demands a listening and a response [...]” (9). She adds that this call from “an other who is asking to be seen and heard” resonates in different ways throughout literature.

Caruth’s claims regarding the presence of an elusive yet demanding call has significant implications regarding reader engagement. Her claims suggest that the text may indeed pursue or require the reader to bear witness. In line with her claims, the goal of this project is to examine how trauma’s recurrence is represented in fiction and whether this form of representation has the potential to pull the reader into the suffering being portrayed. Both of the texts explored in this project demonstrate how the unwitting acts of survivors move trauma from one generation to the next. However, through the figure of the child, both novels also demonstrate the unbidden voice that Caruth claims may surface as a secondary event of the narrative. Thus the figure of the child becomes a compelling representation of the wound that demands a voice in present and future narratives. Through them the reader is drawn to a call that is outside of the immediate plot of the narrative, and I argue that the reader is positioned to bear witness to trauma’s repetition.

To delve deeper into the relationship between fictional representation and trauma, Caruth examines the role that memory plays in recapturing and communicating historical trauma. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth asserts that the paradox of trauma is that it “does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (151). With this Caruth suggests that while literary accounts of generational trauma indeed demand historical awareness, they, in essence, attempt to articulate an experience that escapes comprehensibility. She adds that because memories of traumatic encounters often “occupy a space to which willed access is denied,” they tend to resurface as flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, or nightmares (152). As it is unable to be registered cohesively with a narrative of the past or the present, the intrusive memory “continually, returns in its exactness, at a later time” seeking a place to be resolved (153). In this way, memory does not only play a critical role in the testimony of trauma survivors but also tends to be a critical element of the fiction that attempts to explain incomprehensible historical trauma within its narrative thread. Flashbacks and intrusive nightmares are prevalent in both works of fiction explored in this project. Caruth believes that patterns of intrusive thoughts such as those depicted in *Flood* and *A Question of Power* are particularly telling as they evidence an engraving on the mind that has never been fully integrated into understanding.

Any attempt to understand historical trauma through the lens of psychoanalysis demands early recognition of the truly inaccessible nature of that history. Dominick LaCapra believes that the writer of history seeks to construct a narrative around “the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others” and takes on the responsibility of reconstructing history while being “as attentive as possible to the voices

of others whose alterity is recognized” (40). While this project only briefly references the particular cultural-historical suffering that burdens the protagonists of *Flood* and *A Question of Power*, it uses psychoanalytic theory to advance the question of how the reader becomes implicated in the recuperation of that history. LaCapra’s research, as it connects the confounding aspects of traumatic representation with the affective response of the historian, also carries implications regarding the reader who is compelled to bear witness to the trauma of another through encounters with the literary and other aesthetic forms.

Like the historian the affect, or emotional responsiveness, of the reader influences the way he or she engages with representations of history. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra argues that “part of the process of inquiry [...] is to work over and through initial subject positions in a manner that may enable one to write or say certain things that one would not have been able or inclined to write or say initially” (41). This charge suggests that both the writer of trauma narratives as well as the reader, as they both seek access to a truth that is fundamentally unlocatable, are somehow implicated in the persistence of suffering across generations. As LaCapra explains, “Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence [...] The study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing both for research and for any dialogic exchange with the past which acknowledges the claims it makes on people and relates it to the present and future.” This is particularly evident in Warren’s *Flood* as the protagonist struggles with flashbacks of a repressed past as he attempts to represent the South through his film script. As the

protagonist works through his own subjectivity, he realizes the entanglement of his own identity with the past and land he has fled.

Fictional representation of trauma's elusive entanglement with the past and future is precisely the problem that encourages the questions of this project. Does the text, in the way that it elicits a response, somehow implicate the reader in the movement of suffering? LaCapra argues that "being responsive to the traumatic experience of others ... implies not the appropriation of their experience but ... empathic unsettlement, which should have stylistic effects" (41). Thus seeking historical understanding through literary representation involves the affective engagement of the writer as well as the reader. Furthermore, empathic engagement with the certain unsettling incomprehensibility of trauma helps those involved "come to terms with the wounds and scars of the past [and] such a coming-to-terms would seek knowledge whose truth claims are not one-dimensionally objectifying" (42). As the reader acknowledges the elusive and unsettling nature of traumatic experience, empathic engagement is influenced.

The notion of the elusive movement of trauma is eminent in both of the novels explored in this project. The persistence of melancholia for Brad Tolliver even as he rejects the claim that his native Southern region has on his life and the persistence of the psychic wounds for Elizabeth are tied to particular grievous historical acts of race-related inhumanity. Though each illuminates varying degrees of traumatic response as it relates to ongoing suffering and the repetition of historical violence, in my reading Head's *A Question of Power* seems to further demonstrate how reader response to textual representation becomes a form of testimony to trauma's movement. Elizabeth's relationship with a mother she never meets is described in the novel and functions to

elucidate the force of trauma's movement from parent to child. However, Elizabeth's son, Shorty, the focus of my close reading, although often voiceless and unseen, performs as the critical wound in the text. Acting in my reading as what Roland Barthes calls the "punctum" in his observation of extraordinary photographic images, Shorty's intermittent presence can be seen as an element of the narrative that evokes empathic unsettlement or an "internal agitation" in the reader (Barthes 19). By surfacing as a punctum in the portrait of suffering, an often marginalized character becomes the enigmatic yet demanding voice that Caruth argues often resonates in literary representations of trauma.

Because fictional literature is increasingly recognized as a form of testimony to historical violences, the correlation between narrative structure, trauma theory, and reader engagement continues to be a relevant field of inquiry. The following chapters connect with current scholarship by showing historical trauma as an imbricated cycle with implications that extend beyond the bounds of national remembering and that carry an ethical injunction for readers to stand as witness. By illuminating how the figure of the child is employed in Robert Penn Warren's *Flood* and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, the project uses trauma theory as an approach to better understand the relationship between the reader and the text.

CHAPTER II  
UNBIDDEN VOICES: MELANCHOLIA AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA  
IN ROBERT PENN WARREN'S *FLOOD*

A troubled sense of history and melancholia often permeates the literature of the U.S. South, demonstrating the ways in which the identity of people from the South is bound to a traumatic past. Through the fiction of white Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner, the reader witnesses how the vestiges of this troubled history move from one generation to the next creating what trauma theorists consider an elusive force that resists comprehensibility. Similarly, Robert Penn Warren's *Flood*, published in 1963, grapples with the pervasive force of historical loss even as "the South" as an authentic place is disavowed by the protagonist and the community in which the novel is set faces its demise. *Flood* is the tale of a screenwriter's return to his small Southern hometown, Fiddlersburg, Tennessee, to capture the essence of the community before it is inundated by a government orchestrated flood. Though the Tennessee Valley Authority dam project is intended to bring progress to the region, the pending erasure of the town causes grief for many of the characters. When the protagonist, Bradwell Tolliver, returns to the community to write the film script, he is overwhelmed by haunting memories and is compelled to reconcile the identity he has worked to develop against the troubled past he fled. Of particular interest in this project is Brad Tolliver's childhood relationship with his abusive father, Lank Tolliver. Lank embodies the sense of

melancholia and white historical guilt that many scholars argue pervades Southern narratives; and though Brad rejects the lonesomeness that seems to possess his father, he finds himself subsumed by the same elusive force. Unfolding in the novel as a series of troublesome flashbacks, the relationship between Brad and Lank is critical as it reveals the forceful persistence of melancholia from one generation to the next in spite of an inability to acknowledge the loss being shared. Through unbidden memories and consequential narrative ruptures, recurring images of Brad in his youth surface as the voice of historical trauma to resist Brad's attempts to re-present the past through the film script. The self-reflexive experience of the protagonist elucidates the enigmatic nature of intergenerational trauma and the impossibility of disentangling the past from present narratives for the U.S. South.

In her essay "Traumatic Recurrences in White Southern Literature: O'Connor's "Everything that Rises Must Converge" and Welty's 'Clytie,'" Jenn Williamson writes about the ways in which intergenerational trauma tends to surface in Southern literature. She argues,

The literature of the American South reveals a generational inheritance ... of the vestigial psychic effects of white historical consciousness leading to cultural guilt, melancholia, and identity fragmentation. Southern literature, with its recurrences of madness ... and variations of intergenerational identity conflict, reveals a history of traumatic recurrence when considered through the lens of trauma theory. (747)

The intergenerational conflict, traumatic recurrence, and vestigial psychic wounds that Williamson considers common to all Southern literature are also evident in Warren's

*Flood.* When Yasha Jones, a Hollywood filmmaker, learns that the town of Fiddlersburg will be flooded and completely submerged by the TVA in order to bring electric power to the region, he seeks the writing talents of an artist who has lived in the community and would have the ability to get at the essence of what it means to live in a rural Southern community. Yet, in order to elucidate the experience further, Warren is careful to show that the narratives of the people of the community are all interconnected. At a funeral-like ceremony before the town is submerged, one of the townsmen, Blanding Cottshill says to the protagonist:

When Fiddlersburg is under water, God-A-Mighty will jerk our passports. We will be stateless persons. We will be DPs for eternity and thence forward. We will have no identity ... I have spent most of my life here ... and you know, you look back on things in a place like Fiddlersburg, and there's some sort of mysterious logic to 'em. What happened to anybody here – say, to you or Maggie or Cal or me – might, in a way, happen to anybody anywhere. But in Fiddlersburg everything is different. Things are tied together different. There's some spooky interpenetration of things, a mystic osmosis of being, you might say. (Warren 423)

The “spooky interpenetration”, the “mystic osmosis of being”, and the feelings of “statelessness for eternity” that Cottshill uses to describe the feelings that pervade the town of Fiddlersburg poetically elucidates not only the melancholia that Williamson says Southern literature reveals, but also the enigmatic ways in which the vestiges of a traumatic history loom becoming a collective and intergenerational experience.

