"Only a girl like this can know what's happened to you" : traumatic subjects in contemporary American narratives

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“ONLY A GIRL LIKE THIS CAN KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENED TO YOU”:
TRAUMATIC SUBJECTS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NARRATIVES

by

Allison V. Craig

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For my students,

Who, knowingly or not, directed this entire project
Abstract

This project is primarily concerned with the difficulty of representing traumatic experience and the problem of seeing violence and exploitation as natural and inevitable functions of social life. It argues that texts attempting to expose exploitive hierarchies and structural injustices often risk having their stories subsumed and commodified by the profuseness and proliferation of countervailing messages about individual choice and personal freedom. This struggle is highlighted through historicizing five contemporary American narratives—Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*, the films *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms*—with and against critical concerns and popular texts. Furthermore, by employing a trauma studies lens and feminist methodology, the dissertation argues for the ways and extent to which realist fiction can function as a kind of traumatic testimony. Reading the individual and cultural trauma in the selected texts in this way offers a unique perspective from which to examine the seemingly constant threat of violence to the female body, even though this violence is continually disavowed, downplayed, or erased. This bodily and psychic violence can be read as symptomatic of systemic cultural and social violence that functions as a policing mechanism for race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies. Reading these fictional narratives as traumatic testimony calls for a renewed examination of the importance of emotion and empathy in academic inquiry and the role and purpose of literary critique.
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To those unmentioned it is not because disremembered and unaccounted for.

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Prologue

This dissertation has gone through many iterations, versions, and revisions over the years. I was not always sure where I was going or how I would get there. I often wished I had chosen something else. I often wanted to quit. I never thought I would finish. It is only through the support, cajolery, and sometimes antagonism of others that I was able to continue.

The duration of this project from start to finish has itself been exasperating for all involved. Because of its content, “Traumatic Subjects in Contemporary American Narratives,” I necessarily worked in fits and starts, lamenting, when not outright cursing, the irksome complexity I deliberately sought out. Perhaps if I cared less about the subject or the materials it would have been easier, faster. But as someone wise once told me, it takes as long as it takes. I needed the knowledge, language, and clarity that only time and experience can offer to produce a kind of cohesion. It is only a kind of cohesion, mind you, because though the project has finally crystallized—sometimes in ways seemingly beyond my control—there are still pieces missing, out of focus, waiting to be more fully integrated. Some day.

The arguments and insights developed herein, as impartial and incomplete as they are, have come from laborious study as well as from unforeseen and unexpected places: sometimes hidden in full view, irritatingly in front of me the whole time; sometimes buried so deeply I figuratively had to scrape, claw, and dig; sometimes in ways I really could have done without, thank you very much.

For now, in the words of Baby Suggs, holy, it is time to lay it all down, sword and shield. It is in your hands now. Only a girl like this can know what’s happened to you.
Chapter 1

“Only a Girl Like This Can Know What’s Happened to You”: An Introduction to Traumatic Subjects in Contemporary American Narratives

Only a girl like this
can know what’s happened to you.
If she were here she would
reach out her arms towards
you now, and touch you
with her absent hands
and you would feel nothing, but you would be
touched all the same.

~ Margaret Atwood, “Girl Without Hands”

The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie. [...] Language can never “pin down” slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.

~ Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture

One of the most important aspects of trauma studies is its recognition of the value of testimony. Not just testimony in legal terms, as in testifying in a court of law, but testimony as in speaking, writing, and bearing witness; testimony as a mutual understanding that provides solace and healing. This urgent need to speak and be heard serves as both impetus and guide for “‘Only a Girl Like This Can Know What’s Happened to You’: Traumatic Subjects in Contemporary Narratives,” and it is the reason the title begins with lines from Margaret Atwood’s “Girl Without Hands.” Atwood’s poem underscores for the entire dissertation the difficulty of coming to terms with
traumatic experience, both individually and culturally. The lines “Only a girl like this / can know what’s happened to you” call attention to the precarious balance between, on the one hand, the individual need for uncritical validation—usually from someone who has been through what you have been through—and, on the other, the difficult but necessary work of scrutinizing and analyzing trauma as a cultural product.

Understanding the ineffable and liminal of traumatic experience serves a vital purpose that transcends analysis or measurement. We might not be able to explain what that purpose is or how, precisely, it matters, except to say that it does. “And you would feel nothing,” the poem goes, “but you would be / touched all the same.” This emotional, immaterial touch—a touch that is no touch—allays anxiety and bolsters security, even if momentarily, to someone who feels disconnected from others, especially as the result of trauma. Though it is often difficult to pinpoint what trauma is, part of what trauma does is to disrupt and fragment one’s ability to connect, sometimes even to oneself. It creates discontinuity, dissociation, confusion, and incoherence, and a seemingly impassable chasm of grief, fear, and distrust, all of which work to isolate victims and create a kind of cycle of victimization. And yet while a daunting and complicated process, this seemingly impassable chasm can in fact be bridged, to no small degree, through a shared process of empathy. Unassailable bonds can be formed with few or not words at all, based on a simple but profound feeling. You don’t have to say anything. You don’t need to explain. I know how you feel. It is this indescribable, indefinable, unspeakable feeling that is at the heart of trauma studies and makes testimony in many ways understandably sacrosanct. A girl like this can know what’s happened to you.
That feeling and sensation are so central to trauma studies can be problematic in a variety of ways, especially for disciplines driven by the need to demonstrate verifiable, quantitative, and scientific proofs to legitimize their continued existence. How one feels is sometimes derided as unimportant, rudimentary, anti-intellectual, and anti-analytical, not something worthwhile for academic study. A more worthwhile and reasonable disciplinary worry about the centrality of affect is that examinations of feeling are easily commodified, leaving the humanities at risk of pandering to the latest profitable trend. And then there are the limitations of testimony itself. Feeling understood is imperative for individual healing but will not alone explain why or how trauma operates on a structural level and becomes integrated into the machinery of a social system, so much so that it seems essential to its operations. Nevertheless, for all its potential problems, the importance of feeling as both an integral part of the subjective nature of trauma and in the function of testimony is not something to ignore. Rather, it is essential to a more holistic understanding of the world around us, to unlocking crucial elements missing from theoretical inquiry, and to reading literary and cultural texts. For those troubled about its centrality, it should be noted that feeling is not the only component important to trauma studies. Here we can return to the title quote, which has been chosen not solely for imploring identification but for the ways it also complicates and problematizes the notion of identification. After all, even on the individual level, there is also a need for those who have not suffered trauma to identify with and support those who have. If “only a girl like this / can know what’s happened to you,” only those who have suffered trauma, and arguably the same kind of trauma, could understand each other. It is therefore necessary to affirm and go beyond identification in and of itself.
A close reading of “Girl Without Hands” helps to explain how valorizing and moving beyond identification is possible and useful for reading traumatic texts. The poem is literally and figuratively about a girl without hands: “She has no hands. It’s true,” Atwood writes, “Everything has bled out of her” (113). The girl is a walking contradiction in a poem rife with them, starting with the very first lines: “Walking through the ruins / . . . that do not look like ruins” (112). Before we are introduced to the girl, the speaker of the poem grapples with her own feelings of grief and loss through a variety of contradictory and conflicting ideas, such as things that appear to be something they are not: being surrounded by distance, for example, or a “clean circle/of dead space” (112-13). Atwood invites the reader to identify with these enigmas through the simple use of the pronoun “you”: “Walking through the ruins / on your way to work,” “you can’t hold it / you can’t hold any of it,” “pushing the distance in front of you,” and so on (112; emphasis added). We cannot know for sure what the source of the speaker’s suffering is, but because we are invited to imagine ourselves as speaker, and the contradictions are mostly abstract and not testimonial, we can easily project our own suffering in her place. This seemingly minor narrative strategy does more than simply make readers take an active stance toward the poem. It creates the foundation necessary to the identification required to cultivate a feeling of empathy. The consequence is that if we do so, we must confront the central conflict of the poem in ourselves, which is that the speaker ends up feeling responsible for the disconnect she or he feels from the wider world:

No one can enter that circle

you have made, that clean circle
of dead space you have made and stay inside,
mourning because it is clean. (112-113)

The crux of the “clean circle / of dead space you have made” is that it functions as both sanctuary and prison, with the resulting conflict between protective isolation and isolating protection. It is this paralyzing state in which trauma victims often find themselves, desperately wanting solace but acting in ways that ensure their isolation. This acting against one’s own best interest is often motivated by feelings of shame and humiliation. And yet even though this behavior is a classic by-product of victimization, it is also what produces the equally classic victim-blaming response: “No one can enter that circle / you have made.”

The arrival of the girl without hands in the second stanza presents an empathetic double for the narrator’s/reader’s traumatic experience:

If she were here she would
reach out her arms towards you
with her absent hands
and you would feel nothing, but you would be
touched all the same. (113)

The hope provided by the girl’s presence is, once again, a contradiction, because her very presence is an absence, as indicated by the future subjunctive tense, “If she were here,” and the idea of being touched “with her absent hands.” A touch that is no touch. Or, in other words, an understanding based on incongruence and discontinuity. This contradiction is not merely internal to the poem and characters within it. Whereas discontinuity is usually a negative outcome of trauma, in the poem it serves a positive
function precisely by jarring the intellect and disrupting a sense of the definite. This intellectual discontinuity invites readers to struggle with, among other things, what feeling is and what purposes, good and bad, it serves. Moreover, because the poem itself is not actual testimony but instead a fictional abstraction, it can encourage the reader’s full empathetic immersion of a range of contradictions within the poem itself as well as extending to more complex social contradictions the poem may invite about society.

This inducement to grapple with contradiction is a technique Atwood employs again in *Bodily Harm*, as the protagonist Rennie also struggles with her sense of agency and autonomy. Chapter 2 will examine *Bodily Harm* in a larger social context, but it is worth a moment here to describe its overlap with the internal poetic contradictions.

Hands become thematically significant in *Bodily Harm*, introduced early on in relation to Rennie’s grandmother who suffers from dementia. Rennie is a young girl making a peanut butter sandwich in the kitchen when her grandmother walks in, agitated and terrified:

> My hands, she said. I’ve left them somewhere and now I can’t find them.

> She was holding her hands in the air, helplessly, as if she couldn’t move them.

> They’re right there, I said. On the ends of your arms.

> No, no, she said impatiently. Not those, those are no good any more. My other hands, the ones I had before, the ones I touch things with. (Atwood, *BH* 49)

Rennie is disconcerted and disturbed by her grandmother’s dilemma, and Atwood emphasizes this disconcertion as a trope punctuated by hands or their absence. Shortly after we first encounter Rennie’s grandmother, for instance, a homeless man extends his hand to Rennie for good luck, and she is surprised to realize it is not that he wants good
luck from her but is offering good luck to her (67), luck that becomes important to the novel’s conclusion. Upon her first meeting with Lora, a woman with whom her fate becomes intertwined, Rennie notices that Lora bites her nails to such an extent she thinks to herself, “She wouldn’t want to touch this gnawed hand, or have it touch her. She doesn’t like the sight of ravage, damage, the edge between inside and outside blurred like that” (77). Mid-novel, during a dream, “Rennie puts out her hands but she can’t touch her grandmother, her hands go right in, through, it’s like touching water or new snow” (107). She imagines her surgeon Daniel who performs her mastectomy to have “magic hands” that could cure her, not just of cancer, but also of “everything, of anything at all” (183). Rennie even contemplates her own hands in a daydream, possibly flashback, near the end of the novel in a way reminiscent both her grandmother’s conundrum and the plight of the girl without hands: “Her hands are cold, she lifts them up to look at them, but they elude her. Something’s missing” (264).

The final contemplation, which comes only pages from the end of the book, harkens back to that initial episode in the kitchen and fills in the rest of the narrative, thereby underscoring one of the key problems of the novel. When Rennie’s grandmother comes into the kitchen desperately searching for her missing hands, begging for help, we learn that Rennie “puts her own hands behind her and backs away,” because she “cannot bear to be touched by those groping hands, which seem to her like the hands of a blind person, a half-wit, a leper” (Atwood, BH 286). Rennie’s fear comes from not being able to handle the contradiction of her grandmother searching for something right in front of her eyes, attached to her own body. When Rennie’s mother enters and sees the standoff, she asks “Don’t you know what to do by now?” and demonstrates a simple but profound
solution: “Here they are. Right where you put them. She takes hold of the grandmother’s dangling hands, clasping them in her own” (287). Rennie represents all those who have been taught to ignore the contradictions between what is there and what is not, what seems to be and what is. Rennie cannot offer her grandmother what even the girl without hands of the poem ironically can, which is the figurative touch of empathy and compassion: “and you would feel nothing, but you would be / touched all the same.

**Traumatic Subjects**

Defining trauma is not a straightforward task and is therefore challenging to examine theoretically. It is typically understood as an individual experience manifesting itself physically or emotionally. As such, trauma is expected to be the exclusive domain of medical and/or psychiatric assessment, scrutinized, diagnosed, and treated. Trauma defined in this way has become a readily recognizable feature of social life with complex but often narrowly viewed parameters. Physical trauma is marked by acute bodily injury, the impact of which is usually severe and long lasting. Think major car accident, explosion, or casualty of war. Physical trauma is often, though not always, accompanied by emotional trauma. Emotional trauma may or may not result from physical trauma, though it is generally not life threatening in the immediate ways that physical trauma can be. Emotional trauma may stem from less severe, repetitive injury, most notably in the case of childhood abuse. Sometimes it results from a singular distressing event, such as rape, which may leave no physical scars but is nonetheless scarring. But, especially for emotional trauma, definitions get a bit blurry and study more complicated. One may be emotionally traumatized but physically intact, what traumatizes one person may or may
not traumatize another, and the effects and duration of emotional trauma vary significantly. It is this broad subjective component that continues to make emotional trauma difficult to understand even if now commonly accepted as a social reality, even outside of medical practice. Yet it is also this broad subjective component that makes emotional trauma so necessary to examine in late twentieth to early twenty-first century literature, especially when understandings of trauma include not only individual and emotional but also cultural trauma—a kind of collective trauma on a mass scale that affects society at large. “Traumatic Subjects in Contemporary American Narratives” is therefore an analysis of the subject of trauma and subjectivity as a concept.

Why trauma now? E. Ann Kaplan asks this question in the beginning of her book *Trauma Culture*. Part of her explanation hinges on how the post-9/11 American public has been thrust into dealing with mass trauma in ways they felt and were previously immune to in the quotidian experiences of much of the world. The continuous fear of attack and the anxiety it provokes are part of a traumatic experience, and this pervasive fear has been stoked into fervor since 2001. Of course traumatic experience on a pervasive level is not new to the American public, but the awareness of its impact is a growing field of serious inquiry, expanding in scope in the last many decades. In the mid-nineties Barry Glassner charted the ways Americans were paralyzed by what he calls a “culture of fear” in the book of the same name, instigated by a variety of fear-mongering, profiteering techniques (the likes of which were used with abandon after 9/11 thanks to expediencies like color-coded terror alerts and creation of Homeland Security). Pioneer of trauma studies Cathy Caruth argues that our attention to trauma and its effects has gained momentum through the psychiatric community’s official inclusion of
terminology and a diagnosis for post-traumatic stress disorder in 1980. Indeed it was during the mid- to late-nineties that a host of scholarly publications appeared in print establishing the field of trauma studies.²

Trauma studies typically focuses on true, first-person narratives describing individual experiences of victimization, war, and oppression: testimonial accounts of Holocaust survivors and victims of childhood sexual abuse have been paramount. From early on, however, the examination of fiction and literature more broadly has played an important role. Critiques of trauma narratives, both fiction and nonfiction, have tried to account for what traumatic experiences means. Given the features of trauma, specifically its psychological impact, much if not most of the work in the field is rooted in psychology and sociology and often questions about the self that can be traced back for millennia.³ The field of trauma studies itself has come about as a commentary on a textual influx on the subject as well as to fill in the gaps of what is missing in our social understanding of trauma. And yet there continue to be gaps, which result from the complexity of the subject itself as well as the primarily, if not exclusively, medical and psychiatric focus. “Traumatic Subjects” argues for an examination of trauma that extends beyond these medical and psychiatric foci to historical and symptomatic ones, attending to the ways literary representations shed light on particular social preoccupations. Narratives about trauma highlight important universal truths about the human condition, but they are useful especially in what they are telling us about the society out of which they emerge, and it is in this area that trauma studies has not been often explored.
Trauma and Materialist Feminism

The methodology of “Traumatic Subjects in Contemporary American Narratives” builds upon and borrows from several fields and theoretical paradigms, but it does not completely or easily reside in any of them. The two most foundational for the project are trauma studies (as discussed above) and materialist feminism, the former for its important work on the psychological effects of traumatic experience through testimony, and the latter for a theoretical framework for analyzing social contradictions in literary texts to expose the material conditions of daily life. These two fields are linked in a variety of ways, perhaps most significantly in the ways that feminist movement and feminist theory in general made acceptable the areas of experience and subjectivity as vital spaces of study, especially through the concomitant theoretical emergence of identity politics and intersectional analysis. These areas of feminist theory in particular pervade the examinations on the literature of this dissertation in a variety of ways, both implicitly and explicitly, one of the most significant ways being the focus on the subject and subjectivity.  

I use the terms subject and subjectivity in a broad sense and mean to invoke the struggles over meaning the terms imply, precisely because such struggle is necessary for analyzing traumatic experience in narratives based on historical events. Reading these texts against history is a way of constructing meaning, not simply finding it, and this core tenet of the humanities in general and English studies specifically is sometimes downplayed if not forgotten as a result of both the influence of neoliberalism and feminist
backlash. The dissertation is predicated on an analysis of the relationship between the
discursive and nondiscursive subject, despite the onslaught of debate doing so may
engender, and by three interrelated notions of subjectivity in particular, even though the
relationship among them is not readily or easily explained as such. The first is a feminist
concept in which the subject is an individual with a personal and experiential perception
of her own identity in the world. The second is the subjective component of traumatic
experience, which is not identical to experiential perception since it is sometimes far
more unreliable. And the third is the subject constructed discursively, through language
and discourse. A careful examination of the subject and subjectivity can and should
attend to social formations and individual experience by examining the stories of those
individual experiences in their sociopolitical and historical contexts. In this way I am
arguing for the kind of symptomatic reading Rosemary Hennessy suggests may “put on
display the exploitative social arrangements that they so often manage” (MF, 94).

Part of what makes trauma studies foundational for the dissertation is its
attendance to the rich but problematic terrain of individual traumatic experience. Trauma
studies as a field is rooted in psychological theories such as psychoanalysis, and with
good reason, since for too long the psychological impacts of trauma on its real life
victims received inadequate attention. In the last decades understanding about traumatic
effects has been vastly expanded. At a very basic but important level we know that the
effects of trauma are not just a figment of one’s imagination and something to just get
over through strength or will (and therefore a mark of personal weakness if one fails to do
so). We also are closer to understanding how trauma impairs cognitive and physiological
functions. More is being discovered about the very real and long-lasting material impact trauma has on both individuals and society at large, and interest in this work is growing.

The limitation to examinations of trauma, which is also true for trauma studies, is, however, an overemphasis on psychiatry and psychoanalysis and too little analysis of the less obvious but more insidious forms of cultural trauma that are often at the root of individual physical and emotional trauma. The end result of this work has largely been to treat the symptoms rather than the disease. But, one might say, someone who is traumatized does not have a disease. No, not usually (or apparently), and that is precisely what is limiting about the medical model approach to trauma studies, because the only work that apparently can be done is individual treatment. This is not to say individual treatment is unimportant. It is absolutely vital that individuals who have suffered traumatic experience receive care. The point I am making is that a traumatized individual, a rape victim, for example, is not afflicted with a disease that causes their post-traumatic stress disorder. But the prevalence of rape is a kind of social disease that operates on a complex, structural level. The peril of focusing exclusively on individual trauma means that larger cultural traumas are ignored and unexamined. It is for this reason that the dissertation seeks to unlock trauma studies from its mooring to psychoanalysis and add to this approach a materialist feminist methodology that can help examine representations of trauma that expose equally debilitating, low-level and insidious cultural traumas, such as the bombardment of social messages that create fragmentation, despair, and nihilism and inhibit the kind of solidarity necessary to transform structural inequalities.
The need to examine the ways low-level cultural trauma perpetuates the domination and subordination models of social operation is also the reason I examine fictionalized narratives rather than individual testimony. The films and novels are based on real-life people and events, but because they are not restricted to presenting a true experience as it factually happened, they can address problems testimonials cannot. The limits of psychoanalysis become clearer when one attempts to psychoanalyze a fictional or semi-fictional character. The tendency to explain away a problem by believing such traumas only occur elsewhere in other time periods can be more rigorously troubled. The problem of trivializing or delegitimizing an individual’s profound personal experience to explain critical features of society is lessened. And, ultimately, one can more reasonably be invited to empathize with characters of the fictional text as a way to understand someone else’s experience, which is, perhaps, one of the most vital purposes the study of literature serves. In contrast, reading testimonials in this critical manner risks diminishing or dismissing someone who has experienced “real” trauma, which is why they are so often considered beyond reproach and therefore taboo to analyze. Indeed, the function of writing and reading testimony is to validate and legitimize the experience, not to critique it. Reading the selected fictional and fictionalized texts though the lens of trauma studies enables the necessary examination of both individual and cultural experience. Reading them in tandem through materialist feminism exposes social contradictions that help resist the kinds of domination that are happening now rather than speaking only to a seemingly universal condition.

Materialist feminism guides the theoretical framework of the dissertation particularly in its view of texts as products of their respective historical moments through
which can be understood features of the society that produces them. The social contradictions a materialist feminist reading help expose are the disconnections and gaps between what appears to be happening in society and what actually is happening. Confronting social contradictions in “Girl Without Hands,” for example, is crucial in that it offers a glimpse beyond and out of the confines of the “clean circle / of dead space,” the ideological forcefield serving as both prison and sanctuary (112). In other words, by using a materialist feminist model this dissertation interprets literary texts to reveal ideological concealment of objective reality. Social contradictions must be sought after and exposed, lest they go unnoticed, unacknowledged, and thus perpetuate oppression and exploitation in real life. What social contradictions are and how they might be exposed can be explained through an examination of two core concepts informing a materialist feminist theoretical framework: materiality and ideology.

**Materiality and Ideology**

Materialism, according to Marx, is based in a knowable social totality, dedication to analysis of historicity, the need for class consciousness, and the possibility to change social forms of production. “Materiality” in this sense is “matter”—the “matter” that makes up human life (Marx, “German Ideology” 150). Materiality is the (re)production of human life—as opposed to “ideas” or idealized forms, or, as he explains in *Capital*, “the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought” (301). Others, like Foucault, view materiality more in terms of the human “body and the effects of power on it” (58). Still others, like Judith Butler, argue materiality includes both discursive and nondiscursive formations, such as
discourse and the body. Traditional materialist feminism foregrounds materiality as the lived conditions of daily existence and emphasizes the sexual division of labor as a determining factor in those conditions. There have been variations and rearticulations to defining materiality in materialist feminism, and frequently the way materiality is defined depends on how one interprets “ideology.”

One of the paradigmatic texts on ideology is Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” which ushered in a critical shift in thinking about historical materialism. Althusser argues that because “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence” (123) and “Ideology has a material existence” (125), then “Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects” (128). Althusser reads Marx’s theory of ideology as false consciousness, false consciousness as illusion, and hence ideology as what keeps people powerless against their own domination. In arguing that ideology both does and does not have its own history, Althusser differentiates between ideologies and ideology in general. Althusser builds on Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, so that what becomes significant is the “attempt to explain how and why capitalism is a self-perpetuating system, why, in effect, the citizens of capitalist countries, including and especially those whose labour is exploited by the system, continue to support its workings in a consent that is scarcely recognised” (Haslett 59). In short, Althusser and Gramsci endeavor to explain why subjects freely allow their own subjection in contemporary times. Michelle Barrett proposes that there are “two traditions of work on ideology: those who see ideology as functional to the reproduction of capitalism and those who see ideology as a key to understanding subjectivity as an important question in its own right” (97). The two traditions are
frequently demarcated by whether one reads Althusser as either aligned with or departing from Marx. Barrett herself argues it is the failure of Althusser to reconcile “the reproduction of class relations in capitalism” with “subjectivity through Freud’s ‘science of the unconscious’” that “has contributed in no small measure to a continuing divide between” these two traditions (97).

In terms of this project in particular, Althusser’s framework on ideology is ultimately important not for the arguments about its adherence to or severance from historical materialism, which is often at the heart of the divide Barrett describes, but for the formulation that there is no objective reality that exists outside of ideology. And the problem of whether or not there is an outside to ideology is conceptually significant. For Althusser, superstructural elements like politics and ideology are contained in toto by an overriding ideological apparatus. But if there is no outside to ideology, how could one ever know that he or she exists in an imaginary relation to the real relations? And thus how is it possible to overcome or escape ideology if we are always-already constituted as subjects through language? The answer to these questions leaves such a bleak negative outlook in which the subject is inevitably victim to oppression that not to seek an alternative seems to me not only cynical but also socially irresponsible. Besides which, an alternative can indeed be found by looking at the way scholars of all varieties and time periods have attempted to explain ideology. Ideology is described, overwhelmingly, in visual and cartographic metaphors: the camera obscura, the panopticon, veils, matrices, grids of intelligibility, the real, and so on. The common thread among these descriptions is that ideology and ideological structures are, to use a phrase from John Berger, “ways of seeing,” and thus made obvious precisely because they are not. In
nearly all the postulations they are in some way concealed, inverted, illusory, or invisible. What all these theories of ideology do is try to explain in very broad strokes the way systems of oppression continue unabated. Despite areas of disagreement in the body of work theorizing ideology, there is also an enormous amount of overlap in explaining how the machinery of oppression can be made more obvious and intelligible. These metaphors are necessary, because though there are concrete structures that can be identified (such as government, economic systems, education), it is difficult to see how they are connected, and even more difficult to understand how the consequence is that so many can be controlled by so few. The language of fissures, ruptures, symptoms, contradictions, discontinuities, gaps, and antagonisms—such small but significant breaks in an otherwise consistent, or at least apparently consistent, structure—are invoked to demonstrate that being subject to ideology is not a forgone conclusion, despite the immensity of its scope.

Žižek writes, “Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape an insupportable reality,” rather it is “an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations” (45). Of particular importance in Žižek’s formulation for a project on trauma is the way he explains “the function of ideology,” which, in his words, “is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel” (45; emphasis added). In other words, individuals seek out the comfort that ideology and ideological structures serve because of traumatic experience. Ideology promises protection from dangerous social ills, ills that it often creates. This traumatic kernel is something that, for me, draws together Marxist and poststructuralist theories in a united front. I believe that by reading texts as products of
their respective histories, they can reveal the contradictions, gaps, and disruptions that exceed the bounds of ideology and therefore expose the mechanisms of oppression. The crux is that trauma resides, so to speak, in the gap. It creates a fragmented identity that begets a kind of double consciousness, whereby even when one believes oneself to be outside, she is still within the confines of ideology. Such fragmentation is not limited to the individual; it is also cultural in ways that go beyond the psychoanalytic. On one hand this makes it that much harder to exceed the confines of ideology. But on the other, it offers tremendous potential.

**Re-envisioning Ideology Critique Through Traumatic Subjects**

Because of this problematic, I tend to think of ideology as a slightly different visual metaphor, one that emphasizes the ways it is a material and immaterial force, visible and invisible, discursive and nondiscursive. The connections among structural locations like government, corporations, economies, and education is akin to that in an electric fence. The boundaries between these ideological strongholds are invisible and so distantly perceptible by most other senses that they seem not even to exist at all. We are told daily through hundreds if not thousands of social and cultural messages that the perimeter has been established for our own safety, because without it there is imminent danger. The power is always everywhere on to protect us. We believe the boundaries to be intact because we cannot tell if they are not. And if we are shocked moving beyond the invisible boundaries of the electrified field, this is but a small price to pay to keep out those who mean us harm. But there are a number of ironies in the system. For one, the electricity is not always on, but we have become so habituated to thinking it is on, that we
act as though it is. And even when some parts of the electric field are on, others are not, and rarely are they all on at once. Ideological apparatuses, after all, are largely independent of one another and not usually collusive or conspiratorial, even when the outcomes of their practices are socially reprehensible. Hence there are almost always gaps between structures and exceeding ideological boundaries is more possible than one believes. In the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, however, the ideological strongholds seem to and in fact have become interchangeable, particularly in the way education and government are controlled more and more by corporations, which means the control of the perimeter has become more centralized, and the power exerted more concrete and continuous. But the other side of this predicament is that more centralized does not mean more efficient, and it certainly does not mean more expertly managed. If anything, it means that if the power goes out in one area, it is also likely to go out in multiple areas. And finally, we are misguided, manipulated, and ultimately injured by the very reason we so readily capitulate to ideology. Many truly believe the fence offers protection from danger. Some let their greed overshadow the fact that the fence offers little protection. And few realize that there is potentially more danger from the fence itself than any outside danger that exists.

Ideology imagined in this way highlights that its limits are not merely passive controls or solely internalized, irrational fears. The concrete structures exist and exert control, but ideology itself is not an always all-encompassing totality—it is only perceived as such. And yet this metaphor, like its predecessors, is limited and incomplete in that it cannot account for the complexity of social systems because it is still overly predicated on a binary, inside/outside epistemology. What is more, the first part
of this developing metaphor, like others, is static and therefore does not reflect the
dynamism of real life, which often functions irrationally and affectively, with more
connection to emotion than reason or logic. To account for the complexity of social
systems we need not and should not abandon this structural model, but ought to layer it
with a systemic model that deals with real, living systems with complex moving parts
that do not always function as expected. One of the most cogent examples I have found
in this regard comes from nature itself and is detailed in *Vanishing of the Bees*, a
documentary film that examines the near breakdown of the honeybee industry due to the
sudden, overwhelming, and at first inexplicable deaths of its bee population. It requires
unpacking to explain sufficiently, so, en route to establishing the complex metaphor that
offers a more practical and holistic understanding of the connection between ideology,
trauma, and culture, the next several passages describe key parts of story as told by the
film.

According to the *Vanishing of the Bees*, United States scientists dubbed this
unexplained global event Colony Collapse Disorder, or CCD. Beekeeper Dave Mendes
describes the vast losses in one of the film’s examples—40,000 beehives and 2 billion
bees, almost the entire population on one farm in only a few weeks—as a kind of “bee
holocaust.” The term “holocaust” invokes one of the most infamous traumas in history,
and the connection may seem at first ridiculous and trivializing when talking about bees,
but this staggering statistic is a serious matter with far-reaching social consequences.
Agriculture, even commercial agriculture, for all its technological advancements, could
not exist, after all, without the pollination honeybees provide, from the fruits and
vegetables we eat directly, to those grown to feed livestock. At the rate bees have been
dying, which is faster than they can be repopulated, the projected consequences are dire. The analysis of this problem is particularly useful for consideration here as an analogy to the limitations of current models of ideology and underscores the possibilities for a more dynamic one.

A key correlation for a project examining ideology and trauma is the impetus by scientists to pathologize a single problem as a discrete medical event: Colony Collapse Disorder. This way of thinking is ideological in the sense that, like the electric field model, it is something to protect against—bad individuals who are either inept or intent on doing harm to those who live in the protected confines of the system. But the inside/outside binary, like the name of the so-called disorder, collapses under scrutiny when internal contradictions are revealed, such as when we realize that the danger perceived as an externality is actually created by the system itself. For example, the technological advancements in the industry hailed for increasing profit and improving production efficiencies are not advancements at all in the long run. Vanishing of the Bees explains that after its initial designation, CCD was largely thought to be the result of “bad” beekeepers, or, in other words, individuals were to blame for the losses. But not simply an individual problem, CCD is likely the result of more complex factors connected to pesticides. Not the use of pesticides per se, since pesticides have been used since World War II without resulting in CCD, but rather the shift from spraying pesticides on crops to the use of systemic pesticides. Systemic pesticides include seeds dipped in pesticides before planting so that the pesticide is incorporated into the growth of the plant at the cellular level as well as chemically engineered seeds designed to grow into pesticide-resistant plants. These systemic pesticides do not kill the bees right away,
which is why it took years before beekeepers noticed any ill effects and which is why when ill effects appeared they were catastrophic. The problem is more insidious, such that the pesticides slowly accumulate in the environment and in the bees themselves over a series of generations. The bees that have been impacted by the residual accumulation of the systemic pesticides begin to show nervous and immune system dysfunction, explained by Mendes as “low level sub-lethal doses over a long period of time.” This low level sub-lethal explanation is precisely what I mean by cultural trauma. In the case of bees, the outcome is that they eventually become so impaired they cannot find their way back to their hives and die.

The complexity of the problem does not stop there, but it does start to demonstrate how ideological impact is internalized, literally and figuratively, in ways that a totalizing visual metaphor cannot account for on its own and that a more holistic one is needed. Michael Pollan, author of *In Defense of Food* and *Food, Inc.*, explains in *Vanishing of the Bees* that the need for extensive pesticide use results from monoculture agriculture, the corporate system of agriculture we know better as factory farming. Factory farming of the bees themselves is also an issue, from replacing the diets of bees from honey to sugar water (the equivalent of feeding humans nothing but junk food) to bioengineering the bees themselves to bring out certain traits. Researchers like Maryanne Frazier remind us in the film that when we pick up a prescription, pharmacists ask us what other medications we might be taking to assess potentially negative drug interaction, and yet there is virtually no inquiry into the kinds of synergistic interactions for low level sub-lethal pesticides resulting from monoculture agriculture and thus little to no inquiry on its impact on honeybees or the honey these bees produce. This also
means there is no inquiry into the impact of systemic pesticides or synergistic interactions on livestock eating the food those honeybees pollinate—livestock whose diets include enormous amounts of antibiotics—or the livestock then eaten by humans.

So much more could be said about this documentary, but ultimately my purpose in introducing this discussion of bees here is that we need to look much harder at the ways the most serious negative consequences are produced by the system (monoculture agriculture resulting from corporate factory farming) and perpetrated by the system itself (through systemic pesticides) rather than focusing on immediate, isolated causes. Like the bees, we are literally being poisoned from within. In the Foucauldian sense, this suggests that society itself has become perverse. But it is not inevitable or irreversible. What is instructive here is how this real life microcosm helps to explain structural features of the ideological model, and how individuals have such difficulty finding ways to see beyond its invisible confines. Corporations are not necessarily deliberately ruthless or maniacal entities out to oppress individuals in society. The ideological structures are, after all, made up of individuals in society. And they often are motivated by the belief that their systems protect and benefit society without realizing the trauma they create and perpetuate. With the move to globalization there are fewer ideological structures that exert more power with greater risk of deleterious effect. This ecological example demonstrates that, though harder to trace, emotional and psychological impacts have physical and material effects, and as with the bees, we must shift our thinking to find them.
An Overview of Upcoming Chapters

“Traumatic Subjects” uses the aforementioned dynamic ideological calculus to read selected contemporary American narratives, specifically late twentieth to early twenty-first century North American realist texts written and/or directed by women about true events and/or historical realities. Each of the chapters showcases a text or pair of texts, novel or film, read alongside coinciding historical and cultural trends that underscore the ways the texts are representative of and reveal issues about society during the neoliberal era. I use neoliberalism to describe the economic shift in the 1970s to a capitalistic formation characterized by increased privatization and deregulation, intensified global trade brought about by lessened trade barriers between nations, and intensified governmental security.\(^\text{10}\) In particular, this dissertation studies how contemporary representations of trauma shape and are shaped by the negative relationship between violence, gender, and identity, a relationship, while predicated on a longstanding domination-subordination hierarchy, continues not because of its universality or inevitability, but because of the ways it becomes reinscribed and reinforced in the historical moment to seem universal and inevitable. Reading the selected texts as cultural traumas offers a unique perspective from which to examine the seemingly constant threat of violence to the female body, even though this violence is continually disavowed, downplayed, or erased. This bodily and psychic violence can be read as symptomatic of systemic cultural and social violence that functions as a policing mechanism for race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies. Reading these fictional narratives as traumatic testimony calls for a renewed examination of the importance of subjectivity as part of a
materialist feminist inquiry, emotion and empathy in academic inquiry, and the role and purpose of literary critique.

Though there is some overlap, most of the texts of this dissertation were written and published before 9/11, and even then the American public had become fairly well versed in the concept and familiar with some of the terminology of trauma, or was at least beginning to. Although read from both a pre- and post-9/11 lens, this study looks particularly at what allowed the concept of trauma to be understood in the general population towards the latter twentieth century, which, ironically, had less to do with a particular historical event and more to do with its increasing pervasiveness in literature, film, and popular media that then drove attention and awareness to it as a function of daily life. That literature, film, and popular media emerging during this time period have called such attention to trauma reveals how contemporary hegemony renews its ability to disconnect and isolate the individual, the outcome being, in part, the perpetuation of violence and exploitation. And though these texts and readings of them are fraught with difficulty, including, at times, even the very incoherence associated with the fragmented identity they portray and examine, the efforts are essential, because, in the words of Toni Morrison’s Nobel Lecture quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, “Language can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.” “Traumatic Subjects” emulates Morrison’s philosophy to limn “the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers” as a way of “arc[ing] toward the place where meaning may lie.”
The chapters themselves are structured theoretically and topically, with the first two chapters exploring predominantly individual trauma as a function of cultural anxieties and the second two moving more directly into the ways cultural traumas can be explored through narratives about individuals. The only text in the dissertation not based on a true story comes first: Margaret Atwood’s novel *Bodily Harm* (1981) in chapter 2. Chapter 3 pairs the films *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) and *Monster* (2003). The final two chapters function in tandem though are separated into Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) in chapter 4 and concluding with Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* (1995) in chapter 5.

*Bodily Harm* unfolds as reflection of the main character Rennie’s imprisonment, a woman who represents the classic naïve tourist, and delves into disturbing and complex matters of embodiment, social injustice, and sexual violence. The bodily harm depicted manifests itself physically, psychologically, and politically, perpetuated by the ruling class as well as an oppressed yet complicit culture. Chapter 2, “‘This is What Happens to Women Like You’: The Naïve Tourist and the Body Politic in Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*” is both reflection and response to the sex wars in feminism. The chapter illustrates the continued importance of symptomatic reading and examines characteristics of neoliberalism, theorized by Harvey and others as a paradigmatic shift in the ways global capitalism adjusts to absorb threats to its existence. Reading *Bodily Harm* alongside the burgeoning of horror films in the mid-70s and its resurgence at the turn of the millennium offers insight into the pattern and trajectory of the naïve tourist trope in culture. Horror films offer scintillating, stylized, semi-pornographic, and largely unrealistic representations of sexualized violence, and the rash of remakes in the 2000s of those first films highlight two key issues: (1) the re-emergence of such films using the
naïve tourist capitalize on cultural anxieties, and (2) they transmute sexual violence into sexualized violence as a way of diminishing discomfort and obscuring lingering effects of worldwide poverty and violence against women. The backlash against the interrogation of social economics brought about by feminism in an era of neoliberalism contributes to this concealment.

