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TRACING TRAUMA THROUGH THE GENERATIONS IN TONI MORRISON, ART
SPIEGELMAN, AND LINDA HOGAN

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine how trauma transcends generations in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*. In particular, I pay attention to the way the person first affected by trauma approaches telling their story to the next generation in their family. *Beloved* and *Maus* demonstrate that attempting to distance the next generation from original trauma by holding stories too close or too high exacerbates or creates traumatic relationships between generations. *Solar Storms*, however, provides a model of sharing trauma communally and intergenerationally that creates strong ties within the community and between generations. By comparing how stories are told, I find that the willingness to share traumatic experience greatly influences how subsequent generations receive their ancestors' traumatic past and deal with their own trauma born out of their relationships with family members.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Remembering to Forget.....	7
Summary	8
Source of Trauma.....	9
Sethe’s Trauma	14
Effects on Denver.....	17
Why Denver Matters	22
Chapter 3 As if the Holocaust Were a Blockbuster	27
A Heroic Victim.....	28
Unmatchable Standards.....	32
Layers of Exclusivity	38
Why this Matters.....	40
Chapter 4 Sharing Trauma	42
Summary	42
Introduction.....	45
Origins Out of Violence	47
Trauma in Nature	52
Community Building.....	55
Identity Reclamation	58
Why This Matters.....	62
Chapter 5 Conclusion.....	63
BIBLIOGRAPHY	66

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Case 11. – Mr. C. W. E., about 50 years of age, naturally a stout very health man, weighing nearly seventeen stone, a widower of very active habits, mentally and bodily, was in a railway collision on February 3d, 1865. He was violently shaken to and fro, but received no bruise or any sign whatever of external injury . . . He was necessarily much alarmed at the time, but was able to proceed on his journey to London . . . nearly fourteen months after the accident . . . He has lost about twenty pounds in weight, is weak, unable to walk a quarter mile or attend to any business. His friends and family stated that he is, in all respects, “an altered man.” (58-59 Erichsen)

According to Ruth Leys, in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*, modern understanding of trauma can be traced back to John Erichsen, a doctor and professor of surgery in the 1860s. The above quotation is taken from Erichsen’s work “Injuries of the Nervous System: On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System” in which he observes victims suffering from maladies caused by railway accidents. He is particularly interested in cases, such as the above, where there was no immediate injury detected and the patient had the ability to go about their daily tasks for a while with little difficulty. Months after the accidents, Erichsen finds these patients to have developed very serious life changing maladies or even complete changes in personhood, as observed in Mr. C. W. E’s case. Erichsen’s findings appear to be classic cases of trauma’s effects on the mind with symptoms showing up months or even years after the incident. However, Erichsen, at the time, hypothesized that the significant length of time it took for these physical and mental

maladies to appear after the accident was due to “concussion of the spine.” He approached his study of the phenomenon from a physiological mindset, but soon, the study of this type of phenomenon would take on a psychological framework, the approach we commonly associate with trauma today.

Leys names figures such as Alfred Binet and Sigmund Freud as forerunners in this field of thought, who were concerned with how the mind is wounded by “sudden, unexpected, emotional shock” (Leys 4). Leys goes on to claim that the focus of the field began to fall on the “hysterical shattering of the personality” brought about by traumatic experiences, as well as the idea that traumatic events are received “outside the domain of ordinary awareness” (Leys 4). This concept, that events are coded in the mind outside of typical, conscious awareness, led to the popularization of hypnosis as a treatment for accessing the events from memory. Spikes in the popularity of trauma’s study can be seen in both World War I and World War II as well as in the Vietnam war, with particular attention paid to Holocaust survivors as the long-term effects of concentration camps started to become clear in the years after World War II.¹

The study of trauma in literature then arises with Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Caruth’s book examines works of literature and film in the lens of psychoanalytic theory, including the use of ideas produced by psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud, Paul de Man, and Jacques Lacan. In the Introduction, Caruth notes that she does this because she finds that “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (Caruth 3).

¹However, the study of trauma in psychoanalysis is marked by lack of cohesion in the field and agreement on definitions of terms used to describe the phenomena of traumatic experience.

Caruth also supports her use of trauma theory in combination with literature by opening the book with an analysis of how Freud uses literature to deepen his analysis in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud calls upon Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* to further explain the belief that trauma is unconsciously reenacted by the affected individual by pointing to a scene in which trauma is repeated. Caruth, however, finds that Freud not only demonstrates his point dramatically through literature but also suggests that the inclusion of Tasso's work "exceeds, perhaps, the limits of Freud's conceptual or conscious theory of trauma" (Caruth 2). She conceives that his use of the literary work exceeds the limits of Freud's understanding because it pushes his analysis forward, further than he could consciously explain. Caruth claims that the language seen in literature "defies, even as it claims, our understanding" making it the perfect tool "to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness" (Caruth 5).

In the most recent studies of literary trauma theory, Michelle Balaev notes a major shift in the way critics consider trauma. Balaev claims that early critics such as Caruth and Kali Tal rely on the assumption that trauma is unrepresentable. In particular, she finds that Caruth "suggests trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language" (Contemporary Approaches 1). However, as literary trauma theory has progressed, critics move past this impasse, and Balaev highlights how modern critics achieve this in the collection she edited, *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (2014). Balaev explains that the critics in her edited volume move "away from the focus on trauma as unrepresentable and toward a focus on the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic

experience” (Contemporary Approaches 3). This type of analysis is made possible by engaging a pluralistic model of trauma that includes frameworks incorporating psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories as well as ideas that acknowledge social and political ones.

One point that I found greatly important in Balaev’s analysis of contemporary literary trauma theory in her introduction is that “A single conceptualization of trauma will likely never fit the multiple and often contradictory depictions of trauma in literature” (Contemporary Approaches 8). Therefore, she seems to largely argue that a lack of cohesion in theories of trauma across multiple disciplines is logical, perhaps even inevitable. She then claims analyzing literature within social and political frameworks exposes “a wide variety of values that reveal individual and cultural understanding of the self, memory, and society” (Contemporary Approaches 8).

The idea that trauma cannot be represented singularly in literature is particularly important in my work as I analyze how trauma is passed down to later generations. However, Balaev criticizes trauma as an intergenerational phenomenon in her paper “Trends in Literary Trauma” because she finds it reductive. She believes critics tend to assume that the protagonist is the “every person” representing the entire group affected by a communal experience of trauma. In her view, trauma that spans generations, disregards original, individual traumatic experience. My work, though, does not assume that the main character is the rule for the affected community, but examines *how* trauma is presented by the author to transcend generations in communities. I specifically focus on how trauma is passed on in families, not simply through “neural-hormonal phenomena with a genetic imprint in memory,” but through an individual’s trauma bleeding into relationships and interactions between kin, creating more and varied trauma (Trends 159). In particular, I focus on how trauma is shared through storytelling in Toni

Morrison's *Beloved*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*. I pay special attention to the way the storyteller approaches telling their story, and the effect that the willingness to share one's trauma has on how subsequent generations receive their ancestors' traumatic past and deal with their own trauma born out of their relationships with their parents.

My analysis of these works, by uniting them through common themes of intergenerational trauma and storytelling, allows the consideration of how sharing traumatic experience is important for personal and communal healing as well as understanding the long-term effects of trauma enacted against a community across generations. By exploring exactly what behaviors of the first affected party cause harm to the next generation, it is possible to conceive of ways to prevent the passing on of trauma, which seems to compound generation after generation, if not addressed, according to these works of literature.

The first chapter titled "Remembering to Forget" is an analysis of the trauma passed down from ex-slave, Sethe, to her daughter, Denver, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In particular I focus on how certain aspects of Sethe's traumatic experiences in slavery influence her relationship with Denver. I argue that the traumatic experiences of slavery force Sethe to commit infanticide, and Sethe's personal approach of coping with the past damages her relationship with Denver as Sethe never tells stories about her past, other than the ones that cause her little pain. Therefore, Denver finds herself in a position stuck between love and fear for her mother and cut off from the rest of society as Sethe cuts ties with the community in an effort to forget her pain.

In the second chapter, "As if the Holocaust Were a Blockbuster," I similarly analyze how traumatic experience, by way of the Holocaust, has adverse effects on the relationship between father and child in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. In *Maus*, the sharing of traumatic experiences is very different compared to those seen in *Beloved*, as the father, Vladek, willingly tells, proclaims

even, his past. Despite his telling the stories, they are still exclusionary because they are marked by a certain pride of having survived the Holocaust, to the point that Vladek makes his son, Artie, feel as though nothing he could ever do would amount to the accomplishment of surviving the Holocaust. Vladek allows his “victory” to hang over his son’s head throughout his entire life and creates a strained relationship between father and son that exacerbates traumatic events in Artie’s life.

Finally, in the third chapter, “Sharing Trauma,” I explore how in Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* open sharing of traumatic experience and the acceptance of shared trauma allows for non-traditional relationships to be formed in a damaged community. Compared to the novels in the first two chapters, in which traumatic memories are either not shared or shared in a possessive way, *Solar Storms* features a Native American community in which the culture relies on the communal nature of stories, origins, pain, and trauma. In returning to the community of Adam’s Rib, the protagonist, Angel Wing, finds that her trauma is hers alone but can be attributed to a long line of colonial oppression and violence, shared within the community. In learning about her culture through the stories her grandmothers tell, Angel comes to terms with her toxic relationship with her mother while her ancestors land is threatened by modern development in the 1970s.

In sum, my thesis aims to examine how the writers have represented the different ways trauma is handled by the individual, and how individuals’ coping mechanisms can have adverse effects on generations growing out of their parents’ traumatic experience.

Chapter 2

Remembering to Forget

Denver sighed with relief. For a minute there, while her mother stood folding the wash lost in thought, she clamped her teeth and prayed it would stop. Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it. Not being in it, she hated it . . . (Morrison 62)

Without having read *Beloved*, one would guess from the above quotation that Denver is six or seven years old and justifiably upset about not being included in her mother's story and thoughts for a spell. However, Denver is an eighteen-year old girl who finds herself in anguish at the thought there is a world "gleaming, powerful" that she does not, and has no desire to, know. This excerpt is one of many moments in *Beloved* where it is evident that Denver has not fully developed as an eighteen-year-old should. Not only is her reaction to her mother's lapse into the past childish, but it also reveals a lack of self-identity and a heavy dependence on her mother. Although personal growth can be stunted by many things in a child's life, it becomes clear, as the novel progresses, that Denver's underdevelopment owes to her relationship with her mother, Sethe. In *Beloved* Morrison explores how trauma lingers in families through the unhealthy, dependent relationship between Sethe and Denver, spurred on by Sethe's inability to confront her past and willingly share it with Denver.

In order to examine the trauma passed on to Denver, it is necessary to first examine the source of trauma in *Beloved*. Although the source of trauma for Denver is her mother, Sethe,

Denver's exposure to trauma indirectly stems from the violence and destruction of the family in slavery. Therefore, this chapter will begin with an examination of slavery in the novel, followed by an analysis of Sethe's trauma, and finally an evaluation of how Sethe's trauma affects Denver.