Though Cottshill's testimony demonstrates the bereft state of the community in the wake of the loss of Fiddlersburg as a home, his allusions to an absence of identity and his inability to name the stigma that binds the people of Fiddlersburg suggest a deeper sense of cultural loss. In "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud explains that a reaction to the loss of an ideal "such as one's country [or] liberty" is common in melancholia as well as mourning. However, he explains that "melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness" and that the evasive nature of the loss, as it beguiles even the one who experiences it, "seems puzzling because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him entirely" (245-46). Warren further depicts the elusive nature of melancholia when Lank Tolliver's attachment to a loss that is difficult to name is echoed in Brad.

According to Williamson, O'Connor's short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" provides a particularly compelling representation of how the generational inheritance of historical loss is played out. She believes that O'Connor's male protagonist grapples with the ways in which "heritage undermines the stability of ... contemporary identities which have become unmoored from original foundations on slavery's race and class boundaries" (750). Williamson also draws attention to the mother of the protagonist who, unnamed, continually revisits this history through narratives about the past because she is unable to confront the trauma of its loss. This recurrence of a historical narrative that is unable to be worked out through the mother of O'Connor's protagonist is central to Williamson's claims as she later demonstrates that the guilt and shame of history soon becomes the tie that binds mother and son even after death (753). Like the protagonist and mother in "Everything That Rises," Brad Tolliver's return to

Fiddlersburg to write the film script may be seen as an attempt to revisit history in order to achieve a stable identity. The debasing internal dialogue that Brad conjures when he repeats to himself “If I don’t make this picture right, I am a failure. I am a failure and good,” shows how his writing and his identity are linked to a melancholic state (Warren 77).

Similarly to the experiences of O’Connor’s and Welty’s characters described in Williamson’s essay, Warren’s protagonist recounts a tumultuous relationship with his father. When confiding in Yasha during this and other contemplative moments, Brad reveals that his disdain for Fiddlersburg is connected with several violent experiences at the hands of his father. He tells his filmmaking companion, Yasha, that if it weren’t for the brutality he suffered at the hands of his father he would have “settled down in Fiddlersburg” (116). But due to the violences of his childhood, he fled what he has considered a “garbage dump” of a town (392). By the age of thirteen, Brad had become an avid reader, enjoying the volumes of a library that his father had acquired. One day he saw his father callously ripping and burning the pages of the books. Disturbed by this he felt compelled to intervene. When he did attempt to shelter the books, he was beaten by his father until he was “dazed” by the violence (117). Brad explained to Yasha that part of his father’s rage towards him was due to the fact that “he [Lank Tolliver] couldn’t stand Fiddlersburg.” He explained that his father often fled Fiddlersburg to a nearby swamp in order to quiet an overwhelming rage that Fiddlersburg conjured in him. Though the source of Lank Tolliver’s contempt is never articulated through Brad, it is clear that Brad inherits it as his hatred for Fiddlersburg is consistently revealed alongside memories of violent encounters with his father.

Aside from the markings of individual wounds, Williamson stresses that Southern literature demonstrates an inheritance of a shared historical and cultural experience that is plagued by burdens of guilt. She attributes this to “the Civil War and Reconstruction [which] stripped Southern white society of the structures which provided it with a sense of community and identity” (749). The psychological alienation that Williamson describes is often seen in melancholia and also tends to explain the strange behaviors of Lank Tolliver. Freud observes that the melancholic tends to experience “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that ... culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (244). When Lank Tolliver’s rage did not manifest through acts of violence towards his son, it was shown through acts of self-isolation when he would retreat to the nearby woods, lay prostrate on the ground, and cry. Brad describes his father’s frequent retreats to the swamp, as a “*nostalgie de la boue* ... [that] quieted him down” (119). The expression *nostalgie de la boue* literally translates to a nostalgia for the mud and signifies a longing for a more depraved way of life. Lank Tolliver returns to the lands of the swamp in order to connect with a dissolute history and arguably a Southern identity that has been lost. The narrator explains that outside of a Southern identity the people of Fiddlersburg were “a wore out bunch of red-necks and swamp rats that had crawled out on dry land” (256). Thus, while Lank’s rage grows in response to an inability to ever recapture that past, the ritual of return at the swamp allows for a cathartic appraisal of that past.

Images of this scene and others similar to it flood the memory of the protagonist in the form of flashbacks when he is working with Yasha Jones to create an intimate portrayal of what Fiddlersburg represents. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth offers critical insight regarding how memory functions to recapture and communicate historical events. Referencing Freud, she argues that memories “occupy a space to which willed access is denied,” resurfacing as flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, or nightmares (152). Caruth believes that the flashback is particularly telling as it evidences an engraving on the mind that has never been fully integrated into understanding. The reticence of the protagonist to acknowledge the historical loss that plagues him and the inability of his father to publically mourn that same loss seems to be a consequence of the traumatic engraving on the mind that Caruth describes. Whereas much of the novel illustrates the elusive state of melancholia that persists as a latent effect of historical-cultural loss and the inability of the characters to ever truly name what they have lost, particular experiences of the protagonist evidence the traumatic rupture that happens when the strongholds of those historical wounds are confronted.

It seems clear that Brad’s recall of the violent acts of his father are unbidden memories tied to traumatic encounters. True to the form of a disclosure rendered through a flashback, Brad does not integrate the violent beating he suffered at the hands of his father into his personal narrative as a lived experience. Rather he describes the experience as though he has been distanced from it. It is as though he was merely an observer of the attack, watching as though through Yasha’s camera:

Brad saw, in his mind, the man sitting there. He saw himself come in the door, a boy of thirteen, and walk to the man, and wordlessly, take the book

off the man's lap. He saw the man – a big, booted man with black mustaches and coarse black hair – rise slowly. He saw the man snatch the book from the boy, toss it into the fire, and, all in one motion, swing out a snapping, controlled blow ... to the side of the boy's head. The boy broke the blow, slipped to one knee, and jerked the book from the fire ... The man snapped [another] blow to the boy's head ... The fourth time, the blow broke the boy's guard, and he stumbled back against the wall, slipped to his knees there, propping himself against the wall. (Warren 116-17)

While the visual effects of this description may be read as a demonstration of Brad's affinity for filmmaking, it also elucidates the uncanny way in which the memory of a traumatic encounter "continually, returns in its exactness, at a later time" seeking a place to be resolved (Caruth 153). Through the narrator, the reader understands that due to the traumatic nature of the experience, Brad projects the scene rather than accepts it as his own lived experience.

The wounded boy, in the way that he surfaces through unbidden memories as a fragmented character that Brad has somehow dissociated from, must be read as a central figure in Warren's novel. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth explains that the detached voice that often surfaces in trauma narratives must never be disregarded as it demonstrates the voice of "an other who is asking to be seen and heard" and evidences an "attempt to tell ... of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (9, 4). Brad's inability to use affirmative language such as "*I experienced this*" shows that he has not integrated the wounding encounter he describes

as a part of his own narrative. Caruth believes that traumatic encounters often “evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence” (153). However, as Brad is reminded of the experience while working to create a narrative about Fiddlersburg, he seems paradoxically to acknowledge the significance of the violence.

The paradoxical way in which intergenerational trauma moves from parent to child evidencing the force of an experience not fully owned continues to be demonstrated throughout the novel. In “Buried Graveyards: Warren’s *Flood* and Jones’ *Buried Land*,” John Hiers examines the emotional crisis and melancholic state of Warren’s protagonist. Hiers writes, “Brad’s mind is a continuous replay of his catastrophic ... failures. Constantly reliving the factual events of the past, Brad fails to live fruitfully in the present. When he contemplates the obliteration of that factual past by the rising flood waters, he can see only chaos” (98). In a critical moment in the text, Brad and Yasha look over the rising river and contemplate the best way to represent Lank Tolliver in the film script. Brad falls silent and seems reluctant to conjure more memories of his father. He says with much deliberation “Look, we can put him in our moving picture. My old man, I mean.” Then he falls silent again. This time Yasha senses his turmoil and says “don’t feel that you must tell me ... you might say that science is the right telling. And art is the right not-telling” (118). Here Warren shows the vulnerability that Brad experiences when attempting to access language that describes his father and his past. Yasha, who seems aware of Brad’s struggle, attempts to alleviate his anguish by offering him the option not to reveal what is buried. He suggests that art somehow allows the discretion to avow but not articulate certain accounts of history.

Brad, in a trance-like state, seems unaware that Yasha has spoken to him. He begins to recount an experience that he says “[he] never told anybody. Not a God-damned soul” (119). Once when he and a friend followed his father into the woods, he witnessed something that disturbed him. His father lay in the mud sleeping while a black servant watched over him with pity. When Brad sees his father lay like a baby with dirt and mud streaked on his face, he experiences another emotional rupture. He screams out, “It’s a God-dammed lie ... Say it’s a lie ... Say he has not been crying” (119). Refusing to believe that his father was a man who cried, Brad raised his hand to beat the servant who witnessed it all.

Seeing his father overwhelmed with emotion and reduced to an infantile state shattered Brad’s concept of his father. Through this disclosure to Yasha, Brad seems to negotiate what that encounter means to him and how it shapes his attitude towards Fiddlersburg. Hiers believes that “as Brad carries on his private search for guidance and direction, he inevitably finds that his family’s and his people’s history must first be accounted for and somehow justified” (98). When Warren writes that the knowledge of his father’s suffering “tore at some fundamental of [Brad’s] own being,” he shows that the boundaries of Brad’s and his father’s anguish were blurred by this encounter and elucidates the insidious way in which the transference of suffering occurs (176).

