Legible Grief:
Discursive Liminality in Twentieth Century Literatures of Trauma

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Abstract

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Currently, scholars in the fields of trauma and affect studies are sharply divided on whether "direct" or extra-discursive experience is possible, and moreover about how such a space might function within the fraught contexts of survivor narratives. On the one hand, scholars of trauma in the Caruthian tradition share with affect theorists such as Eve Sedgwick an interest in possibilities of "unassimilated" or extra-discursive experience. On the other hand, there is also a rich body of research dedicated to tracing the movement of traumatic affect through discourse itself, which treats both trauma and emotion as socially-produced and historically-contingent categories of experience, available only to particular subjects at particular times. Importantly, scholars are divided in terms of where to locate possibilities of resistance against the ideological machinations that fix all bodies in networks of power, positing "unassimilated" space as either

problematically apolitical or as a site of profound political possibility. Despite their differences in emphasis, however, I suggest that scholars in affect and trauma share an over-reliance on a false binary between the discursive and non-discursive realms: it is frequently assumed that if an experience fits ontologically within one, it cannot simultaneously exist in the other. My project aims to intervene at precisely the ignored middle juncture between pre-reflective or sub-conscious experience of traumatic affect and its entrance into language and discourse, to position literature as a source of knowledge about the process of assimilation itself, the entrance of encounter into language, the moment where traumatic affect is given shape in traumatic narrative. I am focused on tracing the ways in which individual grief becomes legible in discourse, analyzing the extent to which traumatic recognition may ironically either require subjective annihilation or guarantee subjective being. Through intersections among studies in trauma, affect and phenomenology, it is possible to understand assimilation in discourse as a process that needn't inevitably remove survivors from direct experience of their own emotions and experiences, and to shift conversations about the ontological *existence* of discursively liminal affects towards a deeper exploration both of the resilient felt-sense and of the scholarly value of affects – like grief – that frequently feel "speechless."

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INTRODUCTION

The intextuation of the body corresponds to the incarnation of the law; it supports it, it even seems to establish it, and in any case it serves it. […] For the law plays on it: "Give me your body and I will give you meaning. I will make you a name, a word in my discourse."

- *Michel De Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (1984)*

Currently, scholars in the fields of trauma and affect studies are sharply divided on whether "direct" or extra-discursive experience is possible, and moreover about how such a space might function within the fraught contexts of survivor narratives. On the one hand, scholars of trauma in the psychoanalytical tradition share with affect theorists such as Eve Sedgwick an interest in possibilities of "unassimilated" or extra-discursive experience. On the other hand, there is also a rich body of research dedicated to tracing the genealogy of traumatic affect through discourse itself, which treats both trauma and emotion as socially-produced and historically-contingent categories of experience, available only to particular subjects at particular times.[1] As I detail below, there is lively scholarly dispute surrounding where to locate possibilities of resistance against the ideological machinations that fix all bodies in networks of power, leading to contrasting theories that posit "unassimilated" space as either problematically apolitical or as a site of profound political possibility. Despite their differences in emphasis, however, scholars in affect and trauma share an over-reliance on a false binary between the discursive and non-discursive realms: it is frequently assumed that if an experience fits ontologically within one, it cannot simultaneously exist in the other. This project aims to intervene at precisely the ignored middle juncture between pre-reflective or unassimilated

[1] What I am referring to as "the psychoanalytical tradition" denotes scholarly interest in trauma from perspectives informed by psycho-analysis and deconstruction, including Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and others. The "genealogical" line of inquiry, by contrast, denotes scholars such as Ruth Leys, E. Ann Kaplan, Didier Fassin, Richard Rechtman and others.

experience of traumatic affect and its entrance into language and discourse, to position literature as a source of knowledge about the process of assimilation itself, the encounter between experience and language, the moment where traumatic affect is given shape in traumatic narrative. I am focused on tracing the ways in which individual pain and suffering become legible in discourse, analyzing the extent to which traumatic recognition may ironically either require subjective annihilation or guarantee subjective being. In both such cases, of course, the nature of subjectivity is intimately bound up with questions of representation in discourse.

In the process of theorizing the space between discursive and non-discursive realms, I am focused on several orienting questions. At the outset, what are the consequences of granting the felt existence of a non-discursive realm wherein experience is direct and unmediated, and how might one understand such a realm in and through language? Many works in what might be considered the genre of "traumatic literature" (literatures interested in the experience and description of painful affect) express a special interest in the precipice between direct, felt experience and mediation in discourse, and register the act of noticing such a precipice –of becoming objects of "intextuation," which are given meaning in linguistic and narrative structures. Some works, such as M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong*, explore such intextuation through treating language pluralistically as that which may simultaneously mimic, create, and destroy traumatic experience altogether; the work is interested in, as Juliana Spahr points out, "the conflicts between telling and not telling, between naming and not naming" (back cover). Don Delillo's *The Body Artist* is a more direct and individual inquiry into how grief feels as it becomes assimilated in language, or on grief as a sensation before it is fully integrated into consciousness through discourse. Both texts are meditations on this process, and like many others they turn language in on *itself* as a form of representation that may nonetheless be lived

(by a subjectivity both within and outside of it), be encountered directly in its own tangled intimacy.

If assimilation in language is conceptualized as a process rather than as an already-given inevitability, time – readerly time, literary time – may slow down enough to notice how exactly it feels for a consciousness to experience discursive assimilation. Deeper questions thus emerge about whether it is possible to trace this process in all of its ambivalence, as a colonizing mechanism that both fixes bodies and stories in particularly problematic ways and simultaneously behaves as a guarantor of meaning and survival. Importantly, however, the dimension of direct experience remains, even as experiences may seem to fold into the entirely discursive; there is still some intelligibility in the question of how it *feels, directly*, to have one's story taken up and circulated in the world. In other words, there may still be a meaningful unassimilated dimension in the process of assimilation itself. As I detail below and throughout this project, tracing the circulation of traumatic affects and stories in language and "in the world" is an especially productive interest not only in traumatic literature but also in affect and trauma theories, and as such this line of inquiry will become important in reconciling disputes over where to locate political possibility across the spectrum of assimilation in discourse.

With each of the two threads I detail above, I also trace questions about what some iterations of contemporary phenomenology may reveal about burgeoning self-consciousness as survivors of trauma become legible as objects in trauma discourses. Through exploring intersections among studies in trauma, affect and phenomenology, it becomes possible to understand assimilation in discourse as a process that needn't inevitably remove survivors from direct experience of their own emotions and experiences, and to suggest that literature may present fertile ground for an exploration of what it feels like to experience the self ("selfhood")

simultaneously in direct, felt experience and in objecthood. After a brief review of what might be called "discourse debates" in both trauma and affect studies, I return to the question of phenomenology below in order to articulate the main contributions that attention to the field may generate for these conversations, and also to re-assert the value of traumatic literature as a space within which to carry out such conversations.

Assimilation and Discourse

Before approaching phenomenology as a field that might contain additional voices on the topic of discursive assimilation, it is necessary to trace the concept very carefully through its particular and diverse iterations in trauma and affect studies. Above all, one must be very conscious in attention to denotation: "unassimilated experience" for early trauma theorists has much in common with—*though is not identical to* --- "unassimilable" ideas that animate the ontological turn in affect studies, and finally each must be compared to and distinguished from "pre-reflective" or "direct" experience in contemporary phenomenology. Though the concepts have much in common (and indeed, as I will suggest, represent three perspectives on one experiential space), clarity will also be gained by maintaining the disciplinary and denotative boundaries that mark their differences.

In *Unclaimed Experience* (a text that both inaugurated trauma studies and gave rise to many of its most impassioned debates), Cathy Caruth defines trauma specifically as a phenomenon to which the survivor does not have direct access, and so underscores the "cry of the witness" as the only available re-presentation of the event (3). "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event," she writes, "but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor

later on" (4, original emphasis). To unpack that deceptively dense phrase, Caruth here defines trauma itself through four essential elements: it represents a "breach" in experience, so that the survivor has no direct access to his or her own representation of the event; survivors engage in a pathological return to the event, unable to process it as fully intelligible or coherent; survivors thus require witness figures in order to re-present and work through the event, and thus trauma links subjects to other subjects; and finally, that such experiences mark *the very possibility* of history or of reality. For Caruth, in the tradition of de Manian deconstruction, "the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential" exists in the very nature of trauma itself: "[through trauma,] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (11). In other words, history is not only the history of language, discourse and understanding – it is not only the meanings that are constructed through ideology and discourse, as entry-level post-structuralism might imply. There is some *outside* discourse, some *unassimilated* level of experience (captured uniquely in trauma), and rather than expressing total incoherence, this space presents radical possibilities in understanding meaning and history.[2]

For critics in the Caruthian tradition, like Shoshana Felman (whose work on legibility and justice is particularly important beyond the discourse debates in trauma studies), it is important to preserve trauma as a space of unassimilability or "representational aporia" precisely because it marks not only the potential for history, but the possibility of historical justice. Of the need for a witness figure, Felman writes:

[2] As Richard Crownshaw and Selma Leydesdorff point out in their Introduction to *Memory and Totalitarianism*, "emerging from [Caruth's] understanding of traumatic experience is the idea that silence is not a sign of the "elimation" of history but of its dislocation" (onto the other) (viii).

> Because the experience of trauma addresses the Other and demands the listening of another, it implies a human and an ethical dimension in which the Other receives priority of the self. This ethical dimension is tightly related to the question of justice. (174)

Usefully, Felman also invokes several clarifying idioms for understanding what Caruth means to denote by "unassimilated experience." What the survivor experiences in trauma is by turns "the event par excellence," "the event as unintelligible," "the pure impact of sheer happening" – and this event ensures that others have both an ethical and a juridical responsibility to honor the interpersonal threads that traumatic testimonies create. History itself is thus only accessible through the witness figure, so that Caruthian understandings of trauma have the happy consequence of linking transcultural and tranhistorical subjectivities through the optimistic and redemptive global circulation of empathy.[3]

Though the question of "sheer happening" has been critiqued passionately by scholars from multiple disciplines, it suffices to identify the three most salient engagements by theorists identified with ideology-focused or Foucauldian approaches, and then to return to a much closer reading of several theorists when I trace the felt-sense of traumatic ideology later in this project. First of all, far from existing outside of the discursive realm, in an important sense unassimilability is *itself* political: it actively silences victims of trauma, since it transforms them into eidetic tape recorders that simply replay their experiences with no interpretive power. As Kali Tal points out in her brilliant re-reading of Caruth's interpretation of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, trauma theorists are preoccupied with their own witnessing "at the expense of an emphasis that does not locate Euro-Americans in the subject position, or indeed locates the

[3] The question of "empathy" is also a central concern in trauma studies, and one to which I return frequently. Important scholars on this topic include Suzanne Keen, Maria Cetinic and Dominic LaCapra.

survivor/ victim there" (8). Indeed, this kind of critique has only grown in relevance since the publication of Tal's article, most recently in reactions to Black Lives Matter protests that foreground white empathy and ally practices to the erasure of African American justice and experience;[4] in the Caruthian model, the interpretive witness may indeed come to occupy a privileged position in the production of meaning, and this indeed feels antithetical to the genuine concern with justice that trauma theorists often express. Tal's critique is propelled largely by the perceived Euro-centrism at the heart of trauma studies itself (with at least its academic origins in Holocaust Studies), and she urges readers to attend to their own ideological positioning as witnesses, even in rhetorics that position "unassimilated experience" or "sheer happening" as central to history and justice. Even the a-political is political, as even the outside-discourse is constructed with relation to discourse (and is therefore discursive/ ideological).

In their recent genealogy of trauma discourse, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman also identify that politicality of unassimilability from another angle. They argue that it wasn't until WWI that trauma was repositioned to become "unspeakable," when survivors were under obligation to testify, and when testimony was seen as offering truth (72). The experience in concentration camps gave way to a positioning of survivors as "giving form to the memory that would […] leave a kind of moral trace" (72). Thus, they point out:

> The psychic destruction of the survivors became the corollary to the physical disappearance of all those who did not return. If the survival of some testified to the elimination of others, it was also because psychic trauma had become the

[4] Much important work is being done on the nature of "white empathy" in both scholarly and popular realms; relevant publications include Juliet Hooker's "A Black History of White Empathy" (2016) and Ruth Chu-Lien Chao, Meifen Wei, Lisa Spanierman, Joseph Longo and Dayna Northart's "White Racial Attitudes and White Empathy" (2015).

> essential constituting factor in this memory of the unacceptable, a memory of which the survivors became the guardians. (73)

Here, holocaust memories that are positioned as "unspeakable" (un-representable, unassimilated) are nonetheless tasked with performing the real cultural and political work as markers of the unacceptable; they mark the point at which humanity becomes impossible (or, to echo Adorno, poetry becomes barbaric), and survivors are thus hailed into the position of guardian of such a space not *in spite of* unassimilated trauma but *because* of it. That historical juncture also, importantly, marks the universalization of the concept of victim status and its role as a guarantor of truth and authenticity. The implication, both for Tal and for Fassin and Rechtman, might be a kind of sick epistemology whereby a victim is trusted and believed only when she gives up the right to her own story, and asks for the help of another. It is therefore more important, these critics imply, to trace the movement of painful experience through ideology and discourse, asking questions about who might qualify as a victim and to what extent that query might bring subjectivity or selfhood into being.

Questions about the unassimilable – and indeed, about the possibility of there being anything at all that can come before or beneath ideology and discourse, also animate debate in affect theory, and insights in that field add meaningful dimensions to the conversation about trauma. Eve Sedgwick, importantly, comes down on Caruth's side in advocating for a cosmology of the emotions that acknowledges the extra-discursive, the unassimilated, or the pre-reflective quality of affect. She sees a serious problem in the prevailing hermeneutics of suspicion and critiques a false binary (in Ann Cvetkovic's early work and elsewhere) between theory and the so-called "natural":[5]

[5] In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovic engages with Sedgwick's criticism that cultural theory can be reduced to diagnosing texts as "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" by presenting an alternative to "the ontological turn"

> Rather than broaching an actual theory of affect, [Cvetkovic] instead 'theorizes affect,' in the sense of rounding up affect and herding it into the big tent of what is already understood to constitute the body of Theory. The brand on that body is relentlessly legible: theory has become almost simply coextensive with the claim: *it's not natural*. (513, original emphasis)

The critique of post-structuralism is that it eats up everything around it and does not allow for an engagement with the felt-sense of emotion – if everything is constructed, simply a function of the structures of power that comprise reality and perception, then one's relationship to one's emotional world must necessarily be mediated by and through power. She shares with Caruth, then, an interest in upending this pathological binary: perhaps the experience of trauma is defined by the unassimilable dimensions of the pain-affect,[6] and perhaps this is precisely where one might locate meaning and history.

Indeed, Sedgwick's argument also resonates with Caruth on the subject of what, precisely, affect (including traumatic affect) can do, and she understands the transformative political potentialities of emotion precisely as functions of their status as "outside" social subjection. In Clare Hemmings' exceptionally lucid engagement with Sedgwick, she notes:

> Advocates of affect offer it up as a way of deepening our vision of the terrain we are studying, of allowing for and prioritizing its 'texture.' This texture refers to our qualitative experience of the social world, to embodied experience that has the capacity to transform as well as exceed social subjection. (549)

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that nonetheless still embraces ideology: "my turn to practice [through including a depression memoir alongside an academic engagement with depression as public feeling] exemplifies the activist principle of presenting criticism in the form of a productive or alternative suggestion" (78).

[6] Elaine Scarry's conception of physical pain as "an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language" constructs a further bridge between trauma, affect and the unassimilable (though with greater emphasis on the body).

Hemmings' objection to this kind of "ontological turn" is useful to address, I think, because it also adds nuance and sensitivity to Sedgwick's intentionally polemical arguments. Affect is not always liberating, she points out – it can also be a mechanism of social production (as in the "delights of consumerism") (551). Also, only certain privileged subjects may be thought of as enjoying Sedgwickian openness and freedom; like Fanon, Hemmings wants to remember that in raced and gendered bodies, one's affects do not always belong to oneself.[7] For this reason, she also shares Sianne Ngai's reluctance to reject poststructuralist conceptions of discursive emotion outright, arguing that there is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater: poststructuralism is too often characterized as "entirely rarefied and apolitical," but perhaps it can and is dealing with the sorts of issues Sedgwick raises.[8] Epistemology might, in other words, survive alongside this new ontology (555). It may be possible that one doesn't have to reject discourse altogether in favor of locating true value and history in the unassimilable.

To pause the discussion about the nature of the unassimilable for a moment, I think it is important to point out that neither Sedgwickian affect theorists nor Caruthian trauma theorists are rejecting the existence of a discursive or ideological sphere, but rather are redirecting attention to affective experiences that may not so simply be reduced to functions of that space (and thus may represent a "residue" that cannot fully be understood through post-structuralist analysis). In Brian Massumi's terms, this is a shift in focus from "emotion" (created through language and self-narration of experience) towards "affect" (autonomous intensity) (86). For this project, it remains very important to preserve a critical space wherein to explore the complicated processes whereby such affective experiences are consumed in discourse, and are "eaten up" by

[7] I refer here to Fanon's critique of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology

[8] For Ngai, the difference between unassimilated affect and discursive emotion is one of degree, rather than kind: "affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether' less sociolinguistically fixed, but by no means code-free or meaningless" (27).

the machinations of ideology in a process that transforms affective encounters into discursively produced objects (indeed, it is this very process that is my primary focus). Much of affect theory is focused precisely on how it is that emotions circulate through discourse and ideology, including important work being done by Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed and many others. Ahmed, in fact, most eloquently articulates the value in such a focus. In "Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness," she writes:

> My starting point is always not to assume there is something called affect (or for that matter, emotion), that stands apart or has autonomy, as if it corresponds to an object in the world, but to consider the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what comes near. (124)

Thus, for Ahmed and others, it is perhaps less important to inquire about the ontological existence of some sort of "autonomous" (for Massumi), unassimilated category of experience, than it is to understand the practices whereby experiences come to mean, to function, and to form networks and relations with other contingencies in the world.

These two different critical impulses – on the one hand, to understand trauma through psychoanalytical and deconstructive lenses and on the other, to emphasize trauma's "constructedness" as a historical category of experience – are so exceptionally resilient because they are both highly functional as critical models for cultural analysis. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for instance, seems not only to indicate but to instantiate a Caruthian approach to trauma; Roger Luckhurst underscores this point when he calls the novel "a paradigmatic trauma fiction" (referring to the psychanalytical strain as, of course, the "paradigm"). Luckhurst attributes the novel's centrality in trauma studies to three of its aspects: the disruption of linear narrative, the

figuring of trauma as a kind of haunting or ghost, and the interest in transgenerational transmission of trauma (91). Morrison's novel is, indeed, both a stunning iteration of Caruth's work and a significant contribution to trauma theory in general; one must only encounter the text once in order to understand why psychoanalytical strains of inquiry are both valuable and necessary. Psychoanalytical understandings seem to be particularly productive in the construction and analysis of literary works that are interested in traumatic transgenerationality and transmission, including of course Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Zakes Mda's *Cion* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*. As the analysis in Chapter One will demonstrate, such an approach is also particularly useful in tracing (as *Beloved* does) painful affects as haunting or haunted presences.

Though critical attention to the genealogical strain of trauma theory (like that of Fassin and Rechtman or Tal) is more recent, the lines of inquiry by which it is comprised are nonetheless equally fruitful in terms of cultural and literary analysis. Literature has much to reveal about "victim status" as a category of experience that is only available to particular subjects at particular moments in history, and as a marker of authenticity that is frequently circumscribed by questions of race, gender, citizenship status or class. Works in fiction and memoir that are concerned with immigration, migration and refugee tropes come to mind immediately, where one must be "traumatized" precisely in ways that are legible to legal and cultural systems of identification: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah,* Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. In Dave Eggers' *What is the What* (a fiction/memoir hybrid that tells the story of Valentino Achak, one of the "Lost Boys" from Sudan), refugees use stories as speech acts in order to tactically exploit the genre of the trauma- narrative and provide the refugees with a "way out" from the camp.

Refugee autobiographies (fictionalized to contain the "right" kind of suffering for the UNHCR) come to behave as their own unique genre, tactically composed with no relation to the truth of individual suffering (485). The document is mediated at every turn by editorial decisions, determined both by an awareness of rhetorical audience and by the unreliability of a memory that is produced in the space of the other. It is *this* kind of discourse that both instantiates and pushes further the kinds of analysis that are available within the ideological strain, and these novels in particular make it clear that trauma must be studied not only as a psychological phenomenon but also as a social construction.

It is crucial for me, here, to be very clear that my project does not represent an assertion about the ontological existence of unassimilated experience. Rather, I am focused on exploring what literature may reveal about the personal *felt-sense* of pain and grief as phenomena before they become completely known in language, and then on tracing ways in which writers negotiate the processes whereby pain is taken up and circulated in discourse ("the unfolding of bodies into worlds," as it were). It is thus necessary to establish the critical contexts in trauma and affect studies for a conversation about the unassimilable (as I have done above), but also to emphasize that this project's focus is not on the existence of that realm but on the felt-sense of what I am calling "discursive liminality": on the ways in which psychological or physical pain may seem to exist before or beneath language, may *feel* to leave a certain kind of residue, or may multiply and divide profoundly in their entrance into language and public or political circulation. I turn now to a discussion of one contemporary iteration of phenomenology that helps to illuminate not only the felt-sense of such experiences and the felt violation of their appropriation in public discourse, but also may speak to the possibility of a resilient agentive "self" whose experiences and stories need not inevitably be appropriated by witnesses or deformed in social discourse.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM ZAHAVIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

In *Subjectivity and Selfhood,* Dan Zahavi introduces several ways of conceptualizing first-person experience that help one avoid relying on a dubious binary between "affect" vs. "emotion" or "unassimilable" vs. "unassimilated" experience. First of all, alongside virtually every other figure in modern phenomenology (as reviewer Greg Janzen points out), Zahavi espouses a "non-objectifying self-giveness," in the sense that his work is grounded in the assertion that consciousness is always implicitly present to consciousness. Importantly, however, this form of presence is not a secondary, objectifying state (consciousness does not take *itself* as an object in a numerically distinct second-order action, in other words), but rather a unitary and coherent state of being-aware that does not unfold sequentially. As Zahavi writes:

> Why is first-personal self-reference different from third-personal self-reference? A natural reply is that first-personal self-reference owes its uniqueness to the fact that we are acquainted with our own subjectivity in a way that differs from the way in which we are acquainted with objects. In first-personal self-reference one is not aware of oneself as an object that happens to be oneself […] Rather, first-personal self-reference involves a nonobjectifying self-acquaintance. (27)

In other words, one is conscious of oneself not as an object present in front of some other, *primary* consciousness, but just implicitly as the owner and subject of one's experiences. There is no sense in which a body can move through a world without consciousness of its presence as the self in encounter.

To move away from strict phenomenology or theory of mind and translate this model loosely into the idiom of trauma theory, what Zahavi implies is that there can be no experience

that is not present to consciousness, or not directly experienced by consciousness.[9] All experiences, then, are *both* "sheer happening" *and* "objects of consciousness," not in one or another register but simultaneously and implicitly. Encounters may simultaneously be experienced as unassimilated to consciousness, and also as present to consciousness. One way to understand the implications of that simultaneity is to look back at Caruth's reading of Freud's concept of "latency" and see if it is possible to understand it somewhat differently with Zahavi in mind. Caruth points to Freud's example of a train collision from which "someone gets away, apparently unharmed," but develops a "traumatic neurosis" only much later, which can only be ascribed to his shock at the accident itself (16). Caruth writes:

> What is truly striking about the accident victim's experience of the event […] is the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the event itself […] The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. (17)

Caruth's reading, of course, depends heavily on her situatedness within traditions both of psychoanalysis and of deconstruction. What happens, however, if one looks at this from the point of view of consciousness? Caruth wants to understand latency as a *structural* rather than an *associative* characteristic of trauma, but there is no imperative to assume that the victim does not consciously assimilate the initial crash and also, simultaneously experience it as a direct encounter. These can be two moments of the same analysis, with differing characteristics, but nonetheless united as the coherent experience of an agentive survivor. It's not exactly a

[9] Though a detailed discussion of these debates is far beyond the scope of this project, David M. Rosenthal provides an excellent introduction to philosophical work in this area in *The Nature of Mind*. Zahavi himself summarizes these debates specifically in existentialism and phenomenology in *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, colored of course by his own interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology.

Caruthian approach, but it allows one to consider traumatic experiences in their wholeness as both direct encounter/ consciousness and discursive representation/ consciousness of consciousness.

Thus, one contribution Zahavi may make to this discussion is that the baby can, indeed, be kept along with the bathwater, and that it is productive to work with the assumption that unassimilated and assimilated experience can exist simultaneously, at least at the level of felt-sense. Another contribution of Zahavi's work is his notion of "mineness." Conscious experiences, he writes, are "given immediately, noninferentially and noncritically as *mine*" (124, original emphasis). Janzen unpacks the statement:

> Otherwise put, in consciously seeing x (hearing x, thinking about x, etc.) I am tacitly aware of *my* seeing x. Importantly, Zahavi isn't claiming that a conscious experience is something one *possesses*, like an automobile or a toothbrush, and and that, in having a conscious experience, one is tacitly aware of experience ownership. On the contrary, he takes tacit awareness of mineness to be a means of elucidating the claim that, in being conscious of x, one is tacitly aware of *oneself* as being conscious of x. (3)

As I detail below, this feeling of "mineness" that one experiences is intimately connected to Zahavi's notion of the self, and also has important repercussions in constructing ideas about traumatic stories in relation to the feelings of "selfhood" for survivors. For Zahavi, experiences are given order without being taken as objects; there is an implicit ordering process that happens pre-reflectively, and each consciousness—here, that of a survivor—already experiences a feeling of ownership over its own encounters.

Caruth locates special privilege in trauma survivors because she understands traumatic encounters as *literal*: as having no "meaning," no assimilation in discourse for the survivor herself. As Tal points out, survivors then come to behave as tape-recorders, capable of playing out the same "literal truths" again and again but requiring a witness figure to hear and make "sense" of the stories. The question of ownership does not come up explicitly in Caruth's early work, and surely the privileged position of the survivor is not in question for her; however, the necessity for a witness in the narration of pain means that the survivor may not maintain autonomous authority and "mineness" over the pain. For Zahavi, however, these experiences are inherently the "mine" of the survivor, and consciousness will give them order implicitly, rather than depend on a second figure. Moreover and perhaps most importantly, the notion of "mineness" helps articulate precisely *why* it can feel so deeply violating when one's traumatic experience is appropriated by larger social discourses in service of ideological ideas or even when others express feelings of "empathy," "understanding" or shared pain; the circulation of painful emotions in public discourse is doubly violating, in the sense that it not only robs survivors of the agency in articulating their own stories but also violates the relationship of "mineness" that one feels with one's own pain. When taken out of the context of strict phenomenology and understood simply as a broader model of conscious experience (and painful experience specifically), Zahavi's work thus provides a language through which to articulate the pain of assimilation and circulation in discourse. It underscores the need not only to locate narrative authority primarily with survivors themselves, but also to identify the greater levels of pain associated with questions of ownership and circulation that should be part of vocabularies surrounding trauma and emotion.

Though Zahavi makes much of his notion of "selfhood" (and, indeed, it is an important contribution to his phenomenology), it suffices to touch on it only briefly here, in order to move on to questions about how a sense of "self" might affect experiences of discursive liminality. For Zahavi, all experiences are grounded in a core sense of self, which again is not an "object" of consciousness but simply an integral part of all experiential life. One might say that experiences *are* the self. As Zahavi writes, the self is not a phenomenon that "exists apart from, or above, the experience and, for that reason, is something that might be encountered in separation from that experience" (126). This kind of self (as an almost common-sense, humanist self), then, is very different from what a post-structuralist analysis might denote by the word "subject": this self exists apart from narrative, and does not necessarily depend upon discourse to position and hail it into being. This self is already present in the body's unfolding in the world, and as such the "mineness" of something like grief can be understood as almost somatic: that is, already given. Therefore, when experiences that are felt to be direct or unassimilated (but nonetheless coherently "mine" to a "self") enter into narrative – or, further, are instrumentalized by others in service of larger causes – it is not only doubly violating but also ignores the potentially unpathologized voice of the survivor. Survivors and traumatic consciousness need not be understood as inherently fractured, broken, or alienated from direct encounter; rather, writers have real agency both in articulating their stories and in negotiating and sometimes actively resisting the imposition of "meaning" onto experience that happens for readers and in larger public discourses.