Summary

Toni Morrison situates *Beloved* in the mid-nineteenth century, locating slavery in a transitory period of US history. The Emancipation Proclamation, which deemed all slaves free, was passed in 1863 and bisects the novel. The "present" part of *Beloved* takes place ten years post-emancipation, primarily in Ohio at 124 Bluestone Road. However, the novel features a famously disjointed plotline that constantly jumps, without warning, from the past to present through the memories and stories of the characters. Morrison notes that the non-linearity of the novel, which is done spectacularly well, is meant to mimic the jolting experience of being captured as a slave, but makes for a confusing entry into the novel.² Therefore, it is necessary to outline the novel linearly, beginning with the present. Sethe and her daughter, Denver, live in their haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road in a town in Ohio near Cincinnati. Sethe spends her days working in a kitchen restaurant and beating back memories of her past as an escaped slave from a plantation in Kentucky called Sweet Home. In addition to her time as a slave, lost family members are also memories too painful to remember. These include: her two sons, Howard and Buglar, who have run away; her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, who has passed away; and her

² Found in the Foreword of the First Vintage International Edition, published in 2004, of *Beloved*. See page xviii.

husband, Halle, whose whereabouts and well-being are unknown. The novel centers around Sethe's being forced to face and chronicle her past with the appearance of Paul D, another ex-slave from Sweet Home, and a peculiar young woman who shows up at her door, Beloved.

Denver and Beloved become playmates, and Sethe is happy to have her around, but Beloved's other-worldly nature and hostile attitude toward Paul D drive him away. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Beloved is somehow Sethe's daughter, whom Sethe felt forced to murder, reincarnated and greedy for her mother's love and attention. As the novel comes to a close, Sethe and Beloved form an unhealthy bond that begins to destroy Sethe. In watching their situation escalate, Denver feels she must venture out of the home to find help, something that she has virtually never done, and certainly not without her mother.

Source of Trauma

Morrison explores the physical and mental trauma left behind by the abuse of slavery throughout the novel. One scene that stands out for its mental effect, in *Beloved*, is Paul D's experience of having a bit in his mouth. Paul D, thought to be the last of the Sweet Home men still alive, relates the event to Sethe in the present. Notably, he does not focus so much on the feeling of the bit in his mouth or the physical discomfort it caused him. Rather, Paul D details the devaluation of self the bit caused. Not only is the use of a bit dehumanizing in itself as it is used to reign in horses, but Morrison also adds a layer of further degradation as Paul D observes the relative liberty of Mister, a rooster on the plantation. With the bit in his mouth, Paul D sees Mister trotting around and recalls that "he looked so... free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher" (Morrison 72). Paul D ends his story with, "I was something else and that something was less

than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (72). Morrison’s layering of the rooster and the use of the bit as a tool of punishment not only expertly crafts Paul D’s loss of a sense of humanity, but also demonstrates how the enslaved were often treated as though they were livestock, or in Paul D’s case, less than.

Morrison continues to rely on animal imagery throughout the novel to highlight how the enslaved were viewed and treated by slaveholders. In one of Sethe’s flashbacks, she remembers Schoolteacher, the more violent slaveholder at Sweet Home, educating his pupils on how to characterize the enslaved at Sweet Home. Sethe’s interest peaks when she hears her own name as she is passing by and is curious as to what Schoolteacher means by “her human characteristics” as opposed to “her animal ones” (Morrison 193). Although Sethe does not learn what those characteristics are, it is evident that in the eyes of Schoolteacher she is not thought of as fully human and, therefore, deserves the abuse she and her fellow slaves at Sweet Home receive.

Morrison also makes sure to provide examples of the more violent, physical abuse that the slaves endured, which causes them lasting mental and physical scars. The author again uses animal imagery when Schoolteacher’s pupils assault, milk, and beat Sethe. Sethe references the horrors of the event multiple times, but is particularly outraged at the fact that they stole her milk. As Sethe manages to tell Paul D her story, he is most concerned with the fact that “They used a cowhide on you?” while Sethe focuses on the fact that “they took my milk.” Paul D, then, is angered by the fact that “They beat you and you was pregnant?” but Sethe, again, repeats her main problem with the beating by highlighting “And they took my milk!” (Morrison 17). Her concern for her milk shows her regard for her duty as a mother and how the care of her children is her main priority. The punishment she receives directly compromises her ability to nourish her

children, especially her young daughter, and serves as a symbol of how slavery destroyed families.

In the novel, Morrison continues to draw attention to how slavery destroyed families by paying particular attention to the often-broken link between mother and child. Linden Peach, in his critical analysis of *Beloved*, takes note of the way Morrison employs language to highlight the “factory-like nature” of a mother’s relationship to her child (Peach 104). Sethe explains she barely knew her mother and says “She must of nursed me two or three weeks—that’s the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was” (Morrison 60).³ The language highlights a distinct lack of sentimentality in Sethe’s recall of her upbringing, drawing attention to how the act of nursing a child is desecrated by the functionality of slavery. The nurturing aspect of motherhood, traditionally viewed as loving and deeply personal, is degraded to a “job” passing emotionlessly from one woman to another. This view of Sethe’s loveless upbringing in slavery is especially important in understanding how her notion of motherhood swings to the opposite side of the spectrum in freedom when she has the capacity to love fully.

It is also necessary to understand that the motherhood Sethe knows and Denver is exposed to in the novel is influenced by a history of infanticide. Given the limited options available in protecting one’s child from slavery, many women resorted to homemade abortions⁴ or murdering one’s own children. Morrison chiefly explores infanticide in *Beloved* through Sethe’s partly successful attempt at killing all of her children, but Morrison also ties infanticide to a long history of the act through stories about Sethe’s mother. Nan, Sethe’s caretaker on the

³ See Peach 104

⁴ Hartman p. 167

plantation, tells Sethe that “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away” (62). The storytelling being passed down here from Nan to Sethe and the example being put into practice by Sethe highlights how infanticide is not simply an idea that grew out of nothing but a strategy used to gain control of a situation in which little control was allotted. Although Sethe and her mother did not resort to infanticide for the same reasons, the idea clearly influences Sethe and is her immediate reaction to a threat against her children.

In the novel, Morrison wrestles with infanticide by examining Sethe’s act of “protecting” her children from slavery by attempting to kill them. Paul D, who is scandalized by the story, at first does not believe Sethe did it and seeks her out for questioning. After Paul D confirms it was indeed Sethe who attempted to kill all of her children and partially succeeded with the death of her “crawling-already girl,” he scathingly points out that “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (165). This language is particularly thought-provoking because according to Schoolteacher, and slaveholders in general, Sethe does essentially have four feet. The use of animal imagery throughout the novel and then in relation to this event complicates the readers’ understanding and feelings of the infanticide by grounding it in the viewpoint of the enslaver as well as in the realities of slavery. In Sethe’s mind, slavery is far worse than death, but Paul D argues that “There could have been a way. Some other way” (165). However, Sethe is adamant that the decision she made is the right one, saying “It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (165). Sethe’s levelheaded and assured demeanor leads to the conclusion that, though Sethe intends to protect her children, slavery arrests her ability to do so.

In addition to the type of motherhood Denver is exposed to by virtue of slavery, she is also subject to the loss of identity that slavery creates for her family members. In *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber claims that one of the main ways identity of self is destroyed in the novel is through slavery's destruction of family. The characters are then forced to find a way "to recover from trauma and create an identity out of 'nothing'" (Schreiber 32). Without solid relationships among family members, characters are left without ways to define themselves in relationships of unconditional love. Instead of a family name tying someone to an identity grounded in love, the enslaved are forced to take the names of the people who own them, leading to an identity grounded in property and a sense of objectivity. Schreiber pays particular attention Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, and how her lack of identity, and eventual reclamation of identity, is grounded almost entirely in family.⁵ Morrison portrays Baby Suggs' lack of identity when she finds herself free and asks herself

Something's the matter. What's the matter? What's the matter? (. . .) But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.' Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? (Morrison 141)

The age at which Baby Suggs finds her sense of self is the main force behind this scene, as it is often presumed that one realizes oneself early on in life. Under the ownership of Mr. Garner, the "benevolent" slaveholder at Sweet Home and many other slave owners, Baby Suggs has not been given the right to understand that she is an individual with agency and her own heartbeat. Up until the point of her freedom Baby Suggs had never been able to think of herself as herself, which demonstrates the stunting of self-identity slavery causes.

⁵ See Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* p. 33

Sethe's Trauma

Morrison portrays Sethe's trauma through the disjointed storyline the novel follows, which is chiefly caused by Sethe's memories of the past. In the first section of the novel, Sethe describes how her memories crop up at random:

She might be hurrying across a field, running practically (. . .) Nothing else would be on her mind (. . .) Then something (. . .) and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. (Morrison 6)

Inexplicably and with no real ties to the present, Sethe's past rolls out before her without her permission, and Morrison uses the memories as a mechanism to create an understanding of Sethe's experience. The narrative is constantly in both the past and the present, which builds an unstable sense of space and time in the novel.

Sethe's disruptive memory results from her inability to confront the past. She is unwilling to dwell on the memories that come. She reflects that "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" and that "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (Morrison 6, 42). Sethe even goes so far as to tie her daily work with her active resistance to the past. She describes herself "Working, working dough. Nothing better than to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (Morrison 73). The words Morrison uses to describe how Sethe approaches the past make clear that forgetting is a conscious effort and though not remembering some aspects of her past would be harmful she finds that ignoring most of it is necessary for her sanity and ability to move forward. Yet, it does not seem as though Sethe is moving forward, as she is stuck in the constant back and forth between the past and the present. In "Voices of Survivors in Contemporary Fiction," Laurie Vickroy provides a fitting definition of trauma that

allies well with Sethe's experience. She states "Trauma is an individual's response to events so intense that they impair emotional or cognitive functioning and may bring lasting psychological disruption" (Vickroy 131). This psychological disruption, Vickroy finds, takes the form of Sethe's memories of the past, but the impairment of emotional and cognitive functions manifests in her incapacity to come to terms with the physical and emotional pain she endured.

Morrison suggests Sethe's incapacity to acknowledge the past is a personal and conscious act on Sethe's part by explicitly describing the ways in which she ignores it but also by showing how it is possible to heal. The main way Morrison represents healing in *Beloved* is through the help of and interaction with a community. The importance of the community can be seen when Sethe begins her life as a self-emancipated woman, before the Emancipation Proclamation and the infanticide, with the introduction of

Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling of their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. (Morrison 95)

By interacting with others' and sharing in their experiences Sethe is able to have a "feeling of their fun and sorrow along with her own," which creates an environment where both pain and joy are collective. If personal emotions can be transformed into those that are collective, the burden can be shared. As Vickroy explains, without the support of a community or culture, "individuals are unprotected and forced to cope in isolation," creating the need for the employment of "survival characteristics" (Vickroy 132). In Sethe's case, the use of survival characteristics is necessary when both she and the community simultaneously turn their backs on each other. As Sethe is being taken to jail for the murder of her child, she is seen through the eyes of the community members:

Holding the living child, Sethe walked past them in their silence and hers (. . .) A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. (Morrison 152)

Given the questioning of her body language, the community construes her attempt to remain strong and sure in her actions as pride. By not appearing externally torn to pieces over Sethe's murdering her own child, the community finds itself unable to relate to Sethe and disgusted by her actions. In turn, Sethe's inability to allow herself to break down in front of the community is also an act of distrust in their assumed good intentions. From this point forward, Sethe is shunned by the community, and she, subsequently, makes no effort to reach out. Therefore, both parties are at fault in the isolation of Sethe and Denver.

Another mechanism of healing that Sethe writes off is storytelling. Storytelling and sharing of experiences go hand in hand with community interaction, but even within her family and the close friends who do still associate with Sethe, she refuses to share or allow people to go too far into her past. Sethe's refusal to tell or listen to painful stories is especially evident when Paul D is telling Sethe about having the bit in his mouth. Though he got the story off his chest, she resists it. As Paul D lets part of his story slip Morrison turns to Sethe's perspective noting "He wants to tell me, she thought. He wants me to ask him about what it was like for him— about how offended the tongue is held down by iron. . ." (Morrison 71). Rather than wanting to hear about the story, Sethe focuses on the fact that Paul D needs to talk about it. Then, after he finishes his story "Sethe put her hand on his knee and rubbed" (Morrison 72). The action can be viewed in one of two ways: that she was providing comfort for Paul D or that she was stopping him before he continued any further. From Paul D's point of view the action is "soft and

reassuring,” but her hand stops him from continuing despite the fact that Paul D admits to himself he “had only begun” (72). Here, Sethe’s resistance to the past is seen to extend to the people around her, and in the next section, I explore what this resistance means for Denver.