The memories flood his psyche with such force that even though Yasha offers him the option to keep them submerged, he is compelled to purge them for the first time. Caruth believes that any recall of a traumatic encounter is daunting because the rupture is unable to be registered cohesively with a narrative of the past or the present (153). Brad’s rupture is evidenced when he displaces the shock of seeing his father weeping for the

mud and angrily beats the servant who fans him. Brad's very conscious and self-reflexive attempts to get at what Warren calls the essence of Fiddlersburg, and thus the essence of the South, is disrupted by an unbidden voice that Caruth argues "occupy a space to which willed access is denied" (152). By recounting this scene and the distressing feelings of lonesomeness that reduced his father to tears, Brad moves closer to understanding how his own outlook is bound to the pervasive state of melancholia that haunts his family and community.

Eventually, Brad confesses that he was repulsed by his father's fragile emotional state and resentful of the fact that others in the community had been aware of it. The way he had come to know his father, savage, brutal, unsympathetic, seemed no longer real. Brad admits that he attempted to use the knowledge of his father's more authentic private self to renounce the stronghold that Fiddlersburg, and thus the South, was claiming on his life. Brad's witness to the tears became, according to the narrator, "the weapon he needed to work his will on the father" (176). However, reading *Flood* through the lens of trauma theory suggests that witnessing the tears and responding with violence implicates Brad in a cycle of suffering where the force of traumatic encounters inflict wounds indiscriminately. By parroting back the violent behaviors of his father, Brad gives the violence a generational existence.

Warren shows that Brad, like Lank Tolliver, often resorts to violence as a means of displacing the anger he experiences around the crisis of his Southern identity. Offering a critical reading of Brad's decision to fight in the Spanish Civil War, for example, David Rio asserts that Brad enters the war as "a desperate attempt to fill the emptiness of his life," and therefore he embodies "man's inability to find the true meaning of his existence

and subsequent resort to violence as a means of forging an identity” (129). Rio’s reading is key to this analysis because it shows Brad’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War as a form of disavowal of the violence and suffering in his hometown. He explains:

Warren's approach to the Spanish Civil War in *Flood* is closely interconnected with his literary portrait of the American Civil War in different novels and short stories. In fact, Warren deconstructs the predominantly romantic view of both civil conflicts in the American imagination, emphasizing instead their tragic consequences, inner contradictions, and grotesqueness. In his fictional representation of both civil conflicts, we may find a common focus on some of the hidden realities of idealistically motivated war, particularly the failure of violence as an instrument by which to achieve self-knowledge. (130)

Thus, Rio’s analysis is also key because it attempts, like other scholarship, to illuminate the source of the enigmatic suffering that pervades the South.

When confronted about his disdain for a Civil War monument in Fiddlersburg, Brad says that the emblem represents only “Lies ... That lie that is only the truth of the self” (Warren 256). He says, “Folks say ‘the South,’ but the word doesn’t mean a damned thing. It is a term without a referent ... It means a profound experience, communally shared –yeah. But ... it is lonesomeness” (166). Here it is evident that Brad is resentful and sees his identity bound to the “lost cause” of the U.S. South and the narratives and monuments that would seek to recuperate “the South” as an authentic place. Both his father, a paternal emblem, and the monuments of the Civil War, a cultural emblem are inauthentic to him, thus complicating his feelings about his home. Regarding Brad’s

disdain for the inauthentic emblems of Southern culture, Hiers believes that a critical error for Brad is in understanding that “when one fails to reinterpret the past, he risks emotional entrapment by history. Hence, Brad's mind is a continuous replay of his catastrophic ... failures” (98). In other words Brad’s constant attempts to reject the emblems of the region implicate him in the very movement of the history.

While it is implausible to conclude that a particular encounter described in *Flood* is the exact source of the intergenerational turmoil that Warren represents, it is clear that Brad’s burden is tied to a cultural-historical conflict. Brad himself says that what plagues the Southerner is not only guilt, but a deep and ambiguously disturbed need to have folks around him that are as lonesome as he is (Warren 166). Freud’s research shows that this fear rooted in a sense of ultimate isolation is due to an impoverishment of the ego that is central to melancholia. The conscious of the melancholic, he believes “behaves like an open wound” that bleeds over time leading to an extraordinary diminution of self-regard and the regard for others connected with the melancholic (Freud 252). The impoverishment of the ego that Freud describes sheds light on the mysticism that Blanding Cottshill says binds the people of Fiddlersburg as well as the debasing self-concept that, according to Brad, plagues and disturbs all Southerners.

One representation of Brad’s need to find and to connect with a people outside of his own culture is his relationship with Izzie Goldfarb, a Jewish tailor that lived in his community. Warren writes that part of Brad’s fondness for Izzie was that he “seemed equally beyond suffering and the giving of suffering” in Fiddlersburg (65). Izzie was not of the South; therefore, he did not carry with him the sufferings of Southern identity. When Brad returns to Fiddlersburg, he vows to find and relocate Izzie’s body before the

flood waters inundate the cemetery where he is buried. John Hiers believes that Brad's quest for the grave of his childhood mentor is symbolic for his quest to find and relocate himself (98). He believes that Brad relates to Izzie because he "always felt at once distinct from and yet a part of Fiddlersburg." Thus, to find and secure Izzie's grave, literally making the lost body present, must be read as a subconscious attempt by Brad to recover and secure a part of his own identity.

In the moments that Brad resolves to relocate the body of Izzie, the narrator recounts "[Brad] suddenly thought, with a cold flash of terror: *My father is there. Will the water come over my father?*"(19). Whereas Brad is purposeful about his need to preserve the remains of his childhood mentor, thoughts of his father seem to surface with a horrific force that he does not expect. The reader witnesses the protagonist's internal struggle regarding Izzie, a figure of nostalgic disavowal, and Lank Tolliver, a figure of the actual traumatic loss. Though he attempts to submerge the memories of an unsettling past, those memories resist repression.

Warren's choice to italicize Brad's language seems further telling. He makes it clear that in this moment Brad is neither speaking to Yasha Jones nor actively contemplating a scene for the film. Rather, he is thinking about the need to recover and relocate Izzie's body when an internal voice demands that he consider the remains of his father. The question seems not only to represent a resistance to the silencing of historical violence, but also begs questions regarding the voice of that resistance, a voice that echoes throughout the novel. In the way that one's reading may attribute this voice to the figure of Brad in his youth, representing what Caruth calls a "moving and sorrowful

voice that cries out,” it seems clear that Warren is showing the impossibility of a disentangled past and present narrative for the U.S. South.

In another flashback, Brad remembers a moment of despair that he experienced when coming to terms with burying his father. After his father’s death, Brad returned to his family’s home and was awakened in the night by a compelling urge to visit the room where his father’s body had lain in a coffin. Brad describes the house as “a rising flood ... that rose deeper and deeper around him, absorbing him” (195). He stands hunched over the spot where the coffin had been and weeps. He describes being drowned by the feelings that his childhood home brings forth. The reader sees that the empty space of his father’s home functions very similarly for Brad as the muddy swamp did for Lank Tolliver. In this flashback, Brad remembers succumbing to tears as he tried to appropriate the elusive but overwhelming feelings of loss that he connects with his childhood home. The narrator explains that “he began to weep. [And] he waited for the reward, the sweetness, the relief that should come” (197). There was an expectation that the tears would relieve the immense feeling of grief that overwhelmed him. When there was no relief, the narrator says “he felt that it was some stranger that stood and wept in a grief that had not been divulged to [him].” This elusive grief that distances the protagonist, complicating the understanding of his own suffering, may be read as a force of the melancholia that presides over Fiddlersburg and the empty signifier of the South more widely.

To better understand the traumatic nature of Brad’s encounters with the elusive suffering of his community, a critical question becomes, how does the protagonist begin to negotiate a sense of self in the presence of disruptive memories? Susan Brison argues

that “[b]y constructing and telling a narrative of the trauma endured ... the survivor begins not only to integrate the traumatic episode into a life with a before and after, but also to gain control over the occurrence of intrusive memories” (46). Thus working through a trauma “involves going from being the medium or object of someone else’s (the torturer’s) speech to being the subject of one’s own [narrative]” (48). Brison’s research is significant in that it elucidates precisely the ways in which Brad’s own writing functions to resist disintegration of a traumatic history. Though Brad is hired to capture and articulate the true essence of Fiddlersburg to the world, the reader sees that the film script becomes Brad’s opportunity to work toward a stable identity for himself.

Brad’s first published work, “I’m Telling You Now,” is described in the novel as “a simple tale about an old Jewish tailor ... of a woebegone, bigoted little Tennessee town down by a muddy river” (Warren 60). His short story got the attention of editor Telford Lott, who was drawn to works of “human suffering patiently borne.” This work was compiled with several others and became the work of art that earned Brad the respect of many critics. They believed that the collection spoke to “the degradation of life in his native region” (61). Thus through his writing, Brad, like Warren, seeks to elucidate the elusive suffering endured in Southern culture. Each time he thought about Fiddlersburg and the success he accomplished through attempts to narrativize the essence of the place, it “made tears mysteriously come to his eyes” (63). And though he attempts to distance himself from the melancholy he feels every time he thinks of the place, the act of crafting a truth about it requires an introspective awareness that denies any dissociation.

Brad’s success as a promising Southern writer was a major component of the new identity that he had worked to construct for himself. When that sense of accomplishment

was challenged when Brad's editor promoted the work of Ernest Hemingway over his, he experienced yet another rupture that demonstrates how his identity is bound up in a sort of melancholic attachment. Hemingway's book, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, was sent to Brad by his editor after he had failed at and attempted to produce another great work about the South warning that it "was the book that Brad Tolliver might have written" (16). In his essay, "For Whom The Flood Rolls: Ernest Hemingway and Robert Penn Warren-Connections and Echoes, Allusion, and Intertextuality," H.R. Stoneback argues that in Hemingway's writing the "motifs of identity and redemption, violence and love, war and peace" provide the master key to understanding *Flood* (14). He points out that immediately following the reading of Hemingway's work, Brad orchestrated the events which lead to a "quasi-rape scene," the murder of a TVA worker, and the failure of his own marriage (18). The reader learns that when Brad saw the book he became nauseous and "his right groin hurt" (306). Suggesting a sort of castration, Warren shows that Brad's feelings of failure as a Southern writer is linked to the melancholic loss he fails to see.