The brief synopsis of Zahavi's work above makes clear that his phenomenology provides a language through which to understand, and more importantly begin to untangle, unassimilated experience and the pain associated with all levels of assimilation a little more coherently. It is

necessary neither to reject unassimilated affect as an impossible mode of experience, nor to make sweeping claims about where political possibility might be located; rather, one might surmise that the grounded, core self and the narrative, discursive self cohere, and that there is real work to be done in understanding the feelings associated with discursive liminality and the entrance of encounter into language. In the idea that all experiences are both "sheer happening" and "discursive construction"—but simultaneously and unitarily – Zahavi's phenomenology provides a model that trauma and affect studies lack. It thus allows one to leave questions about the ontological existence of unassimilated experience behind, and move towards an investigation of the felt-sense of discursive liminality and the violation of discursive imposition onto traumatic encounters.

The Consequences of Theorizing Discursive Liminality

This project has both critical and social stakes. I aim, first, to recover the elided middle-juncture of the continuum between the discursive and non-discursive realms, and to position this space as a productive object of inquiry for scholars of trauma and affect. As a necessary consequence, this project also participates in spirited contemporary conversations about the un/transmissibility of trauma, since to focus on an encounter's entrance into language is also to question what it is that language can (and cannot) capture, communicate, or bring into being. The question of transmissibility has been widely addressed by trauma theorists from multiple disciplines, following Caruth's emphasis on the "unspeakability" of trauma as a category of experience. In *The Trauma Question,* Roger Luckhurst lucidly outlines the parameters of a complimentary line of thought:

> Trauma also appears to be worryingly transmissible: it leaks between mental and physical symptoms, between patients (as in the 'contagions' of hysteria or shell shock), between patients and doctors via the mysterious processes of transference or suggestion, and between victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy, even to the extent of claiming secondary victimhood. (3)

Thus, trauma seems to occupy the dual position of being "unrepresentable," unspeakable on the one hand, and being leaky and contagious on the other; it is both uncontrollable and unutterable. As Luckhurst points out, following Adorno, silence is no option despite the barbarism of representation; art and cultural criticism are therefore tasked with "the severe, the paradoxical, imperative of find ways of representing the unrepresentable" (5).

Traumatic representation in literature is a landscape littered with landmines, and the works I deal with closely in the following chapters share an interest in exploring the potentialities, dangers, sacrifices and negotiations associated with such a project. As I address closely in Chapter 3, one linchpin in conversations about representation is the question of empathy, or of the potential for feelings of shared suffering to, on the one hand, create a redemptive interpersonal dynamic for the "working through" of grief and pain, or on the other hand, bring about an all too happy sense of understanding and alliance that elides real material and cultural differences in class, history, race and gender. In one of the more resilient critical formulations of what "responsible" empathy might look like, Dominick LaCapra talks about "empathic unsettlement" as the phenomenon of simultaneously "feeling for" another and being made aware of one's own distinct positionality (41). In other words, engaging with trauma through the affective structure of empathy can actually serve to disrupt the illusion of mutuality,

since one becomes aware of a discrepancy between one's own perceptions and the experience of another. Following Jean-Luc Nancy's radicalization of the Heideggerian notion of *Mitsein*, Marija Cetinic usefully takes this one step further in imagining this kind of unsettlement as generating a sort of last-ditch mutuality in which interlocutors at least experience their own separateness *together*. She writes:

> If trauma cannot be shared in its particularity (if what is exposed is the impossibility of empathic appropriation), what trauma nonetheless forces us to share is the experience of a limit, the limit as shared, of the finite sharing of finitude. For Nancy, such finite sharing […] is the only viable modality of community. (292)

In that this extension of empathic unsettlement offers the possibility of communication and belonging, then, it might be understood as a relatively optimistic (if in the most limited sense) configuration. Even as the historical specificities and phenomenological particularities of traumatic experience mean that it can never fully be witnessed, it is nonetheless available as an existential category of shared feeling. A focus on discursive liminality, importantly, returns attention to the survivor's experience of what it might feel like to "share feelings" with another through language, and also opens up questions about how writers might *resist* consumption by readerly empathy.

On the topic of representation, theorists in both affect and trauma are also interested in how personal or "private" experiences become part of public discourse, and in how trauma is both managed and circulated by institutional and cultural forces. E. Ann Kaplan, for example, investigates how "public" traumas like 9/11 are constructed by and across diverse forms of media, in order to create different kinds of attachments and communities. Sara Ahmed's work on

"stickinesses" in affect studies is complementary, and these are ideas that are important to my focus. An emphasis on discursive liminality that takes for granted the feeling of "mineness" associated with experience invites one to trace the levels of violation that unfold when personal tragedy is appropriated by larger public discourses, and also to trace ways (as I do in Chapter 2) in which "unspeakable" stories actually become relentlessly spoken about, proliferate widely and form attachments to various themes, communities, ideologies and individuals. With Zahavi, one can also assume that even if, as Kaplan argues, trauma brings "new subjects" into being, this may nonetheless be grounded in core selves who may exist alongside new subjectivities in circulating discourses.

The most obvious consequence of attention to discursive liminality is that it may add to the critical vocabulary on the relationship between the "unassimilable" and traumatic representation or transmission. Direct experience, in other words, may have something to do with "direct representation" as it is understood by theorists such as Jill Bennett. For Bennett, whose focus is on affect and trauma as communicable in contemporary art, something like "direct representation" avoids the pitfalls associated not only with unspeakability but also with empathic engagement:

> The kinds of transcriptions of experience one encounters in art do not usually invite us to extrapolate a subject, a persona, from them. Under these conditions, the affective responses engendered by artworks are not born of emotional identification or sympathy; rather, they emerge from a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work. (7)

The idea of an "affective response" that might be characterized as a "sensation" implicitly embraces the model with which I work, since Bennett already takes as a given that there might

be a realm of "sensation" outside the subjects or personae constructed in discourse. Her arguments about contemporary art are directly relevant to more abstract or experimental literary works like Philip's *Zong* or Cha's *Dictee*, but they are also useful in starting to think about how a consciousness might experience pain or grief directly, and whether forms of "representation" or "presentation" might exist that nonetheless are not highly discursive or strictly constructed ideologically (what Ngai might call "less formed and structured").

Overall, then, attention to discursive liminality in literature may contribute to scholarly conversations about transmissibility and representation across multiple disciplines, and moreover might work towards exploring an unpathologized model for survivor voices and stories. The specific works of literature I address in the following chapters diverge in genre, period, context and theme, but they share a special interest in painful affects as they first hover on the precipice of linguistic expression and then become consumed as relentlessly discursive circulating objects. I turn now to a brief overview of each chapter.

Sections of the Study

The first chapter of this project, "The Pure Impact of Sheer Happening in Don Delillo's *The Body Artist* and Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*" aims not only to ground the work critically and methodologically, but to instantiate a working model of discursive liminality and to engage in an initial reading of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* that treats that work as an investigation into the relationship between trauma and semiotic breakdown. I have briefly outlined debates surrounding the "unassimilated," and in this section I look more closely at the various denotations of the concept and the potentially productive distinctions that might be made across the disciplinary lines of trauma theory, affect theory and phenomenology. Since the

process of "intextuation" (or assimilation in language) is my direct focus, I also return to ideas outlined above by scholars such as Karla Holloway and Fassin and Rechtman: figures who are concerned with the ways in which bodies and experiences are made to signify within discursive systems. Finally, since this project coheres around a conception of felt selfhood as both direct consciousness and object-in-story, I trace the relevance of debates in neuro-phenomenology about experience and self-consciousness, most notably by reading the two works through a phenomenological lens.

DeLillo and Powers' novels are extended meditations on unassimilated grief, or on grief as a sensation before it is fully integrated into consciousness through discourse. It is also, importantly, an inquiry into how grief feels as it becomes assimilated in language, and as such is an effective instantiation and exploration of the model with which I will work. Alongside an analysis of DeLillo, a close reading of the first section of Forster's novel (up to and including the traumatic "aporia" or un-representable moment of the cave-event) explores the author's investigation of semiotic breakdown and narrative unassimilability in trauma (in Forster's words: "the human predicament in a universe which is not, so far, comprehensible to our minds") (xix). These novels share a deep interest in grief and unknowability, and thus establish necessary critical ground for the following chapters.

In the second chapter, "Discourse, Circulation and Ownership in E.M. Forster and Dionne Brand," I will read the latter part of Forster's novel alongside Brand's *thirsty* through the lenses of work on affect done by Sara Ahmed and Kathleen Stewart and on trauma by Fassin and Rechtman, Holloway, Luckhurst and Cetinic. Since the first section establishes the extent to which *Passage* seems to implicitly embrace the model of discursive liminality I propose (where it explores the sheer impact of unassimilated trauma in the BOUM), I turn to a reading of the

complicated processes whereby the experience is consumed in discourse, forms and deforms associations and communitites (Ahmed's "stickinesses"), and is ultimately leveraged in the service of large-scale political and ideological events. My primary interest lies in an attention to how it feels when one's trauma enters into such a narrative, and Forster's novel is a rich investigation into the ways in which psychological interiority – both that of the victim and that of the accused perpetuator – is lent coherence from the outside in, and the emotional impact of outside voices that are actively silencing. Traumatic legibility, in the novel, is actively annihilating of selfhood.

My treatment of Brand's *thirsty* follows directly from assertions made about Forster's novel, but widens my focus in terms of racial dynamics and marginalized bodies. As in Forster's novel, here the family's trauma is by turns elided in public discourse and leveraged in terms of specific representations and aesthetics. Questions about the representation of traumatic experience collide with questions about the genealogy of trauma as a discourse, or with what it means to become legible as a victim of profound rupture or violence. Specifically, I contend that Brand registers a deeply unsettled anxiety about the process by which a black subject becomes legible in discourse of diasporic and racialized trauma and suffering, where an individual's pain becomes the object of empathic consumption and absolution. What Shuh-mei Shih calls "Trauma-ism" is thus an acutely de-politicizing and sentimentalizing gesture, so that Brand seems to mourn *not* the failure to alchemize trauma into narrative, but the difficulty in making that act perform any real cultural or political work. The selfhood of victims of trauma is therefore doubly erased, as ideology colonizes unassimilated grief and fixes the victims' bodies representationally as empty objects. Thus, though Brand's work shares little in common with that of Forster in terms of historical, geographical or material specificity, the two texts can be

productively read alongside each other in terms of their interest in the circulation and ownership of traumatic stories, and in the consequences of narrative disinheritance for victims of trauma.

The third chapter, "What Was the Meaning and What the Experience?: The Miserable Memoir and Liminal Grief," I turn to the genre of memoir in order to retrace questions that have been taken up in previous chapters about the felt-sense of the precipice between text and non-text, here positioning the memoir as a textual space in which writers negotiate the working-through of that process. Both Didion's *Blue Nights* and Cooper's *The House at Sugar Beach* behave like transcripts of the writers' negotiations of grief and pain, and they both converge and diverge in the perspectives they explore about the possibilities of intextuation. Both memoirs, importantly, actively resist the participation of personal pain in larger political, social or ideological discourses (like those explored in Chapter 2): Didion in terms of discourses of aging, mourning and family, and Cooper in terms of discourses of large-scale political binaries or responsibility exploitation and historical narrative. In doing so, however, each author enacts particular maneuvers that actually serve to exploit the genre of the "trauma-memoir" in self-protective gestures – at the same time these writers assert particularity and refuse the subsumption of their stories into larger social narratives, they protect themselves against the personal implications of responsibility within these narratives. What's important for my larger project here, then, is that entrance into discourse becomes less a phenomenon against which to protect oneself or within which to suffer, but an opportunity to play, exploit, and to utilize text strategically. Writing pain, in these cases, is even simultaneously a way of avoiding writing pain.

For theoretical grounding, framing these two memoirs in terms of the genre of "trauma memoir" more generally is very important, with reference to work by Luckhurst, Shu, Fassin and Rechtman and others. It is also imperative to explore the larger public, "traumatic" discourses

against which these two writers carefully position their own stories: in Didion's case, particularly Woodward's work on risk and aging, and in Cooper's case, particularly the work of Twitchell on the rise of the trauma-memoir in contexts of African genocide. My larger claim in this chapter positions the process of intextuation in discourse as manipulable and not inevitable, and thus I trace processes of narrative avoidance and resistance that – ironically, perhaps – ensure a position of autonomy and control for survivors of trauma.

The fourth chapter, titled "Representational Anxiety and the Possibilities of Descriptive Reading: Affect as Presence in Chang-Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* and Dave Eggers' *What is the What*" focuses on readings of two novels that deal directly with the belated processing of past trauma, and with what it means to confront one's own experiences simultaneously as unassimilated and as circulating in ideology; that is, to experience oneself as both non-discursive, direct consciousness and as an object in discourse (in Zahavi's terms, as both hermeneutical and narrative self). Put simply, both novels contain protagonists who exist in divided but co-conscious time; they experience the belated, pathological return of unassimilated violent memories in the Caruthian sense, exist in and through the discourses they create for *themselves* as objects, and finally enter into political and social discourses outside of direct experience that ironically guarantee their survival as immigrants or refugees who "pass" in some meaningful sense as certified victims of large-scale public trauma. The novels thus address the extent to which narratives and gestures that guarantee survival also become the guarantors of subjective annihilation. My readings engage Anne Anlin Cheng's article on "the ethics of passing," as well as integrate discourses on orphans and debates about transgenerational trauma.

It is also in the fourth chapter that I make a case for how recent ideas in the turn towards "Descriptive Reading" might open up new perspectives on discursive liminality as an object of

study. The phenomenological thread also becomes particularly useful, since in previous chapters my focus is largely on either the non-discursive or the discursive realms, and on the liminal space between. Here, finally, I am able to being to address theories of conscious experience that refuse to bifurcate felt selfhood into, on the one hand, pre-reflective consciousness, or on the other, object of consciousness. This is a thread that implicitly informs my argument in all other chapters (since, consistently, I certainly see the reduction of the self to either end of the binary model as inherently problematic), but here I am able to ground these theories in works of literature that themselves actively refuse such a reduction.[10]

In the concluding comments of this project, I re-focus on the claims about non-discursive and representational selfhood that form through-lines for my readings of the theory and novels. What is centrally important is tying the readings together in support of my larger claim about discursive liminality and what that might mean for the coherence of the self, and for the self-sense of traumatic consciousness. Thus, my concluding remarks focus on the social and political dimensions of the project, in terms of the consequences that theorizing the precipice between unassimilated and discursive realms might have for survivors of trauma. I propose, ultimately, one possibility for eking out a narrative position for survivors that both actively refuses their construction as Caruthian "eidetic tape-recorders" with no direct claim over their own stories, and also allows for more sensitive treatments of the ways in which experiences are colonized and disseminated through discourse.

[10] I do not mean to suggest that the other works treated in this project do not refuse such a reduction; indeed, I have chosen them precisely because they do. Rather, I mean that in this chapter I analyze these novels *qua* refusals of that reduction, rather than through other lenses.

Chapter 1. THE PURE IMPACT OF SHEER HAPPENING IN DON DELILLO'S *THE BODY ARTIST* AND RICHARD POWERS' *THE ECHO MAKER*

In the end notes of *The Juridical Unconscious*, Shoshana Felman launches a persuasive critique of historian Ruth Leys' reading of Freud in terms of traumatic experience. Leys denies the "reality" of a traumatic event – argues Felman – by reducing it to simply "thematic meaning," or to "a vocabulary of consciousness." Felman continues:

> This perception misses everything about the reality of trauma. We may not understand what trauma is about or where it comes from. But if trauma is not an event (precisely a concrete and historical reality – a blow – we do not understand but have to take in), it is nothing. Trauma is, one might say, the event par excellence, the event as unintelligible, as the pure impact of sheer happening." (179)

As I summarize briefly in the Introduction, debates surrounding the ontological possibility and political potentiality of "sheer happening" as unintelligible "pure impact" have been especially lively in trauma and affect studies, and moreover are increasingly relevant to so-called "post-post-structuralist" impulses in scholarship that seek to shift direction away from the explorations of subjectivity, circumscription and ideological structures that have (rightly and necessarily) required so much scholarly attention in the past several decades. Precisely because "sheer happening" represents such an epistemological lynch-pin but must nonetheless be theorized within those very same linguistic structures that post-structuralism *does* do such an excellent job of illuminating, it feels particularly treacherous to venture towards exploring the felt-sense of something "pure" or "sheer" in human experience.

Despite the air of treachery, however, there are several recent scholarly projects that explore understandings of direct, unmediated experience through vocabularies of emotion that open up different critical directions than those of early phenomenologists or vanguard trauma theorists like Caruth and Felman. In this chapter, I engage two such projects – Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* and Alphonso Lingis' *Dangerous Emotions* – whose very titles point to inversely parallel and intimately shared conceptions of affect and emotion as quotidian phenomena that are nonetheless both revelatory and risky. These projects provide a sharp theoretical lens through which to engage works of literature that share an interest in emotion (here, grief) as a discursively liminal space. I subsequently instantiate such a lens in readings of Don Delillo's *The Body Artist* and Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*. This chapter thus establishes both the *possibility* and the *value* of dedicating critical attention to "sheer happening" before it slips into discourse, and as a result opens up room to explore the limits of language and the resilience of perception in profound trauma and rupture. Taken together, all four texts work towards unravelling the story of coherence that narrative brings to consciousness, and ultimately open up the space from which to observe not only the felt-sense of "pure impact" but also the machinations of discourse from that liminal – that slightly "outside" – position.

Theorizing Grief as Sheer Happening

In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart draws insight into the felt-sense of everyday life by consciously relying on an epistemological approach marked by slowness. Like Sara Ahmed (whose concern with "the unfolding of bodies into worlds" so eloquently lets go of discourse debates), Stewart does not attempt to parse conversations about the ontological possibility of something like "sheer happening," but rather traces what might happen when one shifts one's

focus away from what she calls "the bottom-line arguments about 'bigger' structures and underlying causes" that characterize post-structuralist approaches. Stewart instead takes for granted that the "reeling present" is always "composed out of heterogeneous and noncoherent singularities," always contains elements that are present to consciousness before they cohere into the systems and structures of discourse (4). She writes of the project:

> This book tries to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate us because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us. (4)

Slowing down that "quick jump" to representational thinking indeed exerts a form of parallax on the world, so that (as becomes clear for both Delillo and Powers) affects and emotions can come to feel as if they "exert a pull" on consciousness and on each other as they stick and re-stick together in the evolving networks that constitute experience. Setting the critical intention as "slowness," most importantly, does the important work not of drawing conclusions about "sheer happening" but of establishing the possibility of noticing it, resisting the urge to – as Stewart writes – "ride a great rush of signs to a satisfying end" (5). That Stewart calls her book a "contact zone for analysis" is thus an important epistemological statement; there is really no reason to cling to the idea that unmediated affect must somehow exist outside theory, or outside language, because it is entirely possibly simply to create a space (as Stewart does) from which to *notice*, and to *observe*, the ways in which the objects of consciousness can come to cohere in a multitude of different ways. For this reason it makes sense to understand the works in this chapter that meditate on discursive liminality as encounters or contact zones themselves, rather than teleological or even coherent narrative projects.

How, then, might one theorize what Stewart is referring to as these "ordinary affects," these unmediated objects of direct experience? For Stewart, unlike for phenomenologists like Zahavi, there is a temporality or an order of priority in the scheme of felt consciousness (though I don't think this distinction matters much at all in the end). Stewart echoes Felman in using the word "impact." When affects impact, Stewart writes:

> A charge passes through the body and lingers for a little while as an irritation, confusion, judgment, thrill, or musing. […] Its visceral force keys a search to make sense of it, to incorporate it into an order of meaning. But it lives first as an actual charge immanent to acts and scenes – a relay. (39)

The modal of electricity that Stewart here employs is a very useful way to imagine the cosmology she is exploring; one might think of larger networks and schemata as coming to constitute discourse itself, as the ways in which objects stick to each other semiotically in systems of meaning, and of affects or direct experience as the "charge" – as the impulse that runs along and through these schemes, as a ping that is fleeting and easy to miss but nonetheless fundamentally constitutive of and functionally necessary to the larger networks themselves. My critical intention is to pay attention to those pings as they register in works of literature, and then also to trace their movement along and within networks as they come to cohere in different sense or meaning-making schemes.

At this juncture, it is important to take note of one crucial distinction (mentioned in the *Introduction*) between so-called "unassimilable" traumatic experience and unmediated affect or emotion. For Caruth, the unassimilable nature of trauma is a direct result of its status as a total rupture – as a profound break in consciousness, as an extraordinary or exceptional event that marks the very possibility of history itself. As such, Caruthian trauma could be understood as the

diametric opposite of Stewart's so-called "ordinary" affects, with the latter writer's focus on everyday life or the "animation of the ordinary." For my project, however, I want to suspend such a distinction momentarily, and instead explore the extent either to which the "extra-ordinariness" of trauma may indeed be constructed discursively rather than characterize the felt-sense of profound grief, *or* to which *every* affect is both "ordinary" (common) and "extraordinary" (outside the reason or understanding of discursive or explanatory systems). In any event, it is necessary for my purposes in this chapter to imagine grief and pain as experiences that might be conceptualized as "ordinary" affects, or anyway as sharing their status as "moving targets" that, as Stewart writes, "we struggle to trace […] with big stories thrown up like bill-boards on the side of the road" (93). Grief, like joy, is an affect very commonly experienced as "outside of language" or discursively liminal and then quickly appropriated into many layers of unfolding semiotic dimension – very quickly thrown up on billboards – and in this way participates centrally in any concept of the ordinary.

If grief is so quotidian, however, how might one also conceptualize it as "dangerous"? Moreover, isn't it certainly true that profound pain or loss really does feel like a kind of rupture, a sort of ripping in the fabric of the ordinary? Alphonso Lingis, a contemporary phenomenologist on affect to whose work I turn in more detail in the final sections of this chapter, shares Stewart's emphasis on discursively liminal affect as fundamentally constitutive of reality or conscious experience. The philosopher also takes for granted that emotions do possess a kind of excess, over and above what discursive systems might construct, access, express or reveal (and in the excess might therefore be said to be "sheer happening"), and also contends that emotions and affects both drive conscious action and actively make sense of and give order to conscious experience:

> Emotions channel the currents […]. An emotion isolates an object or event and brings it into focus: it dramatizes. It pulls away what Virginia Woolf called the cotton in our days, the stretches of time when, doing what there is to be done, our eyes are cloudy and our hearts muffled. The emotion frames, crops, views that object or event from a distance or in extreme close-ups […]. The emotional energies charge that object or event and make it shine and glower, purr and howl. (69)

For Lingis, then, affects might be understood to be discursively liminal or excessive not because they exist completely outside meaning-making systems, but because they themselves represent a form of animation that gives "charge" to objects and events: that imbues them with shine, with importance, with power. In Stewart's model, emotions then channel the currents that make the networks meaningful in the first place: though they are not the movement, they are an inherent part of the reason for the movement itself. This reveals a fundamental (though unstated) difference between the models of Stewart and Lingis, then: for the former, affects may move through and dart around the spaces of which they are constitutive, where for Lingis certain affects may drive and direct the movement itself, or the worlding activities that such movement enacts. For both scholars, however, the realm of the discursively liminal is *both* accessible to mindful critical engagement and a valuable part of the overall cosmology of consciousness.

Some emotions – like grief – do indeed have the power to "wake us up," or to disrupt the seamless functioning of discourse long enough for the hammer to break, and it is in this way that they are dangerous and extraordinary. For Lingis, grief is an exceptional kind of feeling because it is so intimately connected to ideas of care and interpersonal intimacy, and in this connection it immediately reminds one of the work that one can do in the world that is not entirely constrained

by semiotic constructions. It is important to note here that Lingis frequently employs the word "care" instead of the word "empathy," and for reasons that I explore in more detail in later chapters that distinction is crucial to avoiding ideological quagmires that attend questions about trans-cultural witnessing or the problematic identity politics of empathy as an expression of shared grief. For Lingis, care is less a mode of understanding than a way of "opening" that, again, can give rise to action in the world: "grief and weeping are active ways we open to the pain and death of others," he writes, "and if we can grieve and weep over ourselves, it is by opening to the grief and weeping of others over our ways" (71). The mode of action that grief makes available to consciousness, moreover, points to an "outside" or liminal space beside semiotic systems:

> [Philosophies of history] see in the directive force of an action a meaning that operates only within the vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric of a semiotic system. […] They explain an action out of an evolving environment where everything is already social, significant and historical. But our action is an interruption of the continuous dialectic of history, an awakening from the drowsy murmur of the semiotics of a culture. (107-108)

In this way, care that arises from grief represents a break from the constraints of discourse itself; "the I awakens," writes Lingis, not as a subject position hailed into being but as a mind conscious of its own action in the world. Most importantly, this kind of "dangerous" grief remains lurking in the limits of language, so that it is not assimilated or articulated in narrative or the forms of storytelling upon which Caruthian trauma theorists foist so much redemptive possibility. Grief remains simply a feeling- an affect – that does not require an expression of

"understanding" or "articulation" in order to frame or reframe perspectives on the "murmur" of semiotics.

Reading Stewart alongside Lingis thus lays the critical groundwork for establishing first the possibility of *noticing* or *observing* feelings and emotions without appropriating them automatically into discourse, and second, the potential of traumatic or painful emotions as disruptive phenomena that may give rise to particular kinds of perspectival clarity. Before turning to close readings of Delillo and Powers as literary works that not only instantiate these ideas but push them further as scholarly objects in their own right, I do want to pause and take note of a particular figure that appears with an astonishing frequency in literary works that explore trauma: that of the echo. In E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (the urtext in any discussion of trauma and semiotic breakdown and one that I treat closely in the following chapter), a central traumatic violation takes place in the Caves of Marabar, and that space is one in which all language breaks down and discourse becomes actively obscured and obscuring. "'Let there be light' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'boum,'" Forster writes, suggesting that the shape of the caves transforms meaningful sentences into an incomprehensible echo. The caves consume sense and difference: "the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine [Mrs. Moore's] hold on life […] If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same -- 'ou-boum'" (139). Iterations of the sense-destroying and unassimilable "boum" recur throughout much traumatic literature, including in *The Body Artist* (in which, as Osteen writes, "the dead […] live again as echoes") and *The Echo Maker*, whose title represents one of many references to reverberations of semiotic breakdown. What might be made of the frequency with which the echo metaphor seems to pop up in this genre?

What in the *echo* represents a unique point of access for writers concerned with discursive liminality and grief?

Kathleen Stewart gets at the heart of the echo figure as both epistemology and cosmology. She writes:

> Ideologies happen. Power snaps into place. Structures grow entrenched. Identities take place. Ways of knowing become habitual at the drop of the hat. But it's ordinary affects that give things the quality of a *some*thing to inhabit and animate. (15, original emphasis)

My suspicion is that it is this "*some*thing" that illuminates the fabric of felt-experience, the discursively liminal elements that constitute and provide the ground for the "structures" and "identities" that seem to condition and give shape to consciousness. It is this *some*thing against which echoes sound the *boum*: it's too difficult to bring into visibility or perception through language, so thinkers have access only to reverberations, like bats using sonar to orient their bodies among objects they cannot see. For this reason, I begin my discussion of Delillo's engagement with the nature of discursive liminality with an exploration of what it is *not*. In other words, I start by exploring how liminal grief creates a vacuum that consumes semiotic threads and sense-making systems, and of how eventually grief can give rise to a perspectival shift that – as Lingis argues – may "wake us up" to the ways in which the objects of consciousness come to cohere into the bodies, forms, figures and ideas that populate experience. I then trace similar threads through a reading of Powers that works through the same impulse to trace reverberations of the discursively liminal, and ultimately to slowly unravel and reveal the labor involved in the construction of the story of coherence that semiotic systems write into being. Ultimately, this chapter establishes the epistemic possibilities of the concept of discursive liminality, in opening

that area of experience up as a critically productive and accessible space. It also explores the extent to which a focus on liminal emotions might provide entry into a felt-sense of selfhood that goes beyond the post/structural, in making visible the unrecovered residue between construction and conscious experience.

