A Literary Archaeology of Loss: The Politics of Mourning in African American Literature

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To my grandfather, Mr. Wilbert Barrington (1925-2006), who instilled in me the love of storytelling, and for the victims, both alive and dead, of the Asian Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. Everyday, I feel your loss.
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When I began this project, I did so not really understanding the degree to which loss operates in our daily lives. As I was working on this project, our world experienced profound losses in 2004 and 2005 during the Asian Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. As I watched the resulting devastation on people’s lives, and later after losing my own grandfather, I no longer felt safe or the need to complete this project. I was uninspired and unsure if academia was where I wanted to be. Despite this, I hope that what is here will help us to understand the power of narrative in the face of trauma and loss. I want to thank Dr. Dickson-Carr for challenging my thinking and writing ability and for agreeing to chair this project. I also want to thank Dr. Tomeiko Ashford and Dr. Dennis Moore for your patience, understanding, and advice.

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ABSTRACT

Richard Wright’s *The Long Dream* (1958), James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) attempt to expose the mental and physical scars of trauma through an excavation of memorable, historical events that resonate with issues of loss. The focus of this study is on the intersection of the mourning of these losses and the use of writing to represent them for the purposes of recovery and healing for the African American community. As close textual analyses of these texts show, by writing about loss and exploring the ramifications of loss within their narratives, these writers expose a critical dimension of African American literature that confronts the overwhelming presence of death, performing a literary archaeology of the physical and symbolic losses that these events represent. By placing narrative forms, oral and written, which are politically and aesthetically able to recover, commemorate, and “funeralize” actual and symbolic loss, these authors suggest a connection between rituals of mourning, functions of writing, and the modes of witnessing and testifying. In the introduction, I build a theory of textual mourning by considering theories of mourning, memory, trauma, and African American literature studies. In chapter one, I explore the language of loss that powers *Beloved* and *Philadelphia Fire* by examining how collective and individual trauma complicates the functions of mourning cultural trauma. In chapter two, I examine two literary considerations of the Emmett Till murder, *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Long Dream* to understand again how the language of loss influences Wright and Baldwin’s narrative strategies in their attempts to confront the sexualized cultural trauma of lynching. Textual mourning continues the functions of mourning by making writing a way to funeralize the dead, present ways of remembrance, and transform loss into politicized literary forms. In the conclusion, I briefly explore the new avenues of inquiry that textual mourning allows in our understanding of how writing, loss, mourning, and melancholia intersect to develop a new language for discussing trauma.
INTRODUCTION

**POLITICIZING AND CHALLENGING LOSS: BUILDING A THEORY OF TEXTUAL MOURNING**

Mobilized to tell a story, memory is the intersection of material, experiential, and sociocultural forces. [...] The materiality of our bodies, the sense we have of ourselves as centers of consciousness, and the stories through which we learn and choose to make our experiential history meaningful all conjoin, so that bodies, selves, memories, stories cannot be understood independently of one another. (Smith 108)

Memorials inspire spaces of remembrance, provide sparks for discussion, and promote the healing processes of grieving. In the case of slavery in the Americas, where there is no place, no space, specifically constructed for the tasks of honoring and properly burying the dead, mourning remains incomplete and a sense of loss remains. In a 1988 speech discussing her fifth novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison acknowledges the lack of and the need for a memorial for slavery:

> There is no place, here, where I can go, and think about or not think about, or summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of, slaves. Or, just one. Something that reminds us of the ones that made the journey, and those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby, there is no three-hundred-foot tower, there is no small bench by the road, there is not even a tree, scored and initialed, that I can visit, or you can visit [...].

Morrison offers *Beloved* as that place. In the absence of a traditional memorial, Morrison’s literary text functions as a space for simulating a process of mourning and challenging historical amnesia.

In a meditation on writing *Beloved*, Morrison provides a provocative conceptual framework for us to think about the function and means for using writing for the purposes of mourning and politicizing loss. *Beloved* is based upon the factual story of Margaret Garner, a young fugitive slave mother who killed one of her children and attempts to kill the others to prevent them from being enslaved in 1856. She became the center of a legal battle, concerning fugitive slave laws and the abolition of slavery. Morrison recognized and expanded upon the

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lack of details about Garner’s “inner” life as represented in the newspaper accounts of her story. She noticed similar occurrences in slave narratives, where there were often silences during the authors’ portrayal of particularly traumatic incidents. These gaps serve as evidence of their inability to fully bear witness to the horrors of slavery and Garner’s inaccessibility to the tools needed to tell her story.

In a project of “literary archaeology,” Morrison finds a hidden history in the absent words and in the surviving images that suggest the presence of buried histories, “which is why the images that float around them—the remains, so to speak, at the archaeologist site—surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth” (“Site of Memory” 115). These images, or remains, become a way of accessing the traumatized lives of the enslaved. Morrison goes on to describe her writing as an attempt to “rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate” (110) by using her imagination. The goal, then, was to create a counter form of history through the neoslave narrative, a subgenre of African American literature that imagines and explores the innermost thoughts of slaves that is often missing in the original slave narratives. While she does not offer a detailed reason for the presence of the images, Morrison hints at the possibility that the gaps and silences exist because the slaves could not name and articulate their losses. *Beloved* operates not only as a space for understanding the degrees of loss for Garner, but by discussing slavery, she also calls attention to the losses of familial ties, language, rituals and practices, and ancestral origins for Africans and African Americans.

This study extends Morrison’s concept of literary archaeology, outlined above, to understand the connections that exist between trauma, loss, mourning, and writing by closely reading Richard Wright’s *The Long Dream* (1958), James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire* (1990). Each exposes the mental and physical scars of trauma through an excavation of memorable, historical events that resonate with issues of loss. The focus is on the intersection of the mourning of these losses and the use of writing to represent them for the purposes of recovery and healing for the

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2 Ashraf H. Rushdy defines a neo-slave narrative as a contemporary novel that assumes the form, adopts the conventions, and takes on the first person voice of antebellum slave narratives. Bernard Bell uses the term fabulation, which he borrows from Robert Scholes, as a term that defines “a return to a more verbal kind of fiction…a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative” (284) to describe a neoslave narrative.
African American community. How do these authors create stories that speak to and about the dead? What tools do they use to create characters whose situations provide possible answers for healing in the face of trauma? How and why do some African American authors use stories of death as creative inspiration and as sites of memory? These are the questions that these texts inspire. These are the questions that drive the development of a theory of textual mourning or the use of imaginative writing to explore historical, collective, and personal memories of potentially traumatic events in the hopes of disrupting historical myths. Textual mourning helps to thwart the loss of culturally important events and identity and to create spaces for the possibility of healing the wounds of trauma. Textual mourning rises out of necessity, as the authors make their texts sites of memory, remembrance, and mourning.