Yasha's invitation to return to Fiddlersburg meant, on the one hand, that Brad would have an opportunity to revisit his renown as a writer of the Southern experience. On the other hand, this opportunity would require him to account for his own culpability in the repetition of violence in Fiddlersburg. Complicating this journey, the protagonist must reconcile his self-concept alongside a place and culture on the brink of erasure. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominick LaCapra discusses how the affect or emotional state of the writer may influence his or her inquiry into history. LaCapra believes that there is an unsettlement between affect and representation that creates a

barrier to closure. By exposing the observer and even the self to this unsettling the writer “comes to terms with the wounds and scars of the past [and] such a coming-to-terms would seek knowledge whose truth claims are not one-dimensionally objectifying” (42). The reader witnesses as repeat flashbacks of wounding events as far back as his childhood invade Brad’s psychic space. The narrator recounts that whenever Brad thought of Fiddlersburg, it “made tears come mysteriously to his eyes” (63). LaCapra’s research suggests that the protagonist’s necessary confrontation with these memories is a part of the inward turning required in order to represent the many unsettling encounters of his past.

Scholars agree that the looming flood and impending submergence of the town of Fiddlersburg brings forward the melancholic attachment to the guilt, lonesomeness, and rage that “Southern culture” at once disavows and embodies. When thinking about the flood waters rising over Izzie’s grave, for example, Brad thinks of the flood as “an eternal drowning, a perpetual suffocation” (18). He seems to believe that unless he can work through this crisis of consciousness by integrating his memories of the town into a cohesive narrative thread, the flood waters will only perpetuate the elusive groove of suffering that persists. Therefore, Brad’s labor to produce a satisfactory film script was also, like Stoneback suggests, a labor to make peace with his hometown, peace with himself, and to become, at the end, completely integrated (19).

As the novel draws to a close, Brad works nonstop with “an angry sense of power” on a story around which the movie could be produced (340). He delivers to Yasha what he believes to be a treatment without “a bolt out of place or a nut loose.” As he reflects on his creation, he considers it a “kind of delight ... that existed by itself without

reference to before's or after's" (341). In this way, Susan Brison might argue that Brad believes he has successfully integrated his memories, his scars, and the traumatic history of the people of Fiddlersburg into a cohesive and comprehensible narrative. However, the finished product is rejected by Yasha Jones, who says it is an "expert treatment" that fails to get at the true essence of the town.

Yasha now realizes what the film script has become for Brad, a means for working through the traumatic vestiges that seize his identity and stifle his productivity as a writer. He says to him that "what you have here now is not a freedom in a beyondness of what happened. Nor is it a plunge into what happened to find freedom ... It is a parody" (342). Thus, Yasha confirms for Brad that there is no way to truly integrate the traces of a traumatic past and that his attempts to control those traces by manipulating the way they are weaved into the tale of his hometown feels inauthentic. LaCapra's research elucidates Yasha's observation. He finds that trauma poses a "dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" (42). Yet it is through this act of attempting to articulate the disparity that one starts to work through the trauma. Though Yasha acknowledges that Brad has repurposed the function of the writing project, he mocks his efforts and fails to see the progress that LaCapra would urge has begun with Brad's attempts to write beyond what has and what is happening.

Flooding the town of Fiddlersburg and erasing it from the landscape of the country would only impede Brad's acceptance of his native land and his melancholic attachment to it. Writing for the film script, though seemingly a futile effort, helps Brad to understand this. At the end of *Flood*, he resolves not to revisit the script saying "I have

finished it, and it has finished me” (353). Thus, Brad accepts that his return to Fiddlersburg was a race against the rising flood waters to make sense of what the narrator calls “the grinning calculus of the done and the undone” and to find what Brad believes to be “the connection between what I was and what I am” (439). It is important to note that Warren never confirms with neat and tidy assurance that the protagonist or the displaced people of Fiddlersburg will ever move beyond the groove of melancholic suffering that persists in the aftermath of historical trauma. In fact, final images of Brad being flooded again with “a sudden, unwilled, undecipherable, tearing, ripping gesture of his innermost being” and the image of the ginning calculus that he conjures suggest that the sense of loss will recur with an ineradicable force for generations to come.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PORTRAIT AND THE PUNCTUM: COMPELLING CHARACTERS IN BESSIE HEAD'S *A QUESTION OF POWER*

One of the most disturbing aberrations of European colonization is the system of apartheid enforced by the South African government from 1948 to 1994. The literature of the region provides testimony that demonstrates the imprints of colonization, the tremendous consequences of apartheid, and the legacy of suffering that remains with the nation's people. To better understand this suffering, researchers and even the nation's own Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) have sought to explore how narrative representations of apartheid's injustice tend to influence global awareness of the nation's trauma. In "On the Ambiguities of Narrative and of History: Writing (about) the Past in Recent South African Literary Criticism," Andrew Van der Vlies examines this engagement with narrative representations of South African history. He believes that the work of the TRC has "invited an ongoing process of creative assessment and 'writerly engagement' with the archive of colonial and apartheid era suffering" (950). However, it seems that the active storytelling that Van der Vlies encourages not only facilitates a cathartic excavation of the experiences of the past for the writer but also has implications regarding how the reader engages with literary representations of the traumatic experiences of others.

Research shows that postcolonial trauma must be studied as an imbricated cycle rather than isolated individual experiences. Though trauma theorists have started to investigate intergenerational suffering as a condition of historical violence, much of the research has focused on Western experiences, particularly the Holocaust. In her work on representations of trauma in postcolonial literature, Mairi Neeves responds to this oversight by showing that the failure to examine non-western and postcolonial contexts of trauma contributes to the continued subjugation of marginalized groups of people. To develop this point, Neeves examines South African writer Lisa Fugard's *Skinner's Drift* and shows that the tension between individual and collective experience is critical to explorations of postcolonial trauma. She writes,

Indeed, in attending to the marginalized and in seeking to draw different oppressed peoples together through the shared histories of colonization, postcolonialism engages with the same task that Cathy Caruth argues may be performed by trauma [when] she writes that, rather than separating and dividing different peoples, "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures" ("Trauma and Experience" 11). (111)

Even as the narrativization of trauma has been complicated by questions regarding the extent to which the violence of apartheid is reproduced through re-telling, it seems that the resistance to further subjugation of marginalized people is precisely the framework that prompts ongoing explorations of the agency of narrative representation. Thus, Neeves's claim that "literature may provide a valuable imaginary space for those who wish to explore the traumatic experiences of others and their impact on society" supports the aforementioned assessment of Van der Vlies (112). Combined, their arguments

provide the scaffold for this exploration of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* as a uniquely complex portrait of both the immediately discernible and the latent suffering of South African people.

In juxtaposition to the many readings of Head's *A Question of Power* as a portrait of madness, I suggest that by demonstrating the outward manifestations of the violence of apartheid and the inward turning of suffering, Head shows how repetitious encounters facilitate the intergenerational transmission of trauma.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a minor character supervenes from the margins of the work, piercing or disrupting the way this suffering is represented. Therefore, *A Question of Power* illustrates not only the severe mental anguish of the female protagonist but also the ability of marginalized figures to disrupt the narrative thread, compelling a more insightful understanding of how historical trauma moves.

While this notion of a "piercing" element is not widely explored within literary contexts, philosopher Roland Barthes explores it in depth in his book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Barthes writes that "the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (4). Yet, in line with both Van der Vlies's and Neeves's arguments regarding engagement with history and trauma through narrative representation, Barthes suggests that some photographs have the ability to attract a spectator with greater force than others. He explains:

among those [photographs] which had been selected, evaluated, approved, collected ... and which had thereby passed through the filter of culture, I

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<sup>4</sup> The research of scholars Shannon Young and Jacqueline Rose focuses on Bessie Head's complex portrayal of madness in *A Question of Power*.

realized that some provoked tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself ... and that others, on the contrary, were so indifferent to me that by dint of seeing them multiply, like some weed, I felt a kind of aversion toward them .... (16)

His observations regarding the unique ways in which elements of photographic art may enlighten an observer about the past seem also to elucidate the way in which a reader may engage with representations of historical violences through encounters with the literary.

According to Barthes there are co-present elements that attract an observer to a photograph. One is the “studium,” which tends to have a universal coding. It is singular in nature and requires a cultural and historical consciousness that allows participation between the spectator and the object that the image represents. Barthes argues that the other element, the “punctum,” tends to break the unary nature of the studium by adding a detail “which rises from the scene ... and pierces” a particular observer (26). Whether the spectator engages with the studium of a photograph as cultural or political testimony or as a historical scene, there is merely “a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment ... but without special acuity.” The punctum, on the contrary, surfaces as “that accident which pricks” and disturbs the “sovereign consciousness” dedicated to the studium. Since the experience captured by the photograph can never truly be re-lived or fully known by the audience, Barthes suggests that an examination of the *punctum* or that which exhorts, fascinates, or even agitates the critical observer must never be disregarded (19). When an element of the narrative exhorts the attention of the reader to a voice that speaks out of the wounds of trauma, it performs like the punctum to evoke an empathic response thereby, transforming reader-text engagement.

Like photographic representation, the narrative, whether fictional or autobiographical, can never truly reproduce the experience of trauma. Rather, the narrative merely acts as a sign or representation of the experience. In his “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” Charles Peirce describes the relationship between the sign and the meaning that it conveys, the interpretant. He says the sign is “something which stands ... for something in some respect or capacity. It [also] addresses somebody, that is creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign” (5). Similarly the narrative may be said to “presuppose an acquaintance [with the traumatic event] in order to convey some further information concerning it” (Peirce 6). It is through this complex system of codification described by Peirce and applied in Barthes’s analysis of the photograph that some readers engage, via an impulse of subjectivity, with the suffering represented in the trauma narrative. Moreover, Peirce’s and Barthes’s claims elucidate how the voice of the wounds of trauma, as described in previous chapters, may address the reader through fictional representation.