Chapter 3, “‘I Always Wanted to Be in the Movies’: ‘Reel’ Violence in Boys Don’t Cry and Monster,” analyzes concept of ideology’s relationship to the representations of women in film through the rise of docudrama and reality television. Modern day filmic heroines are celebrated for transgressing traditional gender roles and imply a gender-neutral, sexually equal world exists. But while the new archetypal screen heroine of commercial film stands up to and bests her male counterpart, they are frequently cloaked in myths and clichés of romantic love and feminine subservience. As docudramas, films based on real events that are meant to accurately and artistically represent essential truths about reality, Kimberly Peirce’s Boys Don’t Cry and Patty Jenkins’ Monster try to represent a more realistic version of the dire consequences for those who transgress gender hierarchies. The bodily harm these films portray, much like Atwood’s Bodily Harm, is not easy for readers and viewers to smooth over and put in the category of entertainment. Both films attempt to expose injustice, create awareness of the way gender-variant persons are oppressed and the way that gender hierarchies continue to be brutally policed. Their power is the ability to expose the difference between reality and representation. Their limitation is that they reinforce the idea of non-normative sexuality as perverse. Because audiences generally read them as accurate reflections of the way things are, they offer rich if muddied terrain for social critique.
Chapter 4, “‘What She Go and Do That For’: Trauma, Myth, and Monstrous Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved,*” moves from perversity to monstrosity. Reading Morrison’s *Beloved* against literary criticism and social issues shows the way female embodiment, especially motherhood, is pathologized as monstrous. *Beloved* weaves a graphically traumatic narrative, illuminating the unspoken psychic wounds of racism and slavery, the disequilibrium between traumatic and transformational memory, and foregrounding one of the most blatant social contradictions of American life: that a nation that proclaims its existence on freedom functions on an economy of slavery. The real-world systemic oppression that lingers in slavery’s wake is easily written off as mere ghost story, overshadowed, ignored, or smoothed over in favor of the individual, the immediate, the ever-present danger lurking in the shadows. But *Beloved* is much more than a ghost story. In a period of feminist backlash and eagerness to disavow continued inequality, the idea of a black woman claiming ownership of her own body and the right over the children she bears from it is terrifying. Sethe in *Beloved* is the ultimate monster: a mother mad enough to kill her own children. This chapter reads *Beloved* as a different kind of haunting, linked to the ways in which traumatic events are mythologized, and to why the representation of the monstrous feminine seems ubiquitous.

In chapter 5, “‘She Was a Body Under Siege, a Battleground’: Identity and ‘The Infinite Nature of Wounding’ in Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms,*” the character Hannah parallels Sethe and Beloved in numerous albeit uneasy ways, and underscores the seemingly never-ending cycle of abuse—referred to in the novel as “the infinite nature of wounding”—perpetuated by capitalism and patriarchy. By geographically melding, as well as masking, a fictional personal narrative with the factual location and culture it is
based on, Hogan sets up a way to confront theoretical problems posed by borders and boundaries, liminal spaces, and the limits of personal experience. *Solar Storms* links the treatment of the indigenous to the perpetuation of violence against women, which are deeply imbedded in the genocide and ecocide resulting from the capital accumulation of colonial expansion. The “infinite nature of wounding,” as it turns out, is not truly infinite, it only appears so. *Solar Storms* traces the origins of violence to the broken pact between humans and animals that seems to be rooted in capitalism’s commodification of the land. Reading the novel alongside the historical and social climate that produced it, especially the rise of identity politics and proliferation of texts about fragmented identity, reveals the ways the material and immaterial, the physical and the psychological, are more and more culturally intertwined. Chapter 5 focuses largely on the antagonist of the novel, Hannah, a woman described as “a body under siege, a battleground” (Hogan 99), and shows how her story complicates the already complicated metaphor of the woman’s body as a battleground, a woman who represents, in extremely disquieting ways, those of us who “are literally absent from our present” (Kruger 5). Read in this way, Hogan’s *Solar Storms* is a symptom of cultural anxiety about alienation, isolation, and the ensuing violence made to seem natural and inevitable. It examines the correlation between critical reception of the novel and the identity politics movement and neoliberalism, and the upsurge of mass-market texts about dissociation and childhood trauma. Because the violence of traumatic experience is largely subjective and experiential, the chapter pairs materialist analysis with the intersectional analysis forwarded by identity politics to show that the infinite nature of wounding represented by the novel exposes the veiling of structural oppression.
Chapter 2

“This is what happens to women like you”:

The Naïve Tourist and the Body Politic in Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*

“Alien reaction paranoia,” says Paul. “Because you don’t know what’s dangerous and what isn’t, everything seems dangerous.”

“Will there be trouble?” says Rennie.
“You mean, will you get hurt?” says Paul. “Yes, there will be trouble. No, you won’t get hurt. You’re a tourist, you’re exempt.”

~ Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm*

Margaret Atwood’s novel *Bodily Harm* opens with the epigraph, “A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman’s presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her.” This John Berger quotation, from *Ways of Seeing*, sets up the importance of representation in the novel: a combination of visual image, philosophical interpretation, and ideological imposition. The representations at stake in *Bodily Harm* are, as the title suggests, human bodies and the varying treatment of those bodies in social and cultural contexts. *Bodily Harm* is a realist novel that can be read to examine preconceived notions of individual traumatic experience. But the title is deceptively simple, for although the kind of traumatic experience it describes does indeed include physical trauma, it also extends far beyond it to encompass the psychological and cultural trauma of the unrelenting threat of bodily harm, both real and manufactured.

The plot of *Bodily Harm* revolves around Canadian journalist Renata (Rennie) Wilford, who goes to the Caribbean to write a travel piece and recuperate from a partial mastectomy. She finds herself unintentionally involved in a political upheaval on the
small island of St. Antoine, a seemingly no account place that just so happens to be a prime drug trafficking route to Cuba and Brazil. After a sham election and an assassination, rioting erupts and Rennie is implicated as a foreign agitator. Rennie represents the privileged white outsider who thinks herself better than the poor inhabitants, the epitome of the naïve tourist, and as such, she must be “put in her place,” so to speak. Her “place” ends up being a filthy prison cell, and the narrative unfolds in flashbacks that delve into disturbing and complex matters of embodiment, sexuality, mobility, and identity during Rennie’s imprisonment.

Part of what makes *Bodily Harm* provocative, particularly for an examination of trauma studies, is how the narrative continuously teeters on the edge of the “blaming the victim” mentality. The naïve tourist, and especially the female naïve tourist, “has it coming.” She should have known better. She should have done her research to stay out of harm’s way. She should not have gotten involved with the locals. She should have simply stayed home where she was safe. Ironically, Rennie was not safe at home. She was fleeing cancer and the threat of home invasion, her intruder leaving sadistic clues that he is planning to rape her. And yet there too, readers find out, she is suspected of “having it coming,” having done something to entice the rapist, and even having behaved in ways to cause her own cancer. In this way, Rennie represents one of the hallmarks of traumatic experience through the guilt and shame one feels for having somehow brought upon oneself. Literary critic Barbara Hill Rigney has suggested that part of Rennie’s problem stems from being too passive. Even in her relationship with her boyfriend Jake, “Rennie abdicates power; she is passive to the point that even Jake lost interest, not so much because of her mastectomy as she believes, but because of her remarkable
acceptance of his exploitive behavior” (Rigney 105). When Jake leaves her, “Rennie reacts to her abandonment with” what Rigney calls “predictable passivity, for it allows her to feel that her victimisation is complete; it reinforces her view of herself as innocent in contrast to a perverse world” (105). Rigney asserts that the Berger epigraph is a kind of “victim psychology” and that Rennie “seems almost deliberately to manifest” it (105).

The trope of the naïve tourist is itself symptomatic of a larger cultural trend reflecting historical and cultural anxieties about sex and violence and the victim psychology that goes along with it. Published in 1981, Bodily Harm emerged during the early years of the neoliberal era as reflection of and response to the sex wars in feminism. At the heart of the sex wars was the problematic relationship of pornography and sexual violence. Pornographic material was not only in the X-rated domain that the novel itself directly tackles, but was also part of the broader cultural milieu of horror films making the scene, literally, in the 1970s. John Carpenter, director of the slasher film Halloween, has said the film industry itself, in fact, thinks of horror films as pornography, and as journalist Jason Zinamon explains in a revealing 2008 Vanity Fair article called “Killer Instincts,” “the lines between horror and porn were often blurry in the 1970s, at the height of ‘porn chic.’ They played at the same theaters, featured some of the same actors, and were financed or distributed by the same sleazy characters” (308). And if the thematic connections were not enough to link pornography with horror films, “Bryanston Pictures, a New York distributor with alleged Mafia connections, used the millions it made from the blockbuster sex film Deep Throat to release Hooper’s The Texas Chain Saw Massacre and Dark Star,” Carpenter’s first film (308). In many ways, the link between sex and violence is made more apparent in horror film representations than in
films certified outright as pornography, and critics have frequently denounced the villain’s tendency to kill the characters depicted as sexually promiscuous. Women are treated gruesomely in this regard. Case in point, “Halloween (and its many imitators) has been criticized for indulging the audience’s sadistic impulses by punishing the girls who have sex” (310). 11

Because Bodily Harm directly interrogates the naïve tourist trope and sexual violence, the novel as representative of these contents is particularly powerful traumatic testimony and urges a renewed examination of its relationship to these issues. Both the naïve tourist trope and horror films made a comeback at the end of the twentieth century, this time in combination as a kind of horror tourism. Films like Hostel (2005) and Turistas (2006) showcase naïve and arrogant American tourists as the victims of gruesome crimes, including torture and the stealing of their internal organs. Such grisly outcomes tap into fears about the way other countries view Americans, especially in light of the Iraq war. But they do more than just that. Reading Bodily Harm against the horror film genre that both accompanied its publication and made a resurgence at the turn of the millennium shows how the naïve tourist trope represents longstanding cultural anxieties of the oppressed fighting back and avenging their oppressors, but also, more insidiously, about the ways cultural trauma is perpetrated through the threat of sexualized violence.

A reading of Bodily Harm as symptomatic of problems in its historical era helps make a case between neocolonial expansion and the perpetuation of sexual violence. Atwood has said, “sexual kink and violence,” which is scrutinized directly throughout the novel, is “not something weird sadists and porn fanciers do; it’s something governments do to people to keep them under control” (Ingersoll 149). Bodily Harm is exceptional in
the way it unflinchingly deals with sexual violence, something that usually remains hidden from view or purposely obscured, often through victim-blaming tactics. Blaming the victim has long served as sleight of hand, misdirecting the gaze away from the victimizer and onto the victim. In the end, the sleight of hand goes much farther than simply protecting an individual. It keeps our eyes off the systemic and structural abuses that make violence and exploitation seem inevitable and continuous, and it guilts us into thinking we have it coming. But *Bodily Harm*, when situated in history in this way, exposes this sleight of hand.

**Alien Reaction Paranoia**

Margaret Atwood is probably most well known for writing speculative fiction texts that disrupt and destabilize traditional social mores and project dystopian versions of life as we know it, and as such *Bodily Harm* has not been a widely studied novel. Contemporary readers accustomed to the prevalence of female heroines in popular literary and filmic representations, might expect Atwood to upend gender hierarchies with a tale of the woman who bests the man. Those familiar with her more well-known novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, might expect her to scrutinize the hierarchy in a politically adroit but oblique way. Readers who were contemporaries of Atwood, or who read her novels as they were published, may have been the only ones to be prepared for the title to be so graphic and upfront about its content. Atwood, after all, has said she does not write “pretty books” (Rothschild). *Bodily Harm* has received nowhere near the attention given *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but, as I explain above, what makes it particularly interesting to revisit is how it can be read alongside the resurgence of the naïve tourist trope in
contemporary horror films. Whereas before the graphic nature of *Bodily Harm* might have dissuaded readers, in light of movies like *Saw* (2004), Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* (2007), Terrantino’s and Rodriguez’ *Grindhouse* (2007), the more graphic the better. Market analyses have shown that sex and violence lose the least in translation and the film industry continues to up the ante to reap profits globally (Dyer 74). The attempt to secure greater profits plays a part of “upping the ante” in popular media in recent decades, but the resurgence of horror films extends beyond profit.

Because *Bodily Harm* is symptomatic of this horror trend, it is worth examining the rise of the horror film more generally. Since Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 1974 and John Carpenter’s 1978 *Halloween*, gore, the grotesque, and the growing belief in the inability to trust the next person who comes along (because you never know who is out to get you), have captured a wide and terrified audience. Early horror films were basically “cheaply made, highly graphic exploitation films that were originally released in local markets” (Zinoman 306). With the new millennium came the contemporary remakes of these cult classics—Marcus Nispel’s *Texas Chain Saw* in 2003 and Zombie’s *Halloween* in 2007—and a host of twisted additions to the horror film repertoire, like *Hostel* (2005) and *Turistas* (2005), both of which directly engage the naïve tourist trope. The new wave of naïve tourist films reflect cultural anxieties about American foreign policy abroad and are part and parcel of this larger trend in the resurgence of horror films in general, which can be traced back to the “shocking birth of the modern horror movie” (Zinoman 304). According to Zinoman’s “Killer Instincts,” the trend started with the temporal coincidence of George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Zinoman writes that although “Romero
was personally upset by the news... he couldn’t help considering its implications for his movie, whose defiant black hero fights off an army of the undead only to be gunned down by an all-white posse” (304). *Night of the Living Dead* “became an instant hit at drive-ins, in large part because of its extreme gore” but also because it was “very real and current,” inspiring one critic to say the film “was more about racism than zombies” (304). And it was not just the gore that seemed real; it was also the sexual violence. In *Last House on the Left*, lead actor David Hess admitted he

“was very mean to the girls [while shooting the film], so when it came to the rape scene, [Sandra Cassell] didn’t have to act,” he says, referring to a co-star who played one of the victims. “I told her, ‘I’m really going to fuck you if you don’t behave yourself. They’ll just let the camera run. I’m going to devastate you.’ I don’t think she was too happy about that.” (308)

It stands to reason, then, that part of the reason Atwood’s *Bodily Harm* has garnered less critical attention than her other novels is not because of its graphic sex and violence, but because it is a direct social critique, something that many readers are ill-equipped intellectually and emotionally to handle. *Last House on the Left* exploits rape by indirectly tapping into its use as a policing function. *Night of the Living Dead* exploits the refusal of viewers to confront racial inequality. If we accept Zinoman’s hypothesis, we can see how the film allowed viewers (who were probably mostly white) to purge their anxiety over the consequences of racism without having to address it directly. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is likewise an indirect critique of government control and female exploitation. Though we may feel unable to mount a direct critique of such injustices, the
indirect, entertaining texts like *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Night of the Living Dead* allow a measure of social anxiety to be released, and released without riot or revolution.

*Bodily Harm* as a novel is, by comparison, very obvious in its engagement of feminist issues, especially the pornography and sex wars of early second-wave feminism. Not surprisingly then, *Bodily Harm* is rarely listed among favorite Atwood novels. To some extent, its realism works against it for mass appeal (this realism factor shifts slightly with the burgeoning of reality television discussed in chapter 3). Gore and the grotesque work precisely because viewers do not want to believe they are real, even if they praise the realistic effects or the probability of the extreme craziness. Whether there are crosscurrents of reality or not, a horror film that borders too closely to the truth cannot ultimately be successful. In fact, in one of the early horror films to present its criminals as “normal people,” was “one of the most infamous films of the era” (Zinoman 308) “Unlike other horror films that cut away from the worst violence, [Wes Craven’s] *Last House on the Left,*” Zinoman writes, “ lingered on the faces of the victims with a realism that remains almost unbearable to watch” (308). Not surprisingly, *Last House on the Left* has since been remade and rereleased.16

Appeal and popularity do not determine intellectual merit, but they do influence what gets read and by whom. In her 1980 lecture entitled “An End to Audience?” Atwood herself has critiqued the dire consequences of what she calls a “fragmentation of the audience on an unprecedented scale,” blaming it in part on “changes in publishing” (351). She anticipated then that through capitalist monopolizing chain bookstores would gain more control over what gets published. She explains that “south of the border,” meaning the United States to the Canadian-born author, “books are increasingly thought
of, not as books, but as ‘entertainment packages’” (352). *Bodily Harm* is not exactly an “entertainment package” kind of book. “What that means for prospective authors,” Atwood writes, “is that they’ll either have to write *Jaws* or it’ll be back to the mimeo machine in the cellar. . . .” (351). As humorous as her statement may sound, Atwood likens such extreme forms of publishing and distribution monopolies to the suppression and murder of authors worldwide. “In any totalitarian takeover,” she reminds us, “writers, singers, and journalists are the first to be suppressed” (350). Atwood argues, “The aim of all such suppression is to silence the voice, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power” (350). Authors are not the only ones who will be affected, because “in the competition for larger and larger amounts of money, the literate audience . . . will suffer” (352). In 1980, Atwood’s claim that democracy itself could be negatively affected, as well as all those living with or without it, might have seemed a bit overdramatic. Today, in light of measures that reduce civil liberties such as the Patriot Act and the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, the claim seems hauntingly prophetic.

*Bodily Harm*, published the year after Atwood’s “An End to Audience?” lecture, is not so much prophetic as it is unsettling, unsettling because of its graphic contents and ambiguity that lies therein. Paul’s comment to Rennie about “Alien reaction paranoia,” that “because you don’t know what’s dangerous and what isn’t, everything seems dangerous” (Atwood, *BH* 67), comes after she runs from the man attempting to shake her hand for luck. This alien reaction paranoia represents the struggle to be empathetic, which I discussed in chapter 1, and reflects the cultural anxiety stoked in horror films both about the naïve tourist and the “faceless stranger” in *Bodily Harm* laying in wait
(223). Even though an unsettling book may not have mass appeal for the reasons I have already touched upon and will return to in more depth later, it has not been completely overlooked by scholars. Those who write extensively about *Bodily Harm* are often openly disappointed by the lack of critical attention it has received. In her essay “Tourists and Terrorists: The Creation of Bodily Harm,” Marilyn Patton suggests “The amount of attention focused on *[The Handmaid’s Tale, Cat’s Eye, and Surfacing]* has drawn interest away from *Bodily Harm,*” adding that it “may be remembered in the long run as one of her major achievements” (150), “the climax of years of writing, much of it unpublished, in which she worked through the problem of fictional representation of political and ethical dilemmas at the same time that she was re-thinking the social demands upon the artist in her speeches and political articles” (151). Why is it then that *Bodily Harm* has received less critical attention than Atwood’s other novels? In the 2004 *Margaret Atwood: Critical Companion, Bodily Harm* is mentioned only twice in the entire text, in passing, and on the same page. In the first mention, *Bodily Harm* is called “nightmarish” and “largely real,” and in the second it is marked as an “anomaly:” “the only novel in Atwood’s oeuvre that places its emphasis squarely on Canadian international relations and postcolonial concerns” (Cook 113).

Certainly Atwood’s oeuvre is far too extensive to distill comprehensively in a companion piece, and it makes sense that Cook would choose to focus on what she sees as Atwood’s more characteristic work, especially for her target audience of high school readers. *Bodily Harm,* however, is not atypical in the larger sense. It is not atypical for what happens in society and thus is not atypical for Atwood’s work, because, as she has said, she draws her inspiration from what is going on in society, from “observations of
life” (Brans 79). Part of Atwood’s literary eminence is the biting realism of even her most outlandish fiction. Consider it an earlier, more potent version of the Law & Order “ripped from the headlines” mentality. Amidst her celebrity as one of the most important authors of our time, Atwood has been careful to represent her work not as a mirror of society, but as a lens that distills and focuses rather than reflects (Hammond 68). Of all Atwood’s novels, Bodily Harm speaks most clearly and directly about the social inequities facing humanity, especially in terms of race and gender. Is such reality too much for most readers to handle, too “brutal” and too brutalizing (to borrow an idea from J. Brooks Bousan’s Brutal Choreographies)? And if so, how can Bodily Harm be too brutal, when horror films are not? Is it simply the difference between realism versus ‘entertainment packages,’ or is it something else?

To return to Cook, if we think in terms of geography and politics, saying that the emphasis of Bodily Harm is “squarely” on “Canadian international relations and postcolonial concerns” may be technically correct as its distinction from other Atwood novels, yet it ignores the ways global capitalism operates in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. It also overlooks Atwood’s own vision of borders and boundaries as relational and not simply as a limit (Hammond 68). In an interview with Karla Hammond as she was writing Bodily Harm, Atwood comments, “Canada is still a colony, although now it has recognized its own colonialism” (77). More importantly, she continues the discussion with the following remarks: “Canadians have had the books on colonialization, but most of their industry is still owned by the United States. The power is held by people other than those having the realization. In the case of women, it’s men; in the case of Canada, it’s Americans” (77). Globally, power operates most effectively
by virtue of its ability to exceed and transmogrify defined boundaries. *Bodily Harm* is a novel about colonizing, about country as colonizer and colonized, about bodies being colonized, and more insidiously, about bodies being colonized both from without and within.

**What She Wants is Something Legitimate to Say**

Above all else, as a writer, Rennie Wilford is in a position to narrate, to identify—she has a type of power to locate her self and make knowledge. But is this type of power enough? Rennie represents the intellectual elite. In a sense she represents those of us who would read and write essays like this. Her profession as a writer puts her in position to use her otherwise marginalized voice to expose social truths, but she chooses not to. She chooses to write about “lifestyles” and trends that don’t even exist. She writes about imaginary trends to see if she can *make* them exist. She wants the chance to really say something legitimate, but contradictorily, she also wants to be able to ignore the responsibility altogether. “Other people make statements,” she says, “I just write them down” (*Atwood, BH* 7). The narrative seems to suggest that Rennie dodges the ability and responsibility to construct her own self. This focus on self is especially evident in psychoanalytic theorizing. Bouson suggests that many of Atwood’s female characters, suffer from a “deficient sense of self” (11). Because of this “deficient sense of self,” they are “subject to the terrors of disintegration anxiety: to the ‘fear of being nothing’; the discovery of the ‘blank lady’ within; the anxiety that the ‘core’ self has been ‘invaded’” (11). Bousan makes a compelling case for how “the drama of the female self-in-crisis emerges in all of Atwood’s novels as a kind of recurring textual anxiety, a repetition
compulsion that is enacted and reenacted in narrative after narrative” (11). “What recurs,” she clarifies, “are not just the terrors of a childhood spent in fear of the bad mother or one’s best girl friends but also the cultural terrors implicit in fulfilling the prescribed roles of the dutiful daughter or passive wife or those of the sexual object or female victim” (11). Is Rennie therefore suffering from such a “deficient sense of self” and simply fulfilling her prescribed role? And if she, like other Atwoodian female characters were self-deficient, what kind of sense of self would be sufficient? Is the accusation of deficiency yet another type of victim blaming? Rennie fails because she does not know who she is as a person? As a woman? As a writer? If this is so, can we not hold Atwood responsible for placing Rennie in a triple bind, because, as Catherine Belsey writes in “Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text,” “women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses” (Belsey 661). Either Rennie attempts to write herself into being, or she allows culture to do so.

It is not just women who are “produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses,” everyone is. Moreover, Rennie is merely a fictional character, so how useful is it to critique how she succeeds or fails to construct a self? It would be no more useful to critique Atwood for writing Rennie the way she does because this approach still focuses on individuals. Is Atwood now the one with the deficient sense of self? The sleight of hand continues to be passed along as a symptom without a root cause, without attention to the systems that shape individuals to be who they are. If we are trying to read the novel as a cultural representation and offer this reading as an intervention in our current culture, it is necessary to read the novel as a part of a specific historical and cultural conversation. Bousan gestures towards this conversation when she writes that
“Atwood’s fiction is governed by the compulsion to repeat because it deals with the basic fears and persisting conflicts that plague women in a male-dominant culture” (12).

Part of the problem, then, is that even though Rennie thinks she has the choice to write herself into being or allow culture to do so, it is not really a matter of conscious choice. She has so thoroughly imbued dominant ideologies regarding who she is, or rather, who, as a woman, she is expected to be, that her sense of self and society’s is one and the same. Rennie, as a part of the intellectual elite (she has gone to college and writes for a travel magazine), could very well understand the dilemma, but she seems not to be paying attention. Like the unnamed, and hence unidentified, protagonist in *Surfacing*, she chooses a dispassionate method of reporting events and developments (Rigney 53). Rennie consistently avoids in-depth issues, explaining simply, “It’s not my thing.” She does “lifestyles,” which prevents her from looking inward. Moreover, Rennie “would much rather be the one who wrote things about people . . . than be the one they got written about” (Atwood, BH 18). Comfortable with inscribing others’ identities, she herself would rather hide behind surfaces. After all, “there were some things it was better not to know any more about than you had to. Surfaces, in many cases, were preferable to depths” (201).

Rennie’s addiction to surfaces, which one could interpret merely as a metaphor for superficiality, develops her “tendency to experience the world not at first hand but as filtered through the clichés of a media-ridden civilization,” as David Lucking contends. Hiding behind the tourist facade of a journalist, “she habitually thinks in terms of films, or photographs, or pictures, or the various other civilized stratagems by which events are framed and neutralized and rendered innocuous” (Lucking 81). Rennie, like Annette in
“A Travel Piece”—one of the precursors to *Bodily Harm* (another is “Rape Fantasies”)—has “learned that she has to strike the right balance between what she manages to notice, spontaneously and candidly—and she always takes a camera with her, just in case . . . and what she chooses to leave out” (Atwood, “A Travel Piece” 137). The camera and the pictures it creates—or denies—evokes the idea of the male narrative gaze as described by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

A more historically rooted reading of Rennie’s addiction to surfaces comes from what David Harvey calls “Postmodernist concerns with surface” (*Condition* 61). Harvey argues that such concerns “can be traced to the necessary format of television images,” that “in the era of mass television there has emerged an attachment to surfaces rather than roots, to collage rather than in-depth work, to superimposed quoted images rather than worked surfaces, to a collapsed sense of time and space rather than a solidly achieved cultural artefact” (61). This shift has come about, Harvey says, as “the artist’s relation to history . . . has shifted,” and the types of products “are all vital aspects of artistic practice in the post-modern condition” (61). If “television is itself a product of late capitalism and, as such, has to be seen in the context of the promotion of a culture of consumerism” (61) as Harvey argues, we can also include the male narrative gaze, pornography, horror films, and media representations at large as part of this culture. The promotion of this culture “directs our attention to the production of needs and wants, the mobilization of desire and fantasy,” and ultimately “of the politics of distraction as part and parcel of the push to sustain sufficient buoyancy of demand in consumer markets to keep capitalist production profitable” (61).
The Power to Act

Atwood has famously denied being a feminist, or having feminist aims in her writing, explaining that she only writes what she sees going on in society. While it would be a mistake to simply take as given that her art is a mirror reflection of the real world, it is useful to focus on the book as part of a representation of culture. And though I say this with trepidation in anticipation of vociferous criticism as an avowed feminist myself, Atwood’s disavowal of being a feminist or having a feminist agenda in her work may be quite useful. That is, such disavowal could be useful if such statements contribute to more critical attention to reading her work as a representation of culture and not as an ideological stance in and of itself. What Atwood as an author wants culture to be or to do is not unimportant, but it is a nostalgic and problematic notion, one advocated by many feminists, for literature to represent women, for example, predominantly if not exclusively in a positive way. But that Atwood’s women are far more complicated does not diminish her work’s feminist merit, just as positive representations of women do not in and of themselves change the status quo of women’s lived reality. Atwood’s work has been immensely important for feminists in a variety of ways, but for critics to continually ask Atwood about her “feminist agenda” is another, albeit unintended, sleight of hand, which directs attention to Atwood as a singular individual alone in the universe and away from her text as a product of culture. Bodily Harm is undeniably Atwood’s creation, and I do not wish in any way to minimize her creative genius. However, Atwood is also a product of culture, her writing is part of a cultural conversation, and the novel itself comes out of a specific era. Rennie as a character may indeed symbolize the ways women in the real world are more severely inhibited by contradictory discourses as
Belsey suggests. It makes sense to investigate these inhibitions, the ways in which both women and men are inhibited, and more importantly, what contradictory discourses inhibit all people. Is it that women are less likely able to have a clear sense of self because of these contradictory discourses? Are they expected to make the right choice amidst the cacophony of contradictory discourses? Or the wrong choice?

“Choice” as both term and option is often oversimplified if not deployed altogether as a cultural fiction. If we treat Rennie as representative of the western, privileged, white woman in the world (because surely we cannot treat her as universally representative of women), what choices are available to her? To be more aware of her role in a system of exploitation? To have power over her body? Her sexuality? In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Maxine Greene writes, freedom of choice is not “only a matter of the capacity to choose; it is a matter of the power to act to attain one’s purposes” (4). What are Rennie’s purposes in the narrative? What do we as readers expect them to be? Rennie the writer appears as superficial and self-absorbed, thereby choosing willful ignorance. She “prefers surfaces to depths” (*Atwood, BH* 201) and pretends to take interest in the political campaigning out of politeness, never intending to write more than the typical consumer-focused travel piece about where to stay, eat, and play tennis. There are many reasons the readers of *Bodily Harm* may be willing to overlook Rennie’s narcissism in the narrative. She is not a capital-J Journalist and it was never her intention to write about social upheaval. She is not unaware of the threat of physical violence, because before escaping to St. Antoine a stranger breaks into her home and leaves a coiled rope on her bed. The police in this scene suggest she is lucky not to have been raped, but not before they intimate she might have been asking for it. Yet readers may
believe Rennie deserves to overlook physical violence on vacation, especially since she is recovering from the bodily harm of breast cancer and having been the intended victim of sexual violence. And yet stepping outside the plot of the novel, this justification becomes important for the way it reveals how society as a whole is generally taught to see women as always already victims, in which case the victimization is something to ignore, on vacation or not.

What *Bodily Harm* can tell us about women, tourism, and the body is, sadly, as relevant today as it was nearly thirty years ago. The cycling of this trope suggests it is symptomatic of something more significant in culture. The fear of bodily harm, from faceless strangers to “primitive” cultures, keeps our attention on the individual and off the social systems exploiting everyone. In an inquiry of social texts, whether a novel by a cultural icon such as Margaret Atwood or a contemporary horror film such as *Hostel,* it is worthwhile to read them less as entertainment and more as purveyors of culture.

To do such a reading, we need to step away from the story of the text and look at the text as a story of culture. In this way, *Bodily Harm* becomes more obviously a product of culture instead of an uncomplicated reflection and/or interpretation of it. In this way, as Rosemary Hennessy writes in *Profit and Pleasure,* I am also arguing for a way of reading texts. Two main historical events take center stage in such a reading: the sex wars in feminism and the burgeoning era of neoliberalism. *Bodily Harm* directly engages the sex wars through character discussions of violence against women, especially in terms of pornography and rape.
She Owes Him Something

The idea of the male narrative gaze, inscribing and prescribing characteristics for women, is prevalent throughout the novel. Perhaps one of the most provocative representations occurs when Rennie reaches the island and flips through a tourism brochure: “On the front is a tanned white woman laughing on a beach, sheathed in one-piece aqua spandex with a modesty panel across the front. A black man in a huge straw hat is sitting on the sand beside her, handing up a coconut with a couple of straws sticking out of it. Behind him is a machete propped against a tree. He’s looking at her, she’s looking at the camera” (Atwood, BH 59). The leaflet entreats its audience—presumably affluent, presumably male, presumably white—with the female’s objectification. Mulvey writes, “Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer” (441). Similarly, the machete, though a useful and appropriate tool in the Caribbean, conveys also a message tinged with brutality. To be sure, the primarily implied message of the machete is its utilization to split the coconut; however, secondary messages are subtler and culturally ingrained. In a culture in which the predominant wielders of those tools are men stereotypically associated with machismo, machetes readily become weapons and a source of domination. For example, Paul—the American expatriate, drug runner, and Rennie’s current love interest—tells Rennie, “If you [meaning, if a man] get angry and chop up your women, that’s understandable; a crime of passion, you might say” (Atwood, BH 215). He subsequently assures her, however, that “Mostly they beat or slice rather than chop” (216). Still, the perception of the male
dominated gaze correlates to an image of control, something unattainable to the women of St. Antoine.

The male gaze not only instigates gender bias, it rejects objectification the likes of which it imposes. Mulvey explains:

According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. (443)

Yet throughout the novel, the purveyor of the gaze—that typically stereotypical masculine gaze—is Rennie. The gaze may indeed be oppressive and particular in its perspective and spectacle for society, but Rennie provides a medium for the stereotypes. She always has her camera ready. She takes the pictures. As a tourist, she can look as much as she wants, but, once again, is under no obligation to see. She looks only superficially, but in doing so she does not realize the potential perpetuation of patriarchal ramifications. The “one-dimensional fetish” (Mulvey 447) of objectification befits her inability to get past surfaces.

Rennie and her friend Jocasta render their own game of objectification in Canada by performing imaginary makeovers on men: “Pick a man, any man, and find the distinguishing features. The eyebrows? The nose? The body? If this man were yours,
how would you do him over?” (Atwood, BH 35). Notice the attention here to particular body parts, and the use of the possessive “yours,” which connotes ownership. Rennie admits “it was a rude game”; Jocasta did not (35). This female gaze is an appropriation of the culturally signified male one. It is still the dominance-submission pattern, but only with women on top. It is significant that Rennie says she engages in the game only before her mastectomy, not after. Once she is confronted with a fractured sense of embodiment, she no longer finds entertainment in the objectification. Or, in other words, until she personally and viscerally comprehends the offensiveness of the situation through the trauma of her mastectomy, she cannot understand the subject-object dichotomy.

The key difference between Rennie’s gaze and that of the dominant male culture is articulated by trauma studies scholar E. Ann Kaplan, who writes, “if women were simply eroticized and objectified, things might not be too bad, since objectification may be an inherent component of both male and female eroticism” (“Is the Gaze Male?” 311). For Kaplan, there are two integral factors that generally differentiate the dichotomy. “[M]en do not simply look,” she argues, explaining that “their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it” (311). This is much like the Berger epigraph in Bodily Harm, which bears repeating: “A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a women’s presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her.” Hence, “If this man were yours” is an appropriation of the jargon but fails to enact similar agency. Rennie’s behavior throughout the novel subtly emphasizes this distinction. For even though she “likes to stare,” when she makes eye contact with Paul
for the first time, “he folds the paper, gets up, and heads towards her table” (Atwood, *BH* 34). And as she watches passively, he acts. Nearer the end of the novel, Rennie becomes more and more aware of the power of the male gaze and is disconcerted by it. In a symbolic passage, Rennie literally appropriates the male gaze by looking through Paul’s telescope, which is trained on a woman in a red bikini on a yacht. An unambiguously phallic instrument, “the telescope,” she realizes, “confers furtive power, the power to watch without being watched. Rennie is embarrassed by it and turns away” (208). Based on her learning curve about objectification throughout the novel, her reaction is not surprising.

Objectification is not a matter of eroticism, though popular culture, such as horror films, has attempted to recast it as such. Kaplan writes, “the sexualization and objectification of women is not simply for the purposes of eroticism; from a psychoanalytic point of view, it is designed to annihilate the threat that women (as castrated, and possessing a sinister genital organ) possess” (311). Whereas Rennie and Jocasta sexualize bodily attributes, the tourism brochure delivers an encoded message of male domination. Kaplan declares that though men and women are both voyeurs at times, “images of women are sexualized no matter what the women are doing literally, or what kind of plot may be involved” (311). Hence, “the gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the masculine position” (319). While Kaplan refers mostly to cinematic imagery, Atwood seems to broaden that visual scope. Still, it is important to note that Atwood’s protagonist has options her film counterparts do not. Newman “suggests that the gaze (and therefore the novel, which reproduces that gaze), however
coercive, is never a locus of complete control—that the gaze even opens a space for resisting that control” (458). Rennie has a modicum of maneuverability to resist the gaze—she could write about its oppression, for example; she could “see” in addition to merely looking through her camera lens—but she chooses not to.

Published during the 1980s pornography wars within feminism, _Bodily Harm_ is a prime example of the muddled expectations of female sexual liberation. Rennie does not want to seem prudish about her boyfriend Jake’s pornographic enthusiasm, a sentiment mirrored by many opponents of the feminist anti-pornography stance. “People who got too intense about sex were a little outré,” Rennie says (Atwood, _BH_ 93). This reaction could readily be modeled on feminists who claim, “the last thing women need is more sexual shame, guilt, and hypocrisy—this time served up as feminism” (Willis 221). For some, limitations on pornographic material seemed to impede rather than enhance women’s sexual liberation.

Jocasta and Lora typify the complications of the so-called sexually liberated female. Whereas Jocasta bemoans the lack of willing male sexual partners, Paul’s ex Lora, who is fatefully imprisoned in the end of the novel with Rennie, is unabashedly sexual. Atwood writes, “the Women’s Movement would have loved Lora, back in the old days, back in the early seventies when they were still doing pieces about the effect of masturbation. They’d have given her ten out of ten for openness” (Atwood, _BH_ 84). Rennie feels unsettled about Lora’s “openness,” especially when she seemingly prostitutes herself to the guards in prison for a couple of packs of gum. The irony is that Lora “openly” uses her sexuality as a tool in hopes of achieving literal liberation.
Rennie, on the other hand, is not liberated it seems, at all. Embarrassed after “chickening out on friendly sex [with Paul] with no explanation at all,” Not only did “she think sex wasn’t an issue,” backing out on sex was “socially gauche, inexcusable really” (Atwood, BH 112). If Rennie is ambivalent about sex to begin with, after her mastectomy she fears the possibility of it altogether. Of course, then she “fall[s] right into the biggest cliché in the book, a no-hooks, no-strings vacation romance with a mysterious stranger” (213) (this “mysterious stranger” is something that could have been easily taken the Atwood short story “Rape Fantasies,” which I discuss in the upcoming section). Although she does not actually have sex with him, Rennie feels vindicated that she allows Paul to touch her. Despite her fears, from how to feel sexual after her mastectomy and coming to terms with the power politics of pornography and rape, “she can still be touched” (193). But her vindication is misplaced albeit consistent with the disconnection to her own power throughout the novel, because instead of seeing her part in this accomplishment of sorts, Rennie thinks, “She owes him something: he was the one who gave her back her body; wasn’t he?” (238). The inherent complication with her (re)construction of touch and sexuality is that Rennie cannot claim it herself. Paul has to give it back to her. Though he may encourage her, Paul cannot effectively or completely endow Rennie with a feeling of self-worth. Self acceptance, physical or otherwise, goes beyond and is distinct from someone else’s perceptions.

Though Jocasta claims to have a positive sexual identity, it too is tangled with problems. She tells Rennie, “All I want is a good enough time, no hassle, a few laughs, a little how-you-say romance, I’ll take the violins if they’re going around, dim lights, roses, fantastic sex, let them scrape the pâté off the rug in the morning, is that too much to ask?”
(Atwood, *BH* 154). But despite claiming all she wants is a good time, she continues only to bemoan the libidinal lows of the men she dates, noting that the last three men she went out with did not try to sleep with her and sarcastically exclaiming, “the new scoring is *not* scoring!” (157). Jocasta, as her name implies, serves as Atwoodian comic relief and a pun on the very Oedipal castration image of the maternal. Consequently, what Jocasta says after her lamentation is indicative of theories on sexuality in relation to dominance-submission: “The new scoring is *not* scoring. Just so long as you keep control. They don’t want love and understanding and meaningful relationships, they still want sex, but only if they can take it. Only if you’ve got something to lose, only if you struggle a little” (157).

Like the piece of rope left on Rennie’s bed at the beginning of the novel, left by the faceless stranger who breaks into her apartment, the control issues and portrayals of threatening sexual representations prevalent in the novel seem to be “someone’s twisted idea of love” (Atwood, *BH* 32). Rennie, for her part, assumes the traditionally female submissive role and generally plays along with Jake’s domination fantasies:

Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn’t move. He liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really did stop breathing. Danger turns you on, he said. Admit it. It was a game, they both knew that. He would never do it if it was real, if she really was a beautiful stranger or a slave girl or whatever it was he wanted her to pretend. So she didn’t have to be afraid of him. (197)
Rennie’s dismissal of fear here simultaneously acknowledges its existence. And once she goes to the police department and sees the video of the black woman’s vagina with a rat emerging from it, her perspective of pornography forces her feelings into the open. She becomes openly frightened of Jake’s aggressiveness she once thought of, by Jake’s insistence, as harmless. She begins to feels objectified and like a mere instrument for sex and has difficulty being sexually intimate with him. “She had trouble,” she explains, “dismissing it as a game” (201).