Effects on Denver

Violence, stigma, and isolation are introduced into Denver’s life early on due to slavery’s skewing of Sethe’s sense of motherhood, prompting her unorthodox protection of her children by attempting to kill them. As a result of slavery, Denver is essentially born into violence. Her birth story is marked with pain and suffering: from the onset of the wounds leading to the presence of the “chokecherry tree” of scars on Sethe’s back, courtesy of Schoolteacher’s nephews, to the pain of the birth itself being precariously accomplished while Sethe is on the run. Following the violent birth, Denver is also present for the infanticide of her sister and taken to jail along with Sethe where “Rats bit everything in there but her [Denver]” (Morrison 16, 42). Last but not least, Denver is nourished with violence when she “swallowed her [Beloved’s] blood right along with my mother’s [Sethe’s] milk” (Morrison 205). While Denver has no recollection of the violence itself, what truly affects Denver is the lingering mark of violence on her psyche, the not knowing, and the lasting social ramifications that lead to her status as a social pariah.

As Denver grows older, things become more normal. Similar to Sethe’s short stint of healing in Ohio, “she [Denver] had almost a whole year of the company of her peers and along with them learned to spell and count” (Morrison 102). Denver loves school and describes the experience with words such as “pleasure” and “thrilled” and is so invested in her learning that she does not realize “she was being avoided by her classmates— they made excuses and altered

their pace not to walk with her” (Morrison 102). Denver is in ignorant bliss of her status until “Nelson Lord— the boy as smart as she was—” “asked her a question about her mother that put chalk, the little *i* and all the rest that those afternoons held, out of reach forever” (Morrison 102). Denver does not know the answer to the question about her mother being locked away for murder at first, but “the thing that leapt up in her when he asked it was a thing that had been lying there all along” (Morrison 102). Deep down, the violence had left a mark on her and she knew there was something wrong, but, previously, there had been no explanation for it.

Due to the social stigma of the infanticide in her family, Denver never goes back to school and entirely withdraws from the community, resulting in an extremely dependent relationship with her mother. Despite her harboring “terrifying feelings about her mother,” Denver has no choice but to remain with Sethe as she is the only person Denver has left (102). Her brothers leave soon after the baby ghost of their sister begins haunting 124 Bluestone Road, and Denver’s grandmother, Baby Suggs, dies when Denver is about ten. Such isolation leads Denver to suffer from both extreme loneliness and a lack of self-identity. Morrison explicitly describes Denver as lonely from Sethe’s point of view throughout the novel, such as when Denver is consumed with Beloved’s care: “Sethe looked at her daughter and thought, Yes, she has been lonesome. Very lonesome” (Morrison 55). Denver’s lack of identity, though, is evident through her incessant need to be the object of stories. As Schreiber explains in *Race, Trauma, and Home*, “Denver gains positive sense of self from the stories her mother tells about her birth,” which is why she despises hearing about anything else from the past (Schreiber 48). Her need to be present in every narrative is also evident when Paul D arrives at 124 and Denver is “hot and shy” at the bottom of the step (Morrison 12). As Paul D and Sethe catch up, Denver thinks about

how her brothers and grandma leaving had not “mattered as long as her mother did not look away as she was doing now” (12).

Denver’s insecurity in her identity, then, seems to be more than just a search for “positive sense of self” as Schreiber explains. Rather, Denver’s panic of not being directly involved in conversation or on her mother’s mind throughout the novel seems to be something more than insecurity with her identity. Her needing her mother not to look away suggest that she does not feel physically concrete without her mother’s eyes on her. Perhaps, because her only relationship is with her mother, Denver is not sure that she is a real, physical entity outside of the world her mother sees or creates. This theory of Denver is strengthened when, after Beloved arrives, Denver attempts to affirm her existence through means other than her mother. When Denver tells Beloved the story of her birth, Morrison describes Denver as “nursing Beloved’s interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved” (Morrison 78). Morrison also calls Denver a “strategist” in how she keeps Beloved occupied, telling her stories and tiptoeing around her temper (121). Denver plots and executes the everyday tasks Sethe assigns as ways to keep Beloved’s attention, “Otherwise Beloved gets private and dreamy, or quiet and sullen, and Denver’s chances of being looked at by her go down to nothing” (121). Here, Denver’s ulterior motive in keeping Beloved’s attention is revealed with her desire of simply “being looked at.” Similar to her panic when her mother looks away, Denver’s goal has nothing to do with having company or a playmate. Denver’s main focus is holding Beloved’s attention on her in a way that suggests that Denver feels as though she does not truly exist outside of the consciousness of others.

Morrison especially highlights Denver's need for confirmation of her existence when Beloved begins playing tricks on Denver and disappears to what is assumed to be "the other side":

Now she is crying because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing. She grabs the hair at her temples to get enough to uproot it and halt the melting for a while. Teeth clamped shut, Denver brakes her sobs. She doesn't move to open the door because there is no world out there. She decides to stay in the cold house and let the dark swallow her like the minnows of light above. She won't put up with another leaving, another trick. (Morrison 123)

Now, it is possible to read this scene as though Denver does not want to exist without Beloved; that the thought of Beloved's disappearing is so devastating she needs to cause herself physical pain. However, the phrases "she has no self" and that "she is dissolving into nothing" speak more to Denver's inability to locate herself in the world without the presence of others. Given that her brothers and Baby Suggs are gone, she cannot afford to lose her new guest either.

In addition to Denver's withdrawal from society, Denver's lack of identity or belief in her existence can also be attributed to Sethe's inability to confront her past. As Sethe beats back the past she leaves Denver out of her narrative. Other than her birth story, Denver is not permitted to know anything about the past. As Sethe explains, "the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (Morrison 42). While Sethe believes she is protecting her daughter by keeping her from knowing anything about the past, Denver finds herself always wondering why Sethe killed her sister and how Denver herself then fit into Sethe's life. Without knowing why Sethe did it, Denver does not know if it could happen again, so she says "I spent all of my outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me (. . .)" (207).

Clearly, Denver's lack of knowledge ultimately leads her to live in a constant state of fear and isolation.

Although the explanation for why Sethe killed Beloved is not easy to grasp or accept, perhaps Denver would have been comforted and felt "safer" when provided an explanation for the infanticide grounded in an extreme form of love. However, Denver is never provided this solace and lives in a home filled with fear and uncertainty. Morrison demonstrates Denver's fear of Sethe mainly through hair-braiding imagery. At the first mention of hair-braiding, it is evident Denver is not keen on it: "'Maybe we should unbraid it?'" asked Sethe. 'Uh uh. Tomorrow.' Denver crouched forward at the thought of a fine-tooth comb pulling her hair" (Morrison 60). On first read, this reaction seems to be entirely due to the pain of the hair pulling, but Sethe braiding Denver's hair is given new meaning when Morrison exposes Denver's dream where Sethe

cut my head off every night (. . .) Her pretty eyes looking at me like I was a stranger. Not mean or anything, but like I was somebody she found and felt sorry for. Like she didn't want to do it but she had to and it wasn't going to hurt (. . .) Then she comes over to my side. I know she'll be good at it, careful. That when she cuts it off it'll be done right; it won't hurt. After she does it I lie there for a minute with just my head. Then she carries it downstairs to braid my hair. I try not to cry but it hurts so much to comb it. (Morrison 206)

Denver's disturbing dreams about her mother hint that she possesses some understanding that her mother is not killing her out of malicious intent with the phrases "Not mean or anything," "it won't hurt," and "Like she didn't want to do it," but beneath it all Denver is hurt, confused, and desperate to understand.

Sethe's inability to confront her past also translates into her inability to help Denver develop. Morrison makes clear Sethe is well aware of the effects of Denver's isolation such as when Sethe believes she "understood Denver. Solitude had made her secretive—self-manipulated. Years of haunting had dulled her in ways you wouldn't believe either. The consequence was a timid but hard-headed daughter Sethe would die to protect" (Morrison 99). Despite her troubling evaluation of Denver, Sethe seems to have no intention of helping Denver overcome her "secretive—self-manipulated state"; rather, Sethe is so busy beating the past back that she ignores the present. By not truly moving forward, Sethe creates a situation in which Denver is left to hang in the balance.

Why Denver Matters

Despite all signs pointing to Beloved's presence destroying Sethe and Denver by the end of the novel, Denver is able to overcome her fears and leave 124 Bluestone Road in search of help. After "the two of them cut Denver out of the games" and Beloved begins to slowly torture Sethe with guilt, "it dawned on Denver that if Sethe didn't wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might," prompting Denver to seek out her old teacher, Lady Jones (Morrison 239, 242). However, stepping off the front porch proved difficult as

Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything.

"You mean I never told nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my."

But you said there was no defense.

“There ain’t.”

Then what do I do?

“Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.” (Morrison 244)

And despite her not knowing the stories and what could happen, Denver is able to pluck up her courage and walk down the road.

Through Lady Jones, Denver is successful in finding help, but not in the way she had intended. Denver asks if there is any work she can do for Lady Jones in order to get some food to which Lady Jones replies “Oh, baby . . . Oh, baby” (Morrison 248). Morrison elaborates on this exchange, pointing out that

She [Denver] did not know it then, but it was the word “baby,” said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman. The trail she followed to get to that sweet thorny place was made up of paper scraps containing handwritten names of others. (Morrison 248)

It is not immediately clear how Denver enters womanhood with this interaction. From the irony of the word “baby” being the one that initiates her growing up to the trail of paper scraps that lead her to womanhood, this passage does not seem to make much sense. However, as Denver’s journey continues on, it becomes apparent that the significance of “baby” and the trail of paper scraps are important aspects in Denver’s growth as they guide her into and through the community.

In response to Denver’s asking for work, Lady Jones tells her that no one, not even herself, can afford to pay someone for work they do themselves, ““But if you all need to eat until your mother is well, all you have to do is say so”” (Morrison 248). Lady Jones refers to her

church group that offers a helping hand, but Denver says “‘No, no’ as though asking for help from strangers was worse than hunger” (Morrison 248). Nonetheless, food begins showing up on the stump outside her house. Here is where the significance of the trail of paper scraps becomes apparent as each food donation is accompanied by a note indicating whose basket or plate it is in or on so that Denver could return it, or simply “to let the girl know, if she cared to, who the donor was” (Morrison 249). These notes and returning the baskets and plates lead to conversations between Denver and people in the community. They say they knew her grandma, Baby Suggs, or remember Denver from when she was “a single day old,” but it is not clear, even to them, why they help Denver:

Maybe they were sorry for her. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other just so long and when trouble rode bareback among them, quickly, easily, they did what they could to trip him up. (Morrison 249)

Now, it is possible to understand how Denver is inaugurated into womanhood with the word “baby.” This excerpt centers around Denver’s display of vulnerability. By asking for help and *letting* the community help her, Denver exposes her own vulnerability as openly as a baby would. This show of vulnerability heals the broken bond between herself and the community that Sethe had created through her pride the day she attempted to murder her children and held her head high.

Given these outcomes of the notes on the platters and in the baskets, it is interesting that this is what Morrison refers to as Denver’s inauguration into womanhood. Denver’s experience with the community requires forming her own relationships and being heavily reliant on other people. Lady Jones’ and the community’s kindness is seemingly hard for Denver to stomach,

but, according to Morrison, necessary in her journey of personal growth. What does this mean about Morrison's ideas of personal growth? The entering into a community as one's own person makes sense, but the acceptance of one's need for others is a different spin on this idea. Perhaps Morrison is getting at the idea that in order for Denver's relationship within the community to be one that is true, it needs to be one that realizes the give and take of such a relationship. Although the taking or accepting of help can be the more difficult part of a relationship, it is necessary to forming strong bonds and security of self within a community.

