

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Bearing Witness

It is impossible to separate the text of a culture from the text of an individual.

—Susan S. Lanser

In 1996, a woman was raped every three minutes in this country; seventy eight per cent of them knew their attackers.

—Bureau of Justice
National Victim Center

Take your mouth and make a gun.

—Paule Marshall
Advice from her mother

This book examines literary representations of psychic trauma provoked by sexual violence. Grouping fiction written by North American women either at the turn into or toward the close of the twentieth century, I focus on writers who assume responsibility for “witnessing” and testifying to traumatic events that are pervasively cultural and, at the same time, experienced and interpreted as personal: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood; Or the Hidden Self* (1902–1903), Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Joyce Carol Oates’s *What I Lived For* (1994), and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996). Despite the differences and dissonances

among these fictions, they unite and, to some extent, engage with each other in their respective attempts to deconstruct the relationship between political power and sexual violence at both institutional and individual levels. Put another way, each text qualifies as trauma literature and performs, though not in every case by authorial intention, one of the early tenets of the second wave of the Women's Movement in the West: the fusion of the political and the personal.

My discussion relies on critical methodologies developed from the discourses of women's studies, feminist theory, African American and Native American literary studies, cultural studies, multiculturalism, and psychoanalytic literary theory—all but the last of which developed from the political activism of the civil rights, the women's, and the anti-war movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. In addition, my own expertise in psychoanalytic theory, particularly trauma theory, as a clinical psychiatric social worker and psychotherapist in Boston for many years, informs my readings of the included texts. Conceptually, Annette Kolodny's well-known concept of literary criticism as "playful pluralism" that is "responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none" (161) characterizes my critical approach, which blends intellectual exchange from several fields of study.

The pioneering efforts of feminist scholars who have challenged the criteria establishing the canon of "great" American literary works make it possible for me to group diverse texts, which span a century and cross boundaries of race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and narrative style.¹ To be sure, had I selected a homogeneous group of writers, say, post-World War II white women in the United States, it would be easier to generalize or draw conclusions about their texts. However, such a study would, in my view, merely reproduce existing hegemonic, usually racist discourse. One premise of this book is that the writers in it, whose races, ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, and sexual orientations simultaneously converge and diverge, reflect (though of course, not thoroughly) those who actually produce American fiction. Furthermore, I am influenced by innovative academicians and clinicians in the social sciences, medicine, and the humanities who have recognized the value of liberating psychoanalytic ideology from its patriarchal roots, and who are reworking and revising Freudian ideas to address women's concerns.² In addition, a number of African American literary scholars have recently started to draw upon psychoanalytic theory as a critical framework for textual analysis.³ Significantly, the work of these scholars has paved the way for my study, which assumes as its starting point the possibility of race-cognizant, feminist, psychoanalytic literary criticism.

My chronology focuses exclusively on two *fin de siècle* periods. The first is the turn into the twentieth century and includes works published in 1892 and 1902–1903; the second is the closing decades of the twentieth century and, with the exception of Jones's 1975 novel, concentrates on the years between 1991 and 1996. The seven texts are thematically linked by intersecting con-

cerns, including political and personal trauma, gender and race politics, male violence against women, and curiosity about intrapsychic processes, particularly memory; and it is not accidental that a number of ideas explored in the fiction coincide with radical concepts occupying the forefront of an extended modern conversation on psychoanalysis. Promising to be emancipatory eras for women, the final decades of both centuries are periods in which investigations into psychic trauma, specifically violence against women, occur; the first inquiry focusing on the etiology of hysteria and the second, on widespread domestic violence. At the end of the 1800s, Freud announced the astoundingly high incidence of rape, incest, physical and emotional abuse against women and children, only to precipitate an effective patriarchal backlash which silenced that discussion and discredited its evidence. Likewise, the late twentieth-century revelation of an epidemic of domestic abuse is fighting a similar reactionary backlash, which attempts to mute the conversation and deny women's reality.

Indispensable to analysis of the sociopolitical conditions restricting women's lives and causing their traumas is a political climate permitting, even encouraging, resistance to entrenched patriarchal power. Known for her theoretical and clinical work with trauma and its survivors, contemporary psychiatrist, Judith Herman, believes that "in the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting" (9), which, of course, serves to thwart the battle against sexual abuse. Correspondently, literary critic, Elizabeth Ammons maintains that a reformist feminist "political climate ha[s] the effect of empowering women, including writers," thus enabling them to challenge their "historically assigned inferior status" (*CS*vii) at both cultural and personal levels. Ammons indicates that "women writers at the beginning of the twentieth century flourished in large part—as they do . . . in the 1980s—because of an intensified and pervasive feminist political climate" (*CS*vii). Still, turn-of-the-century fiction by women, like the inquiry into trauma, was followed by a censoring backlash. Similarly, at the turn into the twenty-first century, we find women-authored fiction prospering; yet, an unmistakable anti-feminist backlash trails close behind. Parallel social dynamics underlie both trauma and literary studies. The emergence of ingenious intellectual work, in either (or any) field, depends upon the existence of an introspective, broad-minded, cultural environment. On the subject of trauma research, Herman reminds us:

To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family. For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered. (9)

In the same vein, Ammons observes that “it is no accident . . . that the second great wave of the women’s movement in the United States and the second great burgeoning of women writers as a group occurred at the same time” (*CS* viii). In yoking together these two highly politicized turns of the century, including their backlash, I wish to raise the stakes on Silence. I emphasize the fact that silence is *not* a neutral act; rather, it is a politically regressive one that passively permits the continuation of violence against women and children.

In the following chapters, I argue that each novel in this study examines a repressive sociopolitical ideology of empowerment and disempowerment and, in so doing, confronts the intensely destructive dynamic of sadomasochism. Sadism, as I define it, is a psychological mechanism in which the sadist enacts and gratifies unconscious erotic fantasies by inflicting pain and violence. Masochism, sometimes mistakenly understood to mean the enjoyment of pain, is, in fact, a complex psychodynamic in which powerlessness becomes eroticized, then entrenched within the victim’s self-identity. For the sake of clarity, I discuss sadomasochism as it specifically appears in each text, such as organized genocide in Silko’s novel or child abuse and incestuous rape in Allison’s, as though it were *either* political/cultural *or* personal/psychological. But I am constructing an artificially sharp “difference” for analytical specificity and discursive purposes only, bearing in mind that in *trauma*, the borders separating “political” from “psychological” become blurred, penetrable, and eventually disappear. Indeed, in these novels, the convergence of political and psychological sadomasochism marks the occurrence of trauma. For example: Mutt, in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, is provoked to beat his wife both by his jealousy toward men who he believes leer at her *and* his rage at slavery. By probing how legally sanctioned and institutionally promulgated atrocities subjugate not only individuals, but also entire cultures, the writers I discuss recognize that frequently, if not always, the phenomenon of trauma conflates political and psychological processes.

