TELLING GIRLHOOD: GIRLS' STUDIES, REPARATIVE TRAUMA AND 20TH CENTURY U.S. POPULAR CULTURE

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This project is meant to be a contribution to the fields of girls' studies and feminism and media studies. Girls' studies, in its current iteration, is partially a response to a boom in the 1990s of interest in girls as a market for media and advertising. Girls' studies is largely concerned with girls' relationships to or representations in the media, as well as their and culture's methods of policing their emergence into womanhood. Many texts concern themselves with representations of girlhood and the question of which type of girl is allowed to be depicted and why, or what girls are learning about gender roles, feminism, and body image from media.

My intervention in the field of girls' studies is the argument that the same belief system that generates the woefully homogenous images of the "good girl" covers up a deep-rooted fear of girls and their lived experiences. I incorporate Eve Sedgwick's notion of "reparative reading" and revise it into what I call reparative *narration* or reparative telling, in order to name the way girls' narratives, real and fictional, show

the listener/viewer/reader that their attachment to their own naïveté is an impediment to girls' empowerment and healing.

In order to make a case about the prevailing notions and limitations of girlhood in popular American culture, my dissertation discusses a wide range of texts and media including fiction, television, film, and sociological studies. Works that challenge what American girlhood signifies are meant to show their readers that it is their own "innocence" that is eroded by undesirable depictions of girlhood. The rejection of popular American notions of girlhood through female protagonists who tell stories of rape, abuse, rage, and depression allows for what I call "reparative narration," wherein a girl narrator does not cater to the perceived naïveté of the audience.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shyla Foster is a PhD candidate in English Literature at Cornell University. Her research and teaching interests include late 20th century American literature, feminism in popular culture, happiness theory, and female action heroes. Her work examines authors who intend to make their audiences uncomfortable with young female narrators who challenge ideas of innocence. Her email address is scf55@cornell.edu.

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INTRODUCTION: THE CHILD, THE GIRL, AND THE ETHICS OF STORYTELLING

Which Girls Are We Talking About?

"Telling Girlhood" makes use of childhood studies and critical race theory in order to discuss the popular and harmful image of the child, and more specifically the girl. Ultimately I will show that the figure of the child is a placeholder for adult innocence. As Kathryn Bond Stockton writes in *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*:

> there are bodies (of children) that must live inside the figure of the child.
>
> Given that children don't know this child, surely not as we do—though they move inside it, life inside this membrane is largely available to adults as memory—what can I remember of what I thought I was?—and so takes us back in circles to our fantasies (of our memories). (Stockton 5)

This project is meant to be a contribution to the field of girls' studies and feminism and media studies. Girls' studies, in its current iteration, partially emerged as a response to a boom in the 1990s of interest in girls as a market for media and

advertising.[1] Girls' studies is largely concerned with girls' relationships to or representation in the media, as well as their culture's methods of policing their emergence into womanhood. Many texts concern themselves with representations of girlhood and the question of which type of girl is allowed to be depicted and why, or what girls are learning about gender roles, postfeminism, and body image from media. Sarah Projansky's *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* discusses the common rules regarding which girls are acceptable in film, television, the news, and magazines:

> Girls who are large, differently abled, queer, of color, and/or poor; make "bad" or "dangerous" choices; feel depressed; or even just act silly (1) simply do not exist in media culture; or (2) appear in marginalized representations, on the periphery, with sidekick status; or (3) populate ubiquitous disparaging, disdainful, anxious, and/or protectionist depictions that shore up a narrow version of acceptable girlhood: the impossibly high-achieving heterosexual white girl who plays sports, loves science, is gorgeous but not hyper-sexual, is fit but not too thin, learns from her (minor) mistakes, and certainly will change the world someday. (Projansky 1)

[1] For further reading, Mary Celeste Kearney's "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies" provides a comprehensive review of the historical avoidance of girls' studies among scholars, as well as the boom in marketing and advertising aimed at girls which afforded them space in studies of popular culture and sociology.

Like Projansky's work, mine makes use of a democratic archive, comprised of a variety of texts and media, because in order to develop an understanding of representations of girls and girlhood, you cannot only look at literature. Contemporary girls are everywhere—in novels, magazines, music, films, current events, and television. Projansky explains that "To identify a dominant representation and then focus all one's analytical attention there [is] to reify that dominance" and therefore, "by paying attention to the variety of childhoods available across many contemporary U.S. media forms, and by…pushing back against the texts, I offer an optic that makes alternative versions of girlhood visible" (Projansky 10). One key goal is to do away with conventions that dictate which media, and therefore which girls, are worth seeing, hearing, and reading, which is why my sources are diverse.

Girls' studies often focuses on cultural panic about girls losing innocence, improving the visibility of underrepresented girls, debating the effects of beauty standards, or theorizing about the now immensely popular "tough girl" in the media evidenced by the popularity of series such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. These are all critical pursuits, and they are all present to some degree in my project. My work builds on these and begins with the notion that girls know that innocence is ascribed to them, and uncovers the consequence of that knowledge, and whether or not they can break free of it.

My intervention in the field of girls' studies is the argument that the same belief system that generates the woefully homogenous images of the "good girl" that

Projansky laments in *Spectacular Girls* is covering up a deep-rooted fear of girls and their lived experiences. Ultimately I incorporate Eve Sedgwick's notion of "reparative reading" and revise it into what I call reparative narration or reparative telling, in order to name the way girls' narratives, real and fictional, show the listener/viewer/reader that their attachment to their own naïveté is an impediment to girls' empowerment and healing.

In order to make a case about the prevailing notions and limitations of girlhood in popular American culture, my dissertation discusses a range of texts and media including fiction, television, film, and sociological studies. I argue that Joss Whedon's Buffy Summers, Maxine Hong Kingston's childhood self, Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove, and Kaye Gibbons's Ellen Foster, through their deviant behavior, discover that they are a threat to the identities of the adults in their lives, as well as peers who accept and pursue white American girlhood norms. My view is that works that challenge what American girlhood signifies are meant to show their readers that it is their own "innocence" that is eroded by undesirable depictions of girlhood. Ultimately I show that the rejection of popular American notions of girlhood through female protagonists who tell stories of rape, abuse, rage, and depression allows for what I call "reparative narration," wherein a girl narrator does not cater to the perceived naïveté of the audience.

Children's Studies as the Gateway to Girls' Studies

Children's studies, the umbrella under which Girls' Studies is located, is not primarily about children; in fact, according to many scholars, such as Jacqueline Rose, it could never be about children. Children's Studies is about, and to many can only be about, adult perception of children and childhood, and adult attempts to interpret and reimagine the child. Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* lays bare the falsehood that adults can master the child's voice or cognitive process: "children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be simple. It is an idea whose innocent generality covers up a multitude of sins" (Rose 50). Rose seeks to explain that texts (like Peter Pan) can never be for children, because they are always only for adults. Rose writes that the child is unknowable, and though adults know this, they still have an investment in the false image of child—for their own sake: "This suggests not only a refusal to acknowledge difficulties and contradictions in relation to childhood; it implies that we use the image of the child to deny those same difficulties in relation to ourselves" (Rose 63).

Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* is one of the most famous examples of a self-conscious, metafictional text aimed at children. Part of the text's declared mission is to teach children how to "properly" approach a book—to learn about its parts, such as the title page and the purpose of the table of contents. Jack, the protagonist from "Jack and the Beanstalk," is the

narrator; he keeps a running commentary wherein he advises the reader, and interacts with characters of other stories in an attempt to keep everyone in the correct order and on their assigned pages. The book, with its quirky spins on old fairy tales and comically ugly illustrations, circulated widely and drew more attention to earlier collaborations between Scieszka and Smith, such as *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, in which the wolf asks the children reading to consider that they may not know the entire story: perhaps he was only seeking assistance and was wrongly harassed and profiled by biased pigs.

The Stinky Cheese Man's irreverence and unusual aesthetic may be contributing factors, but there are other ideas conveyed in such a text that hold important implications for my project. The first is that the book is structured in such a way as to suggest that every moment is unpredictable. Jack has a plan but cannot follow through, to the point where it is never clear how or if the next tale will start at all. Pieces of the table of contents fall on Chicken Little, and Jack spoils so much of "Little Red Running Shorts" that the main characters walk away in indignation, leaving the following page completely blank. Jack includes a fake ending of the book to fool the Giant, and employs the reader to help him sneak away: "Just turn the page very quickly," Jack instructs, "and that will be The…" but before he can say "end," the escape is spoiled by the Little Red Hen, in the midst of an oblivious tirade about the fact that she has not been allowed to tell her story yet (Scieszka and Smith). All of these mishaps and "spontaneous" improvisations give the delightful impression that

The Stinky Cheese Man is happening in real time. I say "delightful" because the suggestion of real time storytelling implies that the reader is an important factor in the telling. You are supposed to be paying attention—you are supposed to groan aloud when Red Hen wakes up the giant; you are supposed to realize that, in general, Jack may not be the best for this job.

Of course metafiction, at least in this genre, is a gimmick. Jack is supposedly speaking to us directly, but he is being narrated as well: "'Okay, I've got things running smoothly now,' said Jack the Narrator" (Scieszka and Smith). So, within this text at least, the gesture is not very thorough, and the interactive sections are spaced at intervals between numerous stories that, while unusual and comically anticlimactic, are narrated conventionally. But this book nonetheless helped me ponder the question, is it a powerful move to include the reader explicitly in such meaning-making, and, especially, what are the consequences?

Texts like *The Stinky Cheese Man* can feel comfortably benevolent, because it is about make-believe and seems to have the clear and precise goal of teaching "the child" about the format of a book. The important issue is that the figure of the child remains, and that the child is meant to serve as a type of placeholder for adults, who are supposedly intimately familiar with the fairy tales being parodied. The book appears to be irreverent and out-of-the-box, but it is actually more didactic than even the average children's book, because it is in fact *explicitly telling them how to read it*.

The figure of the child and the assumptions made about the child by adults are apparent in any mainstream work aimed at children. A powerful comparison to make is between texts such as *Stinky Cheese*, which is geared towards the wholesome, naïve child, and the far rarer children's books that are specifically meant to address the child who is not "innocent" or naïve, because they have experienced abuse at the hands of adults. Jo Lampert and Kerryan Walsh's "'Keep Telling Until Someone Listens': Understanding Prevention Concepts in Children's Picture Books Dealing with Child Sexual Abuse" analyzed a list of books from the United States, Canada, and Australia that address children who are survivors or potential victims of sexual abuse. They began by compiling all of the books for children that were about sexual abuse and existed at multiple libraries (148). These books are meant to be therapy tools, used by child psychologists, teachers, or social workers to help children cope with and be exposed to healthy language about their experiences. Out of the mere fifty-eight books they found between the three countries surveyed that matched the criteria, they selected a random sample of fifteen to analyze more closely (148). I am incorporating their findings to show that the innocent child is so entrenched in Western culture that even when two of the biggest "threats" to childhood innocence, sex and abuse, are givens, there is still a (possibly unconscious) need to preserve or restore traditional presumptions about the child.

These books, about abuse at the hands of adults, are ambivalent about acknowledging to children that there are adults in every capacity who could mean

them harm, or simply fall short as caregivers. The largest trend Lampert and Walsh noticed is that "[m]ost of the books overtly suggested telling an adult, but few explained who a proper authority might be, and how a child could tell. This is significant because not all adults are trustworthy, nor will all adults know what to do with the information" (151-152). There is still reluctance, or perhaps unawareness, to imagine that children live in a world where adults fail them in innumerable ways, or that they may have reason to distrust the adults who are readily available to them.

The findings in "'Keep Telling'" suggest that there is a desire to return the child to who they were before the abuse. Many of these books emphasize a lone shadowy figure who, once revealed, will disappear from the life and memories of the child, whose faith in adult wisdom and protection is unshaken. Apparently, the worst option that none of the books approach is the notion that a mother or father could be the perpetrator: "None of the books present a biological parent in the [abusive] role" (158). In the context of sexual abuse, the harm done by the ideal of childhood innocence can be made plain. To never broach the topic of abusive parents, to mostly avoid mention of specific body parts (158), to imply that all adults (except *that* one) are wise and good, is to do away with the abused child instead of heal the abuse. When the instructional texts cannot bring themselves to say where a child might be touched, or address an understandable fear of adults after maltreatment, how can they prompt an open and healing discussion about any particular experience?

The conclusion of this article is not accusatory. Instead, Lampert and Walsh gesture toward what is evidently a revolutionary type of mindfulness: "those who believe children are innocent, passive, and in need of protection will 'speak' to a certain kind of picture book. Those who see children as more resilient and capable of handling fearful images will write a different sort of book" (162). Note that this passage is not concerned with the lessons these books may impart on children. The audience for these books is, first and foremost, adults. They come with guidelines and references for how to successfully speak with children about abuse. They are not meant for children to read alone. So it is the attending adults who, in Lampert and Walsh's words, should believe that children are "resilient and capable." It can be said that these picture books are catering as much to what adults may (or want to) believe about the child as to children who have suffered trauma.

The works I discuss in this project are mostly about children (girls specifically) and aimed at an older audience. I have brought them together because they want to imagine "a different sort of book [or film/reporting]," that does not bother to address the child but instead pressures adult readers to entertain the idea of a different sort of child that may know how to survive and has a relevant perspective that may include sadness, anger, or pain. The different sort of book does not seek to be neatly tied up or "happily ever after". Lampert and Walsh note that the abuse picture books often make bizarre turns in order to resolve the abuse. If the children "tell," then the adult will fix everything in a mysterious and unexplained way: "This common message, that

telling is the end point and that after that it will be smooth sailing, is common in most of the books…This idealized, romantic notion that innocence can be restored so simply is prevalent in [these texts]" (163-164). In these books, "telling" is truly for the benefit of the adult. Once the child tells, we can focus on the adults who know about the abuse, which means the child no longer has to know. The burden has been transferred and the little one can frolic away, unfettered. But my project, "Telling Girlhood," imagines a telling that is solely for the benefit of the child. Adults are not meant to take away the burden of lost innocence, but rather to understand that "innocence" never existed to begin with[2].

Popular media's focus on children's culture and empowerment blossomed in the 1990s with a new wave of children's programming and marketing. The cable network Nickelodeon is often acknowledged as the foremost pioneer in the concentrated focus on children's popular culture, but also with the revolutionary interest in empowering girls by airing series with girls as main characters, and allowing itself to be represented by women like Linda Ellerbee and Rosie O'Donnell (Benet-Weiser 124). Girls' Studies, therefore, is a subheading under children's studies, but it is a unique standpoint since the 1990s gave rise to the term "girl power." Sarah Benet-Weiser's "Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon" claims,

[2] Sociologist Anne Haas Dyson has observed children and also believes they deserve more credit. In "The Case of the Missing Childhoods: Methodological Notes for Composing Children in Writing Studies," she writes, "Children are engaged in transformative actions, and they find support in their own histories, in social engagement with others, and in the intense motivation to corral those pesky letters in order to join in the fun. At least potentially what they construct is a network of practices, a culture" (Dyson 414).

> empowerment became the buzzword of the 1990s—not marginalized political communities, but squarely written mainstream culture. While this kind of empowerment obviously references economic power and the recognition of adolescent (and pre-adolescent) girls as an important market segment, it also seems to address a politico-social power represented in terms of feminist subjectivity. (Benet-Weiser 124)

The specific shows Benet-Weiser mentions in her article, while groundbreaking, nonetheless fail to be examples of a "different sort" of television show when it comes to innocence. Benet-Weiser describes the premise and heroines of a few series in order to demonstrate how they break the mold while simultaneously encouraging consumer culture: "The ideological themes of girl power that are represented in Nickelodeon programs such as *Clarissa Explains it All* and *As Told By Ginger*, where the girls are strong, independent, and often unruly are situated in relation to normative definitions of girls as obedient and docile—even as these 'resistant' themes are marketed as a particular kind of product" (127).

My concern lies in the fact that, stated plainly, *nothing bad ever happens to these girls.* Maybe they are not "docile," but their sassiness is commodified and contained. A different sort of girl would be one who has the courage to live and love herself against huge odds like illness, disability, domestic violence, extreme poverty, racism, abuse, a broken school system, etc. These girls may not be the children of the previous decades whose sole entertainment was a combination of slapstick humor and cartoons

based on toy franchises, but their new lives are suspiciously flattering and convenient for adults. The white, middle class, suburban girl is as much a myth as any other figurative girl or child. Why is there so much reluctance or ignorance surrounding the girl whose resilience does not come from witty comebacks and wacky clothes, but survival? Where is her aggression, her sadness, fear, or haunting memories? The problem is not only that millions of American children are erased in popular culture, but also why are these alternate lives so unthinkable?

A discussion of narrative goals and implied audiences or readers can stumble into ongoing debates within reception studies and reader response theory, which examine the reactions of real people in the world to the texts they consume. Reception studies asks questions like: how can we theorize actual people's responses to different media? Is there a way to do that ethically, without making sweeping generalizations and ignoring individual contexts and intersectionalities? Patrocinio Schweickart's article, "Understanding an Other: Reading as a Receptive Form of Communicative Action," helpfully describes the fundamental and necessary dynamic between the reader and the object being read, and the usefulness of equating reading a text with listening to a speaker:

> When I speak, I place my communicative project in the custody of the listener. My communicative project can succeed only if an other is disposed to understand what I am saying. Similarly, the fate of a writer's communicative project is in the hands of the reader. The writer's project fails unless the reader

> is willing and able to undertake a careful and just understanding of what the writer has written. (13)

The necessity of these expressive and receptive roles is important for any communication to function fairly, regardless of circumstance. This philosophy applies to written texts as well as audiovisual works such as film and television: In order for a story to happen the way it is supposed to happen, the teller (which could be the director, the photographer, the singer, the actor, etc.) needs to assume that the listener understands what is being said and is reacting in the desired way. For example, Jack sneaking away from the giant will not work unless "we" comply and turn the page. So in my dissertation, when I refer to "we" or the audience, I am not discussing an audience made up of real world individuals, but instead the intended "we"; I am arguing for an expected reaction from the audience which, like the Jack example, may not always be realized by every reader or viewer. Whether or not we comply, we are being addressed—and that role, the addressee, comes with an essential and sometimes damaging responsibility to the teller.

Vulnerability to Address in The Lifted Veil

Turning to literature written for adults, my project examines works in various American 20th century media that address the inherent power in making use of the (assumed) audience. Audience inclusion is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it means that a reader can be addressed as "you" and given a sense of responsibility. In

this light, "you" can be of assistance to the narrator in sorting out characters and events. On the other hand, such assigned responsibility can make it seem that the events that take place are at least in part correlated to your involvement. The latter point is illustrated poignantly in George Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil* (18xx). Although this novel appears in a different century and a different country than the texts that appear in the rest of "Telling Girlhood," her discussion of metafiction and the reader's role in the narrative is uncannily prescient and casts a shadow over my interpretation of subsequent texts.

The protagonist, Latimer, forces the reader to share the unpleasant consequences of his clairvoyance. Latimer's sentimental self-abasement and insistence on demonstrating for us how his powers ruin his life are vain attempts to gain his readers' sympathy. For example, clairvoyance interferes with his bitter love life. Bertha, a young woman who is initially betrothed to Latimer's older brother, completely captivates him because he cannot see into her mind. Bertha is his "oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge" (18), even after he foresees that their relationship will end miserably, because in the present his ignorance of her thoughts allows him to fantasize. At this point it is apparent that Latimer is quite determined to be unhappy, and the question arises: why must the reader pity him for the depressing future he has brought upon himself? Somehow sensing disdain, Latimer demonstrates his peculiar ability to break the fourth wall and acknowledge our condemnation after lamenting his stubbornness about Bertha:

> Are you unable to give me your sympathy—you who read this?...Yet you must have known something of the presentiments that spring from an insight at war with passion; and my visions were only like presentiments intensified to horror. You have known the powerlessness of ideas before the might of impulse; and my visions, when once they had passed into memory, were mere ideas—pale shadows…while my hand was grasped by the living and the loved. (Eliot 21)

Perhaps this address is not a plea for sympathy so much as a defensive accusation that we as readers are hypocrites for judging him. If we think he is a fool for wanting to marry a woman whom he knows will come to hate him, his response is that "you" know exactly what it is like to reach for something you know is bad for you. His appeal to us is that we should realize we have at some point made a similar choice, and refrain from judging him.

Key to my questions is the troubling resonance to Latimer's pointing a finger at the reader. In Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, she discusses language and its power to constitute, recognize, and threaten subjects. Language reveals that subjecthood emerges from a state of potentiality: "One 'exists' not only by virtue of being recognized, but in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*" (Butler 5). Such a statement, the identification of a subject with both perception and being perceived, is essential to unpacking the work Latimer begins when he hails "you who read this." Latimer has established mutual recognition between himself and the reader. He shares

his inner turmoil and self-destructive behavior and then reveals to us that we are not so different from him, and that, in his way, *he can see us*.

The question is, now that Latimer can "see" the reader, what does he have to say, and how will we feel once he says it? Butler chillingly explains the price of recognizability: "If the speaker addresses his or her body to the one addressed, then it is not merely the body of the speaker that comes into play: it is the body of the addressee as well. Is the one speaking merely speaking, or is the one speaking comporting her or his body toward the other, exposing the body of the other as vulnerable to address" (Butler 12). The phrase "vulnerable to address" implies that there are risks in being spoken to. As readers, we can be injured, or threatened, or blamed. It is not clear what is at stake the first time Latimer addresses us—we merely know that we have been exposed: Latimer not only interpolates the readers; he also knows that we dislike him.

