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“I DID NOT PLANT THE SEEDS TOO DEEPLY”: INTERGENERATIONAL
TRAUMA AND SHAME IN TONI MORRISON’S *THE BLUEST EYE* AND
EDWIDGE DANTICAT’S *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY*

By

Grace Kimmell

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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In

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Introduction

“Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him” (Morrison 160). As this description of Cholly from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* suggests, trauma can reduce anyone to a terrifying and destructive isolation. When trauma’s genesis is in societal racism or the patriarchal power structure, it can leach its way into our intimate family relationships. Those damaged relationships can in turn create a profound loss or division within the self, as Freud explains in “Mourning and Melancholia.” The trauma victim has lost what a parent or family should be and the security that comes with feeling accepted and loved. If trauma begins with systemic racism and sexism and gets passed down intergenerationally, what is its effect on a black female child’s identity? Is this trauma survivable? What is necessary to recover? My thesis will explore these questions in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes Memory*. It will explore how intergenerational trauma forms, the destruction that it can have on families and on personal identity, and how confronting and processing these traumas can allow one to start on a path to recovery.

Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” contends that the mind, when faced with loss, can follow one of two routes: it can mourn the loss or it can lapse into a state of melancholia. In this melancholic state, the mind internalizes and identifies with the lost object. Angry feelings towards the lost object are also misdirected onto the ego or self. As he explains, “an object loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification” (249). He also observes, “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in

melancholia it is the ego itself” (246). He describes further how the melancholic feels “worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself,” and this delusion is completed “by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life” (246-47), suggesting that the melancholic may be driven to suicide. In other words, such internalization of one’s losses and misdirection of anger can keep one from moving forward and have a tragic end. Freud stresses the melancholic’s deep shame and lack of self-worth. These feelings can be passed down unconsciously from parent to child, a phenomenon known as intergenerational trauma.

According to Linda O’Neill, a trauma specialist, “Complex trauma focuses on early life experiences, which may include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, serious attachment disruption, deculturization, repeated invasive medical procedures, and other adverse childhood events occurring in the first decade of life” (175). She further asserts, “The core of intergenerational or historical trauma is the ripple effect of victimization where the systemic effect of personal trauma often extends beyond the actual victim and can have a profound effect on the lives of significant others” (174). This can especially relate to a cultural or institutionalized inequity or discrimination as it is passed down intergenerationally in families. We see this in the generational reverberations from slavery, as psychologist Janice P. Gump explains. She refers to trauma as “the experience of unbearable affect occurring in a context of profound relational malattunement,” then continues, “Affects produced by slavery were quintessentially of this nature, whether grief from the loss of everything and everyone familiar, the despair of captivity, the helplessness and rage of physical abuse, or the rage and shame of rape. Slavery evoked the core intrapsychic experiences of helplessness, shame, and rage” (46). Gump references psychologist Joy Leary in describing how this traumatic past can result in three

outcomes: “vacant esteem, by which she appears to mean low self-esteem, ever-present anger, and racist socialization. She attributes no small part of African-American anger to what she terms *sensitivity to disrespect*, a state we might call *shame-proneness*” (49). Such internalization of past losses and the consequent self-division, anger, and shame are apparent in both Morrison’s and Danticat’s novels.

Psychologists and theorists have provided us with tools to analyze the many moving parts of intergenerational trauma manifested in both novels. Dr. Joy Degruy, whose work is similar to Gump’s, gives us a deeper understanding of racial trauma as an African-American in America. Like Gump, she highlights how these behaviors get passed down from parent to child and how these emotional remnants of slavery are still present in American society today and can impact identity formation. Degruy’s concept of Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, which she defines as “a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today” (105), plays a large role in understanding the destructive behavior of the characters in both Morrison’s and Danticat’s novels. Degruy’s book, *Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, addresses particular behaviors and attitudes in the African-American community, such as violent behavior towards others and low self-esteem, that stem from racial traumas that have been transmitted intergenerationally. She calls for healing and reform through breaking these intergenerational patterns. Degruy discusses not only how trauma can rework our genetic coding, but how the legacy of trauma lives on through the transmission of beliefs and behaviors. She contends, “These behaviors and beliefs have been necessary for survival at one time, but today they undermine our ability to succeed” (102). She asserts that these behaviors are passed down from parent to child, a cycle that keeps the trauma

alive. Psychologist Fanny Brewster also argues, “The suppression, repression, and amnesia of racial complexes have contributed to the wounding of our American psyche in terms of how we have continued, over centuries, to inflict physical and psychological pain because of falsely constructed ideas regarding differences in ethnicity” (169), which further underscores the impact on modern-day African-Americans and how they interact with American society at large. This repression is itself a trauma, which is intertwined and connected with the history of slavery in America. These notions can help us analyze the destructive behaviors of parents in both novels and the impact their belief systems have on identity formation in their children.

Susan Brison, in her study of trauma, discusses how we interact with others, and how the self is relationally constructed and changes when one becomes traumatized. She states, “The self is viewed as related to and constructed by others in an ongoing way, not only because others continue to shape and define us throughout our lifetimes, but also because our own sense of self is couched in descriptions whose meanings are a social phenomena” (41). Brison emphasizes how our interactions with others form our identities and self-perception. Our social relations can also help us heal from trauma. She explains, “So one makes a wager, in which nothing is certain that the odds change daily, and sets about willing to believe that life, for all its unfathomable horror, still holds some undiscovered pleasures. And one remakes oneself by finding meaning in a life of caring for and being sustained by others.” (66). This confirms the need for reconnection to society and others as a part of healing from trauma. Both novels, and particularly Sophie’s path to recovery in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, will demonstrate the truth of these ideas.

One of the most influential works on trauma is Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terrorism*. It describes the process of successfully mourning trauma and the steps necessary to recovery. She characterizes

traumatic events as follows: “Traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link the individual and community... traumatic events destroy the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of self, and the meaningful order of creation” (52). She describes how traumatized individuals disconnect from the world in order to cope with their traumas. In order to properly mourn and recover, the trauma victim needs to regain a sense of security. Herman outlines three essential stages of recovery: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. She states, “In the course of a successful recovery, it should be possible to recognize a gradual shift from unpredictable danger to reliable safety, from dissociated isolation to restored social connection” (155). Subsequently, she stresses that the shift from danger to safety is an essential first step, which we see in both Morrison’s and Danticat’s novels. She states, “In the second stage, “the survivor tells the story of the trauma. . . . This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). This is crucial to achieving the final stage: reconnection. One needs to confront these traumas and to mourn one’s past self and life in order to move forward and reconnect with others. However, when the first step of safety is not there, the movement towards recovery cannot proceed. In both Morrison’s and Danticat’s novels, the establishment of such a safe environment proves extremely problematic. Leester Thomas addresses this idea of safety and how it can be inhibited by a lack of feeling at home. While the idea of home has many different meanings, it primarily connotes peace, security and safety, qualities essential to trauma recovery, as Herman argues. When safety cannot be achieved within someone’s own family or community or society at large, there is no hope for achieving a safe place to heal from trauma and move through the needed steps for recovery.