Just as these authors share an interest in representing political ideologies of power in realist fiction, they also document how these ideologies, when enacted, permeate their protagonists’ conscious and unconscious intrapsychic lives. That a fictional character may remain unaware of either the political or psychological dimension of her or his trauma does not impede a literary critic from recognizing such meaning. For example: While a victim of domestic abuse may fail to recognize that a component of her abuser’s behavior is motivated by institutionalized misogyny, the reader’s capacity to perceive such meaning remains. Each writer, in command of her creative production, asserts that the impact of major traumatic events is never identical on any two people, and that trauma manifests where political and psychological forces fuse. On this point, literary theorist, Cathy Caruth, who has written extensively on psychoanalytic and trauma theories, states: “If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic

experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (UE3). At this site of fusion, in other words, story originates.

To comprehend the magnitude of trauma, it is necessary to focus on the individualized nuances and textures of each victim's narrative. Although certain events outside ordinary experience—such as forced relocation and incarceration in a concentration camp or reservation, a Japanese internment camp, or a slave ship—are universally and indisputably considered horrific, they are not unidimensional phenomena that are experienced identically by each victim. Toni Morrison emphasizes the importance of humanizing victims whose experiences are frequently represented as indistinguishable. Therefore, she develops each of *Beloved's* characters uniquely to differentiate among the "great lump of slaves" (Darling 7) and avoid what Hortense J. Spillers calls "totalizing narratives" (140). Similarly, in the work of the writers I discuss, trauma and the sado-masochism which foments it are carefully contextualized within identifiable, political, historical, and cultural constructions; for instance, Aubrey's incestuous rape of Dianthe in Hopkins's *Of One Blood* has distinctly different meanings from Glen's of Ruth Anne in Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*.

My concern in this book is to examine how individuals internalize the material conditions of their lives, by which I mean their social and economic realities, through symbols, fantasies, and metaphors in order to build a unique and personalized interpretation of the world. Indeed, this is Claudia Tate's focus when, in her recent book, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (1998), she thinks about how individuals create internal representations of "the material and the psychical . . . so as to construct personal meaning" (15). Conversely, my book also explores how personal meaning is either consciously or unconsciously projected onto materialist culture by intrapsychic representations. For the protagonists in this study whose lives have been irreversibly disrupted by both an internalization of violent sado-masochistic events and an externalized projection of these events, the borders between their "inner" and "outer" worlds dissolve, leaving them feeling lost and fragmented.

Psychologist Elizabeth Waites explains trauma as "an injury to mind or body that requires *structural repair*." According to Waites, "a main effect of trauma is disorganization, a physical and/or mental disorganization that may be circumscribed or widespread," and this disorganization causes "*fragmentation of self, shattering of social relationships, erosion of social supports*" (22, 92; emphasis added). Similarly, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Kali Tal defines trauma as "a life-threatening event that displaces [one's] preconceived notions about the world" (15). Tal stresses that the event must be experienced

first-hand, and not vicariously perceived or mediated through any textual conduit, such as a book or a movie. Likewise, Judith Herman conceptualizes trauma as a “threat to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death” (33), a view that is especially relevant to my discussion on “The Yellow Wallpaper” in chapter 6. Chaim Shatan, a psychiatrist who works with Vietnam combat veterans, describes trauma as a psychic state in which “reality is torn asunder leaving no boundaries and no guideposts” (qtd. in Tal 15). Thus, the question for both the writer and the literary critic becomes: How can such a lost, indefinable state of existence be narratively represented? Can narrative, itself, by compelling victim-survivors to remember and to repeat stories suffused with terror, panic, and pain, serve a palliative role in the healing process? Certainly, psychoanalysis believes that crucial to recovering from an experience of trauma is the capacity and willingness to incorporate that traumatic event *inside* one’s self as an indispensable piece of personal history and identity. Since, in the fiction in this study, narrative is inextricably entwined with memory and the process of remembering, the greater one’s ability to “make story” out of trauma, which is defined differently for each protagonist, the more likely s/he is to regain control of her or his life after that trauma.

While the process of psychoanalysis provides useful paradigms for thinking about these questions and decoding the language(s) of rupture, fragmentation, and even psychosis, for a political analysis of trauma literature by women writers, I am informed by feminism’s challenge to patriarchal power, especially to the artificial rupture between the political and the personal. As an example of that challenge, Jane P. Tompkins’ well-known, early essay “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History” (1978), confronts “the male-dominated scholarly tradition that controls both the canon of American literature . . . and the critical perspective that interprets the canon for society” (82). Likewise, Nina Baym, in her important early book, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870*, also published in 1978, analyzes the work of women writers whose novels, though widely read at the time of publication, have subsequently been neglected. Explaining that these forgotten texts are disparaged for, among other reasons, their sentimentality, a term linking gender and genre, Baym wishes “to correct such a bias” (14) by taking seriously narratives that “interpreted experience within models of personal relations, rather than classes, castes, or other institutional structures” (18). Similarly, focusing on texts by white men, including Henry James’s *The Bostonians* and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, Judith Fetterley, in another early study, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature* (1978), points out that because “classical” American literature assumes the universal American experience is male, the reader of these works must either identify as male or endure a sense of alienation from the text. To expose this

issue, Fetterley sets out to “examine American fictions in light of how attitudes toward women shape their form and content . . . and thus . . . change our understanding of these fictions, our relations to them, and their effect on us” (xi). However, formative as such early feminist literary scholarship was, it focused solely on white writers and white women readers, a deficiency in much feminist literary criticism that continues to require repair.⁴

Barbara Smith’s 1977 landmark essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” was rightfully “filled with rage” (169) at white feminist critics who were (re)defining feminist literary theory without even a cursory glance toward the work of black women writers. Responding to white scholars who seemed to be advocating the creation of a new canon, yet promised one as elitist and racist as the existing patriarchal one, Smith wrote: “A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity” (170). Along with Smith, critics such as Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Trudier Harris, Deborah McDowell, Hortense J. Spillers, Claudia Tate, and Cheryl Wall, working individually or collaborating on anthologies, contributed to the development of a diverse, race-attentive body of feminist theory; and literary scholarship written by and focused on women writers of color flourished in the 1980s. In a 1990 essay, Smith notes the positive changes and cites this impressive critical undertaking by and about women of color.⁵ Yet, she cautions that although “the personal isolation [Black feminist critics] face and the ignorance and hostility with which [their] work is met have diminished in some quarters, [that ignorance and hostility] have by no means disappeared” (784). I am reviewing this familiar territory in literary history because my study brings together theories and concepts that have not been united under one roof before. Thus, a brief clarification of how trauma studies, psychoanalysis, and feminist theory converge with African American, Native American, and European American literary theories and multiculturalism may be useful.