His married life with Bertha is as miserable as he knew it would be. They hate and avoid each other for years, and Latimer begins to suspect and address a new entity that is responsible for his misfortune: the author. Latimer remarks that he is incapable of the initiative it would take to kill himself (which is what Bertha wants) because "[he] was too completely swayed by the sense that [he] was in the grasp of unknown forces, to believe in [his] power of self-release" (Eliot 33). Latimer is partly thinking about the helplessness of getting exactly what he always wanted: his miserable life with Bertha, and the feeling of self-defeat when his fondest dream

becomes an unbearable reality. The phrase "unknown forces" also conveys Latimer's suspicions that his life is being dictated—the predetermined nature is obvious to him because he can glimpse the future; but this particular brand of helplessness is peculiar. Butler asks, "What if language has within it its own possibilities for violence and for world-shattering?" (Butler 6). Latimer is realizing that his life is made up of language, that he is written, and that his world is being shattered by this omniscient "unknown force" that decided to prescribe for him a life of heartbreak. He complains to Eliot about the injustice of being her creature, condemned for his ability to see but not change:

> So much misery—so slow and hideous a growth of hatred and sin, may be compressed into a sentence! And men judge of each other's lives through this summary medium. They epitomise the experience of their fellow-mortal, and pronounce judgment on him in neat syntax, and feel themselves wise and virtuous…Seven years of wretchedness glide glibly over the lips of the man who has never counted them out in moments of chill disappointment, of head and heart throbbing…of remorse and despair. We learn *words* by rote, but not their meaning; *that* must be paid for with our life-blood, and printed in the subtle fibres of our nerves. (Eliot 34)

The reader and author have already been interrogated; now *our* vulnerability to address has led to this moment of judgment from Latimer. He is saying to Eliot, how dare you create this life for me and force me to suffer when you will never know what this life

is like? His experiences are being "epitomised" unsympathetically, and the reader is equally to blame for consuming and critiquing his painful life story. It is telling that he says words have a price. Words and their meanings are separate experiences.

This ethical dilemma, regarding the damage one can do by relating a story, relates to Cathy Caruth's ruminations in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. According to Caruth, history "is a matter not only of what we see and know but also of what it is ethical to tell" (Caruth 26). In this passage, Caruth is talking specifically about betraying secrets, but I want to suggest that the ethics of telling also involve the very story being told. *The Lifted Veil* is costing Latimer something, and he wants to make the reader's complicity plain. There are consequences to having control over the inner workings and struggles of another's mind. And if we still cannot fully appreciate "[t]he horror [of] breaking in on the privacy of another soul" (Eliot 38), then Latimer is determined to demonstrate this horror with the event he alludes to very early on in his account of his only childhood friend—the reanimation by Charles Meunier of Bertha's housemaid, Mrs. Archer.

Mrs. Archer, who is on her deathbed, represents the dangerous hailing voice that may address the reader. Meunier is now a doctor, and conveniently returns in time to monitor Mrs. Archer while waiting for her to die. The scene is tense because her passing is not peaceful—Mrs. Archer is furious about something, but unable to communicate: "there seems a strange prompting in her to say something which pain and failure forbid her to utter; and there is a look of hideous meaning in her eyes,

which she turns continually towards her mistress" (Eliot 40). Latimer's wife is relieved that whatever it is will not be said, because the language would be violently revelatory. Latimer is satisfied because he does not believe he can withstand many more disheartening insights. Unfortunately for everyone, Dr. Meunier has been waiting for an opportunity to experiment with human reanimation. Mrs. Archer is briefly reanimated, and the intensity of her restrained thoughts is unleashed in a grisly speech act:

> You mean to poison your husband…you laughed at me, and told lies about me behind my back…are you sorry…now?"…The wretched woman's heart strings had been set to hatred and vengeance, the spirit of life had swept the chords for an instant, and was gone for ever. Great God! Is this what it is to live again…to wake up with our unstilled thirst upon us, with our unuttered curses rising to our lips, with our muscles ready to act out their half-committed sins? (Eliot 42)

Mrs. Archer's "revival" is a physical manifestation of Latimer's gift of prevision; Dr. Meunier's experiment is a horrific manifestation of the author's task. She dies once and then dies again (an additional illustration of Latimer's clairvoyance, because he experiences events twice). She is also poked and prodded until her inner workings are teased out, and we as readers witness the revelation of her secrets. This is *The Lifted Veil's* lingering depiction of "the horror [of] breaking in on the privacy of another soul." Mrs. Archer's body does not intend to speak—it should never have been able

to speak. She is not truly present to control her speech act—her strings are being pulled by Meunier. He is appalled by what he has done: "Even Meunier looked paralysed; life for that moment ceased to be a scientific problem for him" (Eliot 42).

This cessation of the "scientific problem" of life is not merely caused by an intake of breath, eyelids fluttering, a mouth twisted in confusion. Mrs. Archer's reanimation is literally an indictment; she reveals Bertha's intent to murder Latimer, which horrifies them both. Bertha is terrified that her secrets will be revealed, and Latimer would prefer to remain ignorant of whatever is on her mind: "I felt that Bertha had been watching for the moment of death as the sealing of her secret: I thanked Heaven it could remain sealed for me" (Eliot 41). Mrs. Archer's speech act is a realization of the "world shattering" that Butler speculates about. As readers, we experience it as well; Latimer has already brought us into the room with him, to see what our perceptions have done.

What the readers are left with, by virtue of Mrs. Archer and Latimer's horrific repetitions, is our vulnerability to being addressed by the dead. Eliot thus presents readers with a problem: how good can we be, if "reading" can be compared to what happens to Mrs. Archer? Mrs. Archer has no control in the matter; her inner workings are exposed involuntarily. Latimer makes it clear that the reader is part of the problem and the pain he experiences—our spectatorship intensifies his trauma.

Beloved's Solution

The Lifted Veil As suggests that to take in a narrative passively—to allow a horrific narrative cycle to continue uninterrupted, is potentially evil. As an author who interrogates notions of good and evil,[3] Toni Morrison takes up the debate about the author/narrator/reader dynamic in her work; but unlike Eliot, Morrison presents alternatives. In *Sula*, for example, the protagonist Nel and another woman have a conversation about a past tragedy:

> Tell me how you killed that little boy.
>
> What? What little boy?
>
> The one you threw in the water. I got oranges. How did you get him to go in the water?
>
> I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula.
>
> You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched. (Morrison 168)

As readers, we can ask if we are guilty of "watching." The Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved*, as we know, deals with the repeating traumatic event and the evil of passive spectatorship. Morrison illustrates a helpful alternative to "watching", which is

[3] *The Cornell Chronicle* covered Morrison's 2013 talk at the university where she discusses writing about good and evil: "'It's too easy [to create an exaggeratedly evil character]. Goodness is really and truly hard. You can't seduce it. So writing and trying to find language for it has been probably all I've ever done in the novel'" (Kelley).

one step closer to a solution to passive spectatorship; but the next step, I later argue, is more difficult.

Beloved, about a runaway slave named Sethe who murders her oldest daughter to protect her from her master, is essentially a ghost story. The ghost of Sethe's dead baby terrorizes 124, the house where Sethe lives with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and her youngest daughter, Denver. Dean Franco, in his article, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Beloved," discusses the gothic aspect of the novel as bound up with the reader's accountability: "Sethe's haunting…resonates so awfully because…the reader is made to experience the presence of the past" (Franco 416). The past is slavery, is Sethe's memory of a time she cannot forget. For both *The Lifted Veil* and *Beloved*, addressing the reader manifests as a kind of haunting that calls into question what language can do and how we are implicated in the telling, how the narrative and the reader having an uncanny access to one another, how our judgments and empathy (or lack thereof) are partly why the story is unfolding.

Beloved is preoccupied with the language of trauma. In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth says that "trauma…is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth 4). The notion of trauma itself having a voice is present in Morrison's novel; 124 is immersed in such terrible recollections that one can hear them outside of the house: "The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons…What a roaring" (Morrison 213).

Traumatic memories are made up of words, so loud and present that strangers passing by can hear them. And "the people of the broken necks [and] fire-cooked blood" never resided in 124. Trauma is peculiar in this way—it seems to roam.

In *Beloved*, trauma neither stays in one place nor with one person; it becomes publicly available: "[T]here were places in which things so bad happened that when you went near them it could happen again" (Morrison 287). Memories can take on a life of their own. Sethe introduces the term "rememory," which is memory as a tangible thing: "What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened" (Morrison 43). Anyone can experience a rememory that is not their own if they wander into that space. Sethe teaches Denver about this phenomenon in an effort to protect her from her past as a slave: "Where I was before I came here, that place is real...if you go there…it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you" (Morrison 43).

Sethe is warning Denver about Sweet Home—the farm where the Garners had owned her. Sethe's memories of that time are always swarming around her, no matter where she is. Caruth explains that "traumatic memory is evoked under particular conditions" (Caruth 163). For Sethe, the trigger can be words or a particular sight or smell:

> Then something. The plash of water, the sight of her shoes and stocking awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near

> her feet, 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 out before her in shameless beauty...it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. (Morrison 7)

Sweet Home unfolds like the opening of a novel. Whenever we begin to read, we trigger the unfurling for ourselves and, more tragically, Sethe. The farm rolls out in our minds as if Sethe's life there were being told again from the beginning. The repetition of "rolling" gives us the image of the place unfurling, gorgeous and dangerous; the beauty is part of the terror, and we have the urge to linger there—even though staying will break us.

Beloved, the form of Sethe's dead baby as a woman grown, remembers things that Sethe's baby never experienced; for example, that "dead men lay on top of her." She is referencing being stored in the cargo hold of a ship during the Middle Passage: "in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us" (Morrison 250). Combine this with the earlier observation that there are many traumatized voices speaking around 124, and Baby Suggs' assertion that "Not a house in the country ain't packed with some dead Negro's grief," and it becomes arguable that Beloved is made up of many traumatic memories—and Sethe, still attached to trauma and constantly reliving it internally, is the focal point. So, even if it were possible for Sethe to atone for murdering her daughter, she can never right the wrongs done to these voices, to the "Sixty Million

and more" that Morrison dedicates the novel to. Sethe has taken on too much of the blame and it is killing her; she is slowly starving to please Beloved, who is rendering her "broke down, finally, from trying to take care of and make up for" (Morrison 286).

These same traumatic memories constitute *Beloved*, the novel. *Beloved* may also be considered a rememory. This text has its own metafictional stakes—print enables another potent kind of telling. Note that one of Sethe's jobs as a slave at Sweet Home is making ink: "He liked the ink I made…at night he sat down to write in his book. It was a book about us but we didn't know that right away" (Morrison 44). Sethe is talking about Schoolteacher, the man who takes over Sweet Home once the Garners are unable to, due to death and illness. He teaches lessons to his nephews and records notes while observing the slaves. He and his nephews use Sethe's ink to do an assignment that makes a lasting and fearful impression on her. After Beloved is exorcised by the women in Sethe's community, Sethe stays in bed, defeated and still sad that her dead baby is gone. When Paul D. comes to see how she is faring, she says cryptically: "I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink" (Morrison 320). What is the consequence of this ink, the text of *Beloved*? Futher, as readers who participate in this trauma,what damage does this novel enable us to do?

Like a traumatic memory, the events of this novel can be repeated; Beloved is resurrected every time we reopen the book. Consider this passage:

The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out. Slave life; freed life—every day was a test and a trial. Nothing could be counted on in a world where even when you were a solution you were a problem. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," and nobody needed more; nobody needed a grownup evil sitting at the table with a grudge. (Morrison 302)

The phrase, "even when you were a solution you were a problem" is the essence of Morrison's dilemma. In her essay, "The Site of Memory," Morrison explains that *Beloved* is meant to articulate the horrors that ex-slaves were pressured into leaving out of their narratives (301). So the novel itself serves as their rememories, the "place" where so many terrible events are happening again. Morrison can be said to deny the reader's desire to forget, or maybe to have never known in the first place, the atrocities of slavery. But she is also asking us not to remember: "This is not a story to pass on" (Beloved 324). This is not a story to keep reviving, to reanimate like Mrs. Archer. "[T]he past is something to leave behind." That line and the notion of "evil sitting at the table with a grudge" brings me back to the image of Mrs. Archer—the past, the dead, pointing its finger at us to tell us what we have done, full of hate. When *Beloved*'s narrator writes, "this is not a story to pass on," she is addressing the reader. The novel ends with its title: "Beloved" (324), which means that, similarly to *The Lifted Veil*, if we are not careful we are right back at the beginning, unable to rid ourselves of the dead. Telling is dangerous because trauma

should not be handed down. Eliot does not offer a theory about how to end the cycle. The readers and Latimer continually re-experience his trauma because Eliot means to explore the darker implications of what storytelling can do.

But *Beloved* may offer a way out. The day Sethe murders Beloved is traumatic for everyone. For Sethe, Schoolteacher's return embodies all she endured at Sweet Home. Beloved is haunted by the day her mother kills her and abandons her with the dead. And the day is also important for the community. The communal trauma is that no one helps Sethe that morning: "Nobody warned them, and [Stamp Paid had] always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing—like, well, like meanness—that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already to the house" (Morrison 185). When Schoolteacher arrives to collect Sethe and her children, the town is so bitter towards Sethe and Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, that they do not warn her, they only "watch," which prompts Sethe's desperate action. The town dislikes their pride. Somehow Sethe and Baby Suggs offend the neighborhood by having too much to give at a welcoming party: "this free-floating repulsion was new. It wasn't white folks—that much she could tell—so it must be colored ones. And then [Baby Suggs] knew. Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (Morrison 163).

The day that Schoolteacher comes to 124 and Sethe commits infanticide is a rememory. We know this because the beginning of the murder happens again; only this time everyone makes better choices. The re-happening is near the end of the novel, during the exorcism of Beloved. Denver spreads the word that Sethe is being consumed by her baby's ghost, and this time the town springs into action and decides to get rid of it. Not only is Beloved present, but also a white man on a horse, making his way to 124, which completes the cast of the neighborhood's rememory of the day Schoolteacher came.

There are two major decisions made during the first occurrence of that day: no one warns Sethe, and also Sethe attacks her children as a response to the threat. When the rememory begins, Sethe does not go after Beloved or Denver. When she sees the white man approaching her house, she goes after *him*: "He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing…She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand" (Morrison 309). But this time, the man coming to 124 is not a slave owner; he is a well-liked abolitionist named Edward Bodwin who is responsible for getting Sethe out of jail. So the women who came to save Sethe from Beloved also save her from committing another murder.

Revision seems to be *Beloved*'s answer. The past cannot truly re-happen (Sethe can never undo killing Beloved), but something in the cycle of guilt and pathological reenactment has been healed through the process of re-staging, of trying again.

Looking Forward

If it can be said that *The Lifted Veil* teaches the culpability of the reader in a traumatic cycle, and *Beloved* proposes that the damage can be mitigated by a willingness to confront and essentially problem-solve, then my dissertation asks: what if the reader's culpability were constructive in itself, as well as shield against traumatic cycles because the audience is no longer allowed to simply "watch"? My dissertation draws primarily from works that, like *Beloved*, focus on young women protagonists in the U.S. and address the presuppositions of girls' powerlessness. The sensation of discomfort or disillusionment that the narrators in my chosen texts work to produce not only confronts the context of girlhood "innocence" but also the perceived audience's own innocence—the belief that they are not implicated in what they read, or the nostalgia of a time when they were young and no "adult" thoughts or experiences had touched them. My dissertation focuses on works that undermine the "rules" of girlhood (usefully captured by Projansky) in ways intended to make their audiences uncomfortable. In each chapter, I discuss media and fiction that defy our expectations of girls and young women.

Chapter one is about the girl who transgresses by experiencing depression. "Girl Power and Depression in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," discusses the contradictory nature of the modern empowered heroine as illustrated in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which is about a teen named Buffy who is the new "Slayer": a girl bestowed with super strength in order to fight vampires and demons. It argues that

Buffy's empowerment is troubled by her severe depression in season six. With the help of *Interrogating Postfeminism*, Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, and other texts about action heroines in film and television, this chapter intervenes in the common discussion of Buffy's dark and depressed period as "growing pains," or an exaggerated presentation of what it means to be an adult and take on adult responsibilities, and instead argues that Buffy's depression is an agent in the series that calls attention to the exploitative nature of "girl power" as well as the very premise of the show.

The obstacle that Buffy must overcome in order to earn the powerfully feminist conclusion of season seven is not depression or infantilism, but the oppressive notion of "happiness" that plagues all postfeminist heroines and which Buffy confronts dramatically at the show's end. Instead of ultimately reading Buffy as a postfeminist heroine, I show that she represents the devastating price of postfeminist toughness. The chapter reveals that *Buffy*'s thorough and provocative depiction of depression brought on by pressures imposed on female characters in the media ultimately indicts the viewers for insisting on the corrupt and miserable legacy of the Slayer which, we learn in the final season, originated with rape. This is the introduction of the uncomfortable, complicit audience that must move past their naïveté in order to grasp the reparative power of girls' depression in the postfeminist age.

Furthering the notion that the audience is not separate from the girls' text, chapter two, "Selective Shock about Children and Race through *The Bluest Eye*,"

ventures into critical race theory to ask why readers are determined to deny complicity in America's long narrative of racism. Katherina Capshaw's "Ethnic Studies and Children's Literature: A Conversation Between Fields" argues in part that "Childhood becomes the site on which the consensus memory of civil rights is formed" (Capshaw 248), which means that to some extent our society believes that whatever we can convince children to believe about the world must be true. If children can be convinced that racism is gone and civil rights have been won, the hope is that will become the status quo, and we can ignore signs of injustice because those are inconsequential exceptions to the rule. "Appeals to the colorblind," Capshaw clarifies, "distract from the material inequalities that persist in our field. They may also feed into tendencies in our own work (scholarship and teaching) that sideline or ignore texts that construct childhood as difficult, complicated, or unsatisfying" (Capshaw 247). She is speaking of a profound historical discomfort with problematizing childhood—which by its very nature is to remain untouched. Therefore, that children can experience or harbor racism and prejudice is always a horrible surprise when anyone dares to talk about it at all.

I compare the online uproar about a black actress being cast as *The Hunger Games*'s Rue to the disdain and hatred directed at young Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Amandla Stenberg (who plays Rue) and Pecola are young black girls whose values and endearing qualities are overlooked simply because of their blackness. This chapter answers Stockton's question, "how does innocence, our

default destination for children, cause its own violence? For example, how do children of color display that their conclusion in 'the future of our children' is partial, even brutal?" (Stockton 5). Like Rue, Pecola deserves sympathy, but her "ugliness" preempts the compassion of those who witness her downfall. Using texts that explore the themes of racism and childhood, such as Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* and Beverly Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* this chapter *starts* with the assumption that children harbor and experience racism and argues that the more problematic phenomenon is adults' need to shield themselves from their own corruption, first by clinging onto good intentions, and second by performing shock at the demonstrated lack of innocence in the lived lives of children.

Next, after exploring the intense discomfort surrounding narratives about children and race, I assert that readers *must not* view themselves as separate from narratives about girls, because American culture's denial of girls' narratives fuels a pathology that can only be eradicated through telling. Chapter three, "Vicious Narration in *The Woman Warrior*," like previous chapters, centers on a text that speaks about girls in a way that our society would rather not hear. The developing field of Girls Studies encompasses not only literature that represents girls but also analysis of real girls and adolescents' own accounts of coming into their gender identity. That girls are expected to be happy and colorblind fits with the general model of the "good" or "nice" girl; if a girl is not exactly made of sugar and spice, those who

pretend will get ahead and those that do not will fall behind. Due to the aspiration to be nice, many girls' emotions and experiences are left unexpressed because they contradict popular culture's idealized nice girl. I draw on texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Rachel Simmons's *Odd Girl Out: the Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* to address the motives and consequences of girls' strategies for aggression and "meanness," and show how girls' subversive aggression can be demonstrated in narrative. My argument takes the articulation of girls' anger further and concludes that the reporting of anger in Woman Warrior sets out to have an equalizing effect on the reader. While someone presents the reader with a confession, for that moment the reader's identity becomes just like theirs. During the time that a girl tells the reader a confession, for that moment the reader lives where she lives; in a reality that includes experiences of trauma, anger, and depression.

The final chapter proves what is possible in a narrative wherein the storyteller is a girl who is allowed to make use of an audience whom she believes to be accepting of her reality. The most striking detail about *Ellen Foster* is that she is ten years old and opens the novel by expressing an intense desire to murder her abusive father. If Stockton is correct, and "children are those peculiar legal creatures…who are generally deemed by the law not to have a motive to harm, or, most especially, any rational intent to kill," then *Ellen*'s opening line is meant to challenge the reader and say, yes, here is a girl who wants to kill. And how you respond to Ellen's telling determines whether or not you deserve to listen.

"Reparative Narration in *Ellen Foster*" discusses an explicit use of the perceived audience to heal trauma in Kaye Gibbons's novel, *Ellen Foster*. Combining Carla Kaplan's *The Erotics of Talk*, child psychology, and writings on narrative therapy and reparative reading from Janet Lee and Eve Sedgwick, I suggest the phrase "reparative narration" and argue that the greater capacity of the reader who allegedly does not merely view her accounts as sensational or shocking allows Ellen to actively craft her narrative in a way that helps her survive the retelling and take pride in her resourcefulness. Because of the equalizing effect of telling, Ellen can use the reader as moral support. It is a way for her to distance herself from the action; if she is doing the reader a favor by explaining what happens to her (instead of being alone and at the mercy of troubling memories), then her relationship to her experience is more objective and less painful.

We cannot know the child; it is counterproductive and harmful to employ the figure of the child (or the girl) when speaking to or about children, because it is based on adult yearning for something that children are not, and therefore turns actual children away before they could arrive. Jane Helleiner et. al suggest, in "Anthropology, Feminism, and Childhood Studies" that the critical lens of feminism can be adapted in order to explore the agency and cultural contributions of children. They believe, as I do, that "children must be viewed as active creators and reproducers of social relations and culture. Such an approach can provide a much needed a politically important challenge to the often essentially and universalized

'childhood' constructed through dominant discourse and practice" (136). Fictional girls and children telling what is hard to hear is essential practice for adults who must learn that girls will speak if we step out of the way.