While *The Bluest Eye* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* have frequently been looked at through the lenses of race and feminism, I have not found critical work that particularly looks at gender and race as catalysts for intergenerational trauma. My thesis will explore this topic primarily through the lens of Freud's concept of melancholia and Herman's work on trauma recovery. Both novels are filled with traumatic events occurring in childhood that impact identity formation, and these traumas get passed down from parents to children.

In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, we are introduced to the Breedloves, an African-American family who grapple with poverty, dysfunctional ancestors who rejected them, and rejection from the larger white society. Apropos of their situation, J. Brooks Bouson states, "Accepting as part of their self-definition the shaming qualities whites ascribe to their blackness, the Breedloves see themselves as ugly people" (25). This belief gets passed on to the children in the family, especially the daughter, Pecola. All of the characters in the novel deal with profound losses due to racism and sexism, and they misdirect their angry, hateful feelings onto themselves in a melancholic response. We also see how such a response can lead to explosive family dynamics. *The Bluest Eye* shows us a timeline of how trauma is passed down generationally and ultimately how destructive such intergenerational trauma can be. Claudia, another young African-American character who has a more secure family base, serves as Pecola's antithesis as she is ultimately able to see the trauma of racism as rooted in the external society, not in herself. At the beginning of the novel, however, she also displays a melancholic response. She describes her marigolds that do not grow: "For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth" (6). These marigolds are symbolic of Pecola and her dead baby, and when they do not grow, Claudia blames herself. At the end of the novel, however, she realizes that "I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town.

I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds this year” (206).

Claudia is the only character in the novel to escape the melancholic response and direct her anger where it belongs—at the racist and traumatizing external world.

Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also shows us intergenerational trauma, but it equally shows how Sophie, the novel’s protagonist, is able to move past trauma and start the process of reclaiming her body, mind, and home. Her mother, Martine, was raped by a masked macoute and impregnated with Sophie while she lived in Haiti, and she never mourns or recovers from this trauma. She had left Sophie with her Tante Atie while she moved on with her life in America, but when Sophie turns twelve, she summons her to join her in America. Martine’s traumas and shame are deeply seeded within her: she bleaches her skin, loses weight, and projects her own shame and insecurities onto Sophie by “testing” her to make sure that she is still a virgin. Martine had also experienced such traumatic testing as a young girl. Martine’s traumas are rooted in her experiences in Haiti. She never is able to reclaim her home there, prompting her to feel lost, hateful, and bitter towards the country (which she also internalizes onto herself). She also misdirects that anger onto Sophie and eventually her unborn baby and herself. Jennifer Rossi stresses the idea of Martine’s exile: “A victim of sexual violence (trauma) can become emotionally separated (exiled) from her own body, and a child forced from her country, with no control over her immigration (exile) can feel traumatized by this geological separation. Exile from one’s younger self, birth mother, and/or country of birth creates interlocking desires to return or escape” (1). Unlike Martine, Sophie does return to Haiti to reclaim her home and identity. As Newtona Johnson states, “Encapsulated in Danticat’s conceptualization of displacement is a vision of how women caught in a matrix of power constituted by patriarchal forces can achieve self-determination” (147). We see Sophie as a prime example of this. Haiti

becomes Sophie's safe environment, the first step in trauma recovery. She also achieves Herman's second stage by reconstructing the narrative of both her mother's traumas and her own. She comes to peace with who her mother is and ultimately accomplishes the final stage of reconnection, reclaiming her body, self, and a future life for her daughter in which intergenerational trauma will not be repeated.

The Bluest Eye: Melancholia and Misdirected Rage

The Bluest Eye chronicles two families: the Breedlove family and Geraldine and her son, Junior. As African-American families, they perhaps unsurprisingly fall victim to the traumas of racism so prevalent in our country, especially during the 1940s when the novel is set. The Breedloves are a poor family who have suffered not only from racism, but from a poverty that has kept them confined to their storefront home. Pauline, the mother in the household, is a housegirl for an upper-class white family and consistently compares her life to that of white people and their lifestyle. Cholly, her husband, becomes known not only as a violent man who also set their home ablaze, but who later rapes his daughter. This destructive family dynamic weighs on their daughter, Pecola, who becomes obsessed with the idea that if she had blue eyes, her life would not be filled with hardships as it is now.

Geraldine and Junior, who are a part of a middle-class family, have similar chaos in their household. Geraldine is obsessed with cleanliness and the idea of purity, which brings her closer to her cat than her son. Her son Junior feels her absence, and he becomes violent to other females because they are reminders of what he is lacking--a nurturing relationship with his mother. While many critics have discussed racism and sexism in the novel, not much has been written about trauma and the lack of mourning that profoundly impact these characters' identities. Soaphead

Church, an African-American minister in town, also has endured racial humiliation and shame, seen in his name--“Soaphead,” meaning curly hair that was shiny when hit with soap (167). He, along with Geraldine, is attached to an idea of purity and cleanliness that he cannot shake, for it is his way to maintain sanity and a sense of control in his life.

The novel reveals how traumas due to racism and sexism impact one’s identity, and due to a failure to mourn these traumas, they get passed down intergenerationally. As discussed in the introduction, *The Bluest Eye* shows the dynamics of a melancholic response to trauma in which anger and hostility towards the lost or traumatizing object is internalized and misdirected. In my analysis, I will address the male characters first, as their responses to trauma are more violent, and then progress to the female characters, who handle their traumas more internally and self-destructively.