Between Constructions: Discursive Liminality in *The Body Artist*

As many critics have noted, *The Body Artist* represents a remarkable departure for Delillo from his frequent, explicit concern with those larger structures that "grow entrenched" in the human psyche. [11] Unlike Delillo's canonical engagements with what Julia Breitbach calls "a cinemascope panorama of the American way of life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (works like *White Noise* or *Underworld*), this one is a very quiet, smaller text, oriented by careful attention to the everyday rather than by grand analysis of the spectacles of postmodern ideology (72). The novella, which is about the sudden appearance of a mysterious and enigmatic phantom-like stranger in a woman's house following the death of her husband, ultimately meditates on grief as a form of *presence* – a ghost – rather than of absence. The writing is both careful and delicate. Mark Osteen writes:

> The intimacy of the writing technique […] brings us close enough to hear the faintest whispers of consciousness, thereby inviting us to eavesdrop on the most delicate patterns of thought and emotion. As selves are gradually laid bare, we cannot help but lend a hand in their exfoliation. (67)

Reading the text does indeed feel like a form of "eavesdropping" on daily activities as they occur in the extraordinary and even quietly macabre context of its events, and that word "exfoliation"

[11] Critics who have addressed these ideas include Paul Maltby, Peter Boxall and David Cowart, among others.

is exceptionally insightful: Delillo does peel away the foliage of semiotic dimension, lifting leaf by leaf of text off of consciousness to reveal the spaces in between words and meanings, the gaps between the registering and the interpretation of emotions. In this way, it is a particularly suitable starting point for thinking about how discursively liminal affects like grief and pain might still be animated and explored in language, even if that means watching words as they fall away or recede from view.

From the outset, Delillo treats language as both a living being and as a machine that can break down, can disentangle and crumble apart, and in this way carves out a liminal space from which to observe the incapacities of the system and the resilience of "sheer happening" in the representation of traumatic affects like grief. Delillo's relationship to post-structuralist understandings of language is complex, as David Cowart comments: "[the writer] invites his readers to recognize, with post-structuralist theory, the inadequacy of the old model of things and their word-labels," but "he is impatient of the reductive thinking that makes language some kind of gossamer film, some completely depthless word-gauze between world and cognition" (209). As Breitbach argues, indeed, Delillo *does* express faith in language's ability to communicate sense and meaning, and to create and construct experience even as it disbands in front of the reader's eyes (76), and in this way his ideas may have more in common with a kind of Barthesian exploration marked by playful *jouissance* than the more dour or analytical forms of post-structuralism that treat semiotic arbitrarity as a mechanism of oppression and ideology. In the novella's frequent reference to birds, at least, Osteen sees an allusion to William James' liberating and happy description of "the wonderful stream of consciousness" that exists "like a bird's life" – but there is also, I think, at least a subtle darkness to the many chirping birds outside the house; perhaps Virginia Woolf is there in allusion alongside James, hearing "the

birds singing Greek choruses" as a sign of madness or linguistic breakdown (*MB* 162). Either way, it suffices to note that while signs may seem to dissolve as meaningful mechanisms of narrative or communication, they remain present as a point of access to their own dissolution, as markers of looming collapse.

In "Embodying Perceptions of Death," phenomenologist Suzanne Laba Cataldi writes about how the feeling that grief somehow cannot be put into words – Caruth's traumatic "representational aporia" – can be accounted for by the primacy of perception in conscious experience. "Perception is the source of meaningfulness in the world," she writes:

> As our ordinary occupations and observations take on alien and or unreal aspects, lose their import, and confront us as meaningless activity, the connection between perceptions of death and perceptions of meaninglessness becomes less and less obscure (197)

Because consciousness engages in a form of embodied identification with others (including *dead* others), there is a suspended sense of un-reality associated with death; grief may seem to feel like a "non-affect," a numbing of consciousness to emotion: there is no way to feel or to represent that feeling in language, because it reflects the fundamental sense-less-ness or aporia of death itself (of simultaneous being and non-being). In *The Body Artist*, as in much traumatic literature, the expression of this sense-less-ness is indeed discernable in the disappearance of semantic and syntactic clarity (as I detail below), but it is also worth noting here that the connection between perception and language that feels so intimate – and that much phenomenology takes for granted precisely because of this felt-sense of intimacy – is fundamentally destabilized for Delillo. That's precisely how one gets at discursively liminal emotions, at "sheer happening." It is what remains, even before or underneath its felt-coherence through representational systems.

For Delillo, grief is an active annihilator of semiotic coherence. As many critics point out, Mr. Tuttle might be understood as the affect personified: he appears at the death of the husband, and remains forever in Lauren's peripheral vision. Even as a physical body in the world, he seems hard to see – slightly unformed, forever hazy. Lauren wonders:

> Maybe this man experiences another kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after, and he moves from one to the other shatteringly, in a state of collapse, minus an identity, a language, a way to enjoy the savor of the honey-coated toast she watches him eat. She thought maybe he lived in a kind of time that had no narrative quality. (66-67)

The man exists outside or prior to narrative, and thus has no access to structuring and meaning-making discursive systems. He is "minus an identity, a language," occupying a semiotic vacuum in which the conscious being of the continuous present is the only organizing frame: "A kind of time [with] no narrative quality" suggests the unfolding of the present without coherence, but also without the need for coherence (without, exactly, incoherence – just *without*).

Importantly, Mr. Tuttle is also associated with a falling away of language, where his presence brings about linguistic entropy. This isn't a violent shattering; language simply comes apart around him, as if he interrupts communicative signals like driving under an overpass might interrupt the radio. After his arrival Lauren listens to an answering machine on repeat: "Please / leave / a mess/age / af/ter / the / tone." "The words were not spoken but generated and they were separated by brief but deep dimensions," Delillo writes, "[…] not seven different voices but one male voice in seven time cycles. But not male exactly either. And not words so much as syllables but not that either" (69). The recording expresses immense internal tensions, combining disparate utterances – syllables, but not exactly syllables – that are suddenly estranged, suddenly coming

apart and beginning break down. Moreover, what lives in those "brief but deep dimensions"? The phrase suggests a kind of semiotic vacuum, a dark space into which words tumble and disappear. When Mr. Tuttle does finally speak, it is to flatten verbal space, to evacuate it of sense by expressing a totality or wholeness: "the word for moonlight is moonlight," he says. The reference here is cyclical; either language refers only to itself (a formulation that Caruth might like) or, more provocatively, language bumps up against the limits of the purely material, of the unassimilable. I want to suggest that if one understands Mr. Tuttle as a grief-figure, consciousness of him is consciousness of pre-reflective affect; Delillo *notices* the felt-sense of grief, attending to its unknowability without the pressure to give it sense or shape.

The text also registers the felt-sense of the unassimilable entering into discourse, and indeed this signals the beginning of the end for Mr. Tuttle and introduces Lauren to the capacity to consciously experience her own grief. Delillo writes:

> You drop something. Only you don't know it. It takes a second or two before you know it and even then you know it only as a formless distortion of the teeming space around your body. But once you know you've dropped something, you hear it hit the floor, belatedly. (91)

Indeed, this is a truly poignant engagement with the ontological priority of unassimilated affect. Delillo simply observes, here, the suspension of an object before it itselfpomorphizes[12] in the discursive realm – simply as a formless distortion of space, much like the wind before it registers in the trees. When affect is assimilated into knowledge, then, it "hits the floor"; it becomes something perceptible and relational, a phenomenon that interacts in the world and moves within

[12] I borrow this word from the Object Oriented Ontology of Timothy Morton, and explain its definition in detail in the following paragraph. For now, it suffices to say that Morton sees a distinction between an object's "essence" and its "appearance," asserting that essence is profoundly withdrawn; objects do not "appear" until they "itselfpomorphize" through interaction, just as the wind becomes apparent through the rustling of tree branches.

its circuitry. In other words, when the object hits the floor, the woman becomes conscious of her own emotional life with an adverb that resonates deeply with Caruthian vocabulary surrounding trauma: *belatedly*. Interestingly, too, Lauren is also figured here as a general "you," the general you and the you of the reader.

In this space of linguistic breakdown, the house of *The Body Artist* thus comes to behave as an echo chamber; Mr. Tuttle's presence can only be registered as a reverberation, never as an experience fully present to consciousness. Alongside the semantic echoing and doubling that characterizes the man's language, sound also begins to re-sound and ring throughout the house, and Lauren positions herself increasingly as a kind of detached observer or recorder. Delillo writes: "[Lauren] began to carry the tape recorder everywhere she went […] She wore insulated boots and walked for hours along the edge of saltgrass marshes and down the middle of lost roads and she listened to Mr. Tuttle" (65). In Mr. Tuttle's voice are echoes of her dead husband (89), a figure to which she only has access through the strange man. In this way, Delillo seems to share an understanding of the discursively liminal as accessed through that "s*ome*thing," that sonorous "boum" – that may be captured only indirectly from listening to the recording.

As language does not represent a point of direct access to liminal feelings of grief for Delillo, forms of awareness and attention to perception as a pre-linguistic or extra-semiotic capacity promise a more meaningful or direct encounter with emotion. It is worth turning very briefly towards the concept of "itself-pomorphizing" in the field of Object-Oriented Ontology in order to theorize forms of perception that may register affects in discursively liminal space. In "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," Timothy Morton outlines a careful distinction between an object's "essence" and its "appearance," asserting that essence is profoundly withdrawn; it is ontologically prior to appearance, just as the wind's existence is a necessary precondition for its

becoming available through the rustling of tree branches (206). He associates appearances with the aesthetic, "causation," or relationality, and argues in a truly OOO-ey and slightly wild linguistic flourish that in order to register in consciousness, things "itselfpomorphize"; the wind expresses its relation to a tree by tree-pomorphizing in the rustling branches, to a person by anthropomorphizing as a sensation on the skin, etc. I want to suggest, here, that it might be productive to translate[13] this metaphor into discussions of affective unassimilability, and to consider whether the wind indeed *assimilates* to tree branches, becomes knowable and accessible to consciousness through them, just as grief becomes accessible through the figure of Mr. Tuttle.

In the space of Lauren's grief, objects and experiences do indeed become known by themselves-pomorphizing in the world rather than being named or thought in language. Even before Rey's death, Lauren and her husband seem suspended in a kind of pre-lapsarian space; they share biblical figs together in the morning, signifiers and signifieds have yet to fall into schism or arbitrarity. In the novella's opening, Delillo writes:

> The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely and streaks of running luster on the bay. […] The wind makes a sound in the pines and the world comes into being, irreversibly, and the spider rides the wind-swayed web. (9)

This is direct experience: the wind and everything around it simply "come into being," simply happen without assimilation into discourse or construction into words and narrative; the wind is its very sound in the pines, or in other words the "sound" is the mechanism of perception by the pines of the wind. All things are connected through felt-sense, as the spider registers the web

[13] "Translate" is an important word and one that Morton also uses carefully, as he argues that "itselfpomorphization" is actually a form of "translation" (206)

through pressing – through touching – and in this way the world "unrolls" (the unfolding of bodies into worlds) without constructions of agency or subject/object distinctions. Language is secondary; later, Lauren notices of a bird outside the window: "she saw it mostly in retrospect because she didn't know what she was seeing at first and had to re-create [it], write it like a line in a piece of fiction" (93). Here, the bird's being is ontologically prior to its construction in language – a literal object in a story – and this priority is expressed in a feeling of the "retrospect" – the looking backwards, the discursive imposition that can happen only belatedly. Perception is therefore the first, most direct form of experience, and "knowing" is a form of sense-making that is an observable process. Grief and its echoes exist first at the sheer limits of direct perception.

As Lauren begins to process her grief by encountering its sheer presence in the house in the figure of Mr. Tuttle, she reaches a level of cognitive clarity at which she is able to observe the process of perception and affect disseminating into discourse; she finds a position from which she can actually see and understand the unfolding of this process, and from which the "outlines of things" are fully distinct and discrete. Nearing the end of the novella, and almost with a kind of summarizing gesture, Delillo writes:

> Something is happening. It has happened. It will happen. […] There is a story, a flow of consciousness and possibility. [But Mr. Tuttle] hasn't learned the language. There has to be an imaginary point, a non-place where language intersects with our perceptions of time and space, and he is a stranger at this crossing, without words or bearings. (100-101)

This is a revelatory perspective: Lauren watches as the felt-experience of the passage of time begins to differentiate syntactically, from present-continuous, to present-perfect, to future-

simple. She also registers the existence of a discursively liminal space (a non-place, to be sure, not granted semiotic coherence and therefore lacking defined "placeness") *precisely at the intersection* of language and felt-experience (perception): precisely discursively liminal, where grief lives. In this way, Delillo's text not only traces the breakdowns in semiotics that attend experiences of profound pain or rupture – the sense of the "meaninglessness" or the feeling of "beyond words" that is so frequently collocated with grief, but also locates clarity and revelation there. Grief does "awaken" Lauren to a position outside constructions of narrative and ideology, and indeed offers an opportunity to meditate on or to observe the activities of the narrative-giving mind as it begins to impose sense, both syntactic and semantic, onto the mind's direct perception or experience of feeling. The text thus shares with those of Stewart and Lingis a passionate insistence not *only* on the ability to access and register the existence of the discursively unassimilated, but *also* on the value of doing so in granting clarity to sense-making machinations.

IMPROVISING CONSCIOUSNESS: THE FICTION OF COHERENCE IN *THE ECHO MAKER*

In Richard Powers' 2006 novel *The Echo Maker*, a man named Mark Schluter suffers from a mysterious affliction called Capgras Syndrome after a serious car accident. Capgras, neurologist Gerald Weber relates, is characterized by an uncanny sense of un- or mis-recognition on the part of the sufferer, wherein the people to whom one is closest suddenly seem like imposters: Mark's sister Karin looks, acts, *seems* like Karin herself, but Mark is convinced that she is simply an actor standing in for Karin, some kind of double or robot. At the root of this lack of recognition is a disruption of affective attachments to those figures. As psychologist Ellen Seigelman writes:

> [T]he unconscious logic goes something like this: this woman looks like my sister, sounds like my sister, moves like my sister, knows things about my past that only my sister could know. If she were my sister I'd be overwhelmed with joy to see her. But I'm not; I don't feel anything for her. Therefore, she obviously is not my sister. She's just an an amazingly clever replica, a double (an echo?), an impostor. (48-9)

In other words, Capgras results from a kind of emotional amnesia that the "rational" mind struggles to explain. Rather than experiencing simply a lack of emotional connection, the subject in fact transforms the world around him or her to account for the affective gap: "this is my sister, though I do not feel joy" becomes "I do not feel joy so this cannot be my sister." Obviously, Powers' interest in exploring the felt coherence of selfhood, the primacy of emotional ordering and the role of storytelling in spaces of liminality (discursive, conscious or otherwise) means that this novel has much to contribute to conversations about realms of so-called "unassimilated emotion" and their potential to awaken one to the movements in discursive networks as they stick together or pull apart. Moreover, for Powers as for Delillo, these kinds of special affective experiences are not only observable but their observation is crucial in approaching an understanding of selfhood and consciousness.

At the outset, Powers joins Delillo in configuring profound trauma or rupture (and the resulting grief) as spaces of representational aporia that are characterized by the total atrophy of language and sense-making systems. After the accident, Capgras Syndrome first manifests as linguistic breakdown, which Mark imagines as literally re-mapping the spaces of his body to reflect semiotic oblivion. The narrator imparts:

> Where [Mark's] mouth was, just smooth skin. Solid swallows up that hole. House remodeled; windows papered over. Door no more a door. […] Faces push up to his mouthless face, pushing words into him. He chews them and puffs sound back. (19)

Powers' truncated syntax positions the reader inside Mark's consciousness as he struggles to make sense of his experience in language, though the system has broken down alongside an active literalizing of the body: mouth disappears alongside words; faces "push" word-objects around rather than voice or articulate them with semiotic meaning; sound appears simply as a "puff," like smoke or powder, not given shape or coherence in discernable phonemes. Significantly, in the breakdown of language Mark also feels his sense of selfhood dissolve. "*I didn't mean*," he thinks upon waking (20), "I" (self) "didn't" (negation) "mean" (signify).

Again, also, echoes. Echoes are everywhere in this novel, as Seigelman traces:

> The mating dance of the sandhill crane […] The real and the "fake" Karin, Gerald the public figure and Gerald the private doubter, two women in Gerald's life, one of them recapitulating his fall from grace; Daniel as a mild mannered "seed eater," and as a man with "lust in his heart." (50)

Even further, as Seigelman points out, Mark's first words when he can speak again are examples of "echolalia": the repetition or imitation of words either as a symptom of mental illness or during childhood language acquisition. Mark repeats Karin's "Jesus Jesus. Mark. Jesus" and "too tight shoes" and "shoofly, don't tie me" (36-37). In this way Mark resembles Mr. Tuttle, as a grief-figure that stands in for the atrophy of language: he imitates words and phrases, eventually engages in a form of free-association that links the sounds of words with cultural clichés, repeated phrases, dead metaphors. There may be signifiers but there are no signifieds, or at the

very least dimensions of the signified are warped and inaccessible to others. This is indeed also a "time with no narrative quality," a series of sounds receding from sense. Where Karin's double can seem to be an echo for herself, and where words are simply reverberations of sound-"boums" in themselves – Mark's trauma positions him in a space of narrative incoherence, and therefore (as we've traced) in a position of perspectival privilege.

Powers does land on the value of semiotic breakdown more explicitly than Delillo, especially in the eco-narrative about sandhill cranes that frames the events of the story themselves. As in Delillo, the narrator gestures back towards a kind of pre-lapsarian space, or perhaps a space before the Tower of Babel: a space of wholeness rather than difference, or of the unity of the signifier and the signified. "When animals and people all spoke the same language," he writes:

> crane calls said exactly what they meant. Now we live in unclear echoes. The turtledove, swallow and crane keep the time of their coming, says Jeremiah. Only people fail to recall the order of the Lord. (183)

This is an explicit reference to Jeremiah 8:7, in which the prophet compares the migratory patterns of birds – that natural or inborn knowledge – to a knowledge of godly law or obedience, suggesting that human beings have fallen away from this sort of natural intimacy and no longer "keep the time of their coming," no longer follow instinctual (but here holy) patterns of movement. For Powers, this story is linked directly with that idea of crane calls "saying what they meant": perhaps a unity of words and things, or anyway contact with "direct experience" rather than imprisonment in systems of representation, which here represent precisely the "unclear echoes" that result from falling away from grace. Mark, too, wonders "what can things mean, that they aren't already?" (49). What is the difference between direct experience of the

thing itself and its construction as an object with "meaning," a kind of sign? Meanings are only echoes, only reverberations off of material barely accessible to consciousness. When Mark loses language, he encounters that raw material directly, and in that encounter sees wholeness rather than difference.

As for Stewart and Lingis, for Powers affective experience is a primary mechanism of consciousness, as "actual charge[s] immanent to acts and scenes" – as the ground of perception. Mark therefore lives through the breakdown of the "discursive" realm, the rational world that comprises affects "thrown up on billboards" that is actually a neurological coping-mechanism that the brain undergoes to make sense of the disappearance of liminal affects. Dr. Weber explains Capgras like this:

> The Capgras sufferer almost always misidentifies his loved ones. A mother or father. The part of his brain that recognizes faces is intact. So is his memory. But the part that processes emotional association has somehow disconnected from them. […] He sees what he always sees. He just doesn't… feel you sufficiently to believe you. (61)

In other words, logic adjusts to emotion, rather than the other way around; discourse creates networks that make sense of those pings as they register to the brain, and as a consequence those networks (the sense-making work of "memory") shift and crumble without access to affective connection. Emotions are primary, and therefore, as Weber later clarifies, "lack of emotional ratification overrides the rational assembly of memory. Or put it this way: reason invents elaborately unreasonable explanations to explain a deficit in emotion. Logic depends on feeling" (106). Later, too, he continues: "It's not what you think you feel that wins out, it's what you feel you think" (131). In Capgras, then, there is a striking cosmology of the emotions that resonates

so closely with what affect theorists like Stewart want to talk about: when the system breaks down, or when "logic" depends on a "feeling" that is itself broken or inaccessible, the feeling of seamlessness falls away and the working of the parts is revealed.

It is precisely *in* trauma and grief, then, that this revelation takes place; the machine has to break down in order to be taken apart, to be understood. Before turning back towards an exploration of how contemporary phenomenology like that of Lingis might help illuminate some of the work that discursively liminal affects like grief perform in this context, it is necessary to understand how Powers approaches the "content" of such a revelation: what, in the end, does the breakdown of the networks "reveal"? For Powers, though experience is in fact constituted by a plurality of discursively liminal flashes, the "pings" as they move through form and thought, the mind is always engaged constructing a story of coherence; the activity of the mind gives form, shape and discernability to direct experience: gives it sense and meaning. So that, as Dr. Weber observes, "consciousness works by telling a story, one that is whole, continuous, and stable. When that story breaks, consciousness rewrites it" (185). The "story" that consciousness tells need not be characterized simply as the level of thought which gives rise to long sentences, complicated forms of thinking or elaborate memories (though these phenomena are part of the story); rather, the story of coherence operates even at the base-level of visual perception. Relating the story of Sarah M., who suffers from "motion blindness" and thus experiences the world "under a perpetual strobe-light," Dr. Weber explains:

> Sarah M. alone of all the world saw a kind of truth about sight, hidden from normal eyes. If vision depends upon the discrete flash of neurons, then there is no continuous motion, however fast the switches except in some trick of mental smoothing. (107)

In other words, all motion is actually an illusion, a story that consciousness writes to make sense of an object's appearance in one "flash," as a foot away and in the next, as 11 inches away. Importantly, Powers' language here has much in common with that of Stewart, Lingis, Delillo: the word "flash" has heretofore appeared countless times in an effort to denote "sheer happening"- moments of neural flashes, mechanisms of perception and cognitive register. For Sarah M., as for Mark, Lauren or Lingis, the "truth about sight" is revealed in the breakdown of seamlessly functioning cognition.

Even more importantly, reading Powers alongside Stewart compliments the latter's literary, frequently beautiful narrative style with a real grounding in rhetorics of science and neurology (though Powers is an author of fiction, all of his works share an interest in environmental science, cognitive science and biology). Recall Stewart's explicit critical intention to "slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate us"—for Powers, this "jump to representational thinking" is precisely the precondition for coherence, all the way down to very basic perceptual experiences. Writing about "Neil," a man with a lesion in the right brain hemisphere who could not perceive anything to the left of his sight midline, Powers asserts:

> Cases such as Neil […] suggested two truths about every normal brain, both of them shattering. First: what we took for a priori, absolute apprehension of real space in fact depended upon a fragile chain of perceptual processing. "Left" was as much in here as out there. Second: even a brain that thought it was measuring, orienting and inhabiting plain-old given space might already, without the slightest notion, have lost as much as half a world. (125)

Representations thus go *almost all the way down*: what Powers calls "absolute apprehension of real space," or direct experience of extra-discursive phenomena, only maybe *feels* real to consciousness, or to a consciousness whose normal functioning protects that "fragile chain of perceptual processing." There is still, importantly, *some* residue beneath this jump to representational thinking, that very reside that Stewart wants to observe and understand; but the felt-sense of coherence (of an image, of a feeling, or of an idea) generated by representational thinking (discourse) represents a very powerful hurdle in the project of trying to access (critically or cognitively) discursively liminal affects. Grief, trauma and other such experiences (like traumatic brain injury), thus indeed seem special in their tendency to disrupt the machinations or "slow the jump."

The (Un)bounded Self in Liminal Grief

At this point, it is also necessary to return to the question of "selfhood" – or of feelings of the self in the context of shattering experiences of grief, trauma or sadness. In many narratives of trauma, writers talk about a feeling of the dissolution of the self, or the loss of "part of the self," in painful experiences. In the context of understandings of trauma that not only trace this feeling of self-dissolution but also position survivors and victims as speakers who may have "lost their voice," or lack the ability to make sense of their own experiences (like those I touched on in the *Introduction*), it seems like grief might be doubly-erasing: both of a feeling of subjective coherence and of ownership over subjective experiences. In "Embodying Perceptions of Death," Cataldi traces the language so frequently used to describe this feeling:

> We can see this violence, this sense of being "ripped" away from a loved one, reflected in our ordinary language – when we speak, metaphorically, of a person

> who is grieving as being "all torn up." We [feel this way] – so hopelessly dispossessed or deprived, of a side of our selves, of own flesh and blood [because we are] existentially bound[14] to significant others in the sensitive depths, the fabric, of our own embodied being. (200)

It does seem resonant, then, to take note of that feeling – that loss of felt coherence in subjectivity, and also that very real physical sensation of a hole opening up in the heart or an arm or leg being ripped off; the fabric that connects one to others is indeed torn. Thinking back through Zahavi, this feeling of "tearing" may also be inherent in the nature of traumatic experience itself, since the grounded, core self and the narrative, discursive self cohere; if all experiences are both "sheer happening" and "discursive construction" then there can be a real rip in profound grief, a real tearing apart as one feels oneself unable to consciously make sense of or cohere direct experience in language or narrative -- unable to read "movement" into discrete neural flashes.

What grief and other feelings of liminality reveal, for Powers, is a structure of basic inter-connectivity among all things that also implies that the felt-coherence of "the self" is a discursive illusion alongside all other coherences. At the outset, Powers' assertion that "everything is connected to everything else" appears cliché to the point of obnoxiousness, but it is worth dwelling on for a moment before I turn to the ways in which the cliché can be avoided, towards a position alongside Lingis that ties liminal grief and the revelation of basic incoherence to a

[14] For Cataldi, as a phenomenologist, the feeling of "existential bond" between bodies is grounded in Merleau-Ponty's "reversibility thesis" (the most famous image of which remains the hand touching the hard). As she writes: "As perceptible-perceiving fabric, flesh is two-sided; and its two sides – the sensitive and the sensed – are not thought entirely as apart from each other. The sides of perceptibility are reversible – as a jacket or the windings of a Mobius strip" (190). In this configuration, live bodies and dead bodies indeed share this bond between flesh.

potential for care and empathy that avoids the pitfalls of interpersonal-storytelling-based trauma theory. Powers writes, then:

> The self spread thin on everything it looked at, changed by every ray of the changing light. But if nothing inside was ever fully us, at least some part of us was loose, in the run of others, trading in all else. Someone else's circuits circled through ours. (384)

Like a healthy brain's visual perception of motion in the world, a "healthy" consciousness feels itself to be bounded coherently in a reality wherein divisions of self/ non-self are both discernable and stable. Like motion, however, this feeling is an illusion and a coping mechanism, and can occur only after the jump to representational thinking that enables the brain to make sense of the world by telling itself particular stories; in fact "nothing inside [is] ever fully us," where the self is neither reducible to a set of cells nor disconnected from the other "circuits" that form the networks of experience.[15] Grief, and its attendant properties of ripping apart felt coherences in this sense thus open the position from which to observe not only the operation of networks in the world, as liminal experiences come to cohere and detach and re-cohere in all sorts of felt meanings and stories, but also the central feeling that the bounded "self" is part of this process – that subjectivity and its felt "grounding" in discourse (to refer to Zahavi's assertion of wholeness) isn't anything other than an equally illusory phenomenon.

Importantly, and again, the "value" in discursive liminality isn't so much in the assertion that this is the way that things ontologically *are* (or that liminal positions awaken one to the way things *are*), but in creating a context wherein it becomes possible to observe operations in the

[15]Lingis echoes this conception of unbounded selfhood when he writes: "How myopic is the notion that a form is the principle of individuation, or that a substance occupying a place to the exclusion of other substances makes an individual, or that the inner organization, or the self-positing identity of a subject is an entity's principle of individuation!" (*DE* 27)

world that condition how coherences *feel* real, how motion becomes present to consciousness or stories seem to make a particular kind of "sense": how meaning is created. What I hope this chapter establishes to carry forward, then, are three overarching ideas: first, that "sheer happening" is entirely accessible to consciousness even bounded and articulated in discourse; second, that "sheer" grief may mark a perspectival shift that enables one to observe the machinations of discourse from a particularly privileged position; and third, that critical perspectives are necessary that go beyond divisions between "sheer happening" vs. discourse or ideology towards an understanding of all experiences as both/and and as approachable as such. Such a capacious critical perspective enables one to observe the shape of Stewart's "*some*thing": the edges and perimeters of perception, the actions of the mind, the ways in which narrative and sense come into being.