CHAPTER ONE: GIRL POWER AND DEPRESSION IN *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*

90's Empowerment

Buffy the Vampire Slayer proves that, despite its stigmatization in popular media, representations of depression in girls are reparative—meaning, although depression is viewed as a negative and undesirable experience, unbecoming of the innocent girl, it requires a re-examination of the figure of the girl. That re-examination, in this instance, prompts the girl and her audience to realize that *she* is not the problem. The problem is that many are attempting to deny her process. The postfeminist "girl power" movement may seem progressive but it ultimately reinforces the notion that girls are not meant to be controversial; their power is to be contained, sacrificial, and second to their desire to "fit in " and serve others.

Postfeminism stems from the belief that the feminist movement has done its job, and now can be laid to rest because women have fully gained their equality and rights. Jeffrey A. Brown's *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* explains, "this younger generation of feminism is differentiated by embracing popular culture and focusing on individual choice, consumerism, sexual freedom,

cultural diversity, personal empowerment, and an ironic sensibility" (Brown 147). Brown's text cites shows like *Sex and the City*, *Charmed*, and *The Powerpuff Girls* as examples of media that propagate postfeminist ideals, at one time cheerfully summed up as "Girl Power." By this view, girls can do absolutely anything; they can attain prestigious careers, be athletes or intellectuals, while they also shop, make themselves gorgeous, have great sex, and appear as exceptional mothers/students/daughters/wives. Popular media is at the forefront of the postfeminist campaign. As audience members, we are inundated with female protagonists on television and in film who have Girl Power. These women can do it all; they are fashionable, successful, attract gorgeous men, and can save the world in the meantime if the genre calls for it.

But there is a downside to Girl Power. Angela McRobbie, in "Postfeminsism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," explains that because equality has been "achieved" and girls are allowed to do whatever they like, "the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl" (36). Feminism is, at best, old fashioned, and, at worst, viewed as misguided and/or negative. Girls are supposed to be happy with everything now that equality has been achieved, to the point where one unfortunate trend in postfeminism is that trauma and oppression are read as merely "empowering" instead of shedding light on the injustice of these hardships.

Among discussions of feminist and postfeminist heroines, common TV titles such as *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (most of which had seasons that aired at the same time) are referenced frequently. Buffy is arguably one of the most enduring of these shows, and has certainly inspired a disproportional share of academic interest. David Lavery's forward to *Buffy Goes Dark: Essays on the Final Two Seasons of* Buffy the Vampire Slayer *on Television* begins:

> At "Staking A Claim: Exploring the Global Reach of Buffy" at the University of South Australia, we experienced firsthand to what extent Joss Whedon's creation had become a world-wide, multi-hemispheric phenomenon (and this was back in the day before books in Italian on Buffy and a conference—"Buffy Hereafter: From the Whedonverse to the Whedonesque"—in Istanbul! (Lavery 1).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer stands out as a key test case for this mythology since it appears as a popular and widely analyzed example of glamour/strength. Especially important in the series is Buffy's appearance as a bubbly, blonde, middle class girl who is also the Slayer. Being "the Slayer" means that she is gifted with super strength and a mythical duty to fight and protect humans from demons.

An especially significant crux in *Buffy* revolves around the sixth season of the series, wherein Buffy becomes severely depressed and wishes she were dead. This period of her narrative is troubling, but also innovative and fascinating. Why is it important to have the postfeminist heroine suffer in this way? How is her depression

a powerful reflection on her role, on the paradoxical job of being the "normal" girl who can do everything? Buffy's depression makes me question what these modern narratives so rarely question: what are the consequences of postfeminist toughness? My argument is that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* not only dares to challenge the surety that the action heroine is an inherently progressive figure, but also provides a somewhat self-destructive solution for the damage done by postfeminism.

Buffy is a shining example of the postfeminist heroine because she can repeatedly save the world while still going to school, shopping, dating, and clubbing with friends. One very illustrative plot is an episode towards the end of season 3 titled "The Prom." The supernatural drama of this episode is centered on a classmate named Tucker who unleashes a pack of hellhounds to slaughter all of the students at the prom (he is bitter because he did not get a date). Buffy assures her friends that she will take care of the monsters, that they should go to the dance and not worry. Once the prom begins, Buffy is seen chasing the pack of hellhounds through the woods. Using her crossbow and a dagger, she kills all but one who makes it into the school. She throws herself on top of it and snaps its neck after a brief struggle, inches away from a slightly alarmed student in a tuxedo. She drags the bodies of the dead hounds away from the school, piles them up in the woods, picks up a duffle bag, and soon after arrives at the dance in a stunning pink Pamela Dennis gown. To top off the image of the postfeminist hero who can wrestle with demons and still look fabulous, she is also quite popular that night; the students have made up an award just for her.

The announcer says, "We're proud to say that the class of '99 has the lowest mortality rate of any class in Sunnydale history!" thanks to Buffy's heroism ("The Prom"). She is presented with a golden umbrella that says, "Class Protector." *Then*, miraculously, her boyfriend and epic true love strides in just in time for a slow dance to The Sundays' cover of "Wild Horses." An extraordinarily perfect night, this prom night establishes Buffy as the model heroine whose prowess extends from fierceness to glamour.

The Consequences of Buffy's Girl Power

Buffy is supposedly the ideal balance of tough and girly. *Buffy*'s creator, Joss Whedon, says she is supposed to represent the helpless female victim who is always chased down and murdered in horror movies: "I saw so many horror movies where there was that blonde girl who would always get herself killed. …The idea of Buffy came from just the very simple thought of a beautiful blonde girl walks into an alley, a monster attacks her, and she's not only ready for him—she trounces him" ("Joss Whedon on 'Welcome to the Hellmouth' and 'The Harvest'"). On many occasions Buffy exaggerates her appearance as bubbly and weak while fleeing from a demon or vampire, only to whip around and attack with a smile. She is just a "normal girl," but underneath that she is the Slayer (and underneath *that*, she is a normal girl). At the end of season five, while Buffy and her friends are once again brainstorming ways to save the world, she steps out into a back alley to slay a vampire who is trying to kill a

random pedestrian. After Buffy kills it, the man she saves is staring after her, incredulous:

> Male Victim: How'd you do that?
>
> Buffy: It's what I do.
>
> Male Victim: But you're...just a girl.
>
> Buffy: That's what I keep saying. ("The Gift")

This exchange is surprising because what we expect is some retort or challenge about the notion that a girl cannot be a super hero. But Buffy is not responding to sexism. When she says, "That's what I keep saying," she is not arguing that women should not be as strong as she is. Her focus is not on "you're just a girl," but "you're just a girl." She is just one person, never allowed to rest, always called on to do the impossible. Within Buffy is a depiction of the price of postfeminist toughness, which proves that heroism can be ironically disempowering.

In Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture, Sherrie A. Inness discusses the trajectory of female heroes in film and television. The challenge for writers often seems to be the cultural expectation that men are strong and active, not women. So the dilemma revolves around how to make female toughness palatable to a male audience: “Her toughness and more masculine image suggests that a greater variety of gender roles are open to women; at the same time, however, her toughness is often mitigated by her femininity, which American culture commonly associates with weakness” (Inness 5). The threat of the tough girl requires that they be more

feminine, more sexualized, in order to reassure the audience that she is still in some sense an object. This feminizing tactic can also serve to imply that women's natural state is not to be tough:

> Tough women can offer women new role models, but their toughness may also bind women more tightly to traditional feminine roles—especially when the tough woman is portrayed as a pretender to male power and authority, and someone who is not tough enough to escape being punished by society for her gender-bending behaviors. (Inness 5).

Buffy raises and confronts the trend Inness points out of the tough-girl as-pretender. In season three's "Helpless," as Buffy nears her eighteenth birthday, we learn that there is a special ritual, a "test" she must pass, orchestrated by the Watcher's Council. The Watcher's Council is an organization of (mostly) British men who oversee the Slayer and appoint a Watcher to her. The Watcher trains the Slayer for combat and teaches her about demons, vampires, and the Slayer's responsibility to the world. Buffy's watcher, Rupert Giles, must prepare her for the test. Preparing her means slowly draining her of her powers temporarily and without her knowledge, so that the Council can arrange for her to confront a vampire with nothing but her wit and normal human strength. That the Council arrives with the intent of suspending Buffy's powers implies that it is their power to give or take away as they choose. She has to prove, by killing a vampire without super strength, that she *deserves* the power.

When Giles expresses some concern for her, the head of the Council confidently reassures him, "Once this is all over, your Buffy will be stronger for it" ("Helpless").

Being without her strength renders Buffy vulnerable in a way she has never been since she became the Slayer: not just vulnerable to violent attack, but also to sexual harassment. Buffy first discovers that she is losing her powers during a fight with a vampire. He straddles her and turns her wooden stake around, attempting to push it into her chest. "Let me know if I'm not doing this right," he says, smirking ("Helpless"). It is an obvious sexual joke, made more disturbing by the fact that Buffy's first experience of "helplessness" involves a metaphor for sexual assault. This particular vulnerability further suggests that Buffy is only a pretender to male power, because "Tough men do not face the kind of sexual threat that tough women face constantly…no matter how tough she might appear on the surface, she still can be subjected to the ultimate indignity of rape" (Inness 71). Not only does she have to endure catcalls on her walk home at night, but the vampire she has been assigned to kill was formerly a psychopath who "murdered and tortured more than a dozen women before he was committed to an asylum for the criminally insane" ("Helpless"). That the council would deliberately place her, powerless, in an arena with a man who preys on women, is telling. Buffy eventually alienates the council, and she and her Watcher Giles operate on their own terms until the Council returns to Sunnydale in a last effort to put Buffy in her place.

In season five's "Checkpoint," a large group of Council members, mostly men, arrive at Giles' store, fully equipped with crisp British accents, tweed jackets, and briefcases—in many ways a parody of patriarchal authority. In this season Buffy's foe is an evil goddess, Glory, who is out to find and kill Buffy's younger sister, Dawn Summers (a newly created person who was formed to hide powerful magic that Glory wants to make use of). The Council possesses top-secret files on Glory's origin and weaknesses, and refuses to share them until Buffy has passed a formal "review," to prove that she is worthy and can be trusted with vital information. The council earnestly tries to remind Buffy that she is using borrowed power: "The Council fights evil; the Slayer is the instrument by which we fight. The Council remains, the Slayers change. Been that way from the beginning" ("Checkpoint"). One thing to note here is the word "change." The implication is that the Slayer's job is only temporary, and therefore she can never truly be as knowledgeable or respectable as the Council. But the reason Slayers have such a high turnover rate is that they are eventually murdered violently by a demon. So "change" is a convenient, diplomatic euphemism for "die." The Council decrees that not only must she meet their standards in combat, not only must they approve of her friends, but she is also forbidden to "resist [their] recommendations" ("Checkpoint"). When Buffy still seems mutinous, the Council leader, Quentin Travers, threatens to have Giles deported. "Perhaps you're used to idle threats…but you're dealing with grownups now" ("Checkpoint"). There is a great deal of residual bitterness on both sides from Buffy's eighteenth birthday and her later

refusal to acknowledge the Council's authority. They are back to prove that she is "an instrument" at best, and at worst, just a girl, in need of "grownup" discipline and boundaries.

But *Buffy* allows its hero to have the last word. By the end of the episode, Buffy has an inspiring revelation: "I've had a lot of people talking at me the last few days. Everyone just lining up to tell me how unimportant I am. And I finally figured out why. Power. I have it. They don't. This bothers them" ("Checkpoint"). The Council came in intending to punish Buffy for denying their authority—for her "gender-bending behavior," as Inness puts it. Instead Buffy informs the Council that there will be no review, because she has realized: "You guys didn't come all the way from England to determine whether or not I was good enough to be let back in. You came to beg me to let you back in. To give your jobs, your lives, some semblance of meaning" ("Checkpoint"). Buffy defies the absurdly patriarchal Council by pointing out they are nothing without her. *Buffy* sets up this notion of men coming to take their power back from women who need to learn their place, or as Travers puts it, "the relative status of the players in our little game," only to prove that these men are the true pretenders to her power ("Checkpoint").

How Much is Too Much?

In "Fool for Love," Buffy barely survives a fight with an unremarkable vampire one night, during a routine cemetery patrol. The realization that she can be

bested by a single, “ordinary” vampire makes Buffy newly aware of her mortality, of the fact that every Slayer eventually loses a battle, and she wants to learn more about those final battles so she can safeguard against past Slayers’ mistakes: “I realize that every Slayer comes with an expiration mark on the package; but I want mine to be a long time from now. Like a Cheetoh” (“Fool for Love”). In order to learn more she pays a visit to Spike, a vampire who is known to have killed two Slayers in the past. In a series of flashbacks, Spike narrates these two battles to explain to Buffy how he bested the Slayers.

This is where I believe *Buffy* forcefully and successfully troubles postfeminism. First it takes pains to demonstrate that Buffy is in fact a postfeminist Slayer. We see a truncated evolution of the Slayer through Spike’s memories. The first Slayer he killed was in China, during the Boxer Rebellion. We see the fight—it is clear that this Slayer is an excellent martial artist. She is grim and determined while Spike is grinning and laughing, enjoying the natural high from the violence. The Chinese Slayer is “all business,” as Spike puts it, the pre-feminist Slayer who follows the rules and fights with a strict discipline. She only speaks once, when she knows she has lost. The subtitles read, “Tell my mother I’m sorry,” to which Spike responds, “Sorry, Love—I don’t speak Chinese,” before letting her fall to the floor (“Fool for Love”). We are not given an explanation of the Slayer’s message—one reading is that she is apologizing for losing the fight, for failing to do her duty to rid the world of evil.

"The first one was all business," Spike narrates, "the second—well, she had a touch of *your* style" ("Fool for Love"), signaling that we have entered a new era, a new kind of Slayer. We are taken through Spike's memory of his fight with the second Slayer he killed, in a New York subway train in 1977. This Slayer, who we later learn is a single mother named Nikki Woods,[4] is not at all like the Chinese Slayer. Spike describes her as "cunning, resourceful, and…hot" while we watch the fight ("Fool for Love"). Nikki is clearly a 70s black feminist, with natural hair and a fierce attitude. Unlike the 1900s Slayer, Nikki is not bound by a formal fighting style. She kicks Spike in the groin, and some of her moves involve swinging around the poles in the aisle. She is dressed in street clothes, with a long leather jacket reminiscent of Samuel L. Jackson in *Shaft*. In fact, Nikki's style is such an inspiration to Spike that he steals her coat after he kills her, which becomes his trademark look.

The present Slayer has evolved into the post-feminist Slayer we know. That Spike says Nikki had a "touch" of Buffy's style indicates that she was only half-baked. Buffy has perfected the modernized "resourcefulness" that Spike respected in Nikki. Buffy is known to slay vampires with wooden unicorns and signposts. She banters and flirts with her foes, proving while being a fierce fighter that she is sexually appealing. Enemies often comment on Buffy's surprising well-roundedness. Spike, for

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[4] The dispensability of the Slayer is reiterated in the story arch of Nikki's son, Robin. He attempts to avenge her in season seven's "Lies My Parents Told Me." Robin is badly beaten by Spike, only to be told by both Spike (and Buffy more subtly) that a Slayer's life cannot and should not be avenged because fighting until she dies is simply what a Slayer does. He is afforded no pity for his grief.

example, when he first tries to kill Buffy in season two's "School Hard," is quite frustrated with Buffy's support system: "A Slayer with family and friends," he sighs, "that sure as Hell wasn't in the brochure" ("School Hard"). Buffy is unique because of her ties to her mother and sister as well as a close network of friends and fellow evil-fighters who have grown with her over the years. Like I mentioned earlier, this was almost true about Nikki as well—but when we learn she has a son we also learn that she prioritizes slaying over him. Her mantra is "The mission comes first" ("Lies My Parents Told Me"). Buffy is unique because the Slayer is supposed to be alone, isolated and secretive—except Buffy defies those expectations and somewhat balances her life. But according to Spike, the aspiration for a multifaceted life is still a dangerous burden, and, as we will learn later, Buffy's social ties also present profound dilemmas.

It becomes clear that the Slayer has a history of wishing for release from her constant and extraordinary pressures once Present Spike reveals the secret he has learned about Slayers while past Spike is killing Nikki:

> Death is on your heels, baby, and sooner or later it's going to catch up with you. And part of you wants it. Not only to stop the fear and uncertainty, but because you're just a little bit in love with it. Death is your art…part of you is desperate to know, what's it like? Where does it lead you?...Every Slayer has a death wish. Even you. ("Fool for Love")

Buffy is fairly good at juggling her responsibilities until the end of season five, when her life begins to fall apart—therein illuminating the trap of the postfeminist narrative. First, in "The Body," her mom dies unexpectedly from complications of her surgery. And the foes are piling on: evil goddess Glory finally discovers the secret about Dawn, and there is also a separate army of knights set on killing Dawn before Glory can get to her. Also, Glory has horribly injured a member of Buffy's inner circle, who becomes a constant source of worry and grief. "It just keeps coming," Buffy says hopelessly, "Glory, Riley, Tara…Mom" ("Spiral"). The episode is aptly titled "Spiral," because this is the time when the plot spirals out of control. Buffy hints at her despair just before the army of knights attacks the RV in which she and her friends are fleeing through the desert. In one scene Buffy is sword fighting on top of the RV, killing knights (complete with chain mail and horses) until Giles is impaled by a spear while driving and the RV flips over. The spiraling is particularly ominous because the show has prompted us to wonder, how much heroic responsibility is too much? And what happens if we get to that point? Season five is asking these questions, which we know because we have recently learned the troubling secret about the Slayer's death wish.

It is clear at the end of season five that death and rest is on Buffy's mind. While on the run, after some of her friends are maimed, Dawn is abducted by Glory, and she is still mourning the recent loss of her mother, Buffy falls into a catatonic stupor, and a venture into her mind reveals her secret fantasy of killing Dawn just so this endless chase will be over. Eventually, killing Dawn in order to stop Glory's

destruction of the world becomes a very pragmatic plan. Buffy is forced to consider it, and refuses even though she might be aiding in the apocalypse. The Buffy we see at the start of the season five finale is not the typical Girl Power Buffy who develops strategies or gathers weapons while spouting witty lines and joking with the gang. This time she is exhausted and disillusioned:

> I sacrificed Angel [her first boyfriend] to save the world. I loved him so much. But I knew what was right. I don't have that anymore. I don't understand. I don't know how to live in this world if these are the choices. If everything just gets stripped away. I don't see the point. I just wish…I just wish my mom was here. ("The Gift")

In the end, suicide is the perfect solution—Buffy realizes that her body and Dawn's are interchangeable, that her own death is just as effective in saving the world as her sister's. We also know this is the right answer because the spirit of the first Slayer once gave her a cryptic message: "Death is your gift" ("The Gift"). Jes Battis, in *Blood Relations: Chosen Families in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, describes Buffy's self-sacrifice as "visibly selfish," because "[s]he is not acting in line with the Slayer's philosophy—indeed, she is acting precisely against it" (Battis 75). Battis is not truly condemning Buffy—he goes on to discuss how Buffy always breaks the rules, and how the characters' "selfishness" in caring more for each other than the world is ultimately what saves the world every season.

Still, the notion of Buffy killing herself (instead of Dawn) being selfish is worth addressing. Buffy sacrifices herself because she cannot bear to lose Dawn—but I also believe she is ready to die. The "selfishness" Battis points out is not only selfishness in preserving her sister, who "represents everything that Buffy has lost—her freedom, her innocence, her childish wonder, her fear of the supernatural, her chance for a normal life and most acutely, her connection with Joyce" (Battis 76), but also the selfishness of wanting to quit. But what if this were an understandable decision? What if Buffy deserves to quit? The first Slayer says, "Death is your gift." The immediate understanding is that death is her gift to the world, because Buffy saves it by ending her life. But what if it also means that death is a gift *to* Buffy? She protects her sister one last time before finally resting. She looks past Dawn, beyond the ledge they are standing on, and the sun is rising. She runs and leaps from the edge, the music swells, and her friends cry, but they are all safe. Buffy's body looks peaceful. Her tombstone reads, "She Saved the World A Lot"—a fitting line for a protagonist who has reasonably done enough.

I do not mean to say that death is a reward, but rather a release. Sara Crosby in "The Cruelest Season: Female Heroes Snapped into Sacrificial Heroines" points out that Buffy's suicide was actually part of a concerning phenomenon on prime time television that Spring (2001); Crosby observed (through *Dark Angel*, *Xena:Warrior Princess*, and *Buffy*) that "in one brief, bloody Spring, American television orchestrated the suicides of almost its entire cast of tough, heroic female leads" (Crosby 153). She

explores possible readings of the self-sacrifices and pushes back against one notion that this is the ultimate act against the patriarchy, a way for the female protagonists to escape and elevate from the men who once controlled them. Crosby says this reading fails because the female heroes' "guilt, abject self-hatred, and regressive sacrifice to the needs of a patriarchal community undercut the rhetorical posture of feminist transcendence" (Crosby 154). Guilt and self-hatred are prominent themes at the end of season five, because Buffy is tormented by her inability to beat Glory and her secret desire to let Glory win. The Slayer is supposed to live and die in service of the world. The self-sacrifice is practically part of the job description, so Buffy's death should not be read as progressive. However, Buffy's death is significant in that she is able to experience being done: "The phallic authority, which *Buffy*'s male heroes wield with aplomb, wears heavily on Buffy, wears her out; so when in 2001 she finds herself faced with the sacrificial moment (her life or her sister's and the world's), she releases her friends and embraces her death with relief" (Crosby 164).

But Buffy is resurrected the following Fall. This is the heart of my project, which is to show how seasons six and seven interrogate what being the Slayer means, and thereby revealing that the postfeminist motif ("can-do," "Girl Power") is justifiably destructive and traumatic for the female hero.