Denver continues to become more integrated in the community and develops as she forms a closer bond with Lady Jones. But "As Denver's outside life improved, her home life deteriorated" (Morrison 250). As Denver gets a job with a family in town, the tension between Sethe and Beloved comes to a head one day when the women in the community, upon hearing about the otherworldly girl that is destroying Sethe, come to expel Beloved from 124 Bluestone Road. Beloved disappears without a trace and leaves Sethe frail and in her sick bed with Paul D returning to care for Sethe.

The main thing about the end of the novel that concerns me, though, is that Denver is markedly different in the eyes of Paul D when he sees her walking home from work:

Thinner, steady in the eyes, she looked more like Halle than ever.

She was the first to smile. "Good morning Mr. D."

"Well it is now." Her smile, no longer the sneer he remembered, had welcome in it and strong traces of Sethe's mouth. Paul D touched his cap. "How you getting along?"

"Don't pay to complain." (Morrison 266)

She is completely transformed from the childish, young woman Paul D remembers. Denver is welcoming and the first to smile when she sees him, whereas, upon their first meeting, Denver

was “round and brown with the face of an alert doll” and “stood on the bottom step . . . hot and shy” (Morrison 12). She is also grown up in the way that she says it “Don’t pay to complain” as before she had no problem throwing tantrums when things did not go her way. Here, finally, the readers see that Denver has grown up, in spite of the limits the trauma of her mother put on her.

Denver’s transformation from underdeveloped eighteen-year-old to caretaker of her mother highlights the long-term effects of trauma as it is passed from one generation to the next. Although Denver never experiences slavery herself, the after-effects ravage her mother and create a fearful environment for Denver’s upbringing. She is terrified to leave the house because of her mother’s refusal to tell her what actually happened, yet warns her that the outside world is dangerous. Sethe lost everyone and refused to let Denver go, leading to Denver’s stunted personal growth.

Regarding trauma and healing from traumatic experience, this story is important as the focus of the effects of trauma typically rests on those who directly experience it. However, as seen in *Beloved*, Sethe’s inability to better deal with her trauma leads to her pain bleeding into the life of her daughter. Trauma, here, transcends generations through unhealthy relationships and pervades the life of someone not directly involved for eighteen years. By not being aware of trauma’s long-reach, trauma and its ability to block personal growth can continue to transcend generations. However, by looking at trauma from the perspective of its effects on both the one directly affected and those close to them, it is possible to create healing for the individual, family, and community affected.

Chapter 3

As if the Holocaust Were a Blockbuster

Art Spiegelman's graphic novel about the Holocaust, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, is rooted in the strained relationship between a father and son. The graphic work is split up into two volumes, with the first two pages of Book I, titled "My Father Bleeds History," illustrating the relationship between father and son. The opening consists of a series of panels taking place in Rego Park, NY circa 1958. Artie, the son, walks up to the house he shares with his mother and father after being left behind by his friends. Vladek, Artie's father and a Holocaust survivor, is working out front and notices Artie crying. Vladek asks Artie to give him a hand. Upon finding out that Artie is upset because his friends abandoned him, he tells young Artie "If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week... Then you could see what it is, friends!..." (Book I; 5-6). As Vladek tells his son this "lesson," the scope of the panels spans out to emphasize Vladek's height compared to that of Artie, thereby stressing Vladek's belittling of Artie and his problems.

The first two pages of *Maus* function as both an introduction to the graphic novel, framing Artie's perspective as he transcribes his father's experience of the Holocaust, and a succinct summary of Vladek and Artie's tumultuous relationship. Although *Maus* is focused on Vladek's Holocaust story, it is also interested in the Holocaust's effects on the generations following the Holocaust. In *Maus*, Spiegelman examines the exclusionary aspect of trauma through Vladek's character, and how exclusion aids in the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next.

A Heroic Victim

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Vladek views his survival of the Holocaust with staunch pride. As seen in his belittling of Artie's problems in the introductory pages, Vladek continuously touts his horrific experience as a badge of honor. However, getting Vladek to tell the story does take some convincing on Artie's part. Spiegelman opens Chapter One with Artie going to see his father. Artie explains that he "hadn't seen him in a long time—we weren't that close," and after dinner Artie states that he would like to do a book about his father's life— something that he had mentioned to him before. Vladek replies, "It would take many books, my life, and anyway no one wants to hear such stories" (Book I: 11-12). Although Vladek's words suggest that he is hesitant to tell his story, Spiegelman gives Vladek's reply an entirely different tone by bolding the word "many" in the speech bubble of the panel to show the emphasis Vladek puts on the word. This bolding completely changes the way Vladek's reply is taken as the reader can then hear the flippancy that Vladek puts at the end of the sentence "and anyway no one wants to hear such stories." Through the bolding of "many", Vladek can be seen as faking humility or a hesitancy to tell his story; Vladek's feigned humility comes off as disingenuous as it forces Artie to reassure his father "I want to hear it" (Book I: 12).

Vladek's desire to tell his story is further solidified as he dives right into it with dramatic flair. After a few more comments, pretending to drag his feet, Vladek describes himself as though he is the male protagonist or hero, saying, "I was, at the time, young and really a nice, handsome boy" and "People always told me I looked just like Rudolph Valentino" (Book I:13). Vladek even goes as far as to mention how popular he was with women by unnecessarily detailing the story of a woman named Lucia who sought him out. And even when Vladek showed he was interested in Artie's mother, Anja, Lucia would not leave him alone. Spiegelman

also plays up Vladek's movie-star narcissism by transposing a larger than life movie poster of a masculine, exotic mouse carrying a faint damsel behind present-day Vladek peddling away on his stationary bike while he tells the beginnings of his story.

While Vladek willingly tells Artie his story of the Holocaust, he maintains a possessive attitude towards it. Vladek's possessiveness of his story can be seen in how the story is always centered around him. Granted, the story is his own, but the way he tells the story makes it seem as though he possessed agency in a situation that really afforded little. Vladek's self-centered nature is also emphasized by Spiegelman's making Vladek front and center in the panels depicting Vladek leading into his story. Spiegelman's technique of foregrounding Vladek is especially evident in a panel midway through page 12 that runs across the width of the whole page. The panel is a close-up of Vladek's body on the stationary bike from the handles up to Vladek's shoulder. Artie can be seen in the space between Vladek's arms in the center of the panel, but Vladek's body is shaded darkly, making his arms, and the identification number tattooed to his left-inner forearm, stand out. Spiegelman's imagery not only centers Vladek as the focal point but also emphasizes the dark, looming story ahead.

In addition to the possessive nature of Vladek's story-telling, Vladek turns his story of surviving the Holocaust into a heroic narrative. More often, the Holocaust is thought of as a large-scale, well-organized genocide, with the outcome of who survived and who did not arguably random. But Vladek describes his moves as calculated and cunning, such as how he knew it was good to keep his valuables for bargaining as it became clear that he and his family were in danger. He claims no one else understood his genius by saying, "I was right. When things went worse later, she was able to sell such things," referring to his wife who questioned why he wanted her to take her doll collection (Book I: 38). He also describes how he was able to

force himself into jobs when he was in the camp to make himself valuable. Vladek proudly relates to Artie how he was able to convince the block supervisor that he knew how to work with tin and how he was able to expertly repair shoes, despite only watching his cousins do it, saying to Artie “You see? It is good for you to know how to do *everything*” (Book II: 60).

Surely, Vladek is smart and developed a skill at surviving, but most of his story shows how lucky he was as those equally smart and skillful did not survive. One wrong step, and he would have been gone. In Book II, for example, Vladek tells Artie about a time at Auschwitz when a block supervisor asks if anyone knows English. At first Vladek says he is suspicious and does not want to draw attention to himself, but then dissatisfied with the result, the block supervisor comes back and asks more specifically if anyone knows English and Polish. Vladek then says he saw this as an opportunity to make himself useful. So useful in fact, that the block supervisor kept him close and helped him survive the random choice of who to kill when the block supervisor told him to “...Be sure to stand on the far left” (Book II: 31). Without his luck in knowing English as opposed to some other language, Vladek could have simply decided to stand far to the right that day and been gone by no fault of his own. Nevertheless, Vladek continues to describe his actions as though he knew exactly what he was doing, and turns his narrative of survival into an odyssey of heroism.

Vladek even takes his hero narrative so far as to frame Anja, his wife and Artie’s mother, as a damsel in distress. He describes Anja as if she would be lost without him. Starting with Book I, even before their being taken to Auschwitz, Vladek paints Anja’s character as weak. He tells Artie about how they had gone to a sanitarium in Czechoslovakia after Anja gave birth to their first son, Richieu, to treat her post-partum depression. Vladek does not seem to judge her for it and takes good care of her, but he does use her perceived weakness as a foil to his own

greatness. He states, “I understood much of such sicknesses, so I helped always to calm her down,” and “I told her many jokes and stories to keep her busy,” highlighting his expertise and strong character as compared to Anja’s (Book I: 34-35).

In Book I Artie demonstrates an interest in what his mother was doing before their being taken to the camps to which his father replies “Houseworks... And knitting... Reading... and she was writing always her diary” (Book I: 84). The mention of diaries jogs Artie’s memories and he notes that there were Polish notebooks around his childhood home when he was a kid and asks Vladek if those were Anja’s diaries. Vladek confirms that yes, they were Anja’s diaries but not the ones from the war. “What you saw she wrote *after*: her whole story from the start,” to which Artie replies “OMIGOD! Where are they? I **need** those for this book!” (Book I: 84). Vladek immediately changes the subject by complaining about Artie’s smoking and the Anja’s diaries are forgotten for a while, but Artie continues to look for his mother’s voice through those diaries for the rest of Book I.

In Vladek’s stories about Anja in the camps, he similarly paints her as unable to care for herself. Vladek explains that Anja was in the camp adjacent to Auschwitz, Birkenau, and that “it was just a death place with Jews waiting for gas...” (Book II: 51). While this characterization of Birkenau could be construed as Vladek conveying it was a miracle Anja survived it, he then relays how weak she was and how even as he was expertly caring for himself, he found ways to send her food. Vladek even tells Artie about a time he was beaten for speaking to Anja and says “So he beat me, what can I tell you? Only, thank God Anja didn’t also get such a beating. She wouldn’t live” (Book II: 57). Such characterizations of Anja, as Victoria Elmwood notes in her article "Happy, Happy Ever After," reveal more about “Vladek as a person by the way he depicts

Anja than... Anja's consciousness and perspective" (Elmwood 18). Vladek's depiction of Anja, then, also exposes his need to view himself as a hero.

Unmatchable Standards

Vladek's possessive and heroic storytelling is exclusionary by nature as it functions to block Artie from ever sharing in the trauma of the Holocaust. Granted, no one would want to take part in such a horrific story, but Artie is clearly greatly influenced by it and is forced to deal with the aftereffects it has on his parents. As evidenced by the introductory pages of Book I, Artie's upbringing is surrounded by the Holocaust. Later on, in Book II, the reader is again reminded of how the Holocaust influenced Artie's childhood when he tells his wife Françoise that "When I was a kid I used to think about which one of my parents I'd let the Nazis take to the ovens if I could save only one of them..." (Book II: 14). Artie then wonders aloud if his wanting to save his mother is normal, but it is arguably more abnormal that Nazis are a threat in his mind.