The first chapter of this project involves understanding the motivation, tools, and socio/political value of using African American literature as a space where writing and reading processes become extensions of the traditional mourning practices found in African American culture. By transporting these rituals into textual forms, the authors retain many of the characteristics and purposes of ways of mourning, but also expose a lesser discussed dimension of African American ways of mourning, the material and psychological remains that complicate remembering and forgetting. I develop the theory of textual mourning by considering how it operates as a form of healing for the authors and the characters as they each must participate in a power struggle between these forces as material memories complicate the successful completion of mourning by suggesting that African American texts challenge traditional views of mourning and loss as a depressive state and only individually felt. Textual mourning reveals that an inability to mourn is central to understanding African American ways of mourning. It is in this departure from the current discussions of mourning and loss that shows the distinctive nature of how African Americans respond to and have responded to trauma.

As a brace against the numbing effects for forgetfulness that trauma a, these authors are not content on being lulled into a false sense of a perfect history, but instead look to particular instances of cultural traumas to explore the effects that the daily possibility of death, simply because of one’s race, had on the creation of racial memory and establishment of a collective identity. When these writers return to traumatic events as sites of memory for fictional considerations, it allows them to explore the impact that traumatic events have in shaping cultural responses to loss and creating racial memory. Cultural or racial memory in the chosen
texts is not restricted to the South, music, or Africa, but to the ways in which mourning influences connections between literature, material memories, and images. These authors manipulate the historical stories to pursue the symbolic losses that are often overlooked. The authors’ use of textual mourning becomes a political force that allows them to resist historical amnesia and retain racial memories.

As each of the texts reveal, narrative forms, oral and written, have political and aesthetic abilities to recover, commemorate, and “funeralize” physical and symbolic losses. By transforming rituals of mourning into textual forms, the authors use narrative as a means of accessing trauma and making meaning of events that resist understanding. Textual mourning is a formalized process that exists once we understand the connections between rituals of mourning, functions of writing, and the modes of witnessing and testifying. Textual mourning contains five key components: (1) an ephemeral or material presence of the dead due to cultural trauma; (2) the use of cultural narratives, myths, and rituals; (3) an evident lack of and need for closure as illustrated by the presence of material memories or haunting images that reflect an inability to mourn; (4) a revision of the negative affect of these materials to accomplish a countermemory that allows a discussion of the political, social, or aesthetic value of loss and trauma; and (5) a resultant display through various speech acts or narratives that celebrate and recover loss through rituals of mourning. Textual mourning operates on three levels in these texts. The first is through the repeated considerations of loss that influence the authors’ thematic and structural choices in these texts and in their other novels, essays, or poems. Next, the characters recreate a pattern of textual mourning in their confrontations with loss and ways of mourning by following the previous steps. Lastly, the physical, material forms of the play and novel perform as vehicles for mourning, or at least attempted mourning, by forcing the reader to confront the conditions of loss. Beginning with the various degrees of trauma, then, I discuss these five components in this chapter to elucidate the theoretical background of textual mourning.

When we speak of events as “traumatic” we are using the Greek word for “wound” or a serious bodily injury, scar, or shock. In psychological discussions, traumatic wounds create lasting mental effects. For instance, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle Sigmund Freud takes this term to explore trauma inflicted on the mind that causes a psychic break in our mind’s ability to defend against or to cope with certain experiences (6-8). There are two types of trauma that are of concern in this study. The first is the negative affect of trauma on individuals. Individual
trauma creates disassociation, confusion, and affects an individual long after the immediate impact of the event. Symptoms may arise in disguised or symbolic forms causing a distrust of the individuals’ own mental processes or abilities to separate him or herself from the trauma. The manifestations of the wounds of trauma and the subsequent losses are visible in physical symptoms such as silence, destructive behavior, or simply a lack of awareness of the world. Trauma can negate or destroy the relationships that one has with the past, present, and the future, causing a break in emotional stability. An individual affected by trauma can experience any number of external and internal disruptions, such as depression, illness, changes in self perception, or breaks from home, culture, and religious beliefs. The presence of such responses signifies the severity of the effects of the trauma on that particular individual. Trauma, therefore, may result in mental wounds that inflict the loss of necessary ideals that aid in the creation of a sense of self.

Trauma may not be only individually understood but may also be applied to the experiences of cultural groups and races. This understanding has led to a number of theories concerning group or collective trauma. Collective trauma often concentrates on the relationship between the survivors and witnesses, or descendents, of particular group or cultural traumas, which includes “onlooker trauma,” “secondary PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder),” or “transgenerational trauma”. Cultural trauma is linked to individual trauma because many of the problems reflected in individuals may also highlight issues that affect a collective body. Neil Smelser elaborates on collective forms of trauma by delineating a series of requirements that satisfy the condition of what he calls cultural trauma. He defines it as “memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group that evoke(s) an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening to a society’s existence by violation of one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions” (qtd. in Eyerman 2). Smelser’s definition of cultural trauma is informed by the current understanding of trauma in terms of it being a severe wound or injury to the mind, but is applicable to group settings. As Smelser’s definition and the historical backgrounds of the social contexts in the chosen texts, cultural trauma results in repetitive, unforgettable symbolic losses.

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3 Kai Erickson defines a collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma” (231-241).
4 Ruth’s Leys provides a complete history of the modes of trauma in Trauma: A Genealogy.
whose absence are felt on the same behavioral and emotional levels as outlined in individual forms of trauma. The only difference is that the individually felt trauma also implicates a serious blow to the social bonds of a community or puts one at odds with the community.

Using Smelser’s definition, Ron Eyerman examines slavery as the foundational cultural trauma for African Americans, as it resulted in a “dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric,” but also helped black public intellectuals, such as George Washington Williams, to develop a collective identity for the newly freed slaves through the remembrance of it (2). As Eyerman suggests, slavery as a cultural trauma resulted not only in physical deaths but also in social, symbolic deaths that separated slaves from identifiable origins, rituals, and traditions for the enslaved and later generations because of mental wounds. As a bulwark against social death, slaves left evidence of their existence in folk music, cultural rituals, slave narratives, and generational memories. By doing this, the slaves retained many of their rituals and social mores in revised forms. These material memories and other cultural narratives from the period after slavery allow access to the lives of the people. Eyerman proposes that only in the generations that did not directly experience slavery that African Americans saw slavery as a collective trauma through the work of collecting these material remains and viewing them as impetuses for artistic responses.