Like Barbara Smith, David Theo Goldberg articulates the necessity for political analyses of the relationships among power, race, and the literary canon. He advocates multiculturalism describing it as an investigation of “the body of political relations” (9). Central to Goldberg’s view is the concept of “incorporation” which, unlike ideas of assimilation and integration,

does not involve extension of established values and protections over the formerly excluded group. . . . [Instead,] the body politic becomes a medium for transformative incorporation, a political arena of contestation, rather than a base from which exclusions can be more or less silently extended, managed, and manipulated. . . . Incorporation . . . empowers those once marginalized in relation to the dominant and forceful of the body politic. (9)⁶

Focusing on multiculturalism and addressing the necessity of a more equitable distribution of power to include disenfranchised ethnic groups, Goldberg simultaneously, if coincidentally, articulates the primary aim of the women's movement when he endorses access to power for "those once marginalized in relation to the dominant and forceful of the body politic."

Running parallel to literary critical revision and reconstruction during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, scholars in philosophy, history, clinical psychiatry and the social sciences have attempted to extricate psychoanalysis from its gender-determined and race-bound hierarchies. In the United States, since the mid-1970s, white psychoanalytic feminists involved in this project have included Jessica Benjamin, Phyllis Chesler, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Jane Flax, and Carol Gilligan.⁷ As philosopher Diana Tietjens Meyers writes, "Freud's hidebound conservatism regarding gender has not deterred feminists from capitalizing on the emancipatory potential of psychoanalysis that is embedded in its rich account of intrapsychic forces and interpersonal dynamics" (9). Because psychoanalytic theory relies upon an exquisitely detailed, sophisticated framework which locates the onset of psychological growth and development in infancy, it is unparalleled in its focused attention on individual and interpersonal as well as intrapsychic conflicts that emphasize the unconscious. Interested in both gender and racial issues, Elizabeth Abel, Judith Butler, Jennifer Fleischner, Mae G. Henderson, Marianne Hirsch, Barbara Johnson, Toni Morrison, Nell Irvin Painter, Arnold Rampersad, Hortense J. Spillers, Claudia Tate, and Michele Wallace are among the theorists who recognize the multifaceted potential of psychoanalytic theory when it is employed for textual criticism.

Today, the collaboration between psychoanalytic theory and literary criticism tends to focus on poststructuralist analyses, particularly on Lacan's anti-humanist deconstruction of Freudian theory in which Lacan emphasizes Saussure's work on semiotics. But critics who predated poststructuralism by decades, such as Edmund Wilson in *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Kenneth Burke, and Lionel Trillings, had been applying Freudian concepts to interpret literary works. Emory Elliot explains that "it was Freud's career and vision of man, rather than the details of the psychoanalytic method, that . . . fired the critical imaginations" (1013) of Wilson, Burke, and Trilling. Also, between the late 1950s and the early 1970s, psychologists were writing very reductive biographies of writers, including Thomas Wolfe, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and Herman Melville, in which the author's "psychopathology" was the vantage point from which they examined the work.⁸ Elizabeth Wright and Peter Brooks join Elliot in pointing out that "psychoanalytic criticism . . . was slow to shift out of [this] cumbersome biographical mode" (E. Elliot 1004). Still, by the mid-1970s, influenced by Lacan and Derrida, textual psychoanalytic criticism began to change; a 1977

essay by Shoshana Felman “inaugurat[ed] a dialectical exchange between psychoanalysis and literature. . . . In challenging the assumption of the authority of psychoanalysis over literature, Felman paved the way, via a Lacanian notion of transference, for a psychoanalytic reading practice” (Wright, *Feminism* 224).⁹ By the 1980s, psychoanalytic and feminist scholars began to collaborate in literary studies; presently, in the 1990s, literary critics focusing on issues of race and multiculturalism are deepening that collaboration.

That the paradigm for psychoanalytic theory originated with white, western European, male physicians who envisioned its praxis as a clinical treatment for white bourgeoisie has not prevented some scholars of color from finding aspects of it useful as tools for biography and literary analysis.¹⁰ Hortense J. Spillers, for one, goes so far as to say that “little or nothing in the intellectual history of African Americans within the social and political context of the United States [provides as] effective [a tool as] . . . psychoanalytic discourse, revised or classical, in illuminating the problematic of ‘race’” (135). While almost all scholars agree that psychoanalysis is meaningless (despite its advanced feminist revisions) unless it is contextualized within detailed and sophisticated political/cultural analyses, several critics concur with Michele Wallace who argues “that the general failure [of Freudian theory] to take into account the impact of ‘race’ or cultural diversity is not necessarily owing to anything intrinsic to psychoanalysis but, rather, it has to do with who uses psychoanalysis and what it is generally used for” (Goldberg 261). Indeed, in *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, Claudia Tate explains that she seeks to:

demonstrate the analytical possibilities of psychoanalysis for articulating-complicated conflicts of narrative desire in African American literary texts. . . . Psychoanalytic theory can inform African American literary scholarship by revealing how the material and cultural paradigms of race and gender that typically frame this scholarship do not entirely address the complex textuality of this literature. While such paradigms can effectively describe the external conditions that produce personal experience, they cannot explain how individuals internalize or represent those conditions so as to construct personal meaning. It is precisely this process of internalization—the dialectical engagement of the material and the psychical—that I am attempting to analyze in black textuality. (15)

In this landmark study, Tate (re)interprets and thus stakes an authoritative claim in psychoanalytic theory. She narrows the gap between it and black feminist literary criticism by demonstrating indisputably that individualized constructions of emotional and mental or psychic life are crucial to African American literary scholarship.

Preceding Tate, in the opening paragraph of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison similarly observes that “the narrative into which life seems to cast itself surfaces most forcefully in certain kinds of psychoanalysis” (v). She describes her experience of reading the “autobiographical novel” of white French feminist scholar, Marie Cardinal, in which Cardinal “document[s] her madness, her therapy, and the complicated process of healing” (v) in *The Words to Say It* (1975).¹¹ If the work of Algerian born Cardinal is not pertinent to my study, Morrison’s illuminating interpretations of Cardinal’s “autobiographical novel” are, and I will employ them to argue that psychoanalysis can be used and/or misused as an instrument for literary analysis. First, it can satisfy the need for what Spillers calls “a concept of the ‘one’ . . . missing in African American cultural analysis” (140). In addition, psychoanalysis can provide, as it did for Cardinal, a relationship within which one reimagines, reconfigures or rewrites her narrative while simultaneously recognizing that self-loathing (almost invariably a symptom of depression) is neither a “fixed” nor an essential entity of one’s self. Rather, self-hatred is usually comprised of culturally biased views forcefully imposed from the *outside*. Unconsciously, as if by osmosis, one identifies with these psychologically damaging projections, especially if they are repeatedly enforced. Psychoanalysis facilitates the loosening of the Gordian knot that self-loathing becomes, which, in turn, permits self-hatred to be understood and, ultimately, shed. One of my arguments throughout this book is that an analogous process occurs in literature. Fictional characters experience trauma and, subsequently, as a self-protective response, repress its memories. And, it is within the discourse of healing that the operative dynamics among memory, remembering, and narrative converge. Then they may find both the capacity to remember and “the words to say it,” making healing possible.