The subjective response that Peirce describes seems critical to any examination of how the reader engages with or is affected by representations of historical trauma. Barthes writes “[o]ne can either desire the object, the landscape, the body it represents; or [what] it permits us to recognize or else admire or dispute the ... performance” (19). Thus *Camera Lucida*, though solely focused on photographic representation, also provides an aperture for this exploration of the unanticipated “internal agitation” caused during my reading of *A Question of Power*. The protagonist suffers from violent episodes of psychosis that cause her to withdraw from her community for extended periods of time. Her son is seldom seen and often silent throughout the text. Yet he witnesses his mother’s

torment and tends to intervene during critical periods of suffering. Interestingly, Bessie Head never names the child figure. Rather he is nicknamed “Shorty” by neighbors who recognize his small stature and muted existence. Though this minor character seems to be always only at the periphery of the experience of the protagonist, an unconscious operation occurs during my reading that denies any disregard for his performance in this tale of intergenerational suffering. Because of this both the protagonist of *A Question of Power* and her son elucidate how narrative representation may function as a portrait and the punctum to shape the reader’s understanding of the insidious movement of historical trauma.

*A Question of Power* is set in the fictional village of Motabeng in Botswana, Africa. The protagonist, Elizabeth, has fled a “shut-in and exclusive” South Africa in pursuit of a teaching career (38). When she arrives in Botswana, she observes a comradery among the native Botswanan people that is completely foreign to her. The narrator explains that “it was so totally new, so inconceivable, the extreme opposite of ‘Hey, Kaffer, get out of the way’ the sort of greeting one usually was given in South Africa” (21). As Elizabeth continues to identify with the subjugating encounters of her past, she finds it difficult to dissociate from them or to assimilate with the new community in which she lives. Head writes that “she was so broken, so shattered, she hadn’t even the energy to raise one hand ... It was a state ... below living and so dark and forlorn no loneliness or misery could be its equivalent” (14). In her essay “Memory, Power, and Bessie Head: *A Question of Power*,” Annie Gagiano argues that the novel illustrates the way that memory is linked to ongoing suffering. She argues that this link involves the “arduous process of somehow accommodating the ... past” and recognizing

the “self presenting suffering which persists by means of ineradicable memories” (43). Her argument shows that though the protagonist has fled South Africa, memories of her treatment as a coloured woman contribute to feelings of isolation and despair. This insight into how memory is linked to isolation, despair, and ongoing suffering shows the reader the significance of the protagonist’s traumatic past.

Hallucinated demons that inhabit Elizabeth’s psychic space further contribute to her isolation and despair by constantly and viciously reminding her of her objectionable identity: “Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death. Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death” (Head 45). This record repeats in her mind, shaping her self-concept and dissuading her relationships with others. Though the protagonist never experiences overtly racist treatment from the villagers in Motabeng, where she lives and works, she is aware that her identity as a Coloured South African woman continues to haunt her existence. Playing on her experiences in South Africa, Medusa, a symbol of feminine power and evil, often appears during Elizabeth’s dreams to exhort her death and to warn her that “Africa is troubled water” (44). “You’ll only drown here. You’re not linked up to the people,” Medusa says. The narrator explains that in South African society Elizabeth was “rigidly classified Coloured,” and this classification named her “dull, stupid, [and] inferior” in her native country (57). Yet in Botswana Medusa appears in her dreams to remind her that her mixed race also separates her from other African people.

Though Elizabeth relocates to Botswana on a “never to return clause,” she is haunted by memories of her status as “a product of the slums and hovels of South Africa” (26). Her condition of statelessness seems to contribute to the extreme isolation that confounds her. In fact Gagiano reads this isolation as the cause of Elizabeth’s mental

breakdown. She writes “memory is used in a strange ... way in this text ... It is living on within her mind ... this lingering after-effect of power to acknowledge that it cannot be safely parceled away in her South African past [and] labelled ‘apartheid’” (51). As Medusa and other evil figures possess Elizabeth’s mind, the violence of apartheid persists even outside of South Africa’s borders. Her hallucinations facilitate a perpetual re- instigation of her experiences with apartheid. Thus, neither public places nor her private mental space is safe. As Elizabeth is bound to the hallucinations and memories, her life in Botswana proves not to be an erasure of her past experiences or a removal of the traumatic vestiges of her identity.

Recognizing that *A Question of Power* is largely considered an autobiographical work and that it in many ways characterizes the lived experiences of Bessie Head, Gagiano explores the relationship between the suffering represented by the protagonist and the actual lived experience of Bessie Head. She explains that while in the novel Elizabeth never experiences overt rejection from the people in the community, Bessie Head often spoke on the experience of poor treatment while in Botswana during interviews. Gagiano believes that *A Question of Power* should be read as an amalgam of testimony of the protagonist’s experiences and the author’s experiences. She posits that the novel functions as “both an act of memory and of construction as well as a deed of social enlightenment in which what has been learnt can be told and taught to others” (47). By representing her lived experiences through the harshly violent inner turmoil of a fictionalized protagonist, Head creates narrative testimony and thus a space for the reader to bear witness to her personal encounters with historical trauma.

Like Medusa, two additional figures appear through the intrusive memories and thought patterns of the protagonist. Dan and Sello are often read as complex representations of the power systems and sexual oppression propagated by colonization. These hallucinated figures invade her mind with unrelenting cruelty, making her suffering a tortuous inward experience. The narrator explains, “[t]oo often the feelings of a victim are not taken into account. He is so disregarded by the torturer or oppressor that ... evils are perpetuated with no one being aghast or put to shame” (98). Thus, though no longer directly governed by South African apartheid, Elizabeth continues to experience an ongoing struggle with the system that diminished her existence. Head writes “Both men flung unpleasant details at [Elizabeth] with sustained ferocity” (12). Her inward struggles with Dan, Sello, and Medusa become apparent to the people of Motabeng as she publicly exhibits signs of psychosis: “She was breaking under the strain of it ... and the ugliness of the inner torment was abruptly ripped open and exposed to public view” (50).

When Elizabeth is in the hospital following a public outburst, an Afrikaner man named Eugene attempts to affirm her mental suffering. He says to her, “We are both refugees and must help each other ... I suffer, too, because I haven’t a country and I know what it’s like. A lot of refugees have nervous breakdowns” (52). Here the communal nature of trauma is shown as the protagonist and an Afrikaner stranger attempt to mitigate the crisis of their South African pasts as well as their new abject existence as stateless refugees. Elizabeth realizes that “all suffering gave people and nations ... a common meeting-ground” (31). Head’s writing elucidates Caruth’s assertion that shared trauma can become the unifying link between cultures.

Shannon Young offers a critical reading of the protagonist's isolation, mental suffering, and subsequent madness. In her essay "Therapeutic Insanity: The Transformative Vision of Bessie Head's *A Question Of Power*," Young argues that *A Question of Power* represents the struggle of the subjugated to fight against the injustices of oppressive power systems and to use the knowledge of these systems to live life more affirmatively. She believes that, like Bessie Head, Elizabeth was born into the oppressive systems of South African apartheid that made her interracial existence an abhorrent form. She also argues that apartheid allowed the systematic subjugation, alienation, and self-rejection which led to the intense traumas inculcated by racism (230). Young believes that the life of Head's protagonist must be read as "a struggle to remain psychologically intact" as she is "traumatized by the dominant discourses and ideologies of African apartheid" (231-34). She believes that it is when Elizabeth forcefully counters the "psychological trauma arising out of her intrinsic sense of rejection and the attendant confusion and social anxiety" that she is able to "surpass the abusive and destabilizing boundaries of her society and move into a more fecund, stable space" (234). In fact, Young argues that Elizabeth finds affirmation and achieves victory at the end of the novel when she successfully navigates away from her mental anguish by refusing to cooperate with the systems of injustice and evil represented by Dan, Sello, and Medusa. Her explication suggests that the oppressive violence surrounding Elizabeth and other coloured South Africans is not only mentally pervasive but often inescapable. In the way that Young traces the pathology of Elizabeth's mental illness to systems of generational subjugation brought on by racism, she folds in the discourse of historical trauma.

In "Recognizing Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms in Individuals with Psychotic Disorders," Mathew Putts offers clinical insight that can be used to analyze the fragile mental state of Head's protagonist in *A Question of Power*. He discusses the notion of a "spectrum of reactions" in which both psychotic disorders and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are identified as potential responses to the experience of significant trauma (84). Putts further describes the extenuating link between distressing episodes of psychosis and new traumatic experiences for the victim. He believes that new traumas arise as a result of fear-inducing encounters with "delusions and hallucinations" and the treatment received following the episodes. He writes "At least half of clients hospitalized for the first time after a psychotic disorder described negative reactions to forced hospitalization, hurtful and/or frightening treatment, physical restraint, or seclusion" (86). Putts's research suggests that the link between traumatic events and psychotic disorders is strong and cyclical. Thus, whereas many scholars have sought to examine representations of mental illness or "madness" in *A Question of Power*, it is also plausible to conclude that the protagonist's outward displays of suffering are linked more closely to pervasive and perpetual encounters with violence than to an actual pathological state of mind.

In "On the 'Universality' Of Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*," Jacqueline Rose offers a critical reading in relation to the question of madness. Calling it "imperial naming," Rose argues that the word madness is historicized and politicized in ways that make it both indispensable and corrupt (401). She believes that the novel functions as a semi-fictional account of a coloured African woman's experiences with colonialism, sexuality, and guilt. She explains that because historically African women

were believed to lack the interiority or self-awareness of western women they could never experience “madness” in the universal sense (405). However, because the protagonist of *A Question of Power* manages to mitigate her terrifying experiences and escape death by turning inward and achieving a “talking cure,” the text tends to complicate the notion of deficient interiority (408). Thus by arguing that the inward turning of the protagonist can be read as a resistance to the racist ideologies of colonialism, Rose starts to move the discourse about *A Question of Power* away from the stigmas of madness.