Recently literary theorists, such as Cathy Caruth, use trauma as a trope in analyzing literature. Caruth views trauma as a “double wound” that creates a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (4-5). Mental wounds, therefore, can generate a number of unresolved losses that require energy in order to heal because of their belated effects. Trauma is therefore felt during the actual event and in the memories that represent its unbearable survival. As Caruth’s definition suggests, trauma overwhelms the ability for an individual to cope with the resulting mental stress because of its damaging effects on one’s cognitive, physical, and emotional stability. She writes that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt

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5 Williams wrote *History of the Negro Race in America* in 1882, which is a historical account of slavery, and also a remembrance.
6 Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death*. 35-75.
7 Caruth privileges Freud and the Holocaust as seminal sites for understanding trauma. Her focus reflects the current trend in literary theory that discusses literature and trauma. African American literature as a possible source of understanding the relationship is often left out of the discussion, but it, and the criticism of it, explores a plethora of issues that can be read through the lens of trauma.
the survivor later on” (4). The double wound affects both the survivors and the generational witnesses. As the trauma narratives are repeated or when the trauma repeatedly imposes itself later in the mind, it causes further damage to the individual and to the community. If certain measures are taken, such as mourning, though, it can lead to the healing of the wounds.

Eyerman’s reading of slavery connects with Caruth’s idea of gaining distance from one’s trauma in order to understand it. As we see in the texts of this study, writing allows the authors a certain amount of distance from the scene of trauma. Similarly, after the end of slavery many black intellectuals were concerned with challenging the shame and guilt associated with their previous generations’ enslavement.

Eyerman’s reading of slavery as a cultural trauma also connects with Caruth’s idea of the belated effects of a double wound, as the losses caused by slavery were not immediately understood, but instead required a belated reaction through artistic or literary forms. I would also argue that although later generations did look back at slavery from a removed position, they still did so while unconsciously experiencing the effects of its symbolic losses, such as the losses of familial relationships and language forms. Narratives or storytelling allowed subsequent generations to counteract the loss of meaning caused by trauma through writing and passing of stories as ways of making meaning and gaining understanding. Because mental wounds are often unconsciously present and intangible, literature, with its use of symbolism and metaphorical language, allows the author to explore the ramifications of trauma beyond the realm of the factual details.

For Caruth, the “story of the wound” remains unknown and defies understanding except through a language that is literary or metaphorical that allows the story to be heard” (5). It is here that we must challenge Caruth’s theory because she suggests that the language for understanding trauma can only be found in Freud’s Beyond The Pleasure Principle and Moses and Monotheism. The current trend in literary trauma studies privileges the Jewish Holocaust as the foundational site for discussing trauma. Not only does trauma studies privilege the event as the beginning of trauma as we know it, but also as the point in history where a language developed for discussing it. Thus, discussions of trauma in the context of African American culture and literature are minimal or do not sufficiently address its influence. The effects of trauma exist in African American literature and mourning practices, but discussions of them resist the psychoanalytical base of trauma studies. Throughout the rest of this study, it is my
intention to continue the conversation between African American literature and trauma studies by looking at the ways in which fictional writers and critics of African American literature have responded to both trauma and loss, which often occurs in forms and language not acknowledged in the current rhetoric of trauma studies, but shows similar effects.

Kali Tal, who recognizes the oversight, argues that there is a need for critical conversations in trauma studies of the experiences and critical theories of African Americans responding to trauma. Tal highlights a number of instances in which African American literary and cultural critics discuss the effects of trauma. For instance, she cites W.E.B Du Bois’s well-known theory of double consciousness, which serves as the basis for many theories of African American literature and experiences, as being a description of a traumatized figure’s “internal struggle to reconcile history and individual personal trauma” (Tal 127):

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in the same dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (364-65)

Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness considers how internal struggles, attacks on the ego, and ideas of identity connect with the social stability of history. Inherent in Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness is a transformation of what may seem negative into a “gift” of extended vision. In one sense, then, trauma encourages the creation of responses that attempt to counteract its effects. As evidence, Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that when the authors of slave narratives write to testify to their experiences, it is also a part of the work of identity building. Gates reads the slave narratives not as “black literary culture,” but as the “testimony of defilement: the slave’s representation and reversal of the master’s attempt to transform a human being into a commodity, and the slave’s simultaneous verbal witness of the possession of a humanity shared in common with Europeans” (128). Tal sees the slave survivor in Gates’s account as the “sophisticated straddler of worlds, negotiating hostile territory from a position of disadvantage
which he turns to advantage through reversal, choosing, at the crosswords, a new path to walk […] The survivor is an agent, a witting and powerful, though apparently wounded messenger” (Tal 129). I highlight these two examples to show that resistance and the making of meaning and retention of an identity through writing are foundational political attributes of African American literary theory.

In similar ways, resistance and making meaning in narrative forms also exist in African American ways of mourning. As Karla F. C. Holloway observes in her study of death in African American culture, the end of slavery did not signal the end of violent attacks on African Americans: “The twentieth century rehearsed, nearly to perfection, a relentless cycle of cultural memory and black mourning. Black deaths and black dying have cut across and through decades and centuries as if neither one matters more than the incoherent, associative presence of the other” (Passed On 1). Although Eyerman labels slavery as the foundational traumatic event for African Americans, Emmett Till’s murder or the MOVE bombing, the historical contexts for Blues for Mister Charlie, The Long Dream, and Philadelphia Fire, are secondary forms of cultural trauma due to threats of social death similar to those found represented in slavery. Both events remain incomplete in terms of the victims receiving justice or in the community developing effective responses to the symbolic losses. The overwhelming presence of death in the twentieth century created numerous opportunities for community-wide displays of mourning that allowed individual instances of death to become a part of a collective experience or cultural trauma. As Holloway concludes, “Even if the story is grief-stricken, the act of memorializing retains a particular aspect of a culture’s narrative, and for blacks in the Americas, some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death” (Passed On 1). By characterizing events such as that bombing and that murder as mourning stories or “cultural narratives that are ‘passed on’ in both senses of the expression—they are stories about death, and they are shared within the culture and from generation to generation […] to perform perversely both a descriptive and prescriptive ritual,” Holloway reveals how death has shaped the existence and actions of the black community (“Cultural Narrative” 32-34). Her description of cultural narratives clearly implies that cultural trauma is central in forming and retaining racial memory.