Problematically, as Morrison points out, issues of race are almost always ignored in psychoanalytic theory, as they are, most frequently, in literary texts by white writers, even when their presence is manifest and obvious. Illustrating this, Morrison spotlights Marie Cardinal’s elaborate account of the Louis Armstrong concert she was attending when her initial anxiety attack occurred. That she was listening to Louis Armstrong, a fact which, from her detailed description of the music, was clearly paramount to Cardinal, “goes unremarked—by her, by her analyst, and by the eminent doctor, Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote both the Preface and the Afterword” to *The Words to Say It* (Morrison vii). Only Morrison wonders: “What on earth was Louie playing that night?” (vii). How one “manages *not* to see meaning in the . . . presence of black surrogacy” (13) is a question that *Playing in the Dark* addresses, and it is a question relevant to my study as well. Considering Morrison’s analysis, I suggest that the absence of racialized discourse from psychoanalytic theory can motivate

interested critics to adapt the methodology of psychoanalysis, *itself*, as a tool with which to analyze, deconstruct, and even repair its own “lack,” thus, enhancing its applicability to literary analysis.¹² In other words, in the same way that feminism and psychoanalysis are not necessarily but are potentially compatible, as Benjamin and Gilligan show us, so, too, race awareness and psychoanalysis inform each other as Tate and Morrison demonstrate. A psychoanalytic perspective that is committed to being both feminist and race-cognizant informs the following pages.

Research on psychic trauma, which has been historically entwined with psychoanalytic theory, has increased in the past decade. In the progressive political climate of the most recent women’s movement starting in the 1960s, feminists have successfully raised public awareness about sexual and domestic violence against women and children. In a long overdue attempt to encourage women to bring legal charges against men who have raped and abused them, even when the crimes occurred several years earlier, the court systems in several states have adopted reforms that extend the statutes of limitations on prosecuting perpetrators of sexual crimes against children. Additionally, the growing body of literature by and about survivors of the Nazi Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and childhood abuse/incest significantly broadens perspectives on traumatic experience.¹³ Recent work on trauma by psychoanalytic feminist theorists, most notably Laura S. Brown, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Judith Herman, Kali Tal, and Elizabeth Waites, focuses as well on what I am calling cultural or political trauma, that is: an officially sanctioned, sadomasochistic system of oppression in which a targeted group, perceived by the dominant culture as an obstacle to the goals of the existing hegemony, are tortured, imprisoned, or killed. In this country, slavery, genocide of American Indians, and the witch hunts of the seventeenth century are examples of cultural and political trauma. In contrast, by using the terms “individual,” “personal,” or “psychological” trauma, I refer to sadomasochistic violence against a *designated* victim, who is personally known by her assailant; victims of domestic abuse and incest are examples.¹⁴ Michele Wallace emphasizes this convergence of political and personal trauma when she points out that “large numbers of African-Americans (as well as other peoples [sic] of color) continue to be traumatized by the American experience.” Furthering this connection, she adds a psychoanalytic perspective when she asks: “What is the role of fantasy and the unconscious in the experience, recollection, or memory of trauma? Moreover, what kind of psychological damage does trauma cause and can such victims be reached by psychoanalysis?” (Goldberg 263, 262). Still, having distinguished here between “psychological” and “political” processes, I want to emphasize once again that, in the experience of trauma, such distinctions fall apart, and, as Wallace’s inquiry demonstrates, the categories merge.

According to Judith Herman, “the systematic study of psychological trauma . . . depends on the support of a political movement. Indeed, whether such study can be pursued or discussed in public is itself a political question” (9). Only when political action in North America and Western Europe has focused public attention on the need for social change has research on psychic trauma gained legitimacy. Over the past one hundred and twenty-five years, three unique forms of trauma have emerged into public consciousness: hysteria in the late Victorian era, combat neurosis following World War I, and violence against women and children in our era. Each time public attention to trauma was precipitated and contextualized by political activism. While symptoms of hysteria among middle- and upper-class women prompted the first extended study into trauma, as I will discuss shortly, it was seriously investigated for the second time in response to symptoms of “shell-shock” presented by soldiers returning from the First World War. Research on combat trauma stopped shortly after that war, but resumed following World War II; it reached a peak during and immediately following the Vietnam War, but became a casualty of conservative backlash after the Gulf War when large numbers of soldiers, returning ill from the Mideast, displaying clusters of physiological symptoms, which were eventually classified as Gulf War Syndrome, were pejoratively labeled “hysterics” and “malingerers.” It was not until 1980, in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM III), that “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” became a recognized diagnostic entity; PTSD includes the previous diagnoses of “shell-shock,” “combat neurosis,” “combat fatigue,” and “traumatic neurosis.”

To return to the first serious study of trauma, nowhere was the enabling relationship between progressive political activism and psychoanalysis more apparent than in the story of hysteria. Still, the subsequent effort to suppress Freud’s announcement in 1896 of his revelation that “at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood” (Gay 103), uncannily resonates with a contemporary attempt to silence the same conversation.

Even for an abbreviated summary of the history of hysteria, one must begin in France at the end of the eighteenth century. The French Revolution of 1789 established a secular, republican government, but one so unstable, it was overthrown seven times between 1789 and 1870. When the secular Third Republic was established in 1870, its leaders were committed to undermining the power base of its chief opponent, the Catholic Church. Overnight, women and hysteria were in the spotlight. How hysteria’s symptoms would be interpreted—as demonic possession or medical illness—became a focus of this prolonged political conflict, because, as one of the Third Republic’s founding fathers

remarked, “women must belong to science, or they will belong to the church” (Jules Ferry qtd. in Herman, 15). French neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot, a strong supporter of the anti-clerical state, and committed to revolutionizing and humanizing the care of hysterics, was determined to elevate hysteria to the status of a neurological disorder meriting serious medical inquiry. Toward this end, he modernized the Salpêtrière Hospital for the purpose of studying and providing refuge for hysterics. By 1880, he had succeeded in “his mission . . . to claim hysterical women for science” (Herman 15). Though Charcot concentrated on its symptomatology, he did not pursue hysteria’s unconscious symbolic meaning; it was left to Freud and Pierre Janet, to expand upon William James’s early work with hypnosis to determine its etiology.¹⁵ The result was Freud’s publication of “The Neuro-Psychoses of Defense” (1894), in which he recognizes trauma as the source of hysteria. (All three—Freud, Janet, and James studied with Charcot at the Salpêtrière, though not at the same time). Two years later in 1896, Freud published *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, wherein he explains that the exact kind of trauma to which he refers is “premature sexual occurrences . . . which belong to the earliest years of childhood” (103). With this declaration, Freud explicitly ascribes the origins of hysteria to child rape or incest. Given Victorian values, it is not surprising that this revolutionary theory of childhood sexual abuse met with a “notably unfriendly reception” in Vienna (Gay xxxvi).