Rose further disrupts the notion of madness when she introduces the arguments of scholars who discuss paranoia, ghosts, and hallucinations as linked to the cultural customs and beliefs of the Botswanan people. Though Bessie Head never openly affirmed a culture of witchcraft as a part of her lived experience, Rose believes that in *A Question of Power* she blurs the boundaries between supernatural and lived experience in a way that exposes the insidious nature of colonization. She argues that Head’s representation of the voices of oppression causes even the reader to “go a little bit mad” (404). This mention of the potential of the reader to experience madness when examining the protagonist’s encounters with ghosts and hallucinations is intriguing as it suggests that the experience of trauma is somehow transferred through narrative testimony.

In another particularly insightful section of her essay, Rose further alludes to the transmission or movement of suffering when she describes *A Question of Power* as “a novel of transgenerational haunting where the woman becomes the repository of an unspoken and unspeakable history” (410). The legacy of haunting that Rose describes is demonstrated throughout *A Question of Power* as Head shows Elizabeth’s suffering as an

experience rooted in historical violence. In the novel Head writes “[p]eople cried out so often in agony against racial hatreds and oppressions of all kinds. All their tears seemed to be piling up on [Elizabeth], and the source or roots from which they had sprung were being exposed with a vehement violence” (53). Thus, while Rose’s claim focuses primarily on the relationship between gender and historical violence, it also lends to arguments regarding how historical trauma moves into the future. When she describes the mind of Head’s protagonist as “the place where the hidden and invisible of history accumulates” or “the depot for the return of the historical repressed” and when she asserts that “to the precise extent that history has been robbed or diminished it starts to expand infinitely in the mind,” she shows that the movement of historical suffering from one generation to the next is unstoppable and expandable (411). Therefore in arguing that when traumatic histories are silenced or repressed in the public sphere they persist as they recur in the minds of women, Rose’s research connects with this claim that *A Question of Power* must be read as a portrait of the insidious intergenerational movement of historical trauma.

Head demonstrates the intergenerational movement of trauma when she describes the relationship between parent and child in *A Question of Power*. The reader learns that Elizabeth is introduced to the despondency of her South African existence as a child. A mission school principal guilty of harassment tells preadolescent Elizabeth the story of her illegal and abhorrent birth as defined through the South African Immorality Amendment Act of 1957. She also tells young Elizabeth about her biological mother’s consequential institutionalization. She warns, “[w]e have a full docket on you. You must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like

your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native” (16). Upon hearing this news, Elizabeth cries out from “sheer nervous shock” and is confined to long periods of isolation. With this critical encounter Elizabeth appears to experience a rupture in identity and subsequently inherits the violence of her mother’s South African experience. She accepts the tale of her illegitimacy as a defining part of her identity.

In “The Wound and The Voice” Cathy Caruth explores the consequences of such traumatic encounters. Referencing Freud’s research on the repetitious nature of traumatic suffering during his critical reading of *Gerusalemme Liberata*, a literary example of unintentional repetitious traumas, she explains that literature demonstrates that patterns of suffering often follow like fate and that “the experience of a trauma repeats itself exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (2). About the suffering of colonial oppression, Elizabeth realizes “it is a sustained pressure of mental torture that reduces its victim to a state of permanent terror, and once they start on you they don’t know where to stop, until you become stark, raving mad” (137). With the continuous assaults on the psyche of the protagonist from her youth through adulthood, Head illustrates the relentless groove of suffering that Caruth describes as well as the implications of repeat exposure. Describing the ongoing suffering that Elizabeth experiences, the narrator adds, “It had taken such drastic clamour to silence the hissing record in her head ... it had left a terrible wound. She could feel it bleeding and bleeding and bleeding quietly. Her ... mind was being shattered to pieces” (52-53). The inward clamor as well as the outward manifestations of “raving madness” that Elizabeth exhibits suggest that another more cunning implication of Caruth’s claims is

that the one who suffers from historical violence often wounds others through similar violences.

The principal, bearing witness to the past, transmits the wounds of Elizabeth's mother. Elizabeth begins to experience psychosis soon after when she hears from a mother she never meets: "Do you think I can bear the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me" (17). By bringing forth a history that sought to deny the development of interracial families and by using the history to control the behaviors of young Elizabeth, the mission school principal becomes complicit in the movement of apartheid's violence. This notion of the indiscriminate movement of trauma complicates our understanding of how the wounds of the subjugated are represented. Caruth suggests that "the speaking wound constitutes ... not only a parable of trauma and of its uncanny repetition but, more generally, a parable of psychoanalytic theory itself as it listens to a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nonetheless bears witness" (9). Not only does the critical encounter between Elizabeth and the principal illustrate the pervasively indiscriminate movement of suffering, but it also calls into question the ethical concerns of retelling.

The repeated breaks in narration and often confusing movement between the protagonist's daily routine and the violent assaults on her mind during psychotic breaks also illustrate the unremitting nature of trauma. The ongoing torture that the protagonist faces through encounters with Dan, Sello, and Medusa shows that "the possibilities of massive suffering were being worked out in her" (Head 39). By refusing to withhold the scatological or the grotesque, Head takes the readers on a journey into the protagonist's nightmares: "She found herself faced with a deep cesspit. It was filled almost to the brim with excreta. It was alive, and its contents rumbled ... her face near the stench" (53).

Caruth believes that “the crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives ... often emerges ... as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter ..., or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” (7). Caruth’s question connects with a critical question of this chapter. Does Head’s portrait compel the reader to bear witness to the latent effects of historical trauma?

In support of Caruth’s observations on the movement of trauma, Vamik Volkan’s research on the transgenerational transmission of trauma further elucidates Elizabeth’s wounding encounter with the past and her inability to extricate herself from the horrors of apartheid’s reach. In his research, Volkan argues that “there is a fluidity between a mother’s and child’s psychic borders and that the mother’s anxiety, unconscious fantasies, and perceptions and expectations of the external world ... can pass into the child’s developing sense of self” (85). He offers an example of this permeability when he describes the daughter of a refugee family who recognized and acquired her mother’s anxiety about famine even though conversations about the trauma were silenced in the home (86). The daughter began the work of “repairing and reassuring” her mother. Thus, the mother’s burden becomes the daughter’s burden. About Elizabeth’s encounter with her maternal history, Head writes, “She seemed to have that element of the sudden, the startling, the explosive detail in her destiny ...” (18). This wounding encounter as a child no doubt informed Elizabeth’s lived experience in South Africa and her urgent need for escape. She believed that “It was like living with permanent nervous tension ... born to be hated ... just this vehement vicious struggle” (19).

While the movement of trauma and mental suffering between the protagonist and her mother may be examined as a keen portrait of generational suffering, the

protagonist's relationship with her own son, Shorty, is also compelling. As the majority of the novel deals with the psychological warfare between the protagonist and the evils of her South African heritage, Shorty seems to be a relatively minor character. However, when reading *A Question of Power* as a portrait of intergenerational trauma, his sporadic interventions serve as an element of the narrative that further elucidates our understanding of the ongoing effects of the subjugation caused by apartheid. Head seems to intentionally manipulate Shorty's presence to create dissonance in the reader regarding his witness to the traumatic encounters of the protagonist.

In "Authority and Invention in The Fiction of Bessie Head," Eleni Coundouriotis posits that Bessie Head's third-person narration in *A Question of Power* allows her to mediate herself through her characters. Coundouriotis suggests that this narration "legitimizes the activities of a creative self that invents in order to interpret and define experience" (17). She sheds light on Head's portrayal of the connectedness between Elizabeth's internal and external worlds and how narration links the two. She believes that Head is hyper aware of the protagonist's psychic condition and therefore "increasingly formulates the solutions to Elizabeth's problem" by "always controlling and explaining the narrative to us" (19). Thus, through what Coundouriotis calls psychonarration, Head takes the reader on a journey through Elizabeth's mental breakdown and recovery. Describing the function of this authorial power and grounding her claim, she says "novel writing therefore is a transposition of discourse from one space into another from a discourse of experience to a discourse of literature" (28). What remains to be discovered, is whether the integrity of the experience is compromised in the movement. Coundouriotis concludes, "Truth ... depends on a will to articulate it, to

invent it, to give it form, and thus to authorize it” (30). Similarly, for the reader truth depends on a will to hear it.

The reader is first introduced to Elizabeth’s son when one of her tormentors, Dan, threatens to kill him. “I have the power to take the life of your son,” he says. “He will be dead in two days” (14). The panic that Elizabeth experiences as a result of this imagined threat is evident in subsequent lines when she rushes Shorty to the hospital stricken with illness. The narrator intervenes to offer this about the small boy and his mother: “People who had mothers like he had were lost if they did not know how to care for themselves. [Elizabeth] looked at him in a sort of agony and thought: ‘Journeys into the soul are not for women with children’” (50). Shorty’s intermittent presence challenges the notion that apartheid’s haunting can be represented or reconciled through a portrait of one individual’s suffering alone.

When Birgette, a white colleague from the community garden project, visits the home of Elizabeth and Shorty, she notices the small boy “squeezed quietly into a corner.” She asks “Why is he such a silent child?” Interestingly, Birgette is the first to acknowledge his muted existence in the text. Elizabeth counters, “He isn’t silent. He’s full of dangerous top secret information, but he won’t part with it in the presence of a stranger” (82). Through Shorty, the binary roles of the knowledgeable European and uninformed African are reversed. Head invents a space that moves the African child to the center of apartheid’s suffering. This notion of the child as a figure of suffering becomes more evident when Elizabeth sees images of suffering children during her hallucinations.