I give more information on each cultural trauma in the subsequent chapters. For the historical contexts of these events see Harry, Margot. Attention MOVE! This is America! Chicago: Banner Press, 1987; Metress, Christopher. The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002; and Weisenburger, Steven. Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slaver and Child-murder from the Old South. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998.
Mourning stories, therefore, have a double function as evidence of the existence of a cultural trauma and as mediums for healing. While Holloway accurately acknowledges the existence of mourning stories, I push her ideas further to address the traumatic and melancholic implications inherent in the repetition of these stories.

Cultural narratives do not exist only as carriers for remembrance, but also hold a distinct political function for authors who manipulate them to investigate the cultural psychological strain that may accompany cultural trauma. By purposefully returning to scenes of death, these authors explore mourning stories for racial memory to expose the voids found in the historical record and the “wounds” that exist in the African American collective psyche. “The cultural meanings ascribed to spaces of the dead and dying are invoked through social practices and it is this nexus of social space and practice that reproduces potent death-related memories” (Hallam and Hockey 5). These memories, in the forms of cultural narratives or images, are culturally coded and represent values held by the African American community. John Mbiti, who studies Africa religions and philosophy observes that a central part of African Culture lies in the speaking the names of the “living dead.” He observes that the dead and the living dead hold a privileged position in African culture: “This recognition by name is extremely important. The appearance of the departed and his being recognized by name, may continue for up to four or five generations, so long as someone is alive who once knew the departed personally and by name” (25-26). The purpose of this is to acknowledge and remember their presence. It helps ground feelings of identity and having a didactic teaching function. A theory of textual mourning considers the telling of stories, whether oral or written, as comparable to speaking the names of the dead through the revised forms found in African American culture. In either instance, the purpose is to acknowledge, remember, and establish the dead as didactic ancestral figures. Remembering the dead and telling their stories become linked in developing a collective identity. The construction of the death scenes and the positioning of the dead throughout the texts, also, mimic this tone of viewing the loss of each character as a productive site for creating opportunities for action. This becomes a way of politicizing loss and creating counter forms of mourning. In African American responses,

Death is thus necessarily constructed by a culture; it grounds the many ways a culture stabilizes and represents itself, and yet it always does so as a signifier with an incessantly
receding ungraspable signified, always pointing to other signifiers, other means of representing what finally is just absent. (Bronfen and Goodwin 4)

The materiality of death practices, or objects involved in the processes of grieving and mourning, and the memories that they evoke have a subsequent effect on the imaginative processes of the authors. The authors’ representations of death reflect cultural influences and also aid in assigning the value of constructing a collective identity.

Evidence of death as a representation of African American culture can be seen in the privileging of ancestral figures or the living dead and in the use of death as a signifier of resistance and reconnection to a lost body. Although the thought of locating positive value in the presence of death seems unlikely, death for the authors and characters in this study are opportunities to perform culturally binding rituals and build racial memories. Each event that serves as the context for these texts reveals issues whose importance resides within the African American community on both individual and collective levels. By writing about loss and exploring the ramifications of loss within their narratives, these writers expose a critical dimension of African American literature that confronts the overwhelming presence of death in their culture by performing a literary archaeology of the physical and symbolic losses that these events represent.

The death or absence of certain characters influences the lives of the other characters, often most strongly at these times, suggesting that in these moments their effects are more powerful. The bodily remains and the objects or memories that are material culture allow the authors to search for meaning in what remains and what is absent: “In the absence suggested by death we find potent cultural material and strategies, including objects, visual images and texts that constitute systems of recall for persons and social groups that have been threatened or traumatized by loss” (Hallam and Hockey 7). Material objects, such as memories, mourning stories, images, and dreams, evoke the presence of the dead by operating as retainers of memory: “The interplay between what is made visible and what is buried, that which is retained and that which is lost in the material culture of deaths has an impact in terms of the possibilities of memory and forgetting” (Hallam and Hockey 9). The intent is to make particular events socially visible through strategies of framing, displaying or narrating them. The loss of sensory memory or symbolic losses result in fragmented self images and harms the development of social identities.
Death and dying become the modes of entrance into acts of textual mourning for Wright, Baldwin, Morrison, and Wideman, for their literary archaeology, and for the characters. The authors bring history into the present and the dead into the spaces of the living. The valued relationship between the living and the dead in the African American community allows these authors to approach death not as an ending, but as a transitional space that calls attention to what is absent and what remains in unresolved loss. David Eng and David Kazanjian encourage us to view loss “as productive rather than pathological, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary” (ix). In its militancy, loss can become a political and creative force in countering and recovering what has been lost.

Death, therefore, does not end relationships in the texts, but instead transforms the physical body, social relations, and cultural configurations through ritualized social practices associated with dying, mourning, and grief. Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Hockey, who study the relationship between material culture, memories, and death, suggest that death is rewritten onto objects that mediate our relationship with death and the dead. In whatever form, objects, images, practices, places, and spaces call to mind the deaths of others and how they relate to our lives. Individual deaths may thus hold symbolic value and hold various significances for the African American community. As Hallam and Hockey propose, there is a “cultural politics of memory which reaches across public and private spaces and which designates what is worth preserving in the face of loss” (8-9). Why are certain stories repeated and others forgotten? What sociohistorical meaning or value do cultural narratives have beyond the loss of life? Which particular moments in history are remembered as representative of the spirit of a group? As we take an extended look at the historical contexts of these texts in the following chapters, we find a problem in how and what the African American community chooses to remember because of the implications of inferiority or guilt present in the remembrance. It is the community’s responses, or lack thereof, that decide the continued impact of the trauma on a collective identity. The lives of the characters, also, develop through the relationship between individually and collectively felt traumas.

I offer mourning, by way of melancholia, as another way that Morrison, Baldwin, Wright, Wideman, and African American communities apprehend loss as a productive and creative force because it bridges the gap between private and public moments of loss. Mourning suggests a healing process of working through pain through the use of rituals and objects that allow us to
mark the death of a loved one and begin the grieving process. A theory of textual mourning simulates similar ritual purposes and the uses of cultural narratives, which ends with the text as a site and path towards mourning. During mourning practices, we struggle with gaining the recognition of and the meaning of the symbolic losses.