Post-death Postfeminism

Things are wrong from the beginning. Female heroes are "conventionally beautiful, glamorous, and sexualized" (Brown 7) and Buffy is usually no exception. But Buffy's resurrection in "Bargaining" is anything but beautiful. The ritual involved is horrific, and includes slaughtering a fawn and vomiting a giant snake (all orchestrated by Buffy's best friend, Willow). When we first see Buffy, she is still buried—a rotted corpse in a coffin. She is unrecognizable and grotesque, with wisps of hair stuck to a leathery skull. When the magic touches the body the rotten limbs gradually fill out, her eyes grow back in a rush, and the last image before the credits is of her buried alive, confused and unable to breathe.

Aside from the trauma of clawing out of her own grave, Buffy's sister and friends cannot quite understand why she is not "herself." She behaves oddly, woodenly; she rarely smiles. Willow's rationale is that while Buffy was dead she was trapped and tormented in a Hellish dimension, which is why they had to rescue her, and why she is having trouble adjusting. Tired of the pressure to be full of cheer and gratitude and prove she is not insane or somewhat zombie-like, Buffy delivers a toneless speech to appease them all: "You brought me back. I was in…I was in Hell. I can't think too much about what it was like, but it felt like the world abandoned me there, and then suddenly you guys did what you did….And the world came rushing back. Thank you" ("After Life"). Everyone is happy to hear this; they shuffle into a group hug. Ironically, the happy news would be that Buffy spent her afterlife writhing

in Hell, and the horrifying truth, which she reveals moments later to Spike, is that she lied about her misery:

> I was happy….And I was warm. And I was loved. And I was finished. Complete...I think I was in Heaven. And now I'm not. I was torn out of there; pulled out by my friends. Everything here is hard, and bright, and violent…This is Hell—just getting through the next moment, and the one after that, knowing what I've lost. ("After Life")

Not only was Buffy happy being dead, but she resents her friends for bringing her back. Brown warns us that the new female action hero, in control of her desires, is still underdeveloped: "the close association of these heroines with Girl Power rhetoric means that what exactly she knows 'she wants' needs to be better understood" (Brown 149). But the tension in season six is about what Buffy is *not allowed* to want. She is not supposed to desire death—that is not a heroic desire, not a postfeminist desire, not one that her friends (so desperate to know that she suffered in Hell) are willing to hear. Once the secret is out, Xander (Buffy's other best friend), articulates this confusion with his signature sense of humor: "maybe we were [selfish]. I just feel weird feeling bad that my friend's not dead—it's too mind-boggling. So I've decided to simplify the whole thing: Me like Buffy. Buffy's alive, so me glad" ("Tabula Rosa").

There is also a metatextual discussion happening—the question is not only is it right to bring Buffy back, but is it right to bring *Buffy* back? The finale of season five, when Buffy dies, was almost the series finale. It was written that way because the

creators were not sure that *Buffy* would be taken up by another network after it was dropped by the WB. Joss Whedon reveals, "I wanted to kill Buffy at the end of season five. I think originally I had thought about the idea of ending the series then, and I wanted to make that day truly different and sum up the whole series. That's why "the Gift" begins with a very generic vampire killing" (season 5 DVD featurette). To some extent, it is not only Buffy's friends but also the audience who are responsible for bringing Buffy back. Now our protagonist has two inconceivable desires: not wanting to be alive again, and also not wanting the show to continue on.

These questions, this depression Buffy feels, are often described as obstacles that Buffy needs to move past. In "Normal Again," Buffy experiences magic-induced hallucinations wherein she is a normal girl who has been in an insane asylum for the past five years because she thinks she is something called The Slayer who kills monsters in a fictional town. This is a tragic episode because Buffy's deepest wish to be done with living her Slayer life is made tantalizingly real—a world where her mother is alive, a world she does not have to save again and again. In *Buffy and the Heroine's Journey: Vampire Slayer as Feminine Chosen One*, Valerie Estelle Frankel takes the common depression-as-obstacle route to illustrate what is at stake in this episode: "In that other world she has no responsibilities, no awful job or house payments, no Dawn…This infantilism is a sign of immaturity, a final temptation Buffy must leave behind" (Frankel 167). What Frankel does not mention is the haunting note that "Normal Again" ends on: an ambiguity that destabilizes which world is the "real" one

and thereby calls into question what the show is doing to her, what we are really asking of her by returning her to Sunnydale. That Buffy's anguish at being brought back from a place of peace to dig herself out of a grave and resume an epically difficult life is deemed "infantile" is problematic. From the moment she returns, she is forced to be the Slayer. She comes out of her coffin to find the neighborhood in utter chaos—demons are ransacking the houses and stores, and her gang of evil-fighting friends are for some reason completely inept at fighting them off. Still in shock, Buffy has to kill and/or chase away the demons. In following episodes she is told that she is in debt, that she needs to pay for the house, that Dawn needs to be looked after, that maybe she should go back to school, that she needs a loan, and a job. Buffy, Willow, and Willow's girlfriend Tara are living together, and yet all of the responsibility falls solely on Buffy's shoulders, who, according to critics like Frankel, needs to grow up. I am choosing to raise an eyebrow at this immediate clamor from viewers and the other characters for Buffy, the recently dead girl, to save and take care of everyone.

Crosby has a useful insight into Buffy's death scene, where she gives Dawn a last loving message and tells Dawn to carry on more or less in her footsteps: "In actuality, Buffy's final exhortation tells Dawn that she should live not for herself but for someone else, dooming her to the sacrificial heroine cycle. Buffy wills her younger sister a 'strong' and 'brave' heritage of misery and self-abnegation cloaked in a life-affirming statement" (Crosby 164). Buffy does hint at the crushing responsibility she is finally free of in her last words to Dawn: "You have to take care of them

now…The hardest thing in this world is to live in it. Be brave" ("The Gift"). In some respects, Buffy's life is daunting and unreasonable—which is made clear when she transfers this ominous weight to Dawn. One can just as easily argue that Buffy's resurrection and her resultant depression point to her *friends'* infantilism. Everyone wants Buffy to "move on," but that is just it—she did. She was dead. She moved as far on as one can go. Buffy's depression is constructive in itself. It is striking because it is so unnatural in a postfeminist protagonist. Let us set aside our expectations of a peppy female hero. Let us question our assumption that Buffy is feeling something that she should not be feeling. That Buffy, a typically blonde, beautiful, bubbly girl action hero is tormented for an entire season by a desire to be dead again is usefully troubling.

Considering the repetitive horrors of Buffy's life as a Slayer, why *should* she want to come back? Postfeminsm decrees that women can do it all. But "it all" will drive you insane. In "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminsm's Daughters," Sarah Projansky points out that "postfeminism is by definition contradictory, simultaneously feminist and antifeminist, liberating and repressive, productive and obstructive of progressive social change" (Projansky 68). We have all put unrealistic pressures on Buffy, the same way my student put unrealistic pressures on the protagonist of *Ellen Foster*, the eleven-year-old narrator who must learn to be "motherly" by watching women die all around her. Buffy is being silenced by this postfeminist attitude—she cannot complain because wanting to

be dead is unacceptable. A female protagonist who does not have a voice, who is not *allowed* to be miserable, is not truly feminist or progressive.

Death is Still a Gift

Buffy does eventually emerge from her depression. She literally and metaphorically crawls out of a grave at the end of season six, with Dawn at her side, at the beginning of a new day. The scene seems to suggest that Buffy no longer has qualms about being the postfeminist Slayer/protagonist. But I think she does. I maintain that to think of her depression as a dark period that she necessarily grows out of is to mistakenly assume that she and not her community/audience is in need of correction.

More revolutionary than Buffy coming back to her true non-apathetic self is that she ultimately ends the "heritage of misery and self-abnegation" that comes with being the female hero (Crosby 164). We learn that the legacy of the Slayer is deeply troubling and also witness Buffy refusing to meet impossible expectations in season seven's "Get it Done." In this season, not only is Buffy looking after her friends, but also a swarm of young women from around the world, "potential Slayers" who are being targeted by an evil force who wants to end the Slayer line. Finally, after the struggle of seasons five and six, Buffy has had enough of everyone's dead weight: "I've been carrying you, all of you, too far, too long. Ride's over…Be as scared as you like, just be useful while you're at it" ("Get it Done"). The misery of season six is

constructive—her battle with being forced back into the world by friends who would not let her go pushes Buffy to demand that everyone else take initiative. She forces them to handle powerful magic and demon-fighting while she goes into a portal to learn the truth about the first Slayer.

The Slayer has such a bleak origin that it forcefully calls into question whether there should by a Slayer at all: "First there was the earth…Then there came the demons. After demons there came men. Men found a girl, they took the girl to fight the demon—all demons. They chained her to the earth" ("Get it Done"). We see images of a girl with a chain around her neck that connects to the ground, backing away in terror from a monster while a group of men jeer and shake their staffs from a safe distance. When Buffy enters the portal, she comes to truly understand the legend, as the same thing almost happens to her. She learns that the men who became the Watchers made the first Slayer by chaining her to the ground and injecting demonic energy into her. What ensues is something like a mythical-rape attempt until Buffy puts a stop to it. The demonic energy, an amorphous black substance, forces its way into her ears, eyes and mouth, twists around her legs; "It must become one with you," the first Watchers say ("Get it Done"). Buffy rejects the power they are offering: "You think I came all this way to get knocked up by some demon dust?...you're just men. Just the men who did this. To her. Whoever that girl was before she was the first Slayer….You violated that girl. Made her kill for you because you're weak, you're pathetic, and you obviously have nothing to show me" ("Get it Done"). The Slayer's

history is ghastly exploitation. The Slayer is forced to live a short life of violence and loneliness and pain, to fight endless battles because the men are afraid to. The first Watchers took a powerless girl and forced power into her, yet still expected her to submit to their will. She is normally required to work alone, to stay a secret, to be subjected to cruel and life-threatening tests orchestrated by the Watcher's Council. With extreme unease, we are slowly approaching the question, what is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* really about? Can we, should we continue to comply with this legacy of violation and oppression?

Buffy herself redeems the concept of the Slayer. She is done with the repetitiveness of being called again and again to do it all. She ultimately breaks the most important rule at the end of the series: the Slayer is supposed to be alone. Only one girl can have the power, one girl who is checked not only by the Watcher's Council, but by her short lifespan. But in the series finale, "Chosen," Buffy shares her strength with every potential Slayer in the world, which means hundreds, possibly thousands of women and girls now have the power she has. "In every generation one Slayer is born," Buffy orates, "because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule...I say we change the rule. I say my power should be *our* power" ("Chosen"). Buffy not only ends the haunting, oppressive legacy of the Slayer, but also the series as we know it. She destroys the notion of the one girl who must do everything. "You're not the one and only Chosen anymore," someone points out, "you just gotta live like a person. How does that feel?" ("Chosen"). Buffy merely

smiles, glad to be in some ways finished, and in other ways beginning. Buffy's death, resurrection, and depression should not be dismissed as a metaphor for the challenges of "growing up"—her desire to die jolts us out of complacency with the notion of the female protagonist as relentlessly cheerful and can-do despite all of the hardships and abuses, as someone who is clearly free of patriarchy and so blessed with the legacy of feminism that she can easily achieve the superhuman. "The Slayer" has ended—and it is about time.

CHAPTER TWO: *THE BLUEST EYE* AND THE UNEARNED SHOCK ABOUT PREJUDICE IN POPULAR CULTURE

If *Buffy* proves that there is a cause and effect relationship between the girl and the audience, "*The Bluest Eye* and The Unearned Shock About Prejudice in Popular Culture" venture*s* into critical race theory to ask, why are readers determined to deny complicity in America's long narrative of racism? In *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Robin Bernstein discusses an attribute often expected from children—namely, ignorance of racial prejudice. Such innocence "is not essential but is instead historically located" (Bernstein 4); this innocence is a carefully cultivated notion that remains largely unquestioned, despite its ties to the antebellum south. Bernstein writes: "Childhood innocence—itself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them under claims of holy oblivious-ness—secured the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that status, in the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries" (Bernstein 8). Her argument is that the "holy oblivious-ness" of white children, and especially white girls, was crucial in the establishment of the white child as innocent, delicate, and precious, and the black child as sullied, durable, and inhuman.

Bernstein's insistence that racial innocence is performed becomes essential for me, because I am examining the consequences for adults when (mainly white) children drop the pretense that they are impervious to racism. The failure of youths to perform racial innocence and the baffled horror of adults looking on could not be better illustrated than by the relatively recent drama sparked by the film *The Hunger Games*. After looking at the problem of racial innocence opened by responses to this film, I will turn to Toni Morrison's moving portrait of ruined innocence in *The Bluest Eye*. The reason these two seemingly disparate works are paired is because the racism sparked by *The Hunger Games* proves Morrison's thesis, that the condemnation of the black girl is already present and know by all of us. The scary thing is not that we did not know that black girls are not compatible with the figure of the innocent girl; rather it is the fact that we *already know* that black girls are seen as less valuable. Morrison's novel, and now, amusingly, Twitter, merely lay bare the truths we know but do not want to examine.

The film adaptation of *The Hunger Games* premiered in March of 2012. It earned over 152 million dollars in the U.S. during its opening weekend (The Hunger Games (2012)-IMDb). The film franchise is based on a series of YA novels by Suzanne Collins about a dystopian future wherein the U.S. has been renamed "Panam" and divided into thirteen districts (twelve remaining) that enforce what is basically a caste system. Every year a boy and a girl, always minors ranging from twelve to seventeen years of age, are chosen to compete in the "Hunger Games," a fight to the death

which is televised live and always ends in a single victor/survivor. The competitors are called "Tributes." Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the series and female tribute from District 12, befriends a tribute from District 11 named Rue. Rue is brutally killed, and Thresh, the male tribute from Rue's district, spares Katniss's life in Rue's memory, which ultimately enables Katniss and her District 12 partner to survive the Hunger Games. Rue is described in the novel as "a twelve-year-old girl from District 11. She has dark brown skin and eyes, but other than that, she's very like [Katniss's younger sister] in size and demeanor" (Collins 45). Thresh is described as having "the same dark skin as Rue, but the resemblance stops there. He's one of the giants, probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox" (Collins 126). Amandla Stenberg and Dayo Okeniyi were cast to play Rue and Thresh, respectively. Both actors are black.

Rue's casting choice in particular stirred up bitter controversy. Many viewers took to Twitter to share their anger, confusion, disappointment, or disgust that Rue is played by a black actor. Dodai Stewart wrote a piece for *Jezebel* called "Racist *Hunger Games* Fans are Very Disappointed," where she remarks on the tumblr *Hunger Games Tweets*, which noticed the trend of negative comments about Rue and assembled a collection of tweets complaining about Amandla's race (Stewart). There are hundreds of tweets in this collection. Stewart handpicked a number of the tweets to showcase in her article—some of the more powerful ones are listed here [sic]:

> why does rue have to be black not gonna lie kinda ruined the movie

> EWW rue is black?? I'm not watching
>
> Kk call me racist but when I found out rue was black her death wasn't as sad #ihatemyself
>
> HOW IN THE WORLD ARE THEY GOING TO MAKE RUE A FREAKIN BLACK BITCH IN THE MOVIE?!?!?!??! lolol not to be racist buuuuut….I'm angry now ;o
>
> Sense when has Rue been a nigger
>
> (Stewart)

Despite the fact that the character is supposed to have dark skin, based on the quoted passage from the novel, many readers overlooked Rue's description and expected her to be white. What makes these reactions more troubling is the nature of Rue's death. Her murder is a tragic and cathartic scene that ultimately sparks a riot in her district and begins a revolution against the wealthy District 1 that instated the Hunger Games. Rue is viciously impaled by a spear and dies in Katniss's arms. Katniss then enshrines her body and defiantly gives Rue a moment of silence; a moment that ultimately leads to Katniss being championed as a mascot of sorts for the rebellion. Needless to say, Rue's death is heartbreaking and important. If you are not sympathetic towards Rue, it undermines the entire narrative arc. The comment that Rue's death "wasn't as sad" reveals that many of these dissenters could not bring themselves to see the murder of a black child as tragic. A spear sticking out of Rue's tiny body inspired little empathy from viewers who shared these sentiments.

What I find more interesting than these tweets about the *Hunger Games* film is the internet's reactions to the tweets. Those who have reported on *Hunger Games Tweets* expect the racist comments to be shocking and/or attempt to establish that this is a miniscule, negligible amount of people who resent Rue being played by a black girl. Eric Kain, contributor to *Forbes*'s website, says dismissively, "A Small minority of angry bigots can make a lot of noise and fury even if they don't represent the majority of viewers" (Kain). Kain's piece is titled, "Racist Reaction to 'The Hunger Games' Reminds Us That Free Speech is a Good Thing," and the main argument seems to be that the upside of racist tweets is that they prove that racism is no longer a problem. The few villains among us can be publicly chastised and slowly erased. He concedes that "In the end, we'll likely never rid ourselves of racism and bigotry" (Kain), but in that very statement he makes racism sound like a relic. The shock brought on by those tweets are clearly supposed to reaffirm how far we have come, how distanced we are from those limited, small-minded crazies. Writers are also aghast at the purported youth of the individuals who wrote the offensive tweets. That these tweeters are not old and alone makes their positions that much less palatable. In "Talking to Teens Who Tweeted Racist Things About *The Hunger Games*," L.V. Anderson remarks on how, based on the few people who are featured on the tumblr she was able to follow up with, a majority of the tweets came from people in their teens and early twenties. The tumblr, as well as articles written about it on a range of sites from *Forbes* to *Buzzfeed*, are capitalizing on the shock value. What gets lost is the

creeping suspicion that even those who exclaim in outrage are integral to our reality, in which a black girl's life is considered expendable.

The fact that young people exhibit racism makes the problem more urgent. Prejudice is not dying out. It is continued on and carried out by each new generation. Rue has become the scapegoat from both sides—either she proves that you are racist if you feel her blackness "ruins" her death scene, or your goodness can be measured by how appalled you are at the hateful reactions that have been curated by different popular sites.

As a young black child whose value and endearing qualities are overlooked simply because of her blackness, a child who provokes reactions that show us all just how much damage has been done and how much farther we need to go, Rue has very much in common with Pecola, the twelve year old black girl who is the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. This narrative is about Pecola's destruction, albeit in a less literal way. Like Rue, Pecola deserves sympathy but her "ugliness" preempts the compassion of those who witness her downfall. As Debra J. Werrlein, in "Not So Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*," says: "Morrison challenges America's complacent belief in its benevolent self-image through representation of children who experience race, class, and gender oppression" (53). My argument is that Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* illustrates adults' need to shield themselves from their own corruption, first by clinging onto good intentions,

and second by performing shock at the demonstrated lack of innocence in the lived lives of children.

"Dick and Jane"

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* starts with a peculiar reference to the classic *Dick and Jane* series. It is a brief summary of a day with the idyllic family: Dick, Jane, Mother, Father, a cat and a dog, who live in a "pretty" house (3). Everyone is stereotypically quaint: "Father is smiling…Bowwow goes the dog" (3). But it becomes apparent, in ways that will take some time to explain, that the passage is not meant to feel like an excerpt from an actual *Dick and Jane* reader. Instead, this section is meant to fly in the face of innocence ideology: "Anticipating the currently emerging field of childhood studies, Morrison puts the concept of childhood itself under scrutiny" (Werrlein 53). Morrison's take on the Dick and Jane world, with its increasingly jarring repetition, calls into question not only the ideal of the perfect (i.e., white, wealthy, suburban) family, but also the trauma and horror we overlook in our commitment to and blind acceptance of the ideal of innocence. After all, nothing is more "innocent" than reading a pleasant story about an exemplary, happy family."

The first thing to notice is that the passage starts halfway down the first page (the next section which begins, "Quiet as its kept," starts at least one row higher, so it seems deliberate) (3-4). One reason for the placement could be that Morrison wanted the first iteration of the Dick and Jane segment to go all the way to the bottom of the

page so that it can be one stand-alone idea. Also, the white space and the beginning, "Here is the house. It is green and white…Here is the family" (3) combine to imply a storybook format. Where is the illustration? The narrator says, "Here is the house," instead of "See the house," which would be in line with the other sentences meant to direct our focus. Here, where? The white space could have contained an image of the house; only, the reader does not need a picture, because the narrator imagines that the house and the family are easy to visualize. Werrlein writes, "Dick and Jane primers not only posit the literary 'masterplot' in *The Bluest Eye*; as textbooks in America's public schools, Morrison suggests they posit a *national* masterplot that defines Americanness within the parameters of innocent while middle-class childhoods" (56). We have seen Dick and Jane countless times—in books, films, commercials, text books, magazine covers, cartoons. Sparkling blonde children with springy curls, playing with puppies and their perfectly coiffed parents. They never get tired, angry, bored, injured, or ill.

> Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white-house. They are very happy. (Morrison 3)

Round one of Dick and Jane sounds polite and sweet, but if you try to visualize the events and interactions on the page instead of just the static and cherub-like mascots that are Dick and Jane's family, not everything matches up with the pleasant

tone. For example: what happened to Dick? Dick lives in the house, but after he is initially mentioned, he never shows up or interacts with anyone. The other family members, even the pets, have at least three sentences devoted to them, but for some reason Dick is never mentioned again. Imagine the rosy-cheeked children and parents smiling around at one another, no one noticing or caring that someone has disappeared without explanation. The effect is subtle; the family's interactions do not seem consequential, and it is hard to believe Dick is missing anything worthwhile. But his absence is designed to fool us, to make us read it through once more, because now we know this introduction is at least slightly "off."

Once I accounted for the brother's absence, I noticed another off-putting detail: no one in the family plays with Jane. The cat is apparently cute and likes to meow; the mother is "nice" and laughs, which is (presumably) a happy sound—but neither they nor any other family members want to play. The descriptions are misleading because the only character who outright "will not" play with Jane is the cat—everyone else does something else, like laughs or runs—and it is unclear whether these actions are responses to Jane's wanting to play. Perhaps laughing is what Mother does all the time, because she is perfect and so happy to be Dick and Jane's mother? In the end, a nameless "friend" plays with Jane…and with so little information, it is unclear what to make of this either, and becomes more unclear as the passage unravels.

> Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white-house they are very happy (Morrison 3)

Round two is a repeat of the first, only without any punctuation, which makes it seem rushed, almost like a breathless prayer. Instead of the calm, omniscient narrator, this sounds more like it is being spoken aloud, like a chant. When read aloud the sound of the word "play" is in stark relief because it appears many times and interrupts the flow of the other, easier syllables in the passage. Dick and Jane and their seemingly pleasant, featureless day is suddenly insistent and bores into your brain, as if it were instructing you to do something but you do not know what. What is "play"? What does playing look like? Are we meant to take this for granted? Is the "good game" Jane plays with the stranger something she actually wants to do?

> Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappy (Morrison 3)

Round three takes the previous iteration and removes all of the spaces between words. It sounds jumbled, malicious, and urgent. Read aloud it is nearly incomprehensible, which makes it seem more like a state of mind than conscious

thought. The entire passage has been turned on its head. What once sounded simple and sweetly childlike is now a sinister hum that sounds panicked and insane. Once the picture falls apart we discover embedded warnings and evil taunts—mostly the latter, but the former is alarming: "seethedogrundogrunrundogrun" no longer pertains to the dog. "Runrun" reads like a command, shouted out to Jane in case she hears and is able to get away. "[L]aughslaughmotherlaugh" and "smilingsmilefathersmile" turn jolly parents into Cheshire cats, their expressions disembodied and inappropriate. Smiles and laughter do not belong in this frantic rumble and you begin to wonder if Mother and Father are in on the torture. I say "torture" because the frantic tone and confusing onset of letters implies that the passage can go on forever; the ending words "playagoodgameplayjaneplay" to me suggests that the last two words could repeat indefinitely: "playjaneplayjaneplayjaneplay—" and the pattern makes me even more concerned that "play" means that *Jane* is the toy, or at least, that she is not in on the game being played.

The ending trails off in its repetition, without a period, and when Claudia begins to narrate on the next page, the words are italicized and separate. Claudia's voice is the sound above the low, psychotic hum—the undercurrent that will follow us throughout the narrative. That garbled, claustrophobic sound is felt by those who desperately want but know they cannot and will never have Dick and Jane's life. The dream became a mantra, which morphs into a hellish loop just when you start to suspect there is something wrong with Dick and Jane. Our acceptance of the first

iteration is what allowed its teeth to sink into the world of the novel and inform the identities and parameters of the characters we have yet to meet. It is as if Morrison is asking, "did you even realize what you were reading? What you have set loose?" The same words that were benevolent and coveted reveal their true nature as the hopeless, anti-funhouse atmosphere of the novel.

What Girls Know

The children in *The Bluest Eye* notice the naturalized discrepancies between the way their lives are "supposed" to be and the way they are. Claudia in particular is extremely frustrated that she is precluded from the category of beautiful because she is black. Her parents will never say it explicitly (or the adults around her), but she is observant enough to know that she and other black girls like her are devalued: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasured" (20). Claudia receives white baby dolls for Christmas and everyone expects her to cherish it, because with the doll she can feel closer to beauty. In "Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*," Susmita Roye makes an important clarification: "That Claudia destroys the white dolls given to her as Christmas presents is especially noteworthy because those who buy her the expensive dolls who can ill afford them…by giving her a white doll, they in some way realize their own unfulfilled desire for such a present as little girls"

(217). Claudia can see that there is some pathology behind the doll because the grown women who reprimand her for irreverence seem to love the white dolls even more than they expect Claudia to: "How strange was their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices" (Morrison 21).

Despite their heartbreaking insight, the girls are not permitted to address the behavior that makes them uncomfortable, because children are to be seen and not heard. Being a child means that you do not know anything that an adult does not already know—therefore children are supposed to silently take in information from the adults, who are always right: "It was certainly not for us to 'dispute' her. We didn't initiate talk with grown-ups; we answered their questions" (23). Claudia describes herself and Frieda as constantly being assumed to know nothing, and always associated with trouble and tediousness, even for things that are out of their control. It is clear, though, that Claudia's mother loves her daughters—but instead of coddling, her tactic is to remain curt and practical. A bad cold Claudia catches in the Fall earns harsh words from her mother, who later checks on her in the middle of the night to readjust blankets and diminish a draft. After that experience of tenderness, Claudia reflects: "when I think of autumn I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (Morrison 12). Claudia and her sister are caught in a strange limbo where those who look after them do their best to keep the girls safe and well, all the while fawning over Shirley Temple and blue-eyed dolls. Their sternness

prevents Claudia and Frieda from questioning their priorities or being treated as precious, like those delicate dolls: "Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy" (10).

Because the girls are not permitted to speak about issues like beauty standards or their parents' internalized racism, these issues unfortunately manifest in their interactions with one another. When the children are among peers, they get to voice their burgeoning theories and confront the ideologies that oppress them; the problem is, these moments of agency always seem to take the form of insult or self-incrimination. Claudia, for example, imagines taking out her anger at adults for preferring whiteness on the bodies of white girls in school: "the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so" (Morrison 22). Claudia is jealous and furious because of the unearned admiration that white and light-skinned girls are afforded, and she acts out because she does not have a constructive outlet—how could she when every adult in her life seems to accept the rules without question? Maureen Peal, a new student at Claudia's school, is mixed-race and has light skin and green eyes, which make everyone love her: "she enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly…white boys didn't stone her; white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners" (62).

Claudia is embittered from the start, and fed up with Maureen's fetishized privilege: "When I thought of the unearned haughtiness in her eyes, I plotted accidental slammings of locker doors on her hand" (63). Maureen Peal, because of her precarious, in-between place, brings up powerful anxieties for Claudia, Frieda, Pecola, and herself, once Claudia makes her frustrations known.

Consider this scene: while walking home together, Claudia, Frieda, and Maureen happen upon Pecola, who is being surrounded and harassed by a group of black boys. Claudia and Frieda threaten the boys, and for a moment it looks like there is going to be a brawl; but the presence of Maureen gives them pause: "the boys seemed reluctant under her springtime eyes so wide with interest. They buckled in confusion, not willing to beat up the girls under her watchful gaze" (66). Being a beautiful girl is apparently not only about how light your skin is, but about *how your beauty is maintained by the world around you*. Maureen is the pure, innocent darling of the school, which means no one can bring themselves to commit ugly or immoral acts while she watches. The notion that beauty is at least partially about what you see and what you are exposed to exacerbate the tension between the three girls.

While they are walking, Maureen curiously mentions the subject of the boys' taunts: "Did you ever see a naked man?" (71). The boys accused Pecola of having seen her father naked, as a way of projecting their own self-loathing:

> That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave

> the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred…and sucked it all up into a ball of scorn that had burned for ages…and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. (65)

To be black is to be ugly, and being ugly implies that you should feel humiliated by what you have seen—in this case, your naked father. So when Maureen asks the question, it is particularly loaded; "did you see a naked man," translates to "are you black/ugly?" Pecola's response is surprisingly protracted, given that she is usually soft-spoken and uses few words when she speaks at all: "I wouldn't even look at him, even if I did see him. That's dirty. Who wants to see a naked man? …Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too" (71). The underlying implication is that the "dirtiness" of seeing her naked father makes Pecola "dirty" as well. Maureen has latched onto the subject, and insists on goading Pecola into spelling out her dirtiness despite everyone's obvious discomfort. She picks up right where the taunting boys left off, which is all the more insidious because Maureen had been walking along with Pecola as a companion.

Maureen's own anxieties compel her to reestablish her relative whiteness in comparison to Pecola and Claudia. When Maureen taunts Pecola for her "dirtiness" ("Your own daddy, too!") Claudia has had enough and tries to quiet her (73). A brief scuffle ensues and Maureen runs away, shouting "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!" (73). Maureen, who is light but still brown, needs to

reaffirm *Pecola*'s blackness in order to negate her own. Blackness and ugliness are conflated, and both have to do with the universality of your skin color as well as what one has witnessed (what white girls allegedly never witness).

Bluely Nice

The threat of dirtiness requires constant vigilance, for it is not only Claudia's peers, but also the adults, who police cleanliness and determine who has been sullied. A while after the incident with Maureen Peal, Claudine's sister Frieda is sexually assaulted by a family friend named Mr. Henry. Frieda is distraught and sobbing, but not because of the assault; Frieda is anxious about a conversation she overheard afterwards between her mother and a neighbor: "she said that Mama should take me to the doctor, because I might be ruined, and Mama started screaming all over again" (Morrison 101). Frieda and Claudia are terrified of being "ruined," despite being unclear about what that means. They know the sex workers in their neighborhood are considered "ruined," but no one has taught them about sexuality or promiscuity, so they assume it pertains to physical appearance: "An image of Frieda, big and fat, came to mind. Her thin legs swollen, her face surrounded by layers of rouged skin. I too began to feel tears" (Morrison 101).

Pecola wishes the most fervently to be "clean." She has witnessed her parents having sex, as well as fighting furiously with one another (and often naked). Pecola does not want to be the dirty one who sees what she is not supposed to see: "she

could never get her eyes to disappear…They were everything. Everything was there, in them. All of those pictures, all of those faces" (Morrison 45). Pecola feels cursed and ugly, partly because she is "black" and viewed by the community as somehow more "black" than other black children, and partly because of her family; the Breedloves are all "ugly," and display horrifying behaviors in plain view of Pecola.

Accounting for the double blow of being "ruined" by blackness/ugliness and witnessing stigmatized adult behavior, Pecola's proposed solution is brilliant (and also tragic): "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison 46). She has zeroed in on her ugliest quality, which is the collection of "pictures" in her mind, that they boys make fun of, pictures that make her family unworthy of love, even from black people. She decides she would be happy if she looked more like the white baby dolls Claudia is expected to fawn over—in other words, if she had blue eyes: "Morrison points to the particular predicament of black *girls* in a white nation. For power they need beauty, and for beauty they need whiteness" (Werrlein 63). Pecola's reasoning occurs not only because she wants to change her appearance, but also because, like Maureen, she feels her appearance would change the behavior of those around her: "Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We musn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (Morrison 46).

Pecola, who used to pray for blue eyes and never received them, takes matters into her own hands once she is raped by her father. She visits an outcast named Soaphead Church, who bills himself as a psychic with supernatural abilities, and asks him for blue eyes (Morrison 174). The request for blue eyes is heartbreaking. Pecola has been raped, is possibly already pregnant, and she is more convinced than ever that she possesses inherent flaws, which brought about her abuse. Morrison reveals in her forward that Pecola was inspired by a childhood friend who sincerely wished her eyes were blue; Morrison writes, "I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish" (Morrison x). Pecola, so desperate to get away from herself that she asks for an altercation that, in Morrison's opinion, becomess appalling: "Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was?" (Morrison xi).

After "obtaining" blue eyes, Pecola's view of herself and her surroundings become distorted in order to fit her expectations. She is essentially a pariah after the rape, but now she has convinced herself the reason they will not engage with her is because she is so beautiful now: "He really did a good job. Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off" (Morrison 195). She is confused about being raped because that reality is at odds with her new eyes. She goes between acknowledging that she was attacked and angrily insisting she was not: "He just tried,

see? He didn't do anything. You hear me?" (Morrison 199). To have blue eyes means that she was never raped. To be raped is to be ruined, to be ugly, and as a newly pretty girl, Pecola insists that she "[doesn't] like to talk about dirty things" (Morrison 201). Unfortunately, to deny that she was ever raped and to believe that she has drastically changed her appearance and intimidates everyone around her is insanity. Toward the end of the novel, Pecola has imagined a companion who reinforces her belief in her new eyes:

> Are they really nice?
>
> *Yes. Very nice.*
>
> Just "very nice"?
>
> *Really, truly, very nice.*
>
> Really, truly, bluely nice?
>
> (Morrison 194)

The term "bluely nice" stands out because I imagine a warm blue hue blanketing her vision; the shelter she has longed for; a safe space that tells her, nothing bad has happened to you, and nothing bad will ever happen to you, for now you are beautiful and precious.

Consider the comparison between the world of Dick and Jane at the beginning of the novel and Pecola's world at the end. She believes she now fits into the storybook dynamic. She asks her invisible companion if her eyes are "[p]rettier than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes" (Morrison 201). Alice and Jerry were written to

compete with Dick and Jane, so it seems that Morrison wants us to return to *The Bluest Eye*'s introduction. It is fitting that Pecola turns out to be Jane in the opening, because the nameless, mysterious "friend" that "will play a good game" with Jane turns out to be an elusive voice in Pecola's head, helping her to believe that she is pretty (Morrison 3). And indeed, no one wants to play with Pecola—not her family, not the pets who are associated with unsavory characters. But more important than the sequence of events is the alarming degeneration of the story—the disturbing jumbled words infused with an odd and obstructed repetition of the word "play" is a fitting narration for Pecola's inner world at the close of the novel. She is endlessly "playing" with her "friend"; playing at having blue eyes, at being beautiful, at having no recollection of abuse.

Once the words of "Dick and Jane" unravel, the effect is almost like a suspense thriller; the synopsis we at first assumed was harmless, perhaps even sweet, turns out to be villainous—and, as readers, we were complicit all along. The same is true for Pecola's greatest ambition in The Bluest Eye. I do not mean to say that readers will not find Pecola's wish for blue eyes troubling from the beginning. The horror is that the reader does not (allegedly) recognize herself in Pecola's downfall until the end. If the "Dick and Jane" introduction is subliminally asking, "did you realize what you were reading?" then the overall text is asking, "did you realize what you were doing? To Pecola? To each other?" "Dick and Jane" is impossible; it is poison: "As these characters variously label, degrade, and define Pecola's body so as to discuss the

realities of racism in their lives, Morrison suggests that they mirror the work of a nation that ironically invests in the ideology of childhood innocence at the expense of its children" (Werrlein 69). Morrison says that in writing this novel she was not interested in "resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident" (Morrison ix). How much of our current 21st century U.S. culture relies on established notions of who counts for less? The shock of the Dick and Jane segment is that it was actually the sinister, relentless mantra all along, and we (presumably) do not notice until the expected structures are taken away. And this is the effect of Pecola's fate: "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of the fulfillment" (Morrison 204). Once she is undone, and the "game" she plays with her unknown friend is reduced to "walking up and down…Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind" (Morrison 204), Claudia informs us of what we have done.

That the reader is part of the conspiracy against Pecola is what Morrison wants to impress upon us. Claudia is including me when she says "All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor" (Morrison 205). This phenomenon, Claudia assumes, is familiar to us.

Pecola's desolation is our private shame. Cat Moses's "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" writes, "Claudia bears witness, through the oral tradition of testifying, to the community's lack of self-love and its transference of this lack onto the abject body of Pecola" (624). Because we must know what it means to "know" implicitly that white is more beautiful than black; we must know of wanting a kind of house, a kind of job, of style, of child, that aligns us as closely as possible with the world of Dick and Jane. The innocence that is ultimately shattered in this text is not Pecola's—it is *ours*. The readers wish to protect themselves. This novel is primarily about us, about those who do not wish to know the damage that unquestioned values have caused. Morrison is attempting to wake us up, to quietly unseat us from our "bluely nice" world and know what we would rather not know—that Pecola's fate is everywhere and caused by us.

And this is the strategy I find most compelling—to have the message of the text not be, "isn't it sad what happened to her?" but instead, "what have we done?" Does the horror of the narrative lie in Pecola's rape/insanity, or in confronting our complicity in these traumatic events? "One problem," Morrison reflects, "was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character would smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing" (Morrison xii). My project explores texts that get to the heart of what perceived audiences would rather not know.

We Don't Want to Know Children Are Racist

Toni Morrison may not go into the history of innocence in *The Bluest Eye*, but she is aware that by the time we arrive at the *Dick and Jane* opening, the notion of the pure white child has been around for generations. The ideal of the innocent child (and especially the innocent girl) has been part of Western culture since the Victorian era, but, according to Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood*, "In North America, the belief that children are innocent did not become widespread until the late eighteenth century" (Bernstein 6). Innocence is contingent upon not knowing; therefore, the quintessential child is oblivious to all forms of racial categorization, racism, and racial inequity: "sentimental childlike innocence manifested through the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and…race" (Bernstein 6). Bernstein argues that the pedestal of innocence was crafted in order to stress white goodness and value in comparison to black people. "In many cases," she explains, "angelic white children were contrasted with pickaninnies so grotesque as to suggest that only white children were children" (Bernstein 16). And of course, if black children are not really human, then neither are black adults. Therefore the notion of innocence and goodness were used to dehumanize.

The United States' cultural attitude about children has transformed somewhat to have an aura of benevolence that can sometimes be applied to children of color as well as white children, but its harm still persists. White children are still, for many, subconsciously viewed as closer to beauty and humanity than black children.

Bernstein explains that there is a traceable historical movement to "[link] innocence to whiteness through the body of a child" (Bernstein 6). Whereas innocence for children started as a way of essentializing and further aggrandizing whiteness, contemporary U.S. culture may see "innocence" and more specially, "not knowing," to be a worthy and admirable goal for all children. Erin N. Winkler's analysis of children's race consciousness in "Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race" attempts to debunk the myth of childrens' colorblindness. She says too many parents refuse to talk to their children about race due to a fear that "they are 'too young,' and even mentioning race will 'put ideas into their heads' or 'poison their minds'" (Winkler 1). This insistence, Winkler asserts, is misguided because "research clearly shows that children not only recognize race from a very young age, but also develop racial biases by ages three to five" (Winkler 1).

In reality, children cannot help but see race; first of all, for the obvious reason that people of different races physically look different—"infants are able to nonverbally categorize people by race and gender at six months of age. The infants looked significantly longer at an unfamiliar face of a different race than they did an unfamiliar face of their own race" (Winkler 1)—but also because our media is saturated with the pointed presence or lack of people of color, depending on the context. To tackle the ongoing debate about children's understanding of race, CNN broadcasted a special, called "Kids on Race: The Hidden Picture," hosted and narrated by Anderson Cooper. CNN sponsored a study that involved researchers

visiting a variety of elementary schools with varying demographics and interviewing children about race and conducting studies to gage their perceptions. In one segment, some parents are selected to watch recordings of their children taking the "doll test," in which there is a row of cartoonish children shown on the table, who all look exactly alike aside from their skin tones, which vary from extremely pale on the far left to extremely dark on the far right. The results of the study lead to the conclusion that "white children as a whole respond with a high rate of what researchers call 'white bias,' identifying the color of their own skin with positive attributes, and darker skin with negative attributes" ("Inside the AC360 Doll Study"). The white bias was demonstrated the most when the white children were asked the following questions:

> "Show me the dumb child": 76 % of the younger white children [ages 4 and 5] pointed to the two darkest skin tones
>
> "Show me the mean child": 66% of the white children pointed to the two darkest skin tones
>
> "Who has the skin color most girls don't want?": 66% of the younger white children pointed to the two darkest skin tones
>
> "Show me the bad child": More than 59% of older white children [ages 9 and 10] pointed to the two darkest skin tones
>
> ("Inside the AC360 Doll Study")

With these "shocking" results, CNN hopes to encourage a mainstream, primetime discussion about how unconscious racism manifests in "innocent" children, whom many of us believe are impervious to racial biases.

While the Anderson Cooper special seems to be more interested in the implications about the *children* in the doll study, my interest lies in the reactions of the adults and parents. My project in this chapter is not to figure out how and why children are aware of race and racism, but instead to understand why adults seem to have a vested interest in believing that children, and white children in particular, are colorblind. Why is the CNN study "news"? In one segment, there is a split screen wherein a white mother (one of a small group of parents seated in a studio with Anderson Cooper) is filmed watching a video of her son answering questions about race and demonstrating "white bias":

> Interviewer: "Show me the dumb child."
>
> Boy: taps the darkest figure
>
> Interviewer: "Why is he the dumb child?"
>
> Boy: "Because he's really black."
>
> Interviewer: "Okay. Show me the nice child."
>
> Boy: taps the lightest figure
>
> Interviewer: "Why is he the nice child?"
>
> Boy: "Because he's the whitest."
>
> ("Home Influence on Kids and Race")

The mother is seen smiling slightly, shaking her head in disappointment or sadness. This is her response when Cooper asks for her reaction: "it's disappointing. […] I need to teach him—it's really, it's upsetting. I've spent fifteen years as a teacher trying to teach first graders about all different societies and cultures and races and here's my own child—his finger went so quick to the white side. It's fascinating" ("Home Influence on Kids and Race"). This mother is struggling to say or reluctant to say something. She says "I need to teach him" and trails off. It is clear that she is quite understandably uncomfortable, but notice that she does not say "I need to teach my son about different cultures and races" after mentioning that as a teacher she does this often. Her son, after all, did not necessarily reveal ignorance about "other cultures." Her discomfort is not about what her child does or does not know, but about what his responses say about *her*: "it's coming from me I'm sure, you know—I—was raised in a very, um, white community, so, clearly I've—you know—grown up with these…with, um…my own prejudices I'm sure, you know. It gets passed on sometimes" ("Home Influence on Kids on Race").

Anderson Cooper, sensing her difficulty in articulating upsetting thoughts, tries to mediate her anxiety: "Just so you know, what we've seen, I mean I don't want any of you to feel bad because what we've seen is not any different than what we've seen no matter where we've gone. I mean, it's everywhere" ("Home Influence on Kids and Race"). My intent in pointing out this mother's discomfort is not to ridicule her in particular, but to use her halting explanation as a model for why racial prejudice in

children is so difficult for many adults to speak about. That mother's loss of words is due to the fact that she did not realize the subject of race constituted a problem in her family until the moment she saw her son answer those questions on video. It is counterintuitive that not discussing racism with a child leads to a display of racism from that child.

