“To Wipe out the Past”: Generational Trauma in *Song of Solomon* and *Housekeeping*

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Abstract

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In this project, I explore how generational trauma affects families as a whole, as well as the individual members. In order to accomplish this goal, I compare Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980), two novels about traumas that pass through three generations by means of parenting and naming. These generational traumas culminate in third-generation protagonists who, in turn, have complicated relationships with their families and discordance between what is expected of them and what they want for themselves. Both novels explore the ways that storytelling works as a form of bearing witness, and the repercussions that the failure to bear witness to one's trauma may have. Ultimately, I explore the process that the protagonists -- Milkman in *Song of Solomon* and Ruthie in *Housekeeping* -- go through to finally bear witness and begin the process of releasing themselves from their traumas.

I focus on three main issues throughout the course of this thesis: how the families perpetuate these traumas, how various characters use transience and homelessness as a form of coping, and the effects of both the literal and metaphorical hauntings in order to show the similarities between the families across novels.

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Introduction

Contemporary American novelists Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Marilynne Robinson in *Housekeeping* (1980) tackle generational familial issues. Each of these novels deals with trauma, bearing witness, and a familial isolation from other family members as well as from those outside of the family, with the origins of this tension being ambiguous and unresolvable. In my thesis, I argue that the principle characters bear witness to their traumas by the end of each novel and reveal that, while traumas cause abnormal reactions in the human brain, making them impossible to process as "normal" information, one can still be mentally healthy with direct confrontation and learned adaptability. To achieve this end, I look at how naming and parenting styles perpetuate a generational trauma, the fraught and conflicting meanings of transience and home, and how ghosts and hauntings are featured in each work and how they connect with the traumas. Ultimately I illustrate how each of these novels ends with redemption for the characters, and though trauma manifests in different ways with each family, I demonstrate that comparing these novels helps readers see new patterns in each about reactions to trauma. In comparing *Song of Solomon* and *Housekeeping*, I show how, despite racial and generational differences, bearing witness to trauma is a means of accepting and moving forward for both families, even though each family looks very different because of their differing values and past experiences. Looked at together, these two novels show that, while trauma can reveal itself in dramatically different ways, it is only through bearing witness and sharing experiences that the characters can move toward recovery. Though the interest these authors take in trauma predates trauma theory as a literary field, both novels respond well to such critical interpretations. Before proceeding to the nuances of the novels, I will address the key issues in the field of trauma theory, and

review both Morrison and Robinson scholarship, to show how my thesis contributes a new approach to the novels by comparing their similar moments and themes.

One crucial commonality between these novels is that they draw from similar ideas and experiences of womanhood and trauma. This similarity is primarily because they are both written by female authors, who center the narratives on family relationships. Save for Guitar in *Song of Solomon*, the prominent characters are exclusively members of the family. Families in both novels are heavily isolated from the outside world, living in restrictive houses that keeps them inside. In both novels, the characters have a relationship with flowers that indicates their fragility and fascination with an organic world that others only see in passing. Milkman's view of Ruth as "a frail woman content to do tiny things; to grow and cultivate small life that would not hurt her if it died; rhododendron, goldfish, dahlias, geraniums, imperial tulips," reveals her connection with something gentle that others perceive as insignificant (64). Similarly, Foster reveals Edmund to be a somewhat eccentric man and, though he is dead before Ruthie is born, her fascination with his indelible memory on the home connects her to him almost as though the house has kept him alive. An example of this impact is when Ruthie finds flowers that Edmund has left in the dictionary on pages that correspond to their names. The final connection between these novels that guided my choice to read them together is how they deal with hauntings; both novels have ghosts of some fashion, with, for example, the apparitions Pilate sees of her father, Macon Sr. Morrison models hers after the tradition of magical realism, while Robinson's hauntings rely more on ambiguity and uncertainty in order to show the trauma that Ruthie and Sylvie undergo. These connections reveal these books to be similar in their approach to

understanding women and representing trauma. An analysis of the two works reveals valuable new readings of the overlapping themes.

The traumas that I am most interested in are generational. While the protagonist of each story experiences unique individual traumas, there is a crucial original trauma that so effected the generations before that it continues to impact present day characters many years later. Both novels are prime examples of this phenomenon, and also prime examples of how characters bear witness to their traumas. What vitally connects both books is that, despite countless differences between the two families, their traumas, their histories, and even how they bear experience, they both show someone bearing witness to a trauma that they did not literally witness, and how to bear witness by looking at the nature of the traumas, the ways they are passed on, and the forms in which the characters bear witness.

Trauma is an event that is past or ongoing that cannot be reconciled in one's mind. Dori Laub eloquently describes it in this way:

> The absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of 'otherness,' a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting, and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (69)

That is, while there is literally a time before and after the trauma, what is real to the survivor is that it is ongoing and does not allow for closure in a conventional sense. Its "ubiquity," as Laub calls it, inhibits the survivor's ability to freely remember events before the traumatic

event, as well as preventing them from freely experiencing events in their future without closure. I argue alongside Laub, that bearing witness is a crucial step to obtaining closure. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber adds to this definition by stating that "people experience trauma not just from specific traumatic events but also from their physical environment and support systems" (9). A house filled with ghostly memories -- or a family that cannot offer support can also be, in a much more transparent sense, an ongoing trauma.

Bearing witness is a means of coping with trauma -- by looking directly at it and accepting that one's life must be altered as a consequence of the trauma. To bear witness, one must share stories to truly confront their trauma. Necessarily, there must be a listener, and as Laub writes, "for the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other* -- in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time" (70-1, emphasis original). However, there are potential negative impacts on the listeners who might seek to defend themselves, using such tactics as paralysis, anger, and fear. In these two novels, characters not only share their stories to somewhat unwilling listeners, but listeners exhibit defense mechanisms as well. Bearing witness does not mean healing, but it is a step towards acceptance and a way to counteract the power the trauma holds over them.

Song of Solomon tells the story of Milkman Dead's genealogy as the family moves from slaves to wealthy black landowners. Milkman finds that the misery that accompanies his family's heritage is due in part, to gaps in their ancestral knowledge, and Milkman seeks the answers and learns the value of his people, and of appreciating the family that he has always taken for granted and mistreated. The Dead family's initial trauma is slavery. Though

the novel largely takes place in the 1950s and 60s, the protagonist, Milkman, is only three generations removed from slavery, and his family seldom acknowledges it. However, despite this lack of acknowledgment, slavery is present in how Milkman's father treats his family because he blames his own father for failings that stemmed from his time as a slave. Macon tells Milkman that his father refused to learn how to read, and that "everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn't read" (53). To combat his father's perceived failure, Macon seeks to become financially hyper-successful at the expense of everything else, including his family. Further, Macon seems to demand reparations in some way for the trauma that his father endured in telling Milkman to own things and people, essentially encouraging a new form of slavery where his family is on top, rather than persecuted (55). This moment reveals that neither Macon, nor his father have born witness to his trauma and that it is still affecting him because he is overcompensating for his traumatic experiences. The reality of the situation is that for whatever reason, maybe because it was too horrible to confront, or because family members did not have the tools or words to express what they felt, the Dead family did not bear witness to their traumas before the narrative begins, leaving Milkman stunted from a situation that he never saw first-hand.

The second trauma the family faces is that Milkman's father witnessed white people shoot and kill his father who he loved and respected, and this left him with an oppressive and cruel worldview that impacts his parenting, thus passing on the trauma. Though Macon respected his father greatly, he inadvertently began to blame him for being so passive and peaceful that the white people were able to shoot him. Macon overcorrects, seeming to believe that he can protect himself from such a shameful end by being the opposite of his father: crass, strict, and wealthy.

Finally, Doctor Foster's relationship with Ruth, as well as his suspicious death, causes tension between Ruth and Macon that is irreconcilable and further impacts their parenting and their children's lives. Ruth suspects her husband of killing her father, and Macon suspects Ruth of incest, causing him to deprive her of love indefinitely. This loss of love affects Ruth so profoundly that she antagonizes her husband into hitting her. Witnessing this domestic abuse has an indelible impact on her children, and it causes them to lose respect for both her and Macon. In not modeling a mutual respect for each other, the children cannot learn how to respect their parents. Because none of these characters work to resolve any of their traumas through sharing their truths and their stories, they almost inevitably pass their traumas onto the next generation.

Housekeeping's narrative is propelled by death above all else, and the deaths are the motivations for all the characters' actions. The story, narrated by Ruthie, is about her and her sister Lucille's general instability as they are passed from caretaker to caretaker in the wake of their mother's suicide. Sylvie is the most prominent caretaker, their mother, Helen's, sister. Sylvie is a transient, and only comes to care for them because their grandmother, Sylvia, dies of old age. Before Ruthie is even born, her grandfather, Edmund, is on a train that dives off the track and into the lake, and his death traumatizes Sylvia and her three daughters. The characters' actions (or lack thereof) become divisive across generations and drive the family apart, leaving only Ruthie and Sylvie together by the end. For the Foster family, their initial trauma is the sudden death of the protagonist Ruthie's grandfather, years before she was born. Afterwards, his altered wife coddled her daughters too much. Robinson writes:

> never since they were small children had they clustered about her so, and never since

> then had she been so aware of the smell of their hair, their softness, breathiness, abruptness. It filled her with a strange elation, the same pleasure she had felt when any one of them, as a sucking child, had fastened her eyes on her face and reached for her other breast, her hair, her lips, hungry to touch, eager to be filled for a while and sleep. (11)

The intimacy she describes here is that of a mother craving affection rather than a mother raising her children with discipline and rules; they were free to behave as they wanted and develop attachments where they may because it suited her somewhat lax parenting style, cultivated as a result of her trauma. As her children leave and never return for more than a day, she is unsurprised and does not try to reach out to them, nor them to her because "she had never taught them to be kind to her" (19). The relationship between Sylvie and Ruthie shows the importance of connection to relatives, something Sylvia unintentionally robbed her daughters of, thus causing Helen to rob Ruthie and Lucille of it as well. Edmund established his family in a cold and unfeeling town, and his death leaves them trapped and without an awareness of how to behave in the absence of a patriarch and father.

Perhaps this neglect from their mother is what leads to the second trauma: Helen driving herself into a lake and dying. She tells no one of her plans and leaves her daughters on her mother's porch with snacks to wait until Sylvia returns home. The family experiences two tragic losses and does not attempt to cope with either. Ruthie confuses Sylvie with her mother at the lake even years after Helen's death because she is haunted and ill-equipped to deal with haunting because coping has never been modeled for her. Similarly, Sylvie is ill-equipped to be a guardian. The societal expectation that women engage in good housekeeping, as is modeled by Sylvia, is unattainable for Sylvie and Ruthie. They both fail

at this housekeeping which controls them and contributes to their trauma as well. They are both unfamiliar with how to conduct good housekeeping, and it goes against their true desires to abide by this norm. It is the lack of coping in both novels that causes the traumas to continue throughout the generations, and the extended effects of the long-term trauma is what I unpack in this project.

Geoffrey Hartman's theory of how literary represents trauma, represented in "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," fits neatly in with my readings of the two novels. Hartman, a literary theorist with a focus on trauma, suggests literature augments the study of trauma by identifying with the Lacanian "real." Hartman's argument has two main tenets: literature "finds this 'real,' identifies with it, and can even bring it back," and figurative language already represents literary theory's disconnect between the real/experience and the unreal/understanding, thus making literature the perfect mode of expression for trauma (540). According to Hartman, trauma is governed by the Lacanian "real," becoming itself a feature of the traumatic experience. The "real" works here because trauma is something outside of language that cannot be identified with or attained (Evans 162-3). Metaphors, for example, in trauma theory, no longer serve to communicate to the reader an "enhanced image," and instead show what the survivor truly feels they are experiencing. Therefore, he argues that the role of literature is to use literary/poetic tropes to convey something inexplicable. A crucial moment for my use of Hartman connects with his belief that the "disjunction between experiencing (phenomenal or empirical) and understanding (thoughtful naming, in which words replace things, or their images), is what figurative language expresses and explores" (540). The difference between *experiencing* and *understanding* is crucial to the generational nature of the trauma in these novels. Because

generations before Milkman experienced but did not understand their traumas, it becomes his responsibility to understand them lest he continue the tradition; the same logic applies to Ruthie. However, the novels do not prove that there is true understanding of the experience, so I replace that notion with Laub's idea of bearing witness.

I also use Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's 1992 *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* , which primarily contributes a theoretical framework for the idea of bearing witness. Felman works in literary theory, while Laub is a psychologist. Both study trauma in the wake of World War II, with Felman studying the work that came out of it and Laub speaking with the victims and seeking to understand their experiences. Laub uses the "real" in a similar sense to Lacan. She tells the story of a concentration camp survivor who remembers four explosions when history records only one. What is real for her is not what is literally *real*, but how she remembers the event and how it affected her. The enormity of the trauma it caused her cannot be encapsulated by just one explosion, so she remembers it as four in order to make sense of it (59-61). Both of these works deal with the importance of narrative, which I am using to mean telling a story most likely as a means to bear witness. For *Housekeeping*, the entire novel is Ruthie's narrative, while in *Song of Solomon* there are specific moments of storytelling, such as when Ruth tells Milkman her story on the bus, which work to make those moments that much more powerful. In this crucial scene the fact that she begins in the middle of the sentence shows her difficulty and uncertainty in sharing her version of the story that has for so long been silenced. The connection here between Hartman and Laub is that they both explore the intricacies, inconsistencies, and ambiguities of trauma in a way that answers questions the other leaves unanswered in much the same way that Robinson and Morrison's texts work together. Laub

supports my exploration, further moving to interpret the language and literary themes revealed in the novels.

Joshua Pederson, in his 2014 article "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory," presents tropes in literature that a critic should look for when doing a trauma study Pederson points to the important ideas in previous trauma theory, but also notes that "traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may *choose* not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they *cannot*" (334, emphasis original). Earlier theorists such as Cathy Caruth argued in 1996 that, because the brain cannot process traumatic events normally there are not words that one can use to describe the event accurately, but more recent studies have proven this theory to be inaccurate. As a result, Pederson creates three main tenets to rely on in literary theory of trauma. First, critics should analyze what is in the literature rather than seeking to reconcile the gaps because the gaps perpetuates an understanding that the speaker does not remember the events (338). Regularly, literary theorists find meaning in what is unsaid, but Pederson encourages *trauma* theorists to look expressly at what is stated, and what the narrator is able to share. His second tenet is that "trauma theorists should seek out evidence of augmented narrative detail" (339). The reason for this idea is because if the narrator is especially preoccupied with their surroundings, it might be a means of coping with the situation they are part of. Alternatively, it could be working to call attention to that particular moment as something revealing the character's trauma formation and reaction. In *Housekeeping* specifically, as I show later on, the chapter where Ruthie and Sylvie spend the night on the lake is riddled with details of Ruthie's thoughts and observations because it is the first moment in the novel that she is on the lake with Sylvie, her surrogate mother figure. Finally, Pederson encourages theorists to focus on

moments of distortion (339). These are moments in the text that indicate the narrator is not viewing a situation objectively, or that they are in some way failing to present the information clearly. Again, as I return to in a later chapter, the lake scene represents this notion because Ruthie becomes confused about whether she is with Helen or Sylvie. Pederson's theories guide my research and analysis because he points to specific tropes in literature that indicate a traumatic moment.