In his enthusiasm to announce the seduction theory to the Viennese Society for Psychiatry and Neurology in late April 1896, Freud failed to anticipate his audience’s predictable contempt. Hysteria was prevalent; moreover, his analysands in Vienna, as well as the women in Paris whom he interviewed and studied, were the daughters, sisters, and wives of distinguished bourgeois families. With his public disclosure that hysterical symptoms were the pathological expression of sexual abuse, Freud was identifying the very men he was addressing as guilty of child rape and incest. Many, if not most, in his audience abruptly walked out, signaling the end of this line of inquiry into sexual trauma almost as soon as it began. Unsurprisingly, the Society for Psychiatry and Neurology, a supremely patriarchal body, refused to relinquish its authority over women’s lives; indeed, an open admission that its most respectable men were committing “perverted acts against children” (Freud’s letters to Fliess) would indicate nothing less.¹⁶ Herman writes that although sexuality continued to be Freud’s focus, “the exploitative social context in which sexual relations actually occur became utterly invisible. Psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience” (14). Perhaps, the repudiation of the whole of psychoanalysis by many contemporary feminists can be attributed to an understandable, but erroneous, residual fear that accepting a

Freudian theoretical framework is tantamount to ignoring women's material lives. In other words, a Manichean dualism is unnecessarily assumed in which fantasies, dreams, and the creations of the unconscious are analyzed at the expense of, rather than in complementary conjunction with, the social and economic realities of women's lives.

Freud's well-known and much debated rejection of his own seduction theory shortly after he announced and published it in 1896 destructively altered the course of psychoanalysis.¹⁷ Herman holds his renunciation responsible for the fact that psychoanalysis, "the dominant psychological theory of the next century was founded in the denial of women's reality" (14). Yet, it is a mistake to hold Freud solely responsible for ending the investigation into sexual trauma. If, as I argue, a progressive political context is necessary for radical theories to be accepted, or even explored, as was the case when Charcot modernized the treatment of hysteria in the 1880s, then perhaps Freud underestimated or remained unaware of the changes in the political climate that had been supporting his work. In France, the enlightened effort to understand traumatized women was contextualized by the struggle for secular rule. But, when the clerical forces were finally defeated in the 1890s, women were no longer needed to showcase the superiority of scientific expertise over religious ideology. Later, by the turn of the century, as women began to organize and speak out for themselves, it became inexpedient for any man with political ambitions to champion them. "As long as the study of hysteria was part of [a] . . . crusade, discoveries in the field were widely applauded and scientific investigators were esteemed for their humanity and courage. . . . The study of hysteria had lured [psychoanalysts] into a netherworld of trance, emotionality, and sex" (Herman 17), from which they were eager to escape. Suffering women themselves, unattached to any other cause, provided inadequate motivation for professionals to continue the psychological investigation into their trauma; discussion of sexual violence was, once again, silenced by the late 1890s.

Yet, another possibility must be considered. Perhaps the issue of sexual violation, especially incest, evokes feelings so profoundly disconcerting that no matter how progressively politicized or socially transformed the public consciousness is, when incestuous rape becomes part of public discourse, we can expect an almost immediate and very powerful backlash. There is something uniquely "unspeakable" about incest, as if discussing its existence exacerbates it. Consequently, I think we must ask: Is it possible that incest is so widespread, its incidence so high, that just the mention of the word reflexively summons fear, rage, guilt, denial in any era? At the very end of the nineteenth century, when public momentum for an exploration of sexual trauma waned,

physicians studying it felt animosity directed toward them, similar to that experienced by those who work with sexual trauma victims now. Where incest is widespread, backlash is unavoidable when public attention is focused on it, regardless of century, continent, or level of enlightenment.

If the horror of incest overrides even the most sophisticated culture's capacity for openness, the resultant silencing of women is certainly political. That women developed hysterical symptoms in response to earlier incidents of sexual violence helps to explain their traumas psychologically. But, the counterpart to this notion is political: Only in a culture that sanctions heterosexual misogyny can sexual violence proliferate. If there is an enabling aspect to the relationship between the personal and the political, there is also a destructive one in which patriarchy, itself, traumatizes women. Herman notes that "violence is a routine part of women's sexual and domestic lives" (28)—a comment which brings to mind Wallace's statement that "large numbers of African-Americans . . . continue to be traumatized by the American experience." Both Herman and Wallace are implying that violence may be an assimilated facet of ordinary life for everyone, except heterosexual white men. In fact, when Pauline Hopkins closes her novel, *Of One Blood*, she seems to be suggesting as much.

That the dialectic of trauma includes denial and repression is readily apparent. We encounter now, at the end of this millennium, an anti-feminist backlash which seeks to disempower women by judging them "hysterical" (read "mentally unstable liars") when they speak of their own trauma. This wave of backlash, which targets psychoanalysis as well as feminism, resonates with the cultural repression that has followed every period of intense public debate on trauma over the past one hundred years. Backlash against Charcot's work with hysteria began around 1893 and included accusations that he staged and scripted the hospitalized women's "performances" for his famous Tuesday lectures. Even before Freud asserted that incestuous sexual abuse was epidemic, Charcot regretted commencing a medical inquiry that focused almost entirely on women's symptoms. Interest in hysteria diminished in France when women were no longer needed to aid the anti-clerical campaign. In a parallel fashion, the contemporary public's indifference to large numbers of veterans seeking medical care for Gulf War Syndrome assures that little, if any, research on combat trauma, such as that which followed the Vietnam War, will occur now. Women's liberation groups brought to public consciousness the high incidence of domestic violence, the need to investigate its psychological ramifications, and the urgency of legal reforms favoring victims' rights, but sadly these advances may not be permanent, and must be vigilantly safeguarded against counteraction.