Male Characters

Junior, a young boy from a middle-class African-American family, and son of Geraldine, is a huge source of trouble for anyone who enters into his sphere of influence. He lashes out at his mother, blaming her for neglecting him and depriving him of the love and attention he needs. Geraldine identifies with white society more than with her own people, so she ignores her son and husband to distance herself from these reminders of her own Blackness. Thus very early in his life, Junior has already faced a major loss: the attention and affection of a mother. In coping with this loss, he misdirects his anger towards his mother onto others. As Freud discusses with melancholia, it is too dangerous to express anger towards the lost object, whom one also loves and needs, so that anger must be redirected. As time goes on, Junior grows increasingly vindictive: “More and more Junior enjoyed bullying girls. It was easy to make them scream and

run. How he laughed when they fell down and their bloomers showed. When they got up, their faces red and crinkled, it made him feel good” (87). His tendency towards cruelty highlights a sadistic facet of his character that is particularly aimed at women and girls. These females, despite lacking any direct connection to Junior’s personal life, are triggering objects for him, so much so that he feels fulfilled watching them suffer. The one object of his mother’s unadulterated affection is their cat. The narrator notes, “As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer. The cat survived, because Geraldine was seldom away from home, and could effectively soothe the animal when Junior abused him” (86). This connection is pivotal in understanding Junior and the male characters as a whole within the novel. Though Junior comes to an understanding of what he is missing through seeing his mother lavish attention on the cat, he is not able to cut the libidinal ties of affection to her. Moreover, he is not able to mourn and move forward in life, and he uses violence as a way to cope. Freud states, “hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering” (45), which explains why Junior makes the cat suffer. Not only does Junior abuse this cat, he kills it. The finality of the cat’s death is symbolic of the impact this violent behavior has on others. This is one of many examples of male characters coping with their traumas through misdirected anger and violence. The same principle can be found at play in the characterization of Cholly.

Cholly Breedlove, too, has suffered from childhood family trauma, which was exacerbated by the racist society around him. When he was a child, he was abandoned by his mother in a pile of garbage and left to die, while his father was entirely absent. From the start, he was grappling with traumatic losses that he, as a child, did not have the psychological and

emotional resources to cope with or mourn. To compound this family trauma, Cholly was also persistently insulted, abused, and humiliated by white men in his world, which led to a deep sense of shame. An instance of this occurs when two white men stumble upon him as he is having sex with a woman. They tell him, “Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good” (117), which degrades Cholly as a mere object of entertainment for these men, humiliating him deeply. His reaction to these emotions, though, is not as might be expected: Cholly “had not hated the white men; he hated, despised, the girl” (117). This suggests that his anger towards his abusers, which again cannot be expressed because it is too dangerous, gets misdirected onto the girl. He is humiliated further when he finds his father in an attempt to reconnect with him. This endeavor backfires as Cholly’s father rudely rejects him, barking, “Tell that bitch she get her money. Now, get the fuck out of my face!” (157). This failed encounter only reinforces Cholly’s sense of loss and amplifies the shame and humiliation associated with his trauma. After this interaction, he soils himself “like a baby,” and he is faced with the decision of what to do: “In panic he wondered should he wait there, not moving until nighttime? No. His father would surely emerge and see him and laugh. Oh, Lord. he would laugh. Everybody would laugh. There was only one thing to do ... Cholly ran” (157). This deep-seated humiliation becomes a key component of Cholly’s character, which underscores his motivation for acting in destructive ways.

J. Brooks Bouson addresses such shame in her book, *Quiet as It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. She states, “if a mature sense of shame--that is, the recognition that some phenomena should be kept private and shielded from public view--protects the individual from moments of ‘increased vulnerability,’ it is also the case that family privacy has served to conceal that family provides a dangerous hiding place for family violence and sexual abuse” (27). Such private, shameful family abuse applies to Cholly’s raping his daughter,

Pecola. Cholly's losses, anger and shame cause him to react in the same way that Junior does towards the cat--he inflicts violence on others. But in a strange, twisted way, we see that his rape of Pecola is also Cholly's distorted way of expressing love and affection towards his daughter. We see in the narration of the rape scene that he confuses Pecola with his wife, Pauline. The narrator states, "That timid, tucked-in look of the scratching toe--that was what Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky . . . It was such a small and simple gesture, but it filled him with a wondering softness. Not the usual lust to part tight legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness. A desire to cover her foot with his hand and gently nibble away the itch with his teeth. He did it then, and started Pauline into laughter. He did it now" (162). This glimpse of what is going through Cholly's mind shows that he is confusing the love that he has for his wife with feelings towards his daughter, a confusion that leads to devastating results. Freud's understanding of melancholia as the internalization and misdirection of painful feelings shows how both Junior and Cholly are coping with their traumas in destructive ways. Because their egos are damaged by the shame and misdirected anger resulting from their traumas, they in turn traumatize others. From murdering men to manipulating his wife to sexually assaulting his daughter, Cholly experiences a sense of freedom and power in these acts of violence:

He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned, for he had already seen the fugitiveness in the eyes of his jailer, free to say, 'No, Suh', and smile for had already killed three white men. Free to take a woman's insults, for his body had already conquered hers. Free even to knock her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms. Free to be gentle when she was sick, or mop her floor, for she knew what and where his maleness was. He was free to drink himself into a silly helplessness, for he had already been a gandy dancer, done

thirsty days on a chain gang, and picked a woman's bullet out of the calf of his leg. He was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him . . . there was nothing else to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him. (Morrison 160)

Cholly's "freedom" is really a form of imprisonment in his own isolation, in his own distorted fantasies. We see that in his own mind, the only path to such "freedom" is through dominating and inflicting violence on others. Gump explains how such fantasies get passed down intergenerationally in her work on African-American subjectivity. She states in reference to a clinical case of a patient, "organizing principles derived initially from slavery were unconsciously transmitted to this great-grandfather, were then transmitted to his daughter, who as mother of my patient's father, transmitted them once again" (52). She discusses how a pattern of anger, violence and domination gets passed down through the generations within this family. She also notes that "under this rageful posturing there existed a fragile self" (52). This underlying fragile self is apparent in Morrison's male characters as well. Gump explains how rageful, dominating behaviors are rooted in trauma and get transferred down to succeeding generations, even if not consciously or intentionally. In Cholly's case, the only mode of action he knows is rageful domination--over his wife, over white men, over his family. Cholly has been so traumatized, so humiliated and shamed, that love and relationships have become distorted into forms of violence and control. We see similar dynamics in the character of Soaphead Church.