The first wave of *Song of Solomon* scholarship focused on identity, often fitting it together with naming. In 1984 Linda Buck Myers et. al published "Perception and Power through Naming: Characters in Search of a Self in the Fiction of Toni Morrison" to explore this very connection. They argue that characters' names hold differing types of power as they are perverted and reclaimed, as is the case with Macon Dead. These alterations in power affect identity and selfhood, which Meyers traces throughout the novel. Robert James Butler's "Open Movement and Selfhood in *Song of Solomon*" depicts what movement allows for in the novel and, in the case of Milkman, that is a new understanding and reclamation of his identity. I will take Butler's study a step further to show how this movement and self-discovery necessarily aligns with naming and its power in determining identity, especially utilizing his argument about failed movement and how it further restricts characters. These explorations of selfhood and naming are relevant to my study because I will build on them to show how the power the names hold is traumatic, and how the trauma is passed in along with the names.

When scholars focus on trauma theory in Morrison's work, they typically focus on multiple of Morrison's novels rather than just one, causing the work to be somewhat lacking in its analysis of each work while providing valuable insights that will strengthen my own

argument. Robert Holton considers how Morrison validates the collective traumatic experience of African-Americans in "Bearing Witness: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*." Holton correctly argues that Morrison narrativizes the complex experience of living in the aftermath of slavery by creating characters that face such issues alongside contemporary race issues and their own experiences. Hartman could be applied here, as Morrison seems to be using narrative as a way to demonstrate how healing from such deep trauma is possible. William Martin's 1996 "Linear and Non-Linear Concepts of time in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" discusses how Morrison frames time in a non-chronological way, a major postmodern technique, in order to represent trauma. According to Anne Whitehead's 2004 *Trauma Fiction*, this style is one key way that narratives can represent trauma, alongside a disconnect from identity, two stylistic choices that crucially reflect the characters' trauma experiences. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber published an important book in 2010 called *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* that compares *Song of Solomon* and *Sula* for how they both reflect generational trauma, focusing especially on Ruth and Milkman's relationship, as well as the role that Guitar plays as someone who seeks to maintain black culture as white culture attempts to wipe it out. As for the relationship between Milkman and Ruth, the nursing scene especially reflects a way that trauma is passed down from mother to son, which I will discuss in chapter one. It is even more important to analyze given that it is what earns him his lasting nickname. Each of these works tackles a minor aspect of trauma in the novel that I can pull from, but they are lacking in broader scope. These works support my argument that trauma is generational and long-term, but one can bear witness in a healthy dependence on others.

In *Housekeeping*'s fairly limited criticism, scholars tend to focus on domesticity and gender as they are the most readily available themes. One interesting study is Paula E. Geyh's "Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and the Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*," in which she explores domesticity as the bind that controls women and limits them to the point that they may become traumatized. The crux of her argument is that Sylvie fundamentally misunderstands housekeeping, thus trapping Sylvie to the extent that her only escape is to burn the house down. However, I argue that the fire does not free the two women, and that they must cross the lake to truly be free. The fire is their performative escape from domesticity, but it is the lake that brings them to freedom. However, Kristin King notes the irony of this in "Resurfacings of The Deeps: Semiotic Balance in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*" because the lake holds more mystery for Ruthie throughout the novel than anything else. King's analysis of the novel is formative because she identifies the lake's significance and how it is a site of trauma for Ruthie. She explains that there are two sections of the lake, and her mother killed herself in an uncharted section which parallels Ruthie's lack of understanding of her mother and her reasons for killing herself. These analyses are the prominent arguments about trauma in the novel, and offer a source for why both Ruthie and Sylvie need to escape separately but, ultimately, together.

Postmodern analyses of *Housekeeping* account for space and transience as a means of understanding the characters' broken identity more than their trauma. Corina Crisu writes "At Home with Transience: Reconfiguring Female Characters of the American West in Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping" in order to show how Robinson feminizes a typically masculine space by making female characters that do not align with traditional roles.

Robinson inverts space by changing the Western frontier from masculine to feminine, and using this zone, rather than domesticity, a way for Sylvie and Ruthie to determine their identities. Fatima Zahra Bessedik's "Home-Space in Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping" argues that the characters are out of place physically by living a domestic, rather than transient life in order to parallel their psychological out of place-ness that is created by the trauma that the family undergoes. A consideration of Sylvia and Helen's parenting styles, as well as the way the women dealt with Edmund's death, strengthens the reason for Sylvie and Ruth's straying from domesticity in favor of a counter-typical transient narrative to cope with their losses in a typically masculine way. Each of these spatial considerations adds to my project because I will deal with transience as a means for coping with trauma, which Bessedik lays the groundwork for, alongside Crisu's argument that they occupy space in unconventional and problematic ways.

In the first chapter, I argue that generational trauma is passed down through naming and parenting styles. One key scholar in this section is Semiramis Yağcıoğlu, who shows how Milkman's very nickname forces him to shape his identity around his mother's trauma because she used nursing as a form of coping. Additionally, I use Robert James Butler's notion of open movement to track Milkman throughout the story and how names influence his movement. Because the research on *Housekeeping* is sparse here, analyses of *Song of Solomon* aid in my interpretations of the novel. In *Song of Solomon* -- the Biblical names, the last name Dead, the first name Macon, and the nickname Milkman -- all further the trauma of the Dead family because they stem from and embody traumatic roots. Further, the ways that Ruth and Macon bear witness to Milkman (when he is already so sure he knows their sides of the story) pull him back and forth between their feud. They encourage him to pick up their

trauma and their side of the fight, representing their disparate and problematic parenting. In *Housekeeping*, Sylvia names her daughter after herself but she chooses to go by the more infantile nickname Sylvie. The name is also associated with nature, thus predicting her connection to the woods and the lake that Ruthie learns about later in the novel. The last names Foster and Fisher have deep etymological implications that reflect their parental roles in the novel, as Sylvia fosters Lucille and Ruthie, while Sylvie bonds more with the lake and with nature than she does with the stability that her mother represents. Lucille, meaning light, also reflects her role as a counter to Sylvie's fascination with darkness. The first name "Ruth" and the last name "Foster" overlap in the stories, so I argue for the significance of each author's choice, and how the similarity further connects the two novels. Finally, I will show how Ruth Foster's overbearing love for Milkman in nursing him far too long breaks down his boundaries so that he does not know what he is reasonably allowed to expect from him, reflected in the ways he treats Guitar, Hagar, his sisters, and others. The ways that parents name and raise their children in these novels is a huge contributing factor in the trauma that their children inherit and that so colors their lived experiences. Importantly, I also show the ways that the Dead family passes down not only their unique traumas, but also the traumas associated with slavery, an issue that the Foster family does not have.

The first chapter focuses on how traumas are passed down, while the second chapter shows that these traumas cause characters to reject their traditional homespace and enter into a form of transience and homelessness because the houses are so heavily connoted with their families' traumas. There is a paradox because, despite the fact that every character has a physical home to return to, Sylvie, Ruthie, and Pilate choose homelessness. The relations that these families have with the people that live in their towns are strained at best, with nearly

everyone in Mercy owing Macon money and everyone in Fingerbone thinking the Foster family is strange because the citizens are so close to transience that they are afraid of those who cross the boundary. By the end of the novel, both Sylvie and Ruthie do cross this boundary. In both novels, outside people are suspicious and distrustful of the family. In this section, I use Elżbieta Horodyska, who argues that Sylvie and Ruthie seek to reconcile the irreconcilable in their desire to wander but also find adaptable domesticity. To Horodyska, boundaries collapse in the novel, as Robinson shows often, such as on the lake when Ruthie becomes convinced that Sylvie and Helen are the same. This argument addresses the call to transience and the boundaries that the house places on them that they so long to escape. While Morrison's Dead family adapts to their daunting home rather than destroying it, Pilate rejects stability in favor of traveling. James C. Hall explores how fraught home can be and the draw that characters have towards folklore and heritage over the immediate family that they may find constricting, explaining Pilate's otherwise idiosyncratic behavior. Milkman feels a similar restriction to Pilate, but both Pilate and Milkman, as well as Sylvie and Ruthie, find non-traditional communities that support them and share their interests more than the relationships and expectations that their societies impose on them.

A guiding force behind the characters' pull to travel, alongside a desire to escape the things that limit them in their homes, is the influence that ghosts and haunting have over them. One of the most prominent differences between these two novels is that, while both feature hauntings, in *Song of Solomon* these are literal, with the presence of ghosts, and in *Housekeeping* the hauntings are memories that Ruthie cannot forget nor reconcile with. In the third chapter, I explore the tradition of magical realism by African-American women writers, and how Morrison fits into that tradition. Both hauntings, however, are symbolic of the

traumas that the characters experience, and until they are able to bear witness to their traumas, they continue to be haunted in their own ways. Pilate travels to find peace but returns to the cave that she and her brother hid in as children because her father appeared to her and told her to retrieve the dead man's bones; that is, the man that Macon killed in order to protect the two of them. A question I explore is whether the hauntings stop or continue for the characters after Pilate learns the truth of the bones in her house, and after Ruthie escapes Fingerbone. Here, I will tie in Sanford Pinsker's exploration of magical realism in *Song of Solomon* and how it contributes to the idea of liberation in both novels, and Kristin King's argument that the lake haunts Ruthie in its ambiguity and unknowability. Ghosts and intrusive memories are one of the most traditional ways that trauma appears in literature because they indicate something that is not reconciled for the character, so the choice to travel is tied in with these hauntings in a desire to make them stop without having to bear witness with traumas.

In my conclusion, I will return to the question of bearing witness that I posed in my introduction to show how the final scenes of the novels are the culmination of the characters' trauma experiences and that they point towards recovery for many of the characters. Morrison uses magical realism throughout her novel, and I will explore whether Milkman is liberated through his seemingly literal flight on the final page of the novel. In *Housekeeping*, Ruthie crosses the lake that has been the site of so much trauma for her. I question whether she is finally able to free herself from the constraints that Fingerbone and domesticity placed on her through her narrative. I also discuss whether burning down the house successfully allows Sylvie to bear witness. Finally, I question whether in telling her story to Milkman Ruth was able to bear witness as well. To analyze *Housekeeping*, there are many sources that

deal with the ambiguity of the burning house, and I primarily use Laura Callanan who explores how it resolves the narrative, and whether it was a feminist action, and Paula E. Geyh's analysis of how the end of the novel symbolizes a liberation from domesticity, which augments my argument that burning the house is Sylvie's form of bearing witness. For *Song of Solomon*, I will focus on the flight at the end of the novel using Katherine Thornstein's study about the tradition of flight in African American novels, and I will return to Pinsker for his argument that magical realism in itself is a symbol of liberation.

Finally, in the conclusion I will trace a thread throughout the project to tie together each of the chapters under one cohesive idea. Trauma is the driving force behind the choice to pass down trauma, to live in homelessness, and to give fuel to one's ghosts. However, the liberation the characters attain at the end indicates a bearing witness that points towards a cessation of generational trauma for each family, a unifying theme throughout both novels. I present a more hopeful reading of the conclusions that suggests that the characters move towards a traumatic resolution that has so far been absent in their lives.

Chapter 1: Passing on Trauma Through Naming and Caretaking

The traumas present in *Song of Solomon* and *Housekeeping* are by and large generational; that is, traumas that find their roots in generations prior to, or barely present in, the plot of the novel. In this chapter, I will explore the ways that the characters pass down their traumas; the acts of naming and parenting both perpetuate trauma throughout generations in each story while also illuminating differences between each family and how they pass down their traumas in relation to each other.

In *Song of Solomon*, characters exercise power through choosing names and nicknames. The protagonist has the same name as his father, as well as the father before him: Macon Dead. However, his father is the only one to call him that as everyone in Mercy[1] calls him Milkman. Milkman's father "never knew how it came about -- how his only son acquired the nickname that stuck in spite of his own refusal to use it or acknowledge it. It was a matter that concerned him a good deal, for the giving of names in his family was always surrounded by what he believed to be monumental foolishness" (15). Macon's claim here that the names are foolish is clearly untrue because in giving Milkman the nickname, Freddie, a janitor known for spreading gossip around Mercy, strips Macon of his own naming power. Ultimately, no one ever tells Macon where the nickname came from because few in the town feel comfortable telling him things that counter his interests because he likely owns their property. The etymology of "Milkman" certainly would have angered Macon, since Freddie walked in on his wife nursing his only son far later into his life than was socially acceptable. This moment stays with Milkman throughout the entire novel because he never so much as tries to abandon the nickname, so he is always marked by his mother's loneliness,

[1] Though the names of places in both Morrison's and Robinson's texts are heavily significant, the goal of this project is to show how names impact individuals and their actions.

the thing that caused her to nurse him for so long. However, he is also marked by his father's loss of power, giving Milkman a certain amount of power of Macon.

The nursing scene itself is one that is crucial to the novel because it shapes Milkman's entire future by earning him that lasting nickname and is emblematic of the sole power that Ruth believes she has. Milkman's age when Freddie discovers Ruth nursing him is never stated, but Ruth stares at his closed eyes as "a wish to avoid seeing his legs dangle almost to the floor" (13). The lure of this prolonged nursing is the remote green room in which it takes place, but even more powerful for Ruth is as follows:

> [Ruth] had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the miller's daughter -- the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her: to see golden thread stream from her very own shuttle. And that was the other part of her pleasure, a pleasure she hated to give up. (13-4)

This moment in the novel comes after a description of the disdain that Macon holds for Ruth, and Morrison deliberately juxtaposes his rejection with Ruth's reprieve. Macon, who, as it is later revealed in the novel, is responsible for the death of Ruth's father, her only friend, makes Ruth feel very small. Therefore, all she holds is the power that she imagines for herself in nursing her son, and her belief that she is able to create gold from within herself. Ruth is isolated from everyone in a way that is primarily a result of Macon's abuse and control. These practices are driven by Macon's own insecurity and manifest in him telling people his version of the story about Dr. Foster's death, which makes people think that there is something wrong with Ruth, and that there was something dirty about their relationship. The power that she imagines for herself, and the intimacy that accompanies nursing a child, are small ways that Ruth can reclaim her control over her own life, and, in turn, a way that

she can separate herself from the traumas of her past with people thinking she was odd and setting her apart from the community because of her father's status, and her current relationship with Macon.

Despite the positive effects nursing has for Ruth, in doing so she eliminates boundaries from Milkman's life and permanently alters his identity. His family does not acknowledge his nickname, separating his identity between the public and private spheres. Semiramis Yagcioglu, in "Space Is Political: Reading Places, Names and Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" argues that "while [the nickname] signifies a subject position in the public domain, it does not signify a space within the family sphere because it does not find a residence in the syntax of the family discourse" (117). In other words, the thing that so defines Milkman only defines him in half of his life, leaving his identity ambiguous with his family, and ambiguous as a whole. He carries his mother's trauma and loneliness with him, however, in his family life as well because he is so connected to her through the late nursing. Yagcioglu further notes that Milkman follows pleasure blindly, recognizing no established boundaries. Magdalene's outburst with Milkman at the end of Part I embodies this idea well, as she says "you think because you hit him once that we all believe you were protecting her. Taking her side. It's a lie. You were taking over, letting us know you had the right to tell her and all of us what to do" (215-6). In approaching him in this way, Magdalene suggests that Milkman takes what he wants and controls others because he believes he deserves it, because he has never respected any boundaries in his own life. Further, she shows that he believes he has power over Macon, something that stems from him not using his given name. In nursing Milkman until he is old enough to suspect that there is something dirty about their ritual,

Ruth gives Milkman a sense that boundaries do not exist for him, and alters his ability to form a coherent identity.