An example of contemporary backlash, the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) is an organization comprised primarily of parents, who, from their standpoint, have been erroneously accused of sexual abuse by their own adult children. Through the psychotherapeutic process of free association, the self-identified victims slowly uncover incidents of rape and molestation committed against them, sometimes years earlier. Because of the severity and nature of the trauma, however, the survivors evoke the defense/coping mechanisms of denial or repression in which the memories are avoided or “forgotten” and, under ordinary circumstances, not accessible to cognition. FMSF members, claiming that repressing and recovering memories of traumatic events are impossible, address virulent criticism, not to their accusers, but to the psychotherapists whom they believe have confabulated these concepts. In fact, the “false memory” group accuses the therapists of brainwashing their patients into believing in the veracity of fantasized recollections.

Uncanny similarities exist between this contemporary shift toward suppressing the discussion of sexual violence against women and children and the nineteenth-century movement to silence that same discussion. Today, articles in both scholarly journals and popular magazines caution women who seek psychotherapy to beware of monomaniacal zealots, disguised as trustworthy psychotherapists, whose mission is to convince naive patients that they were incest victims when they were not.¹⁸ Such accusations that therapists brainwash their patients into recalling repressed memories of sexual abuse reflect backlash in several ways. Representing female psychotherapists as witches hunting for young girls as prey to convert into their “man-hating” cults in a culture that has, lest we forget, a less than tolerant history regarding witches, FMSF members and their supporters portray women therapy patients as mindless zombies who can be manipulated into believing whatever they are told. They also warn therapists against deceitful patients who either fabricate entire stories of child rape or confuse their fantasies with reality.¹⁹ Such propaganda clearly perpetuates the misogynistic objectification of women, while protecting both individual sexual abusers and a patriarchal system that views its women as gullible and spineless, so that it can continue to deny that men rape them. In spite of the unwavering efforts of the women’s movement over the last twenty-five years to resist and deconstruct patriarchy’s lies in which women are depicted as more apt to be-guile, exaggerate, or become crazy than to be authentic victims of sexual violence, a backlash similar to the one at the close of the last century has not been preempted.²⁰

Cathy Caruth explains that the victim’s capacity to recover repressed memories long after the life-threatening event is inherent in the traumatic experience, and can enable healing. She points out that to assimilate completely the full impact of trauma contemporaneous with its occurrence defies its very nature.

Traumatic experience . . . suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that *immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness*. The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight—thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing” (UE91, 92; emphasis added).

If Caruth is right, then, portions, at least, of trauma will be denied upon impact. Still, trauma’s reverberations persist. Echoing in the victim’s mind, intermingled with her everyday thoughts, the memories turn up in the form of symptoms, including anxiety, depression, and “conversion symptoms,” wherein psychological pain is converted into physiological disorders, just as it was in hysteria a century ago. “Conversion reactions . . . can now be understood as the body’s way of remembering trauma. The so-called ‘belle indifference’ classically associated with hysteria can be seen as a direct consequence of the dissociation between mind and body” (Waites 15). If the victim-survivor seeks psychotherapy for her symptoms, it is possible that she will, through the process of free association, regain or recover repressed memories of an earlier trauma.

On what do I base my belief that psychoanalysis provides a reliable—indeed, an indispensable—lens through which to see sexual trauma? First, unlike an ideology such as Marxism, which is predicated on fixed and uniform interpretations of oppression, psychoanalysis is based on individual, hence unique, perceptions and representations of cultural experiences and intrapsychic conflicts. In its most basic sense, psychoanalysis presumes that a patient, whose seemingly irreconcilable feelings and fears have been unconsciously repressed, will reveal what has been buried over time through the process of free association if the analytic dyad is a stable, trusting relationship. Focused on individual personality development, psychoanalytic theory suggests a framework in which a constantly shifting, never static complexity of unconscious structures, influenced by interaction among one’s desires, drives, wishes, childhood experiences, physiology, neurobiology, and the totality of one’s environment, struggle toward attaining pleasure in “love and work.” When applied to literary criticism, this theoretical system, which is sometimes criticized for the intensity of its focus on the self, offers an enhanced perspective not provided by any other theoretical framework, because intrapsychic dynamics, like fingerprints, are impossible to duplicate. Of course, this is not to disavow Jung’s concept of a “universal unconscious” or what Wright calls a “trans-individual unconscious” (*Feminism* 224); psyches *do* share symbolic representations. Yet, and this is my point, each remains a unique construction.

Reminiscent of Freud's initial theory that sexual exploitation is at the root of hysteria, the psychodynamic of heterosexual sadomasochism operates as an axis around which my selected novels revolve. Specifically, I show that within each narrative, the male protagonist experiences sexual excitement when he inflicts pain upon or forcibly induces helplessness in a woman. Each writer configures a sexual relationship embedded in this Western hegemonic script of male-subject abuser or oppressor of a female-object. As a psychological phenomenon, this sexual sadomasochism moves across and through racial and ethnic boundaries. At the same time, it is contextualized by the various constructs of race, class, and ethnicity that are uniquely elaborated within each of the seven texts. Heterosexual sadomasochism, a forceful and repeated trope that extends throughout and beyond the fiction in my study, is taken up by these writers as a serious political and intrapsychic liminal event, because it is a widespread, ongoing societal problem. Although it receives a lot of attention in psychoanalytic literature, and although it is contextualized differently in each novel, this psychodynamic cries out for more critical work by literary scholars.

That past experiences of trauma must be consciously acknowledged in order for personal and political relationships to be reconstituted is the connecting assumption between psychoanalysis and the texts under discussion. The authors I study are, above all, *artists* committed to bearing witness to oppression. They understand that true political change is impossible without a metamorphosis in which those desires and wishes considered unspeakable—certain sexual, aggressive, even sadistic feelings—become a deliberate part of public, as well as private, discourse. Their narrative representations of trauma expose the need for social transformation; they target for disruption such bureaucratic institutions as the legal and medical systems or the ways in which capitalism and consumerism comprise the engine of the “democratic” political vehicle.

One recurrent trope in the books I investigate concentrates on the protagonists' varying capacities to use art, especially narrative, as a method of “working through” or healing from trauma. I consider how sexual and artistic passion is expressed in each text when it is developed within a matrix of violence and oppression, and I seek to understand how memories of torture and stories of brutality can be preserved, even transformed into art, without reproducing oppression. Contrary to the American myth of “leave the past behind/begin life anew,” neither individuals nor civilizations can survive severance from their familial and historical ancestries, despite the sadomasochistic relationships within them. Indeed, as the chapters which follow show, rupture with the past precipitates trauma. Each novel traces a course parallel to that of the process of psychoanalysis in that individual characters (as well as entire cultures)

experience crises when they unintentionally thwart the possibility of a future in order to avoid a confrontation with a painful past. As if mimicking the “talking cure,” each text functions as an analyst.²¹ The rhetorical structure or analyst provides for the character or patient a framework wherein repressed memories can surface into consciousness. And the latter finds, to varying degrees, that hysterical symptoms diminish when repressed memories and their accompanying feelings are recalled and verbalized.