Once again we return to the dominance-submission pattern that pervades the text and the sexualization and oppressive male gaze that, while captivated by both sexes is nevertheless biased. The images of pornography in the novel, for example, are exclusively of women. As Kaplan maintains, “dominance-submission patterns are apparently a crucial part of both male and female sexuality as constructed in western capitalism” (318). By internalizing domination as erotic, according to Kaplan, “women have participated in and perpetuated our domination” (324). Rennie allows Jake to put up soft porn pictures in her apartment not because she wants to be dominated but because she is afraid not to be. “These pictures made Rennie slightly nervous,” Atwood writes, “especially when she was lying on their bed with no clothes on” (Atwood, *BH 97*). But even despite her anxiety, she shrugs it off as “probably just her [sheltered] background” (97).

Two of the pictures in particular, the ones cited as making Rennie nervous, are worth a closer examination:

In the bedroom hung a Heather Cooper poster, a brown-skinned woman wound up in a piece of material that held her arms to her sides but left her breasts and thighs
and buttocks exposed. She had no expression on her face, she was just standing, if anything a little bored. The picture was called *Enigma*. The other picture in the bedroom was a stylized print of a woman lying on a 1940’s puffy sofa, like the one in their own livingroom. She was feet first, and her head, up at the other end of the sofa, was tiny, featureless, and rounded like a doorknob. In the foreground there was a bull. (97)

Andrea Dworkin, one of the foremost feminist anti-pornography activists, “outlines four elements of pornography: hierarchy, objectification, submission, and violence,” all of which are present in Jake’s pictures (Dines 99). The hierarchy of both pictures is enacted by the dominant male gaze, which consequently objectifies both women as objects. One woman bears no expression to the point that she is entirely “featureless,” relegated to the background by an image suggesting bestiality. Heather Cooper also bears no expression, and is sadistically tied and bound, forcibly submissive, looking “if anything a little bored” (96). As part of the domination-submission hierarchy, this boredom could actually translate into enjoyment, simply because there is no sign of discomfort or displeasure. It is significant that Cooper is “brown-skinned” since “the ways in which pornography sexualizes gender and racial inequalities are connected to the ways in which men, and often women, tend to deny, minimize, trivialize, and defend themselves against women’s public criticism of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence” (19). Remember the representation of hard-core pornography at the police station: the rat emerging from the *black* woman’s vagina. Pornography is particularly exploitive of sex and race in tandem (19).
The pictures, Rennie’s reaction to them, and additional information on Jake suggests that his idea of sexuality is controlling and crude, and allows *Bodily Harm* to trouble the relationship between sex and violence, especially sexualized violence. At one point Jake asks Rennie, “What is a woman?” Then, without pause he answers his own question with, “A head with a cunt attached or a cunt with a head attached. Depends which end you start at” (*Atwood, BH* 225). Though “it was understood between them that this was a joke” (225), his remark closely resembles Dworkin’s assessment that “both rape and pornography reflect a male outlaw mentality that reflects the conventions of romance and insists, bluntly, that women are cunts” (Dworkin qtd. in Willis 220). The potential desensitization that may occur from recurrent violent and oppressive images of highly sexualized female bodies does little to prevent men from desiring to enact the scenarios. Note that the sofa in the second picture is “like the one in their own livingroom” (*Atwood, BH* 97), and hence there is perhaps little separating Jake or Rennie’s view of real life and pornography.

But the link between pornography and real life is still complicated. Gail Dines writes that some “blame feminists for contributing to women’s feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability,” believing “it is the feminist movement against violence, rather than the pervasive sexual violence that has been uncovered, that is responsible for women’s fear and anger at men” (33). And although sexual liberal Deidre English says, “the fact remains that no matter how disturbing violent fantasies are, as long as within the world of pornography, they are still only fantasies” (qtd. in Dines 20), *Bodily Harm* seems to argue, at least when it comes to Jake, that the line is blurred. Even more disturbing, “Bill Margold, veteran pornographic director, says, ‘I’d like to really show what the men want
to see: violence against women’” (Dines 80). If the line is already blurred for Jake, and most men really want to see violence against women in pornography, there may be little constraining the games he and Rennie play becoming violent. Furthermore, the tenuous balance can become emotionally problematic: is this real or just a game?

The Politics of Rape

The blurred line between the questions of whether the games Rennie and Jake play are real or “just” games, and the emotional dilemmas that go along with it, lead to the complicated issue of rape fantasy. A 1998 study of pornography found that out of “20 novels analyzed, 16 used the rape-fantasy scenario at least once, and most repeated it throughout the book” (Dines 97). Atwood’s controversial story “Rape Fantasies” delves into this extremely disquieting notion. The short story begins, “The way they’re going on about it in the magazines you’d think it was just invented, and not only that but it’s something terrific, like a vaccine for cancer (Atwood, “Rape” 92). As the story unfolds, four female coworkers share their personal “rape fantasies” after Chrissy quotes the magazine as proclaiming, “all women have rape fantasies” (93), and the immediate parallels to Bodily Harm are glaring: the would-be assailant who enters the apartment building by rope, similar to Rennie’s would-be assailant who leaves the coiled rope in her apartment; the references to magazines giving the latest trends, which is what Rennie does; the problematic notion of rape being presented as “something terrific,” similar to the pornographic videos in Bodily Harm using sex and violence as sexually arousing and titillating for viewers; and the similarity between Rennie having cancer and the final rape “fantasy” scenario, in which the narrator tells her rapist she has leukemia and has only a
few months to live. The stories the women share, however, are not exactly fantasies of rape—sardonically referred to in the story as “one of the most significant moments in a girl’s life” (98)—if we take as a starting premise that rape is about power and violence, “and not really about sexuality at all” (Steinem 38). Rather, they are elaborate sexual fantasies with anonymous men, unlike “the statistics in the magazines” that “say it’s often someone you know” (Atwood, “Rape” 102). Chrissy’s fantasy, for example, involves a strange man breaking in and taking a bath with her. Darlene’s is about a man in black clothes and gloves who swings in and out of her apartment Tarzan style. Greta, the narrator, on the other hand, tries to explain that “real” rape fantasies are anxiety inducing to the point of inaction and that real “rape is when they’ve got a knife or something and you don’t want to” (96). Though this argument is a bit closer to the truth, it still does not account rape as the exertion of power and an act performed to control the victim, which is not always through the threat of violence. It is also clear that Greta’s fantasies are not about “real” rape either, but about fending off would-be rapists in clever ways. Instead of being raped, she “end[s] up feeling sorry for the guy[s]” because there “has to be something wrong with them” (98; emphasis in original). The story concludes by Greta fantasizing not about rape but about how she would start a conversation with the potential rapist, because “once you let them know you’re human, you have a life too, I don’t see how they could go ahead with it, right?” (103). Ultimately, what “Rape Fantasies” reveals are the misconceptions about the ways power, violence, and control are key features, not byproducts, of rape.

Diana E. H. Russell, author of *The Politics of Rape*, asserts that “rape and other masochistic female fantasies are a reflection of women’s powerless role in society, the
intense socialization they receive to accept that role, and their sexual repression.” She adds further, “it cannot be overstressed that having voluntary fantasies of being raped, and wanting to be raped in actuality, are two entirely different things” (231). People control their fantasies, for one thing, and in those controlled circumstances, there is a complete lack of fear, whereas “in a real rape or attempted rape situation, unlike the fantasy version, women are usually afraid and often terrified” (231). Dworkin argues that “the most enduring sexual truth in pornography—widely articulated by men to the utter bewilderment of women throughout the ages—is that sexual violence is desired by the normal female, needed by her, suggested or demanded by her” (166). Pornography in this sense perpetuates violence against women under the mistaken guise that women “like it that way.”

Sexualization and arousal potential in rape is a matter of socialized learning that perpetuates itself through both sexes, influenced and maintained by the culture, and continuously represented by media images without accountability. For example, when Jocasta suggests to Rennie a week, or even a day, in which the world switches sexes—“all of the men were turned into women and all the women were turned into men”—both think they would locate empathy for the other (though Rennie is the less enthusiastic of the two). When Rennie relays the same scenario to Jake, however, he immediately dismisses the idea as ludicrous. And what is more, he suggests that if it were to happen, all the women would “become rapists” (Atwood, BH 148). His assumption is that women would want to take revenge on men for their lasciviousness and promiscuity. Or possibly he thinks that the male psyche is hormonally more prone to sexual control problems. In other words, he perhaps thinks that socialization has nothing to do with
acceptable representations of sexuality, such that men are generally supposed to be highly sexualized and women are generally not. However, we have no chronicles in *Bodily Harm* of anything but socialized experience and intellectual creation (whether it be Rennie’s writing, the government’s oppression of the people, Daniel’s—the doctor who performs Rennie’s mastectomy—vacillation regarding his loyalty to marriage, and so on), which suggests a more immediate causal link to society. Thus, when Rennie attempts to relax in the Caribbean, she runs into problem after problem. She wants to be oblivious, but culture will not let her.

Part of what becomes problematic for Rennie and acts as a mirror for society is the way she perceives identity and embodiment. Similar to her appropriation of the male narrative gaze, Rennie comes to believe that women are innately turned on by sexual aggressiveness, which is why she goes along with Jake’s pornographic enthusiasm even though she is uncomfortable. The problem here is that the pornographic becomes synonymous with the erotic. While anti-pornography critics may deride the movement for limiting sexual expression, Steinem explains that sexuality can be erotic—“a mutually pleasurable, sexual expression between people who have enough power to be there by positive choice”—and therefore just as expressive, without being pornographic, in which the “message is violence, dominance, and conquest” (Steinem 37). But Rennie internalizes the dominant social code of patriarchal sexuality, which limits rather than liberates her sexuality and her self. Or as Susan Griffin, author of *Pornography and Silence*, puts it:

When we speak of deception, we must speak of a self destroyed. For the deceiver has two selves. One is a false self, manufactured for appearance’ sake and set
before an audience. This self is allowed to speak, to act, to express, to live. But
the other self, who is the real self, is consigned to silence. She is hidden, denied,
eventually forgotten, and even, in some cases, unnamed. (202)
Rennie constantly and deliberately finds ways not to see herself, much less the political
and psychological power plays of her environment. The next step in such a self-
deception is, according to Griffin, that “the deceiver is in danger of never remembering
that she has a real self” (202). When finally imprisoned, Rennie decides to open up a bit
and tell “Lora about the man with the rope. She’s certain that Lora will be able to
produce something much heavier, a multiple axe murder at least.” But Lora’s response is
more shocking: “I’d rather be plain old raped,’ says Lora, ‘as long as there’s nothing
violent.’ Rennie feels there’s been a communication breakdown. Then she realizes that
Lora is talking about something that has actually happened to her” (Atwood, BH 260).
The notion that rape could be anything less than violent invites the question of what Lora
thinks rape actually is.

Much like Greta’s pity for her imaginary rapists in “Rape Fantasies,” Robin
Morgan writes that it is a somewhat customary reaction to feel sorry for the attacker: “He
is sick, he cannot help himself, he needs help” (135). However, the victim, Morgan
asserts, often is overshadowed in this instance because of what she calls the “Spontaneity
Lie,” or a sudden onset of irrepressible lust that the rapists cannot resist, which is akin to
“Every Woman Loves A Rapist/All Women Want to Be Raped/ Good Girls Never Get
Raped/ It’s Always the Woman’s Fault cliché” (135). While the narrator in “Rape
Fantasies” exploits the first misconception, Lora unswervingly portrays the last. As a
psychologically and sexually mistreated child, even Lora’s mother kicks her out of the
house after her father attempts to molest her. She tells her, "You’re asking for it . . . you flaunt it around enough, it’s a wonder every man in the city didn’t do the same thing a long time ago” (Atwood, BH 162). Lora herself does not register rape until the prison guards beat and bloody her—unless there is proof of physical struggle, an obvious and readily apparent physical struggle, I would add, normative society does not see rape as really a violation. Likewise, Rennie believes, for the most part, that Lora uses sex to her advantage and is somehow responsible.

Furthermore, the predominant “women like it that way” attitude discourages women from interrogating conceptions of sexuality itself. Society stereotypically expects the male in the heterosexual relationship to be the initiator and more assertive partner in sex, and women to be submissive and innocent. If Rennie, for example, were to question whether she likes Jake’s actions, he would likely turn the question back at her, saying something like, “but you don’t know what you like.” Rarely given the approval to figure it out, she probably tends to agree. Rather than challenging the dominant paradigm, it is easier to acquiesce, and especially easier to maintain ignorance rather than risk feelings of inadequacy. Yet, feelings of inadequacy concerning sexuality are another problematic gendered issue: men, for the same cultural reasons of control and dominance, are not supposed to feel inadequate, while women may accept that role as part of sexual schooling by the male. Unfortunately, the stereotypes create more difficulties than anything (for men and women), and it is one of the reasons that Rennie feels like Paul gives her back the ability to be touched rather than trying to claim it for herself with his help.
Rennie is threatened not only by the hidden threat of the man with the rope and confusion about her own sexual desires, she is also continuously at risk of losing more than her sexual identity. Much like her continual inability to deal with her grandmother’s imaginary loss of her hands, her overall self identity rests on being able to open her eyes and move past the issues of embodiment that have sent her running for anonymity in the Caribbean. But as a tourist, she has no motivation to confront deep issues until they forcibly confront her. Whereas the fantasy/reality line is blurred for Jake, Rennie “doesn’t like the sight of ravage, damage, the edge between inside and outside blurred” (Atwood, BH 77). Her own issues of self-loathing for her cancerous body keep her from looking at anything but surfaces. Right after the surgery she tells Daniel, “I guess I should be relieved . . . That you didn’t hack off the whole thing.” To which he replies, “We don’t do that any more unless there’s massive involvement. . . . Massive involvement, said Rennie. It’s never been my thing” (26). The metaphor of “massive involvement” reverberates in the text, pertaining to Rennie’s fear of intimacy as well as the political fracas on the island.

While Rennie fears rejection from Jake, she desires it from Daniel—only to be dissatisfied. However, she also realizes that Jocasta, as a representative of society, fears her body almost as much. Rennie notices Jocasta looking at her, and “wondering how much of her was gone, chopped away; under all that, you couldn’t tell really. A thing with a man. Bizarre. Possibly even gross” (Atwood, BH 144). Rennie’s fear is taboo to discuss openly, but it is a compelling and relevant fear, one easier to discuss, perhaps, in this fictional tale. Robert Hass’s prose poem “A Story about the Body” is a comparable example that exemplifies this fear and is worth a brief digression to emphasize this point:
The young composer, working that summer at an artist’s colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, “I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you that I have had a double mastectomy,” and when he didn’t understand, “I’ve lost both my breasts.” The radiance that he had carried around in his belly and chest cavity—like music—withered very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I could.” He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside the door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl—she must have swept them from the corners of her studio—was full of dead bees. (32)

Even though it may not be as radical a removal as with the Japanese artist in Hess’ poem, Rennie has reason to worry about how her disfigurement seems to herself and others. In a society that puts stress on objectification, where the male gaze objectifies women, Rennie’s fears are warranted. She feels empty, illegitimate, and less of a woman. Like the bowl full of dead bees, surface representations and outward appearances propel quick judgments that often obscure reality. Hence, even Rennie feels somewhat fortunate that she was not massively involved; she “no longer trusts surfaces” (Atwood, BH 40). In
fact, she is afraid of coming apart at the seams, “split open like a faulty zipper, and she will turn inside out” (72).

It is an understatement to suggest that a woman’s relationship to her body is complicated. “As women,” Roberta Galler writes, “we all know that constantly running into external barriers reduces a sense of self-worth.” Galler’s primary focus in “Myth of the Perfect Body” is disabled women, but her essay is applicable more broadly. She writes, “The expectations of others become part of the self-concept and self-expectation” to such a degree that they “may perpetuate a psychological sense of invisibility, self-estrangement, powerlessness, worthlessness, and lack of sexual entitlement” (169). For a variety of reasons and all “Too frequently,” she argues, “our bodies become our enemies” (169). Rennie emphasizes this war of the self when she feels violated by her own body:

. . . sinister twin, taking its revenge for whatever crimes the mind was supposed to have committed on it. Nothing had prepared her for her own outrage, the feeling that she’d been betrayed by a close friend. She had given her body swimming twice a week, forbidden it junk food and cigarette smoke, allowed it a normal amount of sexual release. She’d trusted it. Why then had it turned against her?

(Atwood, BH 74)

Violation occurs around her and within her, but cancer is the only contingency for which she has absolutely no control. Her actions after its inception may prove fruitful or detrimental, but the bodily insurrection itself disregards her cultural behavior or place in society (white, affluent, educated, employed, Canadian, female). Nevertheless, her actions could still influence the outcomes of some of the situations she finds herself in, because,
As she discovers . . . there is no longer an inside and outside, a here and there . . .
little separation exists between the man who breaks into Rennie’s Toronto
apartment (the man with the rope) and other men, the man with the rope and
Rennie, Rennie and other women, Rennie and world imperialism, or Rennie and
an invaded mother nature. (Wilson 201)

Indeed, the significance of the “faceless stranger” is Rennie’s renewal into awareness, or,
her cessation of stasis. Tormented by the faceless stranger throughout the novel, she
recognizes him in various places over the course of the novel, from the Ovaltine-drinking
sadist who breaks into her apartment to her Caribbean drug-running love interest Paul
(who is the one who implicates her for “suspicion” and thus the reason she is
imprisoned). But finally she realizes “there’s no such thing as a faceless stranger” (288).
Everyone has a face, a story, and a life. Rennie’s epiphany comes after two significant
events, the first of which is flashback about her mother instructing her how to help her
grandmother when she believes she has misplaced her own hands. “Don’t you know
what to do by now?” Rennie’s mother asks, instructing her thusly: “Here they are. Right
where you put them. She takes hold of the grandmother’s dangling hands, clasping them
in her own” (Atwood, BH 287). As discussed in chapter 1, Rennie must learn to
empathize and identify to understand how to help. It is the second of the significant
events that propels Rennie’s thinking a step closer to empathy. She wants to disconnect
the face from Lora, to make her a faceless stranger so that she does not feel grief or loss,
but “it’s the face of Lora afterall” (288).

Atwood has said that “the hand . . . is an extension of the brain” (Ingersoll 229). Rennie
must assume responsibility for herself and others in order to finally, and truly,
comprehend her experiences in the larger scheme. She does not have to be subservient or ignorant; she has some control, but only if she can see outside of her entrenched social behaviors.

**Nobody is Exempt From Anything**

What makes *Bodily Harm* so complicated is the tenuous complicity of its traumatized protagonist, who becomes representative of society as a whole. The threat to her physical safety is real and yet she is meant to ignore and disavow it. Rennie is stuck not knowing how much of her circumstance she has helped to create and how much is out of her control. While it would be easy to condemn the patriarchy and its oppression of women and other minorities, the lower economic classes, or the otherwise marginalized, Atwood’s novel does not offer easy solutions. Media influence is subtle yet pervasive. Issues of gender discrepancies permeate the text, and Rennie represents societal subjugation. However, she also has much more power that any female on the island, and more power than nearly all of the males. She can return to Canada at any time, whereas the host country nationals have little choice but stay. She can leave at any time, that is, until she is imprisoned, until it is too late for her to pick up on Dr. Minow’s subtle mocking about the “sweet Canadians.” As a writer, her affluence and political association as a Canadian citizen implicate her as part of the naïve, or corrupt as it is claimed, outsider. As a foreigner, she has the luxury of returning to a country with a stable government and, through writing, could possibly affect change.

Part of the problem of complicity in *Bodily Harm* emanates from power politics. Atwood has said that “politics . . . is everything that involves who gets to do what to
whom” (Ingersoll 149). She writes about what she sees, about society, and women are merely human—no more and no less compassionate than men. *Cat’s Eye* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* pit woman against woman. Joan in *Lady Oracle* competes against her best friend. Zenia in *The Robber Bride* mercilessly caters to the insecurities and desires of her eventual victims in order to gain their confidence. However, Tony, Roz, and Charis use Zenia as well, even if inadvertently, and are ultimately empowered. And in *The Edible Woman*, Marian “maintains her own innocence throughout a destructive sexual relationship until the very end when she realizes that she, too, is guilty of exploitation and destruction” (Rigney 51). With such tangled renderings of society and gender, perfectly happy endings are unrealistic. Thus it is unsurprising that Atwood critics tend to proclaim her as having a “‘bleak’ picture of ‘humanity,’” though she asserts that she merely writes what she sees. According to Atwood, bleak is a subjective word “used by people who’ve never been outside Western Europe or North America, and the middle class of either location. They think bleak is not having a two-car garage. If they think I’m bleak, they have no idea what bleak is like” (Ingersoll 238).

Atwood’s recurrent depictions of physical and psychological damage in *Bodily Harm* ultimately represent the malignancy not just of cancer, but also of political power struggles and the paralysis of traumatic experience. Rennie is initially told as a tourist she is exempt (Atwood, *BH* 69) but struggles to confront the fact that no such thing is true: “She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt from anything” (280). To the last, she is in a state of cognitive dissonance between hope and despair: “She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky, suddenly, finally, she’s overflowing with luck, it’s this luck holding her up” (291). Like the cancer that
infects her body, crimes go unchecked, and victims are chosen randomly: the faceless stranger, danger lurking around every corner, “because when you don’t know what’s dangerous and what isn’t, everything seems dangerous” (69). Yet, women’s marginalized position in society predisposes them to more varieties of bodily harm. The more privileged, like Rennie, have a higher degree of power to combat bodily harm, but they must first become educated about societal frameworks, and more importantly, choose to see the oppressors: the patriarchy and those who subscribe, consciously or unconsciously, to it, both men and women included. As the narrator in Atwood’s poem “The Loneliness of the Military Historian” proclaims, “wars happen because those who start them / believe they can win” (50). But nobody wins, because “all battles are battles, all contain bravery, all involve death” (Atwood, RB 18), regardless of those involved.

Atwood’s women must eventually confront their own particular position in relation to society or have it crash down upon them. As a result, they inevitably seek political and personal autonomy, in addition to debating concerns of sexual equality. But first they must endeavor to look beyond surfaces. In their famous essay “The Female Affiliation Complex,” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write, “if [women] are to understand their own situations, each must individually, whether as trespasser or inheritor, come to terms with the terms she represents” (194). Atwood’s Bodily Harm neither imposes blame nor dodges complicated interpersonal and inter-sexual tension. It allows a safe space through the lens of fiction to scrutinize the ways individuals and society work together in a reciprocal relationship to perpetuate sexualized violence. Cultural messages continue to tell us that what endangers the tourist is her naiveté. What they fail to say, outright, is that this is a matter of design, a type of fearmongering to keep
victims—which is to say everyone—isolated, compliant, and running to the assailants for protection.
Chapter 3

“I Always Wanted to Be in the Movies”:

“Reel” Violence in *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster*

I always wanted to be in the movies. I thought one day, I could be a big star. I guess you’d call me a real romantic. I once heard this saying that’s always stuck with me: all you need is love and to believe in yourself. It doesn’t exactly work out that way.

~ American trailer for the film *Monster*

The sheer act of passing itself is erotic, regardless of the end result or where you come from. Androgynous people are so erotic because they flicker, they’re in motion. The crossing of boundaries feels good at the societal level, like you can have chaos at night, but order and ritual must be restored by day. Brandon was like a party. They rape her to reassert the order. These are the mechanics of hatred.

~ Kimberly Peirce

The sexualized violence of horror films examined in *Bodily Harm* bleeds over into this chapter, figuratively speaking, as representations of sex and gender in film lay bare the difficulties in grappling with “reel” and “real” violence. For while it is one thing to posit the low level cultural trauma of the seemingly constant threat to the female body as part social complicity in a fictional novel like Margaret Atwood’s *Bodily Harm*, it is quite another to examine it in narratives based on real people who were brutalized in real life. Where it might seem relatively harmless to capitalize on cultural anxieties for a good scare and an even greater profit margin, upping the ante with sex and violence has its limits even with audiences. When read against the notion of gratuitous entertainment,
depictions of sex and violence on screen can act as testimony for the cultural trauma of sexual violence and enable glimpses of the tenuous ideological façade.

Representations of sex and gender in film have, much like the film medium itself, evolved rapidly in recent decades. Female characters on the big screen challenge and complicate social mores in increasingly dramatic and intense ways. The one-dimensional sexual object described by Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze”—subservient, pacifist, or mad, in need of male discipline—is no longer the norm. The knight in shining armor may be romantic and flattering but is generally unnecessary if not scoffed at. The Fatal Attraction and Basic Instinct variety of films that portray over-sexed, obsessive, and downright crazy women, still generate an abundant audience, and no doubt the madwoman trope will continue to be recycled ad nauseam, but the new wave of female protagonists come via a Kill Bill meets The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo brutality, with women dishing out more than they take, rational, methodical, and stoic. Films with a strong female lead, as they now tend to be categorized, make the case, often with astounding special effects, that women have achieved equality and it would be foolish and unwise to underestimate their prowess. As Neo sheepishly admits to Trinity upon their first meeting in The Matrix, “I thought you were a man.” She acknowledges his embarrassment responding simply, “Most men do.”

These days, female film characters routinely upend traditional gender roles and are critically and popularly celebrated for it, which would seem to suggest that society has radically redefined its outdated notions about gender roles. At the forefront of this redefinition has been the way queer identities have taken a more obvious role in popular media, to the point where, at least in the United States, one might argue that gay, lesbian,
bisexual, and transgendered characters in television and film are now considered more commonplace than subversive. But this was not the case in relatively recent history and it could also be argued that two films at the turn of the twenty-first century in particular burst the screen confines of normative sexuality and act as the kind of traumatic testimony I mention above. Kimberly Peirce’s Boys Don’t Cry (1999) and Patty Jenkins’ Monster (2003) are each breakthrough films, breakthroughs in terms of filmmaking and performance as well as for the ways they socially intervene on behalf of non-normative gender and sexuality. These films, which can be extremely hard to watch for their graphic depictions of sexual violence, overlap in a number of ways important to an analysis of “reel” violence in an era of neoliberalism. Both are critically acclaimed, winning Academy Awards for lead actress in their respective years. Hilary Swank won the Oscar for her portrayal of Brandon Teena, the young transgendered man from Nebraska raped and killed after his biological maleness was exposed. And it was for her portrayal of prostitute turned “serial killer” Aileen “Lee” Wuornos that garnered Charlize Theron hers, with famous film critic Roger Ebert calling it “one of the greatest performances in the history of the cinema.” Both films work off the archetypal, Romeo and Juliet, love-conquers-all story. Both are unapologetic in their graphic depictions of rape and make implicit and explicit political statements about realities of sexual violence. Both attempt to expose injustice, create awareness of the way gender- and sexuality-variant persons are oppressed and the way that gender hierarchies continue to be brutally policed. And both emerge in the burgeoning momentum of the docudrama, films based on real events meant to accurately yet artistically represent essential truths about reality. These commonalities are, however, not the only reason to include them both in this third
More important is the fact that reading *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* together raises difficult questions and reveals problems about sexual violence in contemporary culture we would otherwise, and probably rather, overlook. Unsettling questions, such as to what extent sexual violence on screen does more to expose injustice or contribute to the larger cult of sexualized violence. Or in what ways justice and equality on screen pacify people into believing social justice efforts are no longer urgent. Or more specifically, why the toughness of the strong female lead is often motivated by a revenge fantasy that includes the audience watching the heroine get brutally raped before she turns the tide, as with *Kill Bill* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The same, after all, cannot generally be said for the strong male lead. The strong female lead may stand up to and best her male counterpart, but more often than not the overall story is cloaked in the same myths and clichés of romantic love and feminine subservience. Worse yet, they are ominous reminders that those who stand out get pounded down.

*Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* try to exceed the romantic tragedy cliché by unabashedly showing the grim consequences for those who transgress gender hierarchies in the real world. And as such, they have been influential in reshaping attitudes and perspective about gender and sexuality, which is no small accomplishment. But their role as social text is complicated. Partly because of the romantic tropes they rely on, and partly because of the success conferred upon them, the way they go about influencing and reshaping attitudes is a double-edged sword. The power of such films is their ability to expose the frailty of social mores on gender and sexuality, the limitation is that such work is not achieved without sustained critical analysis, and the danger they unwittingly reinforce and reinscribe the hierarchies they seek to overcome.
Moreover, if we are only to celebrate the films for their daring and achievement we risk downplaying the enormity of the popular film backdrop they are but a small part of, films that seem to suggest equity means countering male violence with even more violent females. The sad reality is that representations of women in popular film continually fail to match the lived reality of the majority of women in the world, women who are more likely to be victims of violence than victimizers. This is not to say that popular film generally is or should be an accurate reflection of the real world, but the preponderance of such representations that contradict social reality is also not merely escapist entertainment, and to be sure, films like *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* are not escapist entertainment. As docudramas, a genre that dovetailed out of the burgeoning of reality television in the late twentieth century, they are generally understood to accurately and artistically represent essential truths about reality. I will examine this development in the next section, but in short, one of the end results is that audiences have learned to tolerate a greater degree of cognitive dissonance whereby all films come to seem like, at least in some ways, accurate reflections of reality. For a trauma studies examination, one of the most valuable social interventions docudramas like *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* make is that they act as testimonies and thus bear witness to their real life characters’ abuse. On the other hand, one of the main obstacles a literary trauma studies reading of these films faces is that, because they are dramatic renderings of real life content and include theatrical and otherwise fictitious content en route to making a cohesive narrative, they blur the lines of traumatic reality and widen the scope of content that becomes unassailable and sacrosanct.
This tenuous balance between creating awareness and making off-limits any remotely negative social critique is part of what makes *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* ideal for examination. But they are not necessarily ideal as individual texts. In fact, treated individually, each film is more likely to reinscribe the confines of normative sexuality it seeks to transgress. *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* are so awash in a sea of film messages that glamorize sexual violence, it almost seems impossible for their testimony about the brutal reality of rape as a policing function, what Peirce calls the “mechanics of hatred,” to register on any significant level. Indeed that message mostly ends up swamped or drowned out. But treated in combination as part of their historical moment, *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* act as ruptures to the ideological field and remind us that violence on and to the female body is part and parcel of low-level cultural trauma.

**The Courage It Takes to Be Yourself**

“A true story about hope, fear, and the courage it takes to be oneself,” proclaims the DVD jacket for *Boys Don’t Cry*. Part of her Columbia University master’s thesis, it took Peirce six years to bring the 1999 release *Boys Don’t Cry* to the big screen, having started writing it the year the real-life Brandon was killed. Patty Jenkins’ *Monster* came out in 2003, the year after Wuornos was executed by lethal injection in Florida. Because the films’ protagonists were living so close to the time the films were released, and because of the complexity of the true-crime, docudrama genre (examined in more depth later in the chapter), and because of the ways the films act as traumatic testimony, the truth claims the films make literally and figuratively take center stage in problematic and complex ways. Which truth claims deserve the most attention? How can they be sorted
out? How does one offer a useful social critique without doing disservice to the traumatic experiences of the real-life counterparts the films portray, even or especially because those real-life counterparts now only live in social memory? The struggle is not easy precisely because it is often so personally significant, especially for those who know social derision and sexual abuse first-hand. And for those who might not, their introduction is not going to be easy either. *Boys Don’t Cry*, which I focus on for the first part of this section, tantalizes its audience with competing truth claims of gender and sexuality, but ultimately makes tragically ironic its purported claims of “hope, fear, and the courage it takes to be oneself.” I then move to *Monster* because of the way it helps shore up some of the more romantic inclinations of the former by explicitly exposing the speciousness of the love-conquers-all cliché and the ways traumatic experience permeates everyday reality.

When *Boys Don’t Cry* first came out, the scholarly and popular discussion focused on pronouns and names. Should we refer to him as Brandon or Teena? Do we use “he” or “she”? Do we honor his claim to masculine identity, despite female embodiment, or, as the medical community might say, gender confusion? Do we argue that the pronouns do not really matter because we are somehow post-gender (like some say we are post-feminism or post-race)? The political and cultural ramifications prompted by something seemingly so simple as the use of masculine pronoun and surname-cum-proper name are manifold. Calling him Brandon is an implicit argument about gender as a non-binary social construction and about language as predominantly patriarchal in construction, as a spectrum of gender identities rather than fixed oppositions of male or female, masculine or feminine. Calling him Brandon is an
argument that a female-bodied individual can legitimately lay claim to male identity, and that identity is something one has, or, put in capitalist terms, owns. But such an argument operates and relies on much more than simply calling him Brandon. It relies on the fact that others have power to counter his claim to masculinity, will and did police and enforce the male-female binary, and will do so bodily and lethally.

Brandon’s laying claim to masculine identity is shown in a variety of ways throughout Boys Don’t Cry, most of which come through choices of style and dress. For instance, in the opening scene of the film the audience is introduced to Brandon, portrayed by Swank, by a close shot of his eyes in the rear view mirror as he drives. He accelerates, leaving a pursuing police car in the dust. Jump cut to the inside of a trailer, and a young man—Brandon’s cousin Lonnie—is cutting Brandon’s hair, evidently not as short as Brandon wants it. “Shorter,” Brandon implores. With a look of frustration Lonnie stops, saying, “That’s short enough.” As Brandon smoothes his hair, Lonnie asks, “So you’re a boy, now what?” Lonnie’s question, especially the “now what,” works to expose to the audience the fact that Brandon, or Teena, as Lonnie calls him, is a girl, and sets us up as Brandon admires himself in the mirror to notice the trappings of masculinity that he is affecting. Brandon then takes the audience through a litany of masculine representations. Brandon wants his hair as short as possible; he tries to protrude “his” Adam’s apple; he juts out his chin; he stuffs a sock down his pants; he wears jeans, a flannel shirt, cowboy boots, and a cowboy hat. The look that Brandon performs, a midwestern cowboy, is just the beginning. Calling himself Billy, he meets his blind date Nicole at the local roller rink, despite Lonnie’s pleading that they just go home. And
after walking Nicole home and kissing her goodnight, he exhibits a masculine sensitivity and bravado by telling her, “I’m gonna stand right here until you’re safe inside.”

But laying claim to identity, especially a gender variant identity, is not so easy in a society where male and masculine identity has both psychological and material social benefits. One cannot so simply assume maleness without a fight. It is no surprise then when the very next scene of the film shows Brandon running frantically to Lonnie’s trailer, chased by men shouting they are going to kill him for what he did to a girl named Alicia, calling him “faggot” and “dyke” interchangeably. There must be more to passing as another gender than looking the part, and there are serious consequences for exposure. The men pursuing Brandon do not know whether to label her as lesbian or him as gay, hence they scream both “faggot” and “dyke.” Both terms are meant to be demeaning, and being either one would deserve, in their minds, the beating they intend to give Brandon. As the trailer is barraged with rocks and attacked on the outside, inside Brandon exclaims that he doesn’t know “what went wrong.” Lonnie shouts back, “You are not a boy! That’s what went wrong! You are not a boy!” Brandon laughingly responds, “Tell them that. They say I’m the best boyfriend they ever had,” to which Lonnie seriously rejoinders, “You want your mother to lock you up again? Is that what you want?” And after Brandon says no, Lonnie yells, “Then why don’t you just admit that you’re a dyke?” Here we enter one of the core issues in Brandon’s life and in the film, because he is adamant that he is not a dyke, he is not a lesbian. Both sex and gender are relegated to a complicated entanglement of biology, social construction, and binaristic thinking.
The historical reality of the individual Brandon Teena that informs *Boys Don’t Cry* further problematizes the sexual identity crisis Brandon was believed to embody. Peirce had originally expected to include part of Teena’s transformation into Brandon, but decided against it, explaining, “When I showed Teena becoming Brandon, which we had at one point, audiences wanted to know more about Teena and it was hard to move the story forward” (Shatkin). Peirce and co-author Bienen decided to cut out the transformation and focus on the tragic love story between Brandon and Lana. The movie is, in fact, intentionally and “fundamentally structured like Romeo and Juliet,” even though Peirce has said she tried not to go “too far into the love story” lest she risk viewers seeing it “only . . . as a Romeo and Juliet allegory.” It is Lonnie’s comment in *Boys Don’t Cry*, “You want your mother to lock you up again,” which gives the film audience a subtle indication about Brandon’s past, which includes the real life Teena having been molested by male relatives at a young age, which caused her to be thereafter terrified of interactions with men (*The Brandon Teena Story*). When Teena suggested to her mother and sister later in life that she might be gay, she was sent to a psychiatric hospital, and came out saying she was not gay at all, but had a sexual identity crisis and needed a sex change operation. Friends of Brandon said, “his biggest fear was to be touched by a man, to be raped by a man, because she was a man” (*The Brandon Teena Story*). Brandon did not, however, have any fear or repudiation of gay men, though he was highly suspicious and seemingly threatened by lesbians, even telling one of her friends, “I can’t be with a woman that way. That’s gross” (Minkovitz). His apparent homophobic fear may well be a sign of an imbued sense of social stigma and alienation from the psychiatric treatment, from the desire to fit into an acceptable social realm. I do
not believe it disrespectful or trivial to question the role society may have had in Brandon’s transsexuality. On the contrary, it makes sense to wonder how the psychiatrists may have influenced his perception of his own sexual identity, just as it makes sense to wonder about the extent to which society shapes any individual’s perception of self. Such queries are attempts to understand how and why social mores are reflected and reproduced in culture. And yet questions about Brandon’s “real” sexual identity are indicative of the reasons society polices those identities so harshly and part of “the mechanics of hate” Peirce wants her audience to understand.

**Truth Claims and Film Representation**

*Boys Don’t Cry* forces the audience to grapple with sexual identity as a social construction throughout the film, but perhaps less so than grappling with truth claims of the individual characters. The real life Lana Tisdel (portrayed by Chloë Sevigny) successfully settled a lawsuit against Fox Pictures for misrepresenting her character on the grounds that she did not continue her relationship with Brandon once she found out he was a female, mischaracterizing her as “lazy trailer trash,” and falsely putting her at the house the night Brandon was killed. Susan Muska and Greta Olaf, filmmakers of *The Brandon Teena Story*, suggest that the poetic license taken in *Boys Don’t Cry* is damaging, particularly for Lana: “As far as we are concerned, we think it’s extremely tasteless” (49). Part of the drawback for Muska and Olaf is a matter of reality and the confiscation of agency from the real people involved: “It’s very strange to make a film that’s based on a true story but many of its elements are fictive. . . . Basically, [you] project your own concept of who someone is and what they did and use their name
without their consent” (Tucker 49). With or without consent, however, may not be the issue at all. Such criticisms reach to the core of the docudrama genre itself in representing, or not representing, truth. Does it matter, for example, that Phillip DeVine, Lana’s sister’s boyfriend, who was also murdered alongside Brandon in real life, was not included in the film at all? Does it matter that factual details were changed to serve the purpose of the film narrative? Are some details more necessary than others in terms of truth? What is at stake in such questions is the very notion of truth, and the ways and extent to which truth can be represented as factual, accurate, and, in short, true. What is at stake is the reality that people behave according to what they believe and desire to be true, not necessarily to what is true. They behave most frequently, in other words, according to ideology, “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 123).