Most of Artie's present suffering is demonstrated to be in his tumultuous relationship with his father. Spiegelman depicts Vladek as hyper-critical and constantly overlooking Artie's troubles in *Maus* by comparing them to his own hardships. His rough demeanor is first demonstrated in the introductory pages of the novel, but Vladek's harsh tendencies are a constant, prevalent part of the story. It is fair to say every encounter Artie has with Vladek is filled with Vladek's judgement and punitive disposition. He continually hounds and berates anyone around him. A few examples include when Vladek throws away Artie's coat without his permission because Vladek thinks it is too old, when he blames Artie for spilling the pills he was counting, even though it was Vladek who knocked them over, and when Vladek criticizes his

second wife, Mala, for her cooking. Vladek seems to criticize everyone, but for Artie, Vladek's critical nature becomes a centerpiece in his life. When faced with his father's current badgering him about helping with the drainpipe on his house, Artie tells Francoise that he "hated helping him around the house" because "He loved showing off how handy he was and proving that anything I did was all wrong" (Book I: 97). Some could argue that his father was simply competitive, but Artie then explains, "One reason I became an artist was that he thought it was impractical— just a waste of time... It was an area where I wouldn't have to compete with him" (Book I: 97). Artie making life decisions partly in spite of his father shows that the relationship was truly toxic and forced Artie in certain directions in life, away from his father.

The text, though, then undercuts the Holocaust being the direct cause of Vladek's critical nature in a scene depicted between Mala and Artie. Nearing the end of Book I, Artie walks into his father's house to find Mala crying alone at the kitchen table. She proceeds to complain to Artie about the way Vladek treats her as if she were a maid and how she is not sure she can stand his miserly nature any longer. Then, in agreement, Artie says "I used to think the war made him that way..." and Mala replies "FAH! I went through the camps... All our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him" (Book I, 131). The words "war", "FAH", "I", and "nobody" are all bolded to signal where the characters place emphasis on their words as well as to mark this as an important section. The placement of "war" in the sentence, with its bolding, could simply be read as where Artie's tone changes, but it can also be viewed as though Spiegelman is trying to push consideration of why Vladek is the way he is. Perhaps, as one might have been led to believe, the war and the camps are not solely to be blamed for Vladek's behavior. Mala's assertion that she and all of their friends had been in the camps, and none of them were like him, supports the idea that if Vladek had never been in the camps, he still would have been critical

and miserly. However, it can then be argued that Vladek's natural propensity to be stingy is exacerbated by the extreme circumstances of the camps. Vladek uses his past as a crutch for his stinginess, but his reaction to his experiences emphasizes the long-term effects of traumatic experience and how far and long its reaches stretch.

In the beginning of Book II, Spiegelman provides a way to rationalize Vladek's story-telling and rough treatment of Artie through a series of meta panels that depict Art, the comic book artist. The section is titled "Time Flies" and opens with Art sitting at a writer's desk. First the panel's scope is closed in on Art's profile emphasizing that his human face is covered by a mouse mask. Animal masks are used throughout the telling of Vladek's story leading up to this point to show when characters were hiding in plain sight, as Vladek did when he was attempting to avoid the camps. Thereby, the use of the mask here hints at Art's feelings that he is posing as the other characters did, but this time as a survivor. Throughout the page, unexplained flies are buzzing around his body as Art is speaking directly to the reader. He tells them that his father passed away and that the first part of *Maus* was published and had great success. His other thoughts and statements are filled with dates and numbers such as how many Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz and the number of editions *Maus* is being made into in other languages, showing his awareness of the weight of it all.

The last panel takes up almost half the page and depicts Art's desk resting on top of a pile of mouse bodies, such as those he uses to depict the Jews in the Holocaust, providing an explanation for the presence of flies. The fact that his desk is lying atop the bodies suggests the idea that his success is resting on those who suffered. Art provides a visual for how he believes that perhaps he is appropriating the suffering of those in the Holocaust and benefitting off of

something he was not a part of. He then says, “Lately, I’ve been feeling depressed” as he slumps forward onto his desk in defeat (Book II: 41).

The subsequent page shows how he is inundated with people contacting him about movie specials and how to build off of his success. As people keep pushing, Art’s figure grows smaller and smaller until he begins crying like a child, “WAH!” (Book II: 42). Spiegelman then depicts the shrunken Art climbing off the chair and walking to see his therapist, Pavel, who is also a survivor of the Holocaust. He provides counsel for Art as he works through his lingering issues related to his relationship with his father and the success of *Maus*. During this discussion Spiegelman continues to play with the visual representation of the text and also has Pavel don a mouse mask, despite his actually being a Holocaust survivor. Pavel’s having a mask could mean one of two things. First, that in order to keep up with the meta part of the narrative, Pavel must be human and his wearing the mouse mask is purely logical. Or second, that Art is rightfully a Holocaust survivor, in some way, himself.

As Art begins to explain how he is feeling guilty about benefitting from *Maus* and reminiscing on his tough relationship with his father the answer becomes clear that it is the former, that Art can be considered a survivor. Pavel’s counsel is telling about Spiegelman’s intention. Pavel states, “Maybe your father needed to show that he was always right— that he could always survive— because he felt **guilty** about surviving. And he took his guilt on YOU, where it was safe... on the **REAL** survivor” (Book II: 44). Having experienced the Holocaust himself, Pavel has a distinct take on Artie’s problems, and his insight on Artie’s father is particularly useful. Maybe it is true that Vladek needed to find a reason for why he survived, but what is truly thought-provoking here is Pavel calling Art “the **REAL** survivor” (Book II: 44). By deeming him a survivor at all means that Artie can share in the suffering of the Holocaust, but

what is even more interesting is considering how Pavel could see Art as “the **REAL** survivor” and not Vladek. Perhaps Pavel’s calling Art a “**REAL** survivor” refers to Vladek’s inability to move away from the mindset and way of living in constant fear that the Holocaust brought out in him, but by those standards, Art has not “survived” either. While he is far more high-functioning than his father, Art’s most famous work is dedicated to the subject of the Holocaust. And, in addition to his rough relationship with his father due to Vladek’s heightened critical nature, Artie suffers from his mother’s suicide, which is also driven partly by her experience in the Holocaust. As Elmwood points out, “Anja’s noteworthy absence from *Maus* exposes Art’s traumatization by her death,” and she is only addressed at length by Artie in an insert of a comic he had previously drawn about his mother’s suicide called “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” (Elmwood 12). It is drawn in an entirely different style than *Maus*, notably darker in tone and drawn with human figures. Art draws himself in a striped black and white jumpsuit and explains how his father was a wreck, his parent’s friends blamed him, and his guilt about their last interaction destroyed him. Outside of the panel it says, “She came into my room... it was late at night...” and she is depicted walking in saying “...Artie... You... Still...Love...Me... Don’t you?” Artie then “Turned away, resentful of the way she tightened the umbilical cord...” and says “Sure, Ma!” (Book I: 103). The end of the comic then shows Artie in a prison block addressing his mother saying, “Congratulations!... You’ve committed the perfect crime... You murdered me, Mommy, and you left me to take the rap!!!” (Book I: 103). The shorter comic not only explains what happened to his mother, but also shows how deeply her death affected him. He is angry and confused, which manifests in the ending of the comic when he blames his mother for imprisoning and murdering him. Therefore, in addition to the troubled relationship with his father, Art “also introduces

elements of his own trauma— Anja’s suicide— which establishes a direct link between Art, the Holocaust, and its aftereffects” (Elmwood 12).

Artie is also cut off from sharing in family suffering through his parents’ idolization of his brother, Richieu, who did not survive the Holocaust. Richieu was sent away with his cousins where it was thought they would be safe. However, as Nazis also infiltrated the safe town, his aunt, Tosha, had them all drink poison rather than suffer at the hands of the Nazis in camps. Elmwood explains that “Richieu appears in *Maus* as a site of investment for Art’s anxieties about what he perceives to be his shortcomings in his parents’ eyes” (Elmwood 10). Nowhere is this better represented than in Artie’s explanation of Richieu to Françoise: “I didn’t think about him much when I was growing up... he was mainly a large, blurry photograph hanging in my parents’ bedroom” that “never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble... it was an ideal kid, and *I* was the pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete. They didn’t talk about Richieu, but the photo was a kind of reproach that *he’d* have become a **doctor** and married a wealthy Jewish girl... The creep” (Book II: 15).

In addition to being a “site of investment for Art’s anxieties,” Richieu also functions as the son who could share in the suffering of the Holocaust. Vladek refers to him as “...my first son Richieu... Of course, you never knew him. He didn’t come out from the war,” to which Artie replies, “Yes, I know...” (Book I: 30). In taking a closer look at the language used to describe Richieu it can be noted that Vladek takes possession of Richieu, saying “my first son” and “Of course you never knew him,” effectively pushing Artie to the outskirts of the family and cutting him off from being able to share in family suffering.

Layers of Exclusivity

It is also important to keep in mind the exclusive nature of the Holocaust itself in considering how Artie is kept from being a part of his family history. While his father does exclude him from sharing in the trauma with comments he adds throughout his storytelling, the tragic nature of the Holocaust itself provides another layer of exclusivity in that many did not make it out, limiting the number of people who can tell stories, let alone verify Vladek's heroic narrative. Therefore, it makes sense that finding Anja's diaries is so important to Artie, and part of the reason why Artie is so hurt when he finds his father burned his mother's diaries.

Vladek's burning of Anja's diaries is doubly exclusive as it completely silences Anja and keeps Artie from sharing in the trauma of the Holocaust as he is forced to take Vladek's story and point of view as law. It is doubtful that Vladek's intention was to limit Anja's voice or harm Artie, but his actions still create an even greater rift between them. Their confrontation takes place at the end of Book I when Artie continues to express interest in finding his mother's diaries. Vladek dances around the fact that he burned them, and as Michael G. Levine finds, Vladek attempts to distract Artie from the truth by taking him to the bank and giving him a key to his safety deposit box, drawing his attention to the monetary legacy Vladek has provided him. However, this does not satisfy Artie, and as Vladek sees that Artie will not give up on the diaries, he eventually tells him, "One time I had a very bad day... And all these things I destroyed." (Book I: 158). Vladek noticeably never apologizes, but staunchly defends his actions and even turns the guilt around on Artie stating, "Yes it's a shame! For years they were laying there and nobody even looked in," implying that Artie had never showed any interest before or cared about his mother until it was of value for creating the graphic novel (Book I: 159). Vladek's main defense takes the form of cruel taunting as he says in reply to Artie's questioning his father if he

remembers anything of the diaries: “Only I know that she said ‘I wish my son, when he grows up, he will be interested by this’” (Book I: 159). Rightfully, Artie is enraged, but Vladek’s cruelty can perhaps be read as evidence of a deep pain and regret Vladek feels for his actions. Similar to how Vladek is always critical of Artie and finds it necessary to prove he is always right, as Pavel diagnoses in the therapy session, Vladek deflects feelings of pain and guilt by mapping them onto others, with Artie almost always the easiest target.

Further, Vladek’s exclusionary story-telling and his burning of Anja’s diaries eliminates the possibility for his story to be corroborated. Artie, and the reader, are forced to rely on Vladek to tell his story honestly, but due to the one-sided nature of it, it is difficult to see his account as wholly truthful. Spiegelman calls attention to the lack of corroboration for Vladek’s story by having Artie question certain aspects of it, such as asking about a band that supposedly played at the gates of Auschwitz. Artie says that their playing was very well-documented, but Vladek is certain “No. At the gate I heard only guards shouting” (Book II: 54). While it is not a question of whether Vladek was truly there and went through the Holocaust, it does speak to his unreliability as information is given only as he remembers. Spiegelman’s poking fun at Vladek’s heroic narrative in the beginning also frames Vladek’s story with a question of its accuracy. Vladek’s exaggeration of his agency calls Vladek’s reliability as a narrator into question.