The family's naming practice mandates using the Bible; however, the names take on a different meaning than their face value. Macon's two daughters are named First Corinthians and Magdalene, which *Song of Solomon* scholar Ruth Rosenberg claims are names that subvert expectations, emphasizing the ways that Morrison uses her black narrative to invert and corrupt a white religious book. Rosenberg writes of these names, alongside Reba and Hagar, that they "have no religious significance because they derive from the sortilege of the illiterate. This mode of selection protects the lexical opacity of the names. Since they were chosen, not for their sound, but for their shape on the page, they cannot be semantically analyzed" (200). In other words, the significance from these names comes not from what they mean in the Bible, but in how they deliberately do not allude to the Bible in the expected way, reclaiming, in some fashion, a black heritage. The name First Corinthians, for example, has no clear connection to the family because in the Bible it depicts a call to unify under the church, while the novel shows that it is necessary to break free from the power of place: that is, the power the house holds over them. In the same way that Macon's father named his youngest daughter Pilate, after Pontius Pilate by opening up the Bible and choosing a word that he thinks looks strong, so too Macon chooses the names for his daughters by form rather than function.

In following his family's naming tradition, Macon contradicts his claim that the significance behind naming is foolish, indicating that the reader should not take him at his word. The second Macon abiding by this tradition, implies that he assigned no real value to his daughters' names, choosing instead to root the significance in how he chose the names rather than the names themselves. His claim that the naming practices are foolish is

unsubstantiated because he follows them so literally that he names one of his daughters "First Corinthians," a name that completely eludes convention. It follows that Milkman's nickname bothers Macon because he is not the namer, and not the one choosing which implications (traumatic or otherwise) are carried alongside his son's name, but he is too prideful to admit it pains him. Thus, this seemingly minor moment in the novel reveals Macon's dishonesty and need for control.

Considering his own story and what he has learned of others' stories is the crucial step that Milkman needs to take in order to bear witness to his trauma history. In the last chapter of the novel, Milkman "close[s] his eyes and [thinks] of…. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that [bear] witness" (330). Milkman begins by thinking of names of people that he met on his journey to find his heritage but moves beyond that to reflect on everyone he has ever known, and every place he or his family has been. He comes to find that these names are meaningful to him because everyone he has met and everywhere he has been has shaped him. And, the name of each person or place is meaningful to the holder of the name because the name is a result or amalgamation of their own experiences. Ultimately, Milkman's epiphany inspires him to abandon his selfish nature and enables him to empathize with the important people in his life. He realizes "from the beginning, his mother and Pilate had fought for his life, and he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea" (331). In this moment, Milkman comes to understand the personhood of others in a way that he has never been able to before. In realizing that he is not the only one who has experienced trauma, he takes a step towards being able to bear witness because he can understand the damage that he himself has caused.

The last name Dead, then, is even more powerful because it bears witness for each generation. Those familiar with the Dead family's ancestry in Shalimar are able to share with

Milkman that his grandfather was named Jake, though he was mistakenly called Macon Dead and his wife, Sing, urged him to keep the new name because she "'said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out'" (54). Macon Dead was never a slave, though Jake was, and so the name does not have the same connotations and associations as his slave name. Thus, this name that so haunts the Dead family is revealed to be a name of reclamation, a name that bore witness to a man who was freed from slavery, and a name that he chose to keep on his own terms. Despite the fact that it was a mistake made by a careless white man, it was the first Macon's own choice to keep the name, revealing that he accepted the name as a way to move away from his past. He rejected the name he had always gone by as a slave name, built a new life for himself as a Dead, and passed that name on to his children.

However, the name becomes a burden, rather than a symbol of freedom, for the next generations of Macon Deads. Milkman does use it to his advantage when signifying[2] with Guitar, making jokes about how he and his relatives are "already Dead" (89), but by and large it is a marker of being an outsider and not knowing their own people. Further, it implies that they are insignificant and lack agency because they are "dead." To Milkman's father, the error that led to their new name is his father's fault for being illiterate, saying he "got his name messed up cause he couldn't read" (53). He places the culpability here on his father rather than the drunk man who filled the answers into the wrong boxes because he is ashamed of the name; Macon Dead is an ill-humored man and takes no pride in silly anecdotes. However, when Milkman returns his father "could not hear it enough…. He liked the story and the fact that places were named for his people" (334). The first time that Macon is joyful in the story (besides when he is trying to steal gold from Pilate) is when he hears

[2] An African-American tradition of creating puns and other witty jokes about their friends (Wald 110)

these stories about his ancestry and is able to finally answer all the questions he has had about a family. Myers writes that "Morrison suggests here that once false naming is corrected and a true naming or renaming takes place, death ends and life begins" (48). This comment is somewhat tragic, as it argues that for generations the family is barely alive because they do not know their true name, thus showing the necessity of knowing one's people. The name Dead, finally, bears witness for Macon because, where before it stood as an empty placeholder for all the things he did not know about his family, it becomes rich and filled with history of his father, Jake, the first Macon Dead.

Because of the restrictions the Dead family imposes on Milkman's personal growth, he decides to leave his hometown and it is this geographical movement that allows Milkman to bear witness to his inherited traumas. He tells Guitar "my family's driving me crazy…. Everybody wants something from me, you know what I mean?" (222). His family name burdens because there is so much dissonance in his home and so many conflicting expectations from his family that the only relief he can find is through tracing the roots of his family to the name they had before Dead. Learning about his family's lineage results in Milkman's newfound empathy and compassion. Knowing what came before the name Dead that is so empty for him because it lacks connection to his ancestry also influences this shift in Milkman's behavior. As Yagcioglu argues, "the names all bear witness to the presence of black people in spite of all the distortions and erasure imposed by racist ideology. Milkman loses the false name 'Dead' to acquire the ancestral real name" (Yagcioglu 120). Holton notes that Milkman must travel to the south, the site of atrocity in his family history, in order to bear witness to the generational trauma. The return of the traditional family name, Solomon, indicates a moving forward from the traumas that slavery created, and justifies their very existence, and a way for Milkman to claim a true identity moving forward.

Knowing nothing of their family but how they acquired the name Dead burdens both Macon and Milkman, and relief and recovery come when they learn their family's true history.

The truth of the Dead family history is that Solomon, nicknamed Shalimar, was a Flying African, foreshadowing Milkman's father's desire for his singular economic ascension as well as his own fascination with literal flight. Milkman uncovers this story at the end of his trip to Shalimar when he meets with a woman named Susan Byrd. She is an older woman who tells Milkman the story which many believe to be a myth; it is worth noting that his source for the story of the Flying African comes from a woman with allusions to ascension in her name. Solomon provides another example of how Morrison subverts Biblical expectations because she uses him as a representative not of the wise king Solomon, but instead as an example of the Flying African myth, a uniquely African-American allusion. Susan tells Macon "it's just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from" (323). Again, we see a character who claims something to be foolish and then emphasizes it to the extreme, saying he flew three times and then describing the process. She believes the myth to be foolish but is still extremely familiar with it, indicating that the story is told often enough that people in Shalimar must believe it, or at least long for it. The myth of the Flying African is that Africans once had wings but lost them as punishment for their wrongdoings (Thorsteinson 261). This repetition of the myth indicates that "the myth is as much about the loss of flight and the impossibility of return as it is about the continual desire for this freedom" (Thorsteinson 261). For Susan Byrd, and for others in Shalimar, freedom is still far away, and the desire for social ascension looms.

Despite being a generation away from slavery, Macon still dreams of ascension. For him it is economic, while Milkman dreams of literal ascension through flight. In her article "From Escape to Ascension: The Effects of Aviation Technology on the Flying African Myth," Katherine Thorsteinson writes that in the face of modernity and the invention of literal flight, African Americans became more concerned with socioeconomic ascension. Macon certainly embodies this, telling his son "let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). Macon ascended to the position of essentially owning the town but is still angry and incomplete because he abandoned his race in favor of embodying a slaveholder's agenda. Unfortunately, there is no hope that he will truly change because "he wasn't interested in the flying part" of the story, being interested primarily in the places that were named for his ancestors (334). The myth of the Flying African resonates most with Milkman because he inherited the desire for flight and finally understands why he has always felt trapped in Mercy. Milkman, on the other hand, cares very little for money because he has already had it. The ascension he dreams of harkens much more readily back to the Flying African myth. On his journey south, Morrison writes, "the airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability" (220). Invulnerability is akin to freedom because for the first time he is completely out of reach of his father, as well as Guitar who is out to take Milkman's life. It is the benefit that accompanies escape that makes it so appealing to Milkman. For Macon the focus of flight is his economic ascension, and for Milkman it is the desire for freedom that has always haunted his family.

One of Ruth Dead's main limitations in bearing witness to her trauma is the deliberate belittling of her husband, framing her in a light to prevent her children from taking her seriously. Before Ruth is ever able to share her story, Macon tells Milkman that when her father died, he walked in and found Ruth "'in the bed…. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth'" (73). Macon deliberately paints an incestuous picture for Milkman, one that is unjustifiable. It is graphic and perverted to cause discomfort for the reader alongside Milkman and cause both parties to question Ruth's actions. However, the story she tells him is very different; she is kneeling by the bed in her robe and kissing his fingers, the one part of his body not swollen beyond recognition by the pills Macon gave him. Milkman does not welcome this story either when he hears it from his father, nor when he hears it from Ruth, but when she tells it he begins to put the pieces together about his family's traumas, finally understanding his father's dishonesty. He ends the conversation by asking her if she nursed him for too long, and, despite everything else that she has revealed about the horrible things that his father had done to her, this is the detail that he chooses to focus on because he has yet to learn empathy and selflessness. Ruth's moment of intense vulnerability and attempt to bear witness to her trauma story falls on a young man who is too self-obsessed to see how these details impact her, and too motivated by his father's story to counteract his pre-formed image of his mother. The stories his father tells him, though he finds them to be untrue, alter his opinions of his mother in a way that she cannot take back in telling him her truth.

Macon's parenting style contrasts Ruth's, and the two opposing forces working on Milkman cause him to struggle with his identity well into his adult life. Gary Storhoff writes that "the novel contrasts Macon Dead's and Ruth Foster's families of origin to reveal why they over involve themselves in Milkman's life, as they attempt to recapitulate childhood

patterns in their own family" (291). The emphasis on Milkman's parents' upbringings serves to explain, but not make excuses for, the way that they raise their son. Storhoff goes on to argue that Macon was raised to value things and attempts to imitate his father but overcorrects, leaning more towards slavery than freedom as he tells Milkman to "own things… and other people too" (55). So, while Ruth values emotional intimacy because it is what she valued in her relationship with her father, Macon seeks to recreate the ownership that he valued in his father. However, Macon's opposite is in Pilate rather than Ruth, so while the two of them create one whole (an imitation of Jake), Macon and Ruth create an incoherent and out of place parenting style. To return briefly to the nursing scene, Storhoff argues that Ruth's power comes from "deference and servility" and that she displays her trauma as a means of getting power from her relationship with her son and her husband. They cannot both get what they want out of the family, so they "achieve homeostasis through the suppression of their son, Milkman …. [who] provides … Macon with a shadowy reflection of his own workings with Jake" (Storhoff 299). However, the suppression of Milkman's individuality that so identifies both Macon and Ruth's relationship with Milkman cannot last, leading to Milkman's travel and flight.

As recovering the family's ancestral name allows the Dead family to bear witness, Robinson's characters are similarly plagued by a lack of ancestral knowledge, but the narrative ends with far fewer answers for the family. The Foster family knows their family's lineage, and their family name; however, what they do not know, and what they never find out, is what motivates each other. As I will show, there is a lack of communication between the family that prevents communal growth. While Ruth and Macon tell Milkman their story in a way that burdens him, in *Housekeeping* no stories are told at all. The family knows enough about their lineage to share and pass on generational traumas, but they fail to talk

about them with each other. Their names reveal things about what to expect from each character's future, while the names in *Song of Solomon* are primarily a reflection of the family's past. Here, I will show how the traumas in *Housekeeping* are based in comparison with *Song of Solomon*'s.

Robinson uses names to foreshadow the character dynamics and relationships. Ruth is a woman from the Bible who embodies the power of close female relationships, telling her mother-in-law, Naomi "where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay" (*The Holy Bible*, Ruth 1:16). Similarly, Ruthie goes with Sylvie over the bridge and stays with her indefinitely. Ruthie's relationship with Sylvie is one that mirrors friendship much more clearly than one of caretaker and child as neither party takes on the caretaker, so there is a level of equality among the two that mirrors friendship. Additionally, Ruth has a close relationship to Lucille before her relationship with Sylvie, so Ruth as a character is defined less as an individual woman and more as a member of a duo. In her relationship with Lucille as well, the name is ironic because Lucille, the younger sister, cares for Ruth. The dynamics of who should care for who are inconsistent in these relationships, as well as for Ruth Dead. The name always takes on ironic connotations as she is the one who is cared for by Pilate and by her father, and she seems incapable of caring for her children in an appropriate way, letting them be controlled and bullied by her husband. Lucille means light, and she acts as a foil to Sylvie who feels most comfortable in darkness, seen especially in how she insists on eating dinner with the lights off. Edmund, the family's patriarch who is dead long before the narrative begins, means "protector" in Old English, a somewhat ironic name as he established his family in the remote town of Fingerbone and then died, leaving behind a memory of a somewhat eccentric man who can do nothing else to protect his family. In choosing such a name and allowing the protector to die, Robinson subverts expectations early

on in the novel, foreshadowing the other protector deaths to come. Ruthie carries his name and memory with her, but he does nothing to protect her; instead, his memory haunts her alongside the memory of her mother, both having been lost to the depths of the lake. Each of these first names foreshadows in some way the role that character will have in the novel.

Sylvie seems to be named after her mother Sylvia, and Sylvie responds to her inherited loneliness with transience and chooses a diminutive nickname to reject the responsibility that accompanies motherhood. Thus, Robinson draws a necessary and inevitable connection between the two women who share a name, as the natural assumption that follows two characters with the same name is that they will also have similar identities and values. Their similarities, however, are scarce, and after Sylvie leaves home as a teenager she never sees her mother again, save for the one day that she returns to Fingerbone to get married. In passing down her name to Sylvie, Sylvia gifted her with the trauma caused by the isolated and lonely lifestyle that Sylvia chose to lead upon the death of her husband, resulting in Sylvie's inability to stay in one location for very long. Sylvie also inherits the house but does not value its permanence. Sylvia believes the house is the most important thing that one can own, telling Ruthie and Lucille "so long as you look after your health, and own the roof above your head, you're as safe as anyone can be" (27). Sylvie rejects the gift of safety when she burns down the house because she sees entrapment where her mother saw protection. As a form of reclaiming the shared name, Sylvie uses the diminutive form of Sylvia to escape the permanence that she has associated with the name Sylvia. She sees her mother's staying in Fingerbone after Edmund's death as accepting the bad things that happened in her life, so Sylvie believes adulthood and maturity to be tied to unhappiness. Therefore, in using a more childish version of the name and living a transient lifestyle, Sylvie reacts to and opposes the traumas that she inherited from her mother's passive and static habits.