Empathy and Care in the Context of Sheer Happening

For Lingis, the interconnectedness of all things and the illusion of the individuated self mean that a form of active care is possible that is "an interruption of the continuous dialectic of history, an awakening from the drowsy murmur of the semiotics of a culture" (108). Specifically, he writes:

> Our action breaks with the past […], from which we rise up and stand as a man or as a woman. Our action breaks with the present and its future, to give the forces of our care and our protection to an ancient tree, a species of animal life indangered […], an ancient sensibility surviving in an old Guatemalan town. (108)

It is in this "breaking" that the unpathological "I" arises, that I that is not individuated from other objects and consciousness but rather exists in a network that itself generates and gives rise to

care. Urgency and immediacy – like those felt in trauma – are integral motivations for the break, since those affects mean that consciousness comes to feel the "intrinsic importance of reality," the necessary conditions of life and non-life. Importantly, the breakdown of selfhood that happens in grief is here a breakdown of the post-structuralist self, not of the operations of consciousness: in revealing how the narrative is put together, it gives rise to a more diffuse understanding of consciousness, affect and how these phenomena constitute and are constituted by the discursive networks that operate in the world. As a result, agency does not break down with the dissolution of coherent selfhood: agency, rather, is awakened with new urgency. Empathy and care also do not depend upon language and narration, and thus this approach avoids the problems inherent in empathy as a mode of attachment that is imbricated in larger ideological structures and therefore in imbalanced and oppressive power dynamics: the subjects and objects that are constructed in such a situation have already dissolved, leaving only the incoherent and highly contingent processes of an un-individuated consciousness.

In *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction*, eco-critic Heather Houser presents a reading of *The Echo Maker* that complicates the optimism inherent in Lingis' approach to care: in constructing care as an ambiguous affect or action, she also offers a way past the trap of cliché in the idea that since everything is interconnected, love and empathy are "natural" or easy. "Where [the novel] posits that systems operate thanks to interconnection" (as explored above), she writes, it also implies that:

> […] excessive connection can lead to wonder's ugly obverses: projection and paranoia. Reimagining the consequences of connection in this way, the novel also inquires whether connectedness always entails care for human and non-human

> others. Complex affective arrangements thus de-rail ethical energies and disturb the care that wondrous awakenings promote in *The Gold Bug*. (81)

Her point, I think, is very well-taken in the context specifically of conversations about grief, traumatic affect and communication. However, I also suggest that what Houser calls "wonder's ugly obverses," denoting Mark's descent into suspicion and paranoia surrounding the identity of his sister and the governmental puppeteers who might be lurking behind the curtain, are consequences of the basic interconnectedness between all nodes in the network only to the extent that they result from its breakdown: from the atrophy of emotional recognition and the subsequent adjustments that the "rational" mind must make to negotiate reality. Therefore, emotions that "wake us up" to action (for Lingis), grounded in care, may still represent an unpathological mode of communication of traumatic experience, but since grief so often ruptures the system, there is always a teetering of which one must be mindful between, on the one hand, a depth of connection that generates shared action and revelation and, on the other, a slippage into feelings of the uncanny (wherein everything feels *too* connected, *too* similar) and thus paranoia.

As I state above, what this chapter aims to establish is the critical accessibility and value of discursively liminal emotions such as grief, and in doing so to pose questions about what such a project means in thinking about discursive operations themselves: how stories form and are told, how particular elements cohere in what Sara Ahmed calls the "stickiness" of semiotic systems. The reason why concepts of empathy and care remain central to these questions is because such feelings of connectedness straddle the divide between "sheer happening" and discourse just like grief: even though these affects can be felt and accessed beneath language, ultimately they inevitably become articulated *in* and *through* discourse. For that reason, I turn now to a reading of the complicated processes whereby traumatic experiences are consumed in

discourse, forming and reforming coherences on Stewart's "billboards" of representational thinking, and in particular of how it "feels" (liminally or otherwise) when one's own grief is ultimately leveraged in the service of much larger political or ideological ends.

Chapter 2. IN PLACE IS NOT ALWAYS IN THE SAME PLACE: DISCURSIVITY AND LIMINAL GRIEF

Kathleen Stewart quotes Wallace Stevens' "July Mountain," in which the poet writes:

> We live in a constellation
>
> Of patches and pitches,
>
> Not in a single world . . .
>
> The way, when we climb a mountain,
>
> Vermont throws itself together. (Stewart 29)

Stewart describes this as "the poetics of an incipient universe." She observes that Stevens' "Vermontness" (a "social construction," that which "throws itself together") comes into being through a series of "incommensurate yet mapped elements" creating connections, coming to cohere in an abstract idea. Even though she acknowledges that Vermontness is (strictly speaking) a social construction, she sees such constructions as potentially irreducible to ideology. She writes:

> [Vermontness] is a potential mapping of disparate and incommensurate qualities that do not simply "add up" but instead link complexly, in difference and through sheer repetition and not through the enclosures of identity, similarity, or meaning, or through the logic of code. (30)

In other words, the pressure that is exerted by the ideological "codes" that bring individual identity or meaning into being is not necessarily identical to the formation of a concept or construction, as concepts really are created through the linking (or "constellation") of qualities. There is a certain discursive liminality that is preserved even in the process of beginning to make meaning out of direct experience.

For others, "the logic of code" or "the enclosures of identity" are not necessarily outside the realm of direct experience, but that distinction doesn't matter much in how we talk about the felt experience of emotion. In *The Promise of Happiness,* Sara Ahmed brings clarity to the issue, and offers a model for understanding liminality without the trappings of strictly ontological distinctions between "autonomous" affect and "structural/social" emotion. Usefully for my purposes, for Ahmed it is not only impossible but critically unnecessary to understand something like a "sensation" or a "flicker" as existing completely outside the structures and systems of ideology, even if one wants to maintain a meaningful distinction between those phenomena and socially-fixed emotional states. Ahmed writes:

> Before we are affected, before something happens that creates an impression on the skin, things are already in place that incline us to be affected in some ways more than others. To read affect we need better understandings of this "in place," and how the "in place" involves psychic and social dimension, which means that the "in place" is not always in the same place. (231)

To refer back to my reading of Stewart in the previous chapter, another way to understand Ahmed's suggestion here might be to acknowledge that affects *do* feel real before they take on semiotic dimensions, before they are "thrown up on billboards," and that those liminal affects are not entirely *out* of the world; there is still the particular car and the particular body driving its movement, still the highway, still the surrounding ideology that circumscribes even the felt-experience of registering one's heartbeat as it senses fear. Moreover, thinking about discursive liminality alongside Stewart and Ahmed highlights the necessity of rejecting the binary between "autonomous" and "socially-fixed" space altogether. Tracing grief as it moves through patterns and structures of language means resting attention on what it feels like without attaching

meaning, then in the action of attaching meaning, and finally in the process of generating a "public" or larger narrative into which personal grief transforms into a coherent sign of its own. Ultimately, it doesn't threaten the existence of "sheer happening" to say that it is already social when it arises within us – it only shifts the perspective so that one can attend to feelings of sheerness and ideology without coming down firmly on one side of an illusory binary between the two.

Now, I turn to two literary works that are concerned with the insights above: first, what it feels like for discursively liminal grief to become fixed in language; second, what it feels like for such language to "go public," and to begin to signify not only within the context of narrative but for a wider public and towards more openly, collectively ideological ends. I focus on two works from dramatically discrete sociological worlds – E.M. Forster's 1924 *A Passage to India* and Dionne Brand's 2010 *thirsty* – suggesting that each of these texts illuminates the felt-sense of discourse as it comes to make grief *mean*, and ultimately that such projects strike right at the heart of debates surrounding subjectivity and empathy. In the end, I circle back around to thinking about how approaches to empathy like those of Dominick LaCapra might point towards less pathological modes of inter-subjectivity and storytelling in the processing of painful experience, or whether these texts might undermine such an optimistic perspective.

I now turn to a reading of *A Passage to India* alongside *thirsty* within the theoretical framework above, with attention to the complicated processes whereby grief is consumed in discourse, forms and deforms associations and communities, and is ultimately leveraged in the service of large-scale political and ideological events. My primary interest lies, of course, in an attention to how it *feels* when one's grief enters into such a narrative, and Forster's novel is a rich investigation into the ways in which psychological interiority – both that of the victim and

that of the accused perpetuator – is lent coherence from the outside in, and the emotional impact of outside voices that are actively silencing. Traumatic legibility (or the result of bringing grief into narrative), in the novel, is actively annihilating of selfhood. My treatment of Brand's *thirsty* widens the focus in terms of racial dynamics and marginalized bodies. Like in Forster's novel, there the family's trauma is by turns elided in public discourse and leveraged in terms of specific representations and aesthetics. Questions about the representation of the grief affect collide with questions about the genealogy of trauma as a discourse, or with what it means to become legible as a victim of profound rupture or violence. Specifically, I contend that Brand registers a deeply unsettled anxiety about the process by which a black subject becomes legible in discourses of diasporic and racialized trauma and suffering (thrown up on those particular billboards), where an individual's pain becomes the object of empathic consumption and absolution. What Shuh-mei Shih calls "Trauma-ism" is thus an acutely de-politicizing and sentimentalizing gesture, so that Brand seems to mourn *not* the failure to alchemize discursively liminal grief into narrative, but the difficulty in making that act perform any real cultural or political work. Selfhood is therefore doubly erased, as ideology colonizes pre-reflective experience and fixes the victims' bodies representationally as empty objects. Thus, though Brand's work shares little in common with that of Forster in terms of historical, geographical or material specificity, the two texts can be productively read alongside each other in terms of their interest in the circulation and ownership of discursively liminal grief, and in the consequences of narrative disinheritance for survivor subjectivities.

A PASSAGE TO INDIA: MARABAR INTEXTUATED

In "Bearing the White Man's Burden: Misrecognition and Cultural Difference in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*," Timothy Christensen points out that it is not only the novel that occupies a central position in the Modernist canon: some critics have suggested that the Caves of Marabar itself is, in fact, a canonical site. Christensen does a remarkable job in constructing a whistle-stop tour of the myriad number of ways that the cave scene has been read across the decades, each reading reflecting and supporting the contemporary critical trend. Overwhelmingly, scholars agree that the caves engage questions about representational crisis, whether alongside Lily Briscoe's painting in *To the Lighthouse* as a modernist meditation on the problems of non-mimetic representation (as John Marx does), or more recently under the presupposition that "the impossibility of the complete and truthful representation of reality in language is a problem that somehow inheres in India or Indians," as Trilling or Parry do (Christensen 156). To my mind, one additional perspective to bring to the caves is the connection between representational crisis and grief or violation, and to read Adela Quested's accusation of assault against Dr. Aziz either as in fact sincere (rather than mistaken), or as drawing a link between representational aporia and trauma without regard to whether the actual violation took place. As I suggest in Chapter 1, the caves do indeed destroy language and make communication impossible, returning all voices with an echo of "boum" and rendering "the universe […] incomprehensible" (139), which alongside their position as a site of violation lends itself easily to a Caruthian interpretation that defines trauma as "sheer happening": incommunicable, languageless, a threat to all semiotic systems.

Within the framework of trauma theory, then, it's also possible to "follow the story" from Adela's initial speechlessness or representational confusion to the ways in which the assault

scene turns from private to public, gets picked up and circulated within a wider cultural context that is fraught with colonial anxieties, intercultural negotiation, misunderstanding and friction, and which finally results in denying both Adela and Dr. Aziz of a felt-sense of personhood or authorial agency over an experience about which only they truly know anything. Another way to put this is that Forster does provide a model for how feelings get stuck to objects, where objects are understood with Ahmed in a capacious sense as units of experience: Adela's initially unspeakable grief-feeling creates tight interpersonal bonds within both the English and the Indian communities (in fact, creates community) and in the end these communities become forms of expression for constructs of nationhood, government and collective identity. For Ahmed, "happiness" can be understood as a meaningful "justification for empire" (*The Promise of Happiness* 124); here, one might understand grief as variably both justificatory and threatening to England's imperial presence in India. As will become especially relevant to my treatment of Dionne Brand in the next section, the story of how all these feelings and objects get stuck together is one that buries and eventually suffocates the actual experience of both victim and accused, where each is transformed into an object of empathic consumption and in this way "intextuated" – made to *mean*, to be legible in a particular way (even by Forster himself). Sheer happening is tipped off the liminal precipice and it carries with it actual bodies in the undertow.

From the outset, Forster troubles Adela's claims towards ownership over the story of her violation, and traces the leakiness of trauma and grief between private or personal modes of suffering and the construction of larger publics. When Mr. Fielding initially visits Adela in order to clarify the details of her accusation, the Major refuses to let him see the victim. "Possibly my wife might ask her that much," offers in Major (gesturing already to the role of gender in the policing of stories), to which Mr. Fielding responds:

> ‘But *I* wanted to ask her. I want someone who believes [Dr. Aziz] to ask her.’
>
> ‘What difference does that make?” [The Major]
>
> ‘She is among people who disbelieve in Indians.’
>
> ‘Well, she tells her own story, doesn’t she?’
>
> ‘I know, but she tells it to you.’ (159)

Here, Mr. Fielding seems to doubt the autonomy of something like “[Adela’s] own story,” where he points to the role of interlocutor or audience in the construction of meaning, with the suggestion that the story’s content might shift and change depending on who is receiving it. Moreover, the “you” to which he refers is not only an active agent in the construction of meaning, but also an unstable signifier as a pronoun itself; the Major’s wife, by implication a representative of a larger English presence that is antipathetic towards Indians, in this instance slips even further back towards the individual of the Major, who really is the denotation of the “you” in this particular conversation. The word thus denotes the woman, the group, and finally the man, and in this way Forster highlights the linguistic construction of meaning as well as the blur between private and public spheres. When Adela’s “private papers” are then “carried [out] in the arms of a dirty policeman” (163) this blurring overtakes the binary completely, as the actual physical account of the story gets literally translated into a legal and public object in the arms of the policeman. Of course, it is hardly ground-breaking to suggest that meaning is socially-constructed, or that content changes depending upon rhetorical situation, but its nonetheless important that with slowness, Forster is actually noticing the process whereby this happens: there really is something like “Adela’s story” that Fielding might hear before its transformation in public circulation, and before grief will come to stick to ideas about community, race and nationhood.

For both the English and the Indian communities, grief constructs modes of solidarity that slip into political discourse almost immediately. Forster first writes that "although Miss Quested had not made herself popular with the English, she brought out all that is find in their character" (169), and moreover that her violation created a general sense of vulnerability that "reminded them that they were an outpost of Empire" (171). In an extraordinary trajectory, then, what is explicitly engaged in the Caves of Marabar as profoundly un-representable, or a-semiotic, first transforms from an absence into a presence (grief as a loss / collective vulnerability as the new emotional result), and then finally into a shared emotional dimension that actively *positions* members of a community in a particular relationship with Empire that relies on constructs of exposure which ultimately reinforce the dominance and protection of England as the central power. Though less visible, the Indian community is similarly united in solidarity in support for Dr. Aziz, playing drums in the streets and enacting hunger strikes: "a new spirit seemed abroad," writes Forster, "which no one in the stern little band of whites could explain" (202). Dr. Aziz' grief at the allegedly false accusation thus has a similar animating effect as Adela's, creating networks of relation among groups of people that eventually give rise to political agitation or unrest along racial and national lines. Grief thus becomes both the justification of and a threat towards Imperial English energies, having run its course all the way from an individual woman's feeling of speechlessness or semiotic collapse in a little cave. [16]

As a consequence of the story's transformation from an event approaching "sheer happening" to a political *raison d'etre*, access to Adela's interiority or subjectivity becomes extremely limited for the reader, for the public and even in her own felt-sense of selfhood. She

[16] This kind of reading resonates closely with Shoshana Felman's engagement with the Eichmann and Simpson trials in *Juridical Unconscious*, in which she positions legal trials as "theatres of justice" where individuals get blurred with collective energies, and moreover in which the vindication or indictment of a particular individual comes to stand in for collective grievance or justice (6).

becomes a symbol, or in Stewart's language she becomes an image that is itself thrown up on a billboard; her actual voice and body recede behind a sort of simulacrum of vulnerability that flourishes within the fraught ideological climate. As Forster writes,

> Each felt that all he loved best in the world was at stake, demanded revenge, and was filled with a not unpleasing glow, in which the chilly and half-known features of Miss Quested vanished, and were replaced by all that is sweetest and warmest in the private life. (172)

Here, Adela's public image is actually expressed as a deeply intimate connection to each individual's values and passions, so that a defense of the woman actually comes to feel as if it is a defense of oneself, of "all that [one] loves best" in the world. Such an engagement with a traumatic story is very common, and is a perfect example of what Robert Samuels calls the "identifying" and "idealizing" modes of traumatic consumption; he notices that people tend to "return to their own selves as a source of identity or emotional release" when confronted with a traumatic story, and moreover to relate such stories to universal and idealized value constructs (453).[17] Importantly, Adela's actual personhood is actively obscured in such a process, as even her features are "chilly" in contrast to the warmth of the "glow" that animates the viewers; they are indeed only "half-known," and in the end do not carry much importance in the construction of the story's semiotic dimensions. As the violation comes to form attachment to universalized values that are nonetheless felt to be intensely private, like the love of one's family, the individual victim of the violation ceases to matter behind its role as a symbol.

[17] Samuels' article is written in the context of an advanced composition classroom, but the modes of traumatic consumption that he articulates – universalizing, assimilating, identifying and idealizing – are nonetheless resonant with general tendencies of reaction to upsetting or painful stories.

Adela herself registers this process through the striking and sudden awareness of materiality, embodiment, and surface sensation. Approaching the trial, when the concerned Mrs. McBryde begins to examine the woman closely, Forster opens the reader to one increasingly rare moment of access to her interiority. He relates that:

> Hitherto she had not much minded whether she was touched or not; her senses were abnormally alert, and the only contact she anticipated was that of mind. Everything now was transferred to the surface of her body, which began to avenge itself, and feed unhealthily. (182)

Just like Dionne Brand's protagonist, here Adela expresses a vague form of what one might understand as double-consciousness; she feels herself both as self and other, as subject and object, or as thinking mind and touched body. She is thus aware of herself as an object of critique and consumption, and importantly this awareness registers as a hyper-sensitivity of surfaces, or as a lack of interior depth. While it's possible to read this scene with ontological affect theory as an engagement with the "flicker" of unassimilated affect – a feeling certainly "on the surface of the body" – I think more resonant theoretical lenses might be found in trauma theory, where scholars like Kali Tal (as I outlined in the *Introduction*) talk about the mode of survivor-annihilation to which traumatic stories so often give rise. Adela feels herself to be an object; she is suddenly embodied, expressing a hyper-awareness of the way that others see her and of her body's centrality in an act of violation that in fact has come to be publicly shared. When her body is ultimately put on display on a literal "platform" in the courtroom (206), her position both as a symbol and as an object of empathic gaze is solidified.

Ultimately, the only way that Adela will gain authorial agency over story, or over the construction of meaning out of discursively liminal grief at all, is by making herself legible

within it: by capitulating to the story, by intextuating herself as a signifier rather than resisting the oppressive forms of meaning-making that form communities around her. In the courtroom, the double perspective of herself as both consciousness and object of consciousness actually generates a kind of authorial power, when she relates that "she didn't think what had happened, or even remember in the ordinary way of memory, but she returned to the Marabar Hills, and spoke from them across a sort of darkness." Forster continues: "the fatal day recurred, in every detail, but now she was of it and not of it at the same time, and this double relation gave it indescribable splendour" (214). The "double relation" or double consciousness here actually gives rise to an authorial revelation, where Adela is finally legible within her own story, and can actually tell it; the new awareness, however, is exactly of herself as an *object*. Thus, she speaks of herself like she would of a character in a story ("she saw herself in [a cave], and she was also outside of it"), rather than succeeding in representing faithfully the actual felt-sense of the experience as profoundly incomprehensible, as a kind of representational aporia. The final story *is* itself a fiction; what "actually" happened in the Caves of Marabar remains completely illegible to the reader, to the onlookers and even to Adela herself, but here at least she exerts some form of power over the semiotic dimensions of her body and of her consciousness. It is thus a deeply unsatisfying conclusion to the trial, for the same reason that is continues to draw so much critical attention; the story is what Robert Abrams might call "pine-sol scented," with a suggestion that something might have been whitewashed or cleaned up. Despite this kind of readerly uneasiness, however, here at least Adela is visible in her personhood – she participates in the story.

I turn now to a reading of Dionne Brand's *thirsty* that begins by tracing the way that Brand, like Forster, is interested primarily in writing liminal grief spaces *into* language and awareness. I next engage in a discussion of how she revisits and troubles that intextuating gesture

though interrogating the specter of narrative representation as it relates to race, community and trauma; just as Adela may become alienated from her own consciousness as the violation story takes on ideological stickiness in the world, so Brand's characters transform into sites of empathic absolution for both onlookers and readers, and in this way the process of "intextuation" – bringing discursively liminal grief into language – ironically comes to constitute a form of subject annihilation as well.

WRITING *THIRSTY* IN CONTEXTS OF RACIAL AMNESIA

At its most essential, Brand's work is stitched closely into its larger historical and material contexts. It expresses a lyrical beauty that is fundamentally intertwined with, and dependent upon, the issues of social justice that continually define the writer's close engagement with the world "outside" of the text. Born in Trinidad and Tobago and educated at the University of Toronto, Brand was recognized first as a poet (winning the Governor General's Literary Award for *Land to Light On* and receiving nominations for *No Language Is Neutral* and *Inventory*), and has since produced distinguished works in fiction, non-fiction and film. Much of this work meditates on race and diaspora, and explores identity and history through tropes of doorways, gaps and openings. In an interview about the non-fiction work *A Map to the Door of No Return*, published in 2001, Brand observes:

> [The book] allowed me to begin a journey to create a map to a place where a search for identity or the nature and quality of existence would begin. Because time and history separate us from that place it is therefore a space in the imagination. I felt I was connected to this door, this space. This journey would be to create a map to that place, which is both a map to a place in history and a map

to the imagination. (Mavjee 28)[18]

Here, Brand refers to a point of origin – "the places […] where slaves were taken to be brought to the Americas." *thirsty*, published the following year, is organized by a similar impulse but it catapults us to a place far closer in time; the volume's thirty-three poems eke out a space in the imagination that recovers and re-inscribes a flashpoint police shooting in the long history of racial violence in urban Canada. The poems seem to circle the violence as a point of rupture – a departure in its own way - in traumatic repetition. They also trace the ripples of the event outwards to the experiences of the victim's mother, daughter and wife, Toronto's black community and the psycho-geography of the cityscape itself. The volume looks to open, to tear up, and to unearth, rather than to define; it offers no sense of completion, and indeed closes with the word "undone."

thirsty is therefore an activist text, where it attempts to recover a moment of racial violence that has faded in Canada's national memory. It is important, then, to first address the events by which the text is motivated. On August 26th, 1979, Toronto police were called to a rooming house on Oakwood Avenue where a Jamaican-born man named Albert Johnson lived with his wife, mother and children. According to an article published in *The Vancouver Sun* the following year, Johnson had a "history of mental problems" and was often "agitated," though there is only dubious documentation of any tendency towards violence in the multiple interactions he had with the police. What happened next is a story oft-repeated, though with differing names and faces, in newspaper headlines before and since: the officers shot and fatally wounded the man, who they contended was approaching them with something that looked like an axe (it was, in fact, edge-trimmers for the lawn work that Johnson had been doing before the

[18] For an excellent reading of diaspora and belonging in Brand's work, see Marlene Goldman's "Mapping the Door of No Return: Deterritorialization and the Work of Dionne Brand."

police arrived). After pressure from members of the community,[19] the two officers were charged with manslaughter but subsequently acquitted, based largely on the fact that Johnson's daughter's assertion that the shooting was committed execution-style was not confirmed by other witnesses.[20]

Though certainly unrepresented in most history textbooks, the case was the city's first highly-publicized allegation of what is now called racial profiling, and the police force's denial that that possibility even exists continues to typify the robust illusion of Canada as a space of celebratory multiculturalism.[21] In an essay in *Crimes of Colour,* Akua Benjamin refers to the form of "legal banishment" that resulted from this case and others like it, where race was declared "inadmissible" as a factor in the shooting and subsequent trial. The refusal to consider race and racism as features that necessarily circumscribe any relationship of imbalanced power also represents a denial of the democratic right to a fair trial for members of the black community (or, relevant to both Felman and Forster, a "theatre of justice" within which to express collective grief and vindication). Further, Benjamin writes:

> What was banished was not simply the issue [race], but also, and conversely, the legitimacy of the black subject. This means that by disallowing legitimate claims to recognize and address issues of racism that impact the daily lives of Blacks and

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[19] The killing was a flashpoint for members of the community who were already frustrated by what they understood as the racist behavior of Toronto police. The Black Action Defense Committee mobilized 2000 people in a march from Vaughn/ Oakwood to the 13th Division Police Headquarters in protest. The following October, over 1000 people protested at Nathan Phillips Square, where the Albert Johnson Defense Committee also put forth demands that the officers be charged with murder instead of manslaughter, that Johnson's family be compensated by the police, and that an independent review board be formed to deal with complaints against the police (Wasun).

[20] The other witnesses were, of course, the officers themselves.

[21] The illusion that "there's no racism in Canada" is a topic that Brand has frequently engaged. In 1995's *Bread out of Stone,* for example, she writes of the "stupefying innocence" that plagues the Canadian imagination, where there is "no admission of the fact that racism exists and has a history" (178). For a more recent discussion of discourses of race and racism in Canada, see Enakshi Dua, Narda Razack and Jody Nyasha Warner in "Race, Racism and Empire: Reflections on Canada."

> other racialized groups, an important and essential aspect of Black humanity and existence was also banished. (183)

It is this kind of "banishment," I think, to which Brand is responding. Her poetry corrects the doubly erasing gesture of the denial that racism was a factor in the shooting; in recovering black trauma, she also renders the black subject legible. I now turn to a discussion of the poems themselves in order to explore the way in which Brand offers a re-grounding of race and blackness in this trauma, specifically through a narrative of transnational diaspora and immigration. If the experience of raced subjects is elided in national and legal mythologies of triumphant pluralism, it is here folded into a longer story that revalues the tenuous historical positionality of the "newly arrived" and offers figures of the diaspora as witnesses to the historical traumas of racism. Just like Forster, Brand does attempt to write this story into recognition, which is important to establish before approaching a narrative engagement with the consequences of such "socio-linguistic fixing."

Brand is Toronto's poet laureate, and ironically, *thirsty* fits quite seamlessly into the historical tradition of such writers: the volume commemorates a special event or occasion, inscribing into cultural memory by preserving it in text. The project is thus partially documentarian (even the blurb on the book's back cover stresses that "this is a poem about the city," "about a May morning," and "about a man"). She recovers the shooting and its subsequent legal fall-out with assiduous attention to detail and a relentless faithfulness to urban geography, so that racial violence becomes actively inscribed in the textual history of the region – indeed, the text becomes a map. The poems are frequently cartographic: there is a bus stop at Oakwood and St. Clair (one block away from Johnson's house at Vaughan Road), and references to Hanlan Point and to Yonge St. (XXXI 37, XXIV 33, 70). This is necessarily Toronto, during a particular

year and from a particular person's perspective. The poems have an almost dialectical relationship to the "reality" to which they refer, where many of their elements fail to make internal sense and thus rely on the surrounding circumstances in order to function semantically. For example, the "clippers" that Alan carries in XII seem like an almost arbitrary detail until one discovers the role of lawn-edgers as a mistaken weapon. Thus, the poems propel one ceaselessly outwards, requiring an encounter with the real event to make sense even of the imagined world of the text. Furthermore, the city - the "real" city - is a living, conscious organism that contains countless layers of interconnected experience. "A house in this city is a witness box," Brand writes: "the walls of a house can sense like skin / that is why sometimes you can tell / what happened in this apartment" (XXIX 1, 37-9). Space is thus not only *erlebter Raum*- a meaningful, lived "place"- but also a sentient witness, registering each event in a speaking series of memories. The space of the text itself operates in a similar manner, where it forms a kind of "witness box" that contains testimony, that refracts and relays the events of the shooting. Brand composes the work with such attention to specificity that the urban geography of Toronto begins to behave like a palimpsest, no longer fully suppressing the layers of a violent past. She isn't recovering a generalization, a tendency, or a concept, but rather a specific act on a particular day: "It happened and what happened, happened" (XXIX 30-1). The collection is thus an assertion of historical and cartographic fact, where it creates an imaginary space that renders a black subject- a *specific* black subject- legible in the violence inflicted upon him. It refuses to let the events of that day fade in the city's memory.