The problem of truth claims dominates Boys Don’t Cry and can be seen in its narrative sequences. Despite Lana’s steadfastness that she never knew Brandon was a girl, the insinuation of her onscreen representation is that she suspects Brandon may not be a man before anyone else has any idea. But what if the movie representation, despite its legal settlement, is in some ways true? According to Peirce, when she asked Lana, “when did you first know that Brandon was a girl? She replied, ‘Oh, I knew the day I met him.’” However, she immediately changed her answer and said, “‘No, I didn’t really know until that day Brandon told me.’” Then she said, ‘No I didn’t really know until later’” (Brockes). She expressed similar vacillations when Peirce “asked Lana if they meant to go as lovers or as friends,” and Lana replied, “‘As friends, of course, because Brandon was a girl.’ But when Peirce mentioned Brandon's desire for a sex change, Lana
said quickly, ‘Brandon didn't need a sex change, he was always a man to me’” (Brockes). Peirce has said, “Whether Brandon is a boy or girl changes for Lana, sentence by sentence. So I have to ask myself, what can I trust? I can trust that she loves Brandon” (Brockes). The audience is directed to infer from the initial sex scene in the film (the one the MPAA thought worthy of an NC-17 rating because of the duration of Lana’s orgasm) and Lana’s subsequent explanation of the encounter to her friends that she knows something is amiss. We see Lana glance down Brandon’s shirt to see her bound breasts, and in the tandem recollection we hear as Lana lies to her friends that she and Brandon then took off all their clothes and went swimming. The scene ends as Lana moves to unbutton Brandon’s jeans, telling him not to be scared. Lana then answers her curious friends’ “Did you do it?” with an ambiguous, “What do you think?” The audience is left wondering how much Lana really knows. Despite Lana’s supposed intuition and apparent recognition represented by the film, she may easily ignore her doubts as a result of Brandon’s persistent embodiment as the epitome of the charming, attentive Romeo of a boyfriend. And finally, Lana’s experience of Brandon’s penetration during intercourse is reason enough, one could easily argue, for her to ignore other doubts, whatever they are.

The problem of truth claims also dominates popular celebration and criticism of *Boys Don’t Cry*. Discussions about Lana’s character as a person as distinct from the character of Lana in the film continued in the March 2000 edition of *The Advocate*. On the cover of the self-proclaimed “national gay & lesbian newsmagazine,” Hilary Swank and Chloë Sevigny are declared “Oscar’s hottest couple,” and in the title story, “Standing by her Man” author Michael Giltz claims “Chloë Sevigny provided the loving gaze that
made it OK for audiences to love Brandon too” (37). “Standing by her Man” discusses the powerful and personal reactions to Boys Don’t Cry, but there is no mention about why the audience would need to have Sevigny or any other actor make it okay to love Brandon, perhaps because it seems like something so obvious to a gay and lesbian magazine and its readership. But is it, and if so, how has it come to be so obvious? Peirce’s insistence on the Romeo and Juliet tragic love story as central theme of the film and emphasis on the unconditional, gender-free love Lana and Brandon share is embraced and commended by the gay community in Giltz’s article. But what does it mean that Sevigny makes it okay? And what might it mean if she were not pretty enough, or a good enough actress, or straight, to make it okay? Similarly, what does it mean that Hilary Swank is lauded as being believable and realistic as a man, and that her acting prowess is esteemed for pulling off such an endeavor?

Perhaps it is a play on the eroticism of androgyny Peirce envisions, mentioned in the epigraph to this chapter—her assessment that the “sheer act of passing itself is erotic, regardless of the end result or where you come from”—that keeps Boys Don’t Cry in a constant state of uncertainty and anticipation. Throughout the film the audience is shuttled back and forth between believing that Brandon is a man and the contradiction of his inherent femaleness. At the moments Brandon seems most self-assured of his sexuality, we are reminded of the ongoing mental and physical quandary he must have been living. When John Lotter, an ex con, first meets Brandon, after Brandon starts a bar brawl to protect his new acquaintance Candace’s honor (who represents the real life Lisa Lambert), John comments on the smallness of Brandon’s hands. “You’ve got the tiniest hands,” John tells him, a moment that must make the audience anxious at Brandon’s
imminent exposure of femininity, especially if the audience knows that the real John Lotter was convicted of first degree murder for Brandon’s death and sentenced to death by lethal injection. Brandon quickly takes his hands away and covers by saying, “They’re big,” and then citing a hypermasculine example in boxing: “Joe Lewis had tiny hands,” he says. Or consider when Brandon and Lonnie are discussing the possibility of a sex change operation. “What about those doctors?” Lonnie asks. “That shit’s insane,” Brandon tells him. “You gotta see shrinks. You gotta shoot hormones up your butt. It costs a fuckin’ fortune. I’ll be an old man by the time I get that kind of money.” Brandon is already identifying himself as a man—“I’ll be an old man by the time I get that kind of money.” And yet in the next instant, after considering the sex change might in fact be possible, and asking, “Do you really think I can do it?” Lonnie teases, “You’re the butch.” Or consider when Brandon becomes enamored with Lana and ponders a burgeoning storybook romance, at which time Brandon starts his period.

The film offers a number of other interesting examples of uncertainty, anticipation, and general ambiguity for gender and sexuality, but let me return to the issue of naming en route to discussing Boys Don’t Cry as part of its larger social context. The first name we hear attributed to Brandon in the film is Teena, though throughout the film everybody else refers to him as Brandon. Yet in the final moment where John has the gun to his head, Lana bursts in the house and calls, not “Brandon,” but “Teena.” The movie finally ends with a reading of a note to Lana, signed “Love always and forever, Brandon.” Juxtapose these vacillations with Brandon’s actual headstone, which reads “Beloved daughter,” or Hilary Swank’s acceptance speech for the Oscar, in which she said: “I want to thank Brandon Teena for being such an inspiration to us all. His legacy
lives on through our movie to remind us to always be ourselves, to follow our hearts, not to conform. I pray for the day when we not only accept our differences, but we actually celebrate our diversity” (Swank). The diversity she evokes is made emphatic through the simple pronoun “his.” Even consider the packaging of the Boys Don’t Cry video itself: “A true story about hope, fear, and the courage it takes to be yourself.” Is Brandon’s sexual identity that which is uniquely himself, or is he a product of a culture that does everything to take attention away from the capitalistic mechanisms that exploit its subjects? If we return to Peirce’s quote from the epigraph, the eroticism of androgyny has tragic consequences: “The crossing of boundaries feels good at the societal level,” she says, “like you can have chaos at night, but order and ritual must be restored by day. Brandon was like a party. They rape her to reassert the order. These are the mechanics of hatred” (Shatkin).

One cannot escape the ambiguity and apparent contradictions in the film, but it is possible to get so caught up in these internal contradictions that we fail to deal with other more complicated ones. For example, when watching Brandon’s admission of his sexual identity crisis—during the intensely dramatic and painfully unaltered interview with the sheriff following the rape, taken word for word from the real-life transcript—the viewer may be caught between the idea that the sexual identity crisis presupposes the standard of a fixed sexual identity, or that this fixed sexual identity is intrinsically tied to biology. This scene underscores the tactics of a careless and dehumanizing sheriff, who is further implicated in a political and legal system that frequently and unconsciously perpetuates sexist ideologies. Hence what is exposed, ultimately, is not Brandon, but culture at large. Notice, for instance, how easy it can be to avoid talking about the rape itself. Given the
possibility of talking about anything else instead of directly confronting the brutality of rape and abuse, most will. Sometimes this can be for good reason, such as taking care not to revictimize those who have been raped. And in some ways both Boys Don’t Cry and Monster strategically shepherd their audience through the film to cope with the brutality, even if they do so by providing the problematic but familiar structure of the love story. But most of the time discussions of rape are avoided because of the shaming function of rape itself, and in large part through, as discussed in Chapter 2, victim-blaming. As such, devices that may help audiences cope also help them evade. In Boys Don’t Cry, for example, even the graphically violent rape scenes have a number of “outs” to thinking about rape as policing sex and gender when one considers how the characters are all represented as caricatures of some form of social deviance. Brandon, although portrayed as well-intentioned and sympathetic in his gender transgression, is also a liar and thief. Tom and John, his eventual murderers, are unintelligent, chauvinistic “rednecks” whose anger is uncontrollable. Lana, her mother, and friends, are depicted as naïve and unmotivated, and represent the inescapable predicament of growing up in an economically depressed area. In essence, they are all “trailer trash” in a town that had “more than its share of domestic violence” (The Brandon Teena Story), and viewers can probably rest assured that something so horrible could only happen in backwards, far-away places, not their own hometowns. And even the parts viewers are meant to see explicitly as victim-blaming, such as when John says, “you know you brought this on yourself, Teena” before the rape, or when Brandon dutifully “admits” “I know this is all my fault” afterward, may be muted by the plethora of other contradictory messages about how Brandon should have known better than to put himself in the situation.
There are fewer distractions from *Monster* that make it easy to ignore the way Aileen “Lee” Wuornos was sexually abused and exploited. The film begins with a voiceover by Lee. “I always wanted to be in the movies,” she says, as viewers see images of what we imagine to be Lee as a young girl playing dress-up in the mirror. As the happy young girl twirls in her outfit, the voiceover continues, “I thought for sure one day I could be a big, big star, or maybe just beautiful, beautiful and rich like the women on TV. Yeah, I had a lot of dreams and I guess you could call me a real romantic.” But as she finishes the line, “Because I truly believed that one day they’d come true,” Lee is grabbed menacingly by a male arm and pulled out of view. We see additional images of a slightly older Lee with a black eye, being yelled at, seeing a male face glaring at her, and Lee closing her eyes tight, and then an even older Lee lifting her shirt for a group of boys before being picked up on the side of the road for sex work. All the while the voiceover continues, “Whenever I was down I would just escape into my mind, to my other life where I was someone else. It made me happy to think that all these people just didn’t know yet who I was going to be. But one day they’d see.” The discontinuity between the voiceover and the images is explanatory and ironically prophetic given the real-life Aileen Wuornos’ tragic life being depicted on film. A girl beaten and abused her whole life, dreaming of another kind of life, like you find in the movies, like the quote the film will come back to again: “All you need in life is love and to believe in yourself and then there’s nothing you can’t do.” The end of the opening sequence merges fantasy with grim reality as Lee says, “I lived that way for a long, long time, in my head, dreaming like that. It was nice. Then one day it just stopped.” As the title of the movie
appears on the screen, viewers see adult Lee, rain and tear-soaked, contemplating suicide under a highway overpass.

*Monster* is not devoid of problematic and distracting internal contradictions, some of which I return to later in this chapter, but it is much more straightforward about the way it troubles the disconnect between the fantasy of popular media and the reality of everyday life. And it is more straightforward despite taking, one could argue, more liberties with the factual storyline. Working both with and against the romantic love story structure at once, the film effectively shows that those who are victimized are more likely to continue to be victimized, especially those who fall outside the normative social hierarchy, like sex workers or other sexual “deviants” like lesbians. Escaping the effects of trauma by the power of love and being true to oneself is recast as Hollywood delusion, and the film implies that Lee’s desire to be loved, along with and stemming from her repeated abuse, contributes to her murders. And this may not be far from reality itself, though the film goes about it in a way that is purely fiction.

A docudrama must fill in the blanks of a story—connect the dots between facts with what could have happened, and both *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* do this in slightly different ways. *Monster* is factual in its characterization of Lee based on recorded information like trial transcripts, video clips, and letters written to and from Lee in prison. It is also factual in its depiction of the number of times Lee kills her johns (7 altogether), and a number of other more minor details, such as where Lee was finally arrested. But there is one major area where the film depiction is not at all factual, nor does it try to be. In the film, Lee’s motivation to murder is intrinsically tied to her love interest Selby Wall, an entirely made-up character that shares very little in common with
Aileen Wuornos’ real life partner Tyria Moore. This difference may have had something to do with legal concerns, the amount of information available, the degree of willingness or unwillingness on Moore’s part, or even the personal motivations of the filmmakers.

And yet because the most important purpose of the film is to disrupt the love-conquers-all trope, Monster need only fuse Selby with Tyria in the trial at the end of the film. In real life as in the film, Lee was tried first for the murder of Richard Mallory, in which case she pleaded self-defense. Monster does not depict Wournos’ witness stand testimony having already detailed the brutality of her statements in the rape scene itself, but it shows Selby’s cooperation with the police and prosecution as she entreats Lee to confess to the murders. It also depicts Selby/Tyria testifying in court, not on behalf of Lee, but on behalf of the prosecution. In real life, Moore was given immunity from being charged as a co-conspirator to murder, which if convicted would mean life in prison or the death sentence, and from the lesser charge of “Deriving support from the proceeds of prostitution.” And it was in this same trial that the jury rejected Wournos’ self-defense plea, and sentenced her to death. As the film ends, and the police are escorting the hand-cuffed Lee down a hallway and out of the building, Lee’s voice-over returns with a litany of clichés: “Love conquers all. Every cloud has a silver lining. Faith can move mountains. Love will always find a way. Everything happens for a reason. Where there’s life, there’s hope.” In the last scene of the film Lee turns and stares momentarily at the audience. The voiceover ends with, “Oh well, they gotta tell you something.”

And yet even though Monster more explicitly troubles normative conventions of sex, gender, and the popular media fantasies, it falls into much the same trap as Boys Don’t Cry, which is to say that (1) it works against that same sea of media messages that
say otherwise, and (2) it leaves open-ended the way audiences make sense of not only the problems of sex and gender but also their role in the social mechanisms that create those problems. As Paul Wapner writes, “People process experience into action through general conceptions or interpretations of the world” (389). Moreover, “People respond to situations through interpretive categories that reflect a particular understanding of everyday circumstances. Such mediating orientations are cultural in character. They reflect customary, socially transmitted understandings that are embedded in the prevailing values, norms, and modes of discourse” (389). These norms become ideologically embedded in society. David Walsh argues, “If [the filmmakers] had maintained their course and made the story of Teena Brandon’s fate into a wholehearted indictment of American life, which of course is what it naturally tends toward being, the work would not have been well received in their own milieu or by the media” (3). Walsh further argues that the brutal and graphic rape scene “suggests that the filmmakers don’t quite know how to end their story or what to emphasize, so they take the less demanding way out and simply horrify their audience” (3). To say that the rape scene is likely to horrify the audience is true. But that is somewhat different than saying it horrifies them for no reason.

The rape scenes in both Boys Don’t Cry and Monster are explicit, detailed, and methodical in their depictions, and it is unrealistic to imagine them not affecting viewers on a deeply visceral level. The experience of watching these scenes is traumatic, whether or not filmmakers intend otherwise. Such scenes are traumatic to watch in any film, but especially so for one that purports to be “true.” What is the purpose then? And does it outweigh the trauma its audience undergoes? One argument is that the brutality is a
necessary shock used to ground the audience in the material conditions of the ideological consequences surrounding sex and gender. The consequence of non-normative sex and gender behavior is brutality in the form of rape and murder. To return to Walsh, how much more horrifying the audience sit and watch a film like Boys Don’t Cry and valorize Brandon’s character, demonize his assailants, award and applaud the movie as cinematic entertainment, and then do veritably little to change things. Yet what change can any single moviegoer effect? Andrew Ross suggests that “Making a political idea into shared common sense, even among a relatively homogeneous group, is a complex process in which legislation does not simply emerge as a final outcome, elevated above the fray and exuding an air of neutral commonality that makes all other claims seem, by comparison, exceptional and interested” (203). Cultural recognition is part of the step to addressing material inequalities, but it comes slowly and it can be demoralizing and traumatizing in and of itself. Building awareness is an incremental step in that process, and can be a “means to a material end” (216), but it is a hard slog against the culture of fear and threat of violence that the film also reminds us are out there waiting.

**Documentary, True Crime, and the Rise of Docudrama**

So that readings of Boys Don’t Cry and Monster do not devolve into endless questions of fact or fiction and so that they do the kind of work they are capable of doing, which is exposing the way society co-opts sex and gender as a policing function, they need to be situated as part of the culmination of a media trajectory that includes the burgeoning of reality television and the rise of the docudrama. I start by giving a brief overview of what docudramas are and how they emerged as a film genre. Docudramas are an outcropping
of realist film and, I would argue, in essence the filmic version of the nonfiction novel, a
literary genre that originates with the publication of the first true crime novel, Truman
Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, and which is now represented by television programming like
the “Ripped from the headlines” *Law & Order*, and a host of look-alikes and spin-offs.
Docudramas embrace the irony and cognitive dissonance the label suggests, such that
they are unselfconsciously a blend of truth and fiction, a dramatic documentary, a
combination of documentary style and dramatic rendering of historical events. They are
aligned with and named for the documentary itself, a genre which is “based on
documented facts that [are] a matter of record and not just the product of a scriptwriter’s
imagination” (Hampe 124). To make this link to the documentary more obvious,
docudramas sometimes but not always include grainy or hand-held footage or even
documentary-style interviews—where the actor speaks directly to the camera and the
audience sees what appears to be the true, real-time thoughts of the interviewee. It may
even include, as does *Boys Don’t Cry*, word-for-word transcripts of actual interviews in
the film itself. Another prime example would be the film *Infamous*, one of two
docudrama versions of *In Cold Blood*, which includes interview-style footage with the
film characters themselves. Barry Hampe calls docudrama “a television invention,
coined in 1961 to a TV program using actors and scripted dialogue in a dramatic
portrayal of an actual historic event,” but which “Over the years . . . has evolved to mean
almost all dramatic films about actual people or events” (19). In other words,
docudramas are “works of fiction derived from the lives of real people and the history of
real events” (20).
Because a docudrama is in its most basic sense a film based on a true story, the kinds of films that could be included in the docudrama genre may seem excessively broad, so let me further explain why it is important to include Boys Don’t Cry and Monster. In his discussion of the genre as distinct from documentary Hampe claims, “The test of a docudrama is that in it the truth of the real event will always be subordinated to the dramatic needs of the film” (20). Docudramas use some documented and verifiable facts, but they also do not strictly adhere to them. What docudramas all have in common is the filmmakers’ attempts to ascertain or create some kind of truth for the historical event portrayed, even if the docudrama does not tell the story of any specific, real person, and they are hugely popular. In fact, one of the top-grossing movies of all time is arguably a docudrama. The protagonists in the extravagantly produced, action-packed romance Titanic are not based on real people, but the film strives to tell the story of a real event and does so with a backdrop that is accurate and factually documented. The overall storyline consistently coincides with documented historical events, even if the film is largely or primarily fiction. The independent and much-smaller-budget Boys Don’t Cry and Monster are docudramas because of their allegiance to telling what is purportedly true about their protagonists. But unlike Titanic or Capote, they strive to create a more accurate space for the tales of their protagonists not usually afforded by larger commercial film. And in part because they were about real people and released not long after the real life events took place, the documentary quality of Boys Don’t Cry and Monster has more weight to it.

It is the “based on” part of films based on true stories that unavoidably propel them into the contested realm between truth and fiction, for an interrogation of the
category of truth in and of itself, and yield ideal sites of inquiry. They are ideal because
the contestations over truth and reality originally posed to documentary film are even
more appropriate to docudramas that make claims to truth by overtly relying on fiction
and verisimilitude. They are ideal because the contestations over truth claims are at the
surface of the text and can be more readily exposed and interrogated than in realist film
or historical fiction. The questions about truth, reality, and whether we can identify
either or the difference between them, are inexorably hinged to the plot of the film. Yet
whereas questions about plot generally push us into the realm of literary criticism, these
questions are also critiques of the social world. Ironically, what seems like a potential
problem of analyzing docudrama—the loosely-defined boundaries of the genre, the
indefinite limits of nonfiction and fiction—helps demonstrate the extent to which
ideology plays a crucial role in answering these questions. Viewers and filmmakers are
forced to choose what counts as true or at least argue over how much truth matters, and
how much should or should not be part of the film. According to Hampe, this debate has
its roots in documentary filmmaking for specific reasons:

The distinction between truth and reality was an obvious necessary one in the
early days of documentary film. The technology simply didn’t permit much
direct filming of actual events. So a documentary was expected to be true in the
sense that it was based on fact and its accuracy could be verified. But it wasn’t
expected to be real. Most documentaries were re-creations of events, using actors
and written scripts, and were often shot in a studio just like fiction films. (124)
Because it was impossible for technology to capture events happening in real time, and
because the film was a recreation of an event, not the event itself, Hampe holds
technology, or rather the understanding of the limitations of technology, responsible for expectations of truth and reality. “In those days,” he writes, “a documentary was expected to be true, but not necessarily to be real, because reality was usually too fleeting and elusive to be captured by slow film stocks, heavy cameras, and cumbersome, inadequate sound systems (124). Hampe points out the “French chose the term vérité, not réalité” (123) when they named documentary filmmaking. Reality and truth are separate not synonymous concepts.

If it is taken as true that viewers understood the limitations of film technology to capture a real event in the early days of documentaries, surely the same is not true now. If film technology determines or plays a significant role in viewers’ expectations of truth and reality, what do viewers understand to be true or real now in the era of digital filmmaking, cell phones equipped with camera and video, and “reality” television?29 And how do viewers and filmmakers confront, or ignore, the fact that reality does not and never did simply exist on screen, captured by the camera but instead, as Hampe writes, “There is only a high level of symbolic abstraction, which by implication may be made to represent an analog of something that was recorded in the real world” (129). The truth and reality debate may have been decided by the limits of technology for early documentary filmmakers, a debate that is now merely overlooked in docudramas as emanating from that earlier conversation, but there is another explanation that goes beyond cinema vérité, one which speaks more directly to the ability and inability to smooth over contradictions. Rosemary Hennessy explains the role of ideology as it relates to reality this way: “As the medium of social action and the mechanism through which subjects are constructed, ideology produces what can be seen, heard, spoken,
thought, believed, valued—in other words, what counts as socially made ‘reality’” (MF 75). Ideology is influenced by technology, but it is not solely determined by it.

The relationship between true-crime television and the genre of docudrama is more than about content; it is ideological. Docudramas have intensified in popularity since the last decade of the twentieth century as media uses sex, violence, and the grotesque to lure increasingly desensitized viewers. This trend is not an expression of biological need, psychological fantasy, or an accurate representation of America’s “raging” crime scene. Rather, part of its popularity is an ideological distortion brought about by the ruling class’ profiting from the enculturation of widespread fear—a fear exacerbated by the current commodification of terrorism and resulting from neo-imperialism and globalization. It is far from coincidental that reality television has burgeoned since the rescinding of the Fairness Doctrine by the FCC, which enabled public television programming to increase the sex and violence quotient previously restricted to films and private networks. The budgets of reality television programming are miniscule compared to scripted programs that must pay high sums for actors, writers, sets, editing, and so on, which means the profits can be much higher. With its emphasis on violence and crime, reality television is itself a symptom of a culture so alienated from its labor by late capitalism that it looks to television and film for what is “real,” rather than to the obviousnesses of exploitation in the oppressed world around it.

It would be difficult not to get confused by the influx of contradictory television and film messages. Violent crimes in the United States have been, in fact, decreasing for nearly a decade, notably just after the introduction of reality television and the increased popularity of docudramas, but you might never know it because though “Sensational
violent crimes make up far less than 1 percent of all crimes . . . they constitute the majority of crime coverage” (Dyer 87). Making things even more confusing is the way television and film companies compete with one another. Todd Gitlin suggests that in an attempt to retrieve an audience lost to reality television (initially to programs like *Cops* and *The Jerry Springer Show* in the late ’80s and early ’90s, and more recently *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, and any number of shows where strangers eat bugs or marry each other for money), studios offered “on the big screens what the networks would not permit on the small. . . . This meant, among other things, grisly violence” (qtd. in Dyer 76). Basic television then vied for paying cable customers’ attention by reducing censorship standards: “television programmers . . . pruned their ‘standards and practices’ staffs; the deregulatory Federal Communications Commission clammed up; and local news fell all over itself cramming snippets of gore between commercials” (76). The increased portrayal of criminal violence and sex on television continues to up the ante, and Hollywood responds in kind by finding new ways to cash in with greater than ever sex and violence, including (post)modern narrative twists, and appealing to international audiences.

The deregulation of television and film marketing has both directly and indirectly affected the character and impact of film content. To be profitable on the international scene filmmakers must limit the scope and content of their films. For example, “humor,” Dyer explains, “is culturally derived and loses its appeal in translation” because “What’s funny in one part of the world is all but meaningless someplace else” (74). “Other programming genres,” like standard dramas or quirky dramadies, “also lose their international appeal because they contain culture-specific or complex dialogue” (74).
Such films, no matter how good, are not likely to make significant profit in an international market. On the contrary, “market research has shown that sex and violence are the two most profitable forms of content on the international market because they lose the least in translation” (74). It is no wonder then that film and television violence is at an all-time high, not because of demand from the individual psyche or a more brutal modern world, but because of far-ranging profitability potential in the global market. Consider, for instance, that *The Matrix* grossed $171 million in the United States, but its total gross overseas was more than one and a half times that number at $292 million. And *The Matrix* sequels, with production budgets of double the original to have more special effects and longer fight scenes, did far better. Still, it is the previously mentioned docudrama *Titanic* that made $601 million domestically and almost three times as much abroad with $1.8 billion.

By distributing its cinema products abroad, the movie industry is reaping more profits than ever before, much of which correlates to representations of sex and violence. George Gerbner “believes that the current mergers between production and distribution companies have not only resulted in the total control of the world market by our handful of conglomerates but have also caused the multinational monopolies to reformulate all of their content, that aimed at the American market, in the direction of violence, much of it pertaining to crime” (qtd. in Dyer 74-75). Concomitant with the growth in the media industry’s representation of criminal sex and violence as a result of globalization is the increasing privatization of the prison system in the United States and increasing state funds for correctional facilities from the corporately motivated government administrations. But if actual crime is going down, why is there an increase in prisons
and the request for prison funds? Partly because with increasing crime coverage on television, “as crime rates plunged throughout the 1990s . . . two-thirds of Americans believe[d] they were soaring” (Glassner xi). In other words, money goes into incarceration not because there are more criminals or violent crimes, but because of perceptions to the contrary. Dyer contends, “Today’s media saturation with sensational crime content conveys the overall false message that crime is more violent and more pervasive now than ever before” (87). Audiences believe this representation to be an accurate reflection of the ways things really are, which results in a heightened sense of anxiety about the world and the viewer’s place within it. Like Dyer, Barry Glassner explains this effect using Gerbner’s “mean-world syndrome” (44). “Watch enough brutality on TV,” the hypothesis goes, “and you come to believe you are living in a cruel and gloomy world in which you feel vulnerable and insecure” (44). Glassner explains that “In his research over three decades Gerbner found that people who watch a lot of TV are more likely than others to believe their neighborhoods are unsafe, to assume that crimes rates are rising, and to overestimate their own odds of becoming a victim” (44). Often this fear stems primarily from news media’s “disproportionate coverage” (xxi) of crime, atrocity, and death, from “sensationalistic stories designed to increase ratings” (xx). A consistent barrage of such anomalous stories in the news come to be understood as the norm, and the fear induced is both created and legitimated by the apparent authority of the source. One of the many examples of “disproportionate coverage” Glassner provides is this one, which puts a shocking exclamation point on the matter: “between 1990 and 1998, when the nation’s murder rate declined by 20 percent, the number of murder stories on network newscasts increased 600 percent” (xxi).
The causal link between violence and the media and to ideology more generally is not that violence on television creates violent individuals, but that those viewers who think violence is an accurate portrayal of their immediate environment become increasingly fearful and behave in ways to quell their fears. This fear-induced anxiety fosters a growing disconnect with reality, or, to return to Gitlin, “the more violence they watch, the more dangerous they think the world is” and as a reaction “they may therefore support heavy-handed authoritarian responses to crime” (qtd. in Dyer 109). Gerber’s argument about television violence has much the same conclusions. Those who become fearful “may accept and even welcome . . . repressive measures such as more jails, capital punishment, harsher sentences—measures that have never reduced crime but never fail to get votes—if that promises to relieve their anxieties” (qtd. in Glassner 44).

This culture of fear works on an ideological level, so that survivors of the ongoing low-level cultural trauma do not realize their protectors are actually the ones scaring them into submission. Michelle Barrett argues in The Politics of Truth that an individual will “welcome government repression in the form of a larger law-enforcement presence or diminishing protection of personal liberties if such changes are wrapped in promises of increased public safety” (109-110). In other words, this behavior is a direct result of ruling class ideology. It would be a mistake, however, to oversimplify “the media,” nebulous as that term is, as the ruling class, or even to say it is only a matter of the ruling class ideology being somehow transmitted through the news media. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries ideological messages are centralized but pervasive, so pervasive they need not be coordinated. The same news stories are repeated and recycled in multiple outlets at once, and the more things are repeated the more they seem to be
true. The disparity of crime on screen and crime in reality becomes less important than the public outcry for stricter and more comprehensive criminal legislation. Hennessy describes the disconnect between screen and viewer this way: “The social values promoted by the tales of commercial films”—and here I would broaden this to the reality television and docudramas—“offer imaginary representations of reality, allegories by which subjects live, come to identify, and take up their proper places in social life” (*Profit* 145). The “proper place” is one that supports a more rigid morality, tougher laws on crime, greater punishment for criminals, and a general acquiescence to legislation like the Patriot Act or the Defense of Marriage Act.

**It Doesn’t Exactly Work Out That Way**

The connection of the trend toward increased sex and violence produced by neoliberalism and fostered by reality television and docudramas that results in the desire for increased criminal legislation manipulates viewers’ readings of *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster*, which are themselves examples of crime coverage. Hennessy’s critique of the “mythic resonance” (*Profit* 145) of film in her chapter “Sexual Alibis, Colonial Displacements: Materializing in *The Crying Game*” is particularly apt for how the films contribute to and disrupt the expectations of their genres. Hennessy writes, “The cognitive map a film’s viewer produces is not lodged in its particular narrative sequences, images, or structured gazes so much as it is the effect of the social and historical frames of sense-making the spectators (and filmmakers) inhabit” (145). One might argue it is merely coincidental that the period of time in both Brandon’s and Aileen’s lives about which their films focus coincides with the boom of the true crime genre: 1993 for Brandon, 1989-90 for Lee
(though the film also includes a number of flashbacks to her earlier life to show a pattern of neglect and abuse). But it seems more likely that the historical conditions influencing the genre influenced their real-life circumstances as well. Viewers, as can be expected, often overlook that the real-life crimes in both films are culturally produced, ideological effects of social injustice, and most interest and criticism revolves around the details of the story, and instead questions of accuracy and seeming triviality dominate—How could Lana not know Brandon was a girl? “Do you think Aileen forgave Selby?” How much weight did Charlize Theron gain? How did Hilary Swank transform herself for the role? Any compelling film, especially as obviously fraught with social contradictions, is likely to draw such attention. Such questions are not, however, ultimately trivial. Rather, if we read such questions more generously, they indicate the audience’s concern with matters of truth and consequence, albeit in an oblique way. Any viewer mired in ideological distortion, as most of us are to varying extents, still has the sense that there is some conflict between what is and what appears to be. Yet when grasping for ways to unthread the complex grid of messages, they question the truth of matters that go in circles without ever tracing the thread to its source. Viewers are tugging at threads, but at the wrong threads. But this does not make the pursuit of truth seeking futile. Rather it reinforces the need to situate the films as part of their broader cultural and historical scope.

What make Boys Don’t Cry and Monster so valuable for social critique is how they resist and challenge the boundaries of the true-crime genre of which they find themselves a part and therefore how readily the social contradictions can be conveyed for critique. The messages the film tries to convey and which the audience has reasonable and sufficient expectation to believe—“Allegories by which subjects live, come to
identify, and take up their proper places in social life” (Hennessy, Profit 145)—butt up against problematic social realities that the film becomes mired in as a cultural text. Peirce, for instance, wanted viewers to identify with Brandon, and while in many ways that is true, it is also true that Brandon is a thief and liar and as such not courageously being himself. Faced with the cognitive dissonance against a backdrop of social mores, Brandon as “other” outweighs the qualitative transgressions made by the film on the part of gender and sex. Even without the brutal rape, social policing is in place. The balance of social contradictions is thusly weighed out in many other instances between the messages the film tries to impart and the larger social messages the film can and often does impart. These contradictions in the film itself as well as between the film and society are uneasy and complicated. The following is a partial list highlighting the kinds of epistemic struggles the films can expose. For Boys Don’t Cry: love conquers all, except in cases of deviant sexuality, when love will get you killed; gender equals sex except that in reality gender has a complicated relationship to sex and sexuality; transsexuality is not contingent upon medical intervention but has a “natural” and innate biological impetus even though transsexuality as an identity has become linked in complicated ways to mental pathology, medical intervention, and the capitalist proliferation of saleable identities. Monster is in many ways much more straightforward a narrative about the negative outcomes of being socially outcast by gender and sex, but still faces a host of difficult complications: Love does not conquer all, but the love-story structure of the film minimizes the social realities of scenes showing Wournos’ difficulty attempting to get out of prostitution and obtain a legally and socially sanctioned job; sexuality is fluid, except that Lee’s abuse situates her in a social conversation whereby
traumatized women “become gay” as a coping mechanism; Lee is not “naturally” a monster but a human driven to monstrous acts, except that Lee can be read as driven to monstrous acts by desire for love, money, and greed, and not necessarily by rape or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Or consider another kind of contradiction, that in a cultural climate where films loaded with sex and violence are usually financial goldmines, both Boys Don’t Cry and Monster were only meagerly successful at the box-office despite their critical acclaim. Boys Don’t Cry was not financially among the top 100 films of 1999, and Monster finished 84th in 2003 and made slightly more—a rating that is not completely surprising given the overall popularity for the representations of serial murder and serial killers. If the theory holds true that sex and violence “lose the least in translation,” the expectation for a movie with both would be that its profits abroad would be even greater. Monster, however, did less well overseas than it did in the United States and Boys Don’t Cry was not even released overseas. More significantly, in a day and age where sex and violence are glorified, their depictions of sex and violence are deeply disturbing, and should be. The fact that violence in Boys Don’t Cry and Monster is not accepted by the viewers as “representative of the way things are or should be” (Hennessy, Profit 145) is what makes these films notably different from their counterparts. Though it may seem obvious, it is important to examine why the sex and violence in both of these films are so problematic and unsettling.
Sex More Than Violence Will Take Society Apart

Both *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* are difficult films to watch largely because of the brutal and graphic rape scenes. And even though Peirce has said they took care not to brutalize the audience (Fuchs), it is nearly impossible to view the scenes as anything but brutalizing. And yet there is an incongruity here. As discussed previously, more and more commercial films include graphic sex and violence. Even two of the strong female lead films mentioned in the introduction of this chapter are notable in this respect. For instance, in *Kill Bill: Volume 1* Beatrix Kiddo is repeatedly raped before killing her rapist and a number of other people in dramatic fashion, including killing forty-two people by katana and littering the room with limbs in a single scene. *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* shows a horrifyingly brutal rape of its protagonist Lisbeth Salander and then another horrifying revenge rape she perpetrates on her rapist. One might argue that the revenge aspect makes their rapes more bearable, as well as the fact that those commercial films are not docudramas, not based on a real life person, and meant primarily as entertainment. And to some extent these reasons do act as a balm to the trauma depicted, but it is more complicated than that.

The complication revolves around the relationship between sex and violence as represented by film and media. In the documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, Kirby Dick argues that the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) restricts sexual content more than violent content. Peirce is among the filmmakers Dick interviews because the ratings board had initially given *Boys Don’t Cry* a rating of NC-17. Because the studio would not release the film with that designation, Peirce inquired as to what drove the movie from an R to an NC-17 and found out three main scenes prompted the
Two were about sex and one was about sexualized violence. “After Brandon goes down on Lana,” Peirce explains, “he comes up and he wipes the cum off his mouth.” The ratings board objected, and when Peirce inquired into the specific problem of this particular action, they responded, “Well, we don’t really know but that’s really offensive” (This Film). In the interview, Peirce seems exasperated. “So I shoot Brandon in the head and I do all these things to him and that’s fundamentally ok, but there’s a problem here,” she says, wiping her own mouth. The second part of the objection to the sex scene between Brandon and Lana was that Lana’s orgasm lasts too long. Peirce surmises the objection is “totally about Lana’s pleasure, and there’s something about that that’s scaring them, that’s unnerving them.” In an argument reminiscent of Mulvey’s “male gaze,” Peirce contends,

. . . in a construct where most movies are written by men, directed by men, they’re mostly the male experience. So I think that, even in sex scenes, I think that it’s from a male perspective. So I don’t think the focus is female pleasure. I think female pleasure is unnatural, I think female pleasure is scary, in the kind of narrative setting. So I think if you’re a woman who understands female pleasure and understands it from a female perspective you’re probably going into a terrain that’s unfamiliar. And I think generally the unfamiliarity is what breeds the NC-17. (This Film)

There are no published parameters for MPAA ratings, nothing to indicate specifics of why one film receives one rating over another. The ratings board does not have to explain the rating it assigns any movie, and when it does, it can be puzzling. For
example, the *American Psycho* was given an NC-17 initially because the ratings board objected to “the overall tone of the film” (*This Film*).

The other objection made by the MPAA ratings board about *Boys Don’t Cry* was the rape scene, but in particular the anal rape scene. “They wanted me to cut it out,” Peirce explains, but she refused citing that it was “just inherent to the movie” (*This Film*). And yet here Peirce’s logic is complicated. It is “inherent” if the movie strives to graphically depict Brandon’s rape as it actually happened. The rape scene of the film follows the crime report details of the actual rape. It is not sex or violence, or even sexualized violence the ratings board found overly disturbing, but a particular kind of sexualized violence. Why else would they object not to the vaginal rape but only to the anal rape?

The opposition seems to be a uniquely American problem. According to author of *Media Ratings* Joel Federman, The MPAA ratings system is not a universal standard in its assessment of sex and violence, and in fact “the movie ratings systems in Europe have the exact opposite view. Much more open about sexual depictions, much more restrictive about violent depictions than the MPAA” (*This Film*). Newsweek film critic David Ansen argues that “What strikes you immediately about the MPAA, and I’m sure I’m the 300th person to say this, is how much more they seem to be concerned about sex than they are about violence,” and that in particular, “If it’s same gender sex they seem to often have a bigger problem than if it’s a man and a women.” Mary Harron, whose *American Psycho* was objected to for “overall tone,” takes this argument a step further by suggesting “It’s always a fear that sex in some ways will dissolve the social bonds. That sex more than violence, unleashed sex, will take the society apart. Of course that focus
varies. Now it’s unleashed gay sex will take society apart” (*This Film*). But is it really a uniquely American problem since American films are distributed globally and influence globally? Kirby Dick acknowledges the relationship between capitalism and violence skeptically: “as far as the MPAA is concerned,” he says, “it is a violent society, you know, violent material sells. That is no reason to censor sex.” He added that when a ratings board member was “asked why they restrict gay sex more than straight sex [the] response was pretty astounding.” The board member said, “We don’t set the values, we reflect them,” something Dick found extremely problematic, even “horrifying,” saying, “If it was a racist value would they reflect that? If it was anti-Semitic would they reflect that? It’s basically an admission that they’re participating in a homophobic structure” (*This Film*).

But again, it is not violence or sex per se, not even homophobia per se, but sex and violence in combination. What unsettles the viewer is the struggle to smooth over social contradictions of what is happening in society now so that it seems like it is part of the universal mechanism of violence. There is nothing that can be done so I don’t want to think about it. When faced with a graphic, brutal, too-close-to-home reality, the programmed response is to ignore, sidetrack, or reinterpret a more bearable representation. The action of ideology is to enable and ensure the subject’s recognition of itself as a subject and it is a process that works through securing the obvious. In one sense, ideology works by making the subject recognize itself in a certain specific way and simultaneously to construe that specificity as the obvious or nation one for itself (Barrett 100).
Still left is the question of what purpose the brutal rape scenes serve. The real life rapes, as all rapes, were traumatizing. The graphic portrayals were no doubt traumatic for the filmmakers in many ways. And there really is no way around the fact that the scenes themselves do brutalize the audience. Whether the purpose of brutalizing them is sufficient is another matter. For victims of sexual violence, the rape scenes can trigger past trauma and in so doing re-victimize them. For those who have not experienced rape and/or those who do not know someone who has, which in reality is a much lower statistic than most would probably realize, the brutality of the rape scene must be digested and come to terms with. For those who have not experienced rape, those who would benefit most from awakening to the brutal reality, what this usually means, ironically, is that it will be downplayed as something that happens to someone else, someone who deserved it, in some place far away. In other words, the trauma is refigured, distorted, and somehow tempered. And where sleight of hand does not succeed, ideology takes over:

By producing a set of cultural “obviousnesses,” ideology assures the continuation of the dominant representations of the real in a culture, without the requirement of “proof.” That, for example, “experience” is obviously the ultimate test of “truth” or that all phenomena in the world are obviously made intelligible by “cause and effect” are among such ideological “obviousnesses.” By establishing uncontestable (because obvious) truths, ideology postulates a world that has always already been there and will always already be there, a world of unalterable truths and unchangeable verities to which the individual must consent since these
truths and verities are the effects of “laws of nature.” (Zavarzadeh and Morton 49)

Attention shifts from the tale of the film to avoid recognition that violence against women is not a natural or biological drive, leading viewers, and even actors and filmmakers, to focus their energies elsewhere. Monster is marketed by its production company as “searing social commentary, road movie, and, most profoundly, as love story. Theron’s ferocious, fully-committed work—astounding physical transformation matched by unerring psychological acuity—is sure to surprise audiences familiar with her work” (“Synopsis”; emphasis added). Even filmmakers are not immune: Peirce describes Boys Don’t Cry as a “tragic love story” that is “fundamentally structured like Romeo and Juliet” (Shatkin). The representation of the movies as iconic love story or as incredible transformation of the lead actors overshadows the narrative, which in both films is remarkably unsensational for the genre.