One of Morrison's arguments in *The Bluest Eye* is that our culture's persistence on white beauty as the standard has done immeasurable harm to generations of black children, particularly girls: "I focused, therefore on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (Morrison xi). Like the mother from the "Children on Race" special, often we do not understand how cherishing something viewed as good (innocence, beauty), can have terrible outcomes. This is the mindset Morrison assumes of her readers at the start of the novel—she believes we cling tightly to our good intentions and have locked away the origins of many of our country's aesthetic values. Morrison also assumes that we feel we are not capable of bearing the knowledge that our good intentions and values have destroyed parts of ourselves as well as generations of children across the spectrum of skin tones—for after all, black and white parents alike, as evidenced on CNN, react in shock when their children are asked "show me the nice child" and they point to the whitest figures on the scale. *The Bluest Eye* is not a novel Morrison believes anyone

truly wants to read. In the 1993 Oprah's Book Club edition of *The Bluest Eye* Morrison writes in her afterward,

> Sudden familiarity or instant intimacy seemed crucial to me. I did not want the reader to have time to wonder, "what do I have to do, to give up, in order to read this? What defense do I need, what distance maintain?" Because I know (and the reader does not—he or she has to wait for the second sentence) that this is a terrible story about things one would rather not know about. (Morrison 213)

So it seems as if addressing a narrative like Pecola's is to give up some unvoiced type of innocence, even as an adult. Yes, the reluctance may stem from the moments dealing with her rape, but the real tragedy is the one that surrounds that event—the poison that has already seeped into everyone's subconsciousness, represented by Dick and Jane. If we, as Morrison presumes, are alarmed by the premise of the novel and troubled by its themes, then the tension comes from us not wanting to see what is already there to see.

If *The Bluest Eye* can be said to have a central question, then it must be: "What do I have to…give up, in order to read this?" The narrative, like the Dick and Jane introduction, is not really about the child—it is about the adults who cling so hard to their notions of goodness that they do not notice what is happening. What they "give up" is the assurance that they are guiltless, that they are truly empathetic and

ahistorically devoid of racism—the lack of which has been passed on to their "innocent" children in a more perfect form.

But They Are, Because So Are We

Adult insistence on children's racial innocence not only undermines any "equality" messages they mean to send, but actively encourages harmful stereotypes and unjust practices that are still evidenced in adults. The reason is partly because racism is not something that adults or children in the U.S. can escape. In *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"*, Beverly Tatum explains that

> Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as "smog-breathers" (and most of us don't want to be described as prejudiced), but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?
>
> (Tatum 6)

Studies of current and common manifestations of racism support Tatum's description of a smog that everyone is breathing regardless of their desire to or awareness of the atmosphere. The CNN mother who says dejectedly, "it gets passed down sometimes," views her prejudice and that of her son as being the fault of her upbringing, of her neighborhood which suggests that only if she and her son had black neighbors

growing up, those questions about the dumb child and the nice child would have been answered differently. But it is not enough to hope to absorb a positive race consciousness through osmosis; everyone, even children of color, breathes in the smog, and listens to the undercurrent of "Dick and Jane" that Morrison uses to illustrate the same concept. The effects of the pollution manifest early: In "Children's racial bias in the perceptions of other's pain," psychologists survey 159 children from ages five to ten about the amount of pain they would feel and subsequently, the pain they think other white and black peers would feel in twelve hypothetical situations, using a modified pain scale (Dore, Hoffman, Lillard & Trawalter, 4), The results were as follows: "we found no detectable bias at age 7, and a significant bias at age 10. Specifically, 10 year-old children rated the pain of a Black target as lower than the pain of a White target. By age 10, then, American children, as American adults, judge that Black people feel less pain than do White people" (10). The authors make sure to point out that the children do not necessarily harbor animosity towards black children, but that "this bias is related to implicit rather than explicit racial attitudes—attitudes that are less conscious and less controllable" (10).

Qualifiers like the above seem to exist for the purpose of mediation. Establishing that the children are not overtly racist creates an alibi and validates adults' surprise. Shock and surprise are forms of protection, which prove that whatever has just come to your attention is unusual; surprise itself is meant to be evidence that you do not possess whatever it is that baffles you. Morrison takes pains

to preclude shock in *The Bluest Eye*, because we are meant to see ourselves in what is wrong. One example of not allowing shock is the intimate portrayals and interiorities we are privy to, even of those who are cruelest to Pecola: "I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse" (Morrison xii).

Morrison does not want us to feel taken aback by what we should already know. "The smashing" is not new, or rare, or remote. The intended audiences for "Kids on Race," or studies proving that children internalize prejudices at young ages, unconsciously go to great lengths to protect *themselves* from racism. Seeing your own beliefs, beliefs you did not know you had, that you would deny at every available opportunity, parroted back at you by children makes racism more real and more terrible because children—and more specifically, your righteous influence on children—were supposed to be safe.

CHAPTER THREE: VICIOUS NARRATION IN *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*

The Makeup of a Mean Girl

Chapter three, "Vicious Narration in *The Woman Warrior*," like previous chapters, centers on a text that speaks about girls in a way that our society would rather not hear. Due to the aspiration to be nice, many girls' emotions and experiences are left unexpressed because they contradict popular culture's idealized nice girl. I draw on texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Rachel Simmons's *Odd Girl Out: the Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* to address the motives and consequences of girls' strategies for aggression and "meanness," and show how girls' subversive aggression can be demonstrated in narrative. My argument takes the articulation of girls' anger further and concludes that the reporting of anger in *Woman Warrior* sets out to have an equalizing effect on the reader.

Mean Girls (2004), the teen comedy that endures as a cult classic, is based on a 2002 study about teenage girls and their cliques: *Queen Bees and Wannabes* by Rosalind Wiseman. Unlike the book, the movie presents a relatively lighthearted perspective on teen girl bullying and social drama. The film centers on a high school junior named Cady, who is in many ways the "purest" form of an American teenage girl. She is

white and middle class (her mother is a newly tenured professor at Northwestern University); she has had little to no exposure to the damning influence of popular culture; she is not angry or complicated; she is unaware of her attractiveness (a peer later has to inform her that she is a "regulation hottie"); and she is intelligent but also sweetly gullible and pliable. This chapter, "Vicious Narration in *The Woman Warrior*," is largely about a text that illuminates the taboo of girls' anger, and details an account of one girl's need to repress anger, an attempt that leads to misdirected aggression and self-loathing. We begin with *Mean Girls* because it is a relevant and current piece of American pop culture that assumes its audience has intimate knowledge of the elaborate dynamics of being mad and mean in what Cady terms "girl world."

Because the perfect girl is not meant to display anger, battles between girls are played out in more subtle ways than shouting or violence. Instead, alliances are formed, rumors are spread, and the loser is whoever has been abandoned by her friends. Regina George, the leader of "The Plastics," and Cady become rivals once Regina dates Aaron Samuels, to whom she knows Cady is attracted. Typically, the moment Regina kisses Aaron while Cady watches is seen as the catalyst for the plot of *Mean Girls*. However, the kiss does not actually mark the turn of the narrative. The rising action of the narrative is the scene wherein Cady's friends are teaching her the ways of retaliation, and she is told: "If we want this to work, you are going to have to keep hanging out with [the Plastics] like nothing is wrong" (Waters, *Mean Girls*). This statement presents the central idea of the film: multiple characters sabotage

themselves and their relationships due to their need not to appear angry. Once Regina and Aaron are a couple, Regina brings him everywhere and "innocently" asks Cady to comment on his attractiveness. Cady imagines letting her anger out right there in the cafeteria. She throws herself onto Regina and claws at her face, making wild animal sounds while spectators shriek like excited monkeys. But the outburst is only a fantasy; in real time Cady merely complies, because in "girl world, all the fighting had to be sneaky" (Waters, *Mean Girls*).

I do not believe the film is aware that its parody of girl aggression only reinforces the taboo around it. That "angry" Cady is feral, vicious, and beyond reason justifies the need for relational aggression instead of confrontation. When the "Burn Book," a large pink tome filled with malicious jokes and accusations about all of the junior girls in the school, is leaked on campus, the junior girls erupt into a chaotic riot. Like Cady's jungle fantasy, girls are leaping onto one another, slapping, scratching, screaming, falling down stairs, and horrifying the faculty as well as one lone male student who is completely mystified and timidly asks his mother to pick him up early. This scene presents the horror of what will happen if young women express their anger outright. They either scheme to sweetly ruin each other, or they tear each other apart in the hallway. There is no middle ground. For reasons we will explore soon, Regina seems to be the only girl who is intimately familiar with this secret. Naturally then, she is the one who orchestrates the Burn Book riot.

Regina George is both the coolest and the angriest girl in the school. This is why, even though Cady transforms into an antagonist in her own right, only Regina is repeatedly and brutally punished throughout the film. Cady's schemes to reduce Regina to a nonentity by persuading her friends to leave her, persuading her boyfriend to dump her, and ruining her body via a bogus "all carb" diet. Ironically, even discounting Cady's behavior, the film does all of those things to Regina, while implying that Cady's actions were ultimately mean and wrong. Not only are Regina's friends against her, but also by the end of the film she learns that the entire school hates her, including the faculty. Not only does she lose Aaron, but also, due to plot conventions, Cady wins him in the end despite what everyone has learned about her behavior throughout the year. Finally, not only is Regina shunned for having gained weight, but her body is also ruined in another, more alarming way. After hearing the girls in her class cheer at her pain, she starts to vent to Cady about how angry she is; the rant is cut short, however, because she is hit by a *school bus*, and goes to the Spring dance in a back brace. Regina is undoubtedly punished for having too much anger, and too much power. The school riot is an expression of her rage; all the while she is standing at the center of the fray, still and grim, as if everything she feels is finally being set loose.

But why is Regina so angry to begin with? The reasons behind Regina's behavior are never explicitly explained; presumably we are to simply understand that her role is inevitable in "girl world." However, there is a much more interesting

motive to draw out, which speaks to the dangers of repressed anger among girls. Early on, we learn that no student dislikes Regina more than Cady's new friend, Janis Ian. A scarring incident occurred in middle school, and Janis refuses to talk about it, though it's alluded to multiple times throughout the film. Eventually Regina sees fit to inform Cady about her history with Janis. It seems that Regina's anger stems from issues of gender expression. Please consider the following dialogue, and a couple of ending scenes that I will describe afterwards. This is Regina's version of events:

> Let me tell you something about Janis Ian. We were best friends in middle school. …So then in eighth grade, I started going out with my first boyfriend... And Janis was like, weirdly jealous of him. Like, if I would blow her off to hang out with Kyle, she'd be like, "Why didn't you call me back?" And I'd be like, "Why are you so obsessed with me?" So then, for my birthday party, which was an all-girls pool party, I was like, "Janis, I can't invite you, because I think you're lesbian." I mean I couldn't have a lesbian at my party. There were gonna be girls there in their bathing suits! I mean, right? She was a lesbian. So then her mom called my mom and started yelling at her; it was so retarded. And then she dropped out of school because no one would talk to her, and when she came back in the fall for high school, all of her hair was cut off and she was totally weird, and now I guess she's on crack. (Waters, *Mean Girls*)

At the end of the film, after the riot and the Spring dance, we learn that "Regina's spine healed, and her physical therapist taught her to channel all of her rage into

sports" (Waters, *Mean Girls*). She is shown barreling down a lacrosse field, fiercely knocking opponents out of her way and scoring a goal only to be buried under a pile of cheering teammates. Meanwhile, we also know that Janis now has a boyfriend, and even wears a feminine clip in her hair, which softens her appearance as she kisses him in the quad. It is odd that Janis's most terrible secret is that she was rumored to be a lesbian in middle school, when her current best friend, Damian, is an emphatically out gay teen. Why is it that *Mean Girls* depicts "girl world" as having little to no issue with queer men, while unable to stomach a girl who *might* be a lesbian? That Janis dropped out of school, as well as Cady's barely disguised horror during the story, emphasizes how damning that rumor was and *still is*.

Why would Regina do this to her best friend? Also note that in the final quad scene, while Janis is enjoying a romantic moment with her new beau, lacrosse uniform clad Regina walks by with a band of athletic girls; and despite all of her earlier sexual adventures, there is no sign of a male love interest. Regina and Janis's gender representations have flipped. Angry, suppressed Regina is glamorous, vindictive, and willing to humiliate a friend over a groundless accusation about her sexuality. New Regina is athletic and physically aggressive, and is not shown wearing any feminine clothing. She plays lacrosse, which, amusingly, is often lumped with the stereotype of contact sports that sporty lesbians are drawn to. It is arguably Regina's closeted sexuality, or perhaps closeted masculinity, that fuels her anger and erupts into an all-

out brawl in the halls. *Mean Girls* serves as a popular (if evasive) example of why anger is so dangerous and so crucial for those girls who are pressured to fit the ideal.

No Name Woman

The developing field of Girls Studies encompasses not only literature that represents girls but also analyses of girls and adolescents' own accounts of coming into their gender identity—and there are common themes among American girls across cultures that suggest a bottom line of the perfect girl's attributes. This chapter centers on a text that speaks about American girls in a way that our society would rather not hear. That girls are expected to be happy and colorblind fits with the general model of the "good" or "nice" girl—if a girl is not exactly made of sugar and spice, those who pretend will get ahead and those that do not will fall behind. Because of the aspiration to be nice, many girls have emotions and experiences that are left unexpressed because to express them is to contradict popular culture's idealized nice girl. For that reason, texts that refute the nice girl are important because they prove that girls have other kinds of stories to tell, stories that are not nice, that are filled with ugliness and fear and ambition and oppression and relationships and abandonment and abuse. They not only demonstrate the range of girls' expression, but also provide a source of release and compassion.

This chapter deals with a sampling of girls' secrets and confessions. I draw on texts about the motives and consequences of girls' strategies for aggression and

"meanness" to ask how girls' subversive aggression can be demonstrated in narrative; to examine this topic, I am using chapters from Maxine Hong Kingston's genre-bending memoir, *The Woman Warrior*, as a powerful example of the narrator navigating girlhood and how to do or say what she must not do or say in order to genuinely reflect on her life.

In the article "'The Power to Squash People': Understanding girls' relational aggression," Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz explain that "Girlhood as a culturally constructed 'way of being' is regulated by conventions that girls must be pretty but not 'self absorbed' about their appearance; they must be noticed and liked by the 'right people,' but not a social climber; independent but not a 'loner'; and so on" (24). The line is too thin for any girl to actually walk—so the task becomes to put on the good girl façade and keep silent about all of the ways you secretly do not fit the bill. The girl who is soft spoken, beautiful, thin, perfectly-abled but not too athletic, never angry or argumentative or reclusive, and always takes care of others before considering herself, is an extremely rare person, if she exists at all. And girls become aware very early on of what is expected from them; that in itself can cause frustration and disillusionment. The emphasis, then, is on secretiveness; on putting on the right face for the right people; on not sharing deeds and thoughts that are too unladylike.

The first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, "No Name Woman," begins: "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (Kingston 3). This first line is meant to invoke in the reader a sense of curiosity, pride (being "in

on" a secret), and dread (it seems unlikely that the secret will be good news). The first line also clues us in on Kingston's fraught relationship with stories and traditions; after all, it is the opening line of a book, which can be read by anyone. What if the page had begun with the *narrator* saying, "You must not tell anyone…"? The way it is written, we are encouraged to both identify *with* Kingston and to feel voyeuristic and/or scandalized by her seeming disregard for her mother's wishes.

The tension, then, between telling or not telling is both ironic and essential. The narrator's mother tells the story of an aunt in a Chinese village who had an affair. The resultant pregnancy enraged the community and on the night she was due, the aunt gave birth alone and drowned herself and the newborn in the family's well. The aunt's story is supposed to stay a secret because otherwise that shameful past could mar the family name. But at the same time, the only way the aunt's story can remain a secret (and a warning for wayward adolescent girls) is if her story *is* passed on. A secret is something that has to be *kept*—no one can keep it if no one knows it. Also, the telling/not telling tension has a third purpose: "The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her. Her betrayal so maddened them, the family saw to it that she would suffer forever even after death" (Kingston 16). Keeping silent about the aunt is not only a tool to protect the family, but also an ongoing antagonistic act. The aunt's history brings shame onto the family, but their anger will not let them forget it.

And the anger is not purely that of Kingston's family; the nameless aunt is angry as well. Kingston is not entirely sure what she has done, because revealing the scandal in her memoir is a double-edged sword; it can ease the aunt's anonymity, but it also makes the aunt vulnerable to the scorn of readers: "I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water" (Kingston 16). All of this anger between women in Kingston's family may only be inferred (the silence is what gives the anger such vitriol, such a lasting sting), but Kingston reveals the pressure of pretending to be the one who is completely incapable of doing exactly what you *are* doing. Many sections in *The Woman Warrior* that involve Kingston's *own* life (as opposed to her mother or famous legends) deal with repressed anger—and the reasons, experiences, and consequences of that repression.

As a Chinese-American girl, Kingston's identity has many intersectionalities: "how do you separate what is particular to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (Kingston 6). Kingston's narrative also raises the question, what is particular to girlhood? For the narrator, Girlhood and femininity involve overlapping expectations to not tell imposed on them by Chinese and American culture. Even her mother's warning at the opening of the book shows that girlhood and growing into a woman entails the danger of becoming the wrong kind of girl. Kingston must remember her vulnerability and her inherent shame—after

all, the nameless aunt is both a blight and a warning: "Now that you have started to menstruate," her mother says, "what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful" (Kingston 5).

Mean Girls and *The Woman Warrior* both venture into various methods and consequences of relational aggression. The American Psychological Association defines relational aggression as "Relational aggression, which is the main topic of this article, includes social exclusion, friendship withdrawal threats (e.g., "I won't be your friend unless…"), giving the silent treatment and spreading malicious secrets, lies or gossip" (Ostrov). The ostracization of the aunt is an even more devastating example of not being allowed to sit with former friends at lunch, or having rumors spread about you to ensure your isolation. In the above passage, the mother is warning Kingston not to misstep, because she will be cast out, and bullied via alienation.

In the States, many studies of girls have shown that they realize they are being carefully watched and judged for what is seen by adults and peers as unbecoming behavior. Key among the "unbecoming" characteristics are promiscuity and aggression. How does the practice of "girls' studies" shed light on Kingston's discussion of girlhood anger and aggression?

Many recent girls' studies texts are concerned with anger, silence, and suppression of "unladylike" emotions. Anger and relational aggression are not new issues, but they are newly part of a public discussion and panic about girls' potential

for violence. The reasons behind the "newness" of girls' aggression are the same as the reasons behind the nameless aunt's silence and suicide, and the reasons behind the forbidden story of her transgressions as well as Kingston's decision to open the text with the order of silence: the draw and the repulsion of these open secrets exist because there is power in anger. "'The Power to Squash People'" frankly states that "the inability to understand girls' aggression reflects a more general failure to understand girls' agency" (Currie et al 23). The notion that women can have real, terrible power over others, or even that they take stock of times they have been wronged and inflict their hurt onto others contradicts the stereotype that girls are merely passive, or objects to be acted on. The sexist view of gender dynamics is often learned at a very early age; in "Girls, Aggression, and Emotion Regulation" Anne M. Conway's research reveals different social conditioning for girls and boys: "The socialization of gender roles occurs quite early in life….many girls receive cultural messages prohibiting the expression of negative emotions, such as anger. Conversely, girls are often encouraged to be passive and focus on other's needs. These gender norms are deeply embedded yet often invisible within American culture and play out in many domains of daily life" (Conway 337).

Girls are meant to be the gatekeepers of the status quo. Therefore, an angry girl is undesirable because she speaks to an unnerving disquiet, and the threat of upheaval. "Anger and Depression in Girls and Boys" explains that "Anger, an emotion said to be diagnostic of the independent or autonomous self…is also an emotion whose

outward, verbal expression puts people in touch with their rights and needs….anger motivates us to act in ways that can correct a problem or injustice within a relationship" (Cox, Stabb, and Hulgis 110). In *Woman Warrior*, the aunt's anger is both silenced and magnified by her suicide; her aunt and her the family's anger festers continuously and Kingston is expected to inherit both; now she shares them with us.

No Name Anger

Anger inflicts damage when it goes unnamed. The namelessness can stem from lack of precedent, or from an unwillingness to examine, but either way, naming anger and the reasons behind it are necessary for resolution. Rachel Simmons writes about her research on aggressive girl behavior in *Odd Girl Out: The hidden culture of aggression in girls*, which exposes and names meanness as well as the anger it masks. She was granted access to many schools, but there were also many that turned her away: "The smaller towns and some private schools were less welcoming. Their refusal to grant me access, though never explained, seemed to me a sign of anxiety that the truth would be discovered about their girls: that yes, they *were* capable of being mean. In a society raising girls to be loving and "nice," this was no small exposure" (Simmons 7). The girls in Simmons's study have inherited the same anxiety about their own anger that motivates schools to keep girls' anger and meanness unexamined. Simmons transcribes girls' interviews and confessions in which they are often trying to convince

the peers they are angry with that they are not angry at all. Many are denied genuine access to their own anger and to the anger of those around them.