Black bodies, too, will refuse the mechanisms of suppression and erasure that Brand sees operating in dominant racial discourses, where they exploit the porousness and fragility of urban space in order to enter into the narrative, to become visible. Buried bodies will rise to the surface,

escape through doorways and gaps, speak through apartment walls. From the very outset of the collection and in much of her other work, as I pointed out above, Brand is concerned with openings: "let me declare doorways," her speaker asserts- "I am held, and held" (I 8, 14). Immediately following, she characterizes Alan as both a "lacuna" and a "caesura," suggesting that he lives in the lexical gaps of the text (II 33, 38). He is, in this sense, erased but not expunged. The openings that characterize the city become opportunities for expression and representation – indeed, they create an absence that is instantly haunted by the *presence* of that which is erased; the poetry asserts that Alan lives *here*. Further, this sense of porousness serves not only to expose the city's buried, racialized bodies but also the behavior of the cityscape itself. The subway, for example, is likened to the vocal chords of a bird: "These are the muscles of the subway's syrinx," the speaker relates, "it is the sound before music / when the throat vomits prehistoric birds" (XI 23-26). Even the rattling of a crowded train expresses a polyphony that emerges from a single opening; there is a plurality here that resonates underneath the semantic register, pouring outwards in cacophony despite the fact that it is buried underground. There are at least two ways in which this urban porousness might be read, especially at the intersection between the historical erasure of race and racism in Canadian legal discourse (as Benjamin points out above) and phenomenological understandings of trauma as marking an aporia that generates a pathological action of return; here it is *race*, it is Alan's blackness, that has been occluded but that refuses total erasure. In returning to the point of rupture to write the man's existence back into the cityscape, to re-map (as it were) Toronto as a space defined at this moment by racist violence and aggression, Brand transforms the space into one that speaks - that speaks repeatedly, that refuses the silencing gestures of discourses of power, and that captures the reader helplessly in traumatic repetition: along with the speaker, he or she is "held, and held."

Though it is the city that registers the histories of black bodies and racial violence, Brand's work is somewhat more ambivalent about the trope of "cosmopolitanism" as a site of real community and witness, or of the productive testimony and working-through of traumatic experience.[22] As noted by Sandra Almeida, *thirsty* resonates closely with Susan Stanford Friedman's concept of "cosmopolitanism from the side" in its focus on a marginal perspective that would encompass "the experience of those whose citizenship in and loyalty to the nation-state is partial, conflicted, or limited by laws and practices that privilege some and circumscribe others on the basis of such as identity categories as gender, race […] and so forth" (7-8). Indeed, even as the city itself seems predatory and hopeless - "all hope gone hard" (XV 1) - the historical legacy of diaspora and immigration carves out a vantage point from which to create a space of unique perspectival privilege. In this way, it points to a kind of pluralistic and multivalent construct of diasporic cosmopolitanism, as what Bruce Robbins calls "a domain of contested politics […] as an area both within and beyond the nation" (12). Brand's Toronto is, in a similar sense, a space of both the self and the other; on the one hand it emerges out of the immigrant bodies by which it is comprised, but on the other it builds up layer upon layer over histories of suffering. People become "impossible citizens / repositories of the city's panic," as they are worn and tossed by "not wind at all but some unproven element" that is, like the shooting itself, "unproven, not unseen" (Xxii 17-8, 21,23). The space dissolves into and is created by its new inhabitants, but simultaneously represents a process of over-determination that fixes them within ideology. In this way, the speaker's assertion that "a city is all interpolation" registers a deep ambivalence, summoning both the Althusserian concept of "interpellation" and its subversive

[22] For a more robust discussion of urban spaces in Brand's writing, see Molly Littlewood McKibbin's "The Possibilities of Home: Negotiating City Spaces in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*," alongside the article by Sandra Almeida discussed above. Although McKibbin does not address *thirsty* specifically, many of her insights are illuminating when applied to that text.

counterpoint of postcolonial appropriation and contradiscourse.[23] If the city offers a kind of testimony to racial traumas, so it also hails each body towards fixity. This is an idea I return to later in much more detail, but for now it suffices to dislodge the assumption that the city may offer a site of uncomplicated community and witness.

It is actually the communities of global diaspora and immigration that offer real witness to the trauma of the shooting.[24] In one of the collection's most striking poems, the speaker appropriates several of the most vaunted figures in the Canadian "national symbolic" by uprooting and then re-situating them within in the context of centuries-long diaspora. The poem begins in the working class suburbs and immigrant communities on the margins of the city, whose "undifferentiated, prefabricated" ugliness represents a sense of placelessness and forgetting in a somber counterpoint to the ancient so-called glories of Western heritage. The regions of "North York and Scarborough and Pickering," she writes, have "no truth to their names," since "they don't even vaguely resemble the small damp villages / of their etymology" (XX 6, 8-10). The place has thus been abandoned by its colonial originator, as by the ancient Roman armies who came before: "The Romans would not build roads here" (10). The ugliness of the space is associated not with its old age, therefore, but with its newness and lack of history. Even Tom Thomson, that most celebrated of Canadian Expressionists, recoils from the "gas stations and donut shops" that replace "meagre oases of woodland" or "any thing named beauty"

[23] This understanding of the concept of "interpolation" in postcolonial discourse relies on Bill Ashcroft's configuration of the process as one that "counters Althusser's proposition of the *interpellation* of a subject, by naming the process by which colonized subjects may resist the forces designated to shape them as 'other,' thus providing access to counter-discursive agency" (47).

[24] In "'The Place She Miss': Exile, Memory and Resistance in Dionne Brand's Fiction," Johanna Garvey offers a useful discussion of the nature of diasporic belonging in Brand's work. "Brand writes of the diaspora as displacement, loss, exile," she observes, "yet she incorporates into her works the power of memory and the urgency of resistance, especially theough the mapping of space to locate diaspora identifications" (486). Indeed, here the diasporic community signifies both creativity and resilience in the context of traumatic memory.

(11, 12).[25] Importantly, however, the poem takes a dramatic turn in its invocation of members of the Group of Seven by setting up Arthur Lismer as a contrast to Thomson:

> [The inhabitants] are improvising as Lismer's *Forest in Winter*
> some recent past, drowned hues, drenched schemes, plans,
> for an arranged marriage, a red bride, a white garlanded groom, the
> Gurwara on Weston Road. Blue, blue, blue black, that brilliant
> Red leafed tree […] (18-22)

The "blue black" of Lismer's paint of course resonates deeply with racist descriptions of "African" skin color, forcing a pause that nonetheless actively inscribes blackness onto the history of the city. The passage appropriates the famous painting in order to overlay it- to re-*improvise* it- in the context of diasporic experience, drawing on alternate modes of seeing in the tradition of the Expressionist. Moreover, Brand reminds us that Lismer is himself an immigrant (from England, no less); he paints with "new memory," the "same new memory as Violet / Blackman," whose "gesso was that wood floor in Rosedale" (23-5).[26] The invocation of Violet Blackman in a realm of the aesthetic that parallels that of the Group of Seven is a significant gesture here, since it situates her within a historical trajectory that exploits "new memory" in order to transform and re-imagine the physical environment. The moment represents an epistemological intervention, where it positions Blackman squarely in the space of national mythology alongside Lismer: the 'new rememberer' as testifier, and as creator. Thus, it is in the history of diaspora and immigration that a black subject becomes legible and finds a sense of

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[25] For more information on Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven in the context of Canadian national mythologies, see Charles C. Hill's *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation.*

[26] Blackman, a Jamaican immigrant like Albert Johnson, helped to found the Universal Negro Improvement Association in the 1920s. For a brief discussion of her importance in Canadian history, see Dirk Hoarder's *Creating Societies: Immigrant Lives in Canada*. Importantly, Brand herself has also compiled an anthology of stories of black women, including that of Blackman: *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Women in Ontario 1920s- 1950s.*

belonging, defined partially as it is by experiences of profound suffering and trauma – but also, importantly, by the complicated but generative relationship that some figures in the diaspora may have to the dominant national imagination. Alan and his family are visible as members of this community, where Brand actively re-inscribes black experience in this narrative of transnational diaspora and immigration.

As Brand writes in the closing lines of that poem, "nothing in a city is discrete" (45). The word *discrete*, here, should be taken both in its denotation and in that of its homophone ("discreet"): things are neither disconnected and separate *nor* private and subtle. In fact, even as Brand actively recovers this historical event and strongly asserts the existence and legitimacy of Alan as a black subject, she also locates profound trauma in the latter of the two definitions. There is a slippage between the sense of diasporic witness and belonging that is generated by passages like those above (a welcome lack of *discreteness*), and an intensely "public" category of mis/representation that configures the raced body as inherently traumatized (a traumatic lack of *discretion*). In returning to and representing the shooting as a point of rupture (both for Alan and for the community at large), Brand also *intextuates*: she brings the suffering black body into discourse, authorizes it as a victim, and offers it up as a sort of beautiful site of absolution against the brutalities of Canada's racist history; like Adela, Johnson's body becomes a shared symbol. The poems therefore articulate a double gesture, at once asserting Alan's existence and troubling such an assertion through capturing the secondary violence that is visited upon his family as they become consumed by public readers. I turn now to an examination of the machinations of trauma discourse in relation to the black diasporic figure, in order to examine the process by which a black subject is made publically legible - is "intextuated" - through discourses of violence and suffering.

TRAUMA-ISM AND THE LEGIBILITY OF BLACK SUBJECTIVITY

In "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," Shih launches a critique of "global multiculturalism" as a machine through which "everything melts into culture," so that the necessity to account for the real social, economic and political consequences of power dissolves (22). "In the end," she writes, "in the self-ethnographies of the diasporic, the political and the ideological melt into culture. This is a new form of exoticism, or trauma-ism, which culturizes wherever it goes" (24). In other words, trauma discourse performs a generalizing gesture that purges literature of political potentialities, or rather absolves the reader- the "witness"- of any sense of the responsibility that might attend empathic connection. Though Shih is focused explicitly on Cultural Revolution trauma narratives in the U.S., her point is equally salient in the context of narratives of violence inflicted on raced bodies. Brand's text certainly registers a similar discomfort; as a black body becomes visible as a figure that belongs and is articulated within the global diaspora, it also gets *written into* a history of trauma and violence that actually serves to contain its subversive or political potentialities. In recovering the murder of Albert Johnson, in other words, Brand risks bringing up the larger narrative scaffolding of race and diaspora in urban Canada: the murdered black body is made public, is transformed into a symbol, becomes the crux around which conversations about race revolve for a short period of time, is consumed by a white readership- and then dissolves back into the long line of bodies before it. There is a danger, then, that the "officially sanctioned" understandings of blackness put forth in magazines and on the evening news- as traumatized, as forgotten- serve to elide or distract the community from the real material and economic disparities that are naturalized through racial constructs.

In an interview at the National Arts Centre in which Brand discusses the experience of transforming *thirsty* into a play, the poet talks about the shattering of the private domestic sphere as a central trope of the story. She suggests that, beyond the larger conceptual frameworks within which the text signifies, it is primarily "the story of a family that's been broken apart." She continues:

> There is a certain public moment where the husband in the family is shot by the police, and the play and the book take off from there… the kind of horrible turning of this very private life into this very public moment, and how people adapt to that or don't adapt to it. ("Dionne Brand Speaks")

It is significant that Brand already conflates private with public space. She refers to a singular, "certain public moment" during which the shooting occurs, even as, of course, it actually takes place in the hallway of a private family house. Discrete temporal stages now begin folding in on themselves, so that the black body enters into the realm of the public simultaneously to its being wounded. The "horrible turning" from private to public- from domestic to sociological- also signals the body's entrance into larger narratives about racial violence, and discourses of race and trauma that position the body immediately as an object of consumption. It also, perhaps, suggests at least one complication in the construction of the global diasporic community as a site of witness and belonging: it is all too easy to imagine that a shared history of immigration and movement is characterized primarily through pain, through trauma, or through forms of violence that, when conceptualized and refracted through dominant power structures, become another instance in the fetishization of raced figures and bodies. The horrible birth of Alan's body *into* the public is thus configured as a moment of profound agony, as it begins to become available as an object in the pathological games that operate within ideologies of race and culture.

For Alan's wife Julia, through whom much of the text is focalized, the ongoing experience of being represented in newsprint after the shooting leads to an almost Du Boisian state of double consciousness wherein she maintains a constant awareness of *herself* through the eyes of public onlookers and readers, again in close resonance with Adela's experience. Exiting the church after Alan's funeral, she imagines a pixilated newspaper photograph of herself that captures "cascading neo-impressionist rage":

> as if an urgent Seurat had appeared at the funeral
> his pointillist blaze touching the minute light
> of her heart for his *Models*, this death,
> this vacant occasion of a painting (XVI 13-16).

Importantly, the imagined photograph not only resembles a Seurat painting in terms of its pointillist style, but also specifically invokes his *Models*, which is perhaps one of the most famous instances of meta-representation in Impressionist art. In it, three models (or three figures of the same model) in various states of undress stand in front of Seurat's famous painting, "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte." Surrounding them are the parasols, hats and other props that will become part of the painting-within-a-painting ("A Sunday Afternoon"), ironically completed *before* the painting here, in a temporal reversal that has the models preparing for a job that they've already finished. As Nicolas Pioch of *WebMuseum* points out, the painting asks the viewer to contemplate the opposition of "the captured instance of daily life" against the timelessness of art. For Alan's wife, a more resonant way to articulate this might be that the painting underscores the simultaneity of phenomenological experience and of representation; just as the models are both warm-blooded working women and frozen gallery faces, so the wife is aware of herself as both consciousness and object of consciousness. Her rage

becomes fractured and broken apart by its sudden public visibility, so that her own experience of this emotion is wrenched in twain. Indeed, the woman's body enters into "trauma-ism" through newspapers, though photographs; it no longer stands for itself, but for a set of discursive constructs surrounding racial violence and black experience.

Significantly, however, unlike Seurat's evocative meta-representational object, newsprint signals a breakdown of communication and induces a set of relationships that are constrained by over-determined subject positions. Exiting the church door, Julia muses that some people are able to "wedge loss in their mouths like a soother"- and in fact, the newspaper becomes a medium that, in organizing the aporia of traumatic experience into a coherent narrative, creates and then satisfies the public appetite for suffering (2). Readers are hungry, she thinks, and "would seek grief" in her photograph; she is, however, both "vacant" and "empty," a vessel or shell to be filled by public intention and expectation (16, 18). Despite the fact onlookers will impose particular semiotic dimensions onto the signifiers that the photograph contains, they can only be misreadings and misunderstandings:

> At the moment when her nude portrait was complete
> small things like the dusty cupboard to be washed
> […]
> […] annoyingly crossed her face,
> and so readers may have seen indifference
> and when the back of her black funeral shoes
> severed her skin they may have generously mistaken it
> for a twinge of pain (18- 26).

In each of these instances, the wife's body is taken to signify a particular internal state (indifference, pain) that is actively inscribed onto her face. She is thus a "woman put together by newsprint," almost *literally intextuated,* composed through a dialectic between medium and viewer that occludes the specific experience of trauma in favor of a larger narrative about the suffering of the diasporic body and the dissolution of the black family (33). The instance also troubles the figure of the *witness* from the perspective of more Caruthian, psycho-analytical theories of trauma, since here the communication of suffering can only happen through a discourse that is already fraught with imbalance. The sufferer is gendered, raced, wounded and held in stasis for the visual consumption of a viewer who asserts semiotic and epistemic power over the "meaning" of the photograph. This form of "trauma-ism," then, actively erases the experiences that it purports to represent.[27]

If the speaker exerts a certain pressure on the text's structure in her pathological return to the moment of Alan's death, Julia might be said to enact a different kind of pull; she returns not to the shooting, but repeatedly to the newspaper photographs, revisiting but never reconciling with the violence they do to her subjectivity. They comprise the central moment of rupture for the woman, and thus generate a centrifugal drive that propels her continuously to *see* her body, to stand above, to share the vantage point of the readership that consumes her so hungrily. Poem XXXI is a meditation on the relationship between traumatic repetition, visuality and stasis. "The extraordinary emptiness of the woman," she thinks:

> emerging from clusters of dots on the front page

[27] Karla Holloway is the first to apply De Certeau's notion of "intextuation" in the context of raced bodies and public legal and medical discourses (153 *Private Bodies, Public Texts*). Her insights are broadly relevant to the discussion of "public" bodies that are made to signify within particular disciplines and social circulations, and might be fruitfully applied to an analysis not only of Julia's body in this text and Adela's body in Forster, but also those of Albert Johnson's real family members in the press coverage at the time.

then the second page, then the last page
then vanishing altogether, but not vanished

there, in the time, transparent,
held and held, she had been held (11-16).

The two stanzas register a latent tension between the movement and stasis, where the newspaper continually repositions the wife's image- from font page to last page- but simultaneously fixes her in time, holding her not so much in compulsive repetition but in complete inertia. Formally, moreover, Brand's language reproduces this relation; the phrase "vanishing altogether, but not vanished" asserts the control of the present continuous tense over that of the simple past, as if the action must be ongoing, always in process, never finished. After the stanza break we become situated- there is a "there," a page of newsprint- that is the stoppage point of vanishing, but is never final. To "vanish," really, suggests a form of disappearance over which the subject has no agency; things "vanish" when they simply cease to be, when their loss becomes known with no explanation. The compulsion, then, of the repeated "held and held, she had been held" is one that emerges from the woman's suspension between movement and presence. To move is to vanish, to recede helplessly, but to be static is to embody the fixity of fractured subjectivity in the recording of violence. In the process of intextuation, the real body disappears.

THIRSTY'S CONTRIBUTION TO GRIEF AND AFFECT

For whom, then, does the woman's trauma exist? Is the witness/ reader animated by a sudden understanding of his or her own pain, an action that traverses the divide between discrete subjectivities? In a formulation that is both quite resilient in trauma studies and directly relevant

to the question of representation in contexts of racial violence, Dominick LaCapra talks about "empathic unsettlement" as the phenomenon of simultaneously "feeling for" another and being made aware of one's own distinct positionality (41). In other words, engaging with trauma through the affective structure of empathy can actually serve to disrupt the illusion of mutuality, since one becomes aware of a discrepancy between one's own perceptions and the experience of another. Following Jean-Luc Nancy's "radicalization" of the Heideggerian notion of *Mitsein,* Marija Cetinic usefully takes this one step further in imagining this kind of "unsettlement" as generating a sort of last-ditch mutuality in which interlocutors at least experience their own separateness *together*. She writes:

> If trauma cannot be shared in its particularity (if what is exposed is the impossibility of empathic appropriation), what trauma nonetheless forces us to share is the experience of a limit, the limit as shared, of the finite sharing of finitude. For Nancy, such finite sharing […] is the only viable modality of community. (292)

In that this extension of empathic unsettlement offers the possibility of communication and belonging, then, it might be understood as a relatively optimistic (if in the most limited sense) configuration. Even as the historical specificities and phenomenological particularities of traumatic experience mean that it can never fully be witnessed (or indeed even fully experienced, in the Caruthian sense of its locating a kind of aporia), it is nonetheless available as an existential category of shared feeling; since finitude is the very nature of being, this exchange at least represents a non-pathological mode of mutuality.

Brand's work in this collection suggests, however, that such a formulation may well be impossible under the pressure of the racial constructs that operate in the Canadian cultural

imagination. More specifically, since in the poem racial trauma and its expression or narration are always focalized through the trope of the wounded diasporic body- the murdered Alan, his pixilated and shattered wife- a series of symbols come to stand in the way of an actual encounter between a subject, whether she be witness or victim, and her finitude. In other words, the newspaper articles that signal both a breakdown of communication and a fracturing of the black body in a process of intextuation actually function to *interrupt* the healthy process of recognizing one's own alterity, since in many ways these figures are produced in the image of the white reader; they exist *for* the reader's easy consumption, and thus only reaffirm existing ideologies of race. From another angle, this phenomenon also means that "trauma" as a category of experience (or as, for scholars such as Fassin and Rechtman, a discursive formation) gets naturalized, and thus taken for granted as a mechanism that categorizes and hierarchizes experiences of violence or rupture; it becomes more difficult to see the ideologies that operate invisibly beneath such a construct, and the individual fades helplessly into larger and less threatening meta-narratives about race and victimhood. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly for a politically-engaged diasporic writer such as Brand, these images perpetuate the destructive illusion that the reader "understands" racial "trauma," or that it is possible to suffer together: that there is no breakdown, no limit. In valorizing empathy as a redemptive structure, this process thus absolves the reader of any real responsibility for racism and racial violence. It functions as a deeply de-politicizing mechanism.

In many ways, Brand is a writer who has been "claimed" by all of the national Canadian bodies of literary validation. The back cover of *thirsty* is almost hasty in its effort to locate the collection at the center of the Canadian canon, ensuring the reader of its many accolades through award structures such as the Trillium Award and the Governor General's Award (the latter of

which, at least in name, still carries the residue of British colonialism). However, she has been sharply critical of perhaps the most visible literary darling of the "global diaspora," Derek Walcott. In "The Caribbean," she writes:

> Derek Walcott is a poet who has been picked up by the Western intelligentsia as the poetic genius of the Third World… He has appealed from the beginning to foreign critics and foreign needs. Poetry is history and ideology, and Walcott's figure in the Caribbean plays to the belief that colonization brought civilization, brought culture. (26)[28]

Over and above Brand's larger critique here of Walcott's politics, she seems to take particular exception to that notion of a "Western intelligentsia" who have "foreign needs." I suspect that one of these needs might be that of the suffering black body that becomes legible only in relation to the violence inflicted on it through structures of power: that is, only in relation to the monolithic West as produced through certain kinds of audiences and readers. Ostensibly, then, though all of these awards seem to suggest that *thirsty* signals the "good," non-threatening kind of agitation or disruption in the context of the national mythologies, it really only pretends as if it does so; it does not appear subversive enough to go unnoticed or suppressed by the literary powers that be. An examination of race, trauma and representation, however, reveals a sort of latent anxiety about this position. On the level of the text itself, Brand seems to mirror the anxieties that Alan's wife experiences at seeing herself depicted in newsprint; she may perform the re-entrance of the black body in constructions of race, and indeed legitimize it by locating it within larger narratives about immigration, but she is also subtly critical of the machinations of

[28] In "Returning to Come Forward: Dionne Brand confronts Derek Walcott," Susan Gingell provides a more detailed and sensitive reading of the ways in which political and gender differences animate the intertextual relations between the two writers.

trauma discourse that underpin such a move. Where she criticizes the lack of admission that "racism exists and has a history," in other words, she seems also to suggest that, in order for history to be told, it must be told in a particular way. The narrative and its easy configurations of the wounded, raced victim come to behave like a kind of Trojan Horse; it is only after Alan's story is recovered that the real violence begins.

Most importantly, for both Brand and Forster, there is a reminder that in narrating, witnessing or testifying to trauma, the traumatic subject is actually *brought into being*; these stories make it ontologically possible to *be* a victim of trauma, and as such are deeply imbricated in the larger cultural politics that operate in the discourse. There is a danger always of narrating *for* (where bodies become *bodies for*), and of participating in a discourse that subsumes and elides the subjectivities it ostensibly constructs. The genre of "trauma lit," relying as it does on the de-politicizing machinations of Trauma-ism, therefore also creates a kind of "empathy machine" that processes victimized bodies into easily palatable intextuated objects. In the act of consumption – of newsprint, of Walcott, of *Passage* or *thirsty* themselves – the reader may revel in the illusory infinitude of his or her own empathic capacities, which finally re-instrumentalizes the victim as a figure that offers absolution for, rather than condemnation of, the systems that produce such victimhood. This idea circles us back, finally, to questions about the transmissibility of trauma, and suggests that narrative representation in public "trauma discourse" may in fact serve to *interrupt* the process of healing that it purports to support. What Lingis understands as a form of "waking up" that happens in grief carries with it these important questions: who gets to wake up? What do we wake up *to*?

Having established both the resilience of discursively liminal grief and the damage to the felt-sense of selfhood that the discursive realm represents, I turn now to a discussion of the ways

in which writers may *negotiate* such a process in order to preserve liminal space, exerting control over the reader's access to subjective experiences of grief. In the following section, then, I read two memoirs (Helene Cooper's *The House at Sugar Beach* and Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*) primarily as case studies, and as works that engage thoughtfully both with the concept of discursive liminality and with the treacheries associated with entrenched discourses about trauma, empathy and representation.

Chapter 3. WHAT WAS THE MEANING AND WHAT THE EXPERIENCE? THE MISERABLE MEMOIR AND LIMINAL GRIEF

In the previous chapter, I referred to "trauma lit" as a conventionalized genre that brings suffering bodies into view in very particular ways. It is still necessary to think through these conventions themselves, and to consider the various means by which authors might interact with them creatively. In this chapter, then, I first trace the formation of the traumatic canon and its attendant characteristics, and then turn to a reading of two contemporary memoirs – Helene Cooper's *The House at Sugar Beach* and Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (both written by former journalists, importantly) – in order to think through the concept of "coherence" when it comes to liminally discursive affect. Specifically, I suggest that both of these authors (alongside others) in fact creatively exploit not only the genre's affordances but also its conventionality, and that one result of that act of resistance is indeed to withhold liminal grief from public consumption in the very guise of offering it up. It is worth noting at the outset that this chapter is devoted to studying the coherence of "trauma discourse" through two autobiographical case studies. What's important for my larger project here, then, is that entrance into discourse becomes less a phenomenon against which to protect oneself or within which to suffer, but an opportunity to play, exploit, and to utilize text strategically. Writing pain, in these cases, is even simultaneously a way of avoiding writing pain.

In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst identifies some of the characteristics that seem to define the emergent canon of traumatic literature, a canon that introduces an "implicit aesthetic for the trauma novel" (87). Though Luckhurst rightly avoids a prescriptive list of characteristics that might define such narratives, he does assert that many characteristics of

Holocaust testimony might "serve as an outline of a general trauma aesthetic"; these are narratives marked by formal disruption, disjunct style, resistance to closure, aesthetic experimentation, aporia (88-89). Luckhurst himself explores the contradiction in identifying these conventions (how does the so-called "un-representable" become conventional?), and therefore shifts his focus to narrative *possibility* rather than disruption, exploring "the configuration and refiguration" of trauma in diverse fictional forms. He begins his reading with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a book that he contends "helped establish some of the basic narrative and tropological conventions of trauma fiction," specifically in its "disarticulation of linear narrative, its figuration of trauma in the ghost, and its closing reflections on the transgenerational transmission and the complex accommodations communities need to make with such traumatic history" (90). Indeed, I think it's useful to uphold *Beloved* as a paradigmatic work of trauma fiction, especially in the Caruthian sense. The aporia, absence, and un-representability of transgenerational trauma (figured in the ghost) in that novel so explicitly begs for a hermeneutics of suspicion and deconstruction; the aporia seems so clearly *present* in its absence that the novel is Heather Love's choice of critical object in her wonderful "Descriptive Turn" (an objection, of course, to suspicious reading) in "Close but not Deep." I will engage the potentiality of Love's ideas in contexts of discursive liminality in much more detail in Chapter 4. For Luckhurst, again, trauma narratives simultaneously "refuse readerly identification" (as Robert Eaglestone points out) *and* turn readers into detectives, at least in the context of popular epistemologies such as close reading.

The memoir has a curious relationship to the kinds of conventions listed above, even when figured as a kind of "sub-genre" of traumatic literature, and even where critics collocate "the age of the memoir and the age of trauma," as Leigh Gilmore does (2). Indeed (as many have noted) there was a surge in painful memoirs written in the '80s and '90s, at the same time not only as scholarly interest in "Trauma Studies" gained traction but also as psychological and psychiatric models began to embrace concepts like buried memory of childhood abuse and the value of survivor testimony. However, where psycho-analytical trauma theory of the '90s such as that of Caruth, Felman and Laub emphasized both the un-transmissibility of trauma and its tendency to erase or bury subjectivity, popular memoirs seem to be animated by opposite impulses, as Luckhurst points out (119). Many exemplars of the genre explicitly aim at transmission, and even gesture towards readerly empathy as part of the "working through" of grief, and also seem to guarantee subjectivity and the authenticity of a suffering self even to the point of protecting untruths. It is outside my scope and ability here to provide an extended reading of the traumatic memoir as a genre (as Luckhurst does), but it's important to note that "life writing" tends to be a space wherein writers might negotiate the conventions of traumatic literature, working within them while at the same time creatively stretching and challenging the assumptions that readers bring to painful stories. Indeed, Luckhurst suggests that the best kind of writing continually works and re-works painful events in different registers, and life-writing both contains multiple registers and also represents a register in itself.