During one of the most violent attacks on Elizabeth's psyche, Dan and Sello appear together for the first time. They attempt to draw Elizabeth further inward by showing her the extent of the evils of colonization and how the child becomes a figure of suffering. Dan parades and sexually exploits several women in front of Elizabeth to make her feel inferior. Then he calls Elizabeth's attention to Sello's sexual molestation of small children, including his own daughter. Elizabeth struggles to accept the horror that is being revealed to her. Head writes, "It wasn't for an individual to think out solutions to those problems, because it was so foreign to brood over her mind remained a total blank" (144). When Elizabeth attempts to turn away from the notion of the suffering child, Dan turns on a record in her mind: "The child is going to die. The child is going to commit suicide. What are you going to do about that?" He places child-size coffins beside her and continues to urge a response. Realizing her inability to speak or act in response to "awful secrets and a nightmare like that, at once real and unreal" made her feel in some ways complicit with the nation's evils (145). Though "she tried to make a thousand excuses for herself," she sinks further into despair.

After yet another night of terror, Elizabeth wakes up on the floor outside of her bedroom. Her son stares at her and asks "why are you sleeping on the floor ... What was you burning last night" (93). She is disturbed by the presence of a "death-throe [and] charcoal-like foot-prints dragged into each other across the floor." When she starts to question whether what she had experienced in her nightmares was linked to the mess on the floors, she hears both the antagonizing voice of Sello and the disturbed voice of her son. It becomes apparent that Shorty has keen awareness of her suffering. It seems that this narrative technique that keeps Shorty, a figure, who Head writes, "refused to grow"

and the molested children at the margins of the novel yet a central part of Elizabeth's suffering offers a quite compelling challenge for the reader to acknowledge the voice of the subjugated.

The scene of Elizabeth's first public breakdown further elucidates the voice of the subjugated child. There is a confrontation between Shorty and his mother before they take a trip to the public market. The confrontation seems particularly telling as it leads to her first confinement in a mental hospital and separation from her son. The narrator explains,

Her head was throbbing with pain from a sleepless and feverish night. She grabbed a pile of clothes off a chair and said irritably: 'You'd like to be slaughtered, hey? Shut your mouth, you damn little nuisance.' He took all his moods from her and imitated her in every way. A day which started off like this could throw him off balance completely. Suddenly, he seemed to sense something ... and mimicked in a shrill voice: 'You'd like to be slaughtered, hey? Shut your mouth, you damn little nuisance.' ... 'You're at death's door, my son,' she said murderously. 'You're at death's door, my son,' he shrilled. She sat down on the bed and burst into tears. He stood looking at her for a moment, his eyes turned big and solemn.

Something's really wrong here they seemed to say. (49-50)

Shorty takes on Elizabeth's frustration and literally mimics back her violent language. When she cries out with nervous shock, he freezes then cries out himself. The reader sees that he not only witnesses the fragile mental state of his mother but becomes the repository of her anguish. This interaction demonstrates a repetitious cycle of violence

and the transposition of suffering. The reader must reconcile whether Shorty's mirroring back is caused by or somehow contributes to his mother's breakdown. By not resolving this through narration, Head leaves gaps in the narrative that Coundouriotis would argue allows for reader intervention.

When Elizabeth is released from the hospital, she walks into the home of Eugene, the Afrikaner refugee who assumed responsibility for Shorty while she was confined. He says, "I thought you'd be in hospital for some time. *Your son isn't here*" [emphasis added] (56). Subsumed by the force of Head's representation of the inescapable nature of traumatic experience, the sentence somehow transcends all others in my reading. Like Barthes's description of the wounding nature of the punctum "what it produces in me is ... an internal agitation ... the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken (Barthes 19). My attention to Shorty's absence and presence in the novel is somehow elicited, and I begin to engage with something that interrupts my attention to the portrait of suffering that Head creates.<sup>5</sup>

Though there is no textual evidence that Eugene represents malice or intends harm towards Elizabeth or her son, my attention returns to the scene with a sort of compulsion. In his study, Charles Peirce argues that "anything which startles us is an index, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience" (13-14). Indices, Peirce believes, "direct the attention to their object by blind compulsion" which

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<sup>5</sup> In chapters 6-8 of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes explains that some scenes must be explored "not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think" (21). These scenes provide an opportunity for the observer to remonstrate with subjectivity not to fill the scene of the text with the subjectivity of the observer, but to offer or extend it as a means for analyzing interest or attraction. Therefore, to employ Barthes' style when writing about the punctum, a shift to first-person perspective is used throughout the remainder this chapter.

means that an unconscious operation occurs that creates a labor to or pointing to the thing it represents (11). Barthes also acknowledges this visceral response to a particular element of representation when he writes, “whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add ... and what is nonetheless already there” (55). Thus, because that Shorty’s absence and presence create a startling internal agitation in me, disturbing the way that I read the text, it can be argued that he becomes a punctum in Head’s portrait of historical trauma.

The threat of Shorty’s absence, though somewhat elusive as it is never a source of contention in previous scholarship, surfaces during my reading and cannot be disregarded. It creates a new sign for what Jacqueline Rose calls the hidden and invisible violences of history. When describing the wounding nature of the punctum, Barthes writes “the incapacity to name is a good symptom of [its] disturbance ... the effect is certain but unlocatable, it does not find its sign ...” (51). As seen with actual traumatic occurrences, discussed in depth in previous chapters, my reading becomes an inward experience and a labor to uncover the enigmatic and arguably unlocatable source of rupture that must have occurred in me.

Some scholarship suggests that by the end of the novel Elizabeth escapes the tortures of hallucinated power figures Dan and Sello and manages to live peacefully. However, while the protagonist does indeed resolve to “[turn] and [reel] towards life” stating that “the suffering she had endured has sealed her Achille’s heel,” the ineradicable nature of trauma tends to complicate such a hopeful reading (202-203). An escape from suffering would require the abandonment of a generational identity, the ability to subvert harmful encounters in the future, and most improbably an erasure of the traumatic

memories of her past. Gagiano's reading, for example, reminds us that "*A Question of Power* offers no glib ... reassurance of recovery from the damaging effects of harmful power; its truth is not reconciliatory but demanding and warning" (51). Thus, recognizing the demanding and warning voice of the son of the protagonist and the implications of historical violence on his narrative becomes a form of witness bearing.

Through an epistle, Head allows another piercing intervention from Shorty. During a final hospitalization due to a violent psychotic rupture and a deep depression, Elizabeth contemplates suicide. She receives a letter from Shorty who writes "Dare Mother, when are you coming home?" (182). Upon receipt of the letter, she cries silently just as she did when Dan exhorted her attention to the molested and suicidal children that laid in coffins beside her. The letter from Shorty starts a dialogue between mother and child about the suffering she endures. However, when we consider that his isolation and crying out now directly mirror the anguish of the protagonist when she was a child separated from her mother due to institutionalization, the letter also should be read as a trope of the open dialogue between the children of suffering and history. The wounds of history cry out through the simple exhortation of a figure of the future.

Shorty's function as a punctum of the narrative demonstrates an inability to ever fully resolve the traumas of the past. He moves from the margins of the text as a peripheral concern of the protagonist to the center of her experience. In her essay "The Hell of Desire: Narrative, Identity and Utopia in *A Question of Power*," Clare Counihan suggests that the hallucinated characters Dan and Sello are "sites of disassembling narratives and identity" that challenge linear form, chronology, and confluences of the past and the present to intentionally depict South Africa's "frayed and knotted narrative

thread” (71-72). She says that this manipulation by Head and her seeming refusal of the conventional structures of the novel “demands, then, that the reader trace the tension between cohesion and disintegration” and “throw ... colonial and post colonial representation into crisis” (73-74). The tension between cohesion and integration is particularly evident when the reader sees that Elizabeth’s mother’s narrative lived on through her, and Elizabeth’s narrative will live on through Shorty.

In the closing scene of the novel, as Elizabeth’s “painful, broken nerve ends quietly knit together,” she invites her son to write a poem. Like when Elizabeth learned of her mother’s institutionalization, Shorty seems to understand that his mother cannot bear the stigmas of insanity alone. Shorty writes: “The man can fly about the sky, sky butterflies can fly ... A fairy man and a fairy boy can fly about the sky” (205). When she reads his poem, Elizabeth realizes that Shorty has “travelled the journey alongside her. He seemed to summarize all her observations.” The fairy men, Dan and Sello, who occupy her mind and exhort her death, have invaded the psyche of her son. His poem shows that they are now a part of his narrative.

Shorty and other minor characters are seldom analyzed in scholarship about *A Question of Power*. Yet the complex way that he impacts his mother’s suffering, presenting as merely a speck in the narrative is compelling nonetheless. His performance in the novel becomes critical to the reader’s understanding of how the traumatic vestiges of apartheid move from one generation to another as well as how the punctums of narrative representation can offer new insights regarding the shared histories of colonization.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

The argument by Andrew Van der Vlies referenced in the previous chapter regarding the cathartic nature of writerly engagement with the archives of history shows the import of fiction as a form of testimony to historical trauma. While his observations reject the notion of closure through narrativization, they affirm that ongoing testimony espouses “a forum to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary” of the narratives of post-traumatic communities (949). As the political, social, and economic challenges of the U.S. South have become a part of a transnational dialogue that if nothing else challenges the contextual borders of the Global South, this project engages by showing that the persistence of traumatic suffering across generations is a phenomenon that carries an ethical injunction for readers to stand as witness to the suffering voice of another’s trauma. While Van der Vlies’s focus is on writerly engagement, the claim of this project is that readerly engagement with narrative elements that challenge the reader to hear the suffering voice of another is key to revealing the extraordinary nature of traumatic experience. Among those narrative elements, chronology of narrative structure, style of narration, and the presence of an elusive yet forceful character voice in the text seem key. Robert Penn Warren’s *Flood* and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* provide keen examples of how these narrative elements are employed to engage the reader with the enigmatic movement of the suffering borne of historical trauma.