In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1914), Freud developed what theorists now consider the foundational view of mourning. He defines mourning as “the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal, and so on” (243). The act of mourning, as Freud posits it, is an individualized process with successful mourning requiring a coming to terms with, or “working through,” the loss of the beloved person, object, or ideal following a universally accepted process that moves from attachment, loss, grieving, mourning and reattachment. Freud suggests that working through is a necessary and natural process that allows the libido to detach from a lost object to encourage the emergence of an uninhibited ego. The “work of mourning” tests reality for evidence that the loss is gone and if the ego is able and ready to make other attachments by reinvesting interest and energy into other people and activities. The traumatized person recalls and relives the painful memories until the energies of attachment are relinquished and neutralized.

While mourning, as Freud defines it, results in what seems to be a healing, it also comes at the expense of forgetting or detaching from the loss, which presents a problem if the losses are abstract, as in his examples of the loss of ideals of freedom or liberty, and is fundamental to the development of the ego and super ego. These types of abstract losses are an important part of the processes of developing a self-identity and communal identities. Peter Homas extends Freud’s view of what can be mourned and helps in our understanding loss in its abstract terms and historical and cultural contexts. Homas suggests that “the processes of mourning, ordinarily thought of as a response to the death of a loved other, also have validity for understandings of cultural history, groups, and symbols” (x); Homas further contends that group mourning is often done in response to symbolic losses that have “sociohistorical, cognitive, and collective meaning” (20). Loss, therefore, does not have to be of a person, but rather may be of culturally

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important ideals or a system of symbols. Mourning is not just about the loss caused by grief, death, or bereavement, but is also concerned with the psychology of object-loss and object-love during particular developmental stages involved in processes of identity formation. What we have not seen in discussions of mourning in conjunction with cultural trauma, or trauma in general, is a focus on the similarities of these two responses to loss. In a theory of textual mourning, trauma is imperative in understanding the symbolic losses that affect normal processes of development and human relationships.

While Homas suggests a connection between trauma and mourning, he does not recognize trauma as an impetus for creating a need of mourning, but instead reads them both as responses to “stressful and potentially overwhelming experiences of loss” (27). The clinical definition of the ability to mourn is the capacity for an individual to respond to a loss in a way that marks the lost object as valuable, but also finds a way of coping with its absence. Trauma hinders this process: “Clinically, the ability to mourn is a response to a loss that can be remembered and worked through in memory over time. On the other hand, a loss that is traumatic does not permit this work of mourning to take place; rather, all such efforts take the form of repetition” (Homas 27). Throughout the rest of this study, an inability to mourn is used to explain the resistance of the African American community to forget culturally important stories. In this regard, Freud’s definition of mourning does not account for the creativity that melancholia affords these authors or the continuous engagement that it allows with symbolic losses. Therefore, mourning does occur, but it comes through the repetition of cultural narratives in oral and textual forms by way of melancholic attachments. Trauma creates mental wounds which in return produce symbolic losses through the repetition of memories associated with the event, but which also aid in the remembrance of the event. The retention of these memories becomes useful in the textual mourning of cultural trauma because it aids in the retention of racial memory. The failure of mourning symbolic losses can lead to visible social problems and physical reactions. The failure to create redemptive narratives in the chosen texts and in the physical or psychological responses of many of the characters is evidence trauma impedes the process of connecting narration and history. Trauma as representative of the inability to mourn, or incomplete mourning in which no mourning is sufficient or adequate, is similar to Freud’s ideas on melancholia, which he views as a pathological, depressive extension of mourning.
Textual mourning, however, considers the political and creative possibilities of continuous considerations of loss.

While I have been suggesting that the language of loss relies on narrative and images to create the path towards healing, I am aware of the lack of closure that occurs in trauma narratives. Inherent in the language loss, then, I argue is a resistance towards closure and instead works towards the creation of the space that invites us to continuously engage with these catastrophes in the hopes of regaining the symbolic losses represented through the images of the dead. I will locate the reason for this resistance of closure through Freud’s understanding of mourning and melancholia, along with Peter Homas’s extension of it to include the mourning possibilities of symbolic loss. Freud notes that in grief and mourning “it is the world which has become poor and empty” due to a quite apparent loss, whereas “in melancholia it is the ego itself” which is “poor and empty” (246). Melancholia responds to more ideal or abstract losses. The key difference, for Freud, is that melancholia results in an inner sense of loss derived from crucial losses or disappointments experienced during crucial developmental periods. Freud identifies certain mental features which are common to both: painful dejections, loss of interest in the outside world, and the loss of the capacity to love, which are also common responses to trauma. How does one repair the ego if the effect of trauma disrupts self-identity or the connection with a larger community, which are necessary in providing the safety of confronting issues of loss? The features associated with Freud’s idea of melancholia connect with Homas’s discussion of symbolic loss and our earlier discussion of trauma.

Homas argues that the confrontation of symbolic losses requires a combination of mourning and melancholy to generate a negotiable effort of remembering losses crucial in reclaiming racial memory, but also forgetting the loss in order to forge a new identity: “Symbolic loss is a set of symbols that give meaning to one’s experiences of life and the world, and this loss [is] not worked through (mourned) but rather reworked by being made into an object of study” (38). The literary return by the authors of this study to sites of loss allows them to rework symbolic losses into texts that promote a re-examination of losses. The inner work of coming to terms with the loss of such symbols is by no means always followed by generative or creative repair or recovery, but it often involves disillusionment, or disappointment, or despair: “Some sort of combination of ‘resignation,’ along with some mourning, Homas argues, is the best way to describe the most common form of this kind of ‘coming to terms with the past’” (Homas 20).
As a result, mourning symbolic losses reflects the paradoxical relationship that exists between remembering and forgetting and trauma and narrative. As a result, repetition and remembrance of symbolic losses become important in maintaining and creating collective bonds.