Provided the exclusivity of Vladek’s narrative and thereby Artie’s exclusion from taking part in family history and shared trauma, the only way for Artie to take part in the narrative is to write about it. As seen in the section “Time Flies” in Book II, Art, the comic book artist, struggles with the fact that his work is appropriating the suffering of others and profiting off of a hardship he was not a part of. Elmwood argues that “The *Maus* project gives Spiegelman a central role in his father’s survival story: a familial scribe, he who is entrusted with the transmission of the family

history” (Elmwood 4). While Artie’s role is central in his father’s survival story, it is a stretch to say that he was entrusted with the narrative because Artie was forced to ask for his father’s story. Artie was neither instructed to take down his father’s story, nor was his father really “sharing” his story so that Artie could be included in the family history; rather, it was more of a way for Vladek to prove himself to Artie and highlight his hardship.

Maus, then, tells the unfortunate tragedy that continues on after the original source of trauma. Trauma is passed on from one generation to the next and exacerbated by the exclusion of the next generation from sharing in the story of the family tragedy. Rather than creating a way to share in the suffering, ownership of the tragedy is held with pride by Vladek, leaving Artie to feel as though his suffering is not valid and that he is not truly a part of the family. This idea of exclusion is carried through to the last page of Book II. Artie is at his father’s bedside, and it is the last time Vladek is recorded telling Artie about the Holocaust. Vladek says, “I’m tired of talking, Richieu, and its enough stories for now...” (Book II: 136). In his old age and ill health, Vladek probably just slips and actually means to call Artie by his name, but there is certainly significance in this slip for Spiegelman as it is put on the last page of the novel. It appears that Artie has once and for all been written out of the narrative of suffering by his father and replaced by the son that can share in it. This deathbed scene is then followed by the image of his parent’s gravestone, signifying the finality of that reality.

Why this Matters

Spiegelman’s highlighting the exclusive nature of Vladek’s character and his story-telling’s effect on his relationships, especially the one he shares with Artie, shows that exclusion

from trauma produces trauma in subsequent generations. Guarding the next generation from trauma seems to have the opposite effect that is intended as the act of cutting them off creates new trauma through the strained relationships between the original receiver of the traumatic experience and their children. If the next generation is expected to move on from the trauma from the previous generation and find a way to redefine their lives outside of the trauma they were born into, they must be able to accept their place in it. By having their relationships to it denied, they are denied the ability to move forward. In the next chapter, *Solar Storms* provides a model for how the next generation can be incorporated into the traumatic experiences of previous generations. While the method is not perfect, it provides a different way of approaching widespread traumatic experience across a community that is more inclusive compared to those seen in *Maus* and *Beloved*. In *Maus* and *Beloved*, the next generation survives, but they live with the trauma of the previous generation, without having a right to claim that trauma as part of their own.

Chapter 4

Sharing Trauma

Summary

Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1995) is a novel about Angel, an eighteen-year-old girl of Native American heritage, returning to her family after being passed from foster home to foster home in the 1970s. After tracking down her great-grandmother, Agnes Iron, Angel, returns to Adam's Rib to reunite with her family there. In returning to her family, Angel hopes to find her way in life as she describes herself in the beginning of the novel as lost and self-conscious. Thin and pale, she arrives at Adam's Rib eager to feel as though she belongs and is not disappointed when she finds the run-down, Native American community full of love and open arms.

For a while, Angel lives with Agnes and Agnes's mother, Angel's great-great-grandmother, Dora-Rouge. Angel experiences love and acceptance for the first time as she resides in Adam's Rib and begins to learn about her heritage from her grandmothers, whose worn bear skins are magical and natural remedies finally allow Angel to sleep. Soon though, Angel is moved to live with Bush, a woman who had cared for her when she was a child. Bush is not a blood-relative; rather, can be thought of as Angel's step-grandmother, and lives on the outskirts of the community. Bush is the only inhabitant on a small island, Fur Island, out in the waters of the community, and these living arrangements are at first lonely for Angel. Bush's tough, quiet demeanor frustrates Angel, but soon, the opportunity to reflect forces Angel to confront the abuse of her past, remnants of which remain in the jagged scar on her face. As Angel and Bush become more comfortable with each other, Bush's knowledge of Angel's

mother, Hannah, and the isolation of the island lead Angel to heal, grow, and develop a relationship with nature as her relatives have done for generations.

The latter half of the novel features a journey Angel takes with her grandmothers. The women travel by canoe through the interconnecting, boundary waters between Minnesota and Canada to Dora-Rouge's birthplace, the land of the Fat Eaters. Along the way, the women see first-hand how the man-made dams and "development" wreak havoc on the land and waterways, rendering the landscape unrecognizable. They face many tribulations on the waters, and everyone is shocked when Agnes passes away on the journey due to health complications. Bush, Angel, and Dora-Rouge arrive safely at Dora-Rouge's home community of the Fat-Eaters, but they come to find it decimated by construction for a reservoir with multiple dams and a hydroelectric plant. The Native American community there is in the midst of a fight with the government and a hydroelectric company over rights to their land, and Bush goes on to join in the fight against the construction company. Meanwhile, Dora-Rouge reconnects with family as she prepares to die in the community of her birth. However, Angel's motivation for partaking in this journey is that her abusive mother, Hannah, lives nearby. In confronting her mother, Angel finally comes to terms with herself and finds she is ready to move on. At the end of the novel, Angel and Bush return to Adam's Rib with Angel's newfound sister, Aurora, and begin preparing the community for the flood waters coming from the development of the land of the Fat Eaters.

Solar Storms opens with the layering of storytelling in the prologue as Angel says "Sometimes now I hear the voice of my great-grandmother, Agnes. It floats toward me like a soft breeze through an open window," (Hogan 11). Agnes then goes into the story of how when Angel was taken back to her abusive mother, Hannah, by the government, Bush held a non-

traditional grief ceremony. Bush, invites the community of Adam's Rib to her house and tells them to take all of her belongings that they can carry with them at the end of the gathering.

Agnes adds,

But the most important thing they carried was Bush's sorrow. It was small now, and child-sized and it slid its hand inside theirs and walked away with them. We all had it, after that. It became our own. Some of us have since wanted to give it back to her, but once we felt it we knew it was too large for a single person. (Hogan 18)

This Prologue serves many purposes as it presents storytelling and its being passed down from one generation to the next as an important aspect of the novel as well as introduces the theme of trauma and pain in the Native American community. However, more importantly for the purposes of this thesis, the prologue also demonstrates how trauma can be shared across a community, despite trauma's inherently personal nature. Angel remembers Agnes telling her how the sorrow of her being taken away from Bush became "*child-sized*" when the community members were leaving as it was divided among them into more manageable segments when it left Bush's house that night. Angel also remembers Agnes claiming that "*It became our own,*" which suggests that the sorrow was not simply split to lessen the burden for Bush's sake, but that the sorrow became a part of each individual's story, tying each individual to Bush and creating a community around this personal yet shared pain.

Similar to the sharing of Bush's personal trauma in the Prologue across the community, trauma enacted against the Native American community broadly, in the novel, is also thought of as a shared entity, despite the individual violence and hardships people endured. One example of trauma shared across the community can be seen in the Prologue when Agnes relates Angel's being sent back to her mother, Hannah, by the county, to "*all the children lost to us, taken away*"

(Hogan 17). Rather than seeing the event as just one act of domination, Agnes ties Angel's story to a history of Native American children being taken away to boarding schools by the government. Such trauma is incorporated into a history of a people that spans hundreds of years and contributes to a greater pool of trauma that is communally shared and passed down from generation one to the next. In *Solar Storms*, the act of acknowledging trauma as a shared entity across generations strengthens relationships in the Native American community at Adam's Rib, and provides a space for Angel to reclaim her identity in the face of modern colonialization.

Introduction

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Origins Out of Violence

The trope of storytelling, as seen in the Prologue, permeates throughout the entire novel. Hogan also begins the first chapter in the frame of a story with Angel opening the first chapter stating, “I was seventeen when I returned to Adam’s Rib on Tinselman’s Ferry,” showing that she is telling this whole story retrospectively (Hogan 21). Angel proceeds to set the scene, immediately drawing from the tradition of storytelling she learned from the elders in the community about the land, noting “it was where land and water had joined together in an ancient pact, now broken” (Hogan 21). This layering of storytelling in the novel, with stories told to Angel delineated by italics, highlights storytelling as central to Native American culture as represented in the novel, as well as drawing connections from the past to the present.

Notably, storytelling in *Solar Storms* takes on a specific lens that places each story in the context of the past. From the most recent past to the foundational legends of the Native Americans in the novel, each story is told in conversation with its ties to a long, arching history. Most, if not all of the stories in the novel, consist of origin stories that draw their beginnings from times hundreds of years before the character, place, or thing concerned. Angel’s origin story, for example, is prefaced by Agnes saying,

‘Nobody knows where it began, your story. . . What happened to you started long ago. It began around the time of the killing of the wolves. When people were starving. . . I think and I think and I still don’t know.’ (Hogan 37)

While the time is not specific, Agnes emphasizes that Angel’s origins can be traced to a time in the seemingly distant past, presumably long before she was even born.

The other origin stories in the novel share another element in addition to connections being drawn to the origin in the deep past in that the stories are also grounded in traumatic

experience, as Angel's appears to be above. While the time is not exactly locatable, Agnes points to times of violence and starvation as the beginning of Angel's story with "the killing of the wolves" or "When people were starving." An origin story born out of traumatic experience can also be seen in the identification of the first people at Adam's Rib. It is marked by the arrival of "The first generation of the Abandoned Ones," the women and children, who

traveled down with French fur trappers who were seeking their fortunes from the land.

When the land was worn out, the beaver and wolf gone, mostly dead, the men moved on to what hadn't yet been destroyed, leaving their women and children behind, as if they too were used-up animals. (Hogan 28)

The French fur trappers are described as destroying everything in their path and leaving Adam's Rib to move on to land that had not yet been sullied. In their wake, they leave behind their women and children to continue pillaging the natural resources of the region. Therefore, identifying the origin of Adam's Rib with both the destruction of the land and the abandonment of a defenseless group of women and children.

The origin story of Angel's matrilineal family line continues along this vein of traumatic origin with Agnes telling Angel about Angel's great-grandmother, Loretta.

Loretta smelled of something sweet, an almond odor that I couldn't place until years later. Her skin, even her dress, was thick with it. When I finally placed the odor, when I knew it was cyanide, I knew who she was, what people she came from. She was from the Elk Islanders, the people who became so hungry they ate the poisoned carcasses of deer that the settlers left out for the wolves. The starving people ate that bait. (Hogan 38)

Loretta's origin, then, is again tied to the settlers' destruction of the landscape and the mess they left behind. Agnes continues to describe Loretta saying that people in the community thought she

had a bad spirit clinging to her or that someone had laid a curse on her but Agnes says she knows that “*The curse on that poor girl’s life came from watching the desperate people of her tribe die*” (Hogan 39).

From Loretta to her daughter, Hannah, the bitter smell of almonds, haunting look, and sense of an evil presence surrounding her is passed on. Agnes relates that Hannah “*came out of the water*” at Adam’s Rib one day after a storm, and no matter how much they “*scrubbed, the smell never came off that poor girl. It was deeper than skin. It was blood-deep. It was history deep. . .*” (Hogan 40). In “We Were Those Who Walked Out of Hunger,” Irene S. Vernon notes that the smell of cyanide becomes a physical signifier of the trauma passed on from mother to daughter in the novel (Vernon 5). Yet, the odor does not seem to be passed on from Hannah to Angel. Rather, Angel carries a jagged scar on her face.