Peirce herself makes clear that she went to great lengths not to sensationalize Boys Don’t Cry, particularly the rape scene, explaining, “I didn't want to brutalize the audience and didn't want the violence to be anonymous. I wanted it to be very personal and up close; I wanted people to understand the mechanics of hate” (Shatkin). The scene was not part of the gratuitous sex and violence that docudramas usually capitalize on, and yet Peirce’s further explanation is revealing:

When I originally cut the rape scene (which actually involves two rapes in a row) in real-time, audiences were terrified because they thought Brandon was going to get killed. Then I realized if I show it as a flashback, they'll know Brandon survives, yet they'll watch it from his perspective, which is what I wanted. Also,
audiences cannot watch two rapes; emotionally, they can only sustain one. The first rape is cut in a way that forces viewers to experience it yet doesn't violate them. (Shatkin)

Peirce constructed the rape scene to immerse the viewers in the *experience* of what it must have been like for Brandon is an ideological explication in and of itself, the kind Zavarzadeh and Morton describe. Brandon, in the film, and more importantly, in real life, does get killed, so it would only matter that he get killed during the rape scene if the audience—and filmmakers—cannot as readily deal with the rape itself. Furthermore, sexual assault is primarily a result of misogyny, and in Brandon Teena’s case intensified into homophobia, which itself is a classic symptom of exploitation. Violence against women is at the root of the identity masquerade, outing, and subsequent murder of Brandon Teena. Ideology deflects recognition of sexual assault as a product of social inequalities, gender as social construction, and love as a heterosexist, biological imperative between one man and one woman.

The United States has one of the most comprehensive sexual offences laws in the world and offers the longest and harshest prison terms for convicted offenders, but even with the outcry for more personal protection and harsher legislation at the expense of personal freedom, the numbers do not add up. According to INTERPOL, there were 90,491 rapes reported in the United States in 2001 out of a total population of 284,796,887. If we were to believe this number, that would be a miniscule percentage of the population, even accounting for distribution of sex. Linda Fairley, author of *Sexual Violence: Our War Against Rape*, explains that “sexual assault crimes remain the most under-reported cases within the criminal justice system” and that “most
professionals estimate that more than half of the sex offenses committed still go unreported today” (270). In some countries, even fewer are reported. For example, the number of rapes reported in El Salvador during 1999 was zero, a statistical improbability.

Rape statistics in general vary greatly, and it is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to gauge an accurate assessment of the problem. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, in 2001, there were 248,250 victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault,\(^4\) which is a 157,759 difference from INTERPOL. “One out of every six American women have been the victims of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime” and “one in every eight rape victims were male,”\(^4\) numbers that, as disturbing as they are, do not reveal the increased risk of rape for minorities, those who make under $7,500 annually, or sex workers—who are the least likely to report rape and sexual assault given the criminalization of their jobs. For whereas “In no other category of crime does the victim approach the criminal justice system with lower expectations of a successful resolution than in the area of sex offenders” (Fairstein 67), this becomes disturbingly true for sex workers like Aileen Wournos. Fairstein suggests, “The manner in which rape cases are investigated and prosecuted has a profound influence on the enormous number of people who are victimized by sex offenders” (269).\(^4\) The policing mechanism does more to influence the proportion of persons who come forward to report crimes rather than the actual victimization rate of rape. It also puts further pressure on filmmakers’ decisions to try to produce a rape “experience” for viewers, when, given the numbers, many in the audience have experienced it for themselves or at least know someone who has.\(^4\)
Crime data is most often used as incentive to police rather than deter crime, but rape itself has become—and in many ways always has been—a policing function. As a policing function, it is understandable that filmgoers and filmmakers cannot bear to acknowledge the horror that it is a social effect and not a natural given. But the policing function works because it silences discussion, it prevents analysis of how its mechanisms operate in any given time period and how they are perpetuated as if continuous and inevitable. As Kalí Tal writes in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, “The story of the raped female body is quite literally assumed to be ‘unspeakable’” (155). She explains:

Rape was originally conceived of as a crime against property—women were presumed to belong to particular men (fathers, brothers, husbands) who had an interest in their reproductive life and financial worth—and the raped women was always spoken for. At issue in a rape case was a woman’s lowered value (as “damaged goods”) and the loss of face suffered by an owner who could not protect (or who could not control) his property. The claim that women have a right to be protected from rape as persons is a recent development in Western history. The notion that female voices are worthy of being heard and evaluated on their own merits, rather than dismissed out of hand, is also relatively new. The testimony of rape survivors undermines the basis of rape-as-property-violation metaphors. . . . (155)

*Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* testify that not all film depictions of sex and violence mean major profits, and that social understandings of sex and gender are not set in stone. As we shall see again in Chapter 4, the power of the unspeakable is in its disruption of
ideology, which is something silenced in a number of ways and from a variety of fronts. And yet *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster* as ideological disruption need not be silenced by the sea of cultural messages about fitting into the framework of normative society when situated as part of the historical commodification of traumatic identity.
Chapter 4

“What She Go and Do That For”:

Trauma, Myth, and Monstrous Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

“What she go and do that for? On account of a beating? Hell, he’d been beat a million times and he was white.”

~ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

“There must be something terribly compelling about gruesome tales of sadistic moms.”

~ Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear*

Paired with *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* sets the stage for an intriguing social commentary about “how intense the moral panic over motherhood became in the 1990s” (Glassner 105).

Published in 1987 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, *Beloved* has become a cornerstone of American literature. Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, Morrison has become one of the most prominent authors of our time, and arguably one of the most important novelists of the twentieth century. Bill Moyers began his 1994 interview with the Nobel laureate with the question, “What, if you were writing for the rest of the country, would you use as a metaphor for the inner city today?” Without hesitation, Morrison responded with a single word: “Love” (Morrison, “Toni Morrison”). The subject of love is one of the most central, pervasive, and complex themes in her oeuvre, be it romantic or platonic love, love of self or love of country, or the ideal, self-sacrificing, and unconditional love associated with another issue of monumental import in Morrison’s work: motherhood and mothering. In the same Moyers interview,
Morrison explains it was in writing *Beloved* that she “began to think about, really, motherhood. . .” Society often expects mothers to give of themselves in every way possible, even to the extreme of having no life or purpose outside of the motherhood role. And yet there is troubling contradiction of mothers having to be both everything and nothing at once, a contradiction keenly problematized in Morrison’s most iconic work. *Beloved* is a viscerally powerful narrative of motherhood that illuminates a more insidious kind of cultural sadism in the unspoken trauma of racism and slavery. The novel is inspired by the real life story of runaway slave Margaret Garner who, upon being tracked down by slave catchers, killed her daughter and tried to kill her other three children. Abolitionists attempted to have Garner tried for murder as a way of proving personhood for slaves, but instead she “was tried for stolen property [under the Fugitive Slave Act], convicted and returned to that same man” (Moyers 272), and what became of her lost to history. Garner is reinvented in *Beloved* as the main character Sethe, who is not returned to slavery but instead lives in Reconstruction-era Ohio isolated from the once tightly knit black community who see her actions as terrifying, prideful, and, according to fellow Sweet Home plantation slave Paul D, evidence of a motherly love that is “too thick” (Morrison, *Beloved* 193). The crux of the novel is Sethe’s and her remaining daughter Denver’s haunting by Beloved, the ghost of the daughter Sethe kills. Beloved, however, is not your typical ghost. She is, at least apparently, a ghost-made-flesh who literally walks out of the water to trouble the lives of those residing at 124 Bluestone Road. Questions abound about whether Beloved is a figment of the imagination or the physical manifestation of the “crawling already” (110) baby whose throat Sethe slits with a handsaw in the grisly and chilling woodshed scene. As the
relationship between the three women grows confusing and toxic, the community women intervene to perform a kind of exorcism, banishing a startlingly pregnant Beloved into the ether along with any certainty of moral rectitude. The novel draws to a close with classical Morrisonian ambiguity, the final chapter paradoxically proclaiming the preceding events as “not a story to pass on” (324).

The work of Morrison as both author and scholar continues to offer insight in regard to the cultural trauma she explores in Beloved. The critical arguments Morrison made for the inclusion, accommodation, and examination of African-American literature into the literary canon may now seem passé, even a bit ironic given Morrison’s now canonical stature, but many of these arguments are still very much applicable, if not urgent, for a variety of reasons. For one, Morrison’s emphasis on the role of critical scholarship underscores the importance of culture study and of humanities departments to do such work. This is no small issue in the wake of cuts to higher education, and the precedent of the State University of New York at Albany—where Morrison was once an instructor—cutting entire humanities departments under the guise of budget saving measures. For another, determinations about what counts as worthy of study remain a vitally important practice. Determinations like these continue to matter in not only academia but also in society at large, partly because what is deemed implicitly unworthy of study contributes to the social and systemic invalidation of entire groups of people. And finally, Morrison’s arguments are particularly useful for studying Beloved for the ways the canon wars conversation continues to permeate its literary criticism even now. Teasing out these threads helps provide a fuller understanding of Beloved as a small
albeit powerful piece that highlights not only important issues in past American history but also particular and pressing contemporary social trends.

Morrison’s understanding of American literature, the way it shaped her own writing, and the impact society and culture have on authors in general further illuminates the role *Beloved* has as a representative text of the late twentieth century. In a 1989 interview, Moyers expresses astonishment that “in the period of traumatic conflict over abolition and slavery that the American novelists [of the Nineteenth century] were not dealing with those issues.” He asks if she can explain why black people don’t “show up” in the literature of the day, to which Morrison responds, “they do, they show up. They’re everywhere,” but they show up in the “power of blackness,” “the dark symbols,” “the haunting.” This haunting, like with *Beloved*, attests to the ways “writers,” as Morrison says, “are informed by the major currents of the world,” regardless of whether they consciously or unconsciously mean to do so (Moyers 264-65). The idea that “Novelist writers are informed by the major currents of the world” (265) is a fitting corollary to Morrison’s Tanner Lecture argument that “much of the research and analysis has rendered speakable what was formerly unspoken and has made humanistic studies, once again, the place where one has to go to find out what’s going on” (Morrison, “Unspeakable” 8).

Though many wish to believe we have moved beyond the arguments she made in the late Eighties, supposing we are now a post-race, post-feminist society, Morrison’s emphasis on the importance of the role of the literary critic and humanities as the domain of culture study has renewed relevance. As Morrison writes in the foreword to *Beloved*, “I would invent [Garner’s] thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true
in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women’s ‘place’ (xvii). Examining contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women’s place now, *Beloved* too takes on renewed relevance. Coming out of a period of feminist backlash designed to disavow continued and pervasive inequalities in the structural fabric of American society, the cultural trauma of *Beloved* helps to explain how traumatic events come to be mythologized, often in contradictory ways. Unlike *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Monster*, which are often interrogated for accuracy to their real-life counterparts, Morrison is more concerned with “emotional, interior emotional life of the enslaved” overlooked “in the interests of focusing scrupulously on verifiable facts” (Brogan 62). By breaking with and amplifying historical reality, *Beloved* provides unique testimony to the ways trauma is connected to ongoing inequities and systemic oppression.48

Like with novelist writers, currents of culture equally inform literary critics, and surveying their critiques puts in clearer focus the popular social and cultural preoccupations a novel taps into.49 Critical literature about *Beloved* generally falls into two categories: (1) readings about haunting, which are often tied to examinations of the historical effects of slavery and the concept of the “unspeakable,” and (2) readings about motherhood, which are often steeped in canon war arguments. Both categories of readings invariably hinge upon an interpretation of trauma as either individual or cultural. And though many overlap into both categories at once, readings often ignore a valuable relationship between them. This relationship is a complex but reciprocal one, whereby how one understands personal experience determines and is contingent upon how one understands the role of motherhood. For readings of *Beloved*, the more the focus situates
personal experience as either primarily or exclusively individual (even if not entirely unfettered by social and structural hierarchies—such as racism, sexism, and classism), the more likely motherhood is interpreted as consuming, shackling, and essentially traumatic to human autonomy. The more personal experience is viewed as integral to the social and cultural, the more likely motherhood is interpreted as liberating and as a survival mechanism to traumatic experience.

This chapter examines the relationship among literary criticisms of Beloved that focus on haunting and motherhood to show a common but largely overlooked history, one exemplified by feminist interventions to the literary canon wars during the economic turn towards neoliberalism. It is this history that illuminates how both of these critical categories share an implicit if uneasy connection to mythology and monstrous motherhood. Read through a trauma studies lens, haunting in Beloved is not only about slavery and murder but also about how motherhood, and black motherhood in particular, becomes a displacement for structural injustices. Examining the overlap in these readings makes transparent an entrenched connection to feminist backlash that often invokes the fear of a black woman claiming ownership of her own body, let alone the right over the children she bears from it, as terrifying. Read together, one can see the ways the representation of the monstrous feminine has become erroneously ubiquitous, or, in other words, why so many people believe “it’s always the mother’s fault.”

**Haunting, Slavery, and the Unspeakable**

“That Beloved is a ghost story is well known” (Franco 416), but, although it may not be as purposefully cryptic as with Morrison’s discussion of Nineteenth century literature, the
haunting is much more than merely a ghost story. Haunting in *Beloved* has a mythic resonance that not only harkens back to the collective imagination and ingrained elements of the human psyche that have always existed but also to what is happening now.

*Beloved* the character haunts her family and community; *Beloved* the novel haunts its readers, by reflecting contemporary social anxieties about the lingering trauma of slavery, including the ways traumatic experience continues to be ignored, downplayed, and misunderstood. It is not entirely surprising then that it was not before 1987, one hundred thirty years after Margaret Garner’s tragedy and one hundred twenty-two years after the emancipation proclamation, that American culture would embrace and even celebrate an interrogation of the traumatic effects of racism and slavery, after which Morrison’s novel would emblazon the phrase “unspeakable things unspoken” in the cultural imaginary.

Like the slave catcher in the novel who cannot begin to comprehend why Sethe would “go and do that for,” killing her daughter over what he believes only “On account of a beating,” we continue to be largely ignorant about the precipitants and debilitating outcomes of both individual and cultural trauma, especially for women and mothers.

Because it is nearly impossible to read *Beloved* without connecting it to the historical effects of slavery and traumatic experience, much of its literary criticism focuses on haunting. Whether or not it is deliberately examined as trauma studies, much of this criticism is also about individual and/or cultural trauma. The common ground here lies at the heart of trauma studies itself: “the problem of how to represent what is experienced as ‘unspeakable’” (Brogan 63). The concept of the unspeakable—something so terrible, so shameful, so horrifying it can scarcely be named let alone talked about—and the ways it is synonymous with large scale traumatic experience is
foundational to *Beloved* and one of the reasons critics have referred to it as “a Holocaust book” (Demetrakopoulos 54). *Beloved* is an ideal trauma studies text because it offers a variety of avenues to explore the often mystifying interconnections between personal traumatic experience and large-scale, or cultural, traumatic experience.

Morrison’s deliberation on the unspeakable in her “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” Tanner Lecture is a revised formulation of one of the most enigmatic parts of the novel itself. 124 Bluestone Road has shifted from the “quiet” of Book I to the “loud” of Book II. After being shown the newspaper clipping by Stamp Paid, Paul D has moved out, leaving Sethe, Denver, and Beloved to themselves in a strange sort of reverie.

“Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house,” Morrison writes, “recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (*Beloved* 235). The following four chapters of the novel, which start, “I am Beloved, she my daughter” (236), “Beloved is my sister” (242), and “I am Beloved and she is mine” (248, 253), are a swirl of stream-of-consciousness narratives, first by Sethe, then Denver, then Beloved, and then all three in tandem, in which they individually and collectively attempt to understand and explain the atrocity of the shed and its aftermath. One of most powerful parts of the novel and this section is that of Beloved’s personal narrative, which is at once both cryptic and graphic in its intimation of the cruelty of Middle Passage. The section does not follow typical prose form or standard grammatical structure, reading more like a pastiche or imagistic poem, much of which readers must struggle to make sense of, such as Beloved’s explanation of moldy bread as “sea-colored” or teeth as “pretty white points” or white slave traders as “men without skin” (249). It is unclear where she is geographically, in the grave after her
death, in the stream where she emerges after her dramatic re-birth, or on a slave ship: “in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men” (250).

And what is “a hot thing” (248, 249, 250, 250, 251, 252) Beloved keeps referring to, a branding iron, the suffocating heat of bodies in the belly of the ship, the rage of retribution for her own murder? The narrative can be interpreted as Morrison’s attempt to show Beloved’s childlike grasp of language, thus reminding us that she was only two years old when killed: “how can I say things that are pictures,” it begins (248). But as a whole, the narrative discohesion mirrors the deleterious effects of traumatic experience on cognitive function, particularly in regards to recall, comprehension, and fixation.

This discohesion helps explain why, for example, the trauma of Middle Passage seems so inconceivable. After all, in addition to the daunting reality that slaves were seen as commodities and not victims whose personal accounts were important, a major consequence of trauma is that those who survived could not put their unspeakable experience into words. As Morrison herself points out, “no slave society in the history of the world wrote more—or more thoughtfully—about its own enslavement” (Morrison qtd. in Brogan 62). Details of atrocities remaining unwritten and “repeated references in the narratives to ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’ indicate that the authors elided the most repulsive details of their experience at least partly in deference to popular tastes and literary convention, a self-censorship rendering many aspects of slavery (particularly sexual abuse) unspeakable” (Brogan 63). As discussed in previous chapters, part of the shame and fear trauma victims so often feel—as if they have brought their victimization on themselves—comes from not being able to understand what they have been through or
why they went through it, from not being able to remember it all coherently to not being able to forget the snippets and flashes of impartial memories, and from not being able to give voice to the reality of the experience (such as when a rape victim cannot bring herself to say, out loud, “I was raped”). What is inimitably displayed in Beloved is the way this individual trauma is mirrored in society as a kind of collective inability to wrap one’s mind around the immense scope of the legacy of slavery. Due to the relative ease in examining a single person’s actions, attention often centers on the individual instead of on systemic injustice. Figuring the unspeakable as primarily individual thus sets up a scenario all too familiar, where Sethe comes to be blamed for the untenable position slavery, racism, and exploitation put her in.

Beloved draws on and situates Morrison’s work among scholars also struggling with the concept of the unspeakable. Years before Beloved was published, trauma studies scholar Anne McClintock describes the effect of the unspeakable as something that “creates a deep confusion, a kind of panic which can be warded off only by adopting the most extreme of defensive measures” (McClintock, “Unspeakable” 42). She writes, “we can live with the gap between what we know and what we imagine we know ‘so long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes’ . . . But the moment it speaks, the moment it attempts to capture its condition in words, ‘this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments’” (44). This fragmentary existence is a kind of cognitive gap in meaning, much like that of traumatic experience. Significant here is “that one has here not so much a psychological universal as a recurrent ideological trauma, historically occasioned, when a particular tradition of thought is brought face to face with conditions now discovered by historical change to be utterly
unaccountable” (46). What this means is that “a colonial culture is one which has no memory” (Jacobson qtd. in McClintock, “Unspeakable” 46). McClintock’s theory of colonization as traumatic memory loss helps lay the groundwork for the unspeakable in *Beloved* to be read as both individual and cultural trauma.

Scholars who examine the unspeakable in *Beloved* directly expand on the definitions of the unspeakable and how it functions in relation to American slavery and its ongoing historical repercussions. A brief survey of such work demonstrates how focusing on individual trauma, even though essential to understanding cultural trauma, can inadvertently hinder the process. In *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America*, Naomi Mandel defines the unspeakable as “the rhetorical invocation of the limits of language, comprehension, representation, and thought on the one hand, and a deferential gesture toward atrocity, horror, trauma, and pain on the other” (4).

Although she writes about trauma as cultural, when writing about *Beloved*, the unspeakable is presented first and foremost as traumatic silencing on the individual level. Trauma victims, she posits, are rendered mute by the desire to escape traumatic memory, and the silence, which includes deliberate attempts to forget, is enforced by the shame, fear, and guilt often associated with traumatizing acts. Mandel argues that *Beloved*, demonstrating a dislocation of identity from the physical body through traumatic silence, explains how victims become complicit in their own subjugation. “Sethe is haunted,” according to Mandel, “not by the murdered child but by herself. . . (205). Even as Mandel’s theory of complicity reinforces my arguments in previous chapters about the ways trauma victims act in ways that work against their best interests, with *Beloved* something else becomes clear. Mandel’s argument places Sethe-
as-individual above and entirely separate from Sethe-as-mother. While such a move could be seen as a critical act of women’s liberation in the venue of second-wave feminism, placing individual autonomy over social relationships, it acts to detach the relationship between individual and cultural trauma. Therefore, even though it counters her overall premise, reading Beloved this way moves it out of the realm of cultural trauma.

Kathleen Brogan argues, similar to Mandel but more in the vein McClintock suggests, that the novel’s haunting is a representation of historical silencing and works to reinvigorate the cultural heritage that was destroyed, lost, or limited for victims of slavery. In her aptly named book Cultural Haunting, Brogan argues Beloved acts as a burial that performs ritual mourning. Brogan explains that the unspeakable is often understood as a lack of documentation, a literal unspoken and unwritten account of traumatic experience, but accounts of slavery show how this is not the case. Brogan’s argument about Beloved serving as narrative reburial is akin to the testimonial impetus central to trauma studies and the importance to account for that which society strives to ignore and forget. But the act of testifying is a public one requiring participation exceeding the singular individual. The goal of testimony is to share a burden too overwhelming for one person alone and without the community the desired resolution is limited, and this is one of the main reasons Brogan sees Beloved as cultural testimony. That Beloved is an “imaginative construction of a lost, unrecorded history” (Brogan 63) is an implicit argument for the ways cultural trauma relies on individual testimonies to make sense. And yet cultural testimony is not only a function of the novel (and readers) alone, but also of the novel and critiques together as a joint operation: Beloved in
representing the unspeakable and the critiques in explaining what the representation means.

Motherhood Through the Canon Wars

In no small part, the way critiques of *Beloved* often explain the unspeakable, and therefore the relationship between individual and cultural trauma, is through examining the role of motherhood. Motherhood as a term is commonly used to mean both the biological act of childbearing and the social act of childrearing. But because this unproblematic linkage cannot stand in *Beloved*, not with the cruel reality of slavery and the dehumanizing design of “property that reproduced itself without cost” (Morrison, *Beloved* 269). Hence what readings of motherhood in *Beloved* predominantly show are the ways motherhood itself becomes as the site of social struggle. The novel confronts this divide with slave women like grandma Baby Suggs who had eight children, and “Every one of them gone […] Four taken, four chased, and all . . . worrying somebody’s house into evil” (6). And women like Sethe’s mother, who nursed her only a few weeks before returning to work in the fields, and who, on the voyage to America, “threw them all away” save Sethe (74), “all” meaning the babies she bore having been raped repeatedly by whites on the slave ship during Middle Passage. And women like Ella, who “had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by ‘the lowest yet’” (305).

Critical examinations of motherhood in *Beloved* range from motherhood itself as a form of trauma to motherhood as liberation from traumatic experience. Interpreted as a kind of trauma, motherhood can be seen as something that destroys autonomy.
Motherhood becomes something that prevents the individual self from functioning on its own, the “too thick” love (Morrison, Beloved 193) that Paul D accuses Sethe of, and that which prevents her from being her own “best thing” (322). Morrison herself has said that motherhood “was the most liberating thing that ever happened to [her]” (Moyers 270), and as a kind of liberation, motherhood is the motivational force compelling survival, and what enables Sethe to escape from the Sweet Home plantation. It would have been easier to give up, to have her brain shut off like her husband Halle’s after witnessing her brutal assault. “Other people went crazy,” she thinks, “why couldn’t she?” (Morrison, Beloved 83). Sethe outright refuses to sink into traumatic paralysis because she knows her three children are “chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio” (84). “All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl,” Sethe tells Paul D when he shows up at 124 Bluestone road years later, “Nobody was going to nurse her like me” (19). In effect, Beloved seems to suggest that what keeps Sethe alive despite traumatic experience is her belief that her children need her breast milk to survive, that she as mother must survive to ensure their survival. Sethe cannot bear to “draw breath without [her] children” (239-40).

Readings of motherhood in Beloved reveal not only disparate arguments on traumatic motherhood and their relationship to history but also the ways in which canon war arguments play an important role in the critical discourse. Part of the feminist response to the canon wars was to reclaim stories of strong female figures, which came about along with the rekindling of interest in mythology popularized in the West by the likes of Joseph Campbell. Campbell’s approach to mythology gained broad appeal in the States; and yet, as liberal as his work seemed, it still tended to be read through an overtly masculinist lens. Texts like The Women’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets,
*The Woman's Companion to Mythology, When God Was a Woman*, as well as feminist projects like *The Dinner Party*, countered masculinist readings of goddess myths by forwarding a more feminine-centric if not feminist perspective. That early comparative readings of *Beloved* included connections to Demeter, Persephone, the Oedipal triangle and so on reflects this trend. The limitation of these comparative readings, however, is that the connections are almost exclusively to Greek mythology. Morrison herself has even said, “Margaret Garner didn’t do what Medea did and kill her children because of some guy” (Peach 109).⁶⁰

Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, writing about *Beloved* at the height of the canon wars, is one of the early critics who made connections to Greek mythology, arguing, “maternal bonds can stunt or even obviate a woman’s individuation or sense of self” (51).⁶¹ In her essay, motherhood itself is a kind of trauma and the novel demonstrates the “cruel absurdity of maternal passion” (54), a passion which epitomizes Mother Nature gone wrong. Demetrakopoulos focuses on the breakdown of self as a consequence of obsessive motherhood, positing slavery as “the atrocity of historical time,” and motherhood as the killer of the capital “S” self, or, as she writes, *Beloved* “examines the death of the maternal in a woman so that her Self might live” (58). For Demetrakopoulos, maternal bonds figuratively and literally devour a woman’s autonomy. She does so by linking Sethe to the destructive, monstrous mother who devours selfhood. But Demetrakopoulos focuses solely on the Western preoccupation with the negative, terrifying representations of Demeter/Persephone, Kore, and Kali rather than examining the Eastern balance of both creative and destructive elements. Because this balance is
foundational to feminist reclamations of strong female figures like *The Dinner Party*, it is worth a brief diversion to look at Judy Chicago’s installation more closely.

*The Dinner Party* is an epitome of the ways feminists set forth to reclaim stories of strong female figures. Designed to figuratively set a place at the table for women’s stories overlooked and under-emphasized in history, it has been called “an important icon of 1970s feminist art and a milestone in twentieth-century art” (“Exhibitions”).

Included among the thirty-nine place settings, in a departure from its catalogue of historical and mythological women in Western civilization, is Kali, one of the goddesses invoked by Demetrakopoulos. Chicago’s reasons for the departure were “complicated,” and because of the significance Kali will serve later in this chapter, those reasons are quoted at length:

Kali, an ancient Indian goddess, provides a rather dramatic representation of what has been considered the destructive aspect of the Mother Goddess. I felt compelled to deal with such a figure because the idea that powerful women are harmful is deeply ingrained in present-day society, and I believe it is a result of the distorted mythology we have inherited. I wanted to represent, explore, and transform an archetypal symbol of the female as devourer/destroyer, and I chose Kali for that purpose. She is always represented as fierce, cruel, and bloodthirsty.

(Chicago 59)

Including Kali in *The Dinner Party* was designed, according to Chicago, to reclaim a “unified and venerated” image of the life process, one that emphasized life and death as indivisible, rather than the “separate and terrifying entity” Kali and the Goddess in general came to stand for in Western culture (60). The changing emphasis on the
destroyer aspect indicated to Chicago and her researchers the transition to a “rigidly patriarchal family system” and the decline in status of women resulting from women being “placed under the complete control of men,” resulting in such atrocities as “infanticide of females, polygamy, child-marriage, and eventually widow-burning. . .” (60). Demetrakopolous’s uncritical usage of only the negative destroyer aspects of Kali becomes even more problematic in this light.

Teresa N. Washington’s more contemporary essay, “The Mother-Daughter Àjé Relationship in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” comes out of the tradition of those like Barbara Smith and Deborah McDowell who called for a Black feminist criticism, one which acknowledged the unique features of black women’s writing and heritage. Beginning with Morrison’s own disappointment in critics who cannot seem to understand her work, Washington reads motherhood in Beloved through the “Africana theoretical perspective,” specifically in relation to Yoruba, a culture she believes better complements Morrison’s art. ^63^ Washington’s interpretation yields a complex relationship between individual and community, self and other, and advocates the way a woman’s children are, as Sethe believes, her “best thing.” Beloved, she argues, “represents Sethe’s best self” as well as the best self of “that of each of the communal women” who come to exorcise her ghost at the end of the novel, and ultimately “the best self of all Africana people” (Washington 185). The self yields to community because “Beloved, as an all-in-one Deity, is too complicated, too brilliant, and far too painful for existence” (185).

Washington argues for childbearing as ideally an act of sacred creation, and motherhood in Beloved is an argument for consciousness-raising. And yet, in order to make this case, Washington’s position is essentially that motherhood is itself a form of trauma.
Andrea O’Reilly’s position on motherhood in *Beloved* diverges from both Demetrakopoulos and Washington through its grounding in the standpoint theory of Patricia Hill Collins. That O’Reilly builds explicitly on this foundation in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* is key to her assertion that Morrison’s theory of motherhood is empowering to black women and their children. O’Reilly writes, “The matrilineal heritage metaphorically represented by Beloved is a radical reclamation of the mother and daughter bond that was denied and severed under slavery,” whereby “Beloved represents the African American mother line—both its historical rupture in slavery and its repair through mother-daughter connection—the character Sethe represents the psychological trauma of motherline rupture” (87). Calling the connection between Sethe and Beloved a repairing may seem troubling, especially if one reads Beloved’s mysterious disappearance at the end of the novel as abandonment, but more important here is the way O’Reilly figures the “motherline” repair as a healing balm to historical trauma. Indeed the trauma itself is the rupture of the bond between childbearing and childrearing previously mentioned. O’Reilly argues, “In loving her daughter, the mother enables the daughter to love when she herself becomes a mother; motherlove therefore fosters self love. Mothering is thus essential for the emotional well-being of children. To be a loving mother, a woman must first be loved as a daughter” (88). It is the individual who must learn to love herself in order to become a good mother, but it is the inability to mother that causes the traumatic rupture.

Because of the damage traumatic experience inflicts on the minds and bodies of its victims, readings that focus on how an individual heals from traumatic experience are important and critical to understanding cultural trauma. The psychic and physical
wounds of the trauma of slavery are extraordinarily heavy and in many ways continue unabated. Still, while the focus on healing is both commendable and desirable, critiques too often leave important questions unasked, such as how individual trauma becomes cultural trauma, and if one can heal when the historical forces perpetuating trauma are ongoing. Even critiques that examine issues of motherhood, traumatic experience, and history simultaneously are not without limitations, as evidenced by James Berger’s historically astute “Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report.”

In his essay, Berger argues that *Beloved* is an implicit response to the Moynihan report (Berger 408) and thus acts as “a challenge to all American racial discourse of the 1980s—to Reaganist conservatism and to the New Left and black nationalism” (414). Berger’s reading emphasizes the novel’s relationship to “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” of 1965, otherwise known simply as the Moynihan Report. It is particularly in Chapter IV, entitled “The Tangle of Pathology,” which, in an attempt to acknowledge the damage slavery did to kinship patterns among the Black community, Moynihan spuriously argues that what most hurts African Americans is its matriarchal structure. The report verged on claiming slavery had turned black mothers into monsters who emasculate men and propelled understandable social outrage. While Moynihan’s language is couched in greater socioeconomic problems created and perpetuated by whites, the report recommends that the solution to inequality is reorganizing the Black family structure so that it is no longer a matriarchy. This so-called solution is a resounding illustration for and reflection of the process by which people come to believe “it’s always the mother’s fault.” Berger’s close reading of *Beloved* focuses on the scene
where Sethe mistakes the white abolitionist Bodwin for Schoolteacher and argues it is indicative of the “delusions of the 1980s: beliefs that the private, unregulated pursuit of wealth can eliminate poverty, that the poor and the rich, whites and blacks live in separate nations” (417).

So it seems more than a bit ironic that Berger ends his essay by examining one of the few white characters. “Bodwin,” Berger concludes, “like Sethe and Paul D is trying to uncover his heart, which, like theirs, like ours, is buried at a site of historical trauma” (417). He ends, in other words, with the story of a white man, and more problematically, by returning to the history of slavery, not the history of neoliberalism, not the history more closely informing the publication of the book itself. Equally problematic is Berger’s placement of the discussion about the traumatic event around which the novel spirals, which is relegated to the first footnote of the essay. “Among representations of American slavery,” it reads, “Beloved is unusual in emphasizing a former slave woman’s killing of her child,” and “Historians agree that slave infanticide was extremely rare” (417). That this event also highlights the social contradiction that infanticide was rare, not a common occurrence for the erroneously dubbed pathological, monstrous, black mother, a better scene to read would be the shed scene, where the infanticide plays out.

**Myth/ologizing Beloved: From Mother to Monster**

*The Woman’s Companion to Mythology* came out in 1983, the same year as Demetrakopoulos’ “Maternal Bonds” essay. It calls Kali the “Dark Mother,” the “Hindu Triple Goddess of creation, preservation, and destruction,” and “the basic archetypal image of the birth-and-death Mother, simultaneously womb and tomb, giver of life and
devourer of her children. . .” (Walker 488). The depiction of Kali in David Kinsley’s  
*Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* is remarkably similar to Morrison’s descriptions  
of Sethe, particularly in the shed:

She is the terrible one who has a dreadful face. She should be meditated upon as  
having disheveled hair and a garland of freshly cut human heads. She has four  
arms. In her upper left hand she holds a sword that has just been bloodied by the  
severed head that she holds in her lower left hand. Her upper right hand makes  
the gesture of assurance and her lower right hand, the sign of granting favors. She  
has a bluish complexion and is lustrous like a dark cloud. She is completely  
naked, and her body gleams with blood that is smeared all over it from the garland  
of bleeding severed heads around her neck. Her ear ornaments are the corpses of  
children. Her fangs are dreadful, and her face is fierce. Her breasts are large and  
round, and she wears a girdle made of several human hands. Blood trickles from  
the corners of her mouth and makes her face gleam. She makes a terrible sound  
and lives in the cremation ground, where she is surrounded by howling jackals.  
She stands on the chest of Siva in the form of a corpse. She is eager to have  
sexual intercourse in reverse fashion with Mahakala. She wears a justified  
expression. She smiles. (67)

To be sure, there are ways in which this depiction does not correspond, but the parts that  
do are rather astonishing.

Kali is often depicted in the West as a ruthless killer, whose role is to kill the  
wicked on the field of battle. She is sometimes described as becoming so frenzied with  
bloodlust that she kills indiscriminately, and in doing so threatens to destroy the world.
In other accounts, Kali enlists her male counterpart Siva in a dance that will obliterate the universe (Kinsley 74). In all accounts, Kali heralds the apocalypse, like the book of Revelations analogy to the “four horsemen” at the beginning of the shed scene in Beloved (Morrison, Beloved 48). The apocalyptic beginning emphasizes how traumatic events are not simply events eventually gotten over but change everything that come afterward.

When the slave catchers walk into the shed, the shock prompts the already quoted line from one of Schoolteacher’s nephews: “What she go and do that for?” (176). His shock, to the point of the loss of bodily control, seems a likely representation based on the racist and sexist beliefs that expect black women to passively accept degradation. But the nephew’s reaction is also representative of the fear of the monstrous mother. Before going further into that argument, note the striking resemblance of Sethe in the shed in Beloved to Kinsley’s depiction of Kali: “Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (149). A close reading of the passage shows Sethe in a strikingly similar pose to Kali, the Dark Mother, one arm up, the other down, one arm holding the handsaw, the other holding the nearly severed neck of the baby, the two boys prostrate on the ground. The shed scene in the film version of Beloved, which is one of its most unerring parts, corroborates this parallel in an intense and unsettling way. Sethe is perfectly still, indeed practically catatonic, but the film image moves around her as if distorted, a technique that evokes post-traumatic flashback. Her gaze is utterly blank but penetrating, and because the scene is tinted, which is to say awash with, a sepia-toned color red—which we remember from the novel she “outdid herself with” (Morrison,
Beloved 237)—Sethe’s actions come across as unreal, nightmarish, and, like Kali, of mythic proportion.

Elsewhere in the novel, it is Beloved who is the epitome of Kali. The emphasis on Beloved’s naked body at the end of the novel, for one, invites comparison. Beloved is frequently noted as walking around naked, “her belly protruding like a winning watermelon” (Morrison, Beloved 250). When the thirty women arrive at 124 and find Sethe on the porch, next to her is “the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun.” Beloved is “thunderblack and glistening . . . her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling” (261). Morrison’s emphasis on Beloved’s naked body, “disheveled hair” like Kali, and pregnant, protruding belly remind the reader she is pregnant by Paul D, whose sex she demanded, not unlike Kali’s demanding Siva to have “intercourse in reverse fashion.” Kinsley argues that Kali’s nudity “symbolizes that [she] is beyond name and form, completely beyond the illusory effects of . . . false consciousness,” and “completely transcendent” (88). Beloved seems to have become merely feral and uncontrollable, but to the extent that she as a ghost has exceeded the bounds of mortality and become flesh, it would be hard to say she was not, in some ways, transcendent. Beloved as “thunderblack” matches Kinsley’s depiction of Kali’s “bluish complexion,” or the “deep bluish black,” which Kali scholar Elizabeth Harding describes as “the color of darkest night” (41). In pictorial representations, the blood emanating from Kali’s garland is often shown as streaming over her naked body, similar to when “Sometimes [Beloved] screamed, ‘Rain! Rain!’ and clawed her throat until rubies of blood opened there, made brighter by her midnight skin” (Morrison, Beloved 250).
Compare the last line in Kinsley’s Kali depiction, “She smiles,” to that of Beloved’s: “Jesus. Her smile was dazzling.” The “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” section of the novel offers an even more complex rendition of this seemingly simple part of the representation of the smile: “I have your smile,” Beloved tells Sethe (216); “she was going to smile at me”; “Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile . . . her smiling face is the place for me” (212-13). Even Sethe’s mother Ma’am is evoked in the passage: “She’d had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn’t smiling she smiled” (203). Beloved does not merely notice the smile, she tries to reach for it, and in doing so she notices, “chewing and swallowing she touches me” (213). Kali likewise “devours all existence, as She chews all things existing with Her fierce teeth” (Walker, B. 492). She “has swallowed up everything without a trace” (Harding 41). Sethe, or perhaps Ma’am, “chews and swallows” as Beloved waits (Morrison, Beloved 213). Denver also ‘swallows,’ though the connection to her sister is a bit different, as she knows she has “swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk” (205). Sethe rejoinders “I have your milk”—the milk she is so determined to get to her children in Ohio, even after Schoolteacher’s nephews forcibly take it from her (216).