The name “Sylvie” conjures up images of a relationship to nature. The name comes from the name Silva, meaning “spirit of the wood.” Further, it evokes Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron,” a short story with a protagonist named Sylvy who climbs a tree in order to find a bird’s nest for someone staying with her and her grandmother, but when the time comes for her to tell him where the white heron’s habitat is she finds she cannot do it. Her connection to nature is important because it is where she and Ruth develop their connection. Su-ying Lin writes that “in the wilderness, she has the chance to encounter her mother surrogate Sylvie who, in turn, empowers her in a non-coercive way” (208). In the wilderness, Sylvie becomes a mother to Ruth despite the fact that she herself rejects that role. During the night they spend on the lake, Sylvie takes the shape of Helen, and Ruth says that “I spoke to her by the name Sylvie, and she did not answer. Then how was one to know? And if she were Helen in my sight, how could she not be Helen in fact?” (167). It is the lake and the woods that make this connection possible for Ruth, and make her confused about who her true mother is. Additionally, Helen left her with trauma through her suicide, and in becoming Helen for a moment, Sylvie helps to perpetuate that trauma because for Ruth the role of mother is so tied up in trauma. Sylvie’s name differentiates her from other people because it exposes her as an outdoor creature, a transient, and one that is most at home in the woods.

Sylvia and Sylvie differ greatly as guardians, providing Ruth and Lucille with a rather unstable home. Prior to their time in Fingerbone it is unclear what their parentage was like except that they had an absent mother, and their time with their great-aunts is too transitional to have a great effect on them. Sylvia’s parenting, however, is discussed briefly in regard to her daughters, and more closely with her granddaughters. Sylvia’s life, both before Edmund and after his death, is marked by a loneliness that she passed onto her daughters the same way that her mother passed it onto her. Robinson writes:

> She would feel that sharp loneliness she had felt every long evening since she was a child. It was the kind of loneliness that made clocks seem slow and loud and made voices sound like voices across water. Old women she had known, first her grandmother and then her mother, rocked on their porches in the evenings and sang sad songs, and did not wish to be spoken to. (18)

Because she saw this trait being passed down through generations, it follows that her daughters either inherited her loneliness or deliberately strove not to be like her so that they would know nothing of it. Her loneliness affects her parenting because, upon the death of her husband, she became distant and passive, noticing, rather than engaging in the discovery that "it did not occur to [her daughters] to suit their words and manners to her looks…. She had never taught them to be kind to her" (18-9). This moment connects to Milkman never making his female relatives a cup of tea despite them taking care of him his entire life; it had never been expected of him. It seems that Sylvia values physical care over emotional, especially because she encouraged Ruthie and Lucille to own their own home though never seemed to explain any emotional care to them. Ruthie notes that "Lucille and me she tended with scrupulous care and little confidence, as if her offerings of dimes and chocolate-chip cookies might keep us, our spirits, here in her kitchen, though she knew they might not" (25). This passage indicates that Sylvia always kept part of herself distant from Ruth and Lucille because she had been a mother before only to have all her children leave her. Therefore, though her parenting style has always been quite distant, it becomes even more so when she must do it for a second time because of the trauma she has already experienced. This distance teachers her granddaughters to keep a distance from people, thus passing on her own traumas.

Sylvie's care is much more chaotic than her mother's, though no less distant; it makes sense that she is influenced by her mother, but her poor housekeeping is a crucial divergence between the two. The first spring that Sylvie is in Fingerbone is the first time that the house ever floods, indicating a shift in the traditions of the home. And, by this point, the girls are already so traumatized that they "still doubted that Sylvie would stay. She resembled our mother" (68), a figure that they fear because she abandoned them. So, they try to accommodate her rather than her accommodating them, somewhat reversing the role of parent because Ruth believes that "if she could remain transient here, she would not have to leave" (103). Despite the fact that she never does abandon them, her parenting still leaves its mark. Sylvie fails to keep the house tidy the way her mother did, choosing to collect instead, and to allow leaves and cats to find their way inside to stay. Yet, as I will touch on later, the only intimacy she shares with the girls are stories of other people or stories about herself and Helen. In this way, she keeps the same distance between them that Sylvia did, thus embodying the same parenting style that she learned growing up, further instilling in Lucille and Ruth that they must not be intimate with anyone.

Most of the stories that Sylvie tells are about other people, especially other transients, that she met in her travels, indicating the distance she desires from everyone. However, she does tell some stories about her childhood with Helen (leaving out memories of her mother, father, and oldest sister, Molly, perhaps implying their insignificance or traumatic nature), indicating that there are some fond memories worth holding onto. The stories that Sylvie tells about Helen reflects how she does not truly see herself as a caretaker, instead seeing herself as another sister. She tells them "'your mother and I used to make these [pancakes]. We used to go to that same place when we were little girls. Liberia. We were close then, like you two,'" and Lucille responds by telling her of the game that they are playing that they

"'always forget Latvia,'" and Sylvie responds "'we always forgot Lichtenstein. Or Andorra. Or San Marino'" (108). This moment is over quickly enough, with little prelude or afterlude to give it context, but it does something crucial in conveying the way that Sylvie thinks about Lucille and Ruth. That is, she seems them as the next generation of herself and Helen, projecting onto them all the notions she had about their relationship growing on, as well as the traumas that she still holds onto.

As I noted in the introduction, the name Foster is used in both texts which indicates a unifying significance between the texts of foster, rather than biological, families. Robinson uses the name Foster to mirror the ways that the immediate families are constructed in a somewhat piecework way despite the blood relations, and Morrison uses it in a similar way to call attention to how Ruth's father additionally fills the role of mother and friend. Notably, even after her marriage to Macon, Ruth prefers to go by her father's last name because, ironically, Macon is more of an ill-fitting foster family than her father. Ruthie and Lucille use their father's name Stone, so it is only Sylvia who has the last name Foster throughout most of the novel; but, being the matriarch her last name is the one that everyone has in common. Sylvia is the first foster mother in the narrative, making that name daunting to live up to rather than being something positive to associate oneself with. Ruth Foster from *Song of Solomon* tells her husband, whose last name she is to hold, that she "certainly [is her] daddy's daughter" (67), taunting him for not having such a strong family, foster or not, that she felt she did growing up. The name Foster connects and reflects the piecework and less than ideal families in each story.

The Foster name similarly oppresses Robinson's family as Dead does to Morrison's, and it is this negative connotation that causes Sylvie to reject the name for herself as a means of rejecting what she remembers as an unhappy childhood. Sylvie chooses instead to use her

married name of Fisher despite her marriage's colllapse, and she seldom mentions her husband. It seems unlikely that she chooses to keep the name as some sort of loyalty for him, or a way to hang onto what their marriage meant because it seems that it meant nothing to her. When Lucille asks for a picture of him she shows a sailor that she clipped from a magazine, the choice for this image probably stemming from the watery connection of sailors and the name Fisher. The name Fisher foreshadows the hold that Lake Fingerbone has on Sylvie, and the escape that it provides her and Ruth at the end of the novel. Regardless, as much as the women in the novel attempt to be each other's foster families, they fail in much the same way that Edmund fails at being a protector.

Almost no one ever talks about Helen's suicide, but it is extremely present in the story because of the extent to which it haunts both Ruth and Sylvie, and how it prevents them from acting in conventionally appropriate ways. One way this behavior manifests in Sylvie is when she tells the neighbors "[Ruth is] like another sister to me. She's her mother all over again'" (182). It is clear then, from this statement, that Sylvie has not processed her sister's death, and instead of trying to heal properly she seeks to have the same relationship again in Ruth. Additionally, she further rejects the role of foster parent here, choosing instead to see Ruthie as an equal rather than a dependent. Thus, she mistakenly believes that she can at the same time reject the Foster name and repeat the positive childhood memories that she has because she refuses to bear witness to her own trauma. Instead, she collects and shares the stories of others as a way to avoid doing any real work on herself, failing to teach Ruthie how to deal with trauma, and causing her to sink deeper into them. It is when she and Ruth unite at the end of the novel to burn down their family home that she finally is able to, in some way, bear witness to the wrongs that she has committed, and attempt to free both herself and Ruth from the prison that the family house has become. As caretaker, it is her responsibility

to teach Ruth healthy recovery, but she wholly rejects this role, as is embodied by her rejection of her maiden name. Both women are tormented by Helen's suicide, and escape is their only option to heal as they are unable to act in ways that the townspeople of Fingerbone deem appropriate.

Each mother figure in these novels passes down trauma to her children (foster or otherwise) in their own specific form of toxic care, thus exacerbating the differences between the texts. Morrison's Ruth bears witness to Milkman in a time where she is extremely vulnerable, but long before he is mature enough to respect her story in what appears to be a desperate attempt to garner support from the wrong person. Robinson's Sylvie, on the other hand, never shares her trauma, nor does Sylvia, who does not teach her daughters to grieve the death of their father, or her granddaughters to grieve the death of their mother. In each case, Sylvie and Sylvia reject the role of teaching (or learning for themselves) proper trauma recovery through bearing witness, while Ruth Dead does it in a way that embodies her codependence and does not further her recovery at all. An even more drastic example of not embodying trauma recovery is Helen, who ignores her ex-husband's letter and eventually kills herself without so much as a goodbye. In reading these novels together, it reveals the differences in parenting style and trauma recovery, but illuminates the similarities in bearing witness or rejecting the very opportunity to do so.

In naming and in parenting style, the characters in these novels perpetuate their own traumas and make them generational, despite their best intentions. Ruth and Macon give Milkman conflicting ideas of what to strive for in life, while Sylvia and Sylvie share conflicting ideas about permanence. Though they may seek to bear witness to their own negative experiences in using traditional family names, parents associate their children with their traumas instead. These similar tactics show how similar the families are, despite the fact

that the Dead family has to bear witness to their ancestor's slave background as well. Trauma manifests and is perpetuated in similar ways despite its roots and complexity.

Chapter 2: Transience and Homelessness as Coping

Coping with trauma is a necessary precursor to bearing witness, and in *Housekeeping* and *Song of Solomon* the characters use transience and homelessness to first evade and then confront their traumas. Travel gives Pilate, Milkman, Ruth, Sylvie, and Ruthie a way to escape the homes and people that haunt them, and the instability of transience and homelessness that is part of the experience for some of these characters allows them to break out of the constriction of convention. In a response to and form of coping with trauma, Pilate and Milkman from *Song of Solomon* and Sylvie and Ruthie from *Housekeeping* choose travel and, in all instances except Milkman's, extended bouts of homelessness instead of living in their problematic homes. For the women in *Housekeeping*, the home prevents them from healing from the trauma because it continually perpetuates it. Pilate and Milkman travel as a rejection of materiality and a means of seeking out community and heritage, but Pilate's travels are much more prolonged than Milkman's, and completely without the funding that Macon provides Milkman. In both novels, travel allows for freedom from the home-space, escape from their strained relationship with the townspeople, and the creation of a new community where immediate family does not necessarily offer them the same acceptance and support.

In *Housekeeping*, all three main characters find a desire to travel because Fingerbone itself ensnares them. After Edmund's death, Sylvia had no desire to leave her home and came to view it as a safe space, but all her daughters and granddaughters developed a desire to be elsewhere as a result of her staticity. Importantly, the one thing that Robinson shares about Molly is that she becomes a missionary, thus showing that her most important and identifiable trait is a propensity towards movement. Helen, though she raises her daughters in

one unnamed town, left Fingerbone and did not return except to drop Ruthie and Lucille off and drive into the lake. Sylvie leaves Fingerbone and returns twice: once to get married and then to take over custody of the girls for Lily and Nona. The rest of that time she lives a life of instability, riding trains, and never staying at a job for long. Ruthie enters into Sylvie's life of transience at the end of the novel, while Lucille has dreamed of moving to a city through the course of the narrative, suggesting that none of the Foster family stays in Fingerbone.

In contrast, *Song of Solomon* has characters such as Magdalene and First Corinthians who find material safety in the house or the town that they grew up in, possessing no desire to transgress boundaries, while Pilate, Milkman, and even Ruth find comfort in traveling. Pilate is exceptional in being a black woman who goes through bouts of transience and homelessness. Milkman is marginalized by his blackness, and the characters in Fingerbone are for their gender, but Pilate is in an especially dangerous demographic for the time period. Pilate takes the most risks in traveling, which is what prevents other women in the novel from traveling. Therefore, in these novels it becomes a privilege to have the choice to travel, or to have the choice to reject the home that they are leaving because it necessitates that they have a home in the first place. This privilege is important to consider alongside trauma because it is a means of coping with trauma that only some people have access to, making it a somewhat fraught coping method. Because of Pilate's rejection of a home-space, which Magdalene and First Corinthians are afraid to do (until First Corinthians moves out at the very end of the novel), she is able to use transience as a coping method to an even greater extent than Milkman does.

In this chapter, I advocate for transience and homelessness as positive experiences for the characters, despite the fact that it contradicts conventional ideals. First, I will show how

constricted Ruthie and Sylvie are in their Fingerbone home, and how the home-space itself keeps them trapped and oppressed. Fatima Zahra Bessedik argues that "Sylvie… disrespects the home-space" when she comes to stay in the house, thus inspiring Ruthie's similar draw to wandering (560). Further, she argues that Ruthie feels intimacy in the house because it connects her to her grandfather, and, while she certainly develops a connection with him, she is kept in the past alongside her family's trauma by staying in the house and trying to make a fraught space, and one that is devoid of opportunities for her, into a home. Rather than viewing the domestic as an adaptable space that Sylvie could learn to accommodate, I take on the view of scholars such as Elżbieta Horodyska, Jacqui Smyth, Paula E. Geyh and Anne-Marie Mallon who show that transience, rather than domesticity, is the best option for both Ruthie and Sylvie.

Sylvie and Ruthie have both a physical and mental distance from the rest of the town, causing a deeper rift between the two parties and a gap in understanding and compassion. The Foster house is located "at the edge of town on a little hill," foreshadowing the distance that always exists between the family and the town that only grows when Sylvie arrives and makes her mark on the house (5). The townspeople are concerned for Ruthie's livelihood because she does not go to school or brush her hair and, though no one says it to them directly, because she and Sylvie came back into town on the train. In fact, they do not understand Sylvie at all, as is well represented in an overheard discussion between Nona and Lily, Sylvia's sisters-in-law and the girls' temporary guardians:

"Perhaps some attention from her family … "

"A family can help."

"Responsibility might help."

> The spoons went round and round in the cups until someone finally said, " … a sense of home."
>
> "It would be home to her."
>
> "Yes, it would." (39)

Ruthie's aunts give her access to the intimate conversations that people likely have about Sylvie behind her back throughout her stay in Fingerbone. Further, they think that family, responsibility, and a home might help Sylvie in a way they leave unsaid, though certainly they are implying it might help her become more grounded and stationary. However, Sylvie defines herself by her transience, and having a concrete home is abhorrent to and incompatible with her preferred lifestyle. The Foster house's literal distance from the town is indicative of the deep and prominent differences the Foster family shares that the rest of the town does not.