Angel’s scar is a physical signifier of trauma passed on to her from her mother, but rather than directly stemming from the destruction of people and land by settlers, Angel’s trauma originates from her mother’s abuse. Bush is able to fill in the lines of Hannah’s story for Angel because Bush also cared for Hannah when she arrived at Adam’s Rib. Bush knew Hannah from when she was about ten years old when she “*walked out of the dark, cold water*” after a storm “*until she drifted away, first to the north, where she lives now, then to Oklahoma*” (Hogan 97, 104). Bush tells Angel that when Hannah was at Adam’s Rib, she stole clothing from clotheslines in the community, never slept, broke windows, and worst of all, tortured and killed a dog. Bush explains that “*We were afraid of her. I didn’t know why, exactly. I’d always been brave. I was never afraid of anything, not dark or ice. . . But with her, even the corners of the house were dark. They seemed to be in pain. You could feel it*” (Hogan 98). She rationalizes Hannah’s deranged behavior by explaining that Hannah was possessed, haunted by the abusers

of her own past. Bush tells Angel the story of how she found out about Hannah's abuse when she made Hannah take a bath because the sweet odor of the cyanide was so strong. Bush remembers Hannah's "*skin was a garment of scars. There were burns and incisions. Like someone had written on her. The signatures of her torturers I call them now*" (Hogan 99). Bush believes that Hannah's mind was so damaged by her abusers that they became a part of her. It was the only way for Bush to explain how Hannah was able to honestly deny things, she, her body, had done but not she, herself, consciously did. Hannah would claim that a man came and hurt her in the night, even though in the dead of winter no one came to the house, or else Bush would have seen the evidence of them in the snow. After similar instances became a trend, Bush says "*I doubted my own mind, my own eyes,*" yet eventually understood that "*she told the truth. That there was a man come in the night, a ghost. Anyway, it was truth to her*" (Hogan 103).

It is no surprise, then, that Angel's mother physically abused her, but what seems to truly result in the manifestation of trauma in Angel is Angel's not knowing these stories. Before arriving at Adam's Rib, Angel's not knowing who her family is, where she got her scar, and why she was not wanted left her unable to develop an identity and live a happy life. Even after she finds her grandmothers at Adam's Rib, she struggles with not knowing how she got the scar that is so prominent on her cheek. At a party, a community member asks her "What happened to your face, anyway, dear?" to which Angel freezes in terror and remembers that "To hide my feelings, I tried to cut another piece of cheese for Dora-Rouge, but my hands shook and it slipped and I cut my finger, a deep bite off the tip" (Hogan 51-52). Agnes rushes her to the bathroom to clean up the cut and give her some space, but Angel finds herself recalling fuzzy memories related to the bandages Agnes takes out. Angel recalls

when I smelled that odor something inside of me began to move around, the memory of wounds, the days and weeks of hospitals, the bandages across my face, the surgeries (. . .) Whatever it was, I felt weak, my chest was tight. I saw myself in the mirror, and suddenly, without warning, I hit the mirror with my hand, hit the face of myself (. . .) I heard a voice yelling ‘Damnit!’ and it was me, it was my own voice, raging and hurt. There was anger in it a deep pain. . . (Hogan 52)

In the face of these disturbing memories Angel is left defenseless as she does not know their origin and cannot locate their meaning. The onset of the memories of her injury seems to cause a distance within Angel as her body begins to act without her consent, similar to how her mother’s returned memories of her abusers made her act in ways she did not remember. Without knowing the stories of her past and having the chance to address them, Angel is unable to handle the strength of the returned memories.

Angel’s outburst and her inability to locate and come to terms with these violent memories, highlights the importance of origin stories in the novel. Loretta’s origin story, the origin of Adam’s Rib, Angel’s unplaceable origin, and Hannah’s otherworldly origin are all rooted in violence, starvation, and destruction caused by the careless and dominant nature of colonizers and fur trappers of the early 20th century. The telling of these origins, passing them down to generations who can see their effects manifested in themselves, provides background for present hardship and comfort for those both directly and indirectly involved. These origin stories create a common thread of beginnings out of violence, starvation, and destruction, tying the women together by means other than blood. By injecting trauma into the foundation of *Solar Storms*, trauma’s reaches can be seen to extend far beyond the characters themselves, permeating

the natural world around them and the history of their people. It marks the characters' past, present, and future and is a constant feature throughout the novel.

Trauma in Nature

In addition to the physical and mental damage enacted on the characters, the natural world also has significant stake in trauma in the novel. In the stories told in *Solar Storms*, violence in nature is used in a variety of ways to augment storytelling. For example, Agnes says the day Loretta, Angel's blood-grandmother, arrived at Adam's Rib, "*The birds were loud that day. They were migrating, so thick they looked like salt poured from a shaker all across the water and land and sky. But the country was dry. We'd had a drought and there was a windstorm*" (Hogan 38). This cacophony of birds and strained weather enhances the weight of Loretta's arrival and creates a scene building with tension. Similarly, Agnes uses violence committed against the natural world as a marker of time when she tries to locate Angel's origin with "the time of the killing of the wolves" (Hogan 37). Lastly, nature in storytelling is used as a way to characterize the Native Americans in the novel. For example, Hannah's character is often likened to ice, as she is cold, unreadable, and dangerous, creating a better understanding of her in the novel.

However, in *Solar Storms* as a whole, nature takes on a role more comparable to that of a character. Rather than simply enhancing a story with scene and character development, nature in the novel has agency and experiences trauma itself. In particular, the personal relationship each individual character maintains with nature emphasizes nature's dynamic quality in the novel.

One way to look at nature's character in the novel is through a comparison of a character in the novel who has respect for nature and one who does not.

One such comparison is drawn out in a story Dora-Rouge tells Angel about how Agnes acquired her magical "blue-gray fur coat" that sings traditional songs and tells her stories of her ancestors (Hogan 23). The story goes that a glacier bear had wandered far away from home and had been caught by a fur trapper named Beauregard. At first he used it "*to fight dogs. The men made bets on who would win. They kept it awake all year. That's against bear nature. Its poor mind was no longer sane. And its diet was bad, so it went weak, its teeth rotted out, and some of its fur fell out in patches*" (Hogan 45). Then, Beauregard simply had people pay to see it, and when it came to Adam's Rib, twelve-year-old Agnes was infatuated with it. Beauregard eventually hired Agnes to feed the bear because she was so good with it. Dora-Rouge says Agnes was so good with the bear because "*Agnes was not afraid. She was a gentle girl. The bear liked this. It knew her, in a way. Through her eyes, I think. She stole food for it, too, and its fur grew back*" (Hogan 46). One day, after seeing the bear suffer for so long, Dora-Rouge says Agnes decided to put the bear out of its misery and slit its throat. Dora-Rouge says she was amazed the bear let Agnes kill it, and that through the whole, horrid affair "*Its eyes were grateful*" (Hogan 47). Further, Dora-Rouge says that while Agnes "*stroked the big animal*" it "*put a paw on Agnes and stroked her in return*" (Hogan 47). At first, Agnes does not get to keep the fur because the trader tracked her down to retrieve it. However, when Beauregard comes to take the fur Agnes tells him, "*It's all right. This fur belongs to me, but you go ahead and take it. I'll wait for you to die. You won't last long, but me, I have time,*" to which Dora-Rouge confirms "*Not even a year later, he died*" (Hogan 47). The relationship Agnes has with the animal and the love she holds for the bear greatly differs to the disrespect and mistreatment Beauregard has for it. This

difference in relationship to the natural world seems to result in nature's favoring Agnes over Beaugard and rewarding Agnes for it. Nature, then, shows agency in the novel through its acting out against perpetrators and honoring those who respect it.

This reward for respect and curse for mistreatment continues throughout *Solar Storms* as Angel observes people in the community and their individual, seemingly spiritual relationships with nature. However, despite the seemingly personal aspect of each of these relationships, the characters' individual relationships to nature also seem to tie them closer to each other as a community as well as to their ancestors. This idea can be explored in a scene where Angel goes fishing with a man in the community named La Rue. Angel is horrified to find that he refuses to kill the fish before cutting off their skin, and somewhat jokingly thinks to herself that "He was a poor excuse for an Indian," because even she knew that that was not the way to respectfully handle a fish (Hogan 83). She goes on to marvel that "Inside myself, I knew different things about fish, and I hadn't even lived among other natives. I knew it from my heart" (Hogan 83-84). To further solidify her intuition, a huge thunderstorm comes through while they are returning to land and the two narrowly escape a lightning strike. Angel is then convinced that "the lightning sought him out" as vengeance for his actions, and she is certain her intuition for respecting animals and nature is true (Hogan 84). This intuition Angel experiences, though, is specifically tied to the natural world, suggesting that through the tradition of respecting nature and forming personal relationships with it, her ancestors are able to pass on their own knowledge. Nature, then, seems to be both a character with agency as well as a long-standing site of communal knowledge in the Native American community.

Pushing the idea of nature as a site of communal knowledge further, nature can also be thought of as a way trauma can be passed down through the generations, similar to the act of

storytelling. Throughout the novel, violence against the Native American community is linked to the violence inflicted on the flora, fauna, water, and land around them by colonizers throughout history. From the hunting of animals for their skins by the fur trappers with Dora-Rouge and Agnes, to the present years of the novel with construction destroying natural resources and the building of dams in the present, the community members have observed a broken bond between people and the land. Therefore, the Native American community at Adam's Rib sees a connection between the violence done to nature as similar to the violence enacted against them. They demonstrate this connection by characterizing stories of their trauma with the violence directed toward nature. The violence and disrespect inflicted on the community is reflected in the natural world and dates back to the communities of their ancestors before them. The demonstration of man's broken bond with nature is an extension of the violence and suffering endured in their community.

Community Building

By sharing stories and having personal relationships to nature, a site in which communal trauma is housed, the characters in *Solar Storms* are able to build strong community ties and create non-traditional family structures where colonialization destroyed traditional blood-family structures. According to Elizabeth Kella in her paper "Regeneration through Kinship," "The orphan figures in the novel"—seen in Angel's matrilineal line of trauma from Loretta to Angel—"chart a path from colonial destruction of family and tribe to Native regeneration of an inclusive form of kinship" (Kella 108). In other words, rather than allowing the violence to splinter and break their community apart, the community forms and molds itself together to support each

other in various capacities. In Angel's case, her grandmothers, both blood and non-blood, come together to form a family for Angel. Angel even claims that Bush, her step-grandmother, "was the closest thing I had to a mother" (Hogan 182). Bush also attempts to do the same for Hannah, Angel's mother, but due to the extent of the damages of abuse is not able to save her.

To form the inclusive bonds of kinship Kella refers to, it appears that the characters draw from their knowledge of the land and observations of nature. Angel, in particular, sees how she is connected to the animals simply through common elements of life, such as breathing. She describes a moment early on with her grandmothers, Agnes and Dora-Rouge, in their small house, "We would breathe together the way wolves do with their kin, the way they nurture relations by breathing. This breath was alive. It joined us as we were joined in so many other ways" (Hogan 45). Through her connection to nature Angel is able to see that even the most basic connections can tie people together. Angel herself forms a bond similar to hers and Bush's with her own sister at the end of the novel. Upon confronting her dying mother near the end of the novel, Angel finds that she has a seven-month-old baby sister. In line with her non-traditional forms of kinship, Angel develops a motherly bond with her sister and names her Aurora to raise her as her own.

The non-traditional kinship in the community also requires that characters understand the after-effects of trauma that tie them all together. As previously mentioned, Angel struggles at the very beginning of the novel with her arrival at Adam's Rib and punches a mirror due to the recurrence of disturbing memories. Normally, such behavior would be viewed as unacceptable and uncalled for, but given the community's experience with stories similar to Angel's and belief that individual trauma is shared across the community, she is surrounded with love and even praise. John Husk responds to Angel's punching the mirror with "Way to go!" and "Thatta, girl,

Angel. Those things are the source of evil,” saving Angel from embarrassment (Hogan 53).