Distinctions between "high" and "low" forms of life writing have found different iterations over time, most notably in the privileging of autobiography over memoir (Marcus 5), the latter of which is sometimes devalued for being "too personal," or not historical enough. The

two works that I address here fall squarely in the category of "memoir" in this model, and though Didion's work tends to be taken quite seriously by scholars, Cooper's text asks that I briefly go a few steps further in terms of framing the generic expectations that attend it. If one understands the grief-memoir as a sub-genre of "trauma lit" in the sense that such a construction helps us explore readerly expectations and textual conventions that are associated with it (aporia, a focus on un/transmission, negotiation of readerly response and empathy, textual disruption), we might make an even further distinction between "high" and "low" forms of painful memoir. Didion's pedigree means that she falls squarely in the first category, a position that she frequently engages critically in her work. Cooper's novel, for reasons that I detail in the next section, seems to "belong" not on library bookshelves but in supermarket checkout aisles, in Oprah's book club, in the sub-genre of painful memoir that marketing executives call: *Misery Lit*.

On the whole, Misery Lit shares many of the conventions of "higher" traumatic memoir, except that many of the works in this category are coded by particular markers. Esther Addley, writing for the Guardian, observes: "[Misery Lit] is frequently written in the first person, though not always, tracing a heartbreaking arc of innocence and damage. The tale always ends in some form of escape or redemption" (3). Quoting *Waterstone*'s buyer Peter Saxton, she continues: "White cover, swirly writing, big-eyed child. These are the visual clues that tell prospective buyers that they are going to be in their comfort (or discomfort) zone". Alongside these paratextual cues, Misery Lit is also just a little too flashy with elements that worry many scholars of trauma; these include portraits of victimhood as an inherently passive or eidetic state (as I mention thoughout), the sentimentalization of wounded, raced and gendered bodies (as Brand addresses), the expoitation of empathy as a mechanism of redemption and absolution in instances of transcultural witnessing, and the characterization of suffering as a marker of authenticity or as

possessing a special claim towards moral veracity. The category of Misery Lit continues to gain traction in popular culture. As Brendan O'Neill writes, "of the top 100 bestselling paperbacks of 2006, 11 were memoirs about surviving abuse. With combined sales of 1.9 million copies, abuse memoirs made up 8.8% of sales in the 100 bestselling paperbacks last year [2006]."

In *The Late Age of Print*, Ted Striphas explores understandings of so-called "Oprahfication," a phenomenon that I think has much relevance in discussing the painful and miserable memoir as a genre and Misery Lit in particular (*Sugar Beach* most obviously, but also *Year*). Oprahfication, he writes, "functions as an umbrella term – often a demeaning one – in popular discourse." It encompasses:

> A perceived excess of emotionality; the popularization of suffering, public confession, therapy, and self-help; the privileging of image over depth; a lack of intellectualism; and, more generally, the debasement of culture. (114)

Corresponding to the rise of the book club, Oprahfication has come to possess its own circuitry, its own network, wherein affects – like grief – get circulated publically; there is something in this "excess of emotionality" that seems to bubble over between subjects, so that when people read these narratives of suffering there can be an intensely personalized collective response of empathy, which Oprah's producers of course create and exploit. As Striphas points out, book-club texts *need* to be this personal: A book is "valuable to the extent that it demonstrates a clear connection with life, or that it resonates with [viewers'] everyday interests, personal experiences, concerns" (125). "Low-brow" traumatic memoirs thus go several steps further in terms of traumatic convention: not only is pain transmissible, but it is *shared*; not only is subjectivity not erased, but it is *displayed*; not only is the reader invited to relate but that relationship is what

gives the work *value*; not only is grief accessible but it is collectively *expressed*, watched, written about, televised.

With all this, then, grief memoirs like those I address here have a lot on their backs in terms of readerly expectation; as instances of trauma lit, traumatic memoir, and at least in one case Misery Lit, they must negotiate a set of sometimes conflicting conventions within the already-fraught context of liminal grief. In what follows, I explore the way that both Cooper and Didion diversely navigate this difficult terrain. Where the discursive systems that express grief have become so *visible*, so characterized by convention, an opportunity to interact creatively with those systems arises; these writers each exploit the conventionality of their layered genres in order to maintain ownership, agency and a residue of something liminal – something "sheer" – in their experience. In preserving the liminality of grief, moreover, they are each able to instrumentalize readerly expectations towards the service of other ends.

If You Knew What I Had Seen: Empathy and Creativity in *The House at Sugar Beach*

Recently, as Luckhurst and other scholars such as Miriam Novick address, there has been a slew of "fake" or greatly exaggerated memoirs of trauma, the most sensational of which was of course James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (which brought Oprah to tears on national television).[29] There is also Margaret Jones' *Love and Consequences*, Kathy O'Beirne's *Kathy's Story: A Childhood Hell Inside the Magdalene Laundries*, and Herman Rosenblat's holocaust memoir *Angel at the Fence: The True Story of a Love That Survived*, all of which were revealed as highly fictionalized accounts based on events that either never happened to the author in

[29] Striphas' "Literature as Life on Oprah's Book Club" (*The Late Age of Print*) addresses this controversy in detail, framing it as part of the larger pressure for selections in the book club to be "real" or to relate to "real life" (112-140).

question or never happened at all. It is precisely the trope of trauma as an authorizing mechanism, or of suffering as a stamp of legitimacy in the production of truth (as Fassin and Rechtman establish) that enables and invites this kind of exploitation, since the victim status of the memoirist now positions her beyond the reproach of a skeptical public. *How could you question her story?* – readers ask themselves – *Hasn't she suffered enough?* In what follows, I engage in a discussion of Cooper's memoir, a text that I contend appropriates the conventions of trauma discourse more creatively, and re-deploys them as mechanisms of protection. I position the work as a performative critique of trauma discourse's tendency to fix raced bodies as vehicles of suffering (as Brand engages), and of its reliance on empathy and sentimentality as modes of interpretive response. Secondly, I trace the work's tactical re-deployment of these modes as apparatuses of foreclosure against suspicion and critique, and indeed as a profound gesture of preservation in terms of discursively liminal grief. The memoir genre, in particular, may therefore be in a unique position to engage critically with discourses of trauma and the public circulation of affect , since it affords the survivor a particular kind of rhetorical authority in the construction of his or her suffering that engages both the representational and the discursive critical pressures surrounding trauma and grief.

As a textual artifact, *The House at Sugar Beach* (a work that situates Cooper's elite and privileged childhood within the larger context of the First Liberian Civil War) conforms to an almost ridiculous extend to the conventions of Misery Lit: "white cover, swirly writing, big-eyed child." The 2008 edition is explicit in its marketing towards the book club demographic, with its own racial, gender and class associations; the story is followed by a list of Discussion Questions, a Q & A with Cooper, and a recipe for traditional Liberian peanut soup that it titled "Enhancing your Book Club." In the interview, Cooper constructs her audience as unambiguously Western

and in possession of the feminized and solidly middle-classed capacity for deep empathic connection: "I'm hoping that readers who've never heard of Liberia," she states, "can find something to identify with in this book." The question of identification, especially when it occurs alongside the literal consumption of Liberian-ness in the form of traditional soup, articulates in a sweep many of the critical problems with theories of trauma that characterize crisis writing as a mode that responsibly bridges representational divides.[30] There is what Toni Morrison calls "an American brand of Africanism" clearly present here, as Cooper puts forth a version of Liberia that is full of suffering and wounded black bodies, a culture different enough to offer interesting and exotic soup flavors but similar enough that readers can "identify with," understand, and even comfort the pain of others with magnanimous gestures of heartfelt empathy (8).[31] The text's packaging and marketing thereby almost self-consciously position it as a vehicle of shared absolution through testimony, all happening right within the living rooms of Middle America.

The memoir's packaging, however, turns out to be a Trojan Horse that disguises Cooper's deep resistance against and tactical exploitation of the Misery Lit machine. The author's reportorial style (she is, in fact, a White House correspondent for the *New York Times* and a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist) consistently forecloses the kinds of affective language that serves to "personalize" and make intimate many other traumatic stories, thus denying the reader access to that capacious kind of empathy as a vehicle of understanding. In the rhetoric of my project here, you might say that Cooper doesn't throw her emotions up on billboards so much as into a newspaper, but that the gesture is the same; she is the "first reporter" on scene to her own experience, and she controls its discursive dimensions (with the notable exception of her

[30] I am thinking, most notably, of Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*.
[31] Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark.* I originally came across this quotation in Elizabeth Twitchell's "Dave Eggers' *What is the What*: Fictionalizing Trauma in the Age of Misery Lit."

most profound grief, which I address below). Cooper's description of the Liberian Civil War ("our war"), for example, begins by addressing the country's political situation from an objective distance, providing relevant historical context and even a printed family tree that showcases her family's elite political position (introductory material, 134). She shapes the account through reference to statistical facts and documented events, lingering on public school enrollment numbers and even referring to her own uncle by his full name and title as the Minister of Foreign Affairs (136). The titled figure stands in stark contrast against the fond "Uncle Cecil" who appears elsewhere in the text, and creates a simulated distance between the author's experiences with her family members as loves ones, and their complicity in the events that lead to the war. The reportorial style thus chokes off the empathic dimensions of the reader's response to the event – "our war" – since "our Uncle" is suddenly nowhere to be found. Cooper thus draws a bright line between private and public grief, and the rigor with which she details the latter means it is easy to miss the sly rhetorical moves that characterize her treatment of the former.

The text's structure is therefore shaped by a dance, on the part of Cooper's narrative voice, between this kind of detached reportorial articulation of traumatic events and hyper-personalized, affectively charged engagement with the unremarkable frivolities of her childhood. Alongside being a self-conscious stylistic choice, the structure also functions to force the reader into forming an affective connection precisely with the elements of her story that have no traumatic import, dislocating and redirecting any kind of empathy that might arise. As Cooper relays the events of the 1979 rice riots in detached style, for example, she chooses to close the chapter with a dramatic transition: "And during this last year, the last tragic year of the Congo regime in Liberia, I finally discovered boys" (149). On the next page lies a photograph of Cooper "at a wedding reception," followed by a colorful and emotionally-nuanced account of her first

crush. For a reader expecting to form an emotional connection with the writer through the conventions of shared understanding that accompany narratives that promise profound autobiographical violence (or, indeed, to generate this understanding by witness the spectacle that grief narratives create), the transition generates a frustrating cliffhanger that is never fully resolved. On the one hand, moments like these might express an artistic choice that resonates with Cooper's later meta-thematic confession: "When something seismic happened that I couldn't deal with, I concentrated on the superficial" (243). This assertion explains the endlessly deferential structure of the narrative, and indeed captures Cooper's point in trapping the reader – as she herself is trapped – in the frivolous particularities of the world of the Congo elite. On the other hand, though, it must also be conceptualized as a writerly *choice* that Cooper makes, and keeps making. A "concentration on the superficial" can be amended in narrative hindsight, but to do so would be to offer those deeper, more traumatic experiences up for affective consumption by a hungry audience. Indeed, Cooper may even be critiquing current understandings of "traumatized consciousness," pointing to the survival of a diasporic subjectivity *without* those kinds of wounds. In any event, at least for the reader, Cooper's grief remains liminal, stays outside of language.

The memoir also resonates with Caruthian conventions about trauma that construct it as a site of representational aporia, as I address above and detail in the Introduction. However, the answer here really cannot be as simple as that. The sites of aporia that exist in Cooper's account are more productively understood as the result not of psychological paralysis but of her ongoing project to strangle readerly opportunities of feeling and engagement. In other words, Cooper exploits the reader's expectation of the genre (*her grief is beyond words, it simply cannot be stated*) in order to protect the liminally discursive: in order to explain the absence of billboards.

The central trauma of the text – the one that organizes the story's very relationships – is the rape of the mother by rebel soldiers, and this is a site of complete narrative erasure, despite the fact that it is bracketed by moments of hyper-visibility and representational agency. The young Helen sees the soldiers' truck "flash briefly through the trees up the road" as it approaches the house, warning her Aunt and mother that the intruders are approaching (171). Next, having been ordered inside, Helene brazenly maintains her positions as a spectator:

> But we were, all three – Marlene, Eunice and I – peering from the kitchen window, in full view of the truckload of soldiers who were now pouring out of the truck and into the front yard of the house. There were eight of them. Some wore green fatigues, some wore tank tops that showed off their shoulders and arms, with scars and markings on them. (172)

There is an excessive amount of detail provided here, garnered and remembered by the voyeurs at the window; the reader learns the quantity of the soldiers, what they were wearing, how their bodies were marked and unique. The girls, similarly, are in "full view" of the soldiers, creating a reciprocal mode of recognition. Direct dialogue is quoted, with special attention to the emotional nuances of the situation. Cooper also remembers the soldiers' statements in an almost poetic and certainly aestheticized simile, when one of them threatens to "spatter [their] blood against this wall like paint" (173). In short, the moment is over-represented; there is an excess of writerly flare, of art and poetry, of details piling up and up to create an almost baroque impression of the scene in the reader's mind.

Cooper's representation of the rape itself, by start contrast, is characterized by a sense of blindness and deafness that exists not only in narrated time, but at the time of narration. In other words, neither Helene-as-child not Cooper-as-writer provides any representational detail about

the traumatic event. Cooper repeats "I couldn't hear what [the soldiers] said to [Mommee]" and again that "I couldn't hear them" (175). Finally:

> I couldn't hear anything except Marlene's soft sobbing. Beyond that there was silence, I couldn't even hear the ocean. Usually in Mommee and Daddy's room, facing the ocean, you could hear the sound of the breaking waves […] How could they be so quiet downstairs? What were they doing to her that they were so quiet? (176)

The passage seems constructed particularly in order to locate the traumatic event as inaccessible to consciousness, as "sheer"; the silence that Cooper describes is not actual but perceived, since it extends not only to human voices but to the sounds – presumably, ongoing – of the ocean. From a Caruthian perspective and in the context of the trauma-genre, this would suggest that the event cannot be present to Cooper's consciousness, that she would experience it only partially and belatedly, in a cycle repetition that does indeed resonate with her in the returning trope of rogues and burglars. However, the consequences of this representational aporia are important, and I think are no mistake on Cooper's part: there is a refusal here to represent or even imagine the events, and this also marks a point of stoppage in the reader's access to Cooper's grief.

One thing that makes the reading above – of the rape as a site not of psychological paralysis but of *narrative withholding* – more compelling is an analysis of other spurious presences and absences in the memoir. Why, in fact, can Cooper both imagine and narrate other conversations and events to which she was not party? The text contains countless instances wherein the author provides direct quotations of interactions that happen behind closed doors (the conversation between Amos Sawyer and President Tolbert, for example (141)). Most powerfully, there is an extended and detailed account of Uncle Cecil's execution, which happens

while Cooper is at school. The narrative drama that the writer creates, imparting a moment of public and private trauma that does indeed aestheticize the suffering of a close family member, testifies to Cooper's capacity to represent events that she neither directly witnessed nor fully understood – which serves only to underscore the absence of such an account of the rape. This trauma is too personal, too intimate, too liminal; in this way, then, the memoir resists the readerly expectations that are generated by the conventions of the genre, where it refuses to invite pity, empathy and sentiment as modes of engagement.

Despite the sense in which *The House at Sugar Beach* locates trauma as a site of anxiety and withholding, the text also simultaneously re-deploys that convention strategically. In particular, even though Cooper upsets the readers expectations of empathy that characterize Misery Lit as a genre, she also – on a deeper and more important level – enacts and participates in that convention as a mechanism of self-protection against critique, and as an act of preservation of discursively liminal grief. I turn now to a discussion of Cooper's strategic switch from the complete denial of the affective mode to a tactical deployment of sentimentalism, which ultimately forecloses critique against the memoir's suspiciously rose-colored ending and Cooper's own complicity in the suffering of her sister.

The author's homecoming to Liberia represents an artful tying-up of loose ends, as our protagonist returns to her homeland in search of recognition and redemption after years abroad as a student and journalist. For the first time, Cooper loses the objective distance that defines the style of her prose throughout the text. She is explicit about the loss of objectivity when she gets off the plane in Ghana and announces to the reader, "I tried to disappear into my reporter mode, where I observe and listen but don't speak, but it was hard not to engage when the achingly familiar sound of Liberian English surrounded me" (313). The phrase signals a major twist in the

role that Cooper wants to play in her story, from "reporter mode" – a voice that relates events and contexts without close personal engagement – to an active participant, emotionally imbricated in the affective nuances of personal and public narrative. She moves from narrator to protagonist. There is also a feeling of solidarity or "us-ness" that suddenly appears in the rhetoric, despite the fact that she is first so insistent about her fluency in "cullor" and her bi-cultural position as American and Liberian; suddenly, Liberian English is so familiar that it aches (316). Her old friend Alex St. James seems "too American" when she encounters him at the airport, and she thinks accusingly: "I look American too, with my Iraq attire, but at least I could still speak Liberian English" (315). It is, of course, not uncommon to feel the reality of particular parts of one's history and identity in the act of coming "home," but the important point here is that, for Cooper, this represents such a striking departure from previous modes of narrative selfhood. Her homecoming is defined precisely by the sentimental and intensely personal reclamation of her Liberian identity, which signals a profound shift in the responses that are available to the reader.

One significant dimension of the invitation towards affective engagement that becomes available in the sentimental mode, remarkable for its absence, elsewhere, is empathy: or even, perhaps, sympathy.[32] One of the primary features of the trauma genre, to return to an idea just briefly noted above and detailed in the Introduction, is trauma's role as what Fassin and Rechtman call "a signifier of authenticity" and an authorizing mechanism, where it functions as a kind of stoppage point that foreclose critique and renders suspicion uncomfortable (435). Cooper exploits this phenomenon and invites empathy through the sudden shift in her self-identification from immigrant to "refugee": a signifier that represents a universally-recognized and codified

[32] I use these words loosely, in their colloquial sense, rather than as a reference to the rich body of scholarship dedicated to empathy and sympathy as academic objects.

level of trauma and mode of suffering. As she is driven through Liberia, she relates, "I drank in the sights like a starved refugee myself" (320). The moment signals that Cooper no longer welcomes the critical lens through which the Congo class might be viewed; now she is no different from a refugee, and one refugee is every refugee in the trauma construct. In other words, she is now part of a new, slightly twisted kind of privileged class; she has suffered profoundly, experienced unconscionable violence and dislocation, and as such occupies a position that is beyond ethical judgment and critique.

Of course, the re-adjustment of Cooper's subject position and the newly-embraced sentimental perspective through which she articulates it create an affective energy that reaches frenzy at the reunion with her estranged sister Eunice. Eunice, the daughter of a "Country Woman" who is taken in by Cooper's family to raise after the young Cooper complains of loneliness, is perhaps the figure who most haunts the book's margins, a victim both of the profound physical and sexual wartime violence that drives the Cooper family to America (without her), and of the legacy and ongoing power imbalances of colonial domination by the Congo People – a people of whom Cooper's family represents the uppermost tier. Eunice therefore reminds us continually of Cooper's privilege, and of ideological and material violences perpetuated and then covered over and confused by narratives of Congo superiority. She also, importantly, never gets of out Liberia. She stays and witnesses the rest. It is she, then, who might represent Cooper's final accuser and the impossibility of absolution. If Eunice feels any resentment whatsoever, though, it is not evident in the narrative space of the text. The moment of reunion between the two sisters is poetic in form and cinematic in mood: there is an extended description of their embrace, and two final diagnoses from the stuttering Eunice: "You're home" and "Th-th-this is my sister" (329). Eunice's declaration of sisterhood is a speech act that carries

with it complete absolution, erases the profound differences between the two women, collapses the distance between classes and experiences into one kinship identity. The stutter lends a sense of nostalgia to the scene and even slightly infantilizes Eunice. To the extent that Eunice might function as a stand-in for the reader's lingering anxieties about Cooper's complicity, then, the moment forecloses that critique in two significant ways: first, it provides a wrap-up to the story in a manner that satisfies the generic conventions of Misery Lit, with a cathartic and heavily sentimental mutual recognition of suffering. Second, it asks the question: If Eunice can forgive Cooper, is there any reason why *you*, the reader, should not?

Memoirs like *The House at Sugar Beach* – here, positioned as a case study in the creative disruption of the discursive machinations that characterize Misery Lit – reveal much about the limitations of trauma language, and about the value of felt-sense over discourse in liminal affects like grief. Like *thirsty*, this text may represent a significant nexus point for the convergence of psycho-analytical and genealogical strands in trauma theory. On the one hand, Cooper addresses questions about the nature of representation and narration of grief, and on the other hand she interrogates the discursive processes whereby victimhood comes to signify as a marker of value, by which witnessing and testimony become instrumentalized as vehicles of empathic absolution, and through which actual experiences of suffering get sentimentalized and de-politicized in a rhetoric that hails the sufferer ever closer to fixity. Perhaps most important, as I will detail below in my reading of Didion, texts like this one re-appropriate the generic conventions that attend both trauma lit and trauma theory, and yet resist the rhetorical hegemonies that such genres enact; in this sense, they represent a resilient mode of "writing back" in the creative transmission of pain.

QUESTIONING NARRATIVE ACCESS IN *THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING*

Like *Beloved*, *The Year of Magical Thinking* lies at the very center of the "traumatic canon" of contemporary literature. Kathleen Woodward opens *Statistical Panic* by situating this memoir as a frame through which not only to understand her own grief but also to articulate the stakes of her scholarly project, to underscore the "signal importance of understanding our emotional experience through literature" (1). Indeed, what is so striking and so special about the text is Didion's ability to research, report on and theorize her own experience of grief even as she self-consciously aligns with psycho-analytical paradigms that model it as "sheer" or even inaccessible to consciousness, so that she writes as both witness to and sufferer of her pain. Of course, it is my overarching contention in this project that "sheer" grief is in fact accessible to consciousness, through felt-sense rather than narrative, and I think we can understand Didion's echoing of the Caruthian/ psycho-analytical traumatic binary as in fact one register of multiple, a sort of way to "work through" the ways in which liminal grief actually does come to be present to her consciousness. In this way, and somewhat strangely, the memoir is an exquisite expression of Jean-Francois Lyotard's famous assertion that "what art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art and to its pain. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it" (47).

More importantly, since I am not arguing for the strict ontological existence of discursively liminal affects but rather exploring their felt-sense as it appears in writing, I have no interest in diagnosing Didion with the "wrong" approach to grief in her sense that it is inaccessible. Here, my focus is not on what she feels but on what the expectations are that readers may bring to her narrative given its conformity to the conventions of trauma lit. Specifically, I suggest that Didion (like Cooper) actively engages and negotiates these

expectations, where she seems to linger in the theoretical orthodoxy of the "incommunicability" or "inaccessibility" of trauma as an act that actually both preserves a space of the liminal and forecloses readerly critique. In the same way as *Beloved*, *Year* is paradigmatic in that sense, as a meditation on what cannot be represented – but upon closer look, and again as in *Beloved*, what at first appears to be an absence might come to behave like a presence. Below, I discuss the memoir's close conformity to the generic conventions of trauma lit, and next explore the consequences of this manoeuver in absolving Didion of guilt and preserving liminal space.

On the whole, Didion establishes her ethos through a thorough engagement with Trauma Studies as a field of scholarship, and self-consciously frames the inaccessibility of her grief as the overarching structuring force of the narrative itself. She opens an early chapter with a summary of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (the ur-text of Trauma Studies, at least in the English and History departments of the '90s), using that to explain her own experience of denial in mourning (38-39). She also looks for knowledge in poetry and literary theory, in neurology and psychiatry, landing on her husband John's list of reading questions for a poem by e.e. cummings:

> *1) What is the meaning of the poem and what is the experience?*
>
> *2) What thought or reflection does the experience lead us to?*
>
> 3) *What <u>mood, feeling, emotion</u> is stirred or created by this poem as a whole?*
>
> (41)

Already here, then, there is a conscious parsing of the language that characterizes the fields of Trauma and Affect: "meaning" as different than "experience," "mood, feeling, emotion" as three distinct items in a list. Moreover, as a list of reading questions, it is really an example of epistemology; it gives readers something to hang onto as they wade through cummings' poetry,

some way to form meanings and analysis of an "experience" that surely feels, as the list above suggests, "sheer" in some actual way. In a sense, the list is a little version of Didion's larger project in the book, which is to find the right questions – to find access to some "meaning" in her grief, to be able to understand the experience in discourse. It also, of course, conforms explicitly to Luckhurst's idea that traumatic narratives explore trauma in multiple different registers, if not to articulate grief then to "say that it cannot say it."

Didion also understands the core of her grief as a kind of aporia, a sort of black hole around which all of the diverse narrative strands of the memoir seem to swirl. In addition, she also constructs her grief as subjectivity-destroying in the Caruthian sense, where those narrative strands become only inadequate efforts to stave off the existential void that is lurking in the margins of the memoir. She writes:

> [We cannot know] ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself. (189)

There is a significant distinction in the parenthetical phrase – imagined grief vs. grief "as it is" – that echoes discourse vs. sheer happening, or "meaning" vs. "experience." Imagined grief, for Didion, is both accessible and representable; indeed, it is an object that one can capture in the mind, explore, anticipate, wonder about. It's important that Didion does not phrase sheer or extra-discursive grief as "actual," but rather chooses the words "as it is," which is a tautology that itself evades describing the phenomenon with an adjective. In fact this is "the very opposite of meaning," a refusal even in the syntax to test language's boundaries against the void that it

creates. However, for Didion as for Delillo or Powers, grief as sheer happening might present a representational aporia but nonetheless is available for *confrontation*, to experience. It's therefore clear here that although Didion deploys traumatic conventions of aporia on the surface, she does sense a residue of something sheer; there is something in the "experience," something in the meaninglessness of it that might nonetheless be felt. As an aside, also, what does it mean to "confront" an "experience" rather than just to "experience" something?[33] It is almost as if the language positions liminal grief as separate, as non-self, as an external object that might be confronted but not aligned or absorbed in consciousness. Here, then, Didion is self-consciously participating in the Caruthian conventions of aporia and self-erasure, which comes as no surprise to a reader who has been primed towards this theoretical material by the opening pages of the book.

The narrative is also characterized by Didion's consistent attention to the constructedness and artificiality of story, where the writing is animated by multiple frustrated and conscious attempts to create stories that order and exert some form of control over liminal grief – the grief which consistently evades capture in discourse. She states outright that "this is [her] attempt to make sense" of John's death and of the events following, and frequently refers to her reading and research as an effort to control her experience of what is going on around her (7, 14, 26, 95 for example). Indeed, creating language and making semiotic choices is an essential part of the grief process, as she writes: "survivors look back and see omens, messages they missed. They remember the tree that died, the gull that splattered onto the hood of the car. They live by symbols" (152). On top of figuring semiotic dimension as a mechanism of life itself (to "live

[33] Later, Didion refers to the Bahasa language, in which "the same word could be either a verb or a noun" (104). While there may be significant syntactical difference in Bahasa, it's interesting to note that the word "experience" – at least on the surface – behaves the same way, a link that Didion doesn't consciously make in the text but that nonetheless underscores the peculiarity of the phrasing above.

by," to live *because of* and to live *beside* simultaneously), the instance also points to the temporal characteristics of the Freudian and Caruthian trauma constructs, whereby a traumatic event might be experienced "only belatedly." To "look back," here, is both a literal and a metaphoric reference to revising the past, to giving meaning in a conscious process to events that inherently and at the time seem outside of discourse and resistant against certain kinds of semiotic content (in the way that we often refer to a death as "senseless"). As Luckhurst points out, this form of "looking back" in order to make sense of things is a common convention of the traumatic memoir, where readers expect this kind of organizing voice on the part of the author; we rarely come across traditional memoirs that simply detail events as they happened, with no framing, contextualizing or sense-making commentary. In that way, then, the only differences here are that Didion is so relentlessly self-conscious of this process, and that she reveals and even focuses on the cracks that open up when language is found to be utterly insufficient in healing. She not only conforms perfectly to the genre, but it entirely transparent about it.