The townspeople vehemently oppose Sylvie and Ruthie's transience because they are insecure about their own stability and fear losing their homes themselves. Robinson writes:

> So every wanderer whose presence suggested it might be as well to drift, or it could not matter much, was met with something that seemed at first sight a moral reaction, since morality is a check upon the strongest temptation. And these strangers were fed at the stove, in a spirit that seemed at first sight pity or charity, since pity and charity maybe at root an attempt to propitiate the dark powers that have not touched us yet… so the

transients wandered through Fingerbone like ghosts, terrifying as ghosts are because they are not that different from us. (178)

This passage shows that the distinction between Sylvie and the townspeople is thin and breakable, and they are afraid that at any moment they themselves could become transient. Rather than leaving this possibility open, they try to save transients and bring them into the culture that Fingerbone deems appropriate, much as they try to do with Ruthie in trying to remove her from Sylvie's care. In "Sojourning Women: Homelessness and Transcendence in *Housekeeping*," Mallon argues that "Ruth and Sylvie's homelessness threatens our vision of order and security; we would rather dismiss it as deprivation or deviance than acknowledge the insight it both demands and bestows (104). While I later examine the claim that there is insight in transience, here I want to just focus on the urge to dismiss homelessness. Because they are so afraid of the transient lifestyle and of their closeness to it, Fingerbone treats it as a disease to be cured. However, they are not concerned with much more conventional issues such as Ruthie's truancy or that she spent a night on the lake with a stolen boat. Their preoccupation with combating homelessness prevents them from truly looking at what is best for a minor, choosing instead to try to make Ruthie grow into someone who looks and acts like everyone else in the town so that they can validate their belief that their way of life is best.

Both Sylvie and Ruthie feel constricted by Fingerbone's gender expectations which, above all else means keeping a clean house. However, these expectations contradict Sylvie's attempts to blend transience and traditional domesticity. *Housekeeping* scholar Paula E. Geyh argues that "*Housekeeping* both explores the centrality of the space of the house in the new construction of feminine subjectivity and attempts to imagine a new *transient* subjectivity which is located in a place outside all patriarchal structures" (104 emphasis original). That is, the only way that the two women can become subject of their own lives is by freeing

themselves of the father-house, a term Geyh uses to mean a stable house without adaptability. While Sylvie lives there, the house becomes a dissolving house -- one that allows for movement and instability. Geyh writes that "unhousing is the physical and symbolic dissolution of the house through the actions of the transient subject in conjunction with the natural forces of fire and water" (112). Therefore, the dissolving house is unhoused by deconstructing the boundaries of inside/outside and in transients exhibiting mastery over natural forces in order to destroy it, though not necessarily literally. Sylvie does not keep the dissolving house clean because it is not what she understands a home to be, instead unifying it with the outside, much to the dismay of the citizens of Fingerbone. She brings furniture outside and lets stray cats and leaves into the house as if it is an extension of outside. She accumulates garbage -- empty cans, old newspapers -- much to the chagrin of those that see the home. When people come to visit the Foster home they "glanced at the cans and papers as if they thought Sylvie must consider such things appropriate to a parlor. That was ridiculous. We had simply ceased to consider that room a parlor" (180). At this point in the novel, there is a fundamental difference between how Sylvie views the house and how others think she *should* view the house. Sylvie begins breaking down the house itself in rejecting the indoor/outdoor boundaries and finds the townspeople's views unbearable, instead creating a home that enables her to maintain the comfort of transience in stability.

Sylvie attempts to fit into the conventional idea of housekeeping but misunderstands what Lucille thinks proper domesticity should look like. Lucille signifies the hegemonic viewpoint that good housekeeping, that is, domesticity, is indicated by cleanliness. However, being transient, Sylvie struggles to comprehend Lucille's ideals. *Housekeeping* scholar Geyh writes that "Sylvie mistakes accumulation for housekeeping -- she understands the

connection of housekeeping to the accrual of property, but not to the process of sorting and excluding, and so the parlor is filled with newspapers and cans stacked to the ceiling" (107). Returning to the concept that there is a fundamental distance between Sylvie's thoughts from those with stable lives, she strives to correctly exercise housekeeping, but her value system is completely different. She wants to combine the inside and outside because she is more comfortable with instability and wants to hang onto things that she sees as valuable, but they do not align with conventional opinions. Lucille finds this housekeeping and lifestyle incredibly offensive, and "was galled and wounded by her [friend's] imagined disapprobation" (103). Conversely, Ruthie "was reassured by her sleeping on the lawn, and, now and then in the car, and by her interest in all newspapers, irrespective of their dates, and by her pork-and-bean sandwiches. It seemed to me that if she could remain transient here, she would not have to leave" (103). This moment clearly shows how Sylvie attempts to meld transience and domesticity by taking some of her favorite and most comforting habits and bringing them into a stable lifestyle that she otherwise views as undesirable. Where order and stability align with domesticity, disorder and degradation are symptomatic of transience. Despite Sylvie's best attempts for order, Lucille still desires a life with proper domestic habits, and leaves Sylvie in order to find that.

What guides Ruthie into Sylvie's life of transience is the dissolution of boundaries that Sylvie brings with her to Fingerbone and allows the women to break out of the traps that Fingerbone put them in. Crucially, Sylvie brings darkness into a house filled traditionally with light. Horodyska notes that Sylvia is associated with comfort and warmth, becoming inseparable in Ruthie's mind with light, while Sylvie is often associated with darkness because she likes to eat in the dark. Horodyska conflates the lake with darkness, saying, "the

darkness of the night becomes the darkness at the bottom of the lake" (157). The lake is traumatic for Ruthie, and Sylvie protects and comforts her, blurring the boundary between her discomfort with the lake and comfort with Sylvie. Further, Geyh notes that "for Sylvie, equilibrium lies not in the keeping of a balance between the inside and the outside but rather in the loss of such distinctions altogether" (114). Therefore, in transience Sylvie and Ruthie find that they can unite their own version of domesticity with wandering, preventing themselves from being limited by created boundaries (Horodyska). It is the breaking down of barriers that allows transience to become an option.

Ruthie's embrace of transience gives her the ability to bear witness to her traumas. Robinson contradicts ideas of pitying homelessness, advocating instead for gaining strength through wandering. Mallon views such transience as transcendence, writing:

> The Book of Ruth provides an important touchstone for Robinson and her readers as we struggle to re-envision the terms and designs of dispossession. It ties the novel to a tradition of storytelling that speaks for fulfillment in the midst of wandering; and it links Ruth to a woman whose refusal to stay safely at home is a pledge of faith in the endurance of the human spirit and the human family. (96)

Housekeeping alludes to the Biblical story to encourage the reader to break out of the mindset that homelessness is something to be pitied. Instead, Robinson's repeated spiritual references emphasize the good that comes from traveling, and the time and ability that it gives Ruthie to tell her story in order to bear witness. I return here briefly to the notion that transience grants insight: "Ruth's return to Fingerbone replicates Sylvie's own earlier re-entry into the Fisher family… what remains is for her to accept that condition wholly and personally as her own" (Mallon 103). The idea that she can accept transience as her own is

the first time that there is anything Ruthie truly identifies with; she follows Lucille for the first part of her story, then Sylvie for her second, but as Paul Tyndall and Fred Ribkoff note, the night in the lake is "Ruth's spiritual re-birth as a fully individuated person separate from her sister" (94). Though she is still dependent on Sylvie for a time, she shows she is able to become separated from her once she becomes comfortable with her new life as a transient. In the final section I show how burning down the house demonstrates Ruthie's agency and liberation, but here the focus is on her true acceptance of wandering akin to the Biblical Ruth, allowing her to bear witness to her story despite the narrative ending again in Fingerbone.

Robinson's references to the Book of Ruth and other Biblical stories further suggest that wandering functions as transcendence. The tenth and final chapter begins with a seemingly ambiguous allusion to the story of Cain and Abel that works to show, among other things, that transients are aware of their fraught beginnings and can therefore move forward from traumas while working them into their identities. Robinson writes "God troubled the waters where He saw His face, and Cain became his children and theirs, through a thousand generations, and all of them transients, and wherever they went everyone remembered that there had been a second creation, that the earth ran with blood and sang with sorrow" (193). This passage furthers the explanation as to why those in Fingerbone dislike transients: because they remind them of their troubled past that they long to escape. Transients, however, have born witness to their troubles and have made peace enough to live with their pasts, the past of the horrific second creation. Alluding to the Bible builds Robinson's ethos and creates testimony in a way in using it to show the value in transience.

Finally, Robinson reveals that home is not the *space* but the family -- chosen or literal -- that one spends their life with. The literal home-space is a disrespectful and fictional ideal

that strives to trap women in patriarchal roles and prevents them from breaking out of traumatic routines. Smyth writes in her article "Sheltered Vagrancy in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*" that the text "asks that as readers we attempt to reconstruct our understanding of the material world and, directly related to that, of shelter" (283). The town of Fingerbone, Sylvia, and, presumably the reader, all live in a world that champions the importance of stability and shelter. However, Robinson posits that security can be found in a wandering life just as much as through a static one, if a person should so choose that lifestyle. Smyth ends her paper with the idea that "Robinson's characterization of Ruth Stone and Sylvie Fisher suggest that it is the ideology of home, not the homeless, that must be remedied" (290). To return to Bessedik's idea, Sylvie disrespects the home-space by neglecting housekeeping and burning down the house. For Sylvie and Ruthie, wandering allows for them to cope with their traumas and ultimately find a way to bear witness in a way that home-space does not.

For Morrison, travel is a driving force behind the novel and influences much of the action because the Dead family's home-space is so fraught. Macon and Pilate lose the stability of their home when their father is murdered, and instead of setting up roots somewhere Pilate travels to discover her identity, all the while creating her own story that allows her to bear witness to the traumas she has inherited and seen. Macon, on the other hand, moves to Mercy and becomes economically successful in his sedentary lifestyle. As a result, Milkman develops an itch to travel and, importantly, to fly. Flight is a crucial aspect of the magical realism of the text that comes into play in this paper's conclusion, but the desire for flight itself is perhaps less important than Milkman's overwhelming need to escape what has become an extremely oppressive space. His mother is the quintessential example of what he would be afraid to become and what pushes his drive to travel. When Milkman goes to the

south, he is dependent on the hospitality of others to help him with his car troubles or in finding a place to stay, a dependence that he has never had before in his life. Butler writes that “it is not surprising, therefore, that most of the scenes which portray character growth deal with various kinds of open motion” (66). For both Pilate and Milkman, experiencing travel is an essential part of both creating a solid identity and, importantly, finding a way to bear witness to the traumas they have seen and inherited.

In one of Morrison's most evocative images, Pilate's lack of belonging is indicated by her lack of a belly button. Of her smooth stomach, Morrison writes “it isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for, except for the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion” (148). In her travels, Pilate searches for a family or community that she is denied. She carries her desire for connection with her with both her earring carrying her name, the one word her father has ever written, and her belly buttonless stomach, a symbol of the loss of her mother, which, ironically, is what prevents connection. The first place that she stays, some of the women tell her she has to leave, and when she asks if it is because of her stomach, they “would not answer her. They looked at the ground” (143). She must keep moving because there are devilish associations with the lack of a belly button, something that she could not overcome with words or actions.

However, that is not the only reason that Pilate does not settle anywhere for long: similar to Sylvie, she finds instability has more impact in her life than does staying in one place. Everywhere that Pilate goes people become uncomfortable around her upon finding out about her belly button, but Morrison writes “besides, she wanted to keep moving” (144).

This moment is important because it is where Pilate begins to claim agency in her own life, and it is transience that allows her to do that. A few years pass in Pilate's story, and

> When Reba was two years old, Pilate was seized with restlessness again…. She left the island and began the wandering life that she kept up for the next twenty-some-odd years, and stopped only after Reba had a baby. No place was like the island ever again. Having had one long relationship with a man, she sought another, but no man was like that island ever again. (148)

Unlike Sylvie, she is seeking something specific; that is, a long-term romantic relationship, something Sylvie seems to have rejected almost entirely. Sylvie wanders for the sake of wandering, while Pilate's wandering is driven by searching. Additionally, it is implied at the end of *Housekeeping* that Sylvie and Ruthie never stop wandering, while Pilate clearly does. However, the power that traveling has for both women cannot be overstated; while Macon stayed in Mercy the entire time, Pilate found comfort like Sylvie did.

Traveling holds a great lure for both Pilate and Sylvie, and both find their comforts when stationary the same way. Morrison also notes of Pilate that "she gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships" (149). I will analyze Pilate's concern for humanity later when discussing Ruth's static lifestyle, but it must be noted here that Sylvie is quite preoccupied with her relationship with Ruthie and how it mirrors the one that she had with Helen. Though her concern is less humanitarian, perhaps, than Pilate's, both are extremely concerned with keeping their family bonds as strong as they are able to. Also, it is interesting here to note that both Pilate and Sylvie give up the conventionality associated with what might be deemed civilized society. Robinson never notes that Sylvie is unclean, but she must be during her

travels without a home to return to. And, she insists on eating in the dark, a clear indication of the comfort that she has found in her transient life. Both women forget, or choose to ignore, traditional dining habits in favor of what makes them comfortable, as they reject conventional domesticity for what gives them purpose. As previously noted, Pilate and Sylvie demonstrate transience in degrading the home. It is these habits that give them comfort when their transient habits are impractical.

When Pilate decides to go live near her brother, it is because she believed "Hagar needed family, people, a life very different from what she and Reba could offer," a decision made as a direct result of her trauma from lacking a family for the past twenty years (151). Because she is still driven by her trauma, it is clear that she is not healed from it; however, the ease with which she tells her story to Milkman and Guitar, and then later to Ruth, indicates that it is not the first time she tells her story. In contrast, Ruth sits in silence with Milkman for a long time before beginning her story, even starting it in the middle of a sentence. Traveling enables her to claim her story and tell it in a coherent way using her own voice and, as a result, she is able to help Ruth take care of herself in the face of an abusive husband. Being near her family turns out to be a detriment to Hagar as she ends up dying from the broken heart that Milkman gave her, but it allows her to help Ruth, and she ends up helping Milkman as well by showing him what love among family looks like by welcoming him into her home.

The only thing that reaffirms Ruth and gives her strength in her home is the watermark on the table, and, along with her flowers, it is the primary way she copes with her situation. In Ruth's mind, "she knew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of the lighthouse and the prisoner, she regarded it as a

mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream" (11). Ruth's relationship to the watermark is one of someone seeking to discover her own permanence in a traumatic world. Pederson, as I noted in the introduction, states that the reader should seek out moments of extreme detail as in indication of a trauma response, and Morrison dedicates two pages to Ruth's relationship with the watermark. Though vivid imagery is a hallmark of Morrison's writing, this is perhaps the only moment in the novel where so much time is dedicated to something so small and static. Even Ruth's seemingly mystical relationship with her flowers is given substantially less time in the novel. The watermark is Ruth's touchstone, and the only coping mechanism she has once she is no longer able to nurse Milkman.