Soaphead, a minister, is referred to as a “clean” old man. We see rather quickly that he too acts upon blind conviction and anger, which in his case is typically prompted by uncleanliness. We are told that Soaphead Church was consistently surrounded by disappointment and dread. The narrator states, “People come to him in dread, whispered in dread, wept and pleaded in dread . . . Singly they found their way to his door, wrapped each in a shroud stitched with anger, yearning, pride, vengeance, loneliness, misery, defeat and hunger” (172). We are then told, “With occasional, and increasingly rare, encounters with the little girls he could persuade to be entertained by him, he lived rather peaceably among his things, admitting to no regrets” (172). To him, these young girls represent purity and simplicity, for they have not yet been dirtied with life’s disappointments. We see this purity relate back not only to his obsession with cleanliness, but to his relationship with Velma, whom he fell in love with but who later left him. He states, “There wasn’t nastiness, and there wasn’t any filth, and there wasn’t any odor, and there wasn’t any groaning--just the light white laughter of little girls and me. And there wasn’t any look--any long funny look--any long funny Velma look afterward. That makes you want to die. With little girls it is all clean and good and friendly” (181). With little girls, he can avoid the rejection and humiliation he experienced with women. As with Cholly, Soaphead’s erotic attention has been distorted and misdirected onto a child. As Cholly wants to “protect” Pecola, Soaphead realizes how these young girls suffer, and he feels the need to fill a void for them. He pleads to God, “Did you forget? Did you forget about the children? Yes, You forgot. You let them go wanting, sit on road shoulders, crying next to their dead mothers. I’ve seen them charred, lame, halt. You forgot, Lord. You forget how and when to be God” (181). He decides to take matters into his own hands with Pecola and “grants” her blue eyes. However, his acts of love are just as distorted by his losses and traumas as are Cholly’s.

While Soaphead sees an opportunity to make Pecola feel that her wishes are fulfilled by granting her blue eyes, we see that he makes her a prey to his own violent tendencies. He states, “No one else will see her blue eyes. But *she* will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do” (182). He tells her that she will have access to blue eyes once she feeds a dog with a piece of meat (which he has secretly poisoned); he has been wanting this dog to die as it is again representative to him of the world’s uncleanness and filth. His interactions with Pecola ultimately prove to be violent ones, just as Cholly’s are. Both traumatize Pecola in unconscious attempts to deal with their own traumas and sense of helplessness. Both subject her to violent acts in a distorted attempt to acknowledge and love her, yet their own past traumas and racial shaming warp their feelings and understanding of the world. Both use domination as a way to cope with traumas rooted in humiliation from family and from white society at large. Cholly’s violence, along with Junior’s and Soaphead’s, is an attempt to transfer shame and fury onto the women around them, even as it is an unconscious effort to compensate for the loss of love and control in their lives. Their strategies contrast with those of the female characters in the novel, who handle their traumas primarily through self-destructive behavior.

Female Characters

Geraldine, Junior’s mother, is a middle-class African-American woman who most closely associates herself with the white class. She even creates a distinction between upper and lower-class African-Americans, and we see that she prides herself on her cleanliness. This cleanliness is an extension of her preference for “white” things and a reflection of her own self-loathing at being Black and thus “dirty.” This directly ties to racist societal perceptions, including those

rooted in slavery that promote racist stereotypes. Describing the dehumanization of African-Americans following slavery, Degruy states, “the efforts to prove superiority continued. Slavery produced or supported the white ethnocentric model, which was justified by an erroneous belief in colorism, the legal assumption that a colored person is a slave (implying they are equivalent to three fifths of a human, according to the Three-Fifths Compromise)” (47). This dehumanization in societal perceptions of Black people of the 1940s informs Geraldine’s obsession with purity, for cleanliness makes her feel more white and therefore more human. We see this in various descriptions of Geraldine, such as her description of the different classes of African-Americans: “They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud . . . The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant” (87). Bousoon speaks to Geraldine’s interactions with Pecola in reference to her attitude towards these different classes of African-Americans: “Geraldine, who has internalized the cultural construction of white superiority/purity and black inferiority/impurity, views Pecola through the lens of antiblack racist stereotypes . . . as an African-American in white America is a member of an outsider group, she projects the image of Otherness projected onto her by the dominant white culture onto an extension of herself” (38). Bousoon’s explanation not only applies to Geraldine’s connection to purity, but to her entire self-concept. Her ego suffers from never being able to possess the whiteness she desires, and she clings to order and cleanliness to tie her to white society and to “humanity” in general. This is also indicated in her reaction to her hair curlers slipping during sexual intercourse with her husband: “She stiffens when she feels one of her paper curlers coming undone from the activity of love; imprints in her mind which one it is that is coming loose so she can quickly secure it once he is through” (84). Geraldine’s emphasis on being clean, neat and tidy so that she can

avoid being looked at as a “dirty” Black is an attempt to assert her superiority as an upper-class African-American compared to those who are poor and lack even her limited social mobility. This need to assert order is one she never relaxes as she fears that all her power will be lost as soon as she lets that order slip away.

An old adage says that cleanliness is next to godliness; for Geraldine, godliness and whiteness are synonymous. Her connection to her cat also revolves around cleanliness, as she hopes the cat will “love her order, precision, and constancy; who will be as clean and quiet as she is” (85). This connection to the cat is the only emotionally deep relationship that she has in her family. The cat’s importance even supersedes that of her baby son: “Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them--comfort and satiety... [but] Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge in kissing bouts” (86). This emotional distance from her child stands in stark contrast to her behavior towards her cat, a fact that only further demeans her son. She longs to achieve some measure of whiteness, and her Black son and husband are reminders of what she is not and can never truly be. This devotion to cleanliness and adoration of the white world are attributes shared by another female character, Pauline Breedlove, Cholly’s wife.

Pauline, a housegirl for a wealthy white family, becomes immersed in white culture and acquires a preference for living within that culture instead of being at home or around her own children. Similarly to Geraldine, Pauline chooses to situate herself in and identify with white society. Pauline calls herself “colored” to distinguish herself from other Blacks and to ally herself more closely with the white realm. She attains the status of an “ideal servant” in a white home (127). Surrounded by the luxuries of a wealthy white residence, such as a “child’s pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked

out with blue cornflowers” (127), Pauline pines for these pretty things that she cannot have. Meanwhile, “The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. . . . More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man--they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep” (127). This rejection of her children is particularly important in relation to Pecola. She states that Pecola has “Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). Pecola is grouped with the ugly things in her home that Pauline resents. Her attitude towards white society and her neglect of her children also impact how her children develop: “Them she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly’s mother’s. Into her son, she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). Here she plants the seeds of shame and fear in her children, stressing Morrison’s understanding of how racial traumas are transmitted intergenerationally. Black self-acceptance can be extremely difficult to achieve in a racist society. Gump again explains how Black subjectivity is affected by the lasting impacts of slavery, for slavery became the catalyst for dehumanization and stereotypes that have been passed down intergenerationally (42). As Paul Douglass Mahaffey states, “Pauline’s relationship to Pecola is especially tragic because it is a situation in which mother and daughter exist in a patriarchal and racist environment which does not allow them the chance to construct a positive and subjective identity” (161). The trauma of racism has impacted both characters’ identities and their relationship beyond repair. Pauline’s adoration of white people and their lifestyle cuts her off from real relationships in her own world. This need to escape her own identity and culture gets passed down to her daughter Pecola.