African American mourning rituals contain a number of culturally coded procedures. The first of these rituals concerns the body, which usually goes through a series of viewings at a wake and a funeral followed by a ceremony at a burial site. The viewing of the body is an important aspect of these procedures because it allows the family and the community the opportunity to see the deceased one last time. In textual mourning, the presence of the body or reminders of it retain this aspect of African American ways of mourning. The actual funeral also contains a number of ritualized practices, such as a printed obituary, flowers, songs, speakers, and a funeral sermon. Each part often contains dramatic, performative displays of movement, speech, and song. Holloway describes these scenes as the evidence of the overwhelming need for blacks to “funeralize,” or make a display of emotion for the deceased through collective responses. Speaking the names of the dead or displaying emotion over their death is one of the most visible aspects of African American mourning; the latter includes moaning or crying out during the funeral. Other ways of showing emotions are through the use of songs, instruments, and communal responses: “African American funerals during the twentieth century depended on the spectacle of the moment to involve the community of mourners as fully as possible in the emotions and the ceremony of the event. Community involvement in the African American funeral ceremony took its significance (if not its actual practices) from West African cultures that attended to death and burial as an important, public, elaborate, and lengthy social event” (Passed On 173-74). These displays mark the loss of the deceased as valuable and widely felt. Funerals became ways of transferring the body from an individual realm to making it have distinct cultural functions. African American ways of mourning, therefore, privilege a blurring of the lines between public and private loss. 10 A chapter in The Souls of Black Folks shows Du Bois discussing the death of his child as it relates to the suffering of blacks in general. Du Bois’s loss becomes both individually and collectively felt. If we move African American ways of mourning into textual forms, we find similar processes for mourning that include funeralization and the blurring of lines between the personal and the collective.

As the opening quote that begins this chapter states, memory is the site of the creation of subjectivity. Memory, therefore, is a social matrix that is performed through the interrelationship between self-identities, personal and collective memories, and stories or literature. Memories help in negotiating the absences created by traumatic experiences by creating sensory memory. If trauma devastates the ability of one to forget or the wound never heals, then the trauma remains. The nature of trauma insists on the creation of narratives, whether spoken or written. The definition of narrative, however, has a problematic relationship with the demands of history for objective accounts of events. Using Roland Barthes assertion that narrative “is simply there like life itself. . . international, transhistorical, transcultural,” Hayden White concludes that narrative “far from being a problem, then, narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture specific” (5). Many of the theories associated with trauma studies privilege the role of narration in completing mourning rituals and enacting processes of healing. Traumatic situations thereby forces us to repeat images and stories with the hopes that they may eventually be worked through, and we are able to develop sustainable personal and collective identities. By choosing to fictionally recreate traumatic historical events, the authors of these texts become involved in the political strife that arises in our understanding of the relationship between history and narrative. On a higher level, therefore, these authors by completing textual mourning are involved in contentious battles with the larger issues of whose experiences are recorded, explained, and by whom.

I suggest that speaking the names of the dead or speaking about them is the most important element of African American ways of mourning that influences a theory of textual mourning. Using Holloway’s description of mourning stories as an example, we see that in their repetition and oral or textual presentation, these narratives allow the need for funeralization to be filled. The stories become a form of material culture that denotes the life of the deceased and allows their stories to be retained for the use of the culture. History and writing become connected when these authors attempt to bring to the present that which has been lost and that which we need to heal. Ancestors and past experiences can teach valuable lessons and reveal identifying features for a collective body. Connecting history with writing is remembrance in
action. Paul Gilroy recognizes the value of using narratives for such work and of having a “rapport with death”:

It is integral, for example, to the narratives of loss, exile, and journeying which [...] serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory. The telling and retelling of these stories play a special role, organizing the consciousness of the "racial" group socially and striking the important balance between inside and outside activity--the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performative, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity. (198)

The repetition of these stories about slavery, the Emmett Till murder, or the MOVE bombing suggests that, as cultural narratives, they promote a sense of melancholia because we understand that the wounds and losses are still widely felt. The authors respond to them through a mode of melancholia that allows an engagement with the past, but which does not allow the past to consume the present. The result, then, is a type of *racial melancholia* present in African American ways of mourning and textual mourning that allows active healing, but also cautions against forgetting.\textsuperscript{11} What we find in these texts is an absence of these mourning practices or if they are present, they are unfulfilling in terms of funeralizing the dead. It is in this absence that the need for mourning still exists and an inability to mourn develops.

Since Freud’s discussion of it, melancholia has normally been viewed as a depressive, pathological state of mourning. The history of melancholia, however, also reveals its connection with creativity and a clairvoyant eye. We actually see this in Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness and Gates’s reading of slave narratives discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Similarly, Eng and Kazanjin review Freud’s discussion of melancholia to consider it as a political and productive function. Melancholia creates a relationship between the past and the present through the remains, in this case traumatic memories or felt symbolic losses that cause the depressive state of the melancholic. It is through this relationship, Eng and Kazanjin suggest, that sites of memory and history are created. Instead of viewing melancholia as an advanced, pathological form of mourning that leads to a depressive state, the authors of this study instead consider the value of continuous mourning implicit in the concept of the mourning story (4-23).

\textsuperscript{11} David L. Eng and Shinee Han in “Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” found in *Loss* posit a definition of racial melancholia that is negative and only addresses the mourning of issues of assimilation. I revise their term to consider the possibility of melancholia as being a productive force that addresses issues of identity and agency.
Julia Kristeva presents a similar idea in an earlier study, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*, which explores the creative force of melancholia. Kristeva argues that it is the job of the psychoanalyst to curb melancholia by naming suffering, elaborating on it, and dissecting it into its smallest components. When a psychoanalyst is not available, literary and artistic creations provide a temporary substitution (92-106). Melancholia denotes that an appropriate substitute for the lost object cannot be found, which creates an inability to mourn. The artist or the author, then, apprehends the melancholic spirit to create a symbolic sign to represent the loss in a tangible object, in this case fictional texts, which authors use to simulate the action of mourning. Similarly, the characters in these texts move not into rituals of mourning, but instead into rituals that have a distinctly melancholic process that shows a lack of meaning. In *Beloved*, *The Long Dream*, and *Philadelphia Fire*, the narrative strategies employed aids the author’s critique of the ability of language to create suitable signifiers for the loss which restricts processes of mourning and articulations of pain.