In contrast to Pilate's freedom, Ruth is trapped in her home and is not able to travel freely, thus limiting her options for finding ways of bearing witness. As many scholars noted about *Housekeeping*, domesticity traps women and necessitates that they embrace convention. Yet, Ruth continues to do it poorly by feeding her husband inedible meals and dismissing subservience to humiliate him. These little rebellions prepare her for the comparatively small journey to visit her father's grave, the one thing in her life that gives her strength after she stops nursing Milkman. However, she must learn how to bear witness while not having familial support, and Morrison is ambiguous about Ruth's position at the end of the novel; she tells Milkman her story but her situation does not improve. She knows that Macon has been framing her relationship with her father as incestuous ever since he died, and Ruth finally gets a chance to refute this claim in her monologue to Milkman, saying "he cared whether and he cared how I lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did. And for that I would do anything" (124). She struggles to get this story out until

Macon is grown whereas, in contrast, Pilate tells her story to Milkman the first time she meets him, giving him far more time to digest and incorporate the story into his life. Pilate's years of travel, and her ability to choose her situation, allowed her to learn to bear witness to her trauma, while all Ruth can do is find different ways to cope.

When Milkman follows Ruth to the graveyard, being caught in a moment of vulnerability and while traveling allows her to bear witness for what is likely the first time. Even in the part of the story where she talks about Pilate's role and what Pilate did to help her, she still does not seem to reveal any deep intimate details to her. She tells Pilate she wants "somebody" and she goes to her when Macon threatens her, but beyond that she does not indicate she shared anything with Pilate, Pilate merely sensed the trouble and helped her due to her interest in human connections. However, Milkman walks in on Ruth visiting her father, which is the last impetus she needs to become empowered enough to share her story to the audience that could potentially judge and reject her. She needs an active listener to bear witness to because, as Laub notes, it cannot take place in solitude. She tells Milkman that after her relationship with Macon fell apart, she "started coming to Fairfield. To talk. To talk to somebody who wanted to listen and not laugh at me. Somebody I could trust. Somebody who trusted me. Somebody who was… interested in me. For my own self. I didn't care if that somebody was under the ground" (125). In following Ruth to the graveyard, he proves he is interested in her, even if he still does not necessarily want to talk to her. However, he has the added benefit of being somebody who is alive and can really listen. It is worth noting, additionally, that she does not tell her story in her constricting home environment but instead when they are literally in motion on the bus. Ruth is not comfortable with, or perhaps not strong enough to, travel far from her home. But it is the journeys she

takes and the position Milkman finds her in that first gives her the opportunity to share her story.

Milkman's ability to bear witness is directly correlated to his travels and fascination with flight. The novel begins and ends with flight, bookending Milkman's fascination with the liberatory and fantastical act. This passage is the beginning of Milkman's draw to flight:

> Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy finally discovered at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier -- that only birds and airplanes could fly -- he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women that did not hate his mother. (9)

And, the beginning of part two offers some resolution to his disappointment as he flies in an airplane for the first time which "exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability" (222). Looking at these two moments together shows both Milkman's almost inborn desire to travel far from Mercy, and the satisfaction that accompanies finally being permitted to do so. The realization of his oldest fantasy causes him to feel invulnerable when, in reality, he has actually opened himself up to more vulnerability because it is the traveling that gives him the insight into his family that he needs. And it is travel that allows him to fly at the end of the novel as the way that Morrison shows him bearing witness by owning his ancestry and allowing it to become part of him.

Milkman's travel is partly driven by his desire to explore boundaries that he has never had before, as pointed out to him by Magdalene. Because Ruth nurses him for so long, "Milkman, like a human omelet, spreads in all directions. Devoid of any fixing of the spaces of being, he is nobody" (Yagcioglu 117). However, in Shalimar he cannot take advantage of

people like he can at home because he does not have that precedent established. All the same, they welcome him by asking him to come hunting when they have just met him. And, it is the unwarranted inclusion by people who owe him nothing and have not been trained to fear his family that causes him to start to take accountability for the consequences of his lack of identity, and of his overrunning of boundaries. He thinks to himself "apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved -- from a distance, though -- and given what he wanted. And in return he would be … what? Pleasant? Generous? Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness" (277). He soaks up whatever he wants of other people and refuses to give anything back. Further, he is far from pleasant and generous most of the time because he does feel so entitled to take whatever he wants. It is traveling to Shalimar that gives him the clarity that allows him to see what healthy human interaction is like, and what his place really is in it.

From claiming some identity of his own, it is a short trip for Milkman to bear witness to the traumas he has inherited from and been given by his parents for his family's growth. When Guitar shoots Pilate at the very end of the novel, Milkman offers his life to Guitar, a physical manifestation of the trauma story he has come to acquire. Milkman tells Guitar "'you want my life? [….] You need it? Here" (337). In surrendering himself, he reveals that he knows that he has finished his literal and metaphorical journal by traveling to Shalimar, bringing to his family the truth of their ancestry. The first time that Milkman is pointed in the direction of his family's history, Morrison writes, "all his life he'd heard the tremor in the word: 'I live here, but my *people* … ' or: She acts like she ain't got no *people* or: "Do any of your *people* live there? But he hadn't known what it meant: links" (229, emphasis original). This moment is the shift where Milkman begins to realize that he needs to know the history

of his people to give words and meaning to what his family's trauma looks and, in turn, being able to bear witness to this trauma. When Guitar shoots Pilate and Milkman flies, he chooses to bear witness in the name of his family, rather than just for his own benefit, thus indicating he has learned unselfish values.

As in *Housekeeping*, the characters in *Song of Solomon* learn that home is not a space, but through solid companionship, and through the instability of transience and homelessness they are able to ultimately bear witness to their traumas. In writing her own narrative, Ruthie differentiates herself from others who have always enveloped her identity by telling her story from her own point of view, thus bearing witness to her own traumas. Sylvie teaches the value of transience to Ruthie because, though she is haunted throughout the narrative, she is empowered in herself to live in a town that is so static and judgmental as a transient. Pilate expertly tells her story and is comfortable in her identity in a similar way to Sylvie because they have both spent so much time living as transients, while Ruth is unsettled by telling Milkman her story because she has spent so much of her life in her space of trauma. Finally, Milkman bears witness to his trauma by accepting the consequences to his actions as a direct result of the things he has learned because he traveled. Throughout both novels, the strength and insight that comes from transience helps characters bear witness more than staying in the home and following a conventional lifestyle.

Chapter 3: Ghosts and Hauntings

Both *Housekeeping* and *Song of Solomon* rely on the idea of communication with the dead through literal apparitions or poignant and troubling memory. Further, much of the traumas the characters deal with are either because of or passed down from late relatives; Macon and Ruth pass on the trauma from losing their fathers to Milkman, while Ruthie inherits the family trauma of losing their patriarch as well as enduring the grief of losing her mother to suicide. The traumas haunt the characters and they must bear witness to them in order to deal with these inescapable memories. Characters deal with traumatic memories in fragments, such as Pilate's ghost father visiting her and Ruthie's encounters with her mother on the lake. Robinson writes that "memories are by nature fragmented, isolated, and arbitrary as glimpses one has at night through lighted windows," and traumatic memory especially must be this way in order to cope (53). To view memories all at once is an overwhelming experience, but bearing witness necessitates looking upon traumatic memories. Hauntings, though a recreation in some ways of the traumatic experience, acclimate the characters to the memories and, as they become more incessant and unavoidable throughout the narrative, they prepare the characters to bear witness as the novels achieve narrative resolution. In *Song of Solomon*, the primary haunting is a ghost visiting and delivering messages to his daughter, an unbelievable occurrence in an otherwise believable world. However, *Housekeeping* is not so blatantly haunted; there are no ghosts or communications with the dead. Additionally, it differs from Ruth Dead's visits to her father's grave because it is not intentional. Ruthie stumbles upon memories of her family's past that have worked to traumatize three generations of Fosters, and similarly stumbles upon memories of her mother, primarily in similarities between Helen and Sylvie. It is metaphorical ghosts that haunt Ruthie, these

memories of her grandfather and mother that she never truly got to know, and the memory of her sister once they are separated by time. These consuming memories allow Ruthie to reconcile with her past and bear witness to the traumas that it presented her with.

The site with the most prevalent hauntings is Lake Fingerbone, the place where both Edmund and Helen died. Ruthie is unfamiliar with the space where her mother died, and its very existence causes her more trauma than the familiar lake where her grandfather died. Kristin King, a *Housekeeping* scholar, differentiates between the two deaths based on the specific places in the lake where they happened, using this difference to account for the impact each death has on Ruthie. King writes of the lake where the train went off the track that it is "the charted lake into which men and boys dive searching for evidence of the lost train. This is the level of plain fact, the story of her past that Ruth thinks she is trying to recover until the night on the lake" (569). Ruthie knows this lake, and Edmund's death, and she knows that they affect her. King's argument is that only on the night that she spends on the lake with Sylvie does she realize that it is the other lake, the lake that represents that Lacanian "real," that Ruthie is truly recovering from. Because this lake is "real," it is outside the realm of language and Ruthie cannot identify with it, meaning the uncharted lake itself furthers her trauma. King writes that "this deeper lake is as essential to, and unrecoverable by, the narrative as is Ruth's desire for her lost mother" (570). The uncharted lake represents her trauma, but she is unable to recover it in much the same way that the "real" is unrecoverable. In spending a night on the lake she creates a more intimate bond with it and with darkness, but she is still on the charted lake because Sylvie is trying to steer them next to the train tracks. She never becomes acclimated with the uncharted lake, but its presence haunts her with memories of her mother, even on the charted lake, regardless.

When Sylvie and Ruthie spend the night on the lake, its traumatic symbolism causes Ruthie to become overwhelmed by memories of her mother. Most notably, Ruthie confuses Sylvie with Helen because the lake is a site of power. Darkness characterizes this section in the text, and as Sylvie rows the boat towards the train tracks Ruthie begins to confuse reality with the fantasy of traumatic memory. This moment is, according to trauma theorist Joshua Pederson, an indication of trauma because it is a moment of distortion (339). Robinson writes, "I spoke to her by the name Sylvie, and she did not answer. Then how was one to know? And if she were Helen in my sight, how could she not be Helen in fact?" (167). Ruthie's confusion goes further, and she calls Sylvie by her mother's name, but she does not reply to that either. Here, Robinson shows how powerful the lake is and, as Martha Ravits notes, that it is a site for resurrection. Ravits writes "water that can swallow up the living can also cast up the dead. A vision of the return of the dead from Lake Fingerbone implies a general restoration which serves to bring back the mother" (652). The water has taken from Ruthie two family members, two people that she never knew. Its power is not only in the drowning of people, but in how Ruthie perceives it as being able to resurrect her mother in Sylvie. Again, the novel toys with breaking down boundaries, creating a site where both giving and taking is possible. Grief accompanies drowning, but the opposite is not true for resurrection. There are moments that Ruthie dreams of a resurrection that would bring back her relatives ("say that this resurrection was general enough to include my grandmother, and Helen, my mother" (652), but it is only in her mother's resurrection that she momentarily believes. The lake and the ambiguity of the darkness allow for Ruthie to get as close as she ever does to seeing her mother again, and she almost believes that she sees the ghost of someone who has been haunting her since her death years before. Yet she still feels troubled

because of Pederson's concept of distortion; she is confused about Sylvie presenting as Helen. As I referenced in my introduction, part of the reason for this confusion is that it is the first time Ruthie is on the lake with Sylvie, who is her surrogate-mother, necessarily invoking her trauma memory. She is haunted by the loss of her mother, and because her mother died in the lake it is feasible that in its power to take it also allows Sylvie to become Helen for a time.

Even without Sylvie as surrogate, Ruthie still sees Helen on the lake because Ruthie's hauntings allow Helen's ghost to be everywhere. When they are on the way back to shore after visiting the abandoned island, Ruthie thinks "I think it must have been my mother's plan to rupture this bright surface, to sail beneath it into very blackness, but here she was, wherever my eyes fell, and behind my eyes, whole and in fragments, a thousand images of one gesture, never dispelled but rising always, inevitably, like a drowned woman" (163). Ruthie can never quite confirm or deny whether or not Helen killed herself. But, regardless, she is still quite alive in the lake, everywhere that Ruthie looks, because she has never attained any form of closure from her mother's death. No one will ever talk about it, making it impossible for her to bear witness to the deep trauma of being abandoned. While Lucille is still at home and they observe Sylvie's actions, she and Ruthie "noticed things that seemed familiar to us, and possibly meaningful, and sometimes we talked about them and often we did not" (132). In Sylvie, they see things that remind them of Helen, but they do not even discuss these similarities, perhaps because it is too difficult to talk about the intimate details of a woman lost. Yet, Helen's memory is free from Sylvie as is shown by Ruthie seeing her on the lake, and this moment shows how powerfully haunted by her mother Ruthie is.

The lake scene's narrative presentation itself is essential to how trauma is conveyed through the hauntings of that moment. The great detail that Ruthie puts into the scene suggests that she is latching onto exteriority in order to cope with her rising trauma. Pederson writes that, when looking for moments of trauma, "theorists should seek out evidence of augmented narrative detail" (339). The text is rich with augmented detail, but especially in chapter eight, where Ruthie and Sylvie spend the night on the lake. It is dark and cold, so in some ways it seems that the senses should be dulled, but Ruthie is, instead, far more perceptive. She describes the moon vividly, saying, "the moon was bright, but it was behind [Sylvie], so I could not see her face. There was so much moonlight that it dulled the stars, and there was a slick of light over the whole lake, as far as I could see. In the moonlight, the boat was the color of driftwood, just as it was by day" (165). She goes on to describe the blackness and the distant light from Fingerbone for the rest of the paragraph. Ruthie's interiority becomes unbearable as she finds herself unable to pull her thoughts away from the trauma of losing her mother, so she focuses instead on the things that she can handle, which here are the darkness and the cold.

Ruthie and Lucille do talk occasionally about their memories of their mother, but these memories differ sharply between the girls, revealing Lucille's denial of how haunted she is. Lucille changes drastically as the girls grow up, while Ruthie stays mostly the same and, in a way, both girls are becoming like their mother. The first indication that they remember their mother differently comes when they are waiting for Sylvie to arrive, and Lucille says of Sylvie's hair "'I know it'll be brown like Mother's'" and Ruthie says "hers wasn't brown. It was red'" (43). Later on, Ruthie tells us:

> sometimes we would try to remember our mother, though more and more we disagreed and even quarreled. Lucille's mother was orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow (more than I ever knew or could prove) who was killed in an accident. *My* mother presided over a life so strictly simple and circumscribed that it could not have made any significant demands on her attention. She tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone -- she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned. (109, emphasis original)

This disparate view of their mother is very telling of who they diverge into once they invariably separate. It hardly matters who remembers their mother correctly in terms of how the memory influences them, although in some ways it does matter. If Helen's death is an accident, then it does not make sense that she drops them off first with snacks and their things, as Ruthie notes, so it seems Lucille is in denial of who her mother was (110). Denial is certainly a step in the grieving process, but Lucille is completely unwilling to leave this place, and models the mother that she remembers by taking home economics and becoming friends with a new group of girls. She strives to become the orderly person that she remembers her mother as. Meanwhile, Ruthie embodies a certain indifference, failing to find interest in "improving herself" as Lucille does, and passively begins to follow Sylvie the way that she always had Lucille. In Lucille's insistent denial about her mother's death, she rejects the hauntings that Ruthie experiences and, subsequently, rejects the ability to bear witness to her memories.