Pecola inherits burdens from both of her parents' traumas. At the beginning of the novel, Pecola wants to escape her identity by wishing for blue eyes. She rejects her own innate beauty when she wishes she were white because then and only then could she be loved: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights,-- if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. . . . Maybe they'd say 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (46). This is a direct reflection of her mother's trauma and influence: being loved means being beautiful, which means being white. They will never have the beauty society associates with whiteness, and thus they will never be loved for themselves. This notion is reinforced by Pecola's interactions with Maureen Peal, a young white girl who insults Claudia and Pecola. Portales also connects Pecola's "crazed desire" for blue eyes with Maureen Peal: "This unnatural longing, clearly created and fueled by the same social views that earlier led Maureen Peal to voice her cuteness and Claudia and Frieda's ugliness, eventually leads to Pecola believing that her eyes have turned blue" (Portales 498-499).

One of the key traumatic events that Pecola endures is being raped by Cholly, her father. Cholly quite literally imprints his traumas on his daughter, especially when we see that he actually feels a deeper connection to his daughter than he does to anything else in his life (161). As discussed earlier, the rape of Pecola, while horrifying, is not enacted out of spite or rage, but as a distorted and warped expression of love. What is worth addressing here is that Pecola herself is never an active voice in this scene--we are within Cholly's thoughts only. We hear about the end of the rape, for instance, from Cholly's point of view: "Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted . . . Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let

him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her” (163). The closest description we get of the rape from Pecola’s point of view is the following: “So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her” (163). Changing point of view is a narrative tactic that Morrison uses throughout the novel. Until the very end, we do not hear much from Pecola herself, only the people who interact with and traumatize her. This narrative choice highlights the fact that Pecola lacks full subjectivity; it is as if she has no voice, no say, or any sense of a life that is her own. Morrison’s narrative choice enforces a view of Pecola’s character as so traumatized that she lacks a coherent inner life altogether. This leads to her madness and fragmented sense of self presented at the end of the novel. In a brief section, we are granted access to a dialogue that Pecola has with herself. She questions herself and whether her blue eyes are real and whether they are blue enough. We see that she has descended into complete madness: “*I’d just like to do something else besides watch you stare in that mirror,*” one italicized voice states; her other voice then responds, “You’re just jealous . . . you wish you had them” (194). It is as if Pecola’s mind is split in two, with neither side grasping reality. This complete breakdown into madness is the final result of Pecola’s multiple traumas.

Thinking about Pecola’s character in relation to Judith Herman’s work on trauma and recovery, we can understand that she never had a chance of healing from her traumas because she could not even achieve the first step in Herman’s path to recovery. The essential first stage is achieving safety in one’s environment and securing a surrounding support system in a time of need (Herman 167). Leester Thomas discusses this idea of home and safety in his article, “When Home Fails to Nurture the Self: Tragedy of Being Homeless at Home.” He states, “Explicitly and implicitly, Morrison’s indictment is against anyone or anything that denies one the right to have

a place in society. To be outside is to be without a home--without a birthplace, without a cultural/racial identity; without family bonding; and finally without self-esteem, and consequently, without self-realization” (Thomas 53). Thomas reveals precisely how exiled Pecola feels from safety and from a supportive community at large, which is what prevents her from ever being able to process or recover from her traumas. Society at large is to blame for Pecola’s suffering, for Morrison makes it impossible to blame any one person for her tragedy. Morrison humanizes all of her characters; they all have their own traumatic pasts in a racist society. Degruy discusses societal racism in relation to trauma, stating, “One of the more insidious and pervasive symptoms of Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome is our adoption of the slave master’s value system. At this value system’s foundation is the belief that white and all things associated with whiteness are superior; and that black and all things associated with blackness are inferior . . . Many African Americans have adopted white standards, including those of beauty and material success, as well as violence and brutality” (116). This shows how the demeaning and dehumanizing values of a racist American society infiltrate into African-American subjectivity itself. Gump argues that this traumatized subjectivity then gets passed down intergenerationally within the Black family.

Claudia, Pecola’s friend, serves as her antithesis in the novel and highlights the importance of having access to a safe, supportive environment. At first, Claudia feels responsible for both Pecola’s fate and the marigolds’ failure to thrive for she believes that she planted the seeds too deeply. She states, “For years I thought my sister was right: I had planted the seeds too far down in the earth,” but then she acknowledges that “It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding” (5). Claudia, who has a hardworking, loving and supportive family, has the resources to mourn the losses she faces as an African-American in a

racist world. She comes to understand that the problem is not in herself, but in the external world around her. We see a prime example of this in her relationship to the Shirley Temple doll. While her sister, Frieda, adores this doll, Claudia states, “the special, loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll . . . I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother?” (20). These dolls--white, innocent and pure--were looked at as the ideal gift, for they represented society’s idea of beauty. Instead of fawning over it, however, Claudia destroys it. She states, “I destroyed white baby dolls. But the dismembering of the dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls” (22). Unlike Cholly, Claudia is aware of the misdirection of her anger and how dangerous it can be. Later, she states, “When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love” (23). We see that while Claudia rejects white ideals being pushed on her as a young Black girl, she also does not fall into misdirected fury in the way the male characters do. We also see an acknowledgement that the losses and injustices are rooted in the world around her, not in herself. She observes at the end of the novel, “I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds this year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear”(206). We see this same understanding in relation to Maureen Peal, the pretty white girl in the neighborhood. Claudia states, “The thing to fear was the thing that made her beautiful, not us” (62). This shows Claudia’s understanding of what Portales also explains: “The *Thing* that finds the Maureen Peals beautiful and not Claudia and Frieda, of course, is society itself, those values and mores that society finds desirable” (498). Claudia’s

self-reflection and her ability to reject, rather than internalize, hurtful norms and not melancholically misdirect her rage at her losses onto herself or others, allow her to be able to move forward from the trauma of living in a racist world. As Herman explains, the need to form one's own narrative and not repress or internalize painful feelings in a self-destructive way is paramount. Claudia's character represents the only hope that Morrison's novel offers.