It is the smile, and not the rampage, that leads to Sethe’s rejection by the community in Beloved. Indeed she does more than just smile; she, like Kali, “wears a justified expression.” It was this kind of arrogance that turns the town against her and forestalls the warning that should have preceded the slave-catchers, and it was her seeming arrogance that kept the community from reaching out: “Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once” (152), rather than eighteen years later when the thirty women come. And after
Beloved returns, Sethe justifies to herself, “Too thick, he said. My love was too thick. What he know about it? Who in the world is he willing to die for?” (203). Morrison has said that when Margaret Garner was arrested and asked for explanation, she said simply, “They will not live like that” (Moyers 272).

There are variations and interpretations of Kali that yield even more connections. In some versions, Kali holds a noose in one hand (Kinsley 72), which evokes the numerous lynchings in Beloved, particularly that of Sethe’s mother. And sometimes she has three eyes, which represent ultimate knowledge of the past, present, and future (87).

Again, the shed scene proves comparable:

Enough nigger eyes for now. Little nigger-boy eyes open in sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so her head wouldn’t fall off; little nigger-baby eyes crinkling up to cry in the arms of the old nigger whose own eyes were nothing but slivers looking down at his feet. But the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn’t have any.

(150)

The boys eyes are open, the baby’s eyes are squinting, and Baby Suggs has closed her eyes from the sight altogether. While Sethe herself has her eyes closed, she assumes the power to create destiny, which parallels divine providence and omniscience.

There are clearly ways in which the parallel between Kali and Sethe breaks down. The crawling already baby is certainly not wicked; if anything Sethe is trying to save her children from the wickedness of slavery. The ways Kali is represented in the West also complicates a comparative reading, but perhaps in useful ways. Demetrakopoulos, for instance, focuses on the exclusively negative aspect of Kali: “All women, as they leave
the first bloom of youth, experience the two sides of Demeter: They age into knowing within both the kindness of Sophia, umbrella mother to the species, and the deadly killing anger of Kali” (52). Erasure of Kali as bountiful mother is complete, but even this one-sided perspective shows the ways motherhood itself is seen as dangerous.

There are countless other parallels of Kali in the novel Beloved that also show up in its predecessor Song of Solomon, and continue in Jazz and Paradise. But without going further into those, one might wonder, how could a Hindu goddess, much less a comparative mythic reading, tell us anything unique or revelatory about the culture that produced Beloved? Hinduism was not a popularly practiced faith in the United States when Morrison would have been composing Beloved and currently represents only a small population of followers in North America. Mythic stories from the world over were, however, being told in this country with renewed interest and vigor, especially by feminists like Judy Chicago. There was an act of reclaiming powerful women and women’s stories in the United States. And remember that Alice Walker, with In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, was imploring the search for women’s stories. Even Morrison’s close friend Toni Cade Bambara had written a novel called The Salt-Eaters in 1980, a highly female-centered, politically energized book about the “Seven Sisters” and other women’s activist groups, which was imbued with tales from the gypsies of Hindustan and their devotion to “Sara, their Black Madonna.” Morrison, while still at Random House and seven years before the publication of Beloved, edited Bambara’s novel.

It is not really about whether Morrison was familiar with the Kali mythology. But I am not arguing that Morrison designed the shed scene in the image of Kali or somehow
dropped references like a puzzle to complete, even if she has been known to be that meticulous an author. Rather, what is significant here how such a close and striking similarity with this archetypal image can be read and understood in the greater social context. Whether Morrison knowingly tried to reclaim Kali or not, the novel presents a powerful archetypal image to examine in relation to “the currents of culture.” The myth of Kali seems timeless—what Barbara Walker calls “the same image portrayed in a thousand ancient religions” (935)—and it is this very timelessness that overshadows the way it could otherwise be read with historical specificity, at a time when not only the feminist movement sought to reclaim women’s stories, the general public sought to curtail the feminist movement, literary critics were arguing over what valued as literature, and as the United States’ was shifting toward a global economy again for the first time since the early 1900s. The goddess imagery reverberates throughout Beloved but the echoes of what the imagery means is mediated by countervailing messages that drown out the messages of sexual and racial inequity in favor of a ruling story that posits the powerful woman as pathological, dangerous, monstrous. It seems fairly reasonable to argue Beloved as monstrosity. She is, after all, the physical manifestation of the child Sethe kills. But that Sethe become monstrous is tied to mothering, which presents all sorts of dilemmas as Beloved grows pregnant before disappearing at the end of the novel, “disremembered, and unaccounted for” (323).

**Gruesome Tales of Sadistic Moms**

All too often critiques of haunting in Beloved, despite efforts to the contrary, defer real-world systemic oppression that lingers in slavery’s wake as a mere ghost story, one
overshadowed, ignored, or smoothed over in favor of claims about personal experience and the immediate, ever-present danger hidden in the individual psyche. The woman who becomes a mother turns into a monster. In writing about the economic period out of *Beloved* emerges, David Harvey writes that a “notable feature of neoliberalization” is an increased feminization of poverty, highly racialized lower classes, and the “notion of a proper moral order built upon a very particular conception of the family” (*Brief History* 202). That conception, of course, was the rather newly naturalized white-male-headed nuclear family, which was fought for by “the neoconservative assault on women’s and reproductive rights, which, interestingly, got into gear at the end of the 1970s when neoliberalism came to prominence” (202). Kali, in Kinsley’s words, “threatens stability and order” and is “at home outside the moral order and seems to be unrestrained by it” (74-5). The order she threatens is largely that of the man as head of household, which many take for granted as the way things are and should be. In the chapter “Right of Death and Power over Life” from *The History of Sexuality*, it is Foucault who reminds us of the Roman law of patria potestas, which gave the father the “right to ‘dispose’ of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away” (135). For Sethe to claim this right so disrupts “stability and order” that she is mythologized away, or, like in Moynihan’s report, pathologized.

Barry Glassner provides an additional lens to read the social contradiction about monstrous mothers during neoliberalism. Glassner’s 1995 book *The Culture of Fear* analyzes various social scares and the realities that they mask from the 1970s to the turn of the millennium. He suggests, “The short answer to why Americans harbor so many misbegotten fears is that immense power and money await those who tap into our moral
insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes” (xxviii). According to Glassner, 
scares not only mask reality, often in contradictory ways, they provoke and even create 
them. Scares, he argues, also linger, and “can continue long after its rightful expiration 
date so long as it has two things going for it: it has to tap into current cultural anxieties, 
and it has to have media-savvy advocates behind it” (177).

Although Glassner does not use the phrase feminist backlash, his chapter 
“Monster Moms: On the Art of Misdirection” reads like a backlash exposé. “In just 
about every contemporary American scare,” he writes, “rather than confront disturbing 
shortcomings in society the public discussion centers on disturbed individuals” (6). The 
purportedly disturbed individuals in his Monster Moms chapter are teen mothers, single 
mothers, and, like Sethe, infanticidal mothers. Speaking somewhat sarcastically, 
Glassner declares, “There must be something terribly compelling about gruesome tales of 
sadistic moms” (98). “Infanticidal mothers,” he adds, “are routinely depicted by the 
media as depraved beyond what any of us can imagine about ourselves or our friends and 
relatives” (99). And although it was largely the initial criticisms that debated whether 
Morrison was or was not valorizing Garner’s act of infanticide, there are still critics, and 
even more students, who continue to make arguments about Sethe and Beloved in general 
that “say that we—or our wives, sisters, daughters, or friends—are good mothers by 
comparison,” and which “invite us to redirect (more accurately, misdirect) our self-
doubts” (99).

To what extent, for example, do we look to solve the problems of society not a 
great deal unlike Moynihan, by trying to “fix” the individual? In which case many are 
readily swayed that the appropriate arena for that “fix” resides in the confines of the
home, in the domestic space, in unpaid labor of the mother. The role of the mother in
capitalism, after all, is to ensure her children become compliant and obedient workers, a
role that becomes harder and harder as the reach of the world extends further and further
into the illusion of the safe-space of the home.

The Divine Mother Kali claims *all* beings as her children and hence radically
questions the essence of motherhood. It has been suggested, “the greater the injustices
suffered by women in any particular society, the more prominent the stories of angry
women and fierce goddesses become” (Kearns 219). Kali must “be aggressive precisely
because she is a mother” (214), but the more aggressive she is, the more monstrous she
will be made out to be. Such push and pull is typical of how backlashes work. The
portrayal of a woman who kills her own children warns against excess, whether it is
excess of love, excess of social responsibility, excess of force. It bears repeating that
society overlooks the excess of a systematic oppression and redirects, i.e. misdirects,
blame to the individual. “What she go and do that for?” Nephew asks.

The relationship between culture and myth is reciprocal, in that one propels the
other in a cyclical fashion according to particularities of the time. A reading of *Beloved*
alongside Kali exemplifies culture as cyclical and symptomatic, as a novel that speaks the
unspeakable on numerous levels. To quote Morrison in an interview with Marsha
Darling:

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the
dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It’s bridged for
us by our assuming responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility
for. (247)
To take responsibility. To be the one who says, “Enough.” To be, in other words, what we might expect a mother to be? In this light, perhaps we could look at it another way: The comparison between Kali and Beloved illuminates the ethical struggle over the limits of personal responsibility under an economic system that benefits from, in fact, creates a populace so overwhelmingly childish, powerless, and narcissistic, we lash out at each other, and at mother especially, instead of the system that constrains, compels, and coerces us to be complicit in our own oppression.

By way of conclusion, I end on a quote from Anne McClintock’s latest, “Paranoid Empire: Specters from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib”: “Perhaps in the labyrinths of torture we must also find a way to speak with ghosts, for specters disturb the authority of vision and the hauntings of popular memory disrupt the great forgettings of official history (52). The haunting in Beloved is not just about the trauma from long ago, but the ongoing trauma of today that most can only deal with in distortion, via metaphor, as if it were only a timeless myth. By exposing the myth in its particular time, we expose the trauma of that time as well, and in doing so get one step closer to exposing the oppression that binds us all.
Chapter 5

“She was a body under siege, a battleground”: Fragmented Identity and “The Infinite Nature of Wounding” in Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms*

She was a body under siege, a battleground. But she herself never emerged. The others, with their many voices and ways, were larger than she was. She was no longer there.

~ Linda Hogan, *Solar Storms*

We are literally absent from our own present. We are everywhere, not in the real but in the represented. Our bodies, the flesh and blood of it all, have given way to representations. . . .

~ Barbara Kruger, *Remote Control: Power, Cultures, and the World of Appearances*

Linda Hogan’s 1995 novel *Solar Storms* tells the story of five generations of Native American women living in the Boundary Waters between Minnesota and Canada, an area Bethany Fitzpatrick calls “the Triage region” (1). Because Hogan’s narrative meanders among its female storytellers like the boundary waters themselves, switching and overlapping narrators without warning, readers are forced to wade into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. Water may be frequently interpreted as a literary motif symbolizing life-giving and life-sustaining properties, but as Fitzpatrick’s label indicates, the Boundary Waters region in *Solar Storms* is a battleground, flooded with sick and injured animals, downed trees, and damaged vegetation. Set in the early 1970s, *Solar Storms* has historical roots in the real-life struggle of the Cree and Inuit in northern Québec during the James Bay damming project that forever changed their land and cultural lives.
The novel’s protagonist and primary narrator Angel is a 17-year-old girl searching for her family, her story, and ultimately her self. But this is not simply the feel-good journey of self-discovery story. Scars covering half her face, abandoned by her mother Hannah Wing, her name Americanized to Angela Jensen, Angel has run away from multiple foster homes in the States before returning to the small town of Adam’s Rib in the fall of 1972 to reunite with her maternal great-grandmother Agnes Iron, her great-great-grandmother Dora-Rouge, and Bush, her grandfather’s wife. The beginning of the novel focuses on Angel’s introduction and interaction with her relatives and townsfolk, and sets up a combination of fictional and factual historic and geographic landscapes. After the spring thaw, the four women set out on a harrowing and heroic canoe journey north to take Dora-Rouge to her ancestral homeland to die and protest the building of the Lake Grand dam. On their tumultuous journey Angel confronts her mother and learns what she has suspected, that her mother’s abuse is what scarred her. Throughout the book, we as readers further learn that Hannah’s mother Loretta had abused her, and that Loretta had been raped and brutalized before that. This cycle of abuse is a central crux of the novel, part of what is called “the infinite nature of wounding” (Hogan 94), abuses passed down from colonizers to colonized, men to women, mother to daughter.

*Solar Storms* is a literary deluge of social conflict, about atrocity and exploitation. It is a narrative of trauma, detailing traumatic events and engendering a kind of vicarious trauma, which forces readers to “acknowledge the problem of real human pain generated by cultural misunderstandings and violence in specific times and places in the actual world” (Castor 153). The North American fur trade, Wounded Knee (both 1890 and 1973), and the James Bay hydroelectric project are not just historical
artifacts in the story, mentioned to give an air of authenticity. Rather they remind us that historical documentation is not necessarily accurate or true but contingent on who is in charge of documenting and for what purpose they do so. What is my relationship to this trauma, what is my role, the text seems to compel readers to ask. These and other questions about the confluence of history, reality, and truth, and the trauma created in its wake, are underscored by the fact that while Hogan was writing Solar Storms, the Great Whale damming project, called James Bay II colloquially, was underway and being protested on a global scale through news outlets and public events. The publication of the novel coincided with the temporary halting of the dams, a consequence which came about largely because of public and legal activism initiated by the Cree influencing New York and Massachusetts to cancel their hydroelectric contracts with Hydro-Québec, as well as a timely change in priorities of the newly elected Parti Québécois.69

Solar Storms is by all accounts an inspirational story about the power of women united, but it is also much more than that. By geographically melding, as well as masking, a fictional personal narrative with the factual location and culture it is based on, Hogan sets up a way to confront theoretical problems posed by borders and boundaries, liminal spaces, and the limits of personal experience. Solar Storms links the treatment of the indigenous to the perpetuation of violence against women, which are deeply imbedded in the genocide and ecocide resulting from the capital accumulation of colonial expansion. The novel traces the origins of violence to the broken pact between humans and animals that seems to be rooted in capitalism’s commodification of the land, but which turns out to be even more complex, insidious, and difficult to pin down. Just as Angel recognizes the way the “end of [her] life in one America” (26) ushers in a new
beginning for her as an individual, so too the book begs us to question the origins of the infinite nature of wounding. The “infinite nature of wounding,” as it turns out, is not truly infinite, it only appears so. In the following chapter, I make a series of interconnected arguments to examine this conundrum.

The Infinite Nature of Wounding

Each of the texts in the preceding chapters depicts female victims of violence, some of whom become violent themselves, all of whom are sexually assaulted or threatened with sexual assault as a way of enforcing sex, race, class, and gender roles. All are traumatic subjects, wounded bodily and emotionally, objectified, subjugated, threatened, and brutalized. In Bodily Harm, Rennie is menaced by the constant threat of rape. Brandon Teena in Boys Don’t Cry and Aileen Wuornos in Monster are raped and killed as a way to enforce gender and class hierarchies. Beloved’s Sethe is so traumatized by slavery she kills her own daughter to protect her from it. The trajectory of the examination of these texts moves from passive, complicit perpetuation of violence against women to active opposition, and from victim to victimizer. Rennie actively tries to avoid being victimized, but in trying to escape the violence she, somewhat ignorantly, becomes more directly immersed in it. Brandon tries to fit into the gender hierarchies, only to be killed when he is discovered as passing. The trauma Rennie and Brandon are subjected to represents kinds of brutality deemed socially unacceptable, even though they are then contradicted by the social policing mechanisms of violence used to keep women in their subjugated place. In fact, in one way or another, all of the characters in the dissertation elicit arguments for inviting their own trauma, and their depictions expose the ways
society so easily and readily falls into the victim-blaming mentality that “they had it coming.” As the characters move from more obvious albeit complicated victims (Rennie and Brandon) to both victim and victimizer (Aileen and Sethe), this becomes easier to recognize. Aileen’s story fits into a kind of revenge fantasy, and she is symbolically applauded for turning the tables on male would-be victimizers on one hand, but denigrated on the other as a criminal and throw-away person: poor, prostitute, lesbian. Sethe’s attempts to kill her children and her murder of Beloved functions as a kind of justifiable mercy killing resulting from the horrors of slavery, but also taps into the mythic danger of the monstrous mother and racist aversion to the strong black woman. The trajectory of critique of Bodily Harm, Boys Don’t Cry, Monster, and Beloved speaks to the various ways trauma begets trauma. And it all leads to the examination of “the infinite nature of wounding” in Hogan’s Solar Storms. Infinite wounding: trauma without beginning or end.

Solar Storms is a novel that complicates the commonly accepted social truth of the cycle of violence, that someone who is abused will then abuse another, with its depiction of the novel’s icy antagonist Hannah Wing. Like Wournos and Sethe, Hannah is victim-turned-victimizer. But her actions fall well outside of the socially acceptable and justifiable limits, contradictory as they are. Hannah does not commit violence against the men who abuse her or against representative men who might. She does not commit violence against her children to protect them from the expected violence of a brutally racist society. Hannah represents the extreme of female victims. She does not possess the slightest inkling of compassion. She manipulates those around her. And most horrific of all, she tortures her children and shows no remorse for doing so long
afterward. Hannah is what the media tried to make Aileen Wuornos out to be and the cultural imagination desires the monstrous mother Sethe to be: a woman so traumatized she becomes violence personified; the psychotic woman so disconnected from reality she deserves what is coming to her, not despite her victimization but because of it. Hannah Wing exemplifies the reasons and ways society stops short of finding the root cause to complicated social problems like violence against women, opting for short-sighted symptomatic balms to alleviate anxiety rather than long-term solutions which are much harder to understand and implement.

In this chapter, as with previous chapters, I read *Solar Storms* in relation to the time period of which it is a product. Hannah Wing as traumatic subject reveals important nuances about the relationship between gender, violence, and the social preoccupation with fragmented identity in the late twentieth century. Let me make it clear I am not trying to claim something new or original about the concept of fragmented identity. The concept of the fractured self can be traced throughout written history, as far back as Plato’s *Symposium* and ancient mythology. Likewise, there are various versions and iterations of the Medea story depicting women who brutalize their children without remorse. And as explained in the last chapter, figures of extraordinarily dangerous females like Kali can be found throughout the ages in nearly all cultures, accompanied by real life, pervasive violence against women. It could be easily argued then that relatively little could be revealed about such timeless issues. But arguments about the new are not as useful as those about the particular. I am not arguing about the timelessness of fragmented identity and violence against women in general so much as for a reading of *Solar Storms* as a way of understanding these issues as a reflection of the time period.
Reading Hannah Wing in relation to the identity politics movement and the concept of fragmented identity simultaneously reveals the ways violence against women at the dawn of the Twenty-first century is not simply a cyclical backlash or pervasive reality but a particular formation with particular characteristics.

I start with a two-part introduction to the ways identity politics reshaped cultural attitudes about identity in the late twentieth century, the first by way of an iconic image that epitomizes important arguments made in, by, and about the novel in “Your Body is a Battleground,” so named for Barbara Kruger’s famous artwork; then in the following section, “The Native Issue,” by way of the critiques of the novel that can be largely traced back to the identity politics movement itself. By following historical developments that emerge out of the identity politics movement, I will show how readings of Solar Storms codify neoliberal politics of identity, despite attempts to the contrary, and why it is therefore necessary to address these theoretical and social contradictions.

**Your Body is a Battleground**

Identity politics emerged in the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s as a feminist basis for organizing, theorizing, and combating systemic oppression nationally and globally and has been defined as “basing one’s politics on a sense of personal identity—as female, gay, Black, etc.” (Andermahr 125). It is most famously associated with the Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement,” which argues the need to organize around the basis of identity and for the necessity of examining the interlocking oppression of race, sex, and class categories. Though little about identity politics is uncontested, one of its most valuable contributions to academic study has been in
legitimizing critical analysis of identity, difference, and experience. The ways such categories are represented in society have been taken to task by such cultural critics such as Barbara Kruger, whose iconic “Your Body is a Battleground” piece galvanized feminist arguments about authority over women’s bodies, and exemplifies the struggle over identity and representation depicted in Solar Storms.

The piece itself is a black-and-white portrait of a white woman’s face, divided in two equal halves, one appearing in negative exposure, and superimposed with the words “Your body is a battleground.” The body-as-battleground metaphor is more than creatively figurative. The initial image was meant to provoke and engage literal battles over women’s reproductive rights and make concrete the stakes over moral arguments legislated predominantly by men about women’s bodies. It has since come to stand for broader feminist claims about the traumatic fracturing of women’s bodies and minds. Reading this image against Solar Storms reveals useful connections. The novel’s antagonist Hannah Wing is a woman whose identity is fractured beyond repair and described in words almost identical to Kruger’s piece as “a body under siege, a battleground . . . she herself never emerged” (Hogan 99). This comparison reinforces the reality that not only do women continue to be disproportionately victimized by physical, psychological, and economic violence, but the battleground is not somewhere over there, enacted by uniformed soldiers in war-torn or lawless regions irrelevant to the reader’s personal experience. Quite the opposite: the battle is ongoing and in places one might at first overlook, but the stakes are as high as ever.

Kruger’s larger body of work demonstrates the importance of both identity politics and neoliberalism as informing ideas about violence, alienation, representation,
and the role of critique, all of which are significant to reading *Solar Storms* as a novel about culture. Methodologically, Kruger emphasizes the disconnect between what is and what appears to be happening in society. She focuses largely on women and on gender, “how women inhabit their bodies—how their bodies become figures into stereotypes—and then, how we can bring the body, the speaking body, into that scenario and unmask the stereotype of that figure” as a way of “altering those expectations of how women are and become” (Lichtenstein 198-199). It is not surprising that such an interest in the ways women’s bodies become stereotypes led to another iconic work, which boldly proclaims, “All violence is the illustration of a pathetic stereotype.” And yet as deliberately provocative as this statement is, finding and preventing the dissemination of this pathetic stereotype, in all its iterations, is easier said than done, because as time changes, so does the stereotype. That is, the place of its dissemination changes since it was not in a stable location to begin with; place and therefore the nature of the stereotype is, to use a Deleuze and Guattari phrase, deterritorialized. The violence, however, remains strangely incontrovertible, an unavoidable consequence of Hogan’s “infinite nature of wounding.”

Juxtaposing Kruger’s “Your Body is a Battleground” piece with *Solar Storms* calls attention to the idea that in a neoliberal era, there is, as Hardt and Negri say, “no place of power—it is both everywhere and nowhere” (190).

Kruger’s work further underscores the usefulness for this chapter of what Rosemary Hennessy calls “postmodern conceptions of language and subjectivity” (*MF* 5). Many feminists, for instance, have argued that the movement from subject to object operates on the level of perception and discourse, and is the first step in objectification, and as such, the first in many steps that lead to dehumanization and ultimately violence.73
Theorizing the ways immaterial concepts such as perception and discourse operate on a material level is difficult but necessary to better understand the steps between thinking about violence and being violent. Ironically, one of the ways violence is perpetuated is by not thinking about it at all. In Remote Control: Power, Cultures, and the World of Appearances, Kruger laments that in a “concerted attempt to erase the responsibilities of thought and volition from our daily lives” (5) people are being trained to intellectually tune out. “We are literally absent from our own present,” she writes, “We are everywhere, not in the real but in the represented. Our bodies, the flesh and blood of it all, have given way to representations. . .” (5). Her view of such displacement seems cynical and foreboding: “to those who understand how pictures and words shape consensus,” she writes, “we are unmoving targets waiting to be turned on and off by the relentless seductions of remote control” (5), but her intellectual project, as this one, is more optimistic. The remote control is the television’s illusion of mobility and freedom, which masks the increasing and inescapable number of media advertisements aimed at the individual on a daily basis in an increasingly technological age. David Harvey argues that “television itself is a product of late capitalism, and, as such, has to be seen in the context of the promotion of a culture of consumerism,” which “directs our attention to the production of needs and wants, the mobilization of desire and fantasy, of the politics of distraction as part and parcel of the push to sustain sufficient buoyancy of demand in consumer markets to keep capitalist production profitable” (Condition 61). Based on the idea that a measure of objectivity can be gained through constantly juxtaposing past and present, abstract and concrete, figurative and literal, historical moment with historical epoch, Kruger’s art works to disrupt popular but erroneous notions about identity as
intrinsic and culture as immutable. She entreats her audience to confront “who speaks and who is silent: with what is seen and what is not,” to “think about inclusions and multiplicities, not oppositions [and] binary indictments” (Kruger 220), and ultimately to regain control of the perception they have unwittingly but coercively acquiesced.

Kruger’s “Your Body is a Battleground” pulls together theoretical and historical arguments about identity politics, fragmented identity, and representation, and in doing so sets the stage for reading Solar Storms as a symptom of cultural anxiety about alienation, isolation, and the ensuing violence made to seem natural and inevitable. I will show how Hannah’s traumatic story complicates the already complicated metaphor of the woman’s body as a battleground, as a woman who represents, in extremely disquieting ways, those of us who “are literally absent from our present.” In addition to examining what the novel reflects and reveals about the historical, political, and economic components of which it is a product, because the violence of traumatic experience is largely subjective and experiential, it is crucial also to delve headlong into the unstable ground of the immaterial, the corporeal, and the affective. In order to make this case, I examine the correlation between critical reception of the novel and the identity politics movement, and I explore a trend in popular literature that magnifies the extent to which Solar Storms reflects a social struggle over the concept of fragmented identity.

The Native Issue

Even though Linda Nicholson argues that identity politics now seems largely dead, or, at minimum, “no longer able to command the kind of public attention that it did from the late 1960s through the late 1980s” (4), I argue it still operates in many ways and on many
levels today. In fact, the specter of identity politics is sufficient to compel continued attempts to contain its influence in ways that can be shown in the criticism published on *Solar Storms*. This criticism, even at its most brilliant, and despite its best efforts to the contrary, is marginalized, ghettoized, and confined. A literary review of Linda Hogan’s writing, *Solar Storms* in particular, generally falls under one of two categories: multiculturalism\textsuperscript{74} and ecofeminism.

Multiculturalist approaches to literature and life in general, such as those that stress the inclusion of the literature of the First Nations, arose out of and alongside interest in identity politics. In *Identity Before Identity Politics*, Nicholson describes it in such an incisive way that it is worthwhile to quote at length:

During the late 1960s, certain political phenomena appeared on the US landscape that altered the terms of public debate about social justice. The political movements on behalf of African Americans and women took a distinctive turn. Both of these movements had been a force in the United States politics prior to the late 1960s, most visibly in the earlier civil rights and women’s rights movements. In these earlier incarnations, these movements had fought for legislation aimed at expanding the access black people and women had to opportunities long denied them for reasons of race and sex. But in the late 1960s, a new kind of emphasis emerged from within both movements. While many within these movements continued to work for the above goals, others, particularly those who were younger and angrier, began to articulate different kinds of aims. Those who started calling their movement “Black Power,” instead of “Civil Rights,” and “Women’s Liberation,” as distinct from “Women’s
“Rights,” created a politics that went beyond the issue of access and focused more explicitly on issues of identity than had these earlier movements. Other activists, such as those who replaced “Gay Rights” with “Gay Liberation,” made a similar kind of turn. The more explicit focus of these groups on issues of identity caused many to describe this new politics as “identity politics.” (1)

One of the results of identity politics on academia in the United States was the development of multiculturalist departments in colleges and universities designed to foster awareness of pluralism and diversity and work for structural social change that reflected this awareness, departments like American Indian Studies, Women’s Studies, and Africana Studies.75

But the concept of identity developed to challenge the status quo in the late 1960s became an object ripe for commodification under the move towards neoliberalism in the late 1970s. As defined by Harvey, neoliberalism in theory operates on the “view that individual liberty and freedom are the high point of civilization” and hence “can be best protected and achieved by an institutional structure, made up of strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade: a world in which individual initiative can flourish” (Lilley). “The implication,” he explains, “is that the state should not be involved in the economy too much, but it should use its power to preserve private property rights and the institutions of the market and promote those on the global stage if necessary” (Lilley). Ray Kiely argues that in practice, “the dominance of neo-liberalism was re-established in the 1980s” (63). The timing could not have been worse for the identity politics movement since abstract concepts like identity can be readily bought, sold, and disseminated in the increasingly privatized, global markets of neoliberalism. The
obvious way this occurs is when identity becomes attached to more widely recognized commodities like clothing or cars. A less obvious way identity can be commodified is when it becomes a seemingly intrinsic part of stories told about culture, stories that become the fabric of people’s beliefs about the world. As a commodity, the destabilizing potential of identity as a transforming and transformative concept can be quelled, nullified, or, worse yet, used as a way to reinforce the very status quo it seeks to challenge. Whether a result of a conscious leeriness of the double-edged sword of identity politics in a neoliberal era or blatant prejudice, there is no shortage of debate about the legitimacy and utility of multiculturalist departments. Most humanistic studies in a neoliberal economy are under intense pressure to legitimate their subjects as marketable just to survive. This pressure is especially felt by programs seeking to challenge the status quo precisely because they are seeking to challenge the status quo. Consequently, programs that attempt to carve out academic space where there was none or little before by way of legitimating study of long-suppressed subjects face an uphill battle.

What does this double-edged sword mean for critiques of *Solar Storms*, which have largely been published under the umbrella of multiculturalist and multiethnic journals? In today’s increasingly specialized markets, it seems on one hand promising that a preponderance of *Solar Storms* articles are published by multicultural journals or journals devoting special issues to multicultural texts and topics. The fact that such interest can be sustained in the historical moment speaks to the success of identity politics as explicitly challenging and making room for an absence of subjugated voices in scholarship. Yet there is also something unsettling about the insidious cooptation of
identity politics as a way to bolster rather than challenge the status quo, which reveals itself in a kind of tokenistic toleration of multicultural departments in the academy, whose influence carries less weight in a corporate world, or, alternatively, who must sell themselves in consumerist ways to maintain their existence. Both can be seen in the fact that articles about Solar Storms are by and large published in journals specifically dedicated to Native American, women’s studies, or multi-ethnic literature, sometimes under such obsequious-sounding mantles as the “Native Issue.” Indeed, most of the articles on Hogan in general continue to come largely from within multiculturalist programs.77

The pervasiveness of these critiques housed within women’s studies and First Nations studies programs coincides with and stems from some notable historical trends occupied by Hogan’s novel. In a Feminist Studies review published the year before Solar Storms, Sylvia Bowerbank and Dolores Nawagesic Wawia mark an upsurge in writing by Native North Americans while also calling for “A new and distinct method of criticism, relevant to English texts by First Nations writers” which “challenge[s] the application of Western critical approaches to Native, Métis, and Inuit texts” on account “that universities have been, and remain, unsuitable settings for the learning of Native ways of knowing, telling, and writing stories” (566). Following Bowerbank’s and Wawia’s model of “Native and Métis women writers celebrat[ing] the spiritual legacies of their grandmothers and the wisdom of the female lineage” (566), Hoefel’s “Narrative Choreography” essay argues, “the female narrator embarks on a search for her authentic self” (33).
“Narrative Choreography” was published in *FemSpec*’s “Native Issue,” an issue meant to be an inclusive, commemorative, and modest attempt to counter the exclusionary and discriminatory practices faced by native peoples throughout the history of colonization. And yet the name itself, the “Native Issue,” is unnervingly evocative of feigned inclusion that elides hegemonic practices, if not outright racial hostility. What raises further concern is a kind of consumerist appropriation evident in the editor’s note to the volume, which argues, “Special themed issues occurred . . . as a way to create heightened awareness about particular kinds of work in volumes that had a specialty market and longer shelf life value.” To be fair, the “Native Issue,” is intended to “raise the interest of the speculative techniques to interrogate gender roles used by Native women from different backgrounds” and in general that “Special themed issues on the writings of women of particular ethnic minority groups that challenge gender help the reader to a better understanding of their creations” (Weinbaum 1). But it can too easily be argued that this kind of heightened awareness benefits both those who do and do not fit into the grouping “ethnic minority,” and that those cashing in on the wave of multiculturalism spurring interest in special-themed issues are predominantly non-Native.

Furthermore, arguing the authenticity and uniqueness of group identity as Hoefel and Weinbaum do imperils the commodification facing identity politics in neoliberalism. Chadwick Allen’s “Blood (and) Memory” struggles with and against this commodification. Allen describes Hogan as one of several contemporary authors “developing the connotative possibilities” of M. Scott Momaday’s redefinition of American Indian authenticity established by his Pulitzer Prize winning *House Made of Dawn* (Allen 94), a novel that sanctioned respectability within English departments for
American Indian literature more broadly (Kidwell 3). And yet this respectability has
been clouded by to the ways that, “Ultimately, it has become an argument over who in
contemporary America may assume the authority to speak ‘truthfully’ and ‘authentically’
about American Indian perception and identity” (Allen 95).

Creating awareness for First Nations the ways a novel like Solar Storms does and
the articles about Solar Storms do is essential for promoting a more just, equitable
society. Those who publish criticism of Solar Storms continue to do so overwhelmingly
because they genuinely believe in that struggle, not because they are intentionally selling
out. But in the years since the emergence of identity politics and its subsequent decline,
the danger is a kind of complacency that accompanies commodification. The explicit
status quo-resisting identity politics has been subsumed, its voice, territory, and influence
muted, reduced, and weakened by the neoliberal politics that encourages the proliferation
of multicultural departments and journals as long as they are generating profit but are
primarily symbolic and ineffectual towards producing social change. Solar Storms may
feel like, and is, a triumphant story celebrating women’s strength and the resilience of
Native peoples, and that alone provides many with the feeling that justice has been done.
Yet as much as that celebration is worthwhile, it is also worthwhile to remember that the
strength and resilience comes from struggle, a struggle that is not over, not in the book
and not in reality: the hydro-electric projects pause; they do no stop. The wounding
described in Solar Storms stems largely from the subjugation of indigenous peoples by
European colonists, which continues today through corporate interests. The battle is
ongoing, the wounding continues in direct and insidious ways, and the battleground, to
return to Barbara Kruger, is not simply somewhere over there, in a place that has little to
do with the reader’s life. It is a current struggle over women’s bodies, over the body of humanity, and over the domain of global resources. Just as the novel continually emphasizes the instability of even the ground itself, the battleground shifts with the historical moment and the changing preoccupations that accompany it. This shifting terrain can be liberatory when used to expose oppressive social mores and institutions, but it can also be co-opted to conceal and/or misdirect attention away from that oppression.

Ecofeminist critiques, the other dominant category of critical publications on Solar Storms, are not immune from the problematic simultaneity of liberation or cooption facing those of multiculturalism, partly because the terrain overlaps. Hoefel’s “Narrative Choreography,” for example, argues that reading Angel in relation to Paula Gunn Allen’s “seven ways of the medicine woman” (34) exposes interlockings of oppression and creates a cosmogony steeped in the inseparable bond with the natural world, an issue often taken up by both ecofeminist critiques as well as multiculturalist ones. It is the literal and metaphorical terrain, and the ways those boundaries are connected to arguments about the interconnectedness of identity, hierarchy, and bodily experience, that are most valuable and most readily contested. Critiques like that of Fitzpatrick’s “My Body, My People, My Land” frequently connect the geographical boundaries presented by the novel to theoretical arguments about hierarchy and bodily experience. According to Fitzpatrick, it is “The journey of these women into the boundary waters, the Triage region between Minnesota and Canada” which “enables the women to transgress gender boundaries, as well as boundaries between self and nature, spirit and matter, space and time, and dreams and reality” (1). At the heart of Fitzpatrick’s thesis, like Hoefel, is the
“special association between women and nature” (1). Fitzpatrick admits that this association has been “used in problematic ways in the past, especially within dominant American cultural narratives” (2). No small problem, the woman-as-inherently-closer-to-nature argument often made in ecofeminist critiques walks a tightrope of working against or falling into the naturalization of oppressive gender norms. Fitzpatrick contends that Solar Storms rejects this oppression, and that “Hogan uses [women’s association to nature] in such a way as to create a new story of environmental justice, gender equality, and personal and community healing” (2). “Though her characters have bodily connections with nature,” she explains, “this is not the common Western association between women’s bodies and a degraded nature; it is rather a reconfiguring of nature, bodies, and the relationship between humans and the natural world” (2).

Fitzpatrick’s work, like ecofeminist critique more broadly, is valuable for its focus on bodily experience, especially the argument that the novel “reveals the ways in which dominant Western patriarchal ideologies and a history of violent colonialism exploit and harm both women and the environment, and the ways in which women’s bodies and the land are inscribed with this history” (1). “She was a body under siege,” Hogan writes. “Your body is a battleground,” claims Kruger. What Fitzpatrick argues is that the physical body in concert with nature that develops an understanding of collective responsibility, that “in Hogan’s narrative nature is reinvented and both nature and the body are recovered from the degradation of Western dualistic thinking” (12-13). In other words, being physically connected to the earth has the power to produce a nonhierarchical mindset. This poses an interesting complication for Fitzpatrick’s triage metaphor, one that makes it both fitting and problematic. Triage is, after all, designed
hierarchically. Therefore immersing one’s self in that system places you at the mercy of the hierarchy. But triage is a hierarchy with a beneficial purpose, to help those who are most in need. This benefit seems to fly in the face of the non-hierarchical proposition that Fitzpatrick argues entering the triage region enables by working against her guiding premise that “Hogan reconstructs and redefines gender, nature, and the body partly through a denial of value hierarchies and value dualisms,” which Fitzpatrick argues comes about “partly through a denial of dominant Western cultural narratives about women, nature, and women’s bodies, and partly through a re-conceptualization of nature as a dynamic agent” (2). It complicates Fitzpatrick’s claim that “the degradation of land, animals, indigenous people, and women is exposed as intricately linked to a Western worldview that is hierarchical and patriarchal” (6), and thereby complicates her reading of the negative hierarchy of man over nature, and man over woman, which the novel rails against.

For Fitzpatrick to call the boundary waters a capital “T” Triage region may have only been a passing metaphor, one that evokes a powerful image of a battlefield littered with bodies and people in pain. But it is a metaphor that underscores the realities of what is at stake in arguments about identity, particularly arguments about identity through narratives of trauma and the precarious threat of cooptation and commodification multiculturalist and ecofeminist critiques of Solar Storms face. On a battlefield, survival instincts, compassion, responsibility, and even blame get lumped together and obscure the reasons for fighting, in what ways damage is done, and even to what or whom damage is done. Arguments that celebrate “the native;” and the idea of women as inherently closer to nature than men, run the risk of reinforcing racist and sexist
stereotypes. If all violence is the illustration of a pathetic stereotype, as Kruger suggests, a story that seeks to subvert the status quo inadvertently ends up reinforcing it by creating the erroneous idea that the victimized have a kind of power they do not in fact have. The victimizer becomes the aggressor. Angel learns this in Two-Town near the end of the novel: “Reversing the truth, they would call us terrorists. If there was evil in this world, this was it, I thought. Reversal” (Hogan 283).