Naming anger, naming the people or circumstances that cause it, is a central dilemma for Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*. The pressure from family and schools to conform, as well as the cross-cultural navigation the narrator must learn, stifles her voice and makes her unsure of what she knows, what she has to say, and how much power her words hold. Linda Hunt's article, "'I Could Not Figure Out What Was My Village': Gender vs. Ethnicity in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," explains that "Maxine Hong Kingston's personal struggle is fought—and resolved at least partially—on the battlefield of language. The words used against her sting, and, unable to find the right words and the right voice to express her own point of view, she is rendered nearly voiceless for much of her youth" (Hunt 6). Kingston tells us that she has learned, from her family's warnings of "don't tell" as well as the rules of girlhood in her American school, that her voice is not something to be proud of: "We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. …At times shaking my head no is more self assertion than I can manage" (Kingston 172). When she first starts school, Kingston is so mistrustful of her voice that she takes pains to cover up evidence that she has one; her self-expression is erased or postponed:

> My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and

> flowers and suns, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top. I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose. …I spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas. (Kingston 165)

Kingston later reveals that she considers her voice and temper to be like an opera. While that moment will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter, I want to tease out the connection between Kingston's concealment of her voice as well as her anger. To cover her paintings with black is a form of resistance—the black paint hides her ideas, but also it is an idea in itself: an ominous sign of noncompliance that mystifies and disturbs her teachers. Once the black curtain has fallen, Kingston is not confined to what she originally painted. She describes the paintings as "full of possibilities"—in other words, a mystery even to herself. Kingston has been forbidden to tell, on the one hand, and at the same time she does not yet know *how* to tell; "houses and flowers and suns" are not what she has to say. So the open secret s that something more complex, something possibly malevolent, is waiting there.

Unfortunately, before the mighty opera is realized, her concealed anger has an indirect and harmful outlet. Kingston harbors anger towards others for expecting her to be silent, but she is also angry with herself for keeping that silence. Because she is young, and because the rules of girlhood obscure anger and only allow girls to access it indirectly, it is morphed into disgust at another Chinese girl in her class who never

utters a word. Yuan Shu, in "Cultural Politics and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's *Woman Warrior*," explains that "the narrator as the second-generation Chinese-American learns the importance of breaking silence and asserting herself as a speaking and assertive subject [through bullying], the Chinese-American girl who never expresses herself in public and always needs protection from her older sister" (Shu 216). Contrary to Shu, I do not believe this scene has anything to do with Kingston learning to assert herself. Her actions, when she bullies the other Chinese-American girl in the bathroom, stems from Kingston's inability to name her own anger. The experience is extreme, and can only be explained by repressed fury.

The girl in the bathroom is Kingston's unwitting stand-in. She corners the girl by the sinks and "look[s] into her face so [she] could hate it close up" (Kingston 175). Kingston tries to force the girl to speak with a mixture of verbal and physical abuse: "I moved behind her and pulled the hair growing out of her weak neck. I let go. I stood silent for a long time. Then I screamed, 'Talk!' I would scare the words out of her" (Kingston 178). The cruelty spirals until they are both sobbing and Kingston hardly recognizes herself: "What if I couldn't stop, and everyone would want to know what happened?" (Kingston 180). Simmons interviewed girls who experienced a similar loss of control when their anger erupted. An adolescent named Carmen admitted how it feels when you cannot contain your anger any longer: "you feel hateful, you feel hate towards them, and a lot of times you want to go at them. A lot of times you can't stop yourself. You want to but you can't stop yourself. It's hard to

stop yourself once you start" (Simmons 148). And Kingston's event does seem to be endless, which amplifies the helplessness of both girls in the bathroom. Kingston says, "It seemed as if I had spent my life in that basement, doing the worst thing I had yet done to another person" (Kingston 181). The reason I argue that the bathroom incident is not a lesson for the narration in self-assertion is because the victim is really a mirror for young Kingston. She is circling around *herself*, pointing out flaws: "I stared at the curve of her nape. I wished I was able to see what my own neck looked like from the back and sides. I hoped it did not look like hers; I wanted a stout neck" (Kingston 176). Kingston is angry about the victim's "weak" appearance (which reflects her own—she lists all the ways she tries to appear tougher), her silence (which plagues Kingston as well), and the way she is treated by other people: "I don't like the way you're the last one chosen"—something else they have in common (Kingston 179).

It is worth noting that Kingston is harassing this girl relentlessly, but also privately—and even in the moment, she makes a vague attempt to disguise her attack as concern: "I'm doing this for you own good,' I said. 'Don't you dare tell anyone I've been bad to you'" (Kingston 181). The aggression she shows needs to have a benevolent excuse. That she lectures the girl about how she will not receive the attention she wants unless she speaks ("Nobody's going to notice you. And you have to speak right up in front of the boss. Don't you know that?"), that she offers the girl prizes and treats if she says a word (181), implies that young Kingston, if only on a

self-deceiving level, believes she is doing the child a favor. Kingston's account of bullying is a troublingly detailed example of

> the girl who has been taught not to know aggression, and yet is incapable of not knowing it. That she is clearly not a conventional bully makes her story a powerful example of how keeping girls away from natural feelings of anger can lead them to cruel or inappropriate acts…anger is both foreign and central to her self, and the combination leaves her at once blinded and submerged by it. (Simmons 149)

Even while having a frightening, violent outburst, Kingston attempts to undermine her intense anger by trying to rescue the girl from herself. The implication is that, if the silent girl would only secure her future by finding her voice, then she would be safe from Kingston's harassment. The incident is so convoluted and beguiling because the storm of emotion Kingston feels is forbidden to her.

Kingston must realize that this scene is deeply uncomfortable to read. It is disorienting to watch the sympathetic female protagonist do something she should never do. It is alarming to read an account of this "normal" girl's intense meanness; to see the extent of her fury and self-loathing. The bathroom bullying scene is a brave act of telling; with this confession, she is opening herself to judgment, but also (and more importantly), she gives a daring, firsthand account of what it looks and feels like to be mean. To say, "as a girl, I was angry and mean" is striking enough, but to then

say, "now *you* have to know what it is to be a girl who is angry and mean" creates a burden of shared guilt.

We need to see ourselves in Kingston's cruelty. If we judge her, we may as well be circling her in the bathroom, scrutinizing our own faces looking back at us, learning to "hate it up close." "By washing our hands of our own capacity to injure," Simmons writes, "we perpetuate the stereotype that females are nonaggressive. We become accomplices in the culture's repression of assertive women and girls by making aggression pathological, and hidden" (Simmons 151).

"Boom!"

In many ways, Kingston is often the antagonist of her own story: she speaks shameful secrets, and abuses a classmate. Also, the conflict about her voice—when to use it, how to use it—prevents her from telling what she needs to tell. In "Power and Discourse: Silence and Rhetorical Choice in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," Jill M. Parrott describes this drama as the most important threat of the text: "This tension between what is spoken/not spoken, written/not written, given power/powerless is the ultimate conflict of the novel because it highlights the power differentials of the characters' linguistic interactions" (Parrott 380). Growing up, Kingston evidently struggles with the pressure to keep silent and her deep need to stay loyal to her personal truths. During Shelley Fisher Fishkin's "Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston," Kingston admits that the drama of telling is always on her mind as

an author: "I feel that I constantly deal with the 'don't tell' taboo," she says; "I think we all do. There's a lot in society that says, 'Don't tell this secret, don't tell that—' or 'what you have to tell is not beautiful, or unacceptable, or too crazy.' We're constantly told this. 'It's blasphemous'" (Fishkin 786). Kingston is aware of a deep risk, of a shock, that comes with a woman revealing secrets and powerful and negative emotions. Young Kingston finds the risk of telling to be so damaging if not chanced that it could potentially destroy one's psyche: "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves. There were many crazy girls and women" (Kingston 187). As a girl, she is the most in danger of losing her "sanity" and agency by bottling her secrets and anger.

Kingston's plan to avoid insanity is to slowly share with her mother a list of over two hundred examples of actions, emotions, or desires she has hidden because they are unbecoming of a girl. She wants her mother to truly "know" her, and she also wants to conquer her smothering silence: "I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat" (Kingston 197). For a few consecutive nights, Kingston goes to her mother and reveals odd details about herself, such as "I killed a spider" (198) or an experience of praying like a Christian (200). Unfortunately, her method of confession is unsettling and her mother tells her to stop the ritual: "I don't feel like hearing your craziness" (Kingston 200). Kingston is silenced again, and

her throat pain worsens. One mistake is that instead of speaking the truths that are the most pressing to her, Kingston instead resolves to experience the *idea* of telling secrets by revealing relatively unimportant things: "I'd tell a couple easy ones and work up…maybe I could blurt out several a day, maybe an easy one and a hard one" (Kingston 199). Why is she dancing around whatever it is she *really* has to say? What is she afraid of?

Kingston is grappling with the taboo of being explicit. For Simmons's study, one girl is willing to verbalize the unspoken rule:

> With twelve-year-old Carmen Peralta, a wry Latina student at a private school in the Northeast, I was asking about what it's like to tell someone you're angry. She said she never did, and I asked why. "Because it sounds weird for one thing! 'Hey, by the way, I'm mad at you!'" she drawled sarcastically. Becoming more serious, she began to stall. "I won't say, 'I'm mad'—it just—I don't know—I don't like that way of dealing with things because it's weird—just to say, 'I'm mad at you'…It's kind of like *boom*!" (Simmons 71)

This girl, Carmen, believes that admitting anger to the person you are angry with will destroy everything—your image of niceness, your relationship; everything that girls are supposed to hold most dear will explode. Kingston has been nursing her own secret "boom!" that finally detonates at a family dinner: "my throat burst open. I stood up, talking and burbling. I looked directly at my mother and at my father and screamed" (Kingston 201). Kingston describes this sudden passion as a "burst,"

something unexpected that is crashing down on her and her parents. She tells them that she knows they think she is unattractive; that they stunted her linguistic development; that they want to "turn [her] into a slave or a wife" (Kingston 201). Whether or not all of Kingston's accusations and interpretations of past events are accurate, the act of saying them is where her empowerment lies. Kingston is attacking her parents out of anger and shame that she might be a bad daughter: "You think we're odd and not pretty and we're not bright" (Kingston 201). Bringing those fears out in the open means that the many slights and shortcomings and judgments of the past years must now be dealt with. It means that painful misunderstandings come to light. When Kingston confronts her mother for calling her ugly, the mother says: "'That's what we're supposed to say. That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite.' It seemed to hurt her to tell me that—another guilt for my list to tell my mother, I thought" (Kingston 204).

In reality, Kingston is not a "nice" girl—not the girl she is supposed to want to be, and once that is clear, the idea of not being a nice girl becomes bearable. Simmons asks a classroom full of girls to list the attributes of the perfect girl. They tell her that she must not show genuine emotion but always appear kind and pleasant; she should be attractive and witty but not so much that she makes other girls jealous (Simmons 70). In Kingston's mother's opinion, and seemingly even in Kingston's own, she possesses none of these qualities: "Noisy. Talking like a duck. Disobedient. Messy…You turned out so unusual. I fixed your tongue so you could say charming

things. You don't even say hello to the villagers" (202-203). Kingston has finally been *named* as the "anti-girl," in Simmons's words. And Kingston has shown us that there is potential freedom in being named, even if the name is undesirable to many. The anti-girl "lacks the ideal girl's sophisticated indirection. She is the polar opposite of the 'nice,' other-oriented, relational girl. The non-ideal girl is mean, opinionated, and pushy…She is not the sweet girl everyone wants to be around; she is unhappy and insecure. She is not social. She is not in control of her emotions. She is hard to get along with" (Simmons 126). Kingston's defiance illuminates the creativity and self-realization that comes from being outside of the ideal. The bursting out requires declaring her capabilities—all the ways in which she stands out and excels: "I'm so smart, if they say write ten pages, I can write fifteen" (Kingston 201).

Kingston's outburst further posits her as an antagonist of sorts, but at the same time, she becomes angry and "mean" in a way that encourages girls to claim their emotions. The opera that Kingston eludes to earlier, which waits beneath her kindergarten paintings covered in black, is allowed to ring loud and clear in this moment: "[words] kept pouring out anyway in the voice like Chinese opera. I could hear the drums and the cymbals and the gongs and brass horns" (Kingston 203). This is her coming out concert. She dares to scream out what she has been feeling and to declare that she has qualities to be proud of. Perhaps, hearing such bold assertions may cause other girls to notice the "anti-girl" within themselves—Kingston, at least, believes that telling has an equalizing effect: "If only I could let my mother know the

list, she—and the world—would become more like me, and I would never be alone again" (Kingston 198). If you tell someone, "I have done or thought something no one else like me has ever thought or done," that the secret is now on the listener's mind makes you less of an anomaly: your life becomes imaginable.

That line, the part about making the world more like you, could be an epigraph for each of my chapters. When you hear or see a telling it cannot be separate from you; not if you fully engage. That is why storytelling in general, and especially the tellings of those who are traditionally silenced (girls, women of color, those who are not cisgendered or heterosexual) are so powerful and scandalous. They call us out. The tellings say, "I'm going to let you in on all of the bad things we have done together," or even worse, "while I tell you this, you and I are the same." Kingston is aware that many may want to maintain distance from her accusations; to attribute her voicelessness in early life to Chinese culture, which is foreign and apart from them. There are those who would think she is not indeed speaking to them; who would think that No Name women only come from Elsewhere. Kingston, in "A Conversation with Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston" is affronted by that defense mechanism: "I'm writing America. And when they put this China label on it, it means that they have denied what they have read….I am talking about the way we're treating women right here" (Whalen-Bridge 80). The listeners have read and cannot now un-read. Similar to *The Bluest Eye*, *The Woman Warrior* declares that to not

recognize your place in the telling is to "deny what you have read." The text may be fictional, but our responsibility to it is real.

CHAPTER FOUR: REPARATIVE NARRATION IN *ELLEN FOSTER*

I have discussed the confrontations of trauma, abuse, and racism against prevailing notions of girlhood in America by various media. I began with the resonance of opening lines and how they reveal the naïveté or unwitting bias of the perceived audience. "Here is the house" in *The Bluest Eye* carries with it the assurance that to live within the racist history of the States is to already know what that house looks like, and to already be exposed to a constant desire for that house. *Woman Warrior*'s "You must never tell anyone" establishes a secret that we must learn and also keep—a duty complicated by the fact that the writing of the secret means it is already un-kept. These first lines imply that we need to be reminded or warned; that there is some idea we may be reluctant to encounter; but that idea is at the heart of this girl's narrative. Now I intend to arrive at my overall argument, which begins with the question: what might be the benefit, evidenced in a fictional narrative, of a young female protagonist telling others a story that troubles the cheery, naïve, sheltered girls they feel they are supposed to be, without shame or apprehension? That means no Dick and Jane backdrop; no hushed voices or family legends to set the tone; no laborious effort to explain and justify how our depressed heroine got that way. What

would such a heroine look like? The result, I am arguing, is a girl who can tell her life and do the work of puzzling out the impacts and lessons of her experience, because she is free from wondering how a girl ended up with that life in the first place. The novel *Ellen Foster*, written by Kaye Gibbons, is a profound illustration of what such a girl's telling may look like.

The range of traumatic experiences for children, diagnoses, treatment, and constructive adult behavior towards traumatized children are all still debated and analyzed in child psychology. One major impediment is that the child's support network—parents or guardians, school staff and faculty, community members, etc. —are often unable or unwilling to acknowledge that children are not inherently predisposed to "bounce back." PTSD can be an ongoing and painful reality for a child.

Psychologists Paul Stallard and Fergus Law did a case study in 1994 about the effects of adult denial on children dealing with PTSD in "The Psychological Effects of Trauma on Children." They write, "[t]here is growing evidence to demonstrate that children involved in traumatic events suffer prolonged and significant psychological distress *although adults have been found to consistently deny, underrate, or fail to recognize their severity*" (Stallard 89, emphasis added). Stallard and Law did a case study involving seven elementary school children who were involved in a terrifying bus crash. Everyone survived, but Stallard and Law found that the children were not given adequate tools or support to deal with the emotional aftermath. These children

explained to these therapists the underlying theme I have drawn out of all these works, namely that adults protect themselves with their belief that children are innocent and unfettered: "A recurrent theme expressed by child trauma victims is a difficulty talking with adults. Parents often want to deny the severity of the incident and avoid talking about it in order to minimize the distress of the child" (Stallard 95-96). These children, in third grade, have already learned that their pain is not supposed to exist and therefore must be kept secret. I hope to combat the taboo of children daring to discuss trauma. The expectation of innocence kindles its own form of trauma due to isolation, shame, and guilt: "The severity and longlasting nature of the effects of traumas are consistently underestimated by adults. This places pressure upon the child to appear well which in town generates a feeling of being misunderstood and results in them keeping their distress to themselves" (Stallard 96).

Ellen Foster's opening line is, "When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy" (Gibbons 1). Ellen is doing a number of provocative things in that one sentence. The phrase "kill my daddy" implies that she still *is* a child because "daddy" is affectionate, and juxtaposes the sweetness of "daddy" with the concept of murder. The word "kill," though, is not as sinister as it might be, since it is clear that Ellen, who "would think of ways" to do it, never actually kills her father.

The overall effect is exactly what my project has been building towards. The reader is not meant to be shocked. Discussing killing from the first sentence is meant to seem somewhat alarming. But there is a confident matter-of-factness about Ellen's

tone here. She is not only telling us that she fantasized about murder, but that she *rehearsed* it: "I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy" (Gibbons 1). Young Ellen did not take her wish lightly. She challenged herself to think through the steps, to practice what she would do, and how she would react. This revelation, that Ellen plans ahead and tries to think things (like murder) through, shows that she is not the little girl narrator she is "supposed" to be. And if we want to hear her out, if we want "in," then we have to be co-conspirators. We have to know and appreciate that she knows what the ideal girl is like, and that she will never be that girl. Ellen is only speaking to those who are ready to hear her. She is engaging in what Kaplan calls "the erotics of talk: the search not for a voice, but for a listener capable of hearing that voice and responding appropriately to it" (Kaplan 15). Buffy, Kingston, and the girls in *The Bluest Eye* can be said to be searching for their voices. They are trying to find a way to say; a way to explain their depression, or anger, or guilt; they want to tell us why they are the way they are. But Ellen does not need to explain herself. She already has her voice, and she has a view of her narrative unfettered by the politics of a girl having spoken.

Ellen is not only proving that she is an individual and not our preconceived notion of the innocent girl, but that she knows that expectation exists and how it could be used to her advantage: "When they come in the house," she imagines, "I'm all in a state of shock and just don't know how to act…I just stand in the door and look like I'm shaking all over." Because Ellen knows that "[t]his homology between

girls and innocence deems young females to be blameless, faultless…simple, naïve, unsophisticated, artless," etc. (Currie 96), there is no doubt in Ellen's mind that she would be presumed innocent. In her scenario no one asks her, "what happened?" because that would at the very least presume that Ellen is a witness and therefore has useful knowledge of the grisly event, which is almost as unthinkable as asking if the death is her fault. Her description of her demeanor as "shocked" and "shaking" implies that she is confused about what is going on. She is not even sure as to whether or not her daddy is dead; that she cannot recognize death emphasizes her "innocence." Therefore, all she reports is that "something's the matter." Ellen also performs the "correct" state of mind. "Shocked" and "shaking" are not only useful in suggesting cluelessness; they are also demonstrations of being appropriately traumatized. A young girl is *not* callous about death. Ellen performs being a "girl" because she is well aware of what is culturally expected of her.

> Of course I would call the rescue squad and tell them to come quick something's the matter with my daddy. When they come in the house I'm all in a state of shock and just don't know how to act what with two colored boys heaving my dead daddy onto a roller cot. I just stand in the door and look like I'm shaking all over. (Gibbons 1)

That the reader is meant to be her ally. The "of course" is conversational and mocking; she imagines us listening with a wry smile because we all know her part well. Ellen does not have to explain that "because the adults who come for my father's

body will expect me to feel overwhelmed and terrified because I'm young and a girl, I will take advantage of that stereotype so they will not suspect me." That she trusts us with the knowledge of her non-innocent inner thoughts precludes the possibility that we do not already know that she can successfully take advantage of an innocent girl façade. The most striking feature of Ellen's narrative is that she has a strong sense of who her appropriate audience must be. Kaplan writes that the female narrator seeks to "transform a listener, if necessary, from antagonist to conversational partner" (Kaplan 16). Ellen has *made* us into the people she wants to speak to, which shows in the freedom of her telling. She not only speaks frankly about murder and manipulating those who think she is innocent, but she also has a dark sense of irony that she is constantly unapologetic about. Her father does die by his own devices, and her summary is: "I heard how they found him shut up in the house dead and everything. Next thing I know he's in the ground and the house is rented out to a family of four" (1).

Talk to Me Like I Have Some Sense

Kaplan wonders, "How does women's writing—where the stakes of recognition have always been particularly high—reflect that potential failure and rewrite the perennial quest for an ideal listener in light of it?" (Kaplan 6). My project takes this issue of recognition in a direction Kaplan does not explore: recognition is more vital and rare for girls than it is for women, who are already woefully

unrecognized. That was the impetus for Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: "I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (Morrison xi). To be vulnerable is to be objectified, or thought of as prey that must be pursued or protected; the vulnerable girl cannot be recognized as a subject with her own opinion of herself, and her own view of her life. The essay "I Ain't No Friggin Little Wimp" by Renee R. Curry describes how essential it is for a young female narrator to establish how she will be telling her story and that in order for her listener to continue, they need to accept that she will detail her genuine moods and reactions to events, regardless of what an innocent girl "should" do. In describing the decision of a girl narrator to drop the façade, Curry also explains the profundity of Ellen's opening line: "The choice not to impersonate an innocent girl is an act of trust and love that may not always be appreciated or reciprocated by readers because reader desire has been set up as a desire for innocence on the part of girl 'I's'"(Curry 103).