Traumatic events resist simple comprehension, as do the endings of the chosen texts. Often in these texts something is absent in the community that makes mourning within it impossible. Each text reenacts scenes of mourning with some of the normal tenets of African American traditions, but all of the attempts seem strangely unsuccessful in evoking a sense of healing or recovery. In textual mourning, it is more about the lack of successful rituals of mourning that shows that the issues inherent in the MOVE bombing, the story of Margaret Garner, and the murder of Emmett Till are unable to be mourned through usual means. Beyond the failure of mourning practices with the characters, the texts in general are imbued with mourning mixed with a sense of resignation that the loss is irrecoverable. The function of performing mourning through some type of verbal response in African American ways of mourning and creating substitute forms of mourning connects with current theories about how to heal from trauma, such as Caruth’s idea of the double wound discussed earlier. Dori Laub and Shoshanna Felman also suggest that literature and speech acts are possible places for healing. There is a generational element in storytelling that allows the next generation to gain distance from the original or primal scene which allows enough distance to gain meaning in the trauma, such as in the case of slavery. Morrison, who argues that the “remains” of history exist, privileges storytelling as a tool for excavating the remains of loss, exploring the traumatic conditions directly, and speaking the unspeakable.
The telling is the means by which to excavate and revise the remains to make them useful carriers of racial memory and possible spaces for healing. The key to breaking free of the entrapment of trauma is what Laub terms “reexternalizing the event” through the construction of a narrative that reconstructs history (15-18). “Art inscribes (artistically bears witness to) what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times” (xx). As a result, “literature becomes a precocious mode of witnessing—of accessing reality” (xx). Laub calls this “narrative as testimony,” a literary witness that not only “records, but rethinks, and, in effect transforms history” (95). Testimony involves the telling of the story, which entails a reformation of self that challenges personal and collective identity. Testimony has a double function of producing social discourse and initiating individual recovery. Private anguish is brought into public record and into public memory. Therefore, the writer acts as the witness and the actual history or person/events from history is in the role of the testifier. The writer also moves into a mode of testifier as well, but now the telling occurs in order to provide voices for the future and not silence. The act of testimony becomes a speech act and draws meaning from its effect on the listener. The stories we tell and the reasons we tell them blend historical and creative methods with elegiac intentions through the tools of fiction. Each author of this study use writing as a mode of recovery and as a way of working through the issues.

Narrating loss, or textual mourning, then uses a number of features associated with political rhetoric. The premise set forth by Aristotle will serve as the basis of the analysis of the language used in the narratives. Aristotle defines rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (3). Three divisions allow the speaker the means through which persuasion can take place: (1) the speaker’s power of evincing a personal character which will make his speech credible; (2) his power of stirring emotions of his hearers; and (3) his power of proving a truth, or an apparent truth, by the means of persuasive arguments (24-5). The writers who take as their subject catastrophes often create artistic forms that attempt to leads us towards a sense of mourning or closure in response to trauma. The politics of rhetoric combined with a poetics of mourning allows these authors or artists to apprehend the loss as a productive force. In its militancy, loss can become a political and creative force in countering and recovering what has been lost. Textual mourning is related to the poetic genre of elegy that reveals a relationship between literature and loss in creating meaning from death or, at least marking the loss as important. Elegy consists of making meaning out of death as a way of
marking what is present and absent. An elegy is both a private record of pain and a publicly shared declaration of processes of mourning. It contains both an element of memorialization and an attempt at mourning through narrative forms. By combining the characteristics of rhetoric and the poetics of elegy, we are able to understand the language of loss and the five characteristics that I see occurring in textual mourning.

Textual mourning, therefore, has a de-traumatizing effect. Texts that urge mourning imply a clear site of value because we only mourn what matters. The telling of the story through writing becomes a part of the mourning ritual and has ties to the orality of African American responses to death. It is through these varied practices that “the second wound” is found in the voices of these stories that the writers tell and how they attempt to bear witness. A healing, or lack of healing, for many of the characters in each of these texts come through narrative responses. Writing and telling the stories become performances of healing that constitutes textual mourning. As Kali Tal reminds us:

If the goal is to convey the traumatic experience, no second-hand rendering of it is adequate. The horrific events that have shaped the author’s construction of reality can only be described in literature, not recreated. Only the experience of trauma has the traumatizing effect. The combination of the drive to testify and the impossibility of recreating the event for the reader is one of the defining characteristics of trauma literature. (121)

Although language cannot provide comprehension of trauma, it is in the telling, or the attempt to bear witness, that the story gains urgency, enacts its purpose, and shows the value of textual mourning.

The presence of trauma and its obstruction of a mourning process require the creation of alternative monuments or temporary substitutes, what Peter Homas calls countermonuments, to honor the dead. Examples of this include speaking the names of the deceased in rap songs, writing poetry about them, or even by wearing shirts that portray the deceased. All of the texts of this study offer a countermemory in understanding lost bodies, spaces, and ideals by configuring absence as a potential presence. These authors invent memory to awaken consciousness of the mythical histories embedded in American culture with some hope of revealing some type of truth. A countermemory produced by individuals or marginalized groups may reshape national or communal identity and put changing political and ideological agendas in tension with the
public commemorative narratives. Homas argues that a countermonument is created as a way of resisting silence or bringing forgotten information from the realms of absence to inspire a different view of mourning (Homas 22-26). Writing connects to a collective body through its material form in plays, novels, or poems making them a conduit for experience that moves from individual to collective. Writing can be an act of commemoration. 12 The Long Dream, Blues for Mister Charlie, Beloved, and Philadelphia Fire therefore become countermonuments through counter acts of mourning. Within the texts, many of the characters present counter ways of mourning that take the place of traditional modes.

The Long Dream, Blues for Mister Charlie, Beloved, and Philadelphia Fire are spaces where the voices of the dead are freed and the “liberation of testimony” assists the mourning of events that resist understanding. These works, with their basis often historical facts and characteristics of the times in which they were written becomes a mediation between the author and a larger community. So these works begin their service as monuments and sites of commemoration that highlight the value of individual lives in order to create an interwoven collective history, “a record for public memory.” Literature transforms into spaces for mourning and successfully “working through” the trauma evoked by experiences with death. Although these texts begin as recoveries of the dead, they also speak to the symbolic loss of defining characteristics of identity. The tenets and function of art become the media through which there is a “return and a repossession of the living voice.” In many ways, mourning operates on the same premise as history as each author attempts to make sense of a traumatic past. Unable to move forward until the dead or the symbolic loss of self-identity or normative rites of passages have been properly mourned, the outcome of these various degrees of loss is a severe effect on a character’s development or the entrance into particular rites of passage or collective identity. Viewing loss as a positive force allows Wright, Baldwin, Morrison, and Wideman to shape a workable view of history fosters a sense of agency and the ability to retain racial memory in the face of trauma. Textual mourning allows African American authors to bridge a connection between the work of mourning and the work of writing, in order to present the African American community with ways of dealing with an unbearable and often unspeakable history that repeats.