The Foster home is another haunted space for the women, primarily because the presence of Edmund, the influential patriarch, consumes the house in its design. He built the house himself, and each of its idiosyncrasies such as the trapdoor or the slant of the ceiling

must constantly remind the characters of him. However, even more than that is the way that his eccentrics adorn random corners of the home. Ruthie describes the furniture in the bedroom that was her grandparents' and becomes Sylvie's: "all three pieces were painted creamy white and would have been unremarkable, except that my grandfather had once ornamented them….Each of these designs had been thought better of and painted out, but over the years the white paint had absorbed them, floated them up just beneath the surface" (89-90). The passive voice suggests a question of who painted over them; it is implied that Edmund is the one that thought better of them, but the possibility that Sylvia sought to block out memories of her late husband is still present. If so, it is clearly representative of her failure to cope with traumatic memory that the images are surfacing beneath the paint covering it up. His resurfacing presence is palimpsestuous, a sign of the inevitability of Sylvia (and the rest of the family) being haunted by Edmund. His overarching presence in the house acts as a manifestation of the mental hauntings that the Foster family endures.

Lucille is most successful in rejecting Edmund's ghostly presence, though she refuses to cope with what his death means to her. When Ruthie finds flowers in one of her grandfather's old dictionaries, Queen Anne's lace under Q, pansies under P, she wants to save the flowers, to sentimentally save them in another book. Lucille, however, "scooped up the flowers and crushed them between her palms" with the intent of burning them in the furnace (126-7). The fight that the girls have over this is the first indication that they are moving in different ways because Lucille refuses to be haunted, refuses to acknowledge the trauma her family has endured. However, in doing so she perhaps does more harm than good in hindering her ability to bear witness the way that Ruthie is able to by the end.

By the end of the novel, Ruthie is aware that she is the one doing the haunting because Lucille does not truly know what has happened to her and Sylvie. Sylvie carries a newspaper clipping in her coat that claims she and Ruthie died in the lake, the very place that has taken so many lives in the Foster family. Lucille has little choice but to believe this version of events, but the fact that they are still alive alters what it means to be haunted; Lucille experiences the haunting of loss, rather than the haunting of death. Ruthie writes:

> if Lucille is [in the house], Sylvie and I have stood outside her window a thousand times, and we have thrown the side door open when she was upstairs changing beds, and we have brought in leaves, and flung the curtains and tipped the bud vase, and somehow left the house again before she could run downstairs, leaving behind us a strong smell of lake water. She would sigh and think, 'They never change.'" (218)

In encountering the ghosts of relatives lost for the first time, at least in Ruthie's vision of her, Lucille begins the path to bearing witness to her traumas. She must face the loss of her sister and aunt, wherever they are, and do away with the denial that has prevailed in her life. Sylvie and Ruthie do not escape the memories of their lost family, but in crossing the bridge and in Ruthie writing down her story they are able to look directly at what haunts them and tell the story of it so it becomes less controlling and ubiquitous in their lives.

The women in the novel are all haunted beyond their physical location because they each have dreams that serve to reflect the fears they have that are based in traumatic memory. Ruthie reveals dreams her grandmother had, saying "once, she told us, she dreamed that she had seen a baby fall from an airplane and had tried to catch it in her apron, and once that she had tried to fish a baby out of a well with a tea strainer" (25). The commonality between these dreams is that she is trying to save a baby's life with insufficient tools. The dreams

reflect Helen especially because of her suicide, but all of her daughters are lost to her and she does not have the tools to bring them back.

After the night Lucille and Ruthie spend in the woods, Lucille has a dream that predicts her distrust of Sylvie. She tells Ruthie it was "'not about anything. I was a baby, lying on my back, yelling, and then someone came and started wrapping me up in blankets. She put them all over my face, so I couldn't breathe. She was singing and holding me, and it was sort of nice, but I could tell she was trying to smother me'" (120). When pressed, she decides that the woman reminded her of Sylvie. Similar to her grandmother's dream, Lucille is a baby which expresses her vulnerability, and she is unable to stop Sylvie from smothering her because of this vulnerability. Her fear here is that, while having Sylvie around is somewhat comforting, ultimately her failure to care for the girls will in some way put them in danger, or, at the very least, that she does not have good intentions towards them. This moment comes shortly after she begins to doubt and question Sylvie, and her dream works to exacerbate her fears.

The same night, Ruthie has a dream about Helen that demonstrates her abandonment issues and seeks out Lucille to talk about it with her, but Lucille rejects her. Ruthie writes "in my dream, I had waited for her confidently, as I had all those years ago when she left us in the porch" (121). Ruthie's dream reflects the fear that she does not know better than to keep waiting for someone who will never come back. Both girls, in a way, are haunted by the memory of someone who is meant to take care of them but fails to. Because of this fear, both girls are reluctant to trust this new woman who is to be their caretaker, who is flighty, and who so reminds them of their mother. They both fear they will again be disappointed, this time by Sylvie. However, Lucille continues to pretend her fears are meaningless, neglecting

them entirely by saying that her dream was "not about anything," while Ruthie is eager to share hers. Again and again Ruthie longs to face what haunts her and bear witness to it through conversation and confession, and again and again Lucille rejects the opportunity, refusing even to hear Ruthie's dream. All three of these dreams show a fear of repeating a past mistake, but only Sylvia and Ruthie are mindful of their actions going forward, while Lucille rejects the significance and refuses to discuss what she fears.

Every character has a choice to make as they are haunted by their traumas: to look at them directly or to push them aside. It is necessary to look upon it to bear witness to it, but Lucille refuses to do so because she so desires what she deems to be a normal life; acknowledging what she and her family have been through is a direct contradiction to this goal. Ruthie, on the other hand, with her somewhat dreamy and observant demeanor, is fascinated by the things that haunt her, which sets her up to write a narrative that works to heal her. In *Song of Solomon*, I will show a similar trope that those who are able to look face to face with their ghosts (sometimes literally) will be most able to bear witness to their story in a healthy and fruitful way.

Central to the representation of trauma and bearing witness in *Song of Solomon* is magical realism and the appearance of ghosts *literally* rather than figuratively. Magical realism is a tradition that began in Latin American literature and has largely been interpreted as a commentary on colonialism. However, this interpretation of the tradition negates the way that female authors use it because they often stray from the patriarchal colonial narrative. It is a useful lens through which to view *Song of Solomon* because there are moments that are inexplicable, yet extremely effective in communicating the characters'

traumas. Most notably, the ghost of Pilate's father appears and she believes in him thoroughly and as a positive force, despite the fact that his death haunts her.

Takolander and Langdon argue that "the traditional interpretations of trauma and magical realism are […] unsatisfactorily limited [….] attending to magical realist trauma narratives by women requires a revision of how magical realist and trauma literature are understood" (42). Traditionally, magical realism, as I have previously noted, is considered exclusive to postcolonial literature, which, as a whole, negates the experiences of women because war and colonialism is thought to be a masculine venture. These texts are "intent, instead, on ironizing particular discursive structures of power in order to reassert women's humanity against their traumatic objectifications" (Takolander and Langdon 45). The traumas that the characters, especially Pilate and Ruth, who have the primary connection to the dead in the novel, are not unique to women, but they have been objectified as figures who are failing to behave in a sufficiently feminine way nonetheless. Ruth cannot cook and spends some nights sleeping on her father's grave, while Pilate rejects nearly all societal expectations in favor of living a free and pleasing life. To reject magical realism as a whole is to reject these depictions of communication beyond the grave as insignificant and purely metaphorical.

Magical realism makes literal situations that could not be communicated through language. Valerie Henitiuk writes that "the magic is not disturbing to the characters or narrator because it is depicted as a normal part of their everyday reality [….] this natural process engenders in readers an equally natural response" (410-11). While in *Housekeeping* the ghosts are fictitious, Morrison continues the tradition of magical realism, nodding to Latin American writers in order to add another layer of complexity to the text. Of course,

Beloved is Morrison's novel most often associated with magical realism, and the trauma that causes Beloved to come back to life stems from slavery, a root of trauma for the Dead family as well. An example of the overlap between these novels is that "as readers, while we have to work at it, we can piece together a fairly coherent linear progression of events from the time during slavery at Sweet Home to the present of the frame narrative in post-abolition Cincinnati" (Aldea 67). Similarly, in *Song of Solomon* we must piece together the family's history by the different versions of each story that are told by Macon, Ruth, and Pilate. Eva Aldea also notes that Beloved is invoked by Sethe's struggles to reconcile with her memories, which could also be why Pilate and Macon see their father. However, this is not to say that Macon Senior is in some way a figment of their imagination. Rather, the very desire to compensate for their traumatic past is strong enough for them to reincarnate him.

While Macon Senior could be perceived as being a negative force, he is actually working in a way that is beneficial for Pilate. Aldea argues that "Beloved, as the magic element in the novel, is thus clearly not an element that allows any kind of individual healing after the horrors of slavery" (Aldea 71). By clinging to this representation of her child and site of greatest guilt, Sethe is unable to face the reality of her situation and adapt accordingly. Similarly, Pilate and Ruth could be holding on to the past and refusing to let their fathers rest and move on with their own lives by spending so much time communicating with him. However, while Beloved causes Sethe more problems in her own identity, Macon Senior seems to be trying to help Pilate by telling her to "sing." Morrison writes that when he initially appears to her she sings, which "relieved her gloom instantly" (147). However, this is also her mother's name which gives the advice to "sing" a double meaning, both of them far more positive that Sethe's arrival. His presence emboldens her and encourages her to

atone for a past that she feels guilty of so that she is able to bear witness long before any of the other members of the Dead family.

Morrison's uses of magical realism works to intermingle two opposing forces as a way to represent the complexity of trauma. Shannon Schroeder writes of *Beloved* that "the use of magical realism as a narrative mode enables Beloved to mediate not only between past and present realities but also between the natural and supernatural worlds" (101). Similarly, the dead in *Song of Solomon* move between past and present because Macon Senior is only alive in the past and knows nothing of the present. Further, he seems to be of a supernatural existence while also seeming to Pilate (and the reader) to be completely natural. Interestingly, Michael Rothberg argues that the presence of ghosts is not included seamlessly in the narrative, and violates the binaries present throughout the rest of the text. The only reconciliation, Rothberg argues, is through Morrison's nods to intertextuality. The posthumous communication, then, is not a literal communication with the dead, but rather, a communication among previously published texts in the African-American canon that have sought to communicate the unique experience of black oppression. However, Schroeder argues much more compellingly that magical realism serves to connect historical and current moments. As in *Beloved*, understanding the family's history is crucial to understanding their present, and in claiming a violation of boundaries such as these, Rothberg negates the way oppositions lean on and blend into each other as a means of achieving some form of unity by the end of the novel. Magical realism necessarily blurs conventional boundaries and calls into question the idea that disparate ideas can even exist, and Morrison certainly makes this choice intentionally because trauma blurs boundaries such as before and after, so the effect of a ghost whose presence the reader does not question perpetuates that idea. The function of

magical realism is to make real a feeling rather than an experience which is essential to communicating the experience of trauma.

The moment that Pilate shares with her employer where he believes he is on the edge of a cliff is crucial not only in revealing her empathy but also in demonstrating the function of magical realism in the novel. Pilate tells Milkman:

> 'The husband came into the kitchen one afternoon shivering and said did I have any coffee made. I asked him what was it that had grabbed hold of him, he looked so bad. He said he couldn't figure it out, but he felt like he was about to fall off a cliff. Standing right there on that yellow and white and red linoleum, as level as a flatiron. He was holding on to the door first, then the chair, trying his best not to fall down. I opened my mouth to tell him there wasn't no cliff in the kitchen. Then I remembered how it was being in those woods. I felt it all over again. So I told the man did he want me to hold on to him so he couldn't fall. He looked at me with the most grateful look in the world. "Would you?" he said. I walked around back of him and locked my fingers in front of his chest and held on to him. His heart was kicking under his vest like a mule in heat. But little by little it calmed down.' (41)

Gabrielle P. Foreman writes that "it is not that the reality of the cliff that we are convinced of; rather, it is the experience that Pilate and this man share and the intensity of the faith that we are expected to believe" (299). In the magical realism of the novel, it is not so much the ghost that the reader believes in, but in the intense shared experience linking the ghost and the reader. Because she knows what it feels like to feel something unbelievable, Pilate sympathizes with the man and offers to do for him what she would do if she could see the cliff that he was standing on. At this moment, feelings are more important than facts because

he “feels like” he is on the cliff even though he seems to know he is not (“he couldn’t figure it out”). Therefore, it is not the ghost we believe in when Pilate speaks of her father, but the experience she has when he appears to her. It does no good to question whether or not the ghost is real because it is a matter of whether or not what she experiences when she talks to him is real.

After his death, Pilate’s father gives support and information by telling Pilate her mother’s name and appearing when she needs him in order to guide her into bearing witness. The first time Pilate sees his ghost, she is with Macon and they are both extremely afraid of the apparition. However, he comes back many times and recites “sing, sing” and “you can’t just fly on off and leave a body” (147). These recitations have double meanings and help Pilate bear witness to her traumas and to atone for her sins as well as guide her to her family’s heritage. By the end of the novel Milkman learns that “Sing” was her mother’s name and the body is not the man that Macon killed, but a reference to Solomon, her grandfather, flying away and leaving his family. However, upon initially hearing it, “Pilate understood all of what he told her. To sing, which she did beautifully, relieved her gloom immediately. And she knew he was telling her to go back to Pennsylvania and collect what was left of the man she and Macon had murdered” (147). In singing, she is able to bear witness to her traumas by obtaining a voice. And, in returning to get the man’s body she confronts a traumatic event and makes up for it by keeping it with her for the rest of her life. In forming a relationship with her ghost father, Pilate is able to accommodate the traumas in her past and move forward from them.

Though there is no ghost in the relationship between Ruth and Dr. Foster, she still communicates with him beyond the grave. She tells Milkman, “[…] I started coming to

Fairfield [….] to talk. To talk to somebody who wanted to listen and not laugh at me" (125). Not only does her devastating story show how horrible her relationship is with her husband, and how much better her relationship was with her father, but it shows that she is fulfilled by these communications. As with Pilate, it is not important whether or not there is a ghost there in order for her to have a similar experience of magical realism in which she communicates with one who is dead. She still gains strength and comfort from her visits, the same thing Pilate gets from her visits with her father. As I noted in the previous chapter, traveling away from her traumatic household gives her the strength to bear witness; however, it is not the only motivator for her. Pilate's father tells her to sing and so she does, and in singing she tells her story. Dr. Foster similarly tells Ruth to sing by being a consistent and trustworthy person to speak to, encouraging her to feel safe and tell her story in the same vein as magical realism.