As sense-making mechanisms, also, stories fail. When Didion's daughter Quintana (whose death she later writes about in 2011's *Blue Nights*) is hospitalized just prior to John's death, she thinks to herself: "*Read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information is control*" (94). Didion is relentlessly discursive, in the sense that the only comfort that is available to her in this period is through language, through at least the attempt to narrate herself through the experience and exert some kind of control over its meaning. Language is the only space in which Didion feels coherent as a subjectivity, and yet it always falls short; there is always a liminal space lingering at the edge of her consciousness, and it makes her deeply uneasy. She writes:

> The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is a case in which I wish I had instead of words and their rhythms a cutting room, equipped with […] a

> digital editing system on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time […] This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning. This is a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself. (7-8)

There is a curious kind of literalization of experience in this passage, as Didion sets up a distinction between words and "meaning" – thoughts and beliefs, though these are in fact linguistic phenomena, somehow become "penetrable" like physical objects, and the writer's words are frustrated and inadequate in that exercise. By gesturing towards this kind of physicality or literality of experience, she is pointing towards its existence outside language; thoughts and beliefs have no semiotic dimension, because they simply sit inertly and impenetrably before consciousness. As sincere as this frustration is, furthermore, it also announces to the reader that Didion is already planning to fall short. As a conventional grief memoir, the text is filled with holes and gaps, pain so profound that it represents the stoppage of language, and in this way it is not so unique; what is special here is Didion's direct communication of that phenomenon, where she seems to look the reader in the eyes directly and announce that the work may really be about the inadequacy of narratives like it.

What are the consequences of these holes? As in Cooper, I think they might be productively read not only as the result of psychological phenomena after trauma but as strategic techniques of *narrative withholding*, and that perhaps readers tend to miss what is withheld because they bring to the narrative such entrenched expectations that gaps will be everywhere. Recall Kathleen Stewart's conception of extra-discursive affects:

> People who are really into color therapy don't read colors as symbols and codes. They're into the real surface qualities of colors and what they can do. They don't

> care what the colors "mean." They're fooling around with the forces that be, to see what things are made of. They want to set things in alchemical motion. (33)

Didion is obsessed with reading colors as symbols and codes; her singular focus is on trying to bring grief into semiotic dimension, trying to muscle it into something that can signify as an attempt to heal. However, in this conventional obsession, it's easy for readers to lose sight of the fact that they actually are being presented with a so-called "color" in grief; there is an actual experience of pain here, it has a "surface quality" – it is present, though perhaps inaccessible through the vertical dimensions that are required for Didion's so-called "penetration" of her thoughts and beliefs (incidentally, in *Blue Nights*, the color blue in fact is forced into semiotics, as it becomes the structuring metaphor throughout the memoir). The consequence of ignoring this color/affect, or anyway of constructing it as difficult to access, is that it diverts our attention elsewhere, and it's easy to miss Didion's self-protective manoeuvers that occur just in the corner of the reader's eye.

A few scholars, most notably James Phelan, have approached *The Year of Magical Thinking* with a slightly skeptical attitude or have read the memoir suspiciously with a latent sense of anxiety over what is hovering in the margins. Phelan thinks about Didion's prose as "unintentionally off-kilter," and therefore as an example of what he (as a narratologist) calls "deficient" (as opposed to unreliable) narration. In "The Implied Author, Deficient Narration, and Nonfiction Narrative: Or, What's Off-Kilter in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*?," he writes that for most of the memoir, "the implied Didion writes about her experiences with admirable frankness and insight, establishing her narrating-I as a reliable spokesperson and initially emphasizing the interpretive and occasionally ethical distance between that I and the […] experiencing-I" (129). In other words, he understands the

memoir as an account written by a later Didion about her earlier self, where the writerly persona is an autonomous voice that sincerely engages and takes critically the cognitive limitations that are imposed on the earlier Didion by the immensity of her grief.

This is only up to a point, however. Late in the story, he sees a disruption of "the system of intentionality governing the narrative," specifically in the passage wherein Didion finally absolves herself of the guilt she has been feeling for not seeking more medical intervention before John's death. Phelan quotes the following:

> Only after I read the autopsy report did I begin to believe what I had been repeatedly told: nothing that he or I had done or not done had either caused or could have prevented his death […] The LAD got fixed in 1987 and it stayed fixed until everybody forgot about it and then it got unfixed. *We call it the widowmaker*, pal, the cardiologist had said in 1987. (207)

Phelan sees a big blindspot here. He writes: "the problem is that, according to the purposeful design of the narrative, the realization that "everybody forgot about it" should not lead either the experiencing-I, the narrating-I, or the implied Didion to the conclusion that there was nothing she or John could have done to have prevented his heart attack" (130). As a result, the narration is rendered "off-kilter," in the sense that the voice that readers trust – the later Didion who is responsibly explaining her earlier self's cognitive disruption – actually misses this point alongside the other voices in the text (the point that forgetting about the LAD *is*, actually, something one might feel guilt or complicity about). I think we might even read this alongside Cooper as a gesture of absolving writerly guilt through the magic of narrative: just as Eunice's sentimental forgiveness enables her to move through her feelings of culpability in the sister's

suffering, so here Didion's unintentional mis-reading of the situation means that she can move on.

In the context of the trauma genre, however, I think we can go one step further. First of all, the instance absolutely emphasizes the insufficiency of discourse as an order-making mechanism; here it totally fails, as all of the other attempts do, but the difference is that here it escapes even Didion's notice. There is an interjection of "no" that sneaks up and secretly strikes the reader, with the jarring consequence of opening up a fissure between the usually reliable Didion to whose perspective one has thus far been aligned and the perspective of the reader. If a reader misses the moment, it is because he or she is so totally aligned with Didion at this point that it's easy to share her blind spots, to trust that she would identify them if they were there; most readers are not narratologists, and most readers want Didion to feel better anyway. One of the effects of Didion's mistake, furthermore, is to reveal the seams involved in the constructions of stories surrounding grief, and to emphasize that Didion is really in a process of negotiation with herself and with the reader through these multiple attempts at storytelling.

However, and this is the important point, the memoir's status as a paradigmatic instance of the trauma genre means that Didion gets away with the omission. Just as Cooper exploits the reader's expectations of sentimentality and shared empathic resolution in order to absolve herself of her own real complicity in Eunice's suffering, so Didion exploits the reader's expectations of gaps – of things unnoticed, unrepresented – in order not only to absolve herself of guilt over John's death but also to position herself beyond the reproach of a reader who might be skeptical of such an absolution (*Why question her story*? – to echo Fassin and Rechtman – *Hasn't she suffered enough*?). In other words, if we position the instance above as a moment of "untruth" that even Didion herself does not recognize, we simultaneously understand that untruths

characterize all painful stories, where painful stories, according to the trauma construct, are just unsuccessful attempts at making meaning out of the meaningless. The gaps are there because they *should* be there, this seems to imply, not because Didion is seeking a false resolution.

As I mention above, both Didion and Cooper are journalists; they are skilled in arriving at a scene of immense suffering, in the middle of a war (for Cooper) or in the aftermath of a murder (for Didion), and of quickly coming up with a context that will help readers to make sense of the event. This is, in fact, the bulk of a journalist's job: to make sense of things. Both writers are therefore fluent in the language that characterizes such a project, and yet even so, both of the memoirs I've addressed here take the struggles of representation as a central theme, and in fact exploit those struggles as a mechanism of absolution for themselves. Moreover, the actual grief (the grief "as it is") that the writers feel remains "sheer" or extra-discursive, which actually serves as a kind of protection of liminality, and again goes unnoticed due to the expectations that readers bring to the trauma genre.

I want to be very clear, in closing, that I am not indicting these writers for those moves. I am not making judgments about whether such gestures of absolution and protection are just or unjust. Rather, I think they are very exciting in the context of discursively liminal grief! What my treatment of these two texts within the context of generic expectations implies is that as painful stories come to cohere in an actual genre, and as readers generate expectations surrounding this genre that express critically entrenched notions about representational aporia and fractured selfhood, an opportunity arises. There is space for immense creativity within those strictures, and I understand both Cooper and Didion as voices who manage to stretch, manipulate and play within them, even turning them on their heads in the service of private ends. If anything, this represents a recovery of unpathological survivor subjectivity and narrative agency;

far from requiring a witness to make sense of these traumatic experiences, these two memoirs manage to *exploit* the witness/reader's own sense of self-importance in order to transform their stories into speech acts that have wonderfully unpredictable consequences in the genre.

Both memoirs, importantly, actively resist the participation of personal pain in larger political, social or ideological discourses (like those that I explored in my reading of Brand): Didion in terms of discourses of aging, mourning and family, and Cooper in terms of discourses of large-scale political binaries of responsibility, exploitation and historical narrative. In doing so, however, each author enacts particular maneuvers that actually serve to exploit the genre of the "trauma-memoir" in self-protective gestures – at the same time these writers assert particularity and refuse the subsumption of their stories into larger social narratives, they protect themselves against the personal implications of responsibility within these narratives. What's important for my larger project here, then, is that entrance into discourse becomes less a phenomenon against which to protect oneself or within which to suffer, but an opportunity to play, exploit, and to utilize text strategically.

In the following chapter, I shift my focus to two novels that deal directly with the belated processing of past trauma, and with what it means to confront one's own experiences simultaneously as unassimilated and as circulating in ideology: that is, to experience oneself as both non-discursive, direct consciousness and as an object in discourse. Put simply, both novels contain protagonists who exist in divided but co-conscious time; they experience the belated, pathological return of unassimilated violent memories in the Caruthian sense, exist in and through the discourses they create for *themselves* as an object, and finally enter into political and social discourses outside of direct experience that ironically guarantee their survival as an immigrant or refugee who "passes" in some meaningful sense as a justified or rubber-stamped

victim of large-scale public trauma. The novels thus address the extent to which narratives and gestures that guarantee survival also become the guarantors of subjective annihilation.

Chapter 4. REPRESENTATIONAL ANXIETY AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF DESCRIPTIVE READING: AFFECT AS PRESENCE IN CHANG-RAE LEE'S *A GESTURE LIFE* AND DAVE EGGERS' *WHAT IS THE WHAT*

My central aim in this project has been to start with the hypothesis that emotions that feel "speechless" – that exist on the margins or at the limits of language – are nonetheless accessible to consciousness, and may be observable as phenomena as they arise, dissipate, or form semiotic attachments in the mind. I thus started with an analysis of literary works that engage grief and trauma as inchoate affects, or as experiences that are present to consciousness but not expressed in language: Delillo's strange visitor, Forster's dark caves. I then moved towards tracing the ways that writers register liminality itself, and most importantly the ways that they articulate what it feels like to observe one's emotions as they begin to get stuck to particular meanings, with a commitment to agentive negotiation over the values and underlying metaphors that drive the sense-making processes of the entrance into narrative. For writers like Cooper or Didion, I contended, negotiation takes the form of creativity within the conventions of traumatic literature as a genre, so that the very entrenchedness of such conventions actually ends up affording writers a space to play with roles, agency, complicity, and value. In other words, the fact that the genre is so codified, so deeply familiar to readers, actually opens up a space for these writers to play with how the pieces might fit in such a construction, and as such approaching meaning-making with meta-cognitive awareness of how much agency we possess over the semiotic dimensions of emotion. Importantly, following Sara Ahmed, I also looked at the social constructedness of

emotions like grief, and at the way writers like Brand might observe the *limits* of their agency in traumatic stories, especially in contexts of ideological over-determination.

Throughout, I have been careful not to position my observations within the realm of ontology, and moreover to avoid temporalizing affects like grief as phenomena that might move from the limits of discourse towards another, *later* moment of becoming discursive (i.e. "I feel something but can't name it, and then later I name it and understand its meaning within this larger narrative structure"). The reason for that avoidance is that I understand discursively liminal emotions as existing alongside and simultaneous to their semiotic attachments, rather than as separate moments in a grander teleology; in any given moment there is the opportunity to simply observe feelings as they arise, and also to think about what those feelings might "mean" or how they come to be determined and structurally fixed. In this final chapter, then, I begin by looking at two literary works that seem to register that kind of simultaneity, and which position grief simultaneously as a discursively liminal presence and as a semiotic object that can form attachments in narrative: Chang Rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* and Dave Eggers' *What is the What*. Along the way and towards a more general envoi, I make a case for how recent ideas in the turn towards "Descriptive Reading" might open up new perspectives on discursive liminality as an accessible object of study. I close with a return to the suggestion that certain iterations of contemporary phenomenology might ground (theoretically) the experience of mind outside language or the felt existence of discursively liminal emotions. Finally, I examine how such a theoretical grounding might help construct the "self" as a whole and un-pathologized experience, rather than as a linguistic or discursive position accompanied by some kind of primordial residue that is fundamentally inaccessible to consciousness.

REPRESENTATION AND ANXIETY IN *A GESTURE LIFE* AND *WHAT IS THE WHAT*

Both Chang-rae Lee and Dave Eggers make strong novelistic assertions about the value of representation – or what I call "traumatic legibility" in my discussion about Brand – while also registering the treacheries that are associated with social constructions of victimhood, grief and traumatic memory. Indeed, the effort to tell stories about suffering is often accompanied by concerns about the limits of interlocutionary empathy or the political dimensions of "representing others" in contemporary traumatic literature, and the maneuvers that writers undertake in doing so are productive objects of study in current scholarship on grief.[34] In this first section, I will touch briefly on Fassin and Rechtman's work on traumatic legibility specifically in terms of international humanitarian discourses, in order to frame a reading of the two novels that traces the value of such legibility alongside a consideration of how fraught it can be. I do this in order eventually to turn attention to what remains *un*-represented or discursively liminal for those writers, and to analyze the ways in which a "Descriptive Reading" approach might provide access to that dimension in narrative.

Fassin and Rechtman address a fascinating shift in the perceived mission of humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross during the genocide in Biafra. At its inception, the authors argue, the medical humanitarian movement focused on negotiation and compromise as primary roles; organizations needed to maintain dialogue with oppressive and genocidal regimes in order to ensure continued access to victims (192).[35] During the war in Biafra, however, this kind of "secret bargaining" came under criticism, and a smaller group of doctors in the Red Cross split

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[34] For readings of grief, memoir and cross-cultural ventriloquism, see Elizabeth Twitchell's "Dave Eggers' *What is the What*: Fictionalizing Trauma in the Age of Misery Lit" (which I address below), Ihab Hassan's "Post-Modernism: A Self Interview," Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* and Yogita Goyal's "African Atrocity, American Humanity: Slavery and Its Transnational Afterlives"

[35] The authors locate this inception "on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859, out of the spectacle of wounded men dying without medical care" (192).

from the organization in order to found Medicins San Frontieres in 1971, which is driven by the belief that the primary goal of humanitarian organizations is *not* to negotiate with oppressive regimes but rather to *bear witness* to the atrocities committed and act as advocates for victims, even when that act might damage political relationships. As an attendant consequence, the concept of the "witness" is also evolving into a distinction between what Fassin calls "the survivor witness" (who provides eye witness testimony: concentration camp survivors, for example) and "the humanitarian witness," a position characterized by "second-hand testimony by parties who report what they have seen and heard [after victims] confide in them" (193).

The reason why I touch on this conceptual genealogy here is that the rise of the "humanitarian witness" brings with it several crucial consequences. As the writers point out, in this kind of testimony:

1. Witnesses "have only partial knowledge" of the situation
2. They thus only report "the parts that they think make sense," and make editorial decisions based on what they believe the public expects
3. A relationship emerges between the witness and their audience based on "a protocol of compassion," and the intimate is opened to public view
4. A complex political situation is reduced to "a purely emotional plea in order to galvanize public opinion"
5. Testimony becomes more central to humanitarian work than traditional medical assistance (during the last century in Palestine, for example) (193-4)
6. Physical and psychological scars of violence come to "authenticate the account of an asylum seeker" and mean that bodies can cross international lines (222)

In other words, the new focus on the witness rather than the victim—in what Annette Wieviorka calls "the era of the witness"—means that humanitarian workers occupy the role of spokespeople rather than only medical aids, making decisions about how to represent victims and which "spin" to put on the situation.[36] For my own purposes, this shift relates directly to the codification of trauma discourse as a fixed genre with particular narrative expectations, whereby victims become representational and highly visible, embodied objects who must edit their memories and stories into forms that are appealing for public consumption, and in that pressure are potentially dispossessed of a direct relationship to their own experiences.

Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* captures many of the difficulties associated with representation in discourses of humanitarianism. In the novel, a former "doctor" (in position rather than education) in the Japanese Army named Hata negotiates a frenzied back-and-forth narrative between his contemporary life in a small suburban American community and his memories of being responsible for the medical care of the so-called "comfort women" who were victimized during the war on the base where he lived. Lee shares with Eggers a narrative structure that oscillates between a the protagonist's recollection of a traumatic memory and their narration of present-day experience, and in both cases the two time-frames behave dialogically, as the past seems to intrude into and give shape to the present while the present allows the character to process or confront the past. For Lee, the present contains an urgency about bringing the past into visibility; Hata is relentless in his need to be "represented" and actualized in his small community, and simultaneously struggles with how or whether to bring the female victims of the past into recognition or being. In an important sense, both works contain protagonists that behave both as humanitarian witnesses and as invisible or forgotten victims, and the stories are

[36] Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of Witness* (2006).

fragmented along these lines—on the one hand as survivor tales and on the other as discourses about human rights and victim status.

As critics like Suk Koo Rhee and Mark Jerng address, representation is a nexus point for many of the anxieties that Lee's novel expresses, and these anxieties are contextualized by the concept of the "age of the witness" that Fassin and Rechtman identify. The politics of representation are complicated: on the one hand representation ensures that victims have a place in history, but on the other it tends to dissolved individuality into the conventional and highly familiar genres of suffering that I have addressed in other chapters. For Hata, from the outset, being "visible" or available for the aesthetic consumption of others is crucial to the cultivation of personal value, psychological peace and grounded existence. In the novel's opening lines, Hata talks about how the geography of the suburbs begins to "show" on his face, which constructs the face as a signifier of place. Moreover, Lee writes, "there is a gradual and accruing recognition of one's face, of being, as far as anyone can recall, from around here" (1). Thus, Hata introduces himself to the reader through a rhetoric of performance, visibility and location, suggesting that for the old man, the ways in which surroundings register themselves on his body and the increasing familiarity of that body bring with them the possibility of passing as if he belongs, and even of flattening his traumatic history into a visible representation of the present. Even further, this kind of aesthetic representation is actually crucial to Hata's sense of himself as an individual with real existence. Listening to his daughter play the piano, he relates:

> The composition calmed me. Aside from the lyrical, impassioned musings, there are unlikely pauses in the piece, near-silences that make it seem as if the performer has suddenly decided to cease, cannot go on, has even disappeared. (29)

It's a strange association to make so early in the novel: that the meanings that are created in such a "lyrical" representation actually brings the performer's existence into being, as if the subject exists in the phrases he writes and in the listener/reader's recognition of them. Silence and invisibility are therefore threatening, precisely because they carry with them the threat of disappearance—of suddenly "deciding to cease." The novel's opening chapters seem to land repeatedly on these points: visible faces and bodies as forms of belonging, representation as a precondition for existence.

Having established such a frame early on, Lee ensures that the reader's attention is highly attuned to the kinds of choices that are made in who gets to be visible, and in what ways. Hata himself, though unreliable, is in a position of "narrative control" both in his memories of the war and in his suburban present. During the war, he is responsible for taking care of the women who have been kidnapped into sex slavery; he examines their bodies, develops and oversees "procedural considerations," and ultimately generates reports that "state their fitness for their duties" (181). He is thus responsible for telling the "right" kinds of stories about the women and the ways in which their bodies do or don't signify the torture that they are undergoing (their "fitness"): he is a humanitarian witness, though in this context for an anti-humanitarian cause. Until he meets K (who will be the only woman to whom he grants humanity—and whose humanity will ultimately represent the novel's central trauma), he continues to refer to them as "female volunteers," to their rape and torture as "duties," to their injuries and reproductive vulnerabilities as "procedural considerations." If visibility is so crucial to belonging and existence, one of the ways that Lee registers anxieties surrounding representation is that Hata's personal concern for his own visibility seems at odds with his active role in erasing the humanity and victimhood of the women. He is the agent that denies the women institutional humanitarian

recognition, aid and reparation, even as he continuously circles back to an obsession with the ways in which he is represented in present life. There is a significant relationship between those two strands of the story that speaks directly to Lee's ambivalence about the politics of victimhood and representation.

Even further, there are also palpable anxieties here about how discourse can bring certain meanings into being and hide or repress certain others. In "Consumable Bodies and Ethnic (Hi)stories: Strategies and Risks of Representation in *A Gesture Life*," Suk Koo Rhee writes:

> At first glance, the novel seems to offer a searing indictment of the lurid violence that Korean sex slaves suffered at the hands of the imperial Japanese soldiers during the Pacific War. However, the appalling colonial history is transformed into a background against which a foredoomed love story unfolds: […] The tragic fate of female victims of the war crimes is reconfigured for aesthetic contemplation and consumption, articulated in the language of romance" (96)

Rhee does an extraordinary job of tracing the chivalric conventions that run through this story, and in particular in pointing out that the extent to which it fits perfectly within the generic conventions both of something like Misery Lit and of contemporary, "nostalgic" colonial romance; Hata does indeed fancy himself as a rescuer (if not of K than of his daughter Sunny, which I will address soon), and the women are indeed highly aestheticized as mappable bodies and physical testifiers to trauma even as their humanity is erased through Hata's narrative and medical actions. There is a fascinating oscillation there: if aesthetic visibility brings Hata into being in his present community, it also actively makes invisible the women of his past, who do seem to crumble and erode behind the semiotic dimensions of their bodies. In that sense, Lee's

flirtation with conventional genres of suffering continues to register an ambivalence about discourses surrounding trauma.

Several sections of the story also explore the extent to which pain, suffering and death may serve a status-granting function, here performed by Hata as a witness and testifier. As critic Mark Jerng points out, "identity and cultural intelligibility are clearly premised on rights claims and the status of victimhood [re: the recognition of comfort women and their emergence into subjects of representation though their witnessing of the atrocities done by Japanese soldiers]. "It is through narrative," Jerng continues, "that these women can stake a claim for public recognition."[37] Unlike Brand's meditation on Julia's transformation into objecthood and consumption in the public sphere, however, Lee's engagement stages a strong resistance against such a process and rather *erases* the wounded body completely out of the representation. As Hata recovers the body of his murdered lover and prisoner (K), he loses his grip on any form of perceptual or representational anchoring.

> I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor could I feel the weight of K's remains," he writes. "And I could not sense that other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the face, the perfected cheek and brow. Its pristine sleep still unbroken, undisturbed. And I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part. (305)

The moment lends itself immediately to a Caruthian reading, of course, with its focus on the aporia of trauma, or with the construction of trauma as "the pure impact of sheer happening" that has been my central concern throughout this project—before, outside of discourse and

[37] In "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's "A Gesture Life," Jerng argues that that the novel registers the problem of "how to make sense of transracial adoptees as they emerge within the intersecting processes of racialization, naturalization, and nationalization," especially in the case of Hata's adopted daughter Sunny (42).

understanding. However, within this current framework, I think we can locate not a failure of Hata to approach the experience but a REFUSAL, by Lee, to offer it up for a reader's consumption. It cannot, in other words, be colonized in discourse. This is a moment that I will return to in my discussion of presence and liminality, but for now it suffices to note the extent to which Lee is both asserting the value of representation and visibility and also selectively withholding particular objects and bodies from discourse; he's making really important and intentional decisions.

Before I leave this brief discussion about representation and anxiety in the novel, I want to touch on one moment that I think captures the complexity of semiotic dimension and discourse, and the strangeness that attends the fact that representations can function both as guarantors of belonging and as erasures of human status simultaneously. During the war, the authority Captain Ono tells Hata that he will display a particular sign outside his hut when he'd like the doctor to "prepare" his favored sexual slave (K) for a private visitation with him: a black flag. Lee writes:

> What he determined as the sign, the black flag, was of course meant for me. Hata is, literally, "flag," and a "black flag," or *kurohata*, is the banner a village would raise by its gate in olden times to warn of a contagion within. It is the signal of spreading death. My adoptive family, I learned right away, had an ancient lineage of apothecaries, who had ventured into stricken villages and had for unknown reasons determined to keep the name, however inauspicious it was. (224-5)

There are several points about this that I think are crucial to a reading of symbols and representation here. First, the black flag—or *kurohata*—seems to be an explicit reference to Derrida's *pharmakon*, and therefore it invites readers to bring a deconstructionist lens to the

scene. The linguistic symbol, or the word, indeed functions like *pharmakon* as a signifier simultaneously of something and of its opposite: it is "the signal of spreading death" at the same time as it is a request for Hata to keep K alive, to make her available and clean. On another level, the word is also the man's name; it invokes him, calls him to action, and brings him into being while simultaneously dissolving his personhood into a symbolic physical object. Even more, the symbol invokes Hata's adopted family ancestry and their "ancient lineage," which simultaneously offers both belonging (family history) and exclusion (adoption) in its very semiology. The flag is therefore, I think, a powerful sign to the reader that representations are never straightforward here; they may seem to clarify, to absolve guilt, to make sense of things, but in fact they are deeply treacherous quagmires that, taken to a logical extreme, even gesture at the pitfalls of nihilism that sometime attend the strictest deconstructionist approaches.[38]

Like *A Gesture Life*, *What Is the What* frequently expresses anxiety about representation and storytelling in traumatic contexts. One of the primary features of the trauma construct is its role both as what Jonathan Stark calls a "signifier of authenticity" and as an authorizing mechanism, functioning as a kind of stoppage point that forecloses critique and renders suspicion uncomfortable (435). Both Eggers (the author) and Deng (the fictionalized character based on the "real" Deng) deploy this discourse powerfully, most conspicuously by using suffering as a form of power and authority that silences the voice of the reader/interlocutor. At the novel's opening, Deng characterizes the expression of pain as a form of protective violence: "If someone cut in line," he recalls of his early years in America, "I would glare at them, staring, silently hissing a story to them. *You do not understand*. […] *You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I*

[38] When the flag is actually flown, Hata relates that he experiences it as "a blank spot in [his] vision, a colorless void" (253). I am intentionally reserving my discussion of that moment until later in this chapter, but for now it suffices to acknowledge the "void" as yet another semiotic dimension of *kurohata*.

had seen" (29). The instance constructs language as a form of assault, simultaneously asserting power and silencing any mode of response; even as Deng continually contends that the stories must be heard, his narratives of profound suffering function defensively in literal silence. In typically Eggersian fashion, of course, the line also reverberates through multiple levels of textual mediation. Here, Deng recalls these moments from his past (directing them towards TV Boy) but Eggers' voice is certainly present as well, perhaps as a self-conscious acknowledgement of the fact that the trauma construct immunizes the author against critiques of cross-cultural ventriloquism, inauthenticity or sheer postmodern arrogance. The use of second-person voice also underscores this point, explicitly positioning the reader as the object of these intensely personal accusations. Suffering that is billed as trauma, Fassin and Rechtman point out, cannot be contested or questioned; Deng and Eggers potentially employ the discourse to elicit just such protection.

The text's preoccupation with the nature of representation is a thread that structures much of its complexity, framing its active exploitation of the protections that trauma discourse allows. However, Deng's story also offers a subtle critique of the machinations of such a phenomenon, engaging deeply with the practical consequences of discursive manipulation. As Fassin and Rechtman explore at length, the availability of trauma as a concept also asks victims to manipulate their stories in order to fit the perceived (and very real) expectations of their listeners (213-4). The stakes of "telling the right story" are high, of course, since the disbursement of compensation and aid is often contingent on the suffering of particular forms of violence. In other words, as Stark writes, "compensation […] acts not merely as a form of redress but functions iatrogenically, creating the very malady it cures" (439). Deng explores this phenomenon at length, most notably as a necessary step in leaving the refugee camp at Kakuma.