Perhaps the most notable practice of understanding traumatic experience is Bush’s loving attitude toward Hannah, despite Hannah’s frightening behavior. Most people are terrified of Hannah, but Bush cares enough to attempt to understand her, and through her attempting to understand, shows love and the belief that Hannah’s actions are not her fault. Angel realizes the great care with which Bush attempts to understand Hannah when Bush says,

‘You see how powerless we are against the wind.’ As if to confirm something while cold crept under the door. . . She didn’t have to tell me more to say, ‘Hannah was like that.’

By then I knew what she meant. Indifferent elements, and cold. She meant that a person can’t blame the wind for how it blows and Hannah was like that. She wanted me to know that what possessed my mother was a force as real as wind, as strong as ice, as common as winter.” (Hogan 115)

Here, Bush uses her relationship with and observance of nature as a way to rationalize Hannah’s actions as well as find a way to more fully understand Hannah and explain her to Angel. With Angel’s newfound understanding of nature, she is also better able to understand Hannah’s trauma through the analysis Bush shares with her.

Thus, the formations of nontraditional kinship are all possible through the sharing of trauma and the characters’ personal relationships with nature. Further, the acceptance of communal trauma and its long reaching aftereffects also create a better understanding of the acts of violence committed against them. By not viewing each individual event as enacted by an individual perpetrator who is evil in their own entity, the community has the opportunity to see a web of stories that interconnect, centering their tension around a difference in beliefs. Therefore, the community is able to unite, stronger together, under their shared beliefs, and analyze the acts

of violence as more than personal trauma, but as a means to better understand the oppressions they face.

One aspect of the communal trauma that bears some probing, though, is that the community still remains together, despite the fact that it is their membership in this community that leaves them susceptible to violence. The trauma of the Native Americans in *Solar Storms* is brought on by their membership to this group that is made vulnerable to the violence of development. One may wonder if it would not make more sense to leave the site of trauma. However, their remaining with the community demonstrates how strongly the Native American community in the novel feels that their way of life is valuable as they spend time and energy fighting to protect it. The latter half of the novel features resistance to the dams being built near the land of the Fat-Eaters, and how this resistance builds a stronger community. Exploring to what lengths the community will go to protect what they love and believe is sacred shows that remaining within the broken community is worth the pain of the communal trauma and hardship.

Identity Reclamation

Sharing trauma and the creation of strong ties in the community through culture and nature leads Angel to do more than heal. It leads her to reclaim her identity and enter into womanhood. In the beginning of the novel with Angel's arrival at Adam's Rib, Angel is enveloped in a community that accepts her as no one has before. However, before her arrival, Angel acknowledges she had been lost in some way, lacking an origin and consequently no identity. Angel says "I remembered so little of my life that sometimes I thought I had never really existed, that I was nothing more than emptiness covered with skin" (Hogan 74). Her scars

were also an extremely visible representation of her troubled upbringing and only further pushed her to commit self-erasure. Angel searched for ways to make people love her in all the wrong places, as she thinks:

My ugliness, as I called it, had ruled my life. My need for love had been so great I would offer myself to any boy or man who would take me. . . There was really no love in it, but I believed any kind of touch was a kind of love. Any human hand. (Hogan 54)

However, upon arriving at Adam's Rib, Angel learns that love can even come from non-human origins as she grows in her relationship with nature. When living out on Fur Island with Bush, Angel develops a connection with the land that helps her better understand herself and her place in the world and the community. She begins to feel grounded and solid as she becomes aware of her body in relation to nature. While cutting wood for fire and swimming she feels her body and herself becoming stronger. Her transformation is noticeable as one day when she returns to the mainland to see her grandmothers, Agnes comments, appreciatively, "You're filling out," which seems to mean more than Angel's physical appearance as Agnes has a deeply spiritual way about her (Hogan 91).

Angel's relationship with the land also allows her to develop a sense of pride through preparing for winter. She says after canning fruits and vegetables and helping Bush cutting fire wood, "I stepped back to admire our work: the glass-contained red fruits of the island; to look at the woodpile, the golden and ash colors of bark, with rings that told years of drought and flood. It was the first time I had ever seen my own work before my eyes" (Hogan 93-94). Working with her hands and being able to see the physical outcome brings meaning to Angel's life and allows her to appreciate herself.

Angel's newly developed strength and relationship with nature become absolutely essential on the journey through the Boundary Waters with her grandmothers to the land of the Fat-Eaters. The way to the Fat-Eaters is unknown and dangerous, due to damaging construction practices and dams changing the landscape, and the journey requires Angel and Bush to carry two canoes, packs of gear, and Dora-Rouge. Bush obsessively studies maps drawn over hundreds of years and decides the journey will take only thirteen days, "I'm sure of it" (Hogan 149). But even the best laid plans could not prepare them for the altered waterways and Agnes falling ill. Along the journey, though, Angel further solidifies her relationship with nature and her grandmothers, despite the loss of Agnes, and after spending some time at the land of the Fat-Eaters, finds a new direction.

One of the biggest turning points in the novel comes when Angel arrives at her mother's shabby house upon learning that she is close to death. As she takes care of Hannah she relates. "I thought of Bush saying of my mother that it was not her fault. I wanted to have compassion, but even now I felt the pain of betrayal, abandonment" (Hogan 243). People who live near Hannah come by to help Angel care for her mother and the child, Aurora, and through them she finally learns of how she got her scars. "We knew what had happened to you, your face, how, like a dog, she bit you with her teeth. It was worse for you, maybe because you look like her. She hated you for that, for coming from her body, being part of her" (Hogan 246). The casual nature and the quickness with which this revelation passes seems odd as one could argue this is what the book has been leading up to. Perhaps, how Angel got her scars is not important, rather, it is how Angel is able to forgive her mother. Despite Angel's being horrified, she remains with her mother in her last moments of life. In an epiphany, Angel says that "It was death, finally, that allowed me to know my mother" because in her mother's death Angel found

I was no longer a girl. I was a woman, full and alive. . . I would find it in myself to love the woman who had given life to me, the woman a priest had called a miracle in reverse... And when she died, I knew that I had survived in the best of ways for I was filled with grief and compassion. (Hogan 251)

By returning to Adam's Rib, Angel is able to prepare herself for this moment. By working with nature, developing relationships with those that love her unconditionally, and hearing stories about her past, she finds she can have full compassion for Hannah and no spite left in her heart when she passes. Angel says she grew into womanhood in this moment and comes away with the understanding that her grief is valuable so long as it is coupled with compassion. "She survived in the best of ways" because of her ability to surpass hardship and find her place at the community of Adam's Rib along the way.

The novel ends at Adam's Rib, and shows how Angel has grown and claimed an identity grounded in the traditions of her ancestors, love, and new beginnings. Angel's solidity in her identity can be seen in the beginning of the second to last chapter where Angel acknowledges "Beginnings, I know now, are everything. . . Perhaps my own return began long ago, in a time before I was born, when I was held inside the bodies of my ancestors" (Hogan 334). However, at Adam's Rib, Bush and Angel find that the water is rising due to the completion of the first phase of the project they were unable to stop. Yet the end of the novel is hopeful. Angel states that she can still feel the presence of Agnes and Dora-Rouge sometimes, despite their passing, and she begins a new life with Tommy, a man in the Adam's Rib community, and Aurora.

Why This Matters

In *Solar Storms*, the acknowledgement of trauma as a shared, communal entity allows the characters in the novel, especially the next generation, to see how they fit into the narrative of trauma in their community. Being able to identify with the trauma of their ancestors allows the characters to more effectively deal with the trauma they have inherited as well as the present-day manifestations of colonialization in the Native American community. Through storytelling and the passing down of personal relationships with the natural world, the next generation is fully incorporated into the narrative of trauma in the community.

Sharing traumatic experience with the next generation in the way demonstrated in *Solar Storms* may seem counterintuitive to protecting them, but it appears to result in more productive methods of dealing with the after-effects of trauma than seen in *Beloved* or *Maus*. Instead of denying the next generation access to a history they are surely a part of by virtue of their relationships to the previous generation, the characters in *Solar Storms* are encouraged to understand their ties to trauma. The novel demonstrates that sharing trauma in this way, rather than holding it too close or too high, provides solace for both the individual initially involved in traumatic experience as well as the individual affected by their relationship to the individual initially involved. The novel, then, provides a framework for considering how the deleterious effects of trauma across a community, such as the breaking apart of families, can be combatted through its being shared.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

One thing that is clear about trauma after writing this thesis is that it is infinitely complicated. Not only is it a very personal experience, but it simultaneously has effects that transcend far beyond the individual. Communities can be damaged or marked by a violent event for generations. Physical places, as seen in *Beloved* and *Solar Storms*, are believed to hold trauma and violent memories. In addition, trauma takes on physical and mental manifestations leading to its passing from mind to body to person to place. However, one element that permeates all of the novels is a reliance on family.

What seems odd, though, is that for the generation following a communal, traumatic event, the family is relied on, despite its being the root of traumatic experience for that generation. Each novel deals with this tension between the reliance on the family and the family's being the cause of great pain and hardship by analyzing the relationships between the first affected generation and the following one. Denver, Artie, and Angel, the members of the subsequent generation in these novels, all return to or remain with their families in the face of the fear or pain each family brings with it.

In *Beloved*, Denver's childhood is marked by Sethe's attempt to protect her children from slavery. After all of her siblings are either dead or gone out of fear of their mother, Denver is left hanging in the balance. In her isolation, Denver teeters on the brink of loving her mother and being absolutely terrified of her. Given the chance to hang onto and love someone else unconditionally with the arrival of Beloved, Denver takes it in a heartbeat. However, when Beloved is cast out by the women in the community at the end of the novel, Denver appears to

have come to terms with her mother as she still lives with her and cares for her. Despite it all, Denver chooses to remain.

In *Maus*, Artie says he returns to his father so that he can write about his father's Holocaust experience. However, Spiegelman's focusing the novel around Artie and Vladek's relationship, suggests that, for Artie, there is unfinished business between him and his father. It seems as though Artie tortures himself by reviving his relationship with his father because he needs to resolve their relationship. Vladek is the only surviving family he has left, the only one who could possibly still provide him with a place in the family history. However, their relationship is so damaged and twisted, it cannot be salvaged.

Finally, in *Solar Storms*, Angel seeks out her extended family and returns to Adams Rib after being provided a bevy of foster homes that did not give her the unconditional love of family. For Angel, despite the scar on her face clearly being from her childhood, she returns to her origin in the hopes of finding answers and people who understand her. Compared to Denver's remaining with her mother and Artie's return to his father, Angel's return to her extended family helps her find the answers she was looking for and create family anew.

It seems as though these characters are all forced to return or remain because their family is the only way they can achieve the things missing from their lives. For Denver, it is a healthy relationship between her and her mother and perhaps an explanation of the past. For Artie, it is acceptance or approval from his father. Finally, for Angel, it is an understanding of herself, her origin, and unconditional love.

Due to the necessity of family for these characters often reflecting a necessity for family in real life, I believe it is important to consider how intergenerational relationships in the face of traumatic experience can best be handled. If the next generation cannot avoid trauma as it has

long-lasting effects on their family members, and therefore, their own relationships to them, it is necessary to examine how these relationships can be aided to avoid the passing on of traumatic experience.

In this thesis I offer an examination of the different ways trauma is dealt with by those who experience it, in literature, and how these dealings affect those around them, specifically, the next generation in a community. Storytelling in *Beloved*, *Maus*, and *Solar Storms* is a common way for knowledge and trauma to be passed on, but I find that it is the intentions of the storyteller that influence how trauma is received by the next generation. By acknowledging that trauma is in fact passed on and analyzing the different ways it is handled in these novels, I think it is possible to consider how support can be provided for those who experience traumatic experience as well as the family, friends, and community who also suffer from trauma's effects. Trauma is a tradition that families do not want to pass on.

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