Further support for the argument that magical realism is a crucial aspect of this novel comes from returning to the first chapter of this project and the discussion of names. Ruth Rosenberg claims that Morrison's Biblical names violate white tradition and, similarly, Mahsa Khadivi argues that "Toni Morrison, through adopting the narrative device of magic realism tries to express her African American culture in the face of the dominant European American one" (Khadivi 187). That is, where white tradition asserts that Biblical names are meant to be used and treated in a reverential and serious way, she uses them ironically as a way to claim them for her own oral tradition. Sanford Pinsker credits the Dead family's naming tactic as magical itself; he writes "what defines one of Morrison's characters is more likely to be found in the magic of fairy tale and bizarre physiology than in the documentation, the 'truth,' that realistic History cares about" (Pinsker 193). He uses the

example of Pilate who carries her name in an earring that points towards the past, and the family's hidden history. Foreman writes "Pilate takes the word out of the Bible and puts it in her ear to symbolize her belief that the value of the word is in the hearing, in the telling, that the living tradition is an oral/aural one, rather than a written one" (288). Further, her name creates an essential connection that Milkman uses in his searches, especially because people remember her earring specifically because it is so unique and distinguishing an accessory. The Dead family's very refusal to be conventional in their name practices harkens back to the African-American tradition of folklore and the supernatural.

Milkman does not have the connection to the dead that the women in his life do, so he instead learns how to listen and grow from the experiences that have altered Pilate and Ruth. Foreman writes that "guided by Pilate, Milkman travels from his father's world, in which there is no room for spirits or spirituality, to his own where he absorbs his history and, like his grandfather, learns to fly" (296). His father works to ground him exclusively in reality, teaching him the value of money, property, and controlling other people, while it is the women who are in touch with ghosts that teach him about the relationships that ultimately enable his flight. It is in distancing himself from Macon and his values that he comes to literally leave the ground, the symbol of Macon's values. Pilate's name even draws connections to an airplane pilot, and Milkman's experience on an airplane piqued his interest in flying even more. Ruth's impact is more subtle, but she causes him to doubt his father for perhaps the first time when she bears witness to him, and without this question of whether or not he actually aligns with his father's values Milkman could never have escaped him enough to fly. In teaching him about their unique traumas, Ruth and Pilate enable Milkman's flight, and his metaphorical bearing witness.

Laub's argument that there is no "before and after" to the trauma nicely sums up the ideas presented in this section. In the characters' memories, such as Ruthie's of her mother and Pilate's of her father, there is a veil of trauma draped over it even long before their deaths. Ruthie remembers her mother as distant, remembers her most vividly in the moments leading up to her suicide when she drives them to Fingerbone and leaves them on the patio with snacks, a moment that Pederson argues should call the reader's attention because the narrative detail readily suggests trauma. And it is this distance that invariably dominates her memories of her mother. Pilate looked up to her father greatly, and her fondness for him clearly carried over into the ghost that visits her. However, there is no end to their traumas because, as I have shown, they are so haunted. The memories become so tangible and strong that it is as if those that are dead are still with them. In each of these novels, whether or not the characters bear witness to their trauma, they never forget the trauma because it is, by definition, perpetually ongoing.

Conclusion

Housekeeping and *Song of Solomon* tell the stories of two families who move from denying to bearing witness to their traumas. The protagonists take the necessary steps of acknowledging their traumas' roots, coping with its presence, and coming to look at it directly. This journey results, in both novels, with bearing witness; Ruthie escapes the house with Sylvie and records her trauma story, and Milkman takes flight. The liberatory moments immediately prior are required for them to gather the strength needed to bear witness and leave their stories on a redemptive note.

Housekeeping ends with Ruthie burning down her family's home and escaping with Sylvie across the bridge to avoid being separated, a reaction to their traumatic experiences. Lucille, however, they leave behind with no way to ever find them again or even to know if they are alive. She has already rejected them, but as I previously showed their memory haunts her. In leaving together, Sylvie and Ruthie reject the power that accompanies loss. Ruthie notes that "Sylvie did not want to lose me. She did not want me to grow gigantic and multiple, so that I seemed to fill the whole house and she did not wish me to turn subtle and miscible, so that I could pass through the membrane that separate dream and dream" (195). That both women know the feeling of unexpected loss is in itself sorrowful; that they actively seek out a way to avoid experiencing it again, especially in such a drastic way, is a trauma reaction. They do not want to become haunted by each other, so to speak, so they allow those they left behind to become haunted instead.

At the pivotal moment of the novel, when Ruthie and Sylvie set fire to the house, Ruthie is, perhaps for the first time in her life, and certainly in the novel, an active participant. She uses 'we' pronouns all throughout the house burning scene and seems

relieved that “there is an end to the housekeeping” (209). She even goes so far as to say, “I think that night [Sylvie and I] were almost a single person” (209). Further, she is extremely aware of the cost of losing Sylvie; at this point, she has lost her mother, grandmother, and sister, so she shies away from losing another caretaker and friend. In fact, all throughout the novel Ruthie never seems autonomous enough to make decisions without the guidance of a strong leader (Lucille or Sylvie). Even though she and Sylvie are acting as a single person, it differs from their previous relationship in which Ruthie always followed. With Lucille, even, she literally follows several steps behind when she makes Ruthie go to the drugstore with her. Therefore, the fact that she is acting *with* someone instead of *for* them indicates a new and unprecedented form of.

The lake further demonstrates Ruthie and Sylvie’s liberation, as it has, for Ruthie, resurrective powers. Along with bringing back her mother and memories of her grandfather, it resurrects Ruthie. She conveys that idea clearly, saying “I believe it was the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally” (215). In her reflective state years later, she can ascertain that happened in Fingerbone changed her; she remained in a sedentary and passive state through all her years there. But once she reaches the other side, she recognizes that she is not the same. Remaining in the site of her trauma stunts Ruthie; she seeks to see clearly what happened but instead is haunted by ghosts and surrounded by people like Lucille and her grandmother who will not tell her about her mother or her grandfather, will only live in their own understanding of time that is so fundamentally altered by their own traumas. In reaching the other side of the lake Ruthie finally earns the chance to bear witness because she is finally far enough from her trauma to do so. Just as Sylvie has found coping through transience, so too does Ruthie. And, though she follows in Sylvie’s footsteps by becoming a

transient, she has proven her agency in burning the house down. In becoming a changed person by crossing the bridge, the lake uses its resurrective powers one last time by resurrecting Ruthie.

Robinson characterizes water as overrunning its boundaries to parallel it with Sylvie, indicating both figures help Ruthie to bear witness. Not only does the lake flood the house when Sylvie lives there, but in the first pages of the novel Ruthie describes a flood: one will open a cellar door to wading boots floating tallowy ends up and plants and buckets bumping at the threshold, the stairway gone from sight after the second step" (5). Homes belong to the water much the same way that the Foster house becomes Sylvie's (123). As I have already shown, Sylvie neglects boundaries, as does the water. The townspeople believe the lake swallowed Sylvie and Ruthie up, which saves them from being hunted, and Sylvie saves Ruthie from the unhappy life she has had in Fingerbone. Without the assistance of both of these forces, Ruthie would not have been able to bear witness in recording her narrative.

The end of the novel, therefore, liberates both Ruthie and Sylvie. When she imagines Lucille in the house, Ruthie imagines her trapped in the structures of power because she has failed to find her voice, to act, and to escape. Further, the scene in the restaurant features Lucille tracing water to complete a circle because she is drawn to water since her sister and aunt used it to escape, but she has yet to complete the circle that will show her how to liberate herself. Her memories of Lucille are what Sinead McDermott calls "reflective nostalgia." She looks backwards because she misses the times she shared with her sister, not because she has a desire to go back to what she lost. Rather, she and Sylvie escape the sublime loss that accompanies Fingerbone, and Ruthie can bear witness to her story in narrative form with her newfound agency that stems from her liberation. Though there are

multiple ways she could convey her story, a present listener is the single most essential qualification because, as Laub states, to bear witness one must share it with another. Because Sylvie so completely tells her story, she reveals her ability to bear witness to a massively traumatic upbringing.

In taking flight, Milkman both bears witness and liberates himself from his oppressive past. By learning about his ancestors, Milkman solidifies his identity for the first time in his life. As Yagcioglu notes, Milkman's complete lack of boundaries around his family members causes him to act out and seep into every aspect of their lives, but ancestral knowledge allows for a crucial cognitive shift in him. On his way back to Mercy, Milkman thinks "perhaps that's what all human relationships boiled down to: would you save my life? Or would you take it?" (331). Earlier in the story, Ruth reveals that Pilate saved Milkman's life when Ruth was pregnant, and she tells him she prayed for him every night, and says "what harm did I do you on my knees?" (126). In this moment, he realizes that other people in his life have value besides himself, especially those women he has taken for granted that risked themselves to save his life.

Because *Song of Solomon* both begins and ends with flight and members of the Seven Days, Milkman integrates his identity of blackness specifically. Growing up surrounded by wealth prevented him from acknowledging the specific obstacles accompanying his race. Guitar confronts him about this privilege earlier in the novel, telling Milkman "[you're] a man that can't live [in Montgomery]. If things ever got tough, you'd melt" (104). Guitar identifies Milkman by his distance from reality, specifically of being black in America, while Guitar is deeply ingrained in its meaning by his involvement in the Seven Days-- a group of black men seeking retaliation for hate crimes and lynchings. The novel begins on the day

Milkman is born, when Robert Smith, who is later revealed to be a member of the Seven Days, tries to fly and jumps off the hospital. At its close, Guitar tries to kill Milkman who, in turn, takes flight. The parallelism reifies the significance of both black oppression, the source of much of Milkman's trauma, and of flight, the source of his liberation and ability to bear witness. It takes acknowledging his blackness and forming a cohesive identity to acknowledge his traumas, and it takes traveling to Shalimar to form his identity.

Witnessing Pilate's death and relinquishing control allow Milkman to bear witness and fly. It takes Guitar shooting her, after all, for Milkman to achieve his greatest goal, so her involvement in his liberation is crucial. He thinks to himself "now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). His realization that she possesses flight in a way that he never imagined is the final impetus that he needs. What separates her from Milkman and Macon and the rest of the Dead family is her freedom and goodness. She cares for her family because they are her family, not because of how they affect her reputation, or because of what they can do for her. Milkman takes and takes his entire life only to realize that the willingness to sacrifice oneself for a person you love, the way that Pilate and Ruth do, is what allows for flight. Guitar is the kind of person who wants to take Milkman's life, and Milkman, finally, selflessly tells him "'you want my life? … You need it? Here''' (337). The decision is so crucial because he no longer allows people to sacrifice themselves for him, and finally takes responsibility for his past. Alongside his wrongdoings are his traumas so long neglected and finally faced in his trip to Shalimar. In learning the story of Solomon flying away with Jake, Milkman "now knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air you could *ride* it" (337 emphasis original). For Milkman, surrendering to the air means surrendering his control, surrendering his apathy to others, releasing his

traumas, and letting outside forces control him. The ghost of flight that haunted him throughout his life, preventing, as Thorsteinson notes, interest in himself finally manifests for him as "without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees -- he leaped" (337). Flight is Milkman's liberation, even if it brings him to his death, because he bears witness and lets go of his past, a necessary step to take flight, and moves forward into the air.

These final moments of bearing witness are the result of lifetimes of trauma and avoidance. One of the first causes of trauma in each family is the lack of strong parenting, favoring instead one that continues traumas through generations. Doctor Foster's friendship with his daughter ill-prepared her to be a strong figure for her children, and Jake's murder superseded his kindness, leaving his children afraid. Macon remembers his father for the things he had and lost, which translates into bitterness and materialism in raising Milkman, further knocking Ruth's weak relationship with her son down. Pilate, on the other hand, remembers her father's kindness most and how respectful he was with people, raising her daughter and granddaughter in a house of love. In *Housekeeping*, Edmund's death spurred a motherhood of neglect in his wife, who taught it to Helen. Ruthie and Lucille barely know Helen when she kills herself, and barely get to know their grandmother because of their distance and unwillingness to speak of their pains. When Sylvie comes along, she is friend more than parent, dismantling the house of its boundaries and ultimately doing harm to Lucille and good to Ruthie. The characters are especially susceptible to trauma because their parents introduce them to it so early on.

Similarly, characters' names carry familial trauma and significance or predict future traumas. The name Macon Dead, for example, originates with Milkman's grandfather. The

first Macon Dead named his son the same thing, causing him to be even more disgruntled because the name, in Macon the second's opinion, is a mark of how incomplete their family is without their "true" last name. By the time the name gets to Milkman, it is heavily coated in traumatic memory and expectation, but he does not circumvent issue by going by his nickname. Rather, it marks him permanently with his mother's trauma, who nursed him in order to cope, and angers his father, the one determined to possess the naming power. Both Ruth and Ruthie allude to Ruth's Biblical story, ironically calling attention to Ruth's failure to have female friends while also predicting Ruthie's intense connection with Sylvie. Sylvie carries her mother's name, foiling the women against each other in a way that calls out the instability/stability distinction as well as the differing approaches to raising children. These names function as a means to indicate sources of trauma, as well as point to forthcoming traumas.

Travel, in the many different forms that it appears in these novels, crucially allows characters to cope with their traumas. From something as small as Ruth visiting her father's grave, to something as vast as Sylvie living her entire life as a transient, movement and escape from the site of one's trauma proves a necessary step towards bearing witness. When Milkman finds Ruth at her father's grave, the travel and distance from her home give her the strength to finally tell Milkman her story. Pilate, on the other hand, tells her story to Milkman the first time he meets her, then augments it to Ruth later because she is at peace with has happened in her life. The trauma of seeing her father die still haunts her, literally and metaphorically, but she can bear witness to her story because she spent years traveling. And when Milkman returns from Shalimar, he is a completely changed man because traveling allowed him an identity alongside powerful ancestral knowledge. Sylvie guides Ruthie into a

transient lifestyle in the shadow of the family's burning home, allowing her to write her story down as a form of bearing witness. Travel emboldens characters otherwise traumatized and weak by giving them a way to temporarily escape and cope with what haunts them.

These novels depict literal and metaphorical hauntings as a way to give voice to the traumas and losses that the characters have experienced. The most literal ghost, Pilate's father, is an effect of magical realism to convey Pilate's experience. Whether or not she truly sees him has the same impact on her. Similarly, Ruth goes to her father's grave to talk to him, an experience which prepares her to bear witness when the time comes. It hardly matters to her whether he is there or not because the effect on her is the same: that someone she loves is listening. The hauntings are different in *Housekeeping* because Ruthie's is the only voice we hear, but she experiences hauntings throughout the novel. In the house she sees her grandfather everywhere, in its architecture and the patterns he painted on the headboard, and she imagines his presence. However, when she and Sylvie are on the lake, she sees Helen, her mother, everywhere. She confuses Sylvie for Helen and sees Helen in the water, letting her presence wash over Ruthie and make her mournful, filling her with the feeling of loss. She and Sylvie have experienced loss many times in their lives, and it is the haunting that they know so well that causes them to cling so tightly to each other. In destroying the house, they destroy the physical manifestation of haunting and escape across the haunted lake into a new life where they can look forward. The traumas haunting each of these characters push them to look directly at their traumas, a necessary step to bearing witness.

The stories these novels tell, while extremely different in appearance, follow the same trauma arc. Almost as watching a character go through the stages to adulthood, so do we

watch the characters here grow and change in order to bear witness to their traumas, gaining agency for the first time. These two novels together prove that bearing witness to trauma takes largely the same steps, no matter the trauma's origination. Both families are isolated and uncomfortable with each other at the beginning, but at the end characters have built new families or developed a newfound appreciation for their given family, and, in doing so, find the strength to bear witness.

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