Theodor Adorno believed that no meaningful poetry could be written after Auschwitz because, in his view, post-holocaust art automatically attempts to make sense of that event and, by that very act, insults and invalidates the ordeal of survivors. Countering Adorno, I agree with Kalí Tal who believes that “literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it ‘real’ both to the victim and to the community” (21). The need to be listened to, in addition to the “need to tell,” is a trope that appears and reappears in the written and oral testimony of victims. According to Peter Brooks, “the desire to *captivate* a possible listener” (RP 54) is fundamental to each of us. (Interestingly, “captivate” can be read as having sadistic overtones.) In reference to sexual abuse, repetitive “retelling” emanates, at least in part, from the surrounding guilt and shame that rape and incest victims almost invariably report. My chapter that discusses Jones’s *Corregidora* and Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*, proposes a political-psychological analysis of this humiliation and self-imposed blame that plagues abuse victims.

While five of the seven texts in my grouping are contemporary, none is formally postmodern. Though Oates is considered a neo-realist and her work, like Silko’s and Atwood’s, incorporates characteristics of postmodernism, none would be appropriately categorized with postmodern authors such as Kathy Acker, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, William Gaddis, William Gass, Don DeLillo, Tama Janowitz, and Thomas Pynchon.²² Under the rubric of postmodernism, a “thoroughly” deconstructed, non-hierarchical framework in which every subjective utterance has equal value and no voice has more “author”ity than any other, anyone’s assertion that s/he is a victim because s/he feels victimized must be considered legitimate. On the subject of postmodern critics, Tal asserts:

The approach of most postmodern critics is inappropriate when applied to reading the literature of trauma. Postmodern critics have been concerned with the problematics of *reading*. As professional readers, it is in their interest to put forward the argument that any text, properly read, can be “understood.” Those among them who do not claim to be able to divine the author’s intent simply claim that an author’s intent is irrelevant. It’s obvious that this approach won’t work for the literatures of trauma. The act of *writing*, perhaps less accessible to the critic, is as important as the act of reading. (17)

Competing tensions exist between an aspect of postmodernism—that which privileges one's subjective perspective over all else—and the need for a consensual definition of trauma. Certainly, it makes sense for the sufferer to determine the presence of trauma. Yet, the following example emphasizes how a survivor's *right* to a narrative may be co-opted by inappropriately applying the diagnosis of “trauma.”

Literary theorist Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst and co-founder of the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, Dori Laub, collaborated to produce the book, *Testimony: Crisis in Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). In it, Felman discusses a crisis of “critical dimensions . . . gathering momentum” (48) that broke out in a graduate seminar she taught at Yale entitled “Literature and Testimony.” After the class watched videotaped interviews with holocaust survivors, “there was a sort of *panic* that consisted in both emotional and intellectual disorientation, *loss of direction*. One person [felt] that he literally ‘lost the whole class,’ everything . . . got somehow ‘disconnected.’ The videotape viewing was described [by students] as ‘a shattering experience’ . . . ‘not just painful, but very powerful’; [Felman named their feelings] ‘*anxiety of fragmentation*’” (49). Undoubtedly, viewing the survivors’ testimony evoked myriad profoundly disturbing feelings in Felman’s students, but such reactions are warranted and fitting; indeed, they are noteworthy only if absent. Rather than perceive the class’s distress as normative and help her students integrate the emotions quite naturally evoked from the excruciating testimonial videotapes, Felman interpreted their responses as expressions of *their* trauma, features of which she compared to what is experienced by actual survivors. In Felman’s reworked definition, one participates in the victim’s trauma, *and is oneself a victim*, simply by coming into contact with a survivor’s testimony.

Felman addressed her class: “I will suggest that the significance of the event of your viewing of the first Holocaust videotape was, not unlike [Paul] Celan’s own Holocaust experience, something akin to *a loss of language*. . . . It is this *loss* Celan precisely talks about. . . . You can now, perhaps, relate to this loss more immediately, more viscerally, when you hear the poet say that *language was all that remained*” (50). Felman interprets the fact that the “obsessed” (48) seminar members shared their emotions with each other outside rather than within the classroom as evidence of their need to “*break the very framework of the class* (and thus emerge outside it), in much the same way as the writers [the class] examined somehow all *broke through the framework* of what they had initially set out to write” (48). In my view, her “knowledge” of *their* feelings is highly problematic, as is her manipulation of Celan’s (and other survivors’) experience in a concentration camp.²³ Significantly, according to Felman, one need not experience trauma to be a trauma victim; to feel “something akin” to,

in this case, the pain of a holocaust survivor, it is sufficient to watch videotapes of survivors and listen to their stories. Clearly, I differ. Trauma victims and survivors have experienced *first-hand* a “life-threatening event that displaces [their] preconceived notions about the world” (Tal 15). Second-hand or vicarious perception of trauma is not tantamount to experiencing it.

Emphasizing the specifically individualized or “first-hand” dynamics of trauma in each text in this study, I examine a particular facet of women’s subjugation, which includes not just the sadism forced upon them, but also how powerlessness becomes eroticized, then entrenched within the victim’s self-identity. In a recent essay, Mae Henderson argues that women “participate in the eroticization of dominance and submission. . . . [This] complicity on the part of women . . . reflect[s] the extent to which the sexual fantasies and practices of women have been conditioned by an ideology of female submission, thereby perpetuating patriarchal violence and domination” (286). Additionally, psychoanalytic feminist Jessica Benjamin, in describing her own work, states that she “seeks to understand how domination is anchored in the hearts of the dominated” (*BL* 5). I believe that unless or until we illuminate and understand this dynamic, instead of denying it, we will unwittingly collude with malicious violence against women.

In “Power, Sexuality, and Intimacy” (1986), Muriel Dimen writes that there is “a missing link in the theory of patriarchy. . . . Although theories of mind and society abound, no present theory puts psyche and society together so that the whole story of patriarchy, including women’s experience and its contradictions can be told” (35). My aim is to address the disjuncture Dimen identifies with trauma as an overt site of convergence. The power of the unconscious, the depth and persistence of desires and wishes that entrap people within repetition compulsions that can determine entire courses of lives are evident tropes repeated within many fictional texts and are beginning to receive deserved attention in literary scholarship.