"The UNHCR and the United States wanted to know where we had come from, what we had endured," he relates (485). The refugee autobiographies come to behave as their own unique genre; it is at first unfamiliar to Deng, who finds it "very difficult to know what was relevant and what was not." The documented is mediated at every turn by editorial decisions, determined both by an awareness of rhetorical audience ("we knew that those who felt persecuted […] would be given special consideration") and by the unreliability of memory. Ultimately, though, these documents serve to reify both individual and social history, stamped with a picture and functioning as narrative evidence of one's membership within a traumatized collective. Deng registers a sense of latent anxiety about this conflation of text with the reality of his identity: "I stared at this photo for hours and held the folder close for days," he remembers, "debating with myself whether or not this picture, these words, were truly me" (486). Far from serving as a useful tool of expression, here the language of trauma actively obscures and reconstructs the identities of sufferers; there does seem to be some sense of a "truth" somewhere, something that Deng perceives as "truly [him,]" but it is absolutely inaccessible in the trauma construct.

The necessity of appropriating particular modes of storytelling or content also relates to the universalizing gestures of trauma discourse, which gesture marks another area of tension and critique in the text. Suffering is certainly competitive and hierarchical, forcing the Lost Boys to generalize and inflate their individual experiences so as not to get left behind. Deng is critical of what he calls the "apocryphal" nature of some of the tales, a word which speaks directly to the process of canonizing the past and reifying social history. "We did not all see the same things," he asserts, but "sponsors and newspaper reporters […] expect the stories to have certain elements, and the Lost Boys have been consistent in their willingness to oblige" (21). In this instance, the very act of systematizing the concept of trauma creates a totalizing scale that is

entirely unfriendly to uniqueness. This directly echoes the anxieties that some trauma theorists have addressed; Stark points out that the "universalization" of trauma blurs moral boundaries between victim and perpetrator, epistemological boundaries between direct and indirect witnesses, and categorical boundaries between the fabricated and the authentic (439). It is important to note, however, that the universalizing gesture is a result of the necessary deployment of trauma discourse as constructed by the systems that sustain it; Deng at least partially blames his audience for the untruths in the story, implicating the reader in the process of fabrication. In this sense, Deng's frustration with the discourse creates yet another level of protection against the critiques that might be leveled at the book. It's not *my* fault, he seems to be implying- it's *yours*.

In a more general sense, the text also thematizes the troubling jump between trauma as a descriptive category and as a prescriptive diagnosis. Operating within the systems that rely on such a diagnosis, the UNHCR attempts to count the refugees at Kakuma through conducting a census (384). Like many of the well-meaning charitable gestures that the story contains, the process is actually overwhelmingly disturbing for the people whom it is intended to help. Sudanese elders are reminded both of the colonial era and of the Holocaust, skeptical of any procedure that attempts to impose categories on groups of people; refugee status becomes another "badge of identification on their necks," threatening in its universalizing power and unpredictable in its consequences (385). Though here, of course, the census is intended to help aid operations, the instance does recall historical strategies that are employed by groups of people in power in order to prescribe the futures of the subjected; the elders are certainly correct that any process of sweeping categorization potentially represents or enables abuse. The fact that people at Kakuma adopt creative ways to resist the system of trauma (like the "recycling"

schemes that guarantee more aid by doubling the head-count) suggests that there is a way of negotiating the totalizing process that creatively exploits its own strategies; in other words, there is a "real life" that is being lived underneath and within these systems, which trauma discourse fails to capture entirely.

Before turning to a discussion of discursive liminality and descriptive reading, it is important to note one alternative model in the case of this particular text. While there are certainly many instances of trauma stories in which *aporias* of representation might be said to exist, it is also generative to look at the translation of pain as calling for what Madelaine Hron refers to as "a particularly performative rhetoric that both re-appropriates and resists generic narrative models and cultural assumptions" (xvii). Pain, according to Hron, invites the construction of a survivor-history that enables new literary and cultural forms of expression to emerge; these she understands to be resilient, despite the pressures under which they operate. *What is the What* is surely an extraordinary example of this kind of performative rhetoric. On one level, of course, the text is very much concerned with the un-transmissibility of trauma. Despite the fact that "stories emanate from [Deng] all the time [he] is awake and breathing," that he feels it is his "right and obligation" to continue telling these stories, the sense that "no one is listening" also haunts the novel both thematically and structurally (29, 142). Understood from this perspective, painful experience can neither be remembered faithfully nor communicated successfully. However, a focus such as this fails to take account of the ways in which Deng can represent and *is representing* his particular experience in narrative, precisely through the deployment of trauma discourse in a self-conscious and highly critical manner. As outlined above, the novel does specifically what Hron suggests, both re-appropriating the generic

conventions and expectations of trauma discourse and resisting the rhetorical hegemonies that it enacts. The novel is, in this sense, one big recycling scheme.

Of course, Deng's use of rhetorical re-formation, like that of Lee, is deeply ambivalent. Indeed, there is a real sense in which the reader is complicit in the strategies of power, and is therefore the target of his narrative resistance. More specifically, the readerly expectations that are created by the "genre of the trauma narrative" through Holocaust literature, survivor stories and genocide memoirs do, in many ways, operate as strategies that Deng actively resists; they attempt to interpellate Deng into the victim-position, which carries certain allowances and denies others. He is subject-ed to the discursive characteristics of his position. The narrator himself is entirely conscious of this ideological operation, which is part of the reason that the oscillation between subject forms is so subversive. There is a sense of intention behind the disruption:

> Didn't we all walk across the desert? [People] ask. Didn't we all eat the hides of hyenas and goats to keep our bellies full? Didn't we all drink our own urine? The last part, of course, is apocryphal, absolutely not true for the majority of us, but it impresses people. […] but we did not all see the same things. (21)

Here, Deng at least partially blames his audience for the "apocryphal" untruths of the story, implicating the reader in the process of fabrication; if the reader feels "impressed," he or she must also gain an awareness of the voyeuristic nature of the readerly position. The instance also critiques the universalizing gestures of the trauma genre ("Didn't we all…?"), and therefore implies that generic expectations put pressure on the "truth" of the stories by ignoring unique individual experiences. From this perspective, Deng's rhetorical tactics certainly serve to disrupt these kinds of expectations, but as Twitchell traces deftly, the reader is partially alienated and indeed is confronted with his or her own alienation in an ethics of difference.

Hron's notion of "performative rhetoric" also resonates with the question of what it is that stories can *do,* despite or even because of the artifice of their construction. In Eggers' text, cobbled-together half-remembered narratives have real effects in the world, as reflected in Dut's method of putting the Lost Boys to sleep. "Create in your mind the best of days," he tells them, "-and memorize these details, place this day center in your mind, and when you are the most frightened bring forth this day and place yourself within it. Run through this day and I assure you that before you are finished with your dream-breakfast, you will be asleep" (33). The stories are strictly pastiche, stitched together through impressions and images, but they are nonetheless an integral part of survival that demonstrates autonomous rhetorical choice and agency. They become objects capable of being "brought forth" to perform certain kinds of work, translating a version of personal history into a communicable narrative. On a meta-level, the text of *What is the What* may be doing something similar; Deng's numerous imagined interlocutors might be deaf, mute and absent, but the "you" of the reader remains.

I hope these brief readings of representational anxieties in the two novels are sufficient to frame my next step in this chapter, which is to outline some recent ideas in the turn towards "Surface Reading," and then to illuminate some of the ways in which that epistemology might open up critical access to discursively liminal emotions in traumatic literature. In "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," Heather Love suggests that post-structuralist approaches that are characterized by symptomatic reading indeed "mix well" with particular kinds of hermeneutics in particular kinds of work, and that approach is certainly fruitful both for earlier, deconstructionist scholars in trauma studies like Caruth, and for contemporary scholars working on ideology and emotion like Ahmed. It is also, of course, a fitting theoretical framework for readings like those I undertake above. As such, my shift here does not represent a

rejection of symptomatic approaches, but rather an exploration of what kind of access one might be granted to liminal emotions through a hermeneutics of presence (or rather—not a hermeneutics at all).

Liminal Presences: Surface Reading and the Felt-Sense of Grief

The so-called "descriptive turn" is comprised of many different approaches, all with a focus on the "surface" of a text rather than its depths. For Best and Marcus, "surfaces" can be many things: verbal structures, materiality, affects, pattern-orientations, macro-level analysis, etc. (8-11).[39] Here, I focus on only one of these approaches—that of Heather Love's concept of descriptive reading—which has roots in Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" and might potentially look like the work that Kathleen Stewart does, for example, in *Ordinary Affects*. In "Against Interpretation," Sontag proposes that we set aside structuralist and psychoanalytical models of interpretation in favor of pure experience. Best and Marcus write:

> Instead of saying, "Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A?" Sontag admonished, the critic of a work should "show how what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than… show what it means." (10)

What does it look like, though, to "show what it is"? This question circles us all the way back to Stewart's project of observing the felt-sense of emotion before it is given meaning, or before it is "thrown up on billboards." In a way, symptomatic literary scholarship itself is a practice of constructing, erecting, and writing on billboards: it takes literary objects and "shows what they mean" and then advertises that meaning, makes it public, circulates it.

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[39] Best and Marcus' Introduction to *Representations* provides a broad summary of the multiple approaches that might fit under the umbrella of "surface reading" (Fall 2009).

Love's model of descriptive reading draws influence instead from observation-based social sciences like microsociology and ethology. As she observes, "those fields have developed practices of close attention, but, because they rely on description rather than interpretation, they do not engage the metaphysical and humanist concerns of hermeneutics" (375). Following the descriptive practices of social scientists like Bruno Latour and Erving Goffman, and of course Best and Marcus' concept of Surface Reading, Love suggests we experiment with "literal rather than symptomatic" reading: what do texts say? What happens when we turn attention to what is *present* in a text, rather than what is absent or repressed? In other words, as Best and Marcus write, critics might focus on "ghosts as presences, not absences […] [letting] ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts *of*" (383). The significance of Love's contribution to this scholarly conversation is evident in her brilliant approach of offering a descriptive reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a novel that is both the paradigmatic ghost story of the Twentieth Century and one that has frequently lent itself to fruitful psycho-analytic and post-structural analyses (like the one done by Roger Luckhurst, as I addressed in earlier chapters). Ultimately, Love observes that "a flat reading of *Beloved* suggests the possibility of an alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness" (375).

It is immediately apparent that descriptive reading offers a critical model that opens up scholarly access to discursively liminal emotions like grief, and moreover that such a model allows us to step carefully around the problems associated with empathy and witnessing that I have addressed. Specifically, reading on the "surface" shifts focus to what is present in the experience of affects: how does this emotion *feel* as it arises in consciousness? In other words, one might ask *not* what Forster's BOUM covers over and represses, but rather what it *sounds* like; not what Delillo's ghost represents, but rather what he *is* like; not what Brand's story means

or occludes, but what it *is*; not what Didion manipulates or orchestrates, but what she writes clearly that she *feels*; not what the *kurohata* symbolizes but how its presence is felt in consciousness. Moreover, given the anxieties that both Eggers and Lee express about representation and semiotics (*especially* in terms of empathy and witness) and the instability of narrative modes in those novels, I suggest that *A Gesture Life* and *What Is the What* might be available for alternative, descriptive readings. Such an approach shifts focus from how the writers negotiate the "meaning" and "representation" of historical trauma and victimhood to how unspoken or unspeakable grief feels as it is experienced in present consciousness. What happens when we don't look down for "depth," but rather simply observe what is there?

Descriptive Readings of Lee and Eggers

In both of the novels, I think the place to look for presence is in the framing narratives, rather than in the heavily mediated and mediating traumatic memories. Lee shares with Morrison an immediately apparent engagement with the heavy symbolism and themes of pathological traumatic return that readers might expect from grief stories; just as the ghost in *Beloved* is traditionally understood to represent generations of unnamed and forgotten murdered slaves as well as Sethe's own murdered children, so might Hata's ghostly daughter, Sunny, come to represent or reincarnate the murdered K. Indeed, such a symptomatic reading is certainly available and productive, and this is why it was necessary for me to engage Lee's ambivalence and anxiety surrounding representation and symbolism in the text; a responsible reading, I think, must take into account that Lee seems to be withdrawing the invitation towards a symptomatic reading even as he offers it up. Indeed, one of the text's thematic through-lines is that of the distinction between the depths of deep water and floating on the surface, and it is always

floating—staying surface-level—that that is the most resonant. Hata, for instance, says of his relationship with Mary Burns that they "floated the deep waters": that their relationship's value is in what is immediately apparent, in what is on the surface (61). Later, in one of the novel's most poignant moments, Lee writes:

> It is a profoundly arresting thing to realize the exact mode and matter of one's own life at the very moment it is becoming incarnate and true, namely, how after you have pushed aside and pushed aside again, the old beacons will bob up once more, dotting the waters before you like a glowing ring of fire. (284)

In this instance, what inevitably rises to the surface is what has value: "beacons" as both glowing lights and harbingers of what is to come. However, the symbol of the harbinger closes in on itself, arresting the attribution of semiotic dimension to the figure. The "exact mode and matter" of Hata's life is an unclear referent, except in the tautological next phrase, where we see it becoming "incarnate" (matter) and "true" (mode); it simply appears as it is, floating in the visual field rather than beckoning towards the water's depths. Under the influence of Love, we might configure the scene as an invitation to "float the deep waters" of the text itself, and to ask questions about how grief might be felt and meditated on as a form of discursively-liminal presence (or "surface") rather than as either an *aporia* or as an overdetermined signifier like the *kurohata*.

Like *Beloved*'s ghost, Sunny is relentlessly associated with the present, and moreover with what refuses to be represented or symbolized. Hata seems preoccupied with instrumentalizing his daughter towards his own therapeutic ends—his relationship with her plays out the patterns established with K, and somehow Sunny's redemption seems to offer him the

opportunity to absolve himself of guilt over his complicity in the historical trauma.[40] However, Sunny herself refuses such a symbolic role and rather recedes increasingly from the reader's view. Early on, she is associated with representational liminality, or with a kind of hardcore literalness. As Hata spies on her after she runs away, for example, he relates: "she was simply there, moving without music, hardly looking at [the others] as she swayed and twirled and pushed out her hips, her chest" (114). It is this kind of "simply there" that emphasizes her sheer presence to consciousness; even music, which as I discussed earlier seems to offer a complicated kind of semiotics to Hata, becomes silent, and there is only Sunny's body: material existence with no semiotic context. Sunny exists in these kinds of silences—the silences that earlier had seemed to make the composer disappear—so that she exists in a space outside language, outside the metaphors by which people create meaning in and of their lives. Later, as Hata continues the search for his disappearing daughter, he notices that "everything [he] look[s] upon appears over-real and starkly patent" (202). That word *over-real* gives the reader pause, in that it points to some form of excess, some form of residue beyond the mind's ability to assimilate the material world into semiotic systems. *Patent,* likewise, carries connotations of self-evidence, of transparency, or of overtness: something obvious in-itself, without the conscious processing of it. In short, Sunny's character is consistently associated with the discursively liminal, or with that which refuses symbolic integration. Despite Hata's psychoanalytical impulses towards using Sunny as a processing object in his pathology about K, Sunny represents the mark of refusal. She will not stand in for the absence of K, but rather insists on being an assertion of herself.

It is worth noting that Sunny's position at the surface, at the point of presence rather than absence, has the effect of rendering Hata's world completely uncanny, and ultimately inspires us

[40] Mark C. Jerng provides an extended reading of the dynamics of this therapeutic relationship in "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*" (2006).

to conceptualize the *uncanny* as relevant to discourses on liminality and representation. After Hata's house burns down, he has an almost classic Freudian experience on inspecting the burned property:

> I have the peculiar sensation that this inspection and showing is somehow postmortem, that I am already dead and a memory and I am walking the hallways of another man's estate, leaning into rooms to sniff what lingering notes of his person may remain, the tang of after-shave or slivers of soap, the old wool of his coats and leather shoes, the dust and spice of the cupboards. (139)

Here, Hata's house is both his house and his not-house; it resembles the streets that Freud has walked a thousand times that become suddenly estranged or too/non familiar. Moreover, it feels "post-mortem," like the man is in his own "memory"; the too-familiarity expresses a form of death, or of the doubled persona having replaced the existence of the original man. What's important to point out here and connect to Sunny's surfaces is that the uncanny itself carries with it a residue of discursive liminality, as an experience that is almost an exact repetition/ representation/ double of another experience, but *not quite, somehow.* It is as if the elements of the new experience that replicate the old experience are legible and identifiable, but that there remains a residue of presence that cannot fully be reduced to the previous experience. A descriptive reading that identifies those presences, those objects irreducible in language, allows us to understand Hata's "peculiar sensation" here as an encounter with the irreducibility of his own grief, or with the conscious experience of that emotion outside the semiotics of it. In this way, Sunny's refusal to be assimilated into representation transforms Hata's perception of the destruction of his world, allowing an encounter with grief objects as ghosts rather than as signifiers of symbolic loss.

Importantly, such a reading also makes it possible to understand narrative withholding—like that we see in Didion and Cooper—as the presence of refusal, rather than the consequence of traumatic aporia or dissociation. Going back to the moment of K's death that I analyzed in the previous section, we can again locate not a failure of Doc Hata to approach the experience but a *refusal*, by Lee, to offer it up for a witness's consumption. It cannot, in other words, be colonized in discourse. Even as K is brought *into* being by Hata's testimony – and, indeed, intelligible through the status of legal and historical victimhood – her body and her being are the residue that cannot be subsumed by the semiotic process. Read alongside Love, we can understand Lee's resistance as an active withholding rather than a passive dissociation, and in it can locate a newer rhetorical decision in response to an old writerly dilemma. By focusing on the surfaces, on what refuses to be assimilated into language and meaning, we circle back almost to Sedgwick's original notions of the disruptive power of affect as a site of resistance. For my own purposes, however, it suffices to note the extent to which a descriptive reading approach with an emphasis on discursive liminality makes the moments available to critical consciousness without dissolving them or explaining them away as aporias. In other words, the approach brings the "negative space" of the novel into the foreground;[41] what is un-represented or un-representable opens up as a presence rather than the harbinger of suspicious repression or depth.

Like *A Gesture Life*, *What Is the What* contains a framing narrative that constructs the "present" as an extra-semiotic or non-representational space. Even though Twitchell's reading focuses on the ideology of storytelling and witnessing, she does notice this alternative dimension in the text, and makes much of it. She writes of:

[41] In photography and art, this is often referred to as "Inversion."

> […] the novel's persistent presentness, and particularly its denial of that hallmark of misery lit: an unambiguously happy ending. With the novel beginning and ending during the robbery [what I am referring to as "the framing narrative"], it becomes not only a record of a distant, historical, African suffering, but also a story of present-day American trauma. (640-641)

For Twitchell, here, the "present" is both a time construction and a position in space ("present" to the mind), and the framing narrative's existence has the fortunate consequence of drawing the reader's attention to the constructedness of language and storytelling, and to the "distorted and partial" qualities of any representation of suffering (641). Twitchell sees ethical value in that consequence, in that the novel resists the Misery Lit machine and instead draws attention to the constructedness of the story.

I think Twitchell's symptomatic reading is exceptional, and it goes a long way towards unpacking the complicated relationship between transcultural witnessing, codified trauma genres, and discourses of international humanitarianism. However, if we understand the robber in the present-day narrative frame as a material body and not just a symbol or an expression of Deng's unprocessed childhood trauma, what might that reveal? I don't think such a reading is unwarranted, precisely because like Sunny, the robbery is consistently associated with extra-semiotic or discursively-liminal dimensions; the figures actively resist symbology. Indeed, even Deng's apartment itself is transformed into a non-signifier by the event. Eggers writes:

> In a furious burst, I kick and kick again, flailing my body like a fish run aground. Hear me, Christian neighbors! Hear your brother just above! Nothing again. No one is listening. No one is waiting to hear the kicking of a man above. […] you have no ears for someone like me. (142)

The apartment thus behaves almost like a semiotic vacuum, wherein meaning can be made but cannot escape or be witnessed by an interlocutor. Even the reader ("no one"/ "you") is withheld from the interaction, since not only do we not have the interest to listen but our ears themselves are gone. The space of the robbery therefore resists representational depth, inviting our focus to land on Deng's encounter with the speechlessness of his own grief: with how it can't be made to *mean,* cannot be leveraged in the service of a larger story, just lies dead and dumb as a presence in front of him. In this way, the apartment where the robbery takes place is an active eradicator of Stewart's billboards, and forces a confrontation between Deng, the reader and discursively liminal grief that feels vibrant as it presents itself to consciousness.

Twitchell also lands on one other moment in the text, which is worth addressing because it recalls Lee's *kurohata* as a sort of negative-twin. When the robber first arrives at Deng's apartment, Deng notices that "he has his hand on something near his waist, as if needing it to hold up his pants" (10). Of course, the object is a gun, but Deng relates that he "[doesn't] understand anything," and only later recognizes the danger: "He has been holding it all along, and I was supposed to know. But I know nothing: I never know the things I am supposed to know" (10). First, Deng's initial non-knowledge breaks down the efficiency of the semiotic system, whereby a hand near a waist would signify the possession of a gun, at least to someone fluent in the discourse of robbery. The place where that signified stood is just empty—like the "gap" that Hata perceives in the *kurohata*—but rather than behaving like the *pharmakon,* the hand placement simply dissolves into its literality. It is just a hand, in that anti-semiotic space of the framing narrative in the apartment. '

Furthermore, as Twitchell writes, "the crucial information [Deng eventually gains] is not what the hand-in-the-waistband signals, but that it was a signal at all" (640). In other words:

> Salvation lies not in coming to knowledge, but in recognizing its limits and in recognizing that the knowledge that lies beyond one's limits is of value. […] Like the famous optical illusion depicting either a young or old woman, in Eggers's novel knowledge and ignorance […] exist simultaneously. (Twitchell 640)

In my own context, what constitutes "knowledge" might be conceptualized as what is present in language, discourse and communication—what is not liminal—a space where things signify and that significance is confirmed socially. From that perspective, the opposite of "knowledge" is not ignorance but rather discursive liminality, emotions that are present completely at the surface and do not possess any semiotic depth. Descriptive reading practices that help us identify those surfaces and talk about the way that they are registered to consciousness can rescue them from the realm of "ignorance"; those emotions simply request a different form of attention, and become immediately apparent when approached with observation and awareness rather than suspicion and analysis.

In this final section, I turn back towards work in contemporary phenomenology by Dan Zahavi that establishes the value of letting go of symptomatic reading as the dominant epistemic practice of literary scholarship. In what follows, I provide a discussion of what implications this might have for the experience of the self, and then briefly gesture towards several extensions I see emerging from this fruitful point of intersection.

Discursive Liminality and Sense of Selfhood

One of the anxieties that writers engage about feelings of overwhelming grief or trauma is that it tends to behave like a vacuum. When we experience grief as the object of "speechlessness," or of somehow outside representation and language, it can feel as if a very

identity or sense of oneself dissolves within it. One can feel dispossessed of semiotic dimension, and thus of the central way that consciousness comes to know the world. In other situations, like those about which Forster, Brand and Eggers write, individual "selves" can seem to be interpellated into victim positions, and victimhood is such a heavily circumscribed subject position that it exerts enormous pressure on the consciousness that occupies it. In many ways, then, grief can function both as a response to trauma and as a new injury, where survivors feel not only disinherited of "the meaning of things" but also of their very felt-sense of coherent identity.

If one understands discursively liminal affects like grief as fundamentally *accessible* to consciousness (if not in language than in observation of the felt-sense), that understanding also suggests that grief may not inevitably alienate one from a coherent sense of self. In other words, the accessibility of liminal grief implies that there should be an attendant sense of "self" that is outside language or theory-grounded modes of understanding. Even further, losing language or feeling "speechless" thus doesn't need to damage self-awareness, even though that idea has such capital in contemporary psychology.

In "Theory of Mind, Autism and Embodiment," Zahavi explores the extent to which a phenomenological perspective on selfhood might challenge other theories of mind. Though a detailed explanation of current theories of mind is far beyond the scope of this project, one once-dominant model is that of the linguistic self. In this model, infants do not possess self-awareness until acquire linguistic self-reference. Zahavi writes:

> According to this […] view, the infant was supposed to exist in a "state of un-differentiation," of fusion with mother, in which the 'I' is not yet differentiated

> from the 'not-I' and in which inside and outside are only gradually coming to be sense as different" (198)

Even if this idea is slightly outdated in terms of contemporary philosophical scholarship, it remains pervasive in popular psychology and thus certainly affects how one feels about one's self and selfhood. Following Stern, though, Zahavi asserts that "we need to recognize the existence of forms of self-awareness that precede the mastery of language and the ability to form full-blown rational judgments and propositional attitudes" (198). In other words, we might understand language as one way to "articulate" (and thus transform) experience, but not as *constituting* experience in the fullest, most post-structural sense. From a common-sense perspective, self-experience cannot be reduced to the ability to take oneself as an object as we would other objects. This makes sense especially in the context of literary works like *The Echo Maker,* wherein the brain-damaged Mark loses control of language as a sense-making mechanism but nonetheless retains a coherent first-personal self-awareness in his experience of grief.

As Zahavi points out, a phenomenological perspective first of all "insists that first-personal experience presents me with an immediate, nonobjectifying access to myself" (204). In other words, one does not have to possess the representational capacity to takes one's self as an object as one takes other object; the self is simply there, not as an object of awareness but as awareness itself. Zahavi continues:

> The phenomenological defense of a one-level account of consciousness can provide strong support for the existence of prelinguistic forms of self-experience. […] This is not to deny that there are also more advanced forms of self-awareness that do, in fact, presuppose the use of language, but the primitive self-awareness

> entailed by phenomenal consciousness is independent of such conceptual sophistication. […] To put it another way, the question of self-awareness is not primarily a question of a specific *what*, but of a unique *how*. It does not concern the specific content of an experience, but its unique mode of givenness. (204)

In other words, an infant does not need to master the concept or the word for "pain" or "frustration" in order to feel those affects, and moreover in order to feel them as *mine*, or as qualities that attend self-experience rather than the experience of another.

What is important about the analysis above is that it situates classic Merleau-Pontian first-person givenness within the context of contemporary psychology, and recovers the extent to which post-structural conceptions of subjecthood and subjectivity may distract one from awareness of a pre-linguistic (or discursively liminal) sense of selfhood. Phenomenologists, of course, focus not on how body-awareness is given as an "object" (like other objects), but how it is given as a "subject"- how it is experienced in the felt-sense. Our experience of the world is not entirely constituted by what can be given as "object" in language, whether that is an emotion or a story or a material object. This is all to say that experience need not be understood to be inherently linguistic or semiotic, and that it is certainly possible to have real self-awareness of discursively liminal emotions without being able to "represent" them to ourselves as objects of consciousness. It also provides a meaningful conceptual framework for reading works like those of Eggers and Lee, whereby we might bring one epistemic mode to bear (post-structuralism, ideology-based criticism) on the stories that characters construct for themselves and another (descriptive reading) on what is present to the characters' consciousness as a non-discursive mode of subjectivity. Primary perception is not awareness of an object- it is a genuine form of self-experience. This project has positioned literature as a source of knowledge not only about

how language can and does construct experience, but about how experience is registered to consciousness outside or at the limits of language.

Must grief really come to behave like a vacuum, then, dissolving meaningful experiences of subjectivity or appropriating human bodies into the systems and symbols of ideology? There are several consequences that theorizing the precipice between unassimilated and discursive realms might have for survivors of trauma. First, survivors need neither to be turned into Caruthian "eidetic tape recorders" nor co-opted away from direct experience of grief, because from this perspective the experience of grief is simply that: an observation of what is present to consciousness in trauma. Trauma need serve no other end, need not exist *for* or *to* an interlocutor or give rise to glorified empathy, and need not become entirely inchoate or inaccessible to consciousness simply because it can't be uttered. Second, though descriptive reading practices might provide an epistemic model for critical access to discursively liminal emotions in literature, the emotions themselves demand no new theory or perspective. As Stewart writes:

> This is no utopia. Not a challenge to be achieved or an ideal to be realized, but a mode of attunement, a continuous responding to something not quite already given and yet somehow happening. (127)

Discursively liminal affects require not a new epistemology but simply a different "mode of attunement," a turning of attention to what is present to consciousness rather than what that presence means or signifies, or how it fits into the stories we construct for ourselves and others. Therefore, one must not move away from structural forms of knowledge making at all; those forms can simply be complimented by multiple kinds of attention to a work's surfaces and to its depths.

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