Racially based trauma comes charged with shame, rage, and humiliation. These hurtful feelings can become ingrained in the psyche of African-Americans of every stratum of social class, though they are especially exacerbated when coupled with poverty. *The Bluest Eye* shows how hurtful and destructive mindsets can be transmitted generation to generation, and most of the characters in the novel never get a chance to live their lives free from the shackles of racism. They never achieve the ability to become their full selves because of the traumas inflicted on them. The parents may not be fully aware of the hurt, shame, and abuse that they are inflicting on their children because they are acting out of their own traumas. Nevertheless, there is hope for characters like Claudia, who have the inner resources and the support they need to break the cycle of intergenerational racial trauma. Like Claudia, Sophie in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath Eyes Memory* escapes a self-destructive, melancholic response to trauma and is able to mourn the traumas that her mother has passed down to her. She is able to follow along Herman's steps to trauma recovery, which leads to a reclamation of her self.

Breath, Eyes, Memory: The Path to Recovery

In *Breath Eyes Memory*, we are introduced to a girl named Sophie. Raised by her Tante Atie, Sophie grows up in Haiti, enveloped in a cocoon of emotional warmth with a strong female

community at its center. She never knew her mother, Martine, so she fantasizes about what her mother may be doing while living in America. Then one day, as if conjured from her dreams, Sophie's mother sends her a plane ticket, and Sophie ventures out finally to meet her mother. When she arrives, however, she is met by someone entirely foreign to her. Martine has almost completely severed ties with her Haitian identity. This revelation is followed quickly by another, as Sophie soon discovers the reason Martine has isolated herself from her home country and from Sophie herself: in Haiti Martine had been raped by a stranger. Martine's severance from her home, both physically and culturally, now makes more sense. Newtona Johnson observes, "In dominant discourses of human geographical movement, such as studies of diasporas, immigration, and exile, displacement is traditionally conceived in dystopic terms, specifically, as loss: the loss of roots, the loss of a sense of belonging, the loss of power, and even the loss of an 'authentic' cultural identity" (150). Similar to the women in *The Bluest Eye*, Martine copes with her losses and trauma through self-destructive behaviors. Sophie, however, learns from her mother's traumas instead of becoming consumed by them; she ultimately follows Herman's steps towards healing and reclaiming a life for herself. We also see how various other female characters in the novel cope with traumas rooted in Haiti's patriarchal power structure by forming their own strong female community.

Before she meets Martine, Sophie has ambivalent feelings towards her mother. She states, "I sometimes saw my mother in my dreams. She would chase me through a field of wildflowers as tall as the sky. When she caught me, she would try to squeeze me into the small frame so I could be in the picture with her. I would scream and scream until my voice gave out" (8). The dream expresses the conflicting feelings Sophie has towards this mother she has never known. While the dream begins with her mother in a field of flowers, it ends with Sophie

screaming in terror of being “squeezed” or suffocated by her. When she finally meets Martine, she is not what Sophie had imagined. Martine has come to America carrying her own traumas that she she could not face in Haiti. Sophie’s first interaction with her mother’s trauma involves a doll to which Martine has been unusually attached. When Martine leads Sophie to her new bedroom, she asks, ““You won’t resent sharing your room, will you?. . . She is like a friend to me. She kept me company while we were apart. It seems crazy, I know. A grown woman like me with a doll, I am giving her to you now. You take good care of her”” (45). Martine’s connection to the doll serves as the first signifier of her trauma, for she romanticizes and personifies the doll in a way that presages the madness to which she succumbs at the end of the novel. Martine’s behavior is not dissimilar to Pecola’s at the end of *The Bluest Eye*. Martine reaches the point where she cannot quite distinguish between what is real and what is not. Martine’s nightmares also reflect her deeply ingrained trauma. Martine warns Sophie about these terrible nightmares, which Sophie observes firsthand:

Whenever my mother was home, I would stay up all night just waiting for her to have a nightmare. Shortly after she fell asleep, I would hear her screaming for someone to leave her alone. I would run over and shake her as she thrashed about. Her reaction was always the same. When she saw my face, she looked even more frightened . . . ‘Sophie, you’ve saved my life.’ (81)

Not only do the nightmares reflect Martine’s trauma, but so too does her daughter, Sophie—the product of her rape. Her nightmares indeed began when she was pregnant with Sophie: “For months she was afraid that he would creep out of the night and kill her in her sleep. She was terrified that he would come and tear out the child growing inside of her. At night, she tore her

sheets and bit off her own flesh when she had nightmares” (139). Sophie serves as a permanent reminder of the rape she has long sought to forget. Subsequently wracked with shame and sadness, Martine tried to kill herself multiple times when Sophie was a fetus (139). The fact that she is frightened further when she finally lays eyes on Sophie suggests why she neglected her daughter and moved away in the first place: she wanted to escape the memory of her rapist in Haiti. Feeling unsafe, she left her daughter in order to rescue herself. Yet her self-exile does not succeed in healing her trauma. Living alone in New York, she is shorn of security, self-esteem, and any connection to her native home and cultural identity.

Martine and Intergenerational Trauma

Martine’s self-loathing manifests itself in many ways, from bleaching her skin to her emphasis on “testing.” Testing, a problematic cultural practice in Haiti, purports to appraise a woman’s virginity through inspecting her private parts. Martine tells Sophie, “When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside. Your Tante Atie hated it. She used to scream like a pig in a slaughterhouse. The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure” (61). Yet while Martine describes testing as simply something that mothers must do to protect their children, we understand this as a sexually-based trauma that she and others experienced as young girls. Testing not only impacts Martine, but many young girls in Haiti. Martine feels compelled to test her own daughter, but there are others like Tante Atie who resist this pressure in favor of protecting the girls. Semia Harbawi observes, “Testing might be construed, paradoxically enough, as emblematic of Martine’s connection with Haiti. Her apology for this traumatizing

tradition gestures toward her flaccid ingestion of doctrinaire patriarchal prerequisites. Atie, on the contrary, never resigned herself willingly to this ordeal, thus exhibiting her latent feminist streak of resistance” (41). This helps us to further understand *why* Martine has the attitude that she does towards testing Sophie and also how she feels towards her own body. Martine bleaches her skin and is frail and thin; she adheres to the patriarchal definitions of beauty within the United States. She keeps traumatizing herself further in order to attain an impossible ideal of beauty. By continuing the testing with her own daughter, Martine is cyclically perpetuating the same trauma that she has endured, as well as upholding the patriarchal norms that she absorbed in both Haiti and the United States.