Once the listener/reader stops viewing the Girl as "innocent" and instead as complex and capable, she can be honest without fear of being shut down. When Ellen is forced to see a psychiatrist to talk about past abuse and painful memories, she sets the tone from the beginning: "I told him the first day that if he had to talk to me then he could talk to me like I have some sense" (Gibbons 88). Unfortunately, Ellen's therapist cannot shake his assumptions about girls' innocence, and repeatedly attempts to oversimplify Ellen's mental state. She explains that she changes her last

name to "Foster" because she wants to take the name of her new foster family and leave her old one. The therapist chuckles at Ellen's misunderstanding of the phrase "foster family" and tells her what she is trying to do is form a new identity for herself and pretend she is a different person. Ellen is eventually fed up: "Lord I say to him. I hate to tell him he's wrong because you can tell it took him a long time to make up his ideas. And the worst part is I can see he believes them" (Gibbons 88). This scene is a covert lesson in who the reader must not be if they intend to recognize Ellen. The therapist is depressingly typical. He finds Ellen charming and confused, but he cannot recognize Ellen because he is not listening. Ellen's readers have accepted that she is not innocent and understand that "Trusting a girl 'I' narrator means that we trust what she claims is going on and what she claims is not going on" (Curry 101). Those who refuse to see Ellen instead of the image of the Girl are doomed to either remain ignorant or be drastically disillusioned.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You," discusses what it means to approach a text as something that can do work, instead of something that can be picked apart and "exposed" for its shortcomings: "moving from the rather fixated question, 'Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know?' to the further question, 'What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving-again of knowledge of what one already knows? *How*, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move

among its causes and effects?" (Sedgwick 4). This notion of seeking redemptive qualities instead of classifying ideas as right or wrong is at the center of invitational rhetoric. The key is not to dominate or argue but to "create three external conditions in the interaction between rhetors and audience members--safety, value, and freedom" (Foss and Griffin 10). Ellen establishes these conditions for herself through time shifts and affirmation via inclusion of her audience members.

Ellen actively crafts her narrative in a way that helps her survive the retelling and take pride in her resourcefulness. One component of the "safety" created by Ellen's narrative style is switching between the past and the present. There are two threads that come together at the end of the novel: the period where she is moving from home to home after she leaves her father, and her new life at a nurturing foster home. The time shifts are extremely frequent while she is remembering her father verbally abusing her ill mother who is soon driven to suicide. Ellen tells us about her anger and helplessness while her mother is being shouted at: "What can I do but go and reach the tall things for her? I set that dinner table and like to take a notion to spit on his fork" (Gibbons 4). Immediately there is a page break and the narrative picks up again at her new home: "Nobody yells after anybody to do this or that here" (Gibbons 4). There are four shifts within these two pages, switching from the calm and consistency of her foster mother and her biological mother's pain and depression. I believe this tactic is what enables Ellen to continue talking through what happens to her mother. She takes breaks to remind herself that she is safe and happy now, and

the peace she feels while sharing with us that "Now at my new mama's I lay up late in the day and watch the rain fall outside" (5) gives her the strength to revisit the time when "Everything was so wrong like somebody had knocked something loose and my family was shaking itself to death" (Gibbons 2).

Ellen uses the reader as moral support. When she is recounting moments from living with her alcoholic father, she includes us as silent witnesses to be on her side: "He goes off in the truck like he has some business to tend to. And you know and I know he's gone to get himself something to drink" (Gibbons 5). The "you" is another component of how Ellen creates "safety" in her invitational rhetoric. It is a way for her to not feel alone (we can all scoff at her father's behavior together) and also a way to distance herself from the action—if she is doing the *reader* a favor by explaining what happens to her (instead of being alone and at the mercy of troubling memories), then her relationship to her experience is more objective and less painful. When her father drunkenly attempts to rape her after hearing from his friends (also drunk) that he should have sex with adolescent girls, Ellen uses "you" to articulate her panic without feeling it again:

> What else do you do when your house is run over by colored men drinking whiskey and singing and your daddy is worse than all put together?
>
> You pray to God they forget about you and the sweet young things that are soff when you mashum and how good one feels when she is pressed up by

> you. ...You want to see a light so bad that it comes to guide you through the room and out the door. (Gibbons 38)

The "you" is potentially hypothetical in this instance, but either way Ellen is relating her escape as a series of instructions in order to finish the telling without bringing herself completely back to the experience.

Serious Play

The “Girl-savvy” reader also has access to deeper meanings in girls’ actions that can initially be read as complying with the innocence expectation. Ellen’s strategies are particularly devious. She makes use of what Judith Butler in her preface to *Gender Trouble* calls “serious play”; Butler says, “laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensible for feminism. Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own form of serious play” (XXX). The terms “Girl,” “play,” and “feminism” should be discussed together more often. Generic “play” is what is expected from children; it is connected with innocence and a naïve way of trying to understand the world. But “serious play” is not just a tool for adult women.

Serious play is not a naïve activity. Girls can employ serious play in order to express dark thoughts under a guise of misapprehension, or perhaps even with the intent to shock and disturb the adults who are not really listening to them. Ellen’s examples of serious play usually involve interactions with other people in her life who do not understand her as well as we do. At one point Ellen is forced to live with her

maternal grandmother, who spends the summer insulting and threatening Ellen as a way of blaming and punishing her for her mother's suicide: "You and your daddy let her take them pills or more than likely drove her to it" (Gibbons 78). The grandmother dies in bed while Ellen attempts to nurse her back to health. The constant emotional abuse results in Ellen staring at her grandmother's dead body, feeling responsible for her mother's death, and hating/pitying her grandmother, who is angry and bitter but also grieving. Ellen decides to make a (somewhat disingenuous) effort to react appropriately to this current death, because this time "[she] did not want a soul to say [she] had not done [her] part even down to the decorations" (Gibbons 91).

Ellen fixes her grandmother up in style, with her mature sense of irony intact:

> I found her Sunday hat she never wore and tilted it on her head the way a live woman might pop a hat on to ride to town in. Then the best part I will always be proud of was the nice frame I made all around her body. I put all the artificial flowers I could find from all those show jars around her end to end so she looked set off like a picture. A still life you might say. ...She does look fancy. It's a shame she has to leave I thought. (Gibbons 91-92).

The act of decorating the grandmother's body is defiant, troubling, and most importantly, *funny*. Ellen is making a statement here, to her grandmother, that she is strong enough to realize she is only a mean, old, dead bully—all while being proud of her initiative and proving to her aunt that her past ordeals have turned her into a new

person they will never understand or straighten out: "[Aunt] Nadine said I was sick to do such a thing. But I feel fine I told her" (Gibbons 91). The reader is in on the joke.

The reason this scene is so important in a conversation about girlhood is that it illustrates a key assertion in this project: that girls already have voices, and in actuality the issue is not that we have to uncover them—which is what many girls' studies texts seek to do— but that we are not *listening*. Ellen is turning this newest tragedy into a statement that encompasses grief, relief, forgiveness, and revenge. When girls are allowed to tell without concern for non ideal listeners (i.e. adults who cling to innocence) perhaps it would look like this: the thoroughly dead body of the meanest woman in the world, made up to resemble a delightful old lady on her way to do good deeds. Ellen is playing with us, because we have seen the toll her grandmother has taken on Ellen's guilt and we delight in the small retaliation that helps her regain her agency. She has created a situation that could possibly indicate a very disturbed child, but because her ideal listeners are tuned in, we see it as constructive closure.

Reparative Narration

Sedgwick defines the reparative as "the position from which it is possible in turn to use one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part objects into something like a whole--though not, and may I emphasize this, *not necessarily like a preexisting whole*" (Sedgwick 8). The "murderous part-objects" of Ellen's young life are all of the traumatic experiences that plague her: her father's alcoholism and abuse, her

grandmother's abuse, and seeing her mother and grandmother die. The new "whole" she is fashioning for herself is comprised of serious play: achieving small humorous victories, and infusing the listener and her happier present into her worst memories.

Ellen makes it clear that although she has done away with chronological order and some people are alarmed by her behavior, she is not confused. Unfortunately there are some adults who still try to discredit her process. Her school counselor, for example, is a paranoid reader, who "places [his] faith in *exposure*" (Sedgwick 9), and often pathologizes Ellen and reminds her that she is traumatized and anxious. But Ellen has already figured out that just because something is true does not mean that truth is *useful*; and just because something is not true does not mean it is not positive or beneficial. For example, re-invisioning oneself is not the same as pretending to be someone else, as her therapist suggests. "My old family wore the other name out and I figured I would take the name of my new family," Ellen explains (Gibbons 88). She is trying to let go of a murderous part-object and think of herself as part of something good.

Reparatively narrating her life allows Ellen to be proud of the hard lessons she has learned, and to feel justifiably wiser by the end of the journey. The last home she stays in before finding her foster mother belongs to her Aunt Nadine and cousin Dora, who pride themselves in having nice things and feeling superior to the rest of the family. Ellen is with them for Christmas, and Dora is especially excited about all of the presents that will be under the tree for her. While Dora brags about her past

Christmas toys, Ellen thinks about what she has come to learn about presumption: "I said to myself Dora let me tell you a thing or two. There is no Santa Claus. And you cannot always count on getting everything you want. You'll see. And when you wake up that day and Santa has not laid out everything you dreamed of or he might have missed your house completely then you have to be brave and if you come to me we can talk" (Gibbons 107). Ellen is showing that she values herself by knowing that she has learned an essential lesson—that life can be disappointing and hurtful. She also values *Dora* in this moment. She does not attempt to mar Dora's Christmas by telling her that Santa is not real—and even in her mind where she *does* say it, the main point is that Ellen intends to be a source of support if Dora experiences heartbreak.

Wait Until My Mama Wakes Up

It is a powerful idea, that a girl can use the "worst" of herself to create positive change in her life. Ellen's next round of serious play involves role playing and drawing on inner demons for protection. After a gift debacle on Christmas morning, Ellen is furious that she has to live with her aunt and cousin, and hurt by her callous indifference to her. The lesson about Santa Claus that she holds back before is now shouted out in anger: "That is when I told her I though she was the crazy one. That she and Dora had told each other so many lies about the way the world worked that they believed them. You two are bumping around in this house lost and foolish over each other" (Gibbons 114). She accuses her aunt Nadine and cousin Dora of being

more naïve and childlike than she can ever be, which is *precisely* why she is a pariah in their household. Ellen has long since given up on finding the picture-perfect white life, because she has seen the worst of too many people.

And her father's worst is about to come to her aid. Nadine, furious with Ellen's insubordination, moves to strike her, and Ellen unleashes a chilling memory, invoking her trauma narrative to tell Nadine she is long past the time when she could be cowed or silenced by adults:

> I told her flat out not to touch me or I would kill her. I said that low and strong as my daddy said it to me. I said it with my eyes evil so she would think about how I had been found in a huge house with two dead women and she might see herself just for one second as number three. (Gibbons 113)

Unlike the time Ellen decorates her grandmother's body, she is not making light of a serious situation; but even so I am describing this scene as "serious play" because this is Ellen's version of dress-up. She is role playing as her worst memory, and drawing on Nadine's paranoia that Ellen's marred life will infect her own. These murderous part-objects (her father's threat, the two deaths) are reassembled into armor that both repels and belittles Nadine and Dora.

She has figured out that they are *afraid* of her and what she represents: that although girls are supposed to be innocent, they are not granted any special protections from life. And when something terrible happens, the girl will be changed forever because she has seen beyond her assigned place. She will no longer be able to

pretend the world is filled only with Santa and dresses and “proper” nuclear families. And she will not be ashamed, because she has figured out so much that adults do not want her to know. Ellen muses, “I would really like to paint them one of my brooding oceans but they would miss the point I am sure of how the ocean looks strong and beautiful and sad at the same time…They would not like the picture because it looks so evil when you first look at it” (Gibbons 106). They are the type to recoil at Ellen’s opening line that she fantasized about killing her father, because “it looks so evil when you first look at it.” But that was her coping mechanism. It was where she drew empowerment from: Imagining a world where she can take control.

Ellen's new appreciation for her narrative is what motivates her to leave Aunt Nadine's house on foot and arrive at her foster mother's doorstep on Christmas day. After the intense argument with Nadine (who is so distressed by Ellen's insolence that she needs to take a nap), Ellen announces to Dora that she is leaving. Dora wants to remind Ellen that she cannot fend for herself; that somehow she must *still* have faith in the myth of the Dick and Jane family, where children are not only allowed but *expected* to be incapable and find doting adults to set things right. Dora says to Ellen, "You better wait until my mama wakes up," to which Ellen responds, "You better hush Dora. I've done my share of that kind of waiting. You can wait until you are blue in the face but not Ellen" (Gibbons 115). This is a better example than the dead grandmother scene of Ellen trusting that the reader is her ideal listener, capable of

understanding "how many things [a word] means, how all of its different meanings not only fit together but belong together, why it is so important" (Kaplan 5).

The idea that Ellen must "wait until my mama wakes up" has multiple and powerful resonances that Ellen and her audience have access to. The first meaning is that Ellen has finished waiting for her mother to "wake up"—when her mother kills herself, they are laying in bed together and Ellen pretends that she is merely sleeping: "I have her now while she sleeps but just is not breathing. ...You can rest with me until somebody comes to get you" (Gibbons 10-11). Ellen also attempts and fails to revive her grandmother after she dies in bed.

Second, there is the figurative meaning of "waking up," or facing reality. Ellen's mother is in a fog of illness and depression. She is unable to wake up and be a responsible parent. Ellen's grandmother is unable to wake up and move past her grief and hatred long enough to truly *see* Ellen, that she is only a child and not responsible for her mother's choices. Nadine, Dora's mother, is too immersed in superficiality to "wake up" and understand or care for a girl who has survived severe trauma.

Last there is "wake up" as in "emerge," presumably from laying dormant. Ellen is no longer waiting for her ideal mother to stride into her life and rescue her, or for an adult to decide what is best. She has to do it on her own: "That is why I think I am somebody now because I said by damn it this is how it is going to be and before I knew it I have a new mama" (Gibbons 95). Ellen's assertion that she has "had enough of that kind of waiting" is both layered and transformative. Dora has no idea what

Ellen means when she says that, but her audience does, and Ellen *herself* knows "how many things [she] means," which proves to her that she has endured quite a lot at the hands of adults who are supposed to take care of her, and that despite her family's behavior she is worthy of love.

Reparative narration means that Ellen's desire for self re-invention does not come on suddenly at the end of her narrative. She is forming the new Ellen as she recounts her previous homes. She explains to the reader that she loved to garden with her birth mother when she was very small. Then she reveals that this did not happen as often as she led us to believe:

> I know I have made being in the garden with her into a regular event but she was really only well like that for one season.
>
> You see if you tell yourself the same tale over and over again enough times then the tellings become separate stories and you will generally fool yourself into forgetting you only started with one solitary season out of your life.
>
> (Gibbons 49)

This is Ellen's own form of therapy; she does not deny the truth of what happened, but she sees no problem with allowing herself to feel as if her memory of her mother is longer and more positive than it was. "I got my own ideas about what comes and goes through my head," Ellen tells us, "and I intend to think about what I please from now on. But I figure it will take a while to get that system down pat" (Gibbons 102).

She sets the example of what is possible when a girl is not impeded by adult trepidation and can fully own her personal transformation. She strives to be like her favorite oil paints: "to change a picture idea after you have started one you just have to tear the whole business up and start over. You can use them to paint something the way it is supposed to be not all watered down but strong" (Gibbons 52).

Child psychiatrist Gordon R. Hodas in his guide "Responding to Childhood Trauma: The Promise and Practice of Trauma Informed Care" stresses the importance of the "strong," vivid picture. It is essential that children can narrativize what happens to them. Adult discomfort, though possibly sympathetic, is counterproductive. Stallard and Law decry this common issue, conceding that despite it being in the child's best interest to address her trauma,

> many will undoubtedly find this an uncomfortable and challenging revelation. It is painful to acknowledge prolonged and significant desires in children. A number of adults may cope with this by adopting an initial defensive stance, as for example seen with child abuse, tending to deny that traumatic events could adversely affect children for years to come. (Stallard 89)

Ellen's journey to trust at the end of the novel illustrates that taking ownership of experiences is where strength comes from: "Developing a personal narrative involves helping the child to understand the traumatic experience within a frame of reference that makes sense and offers a sense of mastery and hopefulness" (Hodas 14). The

"mastery" Ellen achieves and demonstrates when she embellishes her grandmother's body and impersonates her father is certainly frightening to some.

CONCLUSION: WHAT CHILDREN KNOW FOR SURE

"Telling Girlhood" stems in part from reckoning with many of my own memories, and using theory and criticism to explain work that were in turn trying to explain to me what happened and how I felt about it. Perhaps most importantly for this project, I know what it is like to feel like a less good child. I knew at seven years old that I felt an attraction to other girls. I did not fully understand sexuality in elementary school, but I knew I was different and I knew that was a secret so terrible it had to stay hidden forever, because it meant I was tarnished. Dorothy Allison states it perfectly in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, while reminiscing about a similar discovery she had about herself as a girl. She recounts how terrible it was "[t]o look at women and think, Nobody else, nobody else has ever waned to do what I want to do. Hard to be innocent, believing yourself evil" (Allison 49). The echo of "no one else" conveys the profound loneliness that is the trap of innocence. It hurts to feel strange, or that you have violated the fundamental rules of being "good."

The girls in my project, real and fictional, are each acts of bravery. It is revolutionary that a bubbly blonde heroine from the early 2000s would be depicted suffering through severe depression and suicidality. The revelation, that she did not

want to be alive, shook the entire cast and set the series on a different path--more introspective, more critical, and daring to unravel the sordid origin of her celebrated power. In chapter two, the bravery is in Morrison and CNN's resolve to show the public that according to our culture, black children are neither beautiful nor worthy of protection, and that most children have learned and retained this lesson since elementary school. Chapter three addresses real world paranoia about girls' anger. *Odd Girl Out*, *Mean Girls*, and *Woman Warrior* all explore the idea of adolescent/teen girl anger being an incredible force that can be devastating when frankly expressed.

But the question of the chapter, of this whole project, is: devastating to whom? Who relies the most heavily on the status quo, wherein girls are (presenting as) happy, chaste, and compliant? Buffy, Pecola, Claudia, Kingston, and perhaps even Regina George are supposed to keep big secrets in order to protect those who are (arguably) supposed to be protecting them. Buffy was compelled to hide the secret that she wanted her narrative to be finished, and that her resurrection was selfish and counterproductive. The girls from *The Bluest Eye* have to pretend they do not realize they are being taught to hate themselves. The secret of *Mean Girls* and *Woman Warrior* is the most convoluted, because that it the nature of U.S. culture's determination to keep girls' (and women's) anger at arms' length. But the secret has to do with girls suspecting the kind of power they have. If you know that your anger will operate like a bomb in your family or in the social climate at your school ("boom"!), then the fear

is about revealing that capability. The power in anger is that it motivates us to step right up to someone and say to their face, “what you are doing is wrong.”

This is meant to highlight the freedom and strength of *Ellen Foster*. Because she dispenses with these inherited secrets, her anger is no longer shameful or secret. This chapter is meant to ask the biggest question of all, the one I want readers to take with them: think about what you are afraid girls (or children) might know. What is the reason for that concern? Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* is infamous for its frank discussion of her being sexually abused as a child. It is so disturbing to some that concerned parents and organizations frequently try to ban it from schools. Allison's retort is blunt, incriminating, and highlights the risk of reading a narrative, all while proving that all objections to the book are morally suspect, at best: "I'm not supposed to talk about sex like that, not about weapons or hatred or violence, and never to put them in the context of sexual desire. Is it male? Is it mean? Did you get off on it?" (Allison 47). Without using the word “innocent,” how would one explain the reluctance to talk to girls about racism, poverty, abuse, depression, or the stifled nature of the ideal “prim and proper” persona?

More is happening to erode the supposedly timeless notion of Dick and Jane. Recently, a third grade assignment at an elementary school in Denver, Colorado went viral. The teacher, Kyle Schwartz, called the assignment “I wish my teacher knew,” and asked her students to anonymously reveal experiences at home that were affecting them emotionally or academically. In an interview with ABC News, Schwartz says “I

struggled to understand the reality of my students' lives and how to best support them. I just felt like there was something I didn't know about my students" (Pelletiere). The article's author, Nicole Pelletiere, explains that the vast majority of the students at Doull Elementary are living in poverty; so the teacher's bafflement stems from unfamiliarity with interacting with poor children.

Like the CNN special about children and racial biases discussed in chapter two, the focus of the article is not on the teacher but rather the "heartbreaking notes" her students wrote: "Some notes are heartbreaking like the first #iwishmyteacherknew tweet which read, 'I wish my teacher knew I don't have pencils at home to do my homework'" (Pelletiere). The concern of the article is not that Schwartz did not understand the challenges of poverty, but that these children are *aware of* and want to shed light on their disadvantages. Pictures of these students' notes, about lack of resources or quiet spaces to focus, or ill, absent, or deported family members, have gone viral—people have tweeted and retweeted the images, and teachers in different districts have taken up the activity, many posting the results from their own students as well. I have yet to find an article titled: "Why are faculty and staff sometimes out of touch?" or "No one should be surprised that being poor is hard." Instead everyone is moved and "heartbroken"—thankfully, the children's concerns have made their teachers better people.

Reparative narration can only happen when the teller is freed from the burden of our heartbreak, when they are allowed to feel what *they* are feeling and have that

feeling--at least during their story--be the most important thing. Interestingly, once given the chance, many of Schwartz's students did not want to be anonymous—they wanted their teachers and fellow classmates to know the truth: "most students are not only willing to include their name, but also enjoy sharing with the class. Even when what my students are sharing is sensitive in nature, most students want their classmates to know" (Pelletiere). These children, it would seem, got a momentary break from keeping the secret that they are not all equal, and that they know what it means to worry about the well being of adults in their lives as well as their own futures. That is where kids' power is—they know what they are not supposed to say, so when they do say it, that courage is resounding. And this time all their teacher could say is, You need to know that you were right. You were right that I did not see you or imagine your life. And even now that you have told me, I cannot see past my own dismay and pity to realize you are asking me for a pencil. What if the result of the story is that no one is surprised? No one is taken aback by what she dared to say, because she is perfectly normal. The listener is allowed, of course, to feel sad, or angry, or anxious—but that is *their* problem, not something she needs to hold for you. And that is what reparative narration is about. It is about having the freedom to tell without the added weight of the listener's trepidation. It means that the girl who is already burdened does not need to take on anymore. Dorothy Allison writes, "telling the story all the way through is an act of love" (Allison 90). And that should not render us heartbroken or shocked anymore.

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