Fitzpatrick’s prevailing concern is the possibility of healing from extensive trauma, of the ability of traumatized subjects to become “fully human,” as Angel does through a sensory connection to nature (9). “Hogan’s emphasis,” she writes, “is on the ways in which a reconfiguration of gender roles, and views towards bodies, matter and nature can lead to healing and serve as an impetus for social, environmental, and political change (13). But in what ways and to what extent are we not always fully human? Even, or especially, for those who have been traumatized, exploited, and degraded, does it not fall into the trap of dualism and hierarchy to suggest, however subtly, that one is incompletely human if not wholly inhuman? This is the very predicament of representing trauma, because even though one is always already human, it feels like one is not. And that feeling is not something to be ignored or dismissed as merely affective. At the level of sensation, there seems to be something missing, and that perception becomes reality, becomes material. It feels like and is a loss, an absence, a sickness: a sickness with no antidote. Enter Hannah Wing.
From Monstrous to Multiple

As the critiques of *Solar Storms* and their relation to identity politics highlight the theoretical complexities the novel engenders, other literary texts help demonstrate the ways *Solar Storms* reflects social preoccupations of the time period. The object of analysis from the previous chapter, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, for example, overlaps with *Solar Storms* in ways that range from general to strikingly similar. The two novels are both deeply rooted in mythological archetype, *Beloved* with its connections to the goddess and *Solar Storms* steeped in origin stories and animism. The plot of both novels is propelled by the attempt to locate the mysterious source that haunts their main characters and reveal the mysteries through the revelation of traumatizing events tied to long-term exploitation. Angel’s mother Hannah and Beloved are both victims of violence endemic to and representative of the anguish and oppression of an entire people. Their bodies themselves are ethereal vessels of this anguish: Beloved as both manifestation of Sethe’s killed child and the untold Africans who died during middle passage; Hannah as “the house, the meeting place,” “her life going backward to where time and history and genocide gather and move like a cloud above the spilled oceans of blood,” her “body the place where all this met” (Hogan 101). In *Beloved*, “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (Morrison 60). In *Solar Storms*, Hannah mysteriously “walk[s] out of the dark, cold water,” unspeaking, “something not right with her” (Hogan 97). And then there is Hannah’s own mother, Loretta. “Some said she was haunted,” Hogan writes, “They said something terrible had come along with her. You could almost see it” (39). Both novels depict monstrous mothers who harm their own children. However, unlike Sethe, Hannah does not harm her children in a rational effort
to protect them from worse danger, but simply, it seems, to hurt them, to externalize pain she feels within herself. She tortures Angel as a baby, using fire, wire, and her own teeth, leaving Angel’s face mutilated and scarred. She is referred to in the novel as a liar, a thief, cold-hearted, and soulless. Hannah herself has been victimized, but rather than simply saving her children from victimization she becomes the unfeeling, calculating, brutal victimizer.

In the last chapter I examine the ways the monstrous mother in Beloved corresponds to feminist re clamations of mythic goddesses like Kali, who are often narrowly interpreted in Western society as dangerous and destructive rather than powerful and creative. Hannah’s mythic counterparts seem solely negative. Both Birgit Hans and Laura Castor argue that Hannah is a windigo, someone possessed by a bad spirit, emerging, according to Cree and Ojibwe stories, “when a human being indulges self-interest to the point where his or her cravings for food or sex develop into a physical disorder” (Castor 169). In “Water and Ice,” Hans writes that the causes are often attributed to famine and winter: a “physical and spiritual famine” that induces cannibalism (96). Hans notes, “Hogan does not identify her character Hannah with the term ‘windigo’” (97). “[I]n fact she never uses the term at all throughout the novel,” but the “Woman Who Married Winter” story Dora-Rouge tells follows the usual pattern of windigo stories: a woman alone during the starving winter of 1936 succumbs to the temptation of eating the flesh of her dead family members, and the two hunters who come to her lodge recognize her as a windigo and kill her and melt her heart as well. (97)
There is no way to redeem the windigo, or resurrect the life it has possessed. Once her heart is frozen, it can only be thawed in death. Early in the novel, Bush says that the old people considered “soul loss,” the kind afflicting Hannah, “an old sickness,” one that has no antidote (Hogan 98). Castor, like Hans, reads the hunters’ story as indicative of the spirit, writing, “Traditional belief had it that the only way to exorcise a windigo’s power was to kill it, for example, by pouring hot tallow down its throat to melt the frozen heart” (169). But neither Angel nor Bush is completely convinced of the impossibility. When Bush tells us “no one knew the antidote for such disease,” she does not end there. She continues, pondering, “... if there was soul loss, where would it go? Where would a soul wander? How could I get it back? There must be a way, was what I thought” (Hogan 98). As Castor observes, Angel “sees her mother not as a windigo or even as an abusive human being, but rather as ‘small and vulnerable as she might have been once, back when she was a girl, before she was tortured into this poor shape before me’” (170). For Castor, this deviation from the myth “demonstrates how a worldview must be distinguished from the individual people who hold it” (170). The deviation also does something else: it creates tension between representations of curable and incurable, between a lost cause and something that can be restored or repaired.

This tension between curable or incurable seems like the kind of sleight of hand we might otherwise associate with monstrous mothers, one that distracts from arguments about systemic, real world exploitation. Questions about whether Hannah, the bad-spirit, can be cured or not, often lead to a fixation for an answer that can never be definitively reached. Sleight of hand operates when the contradiction occludes for whom and in what ways the answer matters, and when the focus falls wholly or primarily on the individual.
As mythic archetype, Hannah is another version of the monstrous mother similar to Sethe in *Beloved*, “depraved beyond what any of us can imagine” (Glassner 99). As modern pathology, she is a woman possessed, gone mad, and diabolical. Being a product of trauma pales next to being compelled into delirium by her passion. Read this way, regardless of external factors, Hannah is diseased from within, a condition that even today is to some extent theorized as a condition of female biology, evoking the hysterical woman made mad by wandering womb syndrome, as if taken directly out of ancient history. This default, madwoman position suggests it is ultimately innate wiring, not trauma or exploitation, which makes the infinite nature of wounding infinite. Where *Beloved* speaks to the way mothers are pathologized as monstrous, *Solar Storms* presents society itself as pathological.

*Solar Storms* tries to transcend gender stereotypes with strong female protagonists and a nonhierarchical worldview, but this transcendence is tempered by theoretical confusion and internal inconsistency. For example, it falls into the trap of the innateness of social constructs as evidenced in the story of Bush and the glacier bear early in the novel. “One chilly day alone, she went to the bear,” Hogan writes. “She lifted her shirt and showed the bear her round, full breasts. Oh, it understood already. It knew she was a woman. It knew she had compassion” (46). Bush’s mercy killing of the bear in the very next paragraph is proffered as evidence of this womanly compassion, not entirely unlike Sethe’s attempt to kill her own children. The novel itself, however, contradicts the equation of woman and compassion with Hannah, a woman who has no compassion whatsoever.
As in previous chapters, I turn to Kali Tal argument that there are “three strategies of cultural coping” characteristic of the ways trauma texts are read: mythologization, medicalization, and disappearance. Particularly in relation to Hannah, Solar Storms complicates and clarifies aspects of all three strategies, so they bear repeating. Tal writes,

Mythologization works by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives (twice- and thrice-told tales that come to represent ‘the story’ of trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative. Medicalization focuses our gaze upon the victims of trauma, positing that they suffer from an ‘illness’ that can be ‘cured’ within existing or slightly modified structures of institutionalized medicine and psychiatry. Disappearance—a refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma—is usually accomplished by undermining the credibility of the victim. (6)

Using mythologization, medicalization, and disappearance as coping strategies overlap in Solar Storms. The first two I briefly describe here, but I will go into medicalization and disappearance in more depth in the next section.

That the windigo stories mythologize trauma might seem like a kind of circular logic, since the windigo is a mythological tale. Mythology, by definition, is “A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon” (OED). Risking the obvious, to mythologize means to make something a myth. But the process may involve
taking something historically true and making it not only predictable, as Tal points out, but false. Myths themselves are not necessarily falsehoods, but they generally are not historically true or accurate either, sometimes as a matter of historical distance. Still, there is quite a bit of latitude in interpreting mythology in culture. To call something mythic usually elevates status. To call it a myth diminishes it. The problem arises from which myths and the social groups who believe them in varying degrees—whether it is in their sacred dimension, their cultural instruction, or the elements of truth they depict—are accepted in the historical moment, and which are deemed too primitive or uncivilized or crazy to be believed. These decisions are often but not always made by the group with the ability and resources to control the dominant stories in culture. If the windigo stories reduce the trauma of rape and brutality to a “set of predictable narratives,” one could say that the stories told by the indigenous make it easier to overlook the rape and brutality of indigenous women despite or as part and parcel of victim-blaming.

Mythologizing or medicalizing Hannah Wing is in some ways a matter of available terminology, especially for a society more likely to know the language of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) than mythology. Students, for example, are quick to declare Hannah as suffering from any number of mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder, or dissociative identity disorder (DID), which many still know as its outdated term multiple personality disorder (MPD). When they do not have terminology, they resort to the simpler, seemingly all-encompassing terms, “psycho” or “crazy.” Such labels are not so much of a stretch. After all, when Bush first takes Hannah in, after wondering about the “old sickness,” she observes,
From the very beginning she didn’t sleep. She paced at night. Like she was trapped, or something was trapped in her. Not insomnia or tossing and turning in bed, you understand. She didn’t sleep at all. I’d hear her feet. They sounded so busy. I thought she’d exhaust herself. Many times the covers were not pulled back and the bed had not been touched. (Hogan 98-99)

Something was trapped in her. They sounded so busy. Others inhabit Hannah. Although very little about DID is uncontested, it is generally accepted that the disorder stems from severe and repetitive early childhood trauma, leading to memory loss and varying degrees of dissociation and disconnection from people and events.\textsuperscript{81} Hannah could hardly fit the diagnosis more perfectly. As Bush watches over young Hannah, she realizes, “They came awake at night, those who hurt her. Them. Those who walked the floor in her skin” (100). Hannah’s case is so severe that “she” is overshadowed by “them”: “She was a body under siege, a battleground. But she herself never emerged. The others, with their many voices and ways, were larger than she was. She was no longer there” (99).

Whether the “others” are interpreted as ghosts or personalities depends on the messages in culture telling us how to read them. In Western culture today, especially pop culture, dissociative identity disorder (DID) is at the top of the psycho list, literally and figuratively. Psychological symptoms of DID are contentious, not well understood, and frequently, if mistakenly, lumped in with those of schizophrenia,\textsuperscript{82} both of which the film industry has helped catapult to archetypal status, and partly why they rank at the top of what most people are quick to identify as “crazy.” Depression, for example, is only mildly crazy, but DID is the real crazy. (Many if not most people can identify with and do feel various stages of melancholy in their lives, but exceedingly few people identify
with regularly turning into someone else with no memory of it afterward.) From the serial killer Norman Bates in *Psycho* and the tortured and traumatized *Sybil* (both of which have been remade for contemporary audiences), to the modern hero Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* and the award winning Showtime hit *The United States of Tara*, representations of fragmented identity are cultural cachet. The popularity of representations of fragmented identity comes in waves but has exploded since the 1980s, which I view as an extension of interest in and legitimacy provided to examinations of identity through identity politics.

**The Battle Over the Meaning of Traumatic Experience**

Rather than solely misdirecting attention from the real social problems of trauma through medicalization, questions about Hannah’s pathology can, if put in historical context, lead to a critique of what instigates and perpetuates her suffering. When Bush asks where a soul would go and how to get it back, she stops short of asking what makes it happen in the first place. What causes fragmented identity, or rather, the way that cause is understood explains features of the society interpreting it. *Solar Storms* is part of a wider discourse that reveals a social preoccupation with fragmented identity at the end of the twentieth century, theoretical and popular. Because it underscores arguments about the relationship of trauma, authenticity, and validity, in this section I look at one of the most contentious of *Solar Storms*’ popular counterparts, *When Rabbit Howls: A First-Person Account of Multiple Personality, Memory, and Recovery*.

In an analysis of the changing understanding of multiple personality disorder as it relates to gender, called “Dividing to Conquer? Women, Men, and the Making of
Multiple Personality Disorder,” Debbie Nathan includes *When Rabbit Howls* as part of a 1980s surge of mass-market literature on the topic, one which received a lot of popular attention at the time (82). Part of its notoriety stems from fascination with and corresponding trepidation about mental illness in its extreme forms, another for the taboos it addresses about childhood sexual trauma, and yet another because it is among only a few autobiographical accounts of DID ever written. In “Trauma, Testimony, and Fictions of Truth,” published the same year as *Solar Storms*, Deborah Carlin explains the unique status of *When Rabbit Howls* as “the only text that is not co-authored by a multiple in which multiple authors are self-consciously registered within its narration” (479); in other words, it is the only one not written by someone who has been “cured” reflecting on the experience afterward. As I have previously written, the tension between curable and incurable is one that hangs in the air for Hannah and her readers. Truddi Chase complicates this binary as someone—a real, not a fictional someone—who was recovered but still multiple.83

A glance at the praise inside of *When Rabbit Howls*’ jacket speaks to the kind of appeal to authenticity and validity the book has. “Remarkable . . . alarmingly real and courageous,” writes the Toronto Sun. “Fascinating, provocative reading,” declares the Library Journal. “[A] document that breaks the silence . . . a searing indictment of the crime of child sexual abuse . . . a truly moving and thought-provoking work . . . an uplifting, inspiring story of a survivor,” hails Sojourner. The introduction and epilogue touted on the front cover by “Robert A. Phillips, Jr., Ph.D.” and the comment from “Dr. Cornelia Wilbur, the psychiatrist who treated Sybil,” on the back give the book an additional aura of authority and legitimacy. In the introduction, Phillips himself counters
the “great deal of controversy over the years as to whether the condition of multiple personality actually exists” (viii) with a lengthy definition from the 1980 DSM. In “Survivor Discourse,” Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray note Phillips’ writing “operates to contain her own words by literally surrounding them,” and argue, “The effect of such mediation and interpretation is to soften the challenge Chase presents to our society” (274). Before getting into that “challenge,” a bit more on authenticity. The title itself proclaims it a “first-person account,” written by “The Troops for Truddi Chase” (emphasis added), written, in other words, “not by Chase” as Carlin notes (479), but by her ninety-two distinct personalities called The Troops (479). Thanks in part to shows like The United States of Tara, different personalities are now commonly referred to today as “alters.”

*When Rabbit Howls* is an aporetic text. If it is truly a first-hand account, it is strangely cohesive as a narrative, let alone coherent, for “more than ninety, separate, distinct individuals, ranging from children to adults, both male and female, some of different ethnic backgrounds, and all sharing the body of one woman” (Phillips xiv). The nonfiction narrative includes a purely fictional element of revenge-fantasy, something that the troops write in the author’s note “did not really take place,” but which is nevertheless touted as “quite real” to “the children . . . who envisioned it. . .” (Chase xxvii). That the Library of Congress officially catalogues *When Rabbit Howls* as biography, not as autobiography, makes things less rather than more clear. And as if to confuse things even further, some segments of narration are told from The Troops’ perspective of what they think Dr. Phillips’ perspective would be, whom they rename Stanley to keep him “at a proper distance” (14). An example of this conundrum can be
seen in relation to a passage about an infrequently discussed alter, Rabbit. Rabbit is the only alter who seems to relive Truddi’s childhood trauma and is so named for the heartrending comparison between her howls of trauma and the eerily piercing sound of rabbits in pain. “It seemed to Stanley,” the Troops write, “that Rabbit was the only Troop member who expressed remembered pain” (218). This is but one example in which the autobiographical account is written from the psychiatrist’s perspective, but it is striking that not only is this the passage from which the book takes its name, but it is also written from the psychiatrist’s perspective while underscoring the etiology of the disorder his patient suffers. This kind of symbolic strategy and literary coherence seems out of sync for someone whose mind is so severely fragmented. As a whole, the narrative offers amazing precision, clarity, and recall for someone suffering from a condition whose most marked characteristic is memory lapse. Anticipating skepticism, The Troops themselves account for this paradox, stating at the outset that the book “is the factual documentation taken literally from our daily journals, our combined recall which we tape-recorded, and our sessions, which were videotaped,” in addition to the most fortunate presence of “The Recorder, a Troop member with almost ‘photographic’ conversational recall” who accounts for the rest (xxv).

These narrative inconsistencies alone seem laughable, enough to discredit claims like “alarmingly real” and discredit DID altogether, were it not for the underpinnings of abuse. Rather than misdirection, it is a reasonable and warranted response to wonder whether or not DID is real when reading When Rabbit Howls, just as it is for Solar Storms, precisely because of its relationship to trauma and the women disproportionately affected by it. The impetus is to discredit DID for the considerable internal problems of a
book like *When Rabbit Howls* or the seemingly contradictory mythic distractions of *Solar Storms*, especially when the numbers of such texts indicate culture is grappling with something important about their contents. But discrediting DID altogether runs the risk of discrediting attempts to understand the consequences of trauma. Where Nathan groups *When Rabbit Howls* with other texts on MPD, for example, she could easily group them as part of a “burgeoning” trend in “literature on child abuse—especially child sexual abuse” (Thomas 293). And though such studies are somewhat dated, even today, popular websites such as AllPsych Online, which represents itself as “The Virtual Psychology Classroom,” presents DSM-IV coding indexes describing DID as “associated with severe psychological stress in childhood, most often ritualistic sexual or physical abuse.” The DSM itself has revised its diagnosis over the years, careful not to argue causality in its official description.

The DSM-IV-TR is carefully worded for good reason. The causal linkage between child sexual abuse and DID has numerous detractors. Many have argued convincingly about the erroneousness of such etiology, noting the vast number of abuse and incest survivors who do not become “multiple” or dissociate in such extreme ways. Others, like Piper and Merskey, have noted the increase in numbers of persons diagnosed with DID since the 1980s, after the increase of texts about “multiples.” “More DID cases were discovered during the 5 years prior to 1986 than in the preceding 2 centuries,” they write (595). Debbie Nathan provides additional complication in that “The vast majority have been diagnosed since 1980, when MPD first gained official recognition as a psychiatric disorder in the DSM” (79). According to Nathan, “Researchers also note that whenever a therapist publicly announces a new symptom, reports of it immediately
multiply” (82). Piper and Merskey declare that because “North American psychiatrists and psychologists are abandoning the notion of MPD-DID as an acceptable diagnosis” they “expect that the condition will revive momentarily and die several times before it finally ceases to be a ripple on the surface of the psychiatric universe” (682). Yet the comment that cements relevance between *When Rabbit Howls* and *Solar Storms* comes at the end of Piper and Merskey’s study. They conclude, “In the end, it is likely to become about as credible as spirits are today” (682). Spirits like the windigo? Spirits like those who are said to inhabit Hannah and her mother before her?

One could argue refuting *When Rabbit Howls*’ credibility falls into Tal’s third cultural coping strategy of disappearance: “a refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma—is usually accomplished by undermining the credibility of the victim” (6). And indeed I do attest that as a narrative, the claims of the book fall apart, that the narrative does indeed undermine Chase’s credibility, and that the claims about DID-MPD as a verifiable illness supposedly proven by the documented experience of the book itself thereby fall apart. But the claims of truth and authenticity are surpassed in this case by something else. *When Rabbit Howls*, especially Phillips’ introduction, overtly proclaims that the book itself proves DID exists. The logical counterclaim is that what the book really does is prove DID is a wild fabrication. Ironically, the controversy over legitimacy of diagnosis and debatable causality suggests there is indeed some kind of important relationship between dissociation and trauma. The relationship is not necessarily a causal one, but it is significant nonetheless. For example, that the novel undermines Chase’s credibility as someone who suffers from a psychiatric illness does not discount her abuse, nor does it deny the existence of that abuse in general. The
trauma is not disputed, the illness is. Immediately after her description of cultural coping strategies, Tal explains, “Traumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of analysis” (6).

Narrative conventions are codified, not unlike the psychiatric codes in the DSM, and “Once codified, the traumatic experience becomes a weapon in another battle, the struggle for political power” (6). That Chase’s book presents itself in an all-too-familiar conventional format speaks to this kind of narrative codification. For Tal, as for Alcoff and Gray, survivor stories like Chase’s, despite their narrative complexities, challenge the status quo and the “powerful political, economic and social forces” who would rather they remain silent (7).

Even though one cannot ignore the problems the narrative-as-conduit to Chase’s experience poses, Chase’s personal experience does not reside purely in the domain of When Rabbit Howls. That experience has been produced, negotiated, and transformed in varying degrees by a host of social, economic, and political entities, including herself, her psychiatrist, the medical community that defines DID, the insurance companies that profit from it, the mode and publication of the book and films it inspired, the consumers of the mass-marketing strategies of the genre, and so on. Carlin speaks to this complexity and the desire to distill its meaning when she discusses Chase’s appearance on The Oprah Winfrey Show. The most shocking aspect of Chase’s story, she writes, was not “surprisingly, the ninety-two multiple personalities she allegedly possessed, but rather it was the horrific childhood sexual abuse that she endured for fourteen years from her stepfather” (475). Winfrey’s “object, as she summed up near the end of the show, was to alert her viewing and studio audience to the fact that child abuse was real and did occur.
even though society preferred to immerse itself in collective denial” (475; emphasis in orig.). As a survivor, Winfrey could overlook the narrative and focus on the traumatic experience, and, as Carlin explains, it was at Winfrey’s “unique brand of relentless delicacy” that “prodded the woman into revealing episode after episode of sadistic abuse” (475). Indeed, Chase had appeared on Oprah as part of a marketing campaign for her book, but it was her experiences, and what those experiences meant, the interpretation of the narrative and not the narrative in and of itself, which Winfrey wanted her audience to contemplate and comprehend. In other words, “What was performed that afternoon on national television, in the tale that the woman named Truddi Chase recounted and in Winfrey’s own acknowledgment of herself as a survivor, was testimony, the transformation of an unspoken, private trauma into a public story that bears witness to and offers proof for what has heretofore remained unspeakable” (475; emphasis in orig.).

Testimony. Unspeakable trauma. Here again, as with Chapter 4, what is encountered is, as Kathleen Brogan put it in relation to Beloved, “the problem of how to represent what is experienced as ‘unspeakable’” (63).

“The battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience,” Tal writes, “is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate,” and “The outcome of this battle shapes the rhetoric of the dominant culture and influences future political action” (7). In other words, the way one reads and interprets the stories of a real person like Truddi Chase or a fictional one like Hannah matters because of the way both texts attempt to represent traumatic experience and the meaning readers make of that representation. In Trauma Culture, E. Ann Kaplan suggests that whether the testimonies fully represent exactly what happened, they generate important venues for healing and
empathy (37). I argue that because both texts work as kinds of testimony, they function as truth claims about the importance of personal experience in relation to structural oppression. More importantly, those truth claims enable and implore us to examine the theoretical conundrums of our own world, in this case, understanding and dealing with trauma. In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth proposes that stories about trauma going back to Freud seem, in fact,

to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language. (4)

If one confines their examinations of trauma to pathology, or even the unconscious, what is lost is the way stories about traumatic experience expose the ways representation itself has taken precedence over reality, or to reiterate Kruger, “We are everywhere, not in the real but in the represented. Our bodies, the flesh and blood of it all, have given way to representations” (5). If representing traumatic experience is already difficult, representing it in a social climate that makes representation suspect makes it doubly so.

As a representative example of the deluge of texts on child sexual abuse and fragmented identity in the years preceding the publication of *Solar Storms, When Rabbit Howls* amplifies the problems of representation for the kind of affliction Hannah seems to embody. This explosion of texts about fragmented identity, especially as a result of trauma, underscores the cultural anxiety about losing connection to oneself and reality in general, which is itself a product of increasing globalization through capitalism, the
increasing speed of globalization, and the alienation that stems from it. I turn now to theories that directly address the relationship between capitalism and fragmented identity.

**The Malady of Our Era**

Any number of authors has argued that the postmodern condition is in part defined by a preoccupation with fragmented identity, and that fragmented identity is a kind of traumatic modern affliction. Foucault famously argued in *The History of Sexuality* that “Modern society is perverse…” (47). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write in *Anti-Oedipus* that because of capitalism, “The earth becomes a madhouse” (192), proclaiming schizophrenia “the malady of our era” (34). Schizophrenia is the “malady of our era” because late capitalism is particularly good, they say, at creating this particular form of madness. It is not, merely, however, that “modern life drives people mad” (34). “It is not a question of a way of life,” they explain, “but of a process of production” (34). “Our society,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “produces schizos the same way it produces Prell shampoo or Ford cars, the only difference being that the schizos are not salable” (245). It should be noted that Deleuze and Guattari use the term schizophrenic symbolically, not clinically, to mean a process that “is pure multiplicity,” “an affirmation that is irreducible to any sort of unity” (42), which harkens back to the tendency to use schizophrenia, multiple personality, and dissociative identity disorder interchangeably. This irreducibility is a product of capitalism that nevertheless must be quelled, because it is a product that “is not salable” (246). Without salability, there is no chance for profit; therefore, “schizophrenia,” they argue, “is not the identity of capitalism, but on the contrary its difference, its divergence, and its death” (246). Deleuze and Guattari contend
that capitalism creates schizophrenia, then turns around and “make[s] the schizophrenic into a sick person” and “confine[s] its madmen and madwomen instead of seeing in them its own heroes and heroines. . .” (245).

It would be difficult to call the fictional Hannah or real-life Truddi heroes, even if this turn-around provides a more optimistic, palatable narrative. Still, Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of schizophrenia as the malady of our era is particularly informative when recalling Morrison’s Tanner Lecture comment from the last chapter: “The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis—strangely of no interest to psychiatry” (“Unspeakable” 16). Deleuze and Guattari’s claim suggests that because the schizophrenic is so severely fragmented she lacks the self-coherence necessary to be successfully treated in the psychoanalytic process; it is therefore not strange at all that traumatic subjects are of “no interest to psychiatry.” There is no profit and no cure. In fact, by this formulation, there is no profit because there is no cure. For this reason, Deleuze and Guattari’s project is a “materialist psychiatry” (5), which they call “schizoanalysis” (98), and whereby “Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough” (131).

A danger of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory is posed by David Harvey, who argues that the theoretical consequence of replacing concepts of alienation and paranoia with madness is an abandonment of historicizing social totality on the basis that “we cannot aspire to any unified representation of the world” and thus cannot “aspire to act coherently with respect to the world” (Condition 52). “The simple postmodernist answer,” Harvey writes, “is that since coherent representation and action are either
repressive or illusionary (and therefore doomed to be self-dissolving and self-defeating), we should not even try to engage in some global project” (52). If this is true, similar to the inability of psychoanalysis to work for the schizophrenic, “We can no longer conceive of the individual as alienated in the classical Marxist sense, because to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of self from which to be alienated” (53). Critical theories that rely on history at all thus become suspect if not moot.

This and other problems notwithstanding, the idea behind a materialist psychiatry, which weds theories about desire, sensation, and emotion to the historical conditions of daily life in late capitalism, is extremely valuable. So much of academic theory eschews critical attention to emotion and feeling, denigrating it as affective, tossing it aside on the grounds of impossibly insufficient analysis. Part of this academic venom is tied to gender in ways that are too often overlooked. Emotion and similar “soft” concepts are still largely seen as the domain of women, hard science the domain of men, and in an era of mass-produced, saleable knowledges, this gender binary has become more rather than less rigid. Readings of Solar Storms that venerate the women’s unique bodily connection to nature and spirit, or those that try to account for the internal fragmentation of traumatic experience, implicitly work to counteract this hierarchy but are contained by the same neoliberal politics that have quelled the identity politics movement.

But the difficulty posed when analyzing immaterial concepts such as desire, sensation, emotion, feeling, experience, and perception does not negate the intellectual value in doing so. In fact, examining narratives about traumatic subjects in relation to the
history that produces them is useful precisely because so much is contingent upon feeling and perception, and on the subjective experience impossible to put sufficiently into words. Laurie Vickroy, author of *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, writes,

> Traumatic experience can produce a sometimes indelible effect on the human psyche that can change the nature of an individual’s memory, self-recognition, and relational life. Despite the human capacity to survive and adapt, traumatic experiences can alter people’s psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present. This tyranny of the past interferes with the ability to pay attention to both new and familiar situations.

(11-12)

Trauma, in a sense, keeps someone stuck in the past as the world continues both with and without them. Traumatic experience creates a glaring disconnect between the individual and the world, on both a concrete individual level as well as a symbolic cultural level. This disconnect is mirrored in popular culture through the proliferation of texts about fragmented identity, which may appear as merely a marketable fad in a neoliberal economy but is actually the resounding social anxiety of an alienated populace who recognizes that disconnect and is, in fact, seeking not only a remedy for clinical illness but for social injustice and exploitation that contributes to its cause.

*Solar Storms* is a narrative about fragmented identity resulting from traumatic experience both in the plot of the story and society at large, and reading it as a cultural product, replete with the material and immaterial concepts that reside around trauma, is above all else an epistemological endeavor. Reading *Solar Storms* as representative of
the struggle to understand “the malady of our era” underscores the contested terrain of identity politics in an era that commodifies identity itself. This perspective suggests that identity politics is not so much the search for wholeness or through a form of existentialism as it is an argument about truth claims that incorporate both individual and social factors. The final two sections of the chapter pair this kind of materialist analysis with the intersectional analysis advanced by identity politics to show that the infinite nature of wounding represented by the novel exposes the veiling of structural oppression.

**It Was Systems We Ended Up Fighting**

As I have said, the infinite nature of wounding is not truly infinite; it only appears so. If it is not infinite, it must start somewhere; it must have a root cause. But the problem with root causes is frequently that what we think is the source is not the source, or only part of the source. The root, like a literal root, might be obscured from view or branch off in multiple directions. Perception itself might be inaccurate or incorrect. Hogan uses the idea of roots throughout *Solar Storms*, whether it is Angel searching for her roots or Dora-Rouge, who Angel imagines “was a root and we were like a tree family, aspens or birch, connected to one another underground, the older trees feeding the young, sending off shoots, growing” (48). Part of the affinity for postmodern theories about fragmented identity emerges out of a willingness to explore intricate webs and complex networks with no clear source, and *Solar Storms* is apposite terrain in this regard. In *Solar Storms*, the root causes, like Hannah, seem multiple because they are. Scholarly interpretations are frequently limited by over-reliance on a single answer (only one root cause) or stopping short when conceptualizing the problem (the root is not really the root).
Even the best-intentioned attempts to understand traumatic subjects have their limits. Psychiatry sees childhood trauma as the root cause of fragmented identity, the merit of which was born out to varying extents by the proliferation of childhood trauma texts in the 1980s. But because of the influence of increasing corporate interests the outcome of such theory tends to end with identifying a “proper” diagnosis that in real life would be accompanied by pharmaceutical treatment of the symptoms. Theoretical examinations remain largely symptomatic as well. The trauma itself remains inexplicably part of the infinite nature of wounding, and an unavoidable component of human life. Such interpretations are not unlike those that focus on the cultural mythologies of hauntings and evil spirits requiring exorcism, which identify important, often sacred, dimensions of social life, but too often fall into cultural and historical essentialism. Ironically, attention to identity categories brought on by identity politics has been largely subsumed by examinations of the individual to the detriment of the systemic analysis advocated by identity politics’ core tenets.

Such limitations to reading Solar Storms are understandable given the novel proposes such a complex and sometimes contradictory depiction of individual versus systemic roles in relation to trauma. The novel opens, for example, with the story of Bush’s mourning ceremony. “I didn’t know what had taken hold of [Bush],” Agnes says, “and what lengths she must go in order to escape its grip” (Hogan 12). Bush’s ceremony is a mourning ritual for the loss of Angel as well as a way to cast off the evil that is Hannah. But when Bush describes Hannah’s mother Loretta, the novel seems to rebut the notion of the bad spirit altogether:
Some people said that what came with her was a bad spirit. Some said an enemy had thrown tobacco into the lake at midnight and laid a curse on her. But I’ve seen bad medicine. This was something else. It wasn’t like any shadow under rocks or anything hiding from the face of light. The curse on that poor girl’s life came from watching the desperate people of her tribe die. (39)

Loretta’s people were the “Elk Islanders, the people who became so hungry they ate the poisoned carcasses of deer that the settlers left out for the wolves” (38). The Elk Islanders were starving because of the changes brought about by the Northern Fur Trade and depletion of resources resulting from capital accumulation. Those who survived smelled of bitter almonds from the cyanide they ingested, which became an identifying marker of their descendents. But this mythos, and Bush’s explanation, points to structural oppression, and counters the more symbolic belief of bad spirits inhabiting damaged individuals.

*Solar Storms* does not detail the extent to which the Northern Fur Trade introduced capitalism to the First Nations of Canada, though the aftermath is referenced throughout and it seems as though the reader should be able to fill in the blanks.90 Trading companies brought with them the institutions of debt, wages, and hierarchy, which resulted in depletion of environmental resources and transformation of the indigenous social order. And yet while such history is well known and widely theorized, it is surprising how often those systemic causes have been overlooked. For example, in a *Canadian Journal of Economics* article published the year after *Solar Storms*, an analysis of the “Cultural, Ecological and Economic Sustainability” of “The Cree Communities of the Hudson and James Bay Lowland, Ontario” argues, “Traditionally, the
Omushkegowuk Cree lived in scattered local bands, moving with the seasons and subsisting on fish and game” but that “Over the past century, the locus of ‘home’ gradually changed from the bush to village settlement structure” (George 356). What is notable is that no explanation of or reason for the change is indicated anywhere in the article, only “the locus of ‘home’ gradually changed.” There is no discussion of the way the fur trade effectively changed the living patterns of the Cree or reference to the contentious 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), which reduced the homeland of the Cree and Inuit to a fraction of its original size and therefore directly and dramatically changed the territory. Nor is there reference to the ways the hydroelectric projects instituted as a result of the JBNQA devastated the hunting and fishing prospects of the region. There is no discussion of how, for example, Hydro-Québec, the provincial government utility most directly involved in the project, took the position that concern over social impact was beyond the utility’s area of responsibility, and that no social issues associated with the project would be allowed to influence the decision whether or not to go ahead with development. (Tanner 122)

That lack of discussion cannot be blamed on lack of knowledge, even if no environmental impact studies were done before the Cree demanded one for the Great Whale hydroelectric proposal. It was no mystery that there was a negative correlation between the fur trade and indigenous culture. The problem is that such details continue to be misread as part of a natural progression of things or the fault of the indigenous population, both of which divert attention from the ways systems of advantage operate.
Reading the novel in relation to the history of colonization and exploitation makes *Solar Storms* a compelling critique of capitalism and the harm it has brought on the First Nations of North America. Capitalism itself is a kind of trauma, inducing by its very mechanisms a heightened sense of alienation in the turn towards neoliberalism, alienation demonstrated by that same sudden proliferation of texts about fragmented identity in the 1980s discussed earlier. But it would be a mistake to argue the infinite nature of wounding as simply or only capitalism. To return to the novel, it wasn’t until “after that, when she was still a girl,” after she had “been taken and used by men who fed her and beat her and forced her” that Loretta would “become the one who hurts others” (Hogan 39). “It was passed down,” but “it” is not simply the wounding of capitalism (39). “It” is tenuously both individual and structural at once. Angel makes it clear that despite Bush’s anger at the social workers who “were unable to do what they should have done” with Hannah and with her, “It was systems we ended up fighting,” not just individuals (96). There is a significant “but” that comes next in the text. “But,” Angel adds, “it went even farther back than that, to houses of law with their unkept treaties, to the broken connections of people to the world and its many gods” (96).

It would be difficult to make a non-essentialist argument about the traumatic effects of capitalism represented in the novel since the “broken connection” encompasses centuries. This is but one reason it is important to examine the novel as a reflection of its own time period. *Solar Storms* is undoubtedly a novel about the origin of capitalism in North America but it is also a story from the perspective of and enmeshed in debates over identity politics occurring during the late capitalism of neoliberalism. There is something else requiring attention to besides the overarching scourge of capitalism, not instead of
but in addition to capital over-accumulation, alienation, and exploitation writ large. Reading *Solar Storms* as only a critique of capitalism means ignoring or dismissing the mythic stories that appear at every turn: “the Hungry Mouth of Water” (Hogan 62) children raised by wolves (55-56), the trickster Wolverine (84), “the girl filled with ice” (94), plant dreaming (170-72), cannibals (186), Beaver, who was the true creator of the world (238-39), and so on. Paying attention to the myths is not just mythologizing if it does not focus exclusively on readings that reproduce the archetypal hero’s journey, idealize and romanticize native culture, or submerge the plot of the novel in narratives of pathological women. In fact, ignoring the mythic dimensions altogether means dismissing most multiculturalist and multiethnic critiques, which, as discussed earlier, form the majority of critiques of the novel and largely come out of departments created by the shift to identity politics. What these critiques often miss is the examination of the novel as a product of its particular history.

Part of what the novel reveals about the infinite nature of wounding is how the very systemic inequalities identity politics sought to examine, challenge, and overcome through its understanding of identity categories as interlocking and structural become invisible. A system of advantage works to conceal the very mechanisms by which it operates. Naturalization, misdirection, misrepresentation, and fragmentation are all methods by which concealment occurs, so it makes sense when such symptoms show up in popular culture. As part of this concealing mechanism, attempts to understand those symptoms have been diluted by overspecialization. Instead of examining the ways identity categories interlock to combat social inequality, for example, identity categories become stylistic, they become valued more or less than others, or they are dismissed as
worthy of examination altogether. The novel’s internal contradictions, like the narrative incoherence of *When Rabbit Howls*, make it difficult to know which story is true, which one is endorsed by the novel, which one is best. Hannah is not truly inhabited by a bad spirit, but Bush performs a ceremony to expel it anyway. Agnes shows the bear her breasts because women are innately compassionate, but Hannah has no compassion at all. Hannah is merely a shell for the trauma done to others and she herself is no longer there, but Angel ends the novel with the revelation that “She hurt me because I was part of her and she hated herself” (Hogan 345). These contradictions could easily pit one reading against another: social versus individual, historical versus mythic, effect or affect. But read as a whole, as a story about traumatic subjects at the end of the twentieth century, *Solar Storms* represents the struggle over hierarchy itself. And as identity politics worked to explain, even hierarchy is interlocking. The multiple roots—psychic, mythic, spiritual, historical—point to valid and important components. But instead of being read as part of a unified story, in the move to specialized knowledges within departments designed to house unique identities, these components get divvied up and effectively silenced. Wounding in *Solar Storms* is not individual or structural but both at once. Fragmentation is both symptom *and* cause. The psychic and mythic dimensions underscored by the novel are not distractions or diversions from the historical and economic. In fact, the former function as a kind of key by which to read the latter. To ignore the ways these components intersect means to miss what makes the novel an important historical document and hence truth claim in its own right.
Beginnings Are Everything

*Solar Storms* provides a conspicuous way to read the historical and economic dimensions of the novel through the psychic and mythic ones, with its recurring emphasis on beginnings. “Beginnings,” Angel learns, “were important to my people” (Hogan 37). The novel’s emphasis on beginnings extends beyond the thematic and is tied to the interconnectedness of history, spirituality, and knowledge. “Nobody knows where it began, your story,” Agnes tells Angel (37). She thinks maybe “What happened to [Angel] started long ago. It began around the time of the killing of the wolves. When people were starving.” Later Agnes return to the idea:

I don’t know where the beginning was, your story, ours. Maybe it came down in the milk of our mothers. Old Man said it was in the train tracks that went through the land and came out of the iron mines. I’ve thought of this for years. It might have started when the crying children were taken away from their mothers or when the logging camps started and cities were built from our woods, or when they cut the rest of the trees to raise cattle. (40)

After Agnes’ initial assessments, Angel’s perspective continues the deliberations in various ways. “I began to form a kind of knowing at Adam’s Rib,” she says, a kind of boundless knowing that “had no separate words for inside and out and there were no boundaries between them, no walls, no skin,” so what you would see of Angel “would not be the mask of what had happened to me, not the evidence of violence, not even how I closed the doors to the rooms of anger and fear” (54). The knowing is liminal, “only a felt thing” (67), but it compels Angel to question everything and open herself to alternate epistemologies: “I thought if it was true that there’s no true north, no still center, no
steady magnetic pole, how could I believe anything I’d learned before? Even land moves” (105). This growing awareness leads Angel to question the history of belief systems usually taken for granted:

People say that in the beginning was the word. But they have forgotten the loneliness of God, the yearning for something that shaped itself into the words, *Let there be*. Out of that loneliness, light was conceived, water opened across a new world, and people rose up from clay, there were dreamers of plants and deer. It was this same desire in me, this same longing for creation, and Bush’s spare words were creation itself. I had been empty space, and now I was finding a language, a story, to shape myself by. (94)

Notice that in this passage Hogan reveals a false root and calls for an examination of what came before. What people say is the beginning is not the beginning. What is forgotten is the feeling and desire that precedes “the word” itself, “the yearning for something that shaped itself into the words,” and then the domino effect of creation, storytelling, and identity formation. Angel comes to understand that her beginning can be traced backward in time to “Hannah’s beginning, one of broken lives, gone animals, trees felled and kindled” (96). She realizes that the beginning she is searching for is both individual and collective; her story is also the story of her people: “*Our* beginnings,” Angel says, “were intricately bound up in the history of the land” (96; emphasis added).