Sophie has a much different outlook on life than her mother, yet she cannot escape her mother’s traumas, which eventually become traumas of her own. While she is facing the burdens of her mother’s life, she is also facing the burden of separation from a community of strong women back in Haiti. As she looks in the mirror, Sophie says, “New eyes seemed to be looking back at me. . . . Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been through a time machine . . . Welcome to New York, this face seemed to be saying. Accept your new life. I greeted the challenge, like one greets a new day. As my mother’s daughter and Atie’s child” (49). This suggests that she must face these challenges headlong and shorn of the supportive community she had back in Haiti. Still, she conjures the love and support of Tante Atie to help her through it. Sophie’s adjustment to America is also made difficult by her mother, who has post-traumatic notions about how potentially violent and hurtful the world is. This includes Sophie dating or associating with American boys. Martine sternly demands, ““You keep away from those American boys.’ The ones whose eyes followed me on the street. The ones who were supposedly drooling over me afterwards, even though they called me a nasty West Indian to my

face” (67). Martine’s admonishments are an attempt to keep Sophie safe, yet similar to Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, Martine has a distorted perception of what safety is, and she only inflicts further harm on Sophie. Addressing Martine’s control of Sophie’s life, Harbawi states, “Hers [Martine’s] is not a healthy example to assuage her daughter’s feelings of non-belonging, which are aggravated by the omnipresent attitude of xenophobia and racial discrimination” (40).

In retaliation for her mother’s overwhelming control and negative views of men, Sophie disobeys her mother when she goes out to meet Joseph, an older African-American man: “My mother was working, I took a chance. I put on a tight yellow dress that I had hidden under my mattress” (82). This begins her journey into a relationship with Joseph, whom she will eventually marry. When Martine confronts Sophie about this relationship and then tests her, she sets Sophie on a path of self-destruction similar to her own. Sophie knows that her mother will not continue to test her once she fails the test, so she takes matters into her own hands. She uses a pestle and mutilates herself. Sophie describes the act: “My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. I took the pestle and the bloody sheet and stuffed them into a bag. It was gone, the veil that always held my mother’s finger back every time that she *tested* me” (88). Her mother’s appalled reaction and her rejection of Sophie afterwards confirm just how conditioned she is by these patriarchal norms and values. Sophie laments, “I ached so hard I could hardly move. Finally I failed the test. My mother grabbed me by the hand and pulled me off the bed. She was calm now, resigned to her own anger. ‘Go’, she said with tears running down her face. She seized my books and clothes and threw them at me. ‘You just go to him and see what he can do for you’” (88). Martine has projected her own trauma and self-hatred onto her daughter, promoting Sophie’s own self-destructiveness. We also see Martine’s utter distrust and distaste for men. This scene is arguably where Sophie is most

traumatized, and this trauma surrounding her body and sexuality remains with her. This is clear when she later states, “I have no desire. I feel like it is an evil thing to do . . . I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off to somewhere by myself” (123). Such sentiments are strikingly similar to those of her mother.

This dynamic between mother and child shapes Sophie’s identity. Sophie is aware that her mother, while pregnant with her, had tried to kill her in the womb. Martine herself confesses, ““When I was pregnant with you, Manman made me drink all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine and verbena, baby poisons. I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you wouldn't go away”” (190). This leads to Martine not only being suicidal but also leaving her child to be raised separately from her. Thus Sophie, raised by Tante Atie for her first twelve years, could only dream of her mother since her mother had abandoned her for a life in America. Sophie’s only sense of love and stability is with Tante Atie, yet her mother takes her away from that to satisfy a selfish desire of her own. In so doing, she added to Sophie’s traumas. Feeling abandoned so early in life sets Sophie up with a void that needs to be filled, but it is one that Martine herself can never fulfill. While a child in Haiti, Sophie fantasizes about her mother wistfully. She recalls, “As a child, the mother I had imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother. She was the healer of all women and the desire of all men. She had gorgeous dresses in satin, silk, and lace, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and lots and lots of French perfume. . . . Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn” (59). Martine was not equipped with the resources to heal from her traumas, never mind be at the point of reconnecting with her daughter as a productive parent (or come even close to the idealized expectations that Sophie had for her). Harbawi notes about Martine: “Apart from her fondness of daffodils, a

further intimation of Martine's alienation from her origins and her adoption of the white gaze is her use of castor oil purportedly to straighten her hair, and 'some face cream that promised to make her skin lighter'" (51). Martine's alienation from her body and cultural identity is projected onto Sophie, and Sophie too will suffer hateful feelings towards her body. While Martine intended to protect her daughter, she in fact damages her by projecting her unmourned losses and traumas, her self-hatred, and her mistrust of men onto her. She suffocates Sophie's identity, her attempt at self-realization, much like Sophie's original nightmare about her predicted.

Sophie's Steps Towards Recovery

Having endured the physical trauma of the testing and her own self-mutilation, as well as the loss of her hopes and expectations for what her mother could be, Sophie falls into melancholia or depression. As Newtona Johnson states, "The ghosts that tortured the mother soon begin to torment the daughter. Sophie becomes depressed, sexually frigid and bulimic. One day, in a fit of frustration and with a desire to confront what ails her, Sophie packs her bags and baby, leaves her husband, Joseph, and goes back to Haiti. 'I need to remember,' she tells the driver of the van that takes her to Dame Marie" (95). Unlike Martine, Sophie is self-aware and refuses to stagnate; she actively takes the necessary steps towards trauma recovery. As Judith Herman explains, there are three major phases in the recovery process: Safety, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection. Moving back to Haiti is a first pivotal step as Sophie takes matters into her own hands. As Herman states, "the first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor" (133). Sophie wants to make a change for herself, and as Herman discusses, this can only be supported by others, not created or initiated by them. This decision is crucial given not only Sophie's relationship with her mother, but with America as a whole, where she never felt she truly belonged. Simone Alexander explains, "While the unification of

body and soul (or land) appears to be a female necessity, men do not exhibit this need. Contrastingly, discord or bodily scars are not visible on Marc, Martine's lover, who not only maintains relations with both the home country and the host country, but also retains his economic and political status as he enjoys the male privilege of the mobile, upper-middle class” (378). While patriarchal dominance characterizes both Haiti and America, in Haiti we see the women carving out their own community and sense of safety where they help support one another. Johnson describes this dynamic: “Indeed, it is through the collective remembering of the grandmother, mother, aunt, and Sophie herself, the narrator, that Danticat constructs her particular view of territorial displacement as an emancipatory site for women” (149-150). While the female characters do not enjoy all the privileges of males in their culture, they create a sense of security and belonging among themselves. This safety is something that Sophie did not find in America, and it is why she is prompted to return home. Herman contends, “Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor recreates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by traumatic experience” (133). This underscores the importance in Sophie’s recovery to return to Haiti, where she not only feels at home but always got the support that she needed as a child. Back in Haiti, Sophie shifts from danger to “reliable safety” (154); she can restore the connections and loving bonds (with Tante Atie and her grandmother) that were left behind when she went to America. As a part of establishing the safety necessary to the recovery process, “the patient is called upon to plan and initiate action and to use her best judgment. As she begins to exercise these capacities, which have been systematically undermined by repeated abuse, she enhances her sense of competence, self-esteem, and freedom” (167). We see Sophie reach this benchmark by her leaving with her child and taking

ownership of her life and her choices. This step starts her recovery process, and in establishing this safety, Sophie is able to continue to make progress towards reclaiming her life and living it without the debilitating weight of her trauma.