The introductory chapter of this project references the research of Freud and Caruth, to show that flashbacks or unbidden memories are tied to trauma in that they register the force of an experience that is not fully comprehensible. The atemporal chronology of both *Flood* and *A Question of Power* functions to elucidate this force. In Chapter II of this project we see that as Brad Tolliver attempts to create a narrative about his hometown, he is overwhelmed by flashback memories that are beyond language and cohesion yet bound to the place and the history that have shaped them. The reader sees the events as they unfold through flashbacks and notices that when the intrusive memories surface, Brad's affect changes. The narrator describes him as entranced, horrified by the memories, and even ashamed of his own complicity. A description of one of the most compelling flashbacks of the novel shows that Brad often experiences dissociative moments when he recalls rupturing past encounters. His recall of being beaten by his father as a young boy shows that he is disturbed in a way that renders him unable to speak about it as his own lived experience. Rather he experiences what appears to be a psychological splitting in order to work through the history, as he and the reader travel back in time to bear witness to the scene together.

Susan Brison's research on the therapeutic nature of trauma narratives offers keen insight on why the refusal of the protagonist to integrate the painful memory is particularly useful in narrative representations of intergenerational trauma. She explains,

[m]emories of traumatic events can be themselves traumatic:  
uncontrollable, intrusive, and frequently somatic. They are experienced ...  
as inflicted not chosen - as flashbacks to the events themselves. In contrast  
[the act of] narrating memories to others (who are strong enough and

empathic enough to be able to listen) empowers survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma. Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is ... a speech act that defuses traumatic memory. (40)

Brison's research provides insight regarding the development of Warren's protagonist. By moving from the position of victim to witness, Brad attempts to gain authority over the intrusive memories. Similarly, this shifting within the structure of the narrative forces the reader to constantly renegotiate time and space in order to work through or find a coherent narrative thread.

Because psychoanalytic theory shows that traumatic experience fails to register cohesively with a narrative of the past or the present, so must any insightful representation of historical trauma. Head's *A Question of Power* also challenges notions of chronology and cohesion. However, with *A Question of Power* the reader must negotiate not only the erratic nonlinear movement of the narrative but also a blurring of the lived and imagined experiences of the protagonist. Claire Counihan argues that the frayed and knotted narrative thread of *A Question of Power*, which refuses to maintain coherence, is significant because "the text precipitates a crisis of representation that draws attention to itself and the reader's necessary collusion in determining the nature of reality and its dependence on mimetic representational strategies" (71). Thus the achronological plot structure of *A Question of Power*, in the way that it forces the reader to seek alternative ways to access and understand the novel and the way that it implicates the reader's necessary engagement with fictional representation, becomes an essential feature to elucidate the recurring nature and elusive movement of trauma.

In both *Flood* and *A Question of Power*, the suffering voice of the protagonists is mediated through the supposedly objective voice of third-person narration. Yet it seems that Warren and Head manipulate their narration in ways that not only shed light on the inescapable historical-cultural wounds but also in ways that provide an aperture for the willing reader to bear witness to how those wounds move within and across generations. Much of the scholarship on Warren's *Flood*, for example, approaches the work through the lens of the self-reproaches of a writer, the legacy of the Civil War, or even the erasure of the agrarian South. While each of these seems to elide the South's history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, there is arguably a metadiscourse also at work within the texts. In fact, though Warren sets his narrative in the South during the early twentieth century, he never directly mentions race-related violence within the novel. Rather, he merely alludes to the violence through the protagonist's renunciation of the disavowing Civil War monument that he calls the "spiritual center of Fiddlersburg" (256).

John Hiers believes that around such scenes "Warren constructs not only historical fiction, but fiction which philosophically explores the meaning of history ... As much as any other modern Southern novelist, Warren approaches the struggle for a viable historical perspective as the tantamount problem for the artist" (100). Hiers's claim that representations of grievous historical violence is a difficult task for any artist suggests that Warren's decision to subvert overt discourse about slavery and Jim Crow is purposeful. It suggests that Warren intentionally diverts the reader's attention to the philosophical realm of metanarrative and in doing so he forces the reader to simultaneously acknowledge the failure of the protagonist to create a romanticized image of the post-Civil War South and Warren's dilemma to construct a viable narrative around

such pervasive communal suffering. Remarkably, in calling the reader to acknowledge the elusive suffering of the protagonist and what's at stake as he attempts to retell a history through art, Warren arguably also coaxes the reader to bear witness to his own melancholic entrenchment as a writer of Southern fiction. When writing *Flood*, he also was involved with many national conversations that sought to rethink earlier positions on race relations in the U.S. South.

Similar to Hiers's claim about Warren's fiction, Eleni Coundouriotis observes that the use of third-person narration in *A Question of Power* allows Bessie Head to mediate herself through her characters in order to shed light on the connectedness between Elizabeth's internal and external world. She believes that Head is hyper-aware of the protagonist's psychic condition and therefore through her authorial power takes the reader on a journey through Elizabeth's mental breakdown and recovery. When Coundouriotis writes "[t]ruth ... depends on a will to articulate it, to invent it, to give it form, and thus to authorize it" she in effect suggests a complicity on behalf the reader who must rely on the perspective of the narrator to arrive at a truth that is not otherwise locatable (30). In the way that Head employs what Coundouriotis calls "psycho-narration," taking the reader on a journey through the sheer incomprehensibility of trauma, the reader must mitigate each unsettling encounter within the text. And in the way that readers themselves may, as Jaqueline Rose describes, "go a little bit mad," Head implicates readers in the persistence of suffering following traumatic encounters.

While the styles of narration and the complicated ways in which the plots unfold in each novel are telling, what they tend to suggest is that there must be a willingness or complicity on behalf of the reader to engage regarding the truth claims that fiction makes

about historical trauma. However, when Brison argues that the hearer of trauma must be empathic enough to listen, she alludes to the claims of LaCapra and Caruth who, referenced throughout this project, believe that responsiveness to representations of the traumatic experience of others often involves an unsettling encounter, one that is potentially outside of the immediate plot of the narrative yet enigmatic and demanding nonetheless. As literature serves to bridge the gap between knowing and not knowing, we must consider how witness is constructed out of these unexpected encounters with literature. Through the figure of the child, both of the novels examined in this project demonstrate compelling representations of a voice that surfaces to demand acknowledgement in past, present, and future narratives.

As discussed in Chapter II, Brad Tolliver's melancholic attachment is borne of the melancholic condition of his father and the despondency that pervades the region in which the novel is set. Though a pointed description of the exact historical violence that binds Brad to his father or the Tolliver family to the suffering of the community of Fiddlersburg is never offered, Warren very purposefully links conflicts in Brad's adult life to violent encounters between him and Lank during his childhood. The scenes of abuse that Brad fails to ever integrate into his personal narrative provide compelling illustrations of how the figure of the child surfaces as a distinct and enigmatic voice in the work. In *Flood*, it seems apparent that Warren intends for this figure to be read as the distinctly pervasive voice of melancholia because each time the voice is heard through intrusive memories, they inflict wounds on the psyche of the protagonist that, though indefinable, bring tears to his eyes. In this way Warren not only positions Brad alongside the reader as a witness to the violent history of the U.S. South, but also demonstrates the

presence of the sorrowful voice that Caruth argues often appears within literature to tell of a truth that is otherwise unavailable.

In another particularly telling moment in the novel, Brad experiences a rush of terror when he considers how the flood waters will impact his father's buried remains. When he hears *will the water come over my father*, a voice that appears from his inner self, it startles him (19). The reader witnesses a conflation of the psyche of the protagonist in his adulthood with the sorrowful voice of the protagonist in his youth. Warren melds the difficult task of coming-to-terms with the violences of historical trauma with the conflict that Brad experiences in attempting to re-present a history. In this way the figure of the child speaks in resistance to any disavowal of that violence in the creation of the film about Fiddlersburg.

Whereas Warren represents the persistent voice of a past that resists erasure or silencing, Head shows the forceful nature of trauma's movement by depicting the ineradicable voice of wounds that cry out even as future narratives for regions that have endured historical trauma are being conceptualized. Annie Gagiano believes that what Head creates with *A Question of Power* is "an enduring testimony to the ineradicable awfulness of violation and abjection and to its horrifying aftermath" (53). It seems that Head's recurring use of molestation, death, and suicide to describe the vulnerable life of the child in *A Question of Power* serves as a forceful warning about how the figure of the child is implicated in South Africa's futurity. As in *Flood* the figure of the child is simultaneously at the periphery of the narrative yet always at the center of the suffering being represented.

In a critical moment in *A Question of Power*, Shorty becomes a victim of the protagonist's anguish. He even mimics back her violent language, demonstrating the repetitious nature of violence. In other critical moments he appears, like the voice of Warren's child figure, as a beckoning call drawing the reader's attention to his open dialogue with the protagonist. In a final critical encounter in the novel, the reader sees the eminent way that Shorty serves to elucidate the projection of intergenerational trauma into the future when the protagonist reads his poem and realizes that he will bear the stigmas of insanity with her. However, in Chapter III of this project I attempt to show that the enigmatic voice that appears in Head's novel speaks not only to the protagonist. Rather Shorty performs like a punctum, and has the ability to speak directly to the reader compelling a more insightful understanding of how trauma moves.

Even as they represent vastly different psychic manifestations, both *Flood* and *A Question of Power* represent the ways in which the difficult task of working through historical trauma involving race-related inhumanity becomes a pervasive internal struggle that creates metastasizing wounds within and throughout generations. These works of fiction share in common complex styles of narration, atemporal framing, and compelling deployments of the figure of the child to show that historical trauma must be seen as an imbricated cycle with implications that extend beyond place and time. Moreover, they show that the voice of historical wounds remains dynamic and engaging even for the contemporary reader.

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