My Introduction is weighted in the direction of theory. Still, all of the authors I have grouped employ innovative narrative form, characterized by ambiguity, paradox, alternating narrators, fluidity of time, and a facade of chaos, which, in turn, creates politically radical parallel- or subtexts formally. Each one challenges the post-Enlightenment concept of a “grand narrative.” For example, Gilman’s and Hopkins’s works, published in 1892 and 1902–1903 respectively, are early expressions of modernism. Gilman gives voice to the “madwoman in the attic,” rewriting her story seventy-five years before Jean Rhys did the same for Bronte’s Bertha Rochester. Eliminating the omniscient (read male) narrator, Gilman breaks with tradition by authorizing the subjective, marginalized voice of an unnamed woman descending irretrievably into madness to write her own story, while she simultaneously challenges the prevalent cultural practices on

defining and treating madness, hysteria, and depression. Hopkins, whose work Elizabeth Ammons calls “profoundly experimental” (Greusser 211), blends existing genres to invent her own hybrid narrative style. Three of the five contemporary novels—those written by Jones, Silko, and Allison between 1975 and 1994—overtly discuss taboo, suppressed subjects, including heterosexual and homosexual sadomasochism.

Oates experiments with narrative form to bring together what most critics consider to be an oxymoronic pairing: the tradition of realism with the project of postmodernism. Her fully developed, psychologically complex and accurate characters are geographically and historically rooted in time and place (New York in the early 1990s). Deliberately, she writes herself into the tradition of American realism that includes Charles Chesnutt, Theodore Dreiser, Ellen Glasgow, William Dean Howells, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, and Edith Wharton; in fact, I argue that she models her protagonist, Corky Corcoran, on Sinclair Lewis’s George Babbitt, a fictional character clearly identified with realism. Yet, her book’s title adumbrates the ambiguity surrounding the novel. As in Gilman’s story, the reader is gradually ensconced in the narrator’s increasingly depressed and deluded mind, and it is only from his perspective that we can experience the narrative.

Atwood also experiments at a formal level, producing *Alias Grace* in an original form I call poststructural realism. Though she insists that “truth” is an ephemeral, sociolinguistic construction, she does so in the context of a life-and-death double murder trial in which discovering “what really happened” is the primary objective. Like Oates, Atwood draws her characters with exquisite, anti-minimalist delineation consistent with realism’s tradition; in fact, reviewers have commented on the nuanced details with which she represents Grace Marks’s work life.²⁴ But as soon as we begin to feel comfortable with Grace’s version of her narrative, she reminds us that “perhaps [she] will tell [us] lies” (*AG* 41). Atwood further blurs the border between inside and outside the text by interspersing authentic historical figures with fictional characters, without revealing which is which. Likewise, she combines imagined reports of the murders with actual newspaper accounts from 1842. She confronts and undermines the concept of truth by contradicting every assertion of it with an equally plausible, yet conflicting, version of the same event.

The chapter immediately following this Introduction, “Reading the Unconscious in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*,” focuses on intersecting political and psychological trauma in the aftermath of the European invasion of the Americas resulting in the dislocation and genocide of Native Americans. Silko probes the inter- and intra-generational repetition of sexual violence, specifically sexual sadomasochism, from both cultural and psychological perspectives. She asserts that a heretofore unexamined, though lethal,

repercussion of the European conquest is a perverse and pervasive sexual dynamic in which erotic pleasure is experienced only when physical pain is inflicted on the "other." Sexuality, as well as art and literature, has been contaminated. In this anti-capitalist novel, Silko redefines what it means to "consume" or be "consumed."

In chapter 3, "Freud and Feminism in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*," I propose a new paradigm for thinking about certain aspects of a girl's so-called Oedipal conflict, a paradigm reflective of the pleasure and "author"ity of "story-making" as opposed to the failure and masochism of "penis envy." Experiencing sexual desire, intellectual curiosity, and the need or drive for knowledge at around the same time, the child interweaves sexuality and narrative, using the latter to explain the former. Focusing on the conflation of psychological trauma and culturally sanctioned violence, I discuss the shame that *Corregidora's* Ursa and *Bastard's* Ruth Anne share regarding their sadomasochistic sexual fantasies.

Chapter 4, "Hysteria and Trauma in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood; Or the Hidden Self*," argues that Hopkins represents her central female character, Dianthe Lusk, as suffering from hysteria's conversion symptoms, including trances, dissociative states, and amnesia, in order to explore the politics underlying that diagnosis, particularly race and gender issues. Since a psychological diagnosis is always a personal matter, and hysteria, in particular, implies earlier, repressed, sexual trauma, Hopkins is entwining the political with the personal by racializing Dianthe's sexual trauma and, in so doing, placing it in the historical context of slavery. In addition, Hopkins's indictment of racist patriarchy, represented by its agent, Aubrey, introduces a trope linking that novel with those of Atwood and Gilman, which I discuss together in chapter 6. The three share an interest in the intellectual and popular discourse at the turn into the twentieth century on the "new psychology," particularly hysteria.

"'Honesty is an art': Postmodern Realism, Truth and Lies in Joyce Carol Oates's *What I Lived For*," chapter 5, discusses Oates's analysis of the hypocrisies of democracy and liberalism, and demonstrates that "forgetting" one's past can be fatal. Formally linking trauma, political/"masculine" power, and sexual desire, Oates examines her male protagonist's intricate way of alienating and isolating his memories. As they conflate, his mind collapses, which Oates rhetorically imitates by shifting between literary devices of American realism and postmodernism, a structural approach that links this text with several others in my discussion. For example, both Oates and Atwood raise important existential questions about "truth," "certainty," and "knowledge" by yoking realism with its theoretical "opposite," postmodernism. In addition, I adapt Lacan's use of Saussure's semiotic theory to discuss the rupture and trauma that result when one's wishes and desires, as well as one's memories, are repressed.

Chapter 6, "Intertextuality and Poststructural Realism in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" emphasizes the "dialogue" that takes place between these two texts regarding the mistreatment of women in the nineteenth century by the medical profession. While Atwood discusses the evolution of psychiatry by interlacing actual historical figures with fictional characters who converse about the latest developments in psychology and neurology, Gilman exposes the sadism inflicted upon women by the institution of medicine. Both books bear witness to and warn against the traumatic "double-bind" entrapping women whose stories are manipulated or repressed. Knowing that if she missteps, she can be sentenced indefinitely to a "lunatic asylum" (at which point she will lose her money, property, and children), a privileged woman's daily existence can be a life-and-death struggle to hide her depression and hold onto her sanity. Both protagonists are imprisoned: Gilman's narrator by the "treatment" she barely survives as a patient of S. Weir Mitchell, and Grace by her sentence of life imprisonment. Atwood mocks, as well as imputes, the legal system that judged Grace, showing that her verdict was based more upon her status as an orphaned, adolescent, Irish immigrant and domestic servant than on the weight of the evidence against her.

In the conclusion, chapter 7, "Words Finally Spoken," I return to a consideration of the relationships among race, psychoanalysis, feminism, and trauma within the different cultural/historical contexts presented in the texts, all of which render complex political-psychological dynamics of repeated intergenerational abuse in which a victim becomes an oppressor. For women who are abused, the novels in this study contend that telling the story, which inevitably is a psycho-political one, can bring coherence to chaos.