In her 2004 essay, “Beginnings are Everything: The Quest for Origins in Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms*,” Ellen L. Arnold94 explains Angel’s exploration into origins as enabling her “to understand this beginning as one of many, a mirror reflecting an entire
Arnold argues that through *Solar Storms*,

Hogan explores commonalities, resonances, and connections between the beliefs and stories of Native American and Western religious traditions, opening on a new spiritual vision in their intersections that foregrounds Christianity’s “others”—women, animals, indigenous peoples, the earth itself—and redeems elements of Christianity and its God by regrounding, feminizing, and “heterarchicalizing” them. (285-86)

Throughout the piece, Arnold explores complex intersections of historical, psychic, and bodily elements of the novel that shape identity. She reads the novel as providing analysis of “tangible realities and historical events” as well as “the intangible realms of interconnection and transformation” (291).

“Beginnings are Everything” models the kind of reading I argue for, one that examines fragmented identity in terms of concrete history and abstract sensation and knowledge-making. Arnold argues that the novel recreates a non-hierarchical worldview that ultimately rejects “Christianity’s patriarchal ‘dominion theology’ and the hierarchical institution it created, which requires practices of exclusion and domination of women and animals” (296). This rejection is demonstrated, according to Arnold, by the way the novel “reinstates the power of women within Christianity by blending its stories not only with indigenous ones but also with earlier versions of Christianity’s own narratives” (296). Arnold’s piece deconstructs Hogan’s retelling of the book of Genesis through the play on Adam’s Rib throughout the novel, arguing that *Solar Storms* reinterprets Genesis in “a more gender-balanced version” rather than the account “that makes woman
Arnold contends that “Hogan links Christianity to its gnostic roots, part of a pattern in the novel that makes a circle of Western traditions, typing them back to their ‘origins’” (298).

Arnold’s argument is especially salient for the way it allows us to see that if the infinite nature of wounding starts anywhere, it is with the idea of dominion and the hierarchy it establishes, the dominion of man over nature, man over woman, the powerful over the powerless. “Solar Storms,” Arnold writes, “demonstrates the importance of recovering an individual identity, of remapping a securely bounded ego, out of the chaos of destruction—the loss of personal and communal histories, the repetition of abuse of self and others—that is the legacy of Conquest (301). Here I would adjust the model Arnold sets up. Arnold tracks dominion as the historical legacy of conquest spanning thousands of years rather than examining the novel in its contemporaneity. Her discussion of the ways the novel rejects dominion theology is even more profound when placed against a historical backdrop in which dominion theology gained renewed vigor. This philosophical resurgence in dominion theology is a corresponding neoliberal reaction to reinforce the structural hierarchies that identity politics challenged.

Capitalism perpetuates the infinite nature of wounding in a variety of overt and covert ways and is thus a key agent in abuses passed down. But capitalism can only operate with an intact hierarchy, the hierarchy asserted by dominion theology. But asserting dominion does not start with capitalism. It starts with the belief that leads to such an institution. This helps explain why and how “Capitalist economies have always moved in cycles of expansion and contraction” (Yates 125). “They are crisis prone by nature” (125) so must tap into what is important and understood by society at the time to
make it appear as things were and always have been this way, to make it appear infinite. With the move to intensified privatization and globalization, capitalism uses more subtle and insidious methods to bring the populace into the capitalist formation. Colonization now takes place as much in the realm of the immaterial as in the material. And the realm of the immaterial is the land of identity. The self becomes a sight of struggle in even greater magnitude than before. Wounding is not only physical violence but also the mental separation where two things that are conflicting cannot exist in the same cognitive space. Deleuze and Guattari say, “no one has ever died from contradictions” (151), but not only is this not quite so, death is a limited (and cynical) way to measure trauma. As symptoms of crisis, contradiction is responsible for the extreme cognitive dissonance of the fragmented self. It is not just something happening over there. Your body is a literal battleground, the harm being done immeasurable, and therefore all the more significant to examine. Bush says, “‘Some people see scars and it is wounding they remember. To me they are proof of the fact that there is healing’” (Hogan 125). Part of the healing in the neoliberal era means an end to the theoretical rifts driven by specialization. It is essential to expose both the visible and invisible scars of trauma—both the material and immaterial aspects of lived reality—to show that the kind of wounding illustrated in Solar Storms is not infinite, nor is it inevitable.
Notes

Chapter 1

1 During a 2005 New York State Writing Series reading of her recently published book *The Penelopiad* at the University at Albany, SUNY, and having noticed ideas and characters came up in similar ways in her poetry and fiction—particularly with the overlap between “Girl Without Hands” and *Bodily Harm*—I asked Margaret Atwood which came first, poetry or prose. Her response was that it was “always poetry.”

2 Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* was an edited volume of essays published in 1995, followed the next year by her self-authored *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Other seminal trauma studies texts include Lenore Terr’s *Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories Lost and Found* (1995), Kali Tal’s seminal *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), and editors Paul Antze’s and Michael Lambeck’s *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (1996).

3 Theories of the self can be tracked to the bases of all world religions, *The Upanishads* being among the first in 2000-1500 BCE. Among others who took on the subject directly are, in order of their birth, Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Chuang Tzu, Aristotle, Socrates, Plotinus, St. Augustine, Christine de Pisan, Queen Elizabeth I, Hobbes, Descartes, Benedict de Spinoza, Locke, Mallebranche, Leibniz, Hume, Adam Smith, Kant, Wollstonecraft, Hegel, Keats, Mary Shelley, Sojourner Truth, Darwin, Thoreau, George Eliot, Whitman, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Bergson, DuBois, Ghandi, Jung, Virginia Woolf, Karl Jaspers, Heidegger, Gramsci, Marcuse, Lacan, Joseph Campbell, Sarte, Rand, Arrendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Althusser, Thich Naht Hanh, Foucault, Baudrillard,
Derrida, Tenzin Gyatso, Carol Gilligan, Donna Haraway, Žižek, Butler, and a vast list of others. The timeline thus spans over 2,000 years and can be quite unmanageable to examine as a discrete field or find an application that goes beyond conventional wisdom (even if that conventional wisdom is quite wise).

4 An entire chapter could be devoted to a critique of theories of the subject, but competing definitions and arguments over the subject are not the focus of this project.

5 Materialist feminism draws on pre- or post-Althusserean arguments on ideology. Pre-Althusser, one could cite Valentin Volosinov, who claims the materiality of the word as the way to understanding the relationship between base and superstructure, and therefore as a site of class struggle. In his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser himself claims ideology has a material existence, which suggests that ideology critique has material effects. Post-Althusser, one of the most popularly employed theorists is Michel Foucault, who claims the materiality of discourse, in that discourse has material effects. (Note: though Foucault is technically a contemporary of Althusser, his work is post-Althussserian in the sense that his theories on ideology in his penultimate series *The History of Sexuality* were published after Althusser’s “ISA.”)

6 “Ideologies have a history of their own (although it is determined in the last instance by the class struggle)” but “ideology in general has no history—not in a negative sense (its history is external to it), but in an absolutely positive sense” (Althusser 122). History here, or rather, the negative condition *no history*, is equated to the Freudian unconscious, “eternal,” “transhistorical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history” (122). Althusser also links this to the history of class struggle evidenced in the *Communist Manifesto*. 
Althusser equates ideology and interpellation as one and the same thing, and adds, “what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology,” which is the reason, he suggests, “why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside of ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says ‘I am ideological’” (131). Althusser’s theory of interpellation thus takes on where his secondary thesis that ideology is material leaves off and makes an argument that bridges the gap between ideology and discourse. “In interpellation,” Haslett writes, “the subject comes to recognise itself as hailed in language” and “In this way Althusser locates ideology within consciousness itself, and it is this always pre-existing working of ideology that guarantees its effectiveness” (63).

Haslett argues that “Althusser’s theory suggests that those elements which are apparently most ‘non-ideological’ are where ideology deeply resides” (65) but that theoretical practice exists outside ideology, for as Althusser himself writes, “Ideology has no outside (for itself) . . . it is nothing but outside (for science and reality)” (“ISA” 131). Such theoretical practices are art, such as literature, and science in that they “mediate between the being-in-ideology and knowledge-of-ideology” (Haslett 66).

Donald Morton and Mas’ud Zavarzadeh think differently, arguing that “To be constituted as a subject is to be given a consciousness by virtue of which one becomes a free agent and a unique and irreplaceable person (because there is only one ‘you’ that can respond to the call of the Other)” (100). Therefore, “The subjectivity and freedom which goes with it . . . are an effect of the person’s complicity with the dominant relations” (100). In other words, there is no escaping ideology and therefore the subject has no agency, and
no possibility for social change, for herself or anyone else. That is, if there is no outside to ideology, there is no possibility for social transformation.

9 Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* is the 1972 BBC documentary-turned-book that examines the relationship between art, language, and ideology. The epigraph to Atwood’s *Bodily Harm* is a quote from *Ways of Seeing*, discussed in chapter 2.

10 According to Matthew Sparke, neoliberalism is, ideologically “organized around the twin ideas of liberalizing the capitalist market from state control and refashioning state practices in the idealized image of the free market” (153-54). “A the macroscale of government policy,” Sparke explains, “these ideas have inspired and informed the promotion and entrenchment of the now familiar neoliberal approach to governance that includes free trade, privatization, financial deregulation, monetarism, fiscal austerity, welfare reform, the punitive policing of the poor” (154). For further reading see Sparke’s full essay “A Neoliberal Nexus: Economy, Security and the Biopolitics of Citizenship on the Border” as well as David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

**Chapter 2**

11 Carpenter, however, thinks too much is made of such a critique, saying simply, “‘Girls having sex aren’t paying attention. That’s it’” (Zinoman 310). Of course, this comment problematically implies that the men the girls are having sex with are paying attention, insofar as they often get away.

12 It is possible that the popularity of *The Handmaid’s Tale* stems from it’s reaching a wider audience via motion picture format only five years after its publication. Marilyn
Patton, author of “Tourists and Terrorists: The Creation of Bodily Harm,” suggests a “film counterpart” (150) to The Handmaid’s Tale is both an advantage and disadvantage. The main disadvantage of a film counterpart is that the novel is often considered less worthy of intellectual examination having been given over, so to speak, to the masses. On the other hand, it is an advantage in terms of recognition, of entreating the film audience to read the book if they have not already. In academia, as cultural studies approaches to reading texts become more accepted, a film counterpart avails multilayered inquiry the novel and its film adaptation.

13 The popularity of Saw (2004) was so immense it was followed by Saw II (2005), Saw III (2006), Saw IV (2007), Saw V (2008), Saw VI (2009), and Saw 3D: The Final Chapter (2010).

14 The 2007 remake of Halloween was soon followed by Halloween II (2009).


16 In the unlikely event it were produced for the screen, Bodily Harm would most likely be critiqued for unnecessarily brutalizing the audience, and perhaps rightly so.

17 Though not the first, Fatal Attraction (1987) and Basic Instinct (1992) ushered in a host of similar films hoping to cash in on their critically and popularly successful formula, which now, apparently thanks to reviews of Black Swan, seem to have their own genre in the Freudian-sounding “psychosexual thriller.” The following are a few of the more notable ones: Single White Female (1992) and Single White Female 2: The Psycho (2005); Basic Instinct 2 (2006), Chloe (2009), the American remake of the Portuguese film Nathalie (2003); Obsessed (2009), a thinly veiled remake of Fatal Attraction; The Housemaid (2010) based on the 1960 original; Black Swan (2010); and Love Crime

Chapter 3

18 Roger Ebert’s assessment of Theron’s performance, as one might expect, appears on the jacket of the *Monster* DVD as a kind of ringing endorsement for the film itself.

19 Peirce co-authored the *Boys Don’t Cry* screenplay with Andy Bienen.

20 Towards the conclusion of the film, both Brandon’s and Lana’s sexuality are in question. After Brandon’s exposure as a biological female, and not long after his rape by John and Tom, Lana visits Brandon in the shed at Candace’s (the shed functions as metaphoric exile or contemplation—in reality Brandon was found murdered in Lambert’s bed) and the two are sexually intimate. In an interview with Cynthia Fuchs, Peirce addresses the potential ambiguity of the scene: “Some people have asked me, are they having sex as lesbians and I say, no not at all. Lana is gendered female and so is Brandon, but Brandon is now neither Teena nor Brandon, but some amalgamation of both” (Fuchs). Peirce’s goal of the film is to show that love transcends sexuality. But for this to work, gender and sexuality must be either nominally set in relief or completely erased. What are the consequences if the audience, and if society in general, accepts this erasure of gender and sexuality? Andrew Ross writes, “Dominant cultural groups always fare best under the rule of the gender-free, color-blind, heteronormative ‘common culture’” (203). Therefore to make post-gender (or post-feminism, post-race) arguments
is both dubious and dangerous for those not in the dominant cultural group, even, or perhaps especially, when made by those not in the dominant cultural group.

Ambiguity is also depicted in the unsaid, unspoken exchanges between Brandon, John, and Tom Nissen (the other man who was involved in the murders and sentenced to consecutive life sentences) in *Boys Don’t Cry*. John and Tom run the gamut from masculine insecurity to sexual perversion. It is implied that John has had a relationship of some kind with Lana (to Lana’s chagrin), we see him being discomfortingly affectionate with Lana’s mom, and inappropriately affectionate with his own daughter. Even the scene when John is directing Brandon how to evade the cops is homoerotic: John reaches his arm around Brandon’s chest, speaks softly into Brandon’s ear—almost touching Brandon’s ear with his lips—before he sinks into the back seat in a manner best described as elation. John’s next emotion, after being nevertheless stopped by the policeman, is rage at the possibility of going back to jail. The film has already established that both John and Tom have been in jail previously, and inferred they were sexually assaulted—which is said to have been the actual case (*The Brandon Teena Story*). The fear of returning to jail sparks a homophobic rage. The rape itself is also a conflicted sexual event for John and Tom in light of believing Brandon to be a man prior to his exposure. And indeed, the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* suggests Tom was teased by some in town for being gay for raping Brandon, though this account is not described in *Boys Don’t Cry*.

21 This quote is abridged and used in the American trailer for *Monster*, which is used in this chapter’s epigraph, as well as in a variety of forms in international trailers.
Aileen Wuornos had romantic and sexual relationships with men and women in her life, and many called her a “lesbian” because her last long-term relationship was with another woman, Tyria Moore. She purportedly had a romantic relationship with a man after Moore, but likely the label stuck for socially normative reasons.

In “A Q&A with Charlize Theron and Nick Broomfield,” Theron is asked how she felt “about the challenge of humanizing a convicted serial killer.” Her response reveals much about the film depiction of Lee’s and Selby’s relationship, and how love—and the lack thereof—impacted Lee’s actions. Theron’s response is as follows:

I didn’t find it a challenge because really the thing was to portray her as a real person. I think that’s why she decided “she” wanted to tell the story. I think too, the way, through society, she was portrayed was very much a monster, not paying attention to the fact that she was a human being. There were a lot of things going on—very complicated situations.

I was privileged to read 12 years of letters that she wrote, and there were also a few letters that Tyra had written her in the first year that she was on death row. And, then she stopped writing her. Even watching her talk in the documentary, she never ever said one bad thing about her [Tyra]. I think that Aileen’s journey, her search was to be loved. I think that’s everybody’s journey—to be loved and accepted. And, she found it, and to be betrayed by that person that you loved so much is just devastating.

Mallory was renamed Vincent Corey in the film.

Nick Broomfield’s documentary, Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer, shows her entire defense as well as interviews with Aileen Wuornos herself in 1992.
Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer shows additional footage from years later, with Lee’s mental state deteriorated after years on death row.

26 In Florida, being convicted of “Deriving support from the proceeds of a prostitute” could result in a sentence of up to five years in prison. Florida criminal laws and types of sentences obtained from floridacriminallaw.org.

27 Though I find much of Peter Vronksy Female Serial Killers: How and Why They Become Monsters objectionable on a variety of levels, the chapter “The Cult and Passion of Aileen Wuornos: The Postmodern Serial Killer” provides useful factual information about the Wuornos’ life, including evidence that supports her convictions. It should be emphasized that guilt or innocence is not vital to read the film as social critique. In this sense, the facts are not on trial, so to speak.

28 Capote (2005) was the first docudrama released about Truman Capote’s writing of In Cold Blood, a year before Infamous (2006), which was produced by Christine Vachon’s Killer Films, which, as a point of interest, produced Boys Don’t Cry.

29 The station TruTV has since emerged to counter viewer suspicion that reality television is not real: its slogan “Not reality. Actuality.”

30 In addition to Joel Dyer’s assessment on crime rates in The Perpetual Prison Machine, according to a “National Crime Victimization Survey” compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2002, “Violent crime rates declined since 1994, reaching the lowest level ever recorded.”

31 According to Dyer, “In 1990, Time Warner and Disney generated approximately 15 percent of their income from outside the United States. By 1997, that figure had doubled to 30 percent, and both companies project that within the next ten years, they will be
deriving the majority of their profits from the international market” (76). This continues to seem like an accurate assessment, though it not a hard and fast rule. For instance, according to the website “Box Office Mojo” as of 31 January 2012, *Chloe* has made 73.7% of its $11 million lifetime gross abroad, but *Obsessed* has made 92.5% of its $74 million gross domestically. The American version of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, which came out 11 December 2011, is on an entirely different scale, with 53.1% domestic, 46.9% international, and $184 million in little over a month, or *Black Swan* (2010) at 32.5% domestic, 67.5% international of $329 million.

32 Dramadies are blended comedy-dramas, and often independently made films, like *Juno* and *Sunshine Cleaning*.


34 *The Matrix* had an original production budget of $63 million, while *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, which finished 4th and 9th in top grossing films for 2003, each had budgets of $150 million in comparison. “Box Office Mojo.” Web. 31 Jan. 2012.


36 Fred Topel asks Charlize Theron this question in “Portraying Monster Aileen Wournos: Charlize Theron Interview.”
According to “Box Office Mojo” as of 31 January 2012, *Boys Don’t Cry* grossed $11.5 million domestically with a production budget of $7 million, which is not a financial success by industry standards. It is the 29th highest grossing film classified as “Gay/Lesbian” from 1980-present. Figures for the international market are not listed on any source and it can be inferred that it was not released internationally.

*Monster’s* domestic gross, with a production budget of $8 million, was $34,469,210; gross overseas were $16 million in 2004 and have risen to about $34.5 million in 2012. “Box Office Mojo” lists it as the 11th highest grossing all-time “Gay/Lesbian” film, 1980-present.

This quote comes from a question and answer session included in the special features portion of the *This Film is Not Yet Rated* DVD. Kirby Dick is responding to a question about whether there is a purposeful allowance for violent film depictions and restriction of sexual ones.

Data collected and assessed on sexual offences law comes from Interpol. Web. 30 April 2004.

According to their website in 2012, “INTERPOL’s International Crime Statistics are no longer being collected from member countries and previous statistics are no longer published. The decision to remove the statistics was taken as some users and some members of the media were making comparisons between countries based on these statistics, when different collection methods make such comparisons problematic.”

National Crime Victimization Survey of the Bureau of Justice accessed through RAINN, the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network online. It is worth noting, “Because of the methodology of the National Crime Victimization Survey, these figures
do not include victims 12 or younger. While there are no reliable annual surveys of sexual assaults on children, the Justice Department has estimated that one of six victims are under age 12.” RAINN.org. Web. 3 May 2004.


44 Even as rape and sexual assault reports statistics by the NCVS have “fallen by half” since 1993 in the United States, numbers on INTERPOL do not show such a significant change—though they do suggest an overall decline. The percentage of rape cases attributed as “solved” however, decreased in the U.S. from 50% in 1995 to 44% in 2001, though the rapes reported changes from 97,464 to 90,491. The definition of “cases solved” is unclear and as such not particularly clarifying.

45 It would be useful to study the victimization rates among sex workers, in the LGBT community and in the lucrative trafficking in persons market, to evaluate how sexual assault and violence against women adjusts and adapts to the global market in neoliberalism. It is outside the scope of this project to compile figures, or determine the application of such figures were to be able to compile them, for whether rates have increased, decreased, or remained steady abroad as U.S. corporations move out of the country to find cheaper labor. It is notable, however, that according to the Office of Violence Against Women from 3 May 2004, there are no provisions in the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 to protect or provide care for adult sex workers who are victims of sexual assault.
Chapter 4


47 In “Black Matters,” the first chapter of Playing in the Dark, Morrison contends that the previously accepted and prevailing attitude that the African-American presence had no influence on American literature is completely inaccurate and unduly dismissive. All too often, she explains, issues of race are ignored out of the desire to be egalitarian, but rather than ignore that differences do indeed exist, awareness and accountability for such differences provides a more precise, more intellectual, more insightful, and more historically grounded basis for literary understanding. Morrison emphasizes that the ideals of American literature—idealism, individuality, overcoming the odds, among others—are only fully realized through the perception of a diametrically opposed enslavement of the African-American condition. In other words, freedom is understood by the lack thereof.

48 In Cultural Haunting, Brogan continues her examination of Beloved, Morrison, and historical documentation during the time of American slavery by writing,

Given her desire for “total access to the unwritten” past, [Morrison] acknowledges that “Only the act of the imagination can help me.” To “fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left,” to reinvest absence with presence, Morrison . . . turns to the ghost as sign of the necessarily imaginative construction of a lost, unrecorded history. (Brogan 62-63)
49 I the next chapter I exam the ways there is a kind of twenty-first century canon war being waged in literary criticism that suggests different critical approaches are incompatible, antagonistic, and mutually exclusive.

50 Numerous literary critics have written about haunting in *Beloved*. Dean Franco, quoted earlier, asserts “That *Beloved* is a ghost story is well known, and it is not hard to imagine how a contemporary novel about a historically distant but nonetheless an always present time—the period of American Slavery and Reconstruction—participates in something like mourning for the past (416). Franco proposes a reading of the novel “as a contribution to the contemporary national discussion of reparations for slavery and Jim Crow segregation call for reparations” (415). Eleni Coundouriotis argues *Beloved* is a ghost story that “mediates historical consciousness and remembrance. . .” (210). Kathleen Brogan writes that “*Beloved* plots the movement from trauma to history as a story of possession and exorcism in which traumatic memory—or the eruption of a denied history—is figured as a dangerous form of haunting,” a haunting which “signals the return of a past that can neither be properly remembered nor entirely forgotten” (63).

51 Having begun the novelistic exploration in *Beloved*, Morrison’s 2008 book *A Mercy* takes up the atrocity of Middle Passage at greater length.

52 Timothy J. Reiss’ translation of Françoise Gaillard’s 1980 “An Unspeakable (Hī)story” opens with the parenthetical, “in other words, how to write History when historical reality seems to come apart and can no longer be experienced except as a collection of non-totalizing anecdotes” (137). Other notable essays on the unspeakable predating *Beloved* and Morrison’s *Tanner Lecture* include: Roger Corless’ “Speaking of the Unspeakable: Negation as the Way in Nicholas of Cusa and Nāgārjuna,” 1982, *Buddhist-Christian*

53 Because this chapter argues that the cultural trauma of *Beloved* helps to explain how traumatic events come to be mythologized, it is worth noting that McClintock’s connection to the unspeakable can arguably be traced to mythology, specifically Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

54 I examine the idea of the fragmentary and fragmented more directly in Chapter 5 with the protagonist Hannah in *Solar Storms*.

55 Scholars have written about the unspeakable in numerous Morrison novels beyond *Beloved* as well. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable* includes a host of literary criticism of Morrison’s work from *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise*.

56 Whereas McClintock traces her arguments on the unspeakable to Camus, Mandel credits Jacques Derrida with her introduction “to the terrain of the unspeakable” (ix).

57 In a chapter on *Beloved*, she analyzes interpretations about the novel’s “sixty million and more” epigraph, contending that “Morrison’s dedication . . . is deliberately posited as a vague approximation that serves the purpose of evoking a vast array of dead bodies,” which “demonstrates the extent to which numerical figures (not to mention figures of speech) cannot account for so vast and devastating a disaster” (170). “In dedicating *Beloved* to ‘sixty million and more,’” Mandel argues, “[Morrison] is utilizing the
unspeakable in order to establish that slavery shares, with the Holocaust, a quality of unspeakability” (170). Mandel concludes her Beloved chapter by examining “the problematic choice of ‘the one word that mattered’ for the gravestone inscription” and how it is “not the name of Sethe’s murdered baby, but an expression of her own frustrations and desires” (204).

58 Brogan’s assessment of the process and function of literary testimony evokes the central thesis of Alice Walker’s iconic canon wars text In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens, in which Walker posits the necessity of reclaiming women’s experience through narrative. She does so using Morrison’s decision to write The Bluest Eye as a touchstone: “To take Toni Morrison’s statement further, if that is possible,” Walker writes, “in my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don’t do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—I write all the things I should have been able to read” (Walker 13; emphasis in original).

59 Campbell examined myth as universally connected in a Jungian collective unconscious sense in texts like The Power of Myth and The Hero with a Thousand Faces.

60 In a seminal text of the canon wars, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” Deborah E. McDowell addresses the rise of Black feminist criticism as a result of the consistent lack of consideration toward the experiences of Black women and the subsequent ignorance of their literature. Though the same problem of an unspecific definition of feminist theory applies to Black feminism as it does for white feminism, McDowell urges an attempt to create and identify a substantial body of Black feminist criticism. McDowell describes the Black feminist experience as political and social,
while also as a personal and psychological journey, distinctively in the cultural context. They should move from the issue of whether or not to “remain a separatist enterprise” and “consider the specific language of Black women’s literature, to describe the ways Black women writers employ literary devices in a distinct way, and to compare the way Black women writers create their own mythic structures” (McDowell 198).

Based on the first footnote in her “Maternal Bonds” essay, it seems possible if not likely that Demetrakopoulos was familiar with standpoint theory, enough to erroneously think that perhaps Collins’ work was not meant for her, that she as a white woman could not comment on issues she thought were the domain of black women. In the footnote, Demetrakopoulos explains her approach to reading Beloved partially in relation to what seems to be a misconstrual of standpoint:

In my opinion, a white critic has no moral right to address the issue of slavery; this is a Black issue, and whether a white person has ancestors who perpetrated the institution of slavery in America or not is beside the point. Living in a white skin makes one a guilty party simply by virtue of participating in the dominant and oppressive group of American culture. I resent a man’s attempting to address the issues of abortion that involve the mother’s body and mind or to write as if he understands the victim in a wife-battering case. The topics that I do address in this essay are ones I understand probably too well in their concrete and personal dimensions. (58)

Standpoint as put forth by Collins and others operates out of the notion that certain communities possess knowledge unattainable outside of that community, but it does not mean that those outside the community have no right to try to understand it.
contrary, attempts to understand are imperative, as is awareness of “situated knowledge, subjugated knowledge, and partial perspective” (Collins 233). That Demetrakopoulos launches immediately into the reasons she as a presumably white critic cannot critique slavery is indicative of an earnest yet misguided attempt at disclosure and thus an effort to honor standpoint itself. One of the many results of such a justification, unfortunately, is that later in her essay, one might involuntarily chafe against the unproblematized idea whether she as a non-Jewish, white critic has the “moral right” to call Beloved “a Holocaust book” (54).

62 With thirty-nine place settings at the table and nine hundred and ninety-nine “Women of Achievement” on the Heritage Floor, The Dinner Party “traces the changeover from matriarchy to patriarchy in the myths, legends, and images of the Goddess” (Chicago 53-55).

63 Washington explains that “Âjé is a Yoruba word and concept that describes a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in African women” and what “spiritually empowered humans” are called (171).

64 Collins’ Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment—a groundbreaking book foundational to intersectional analysis, standpoint analysis, and the domain of subjugated knowledges for women of color—comes out of the same theoretical and cultural milieu as Beloved and the Tanner Lecture. Similar to Morrison’s call to value black writers’ work, the arguments Collins puts forth in Black Feminist Thought respond to the “shadow obscuring the Black women’s intellectual tradition” which she says is “neither accidental nor benign” (Collins 5). Collins takes seriously the significance of literature and the ways authors like Morrison
“and countless others have consistently struggled to make themselves heard and have used their voices to raise essential issues affecting Black women” (5).

For O’Reilly, Morrison’s later novels, such as *Paradise*, make the role between community and individual more present and apparent, so that the individual mother does not shoulder all the blame. “In *Paradise,*” O’Reilly writes,

maternal failure signifies not so much an individual women’s inability to mother because of her disconnection from her motherline; but a *community’s* failure to nurture its own because of its denial, disparagement, and displacement of the funk and the ancient properties.” (139; emphasis in original)

O’Reilly builds off of Collins chapter in *Black Feminist Thought* called “Bloodmothers, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks.” Collins describes the distinctions among these concepts this way:

In African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (Collins 119)

Coundouriotis’s article on *Beloved* and historical materialism provides a useful context here. She writes,
in its classic Marxist sense posits a correspondence between material conditions and human thought and culture which is also operative in the act of writing fiction. Fiction realistically (and in various degrees mimetically) seeks to reflect the world. Yet instead of relying on a simplistic notion of direct correspondence in mimetic representation, historical materialists draw attention to the mediations of, and even deviations from determinism, which locate the meaning of determination in the differences and not the correspondences between reality and its representation. (212-13)

Chapter 5

Keeping in tradition with the native people’s view of the Earth as a living organism and the non-hierarchical view of humans and animals as partners of the Earth, Hogan depicts the land and animals that inhabit the territory, like the boundary waters, as essential as the humans. As Laura Virginia Castor writes in “Claiming Place in Wor(l)ds: Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms,” “The importance of place in shaping collective and individual memory in Solar Storms is typical of Hogan’s work as a whole” and like “In many of her texts, specific places represent survival for her protagonists in the face of the extreme personal, communal, and cultural losses of colonization” (159).

Perhaps what makes it so readable despite its traumatic contents is that it is so cleverly constructed with unforeseen twists of plot and lyrically exquisite prose. Others, like Roseanne Hoefel in her 2001 article “Narrative Choreography toward a New Cosmogony: The Medicine Way in Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms,” suggest, “recogniz[ing] the need to assuage the mounting sorrows of her narrative” (41), it is
Hogan’s humor that allows the “comic respite readers need to continue with these women on their overwhelming quest” (42). Still others have troubled this mitigating urge to alleviate the trauma of the text by pointing out and analyzing the disclaimer on the copyright page of the novel, which proclaims “resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead” as “entirely coincidental.” Castor suggests the disclaimer “protects the author from potential lawsuits and buffers the sharp edges of subject matter charged with political controversy and emotional pain for readers who see themselves mirrored in her words,” but at another level it speaks to a dilemma for all readers and writers of literature in the postmodern era, where basic systems of belief throughout the globe conflict openly with each other, and where the validity of belief itself has been questioned by scholars, writers, and ordinary people alike. (158-59)

69 For an overview of the Great Whale conflict, see Director Magnus Isacsson’s 1996 documentary Power: Hydro Quebec versus the James Bay Cree.

70 Linda Nicholson has written that those who embraced identity politics “believed that focusing on their group’s distinct experiences was necessary not only to understand their group’s unique needs” but that “It was also necessary to redefine the goals of a just society” (3).

71 Kruger’s “Your Body is a Battleground” image serves as the cover art for Nicholson and Seidman’s Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics, a text that came out in 1995, the same year Solar Storms was published, which suggests that her work and the issues it revolved around were circulating broadly. As Toni Morrison would say, “writers are informed by the major currents of the world” (262).
The provocative image in its original context had “Your body” over the top frame, “is a” in the middle, and “battleground” at the bottom frame, included the words “Support Legal Abortion / Birth Control / and Women’s Rights,” and was designed by Kruger for the March for Women’s Equality and Women’s Lives on April 9, 1989.

For a concise discussion on the objectification of women leading to violence see Jean Kilbourne’s *Killing Us Softly*.

I use the term multiculturalism to include a broad category containing a number of overlapping and contested areas, including, among others, the terrain of postcolonialism, multiethnic studies, First Nations Studies, and women’s and gender studies. I prefer the term First Nations to recognize the heterogeneity of tribes spanning the vast terrain of North America and to acknowledge their indigenous sovereignty as afforded by the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. But it should be noted that because First Nations is a term is more often used in Canada than in the United States, and since Native American, American Indian, and Indian are still widely used in academic departments nationally, terminology in the chapter will reflect the chosen nomenclature.

The first Black Studies department was established at San Francisco State University in 1968. The first American Indian Studies programs at California State University at Long Beach were in 1969. The first women’s studies program was developed in 1970.

For further examination of economic neoliberalism see *Clash of Globalisations: Neoliberalism, the Third Way and Anti-Globalisation*, in which Kiely argues that the return to neoliberal policies “involved the promotion of the dominance of the free market and sound money” (63). “In practice,” he writes, “this meant the adoption of fiscal
austerity (except in the United States after 1982), rolling back the state, privatisation, deregulation and trade liberalization” and thus “involved the dismantling of the advances made by organised labour in the advanced capitalist countries, and therefore the end of labour-friendly regimes” (63). See also Michael Yates’ “Economic Crisis, the Working Class, and Organized Labor,” in which he describes neoliberalism as “dogma” that claims “removal of all restrictions on the movement of capital as well as the dismantling of social service programs and the privatization of most public services will lead to maximum economic performance” (134).

77 See Catherine Rainwater’s 1999 “Intertextual Twins and Their Relations: Linda Hogan's Mean Spirit and Solar Storms” in the “Native American Issue” of Modern Fiction Studies, or Laura Virginia Castor’s 2006 “Claiming Place in Wor(l)ds: Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms,” which is published by the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States. Birgit Hans’ published “Water and Ice: Restoring Balance to the World in Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms” in the 2003 North Dakota Quarterly. The University of North Dakota, home of The North Dakota Quarterly and Birgit Hans, is one of the few in the United States to have an American Indian Studies department. Chadwick Allen himself is, as of this writing, Coordinator for the American Indian Studies Program within the English Department at Ohio State.

78 For a detailed analysis of the problem with associating women’s identity as inherently more natural, see Nicholson’s Identity Before Identity Politics. She traces the argument from its Biblical roots and the great chain of being through a racist and sexist social science and concludes that in the twentieth century “environmentalism became a more widely available antidote to claims about natural differences” (Nicholson 35).
Castor mistakenly attributes this story to Bush; Hans correctly attributes it to Dora-Rouge.

Although MPD is an outdated term, because I respond to texts using MPD, DID, or both, I use the terms those specific texts use.

One of many controversies about the diagnosis revolves around whether or not one truly has and/or exhibits marked differences in personalities and the extent of "interpersonality amnesia" (Eich 417), where certain personalities are privy to certain information and others are not. The reaction is in its extreme form wholly unconscious, and the victim loses control of when, how, and to what extent she dissociates.

That schizophrenia and DID are confused as interchangeable makes some basic sense, since dissociation is a core factor for each. Schizophrenics hear voices nobody else hears, whereas those with DID are believed to be able to express distinct thoughts depending on specific "alter," one who speaks for him or herself and whom others can hear. For a useful discussion on the links between multiple personality, dissociation, and Jung’s “‘latent schizophrenia’” (466) see Donald E. Kalsched’s 1999 “Response to ‘The Multiple Self: Working with Dissociation and Trauma’” in Journal of Analytical Psychology, pp. 465-474.

Truddi Chase died in 2010.

In “Becoming an Evil Society: The Self and Strangers,” Laurence Thomas, using Colin A. Ross’s landmark 1989 Multiple Personality Disorder, is among those who causally link “sustained child sexual abuse” to MPD (294). Deborah Carlin makes a similar case when she cites Margo Rivera’s 1989 “Linking the Psychological and the Social: Feminism, Poststructuralism, and Multiple Personality” on the links between...
child sexual abuse and MPD. It should be further noted as Thomas’ article is premised upon his argument that “society is adversely affected simply by the wide-scale absence of goodwill” and “proceed[s] in a somewhat concrete manner by considering a society whose moral climate has substantially changed for the worse over a period of approximately 35 years” (272). Published in 1996, this stands in stark contrast to Glassner’s *Culture of Fear*.

AllPysch does corrected coded DID according to the DSM, and it would be easy, though incorrect, to think the DSM provides etiology, which it does not. The DSM provides coding, largely for insurance purposes, and practitioners use it almost exclusively for that reason. Actual diagnosis is less rigid than the coding suggests.

For example, although the DSM-IV-TR notes that “The essential feature of Dissociative Identity Disorder is the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states” (526) who “frequently report having experienced severe physical and sexual abuse, especially during childhood” (517)—the key phrase here being “frequently report”—it also directly emphasizes the “Controversy surround[ing] the accuracy of such reports” (527) and the “sharp rise in reported cases . . . in recent years. . .” (528). In other words, the DSM indicates a clear relationship between child sexual abuse and DID/MPD but does not, contrary to AllPysch Online’s representation, proclaim etiology.

Andrea Lowenstein addresses this problem in a book review of Joan Acocella’s book *Creating Hysteria: The Myth of Women and Multiple Personality*—which is widely criticized and controversial itself for its seemingly antifeminist, overstated claims—when she argues what Acocella’s book does best is to demonstrate “without question that
mental health diagnoses are merely societal constructions, subject to the winds of change and public sentiment, as well as dangerous misuse” (438).

88 A thoroughly contested term, I use postmodernity as David Harvey does in The Condition of Postmodernity. He writes, “No one exactly agrees as to what is meant by the term, except, perhaps, that ‘postmodernism’ represents some kind of reaction to or departure from, ‘modernism’” (7). Postmodernity is marked, Harvey argues, by “total acceptance of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity” (44), but it, in the end, nothing more than the “logical extension of the power of the market over the whole range of cultural production” (62). Postmodernism is thus a neoliberal product.

89 Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of schizoanalysis often spirals untenably into abstraction, and breaks entirely from materialist history, which leads to an all-too-easy conflation of the abstract and concrete individual suffering from mental illness. Hannah may only be a fictional character, but she represents real individuals who have had their bodies and minds broken from traumatic experience.


91 The JBNQA reduced the size of the Cree lands to “2,158 square miles” (55), while “250,000 square miles [out of the original 410,000 square miles] of newly organized territory will come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. . .” (3).

92 Even in Arthur J. Ray’s seminal article “History and Archaeology of the Northern Fur Trade,” published in 1978, one of the important conclusions is that tribal bands had
become “heavily dependent upon the Hudson’s Bay Company for most of their basic
necessities” (34).

93 See especially Peter J. George and Richard J. Preston’s 1987 article “Going in
Between”: The Impact of European Technology on the Work Patterns of the West Main
Cree of Northern Ontario,” which examines the complex relationship between the
indigenous population and European fur-trading companies. “Whites who depended on
Indian labor,” they explain,

were generally misinformed about and uninterested in the social and
psychological factors governing Indian work behavior, and most Cree were
equally perplexed by European insistence on workaday routine and discipline, by
hierarchical ordering, and by the obviously higher standard of living enjoyed by
Europeans. Nevertheless, the Cree could be “persuaded” the accept wage work,
partly to earn additional cash or credit to purchase consumer and producer goods
(or to reduce accrued debt with the Company), and partly because the Cree
wished to please the Europeans. (456)

94 Arnold is Coordinator of the Graduate Online Certificate in Multicultural and
Transnational Literatures at East Carolina University, a point that keeps with critiques of
the novel coming primarily from within multicultural departments.
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