The next step to recovery that Herman describes involves remembrance and mourning. In this stage, “the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). While Sophie is in Haiti, we see that she connects with her Tante Atie and the other females in the community to retell her story. Later she will speak to a therapist in order to reclaim her story. She begins this process of narrative reconstruction by speaking about her relationships with her female family members, and by storytelling and retelling her own story. We see her reflect, particularly on the testing, her self-mutilation, and her relationship with Joseph: “I had spent two days in the hospital in Providence and four weeks with stitches between my legs. Joseph could never understand why I had done something so horrible to myself. I could not explain to him that it was like breaking manacles, an act of freedom” (130). Her recollections of her past help to piece together her trauma story and help the healing process. She begins to speak out against the testing practice and to discuss this tradition with her grandmother: “I hated the tests . . . It is the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. When my husband is with me now, it gives me such nightmares that I have to bite my tongue to do it again” (156). After this interaction with her grandmother, she cries. We see Sophie genuinely mourning her losses here rather than repressing them. She runs through the streets, weeping. Instead of running away from her past like Martine, she has returned to Haiti to grieve and reconnect, metaphorically running towards the next step of recovery.

Martine then returns to Haiti to see Sophie but also to confront her past that she has been running from since her rape. This forces Sophie to confront her mother as part of her own trauma story. She clearly feels hurt and offended that her mother did not respond to her letters that she sent following her marriage to Joseph. Once Martine discovers that Sophie has returned to Haiti, however, she uses the opportunity to try and heal their relationship and also convince her to come back to New York with her. We see that Haiti grounds both Martine and Sophie. There they are surrounded by a loving and supportive Tante Atie, as well as her mother (Sophie's grandmother). Even if they don't always understand one another, the care and love they feel for each other is obvious. Even though Tante Atie thinks of Sophie as her own daughter, she encourages Sophie to cherish her relationship with her mother, for she won't always be there (173). Tante Atie supports Sophie in her efforts to be her own person, but she also understands Martine's own trauma, and she encourages Sophie to try to understand it too. Atie provides the support needed for Sophie to reconcile with her mother and speak to her again.

Sophie comes home with Martine and soon discovers that her mother, who has been in a longterm relationship with a Haitian-American man, Marc, is pregnant. Sophie is hopeful about the pregnancy and about the restored relationship with her mother. Unfortunately, however, the pregnancy triggers Martine's original rape trauma, and she regresses into a severely depressive state. Her mother's pregnancy serves as a traumatic trigger for Sophie too. She has nightmares all through her first year of marriage with Joseph:

All through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something I 'caught' from her from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we

hadn't both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl (193).

Here we see just how severely Martine's traumas have impacted Sophie. Nevertheless, she confronts and acknowledges that trauma. She sees a therapist and joins a sexual phobia group. There she recounts her experiences and shares them with others, a key step in the healing process.

Sophie comes to realize how intergenerational trauma has impacted her life. Following a session with her sexual phobia group, she states, "I felt broken at the end of the meeting, but a little closer to being free. I didn't feel guilty about burning my mother's name anymore. I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too" (203). This realization gives her an understanding of her past and that her mother never intended to hurt her in the ways that she did. With this new-found understanding, she is able to progress towards the final step in the recovery process, reconnection. Herman describes this final step as follows: "the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She has mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self. Her relationships have been tested and forever changed by the trauma; now she must develop new relationships" (196). Sophie finally gains a sense of agency that is not controlled by her mother's traumas and her traumatic past. She states, "It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had her name burnt in the flames" (203). Having survived her trauma and mourned her losses, Sophie has moved to the final phase of reconnection as she imagines a better life for her daughter. We soon learn, however, that Martine has stabbed herself to death with a rusty kitchen knife. Martine's death highlights her original trauma, as Donette Francis discusses: "In addition to breaking her will to

speak, this perpetrator [her rapist] engenders traumatic body memory so that Martine subsequently equates the sex act with pain and violation” (81). Martine could never move past her original trauma, and she could not bear the weight of that trauma reincarnated in her second pregnancy. Martine had wanted to be buried in Haiti, and when Sophie returns there for the funeral, we see her reclaim the land, her mother’s past, and her own life. She states,

I couldn’t bear to see them shoveling dirt over my mother. I turned around and ran down the hill, ahead of the others . . . I ran through the field, attacking the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a corn stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding . . . The funeral crowd was now standing between the stalks, watching me beat and pound the cane. My grandmother held back to the priest as he tried to come for me. (233)

Here, Sophie reclaims the land that traumatized her mother to the point of death in an act that is witnessed by others. This is a social action that, as Herman describes, “offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy, and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities far beyond her own capacities” (207). This action promotes the message that she learned while in therapy: that her mother’s trauma and death are a part of an intergenerational pattern within Haiti that needs to be broken, but that there are also intergenerational bonds between women that are restorative and healing. She is able to express her anger here openly and outwardly, rather than internalizing it, as her mother had done. This shows that she has truly mourned and can proceed into the future as a survivor rather than a victim.

Sophie's owning her story, while listening and sharing stories with others, helps her heal and move forward in her life. The stories she was told of her mother, the stories shared by her grandmother and Tante Atie, and the stories that Sophie will one day tell her daughter play an important role in her understanding of herself and her community. Sophie says, "It took me twelve years to piece together my mother's entire story. By then, it was already too late" (61); nevertheless, we see that Sophie returns to her culture in order to understand her history, as well as her mother's. In piecing together her mother's story and addressing her own, she does not run from her past—she faces it. In this way, the cyclical pattern of intergenerational trauma can be broken. As crippling as traumatic experiences can be, especially when passed down from parent to child, Sophie provides us with hope that one need not be defined by trauma. Through the painful process of mourning, one can move forward into the future.

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