12 Anissa J. Wardi considers Ernest Gaines and Toni Morrison, among others, as being intent on completing “acts of burying the dead and speaking their names, as well as preserving ancestral graveyards” (25). Wardi says that “these texts [Beloved and A Gathering of Old Men] are themselves offered as gravestones—visible markers that provide a resting place for the ancestors” (51). I suggest that textual mourning operates in a similar way.
In the second chapter, “No One Gets By Without Loss”: Racial Trauma and Textual Mourning in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*, I show how the texts work as similar responses to loss. In this chapter I begin by viewing the Margaret Garner story as an individual story that illustrates the cultural trauma of slavery and Morrison’s treatment of it as a paradigmatic rendering of textual mourning. I am interested in the way that mourning informs the impact of trauma on Sethe’s cognition and physical and social ideas of self-representation, which manifest themselves through a series of physical and symbolic losses. To explore this claim, I return to three scenes in *Beloved*: the lynching scene of Sethe’s mother, the taking of Sethe’s milk in the barn by Schoolteacher and the nephews, and Sethe’s killing of her daughter in the woodshed at 124. I also trace the impact of these scenes on Sethe’s handling of the belated effects of trauma that resulted in symbolic losses, and how these memories emphatically affect the lives of others, specifically Paul D, Denver, and Baby Suggs. I also examine the end of the novel as an indication of the struggle between remembering and forgetting.

I continue to assert the place of mourning in African American literature by looking at *Philadelphia Fire*, which continues the call to remember and to speak to the “unspeakable.” After providing the historical background of the MOVE bombing, I concentrate on the main character, Cudjoe, and how Wideman uses both his writing and Cudjoe’s to critique and explore a number of historical contexts for the bombing of MOVE, as well as his ability to use the power of language to understand the incident. Cudjoe’s search for Simba Africa, the only survivor of the bombing, calls attention to the multiple losses it caused—the loss of community, the for the boy and the structure of *Philadelphia Fire* simultaneously question the ability of language to voice the unspeakable and to rewrite history. Cudjoe’s actions suggest that Wideman sees hope of successfully mourning the victims by retaining and reattaching communal relationships and self-imposed critiques of the black community that question individual responsibility. Wideman, like Morrison, ends his novel by acknowledging that his writing of the novel is his attempt to reclaim the voices and the bones from the ashes of the bombing and to provide a space for a written public record of mourning.

In the third chapter, *Sounding a Hue and Cry*: A Consideration of “Racialized” Sexual Trauma, Loss, and Mourning in Richard Wright’s *The Long Dream* and James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*, I begin with a brief historical background of the Emmett
Till murder as a cultural and sexual trauma. Karla F.C. Holloway and Christopher Metress both argue that in *The Long Dream* the death scene of Chris and his mother’s reaction are reminiscent of the Till story, but I am more concerned with the how the traumatic memory of this scene affects Fish throughout the novel as it is induced by the image of whiteness.\(^\text{13}\) Chris’s death becomes an abnormal site of entrance into male and cultural rites of passages and a lasting memory for Fish. The threat and fear of death complicate Fish’s developing conceptions of his manhood and sexuality as they relate to being black. Just as the Till story repeats in narrative forms and memories as a result of the cultural trauma that it represents, so does the symbolic death of Chris resonate with Fish, in terms of its connections with whiteness, trauma, sexuality, and cultural identity. Fish remembers Chris’s death through a number of events, most distinctly in his first encounter with the police and his first sexual experience. The repetition of this scene and the images of white women indicate that Fish may be unable to mourn the loss of moving from boyhood to manhood naturally because of racialized sexual trauma. I argue that Wright’s positioning of exile as a possible way to deal with mourning of symbolic losses, for him and Fish, reflects an inability to mourn and the disconnection that can occur between individuals and communities during cultural trauma.

I follow a similar track in my reading of *Blues for Mister Charlie* by looking at how Baldwin revises the story of Till to capture the social contexts of the relations between whites and blacks and to illustrate that fear is central to the violence perpetrated on black male sexuality and manhood. I concentrate not only on the death of Richard, the main character killed by the white storekeeper, Lyle, but also on the way in which Baldwin positions his body and memories of him throughout the play as a transitional space for the other characters, specifically, Juanita, Richard’s girlfriend; his father, Meridian; and his grandmother, Mrs. Henry. I also examine the actions and discourse of Richard as evidence that he experiences sexual trauma. As each testifies at Lyle’s trial, the testimonies merge to show the lasting effects of Richard’s death. Richard’s absence and presence reminds both the reader and each character of what has been lost and why traditional mourning does not evoke healing, but the power of protest as countermourning does.

In the conclusion, I reiterate the function of textual mourning by asserting that writing provides the opportunity to create material forms with memory-making capabilities. History

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\(^{13}\) See Karla F.C. Holloway’s *Passed on: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* and Christopher Metress’s *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative.*
connecting with writing is remembrance in action. What is gained by this process of connecting narrative with present-day revisions as processes of mourning? Is it through the process of mourning of the dead that there is a renewal or recovery of something that is lost? In many ways, mourning operates on the same premise as recording history as each attempts to make sense of disputed and often traumatic pasts. Mourning is an act of mediation that leads to a brighter future, one that has sufficiently dealt with the past, and moved on to a present of revision, revival, and repurpose. If the written narratives become those sites where these struggles are reconciled then it is the writer who presents possible ways for dealing with unbearable and often unspeakable histories.

Each of the five components of textual mourning discussed above inform the actions of these African American authors who take on the roles of archaeologists in their investigation of the numerous material evidences of loss in African American history. Additionally, each facet of textual mourning has appearances in African American literature and culture that reflect the innovative ways in which they have dealt with both physical and symbolic losses. It is through the authors’ varied practices of creating texts and using various tropes, themes, and forms found in African American ways of mourning, or through the absence of such practices, that they retain the ability to provide witness in a medium where testifying and bearing witness constitutes healing.
CHAPTER ONE
“NO ONE GETS BY WITHOUT LOSS”:
RACIAL TRAUMA AND TEXTUAL MOURNING IN TONI MORRISON’S BELOVED AND JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN’S PHILADELPHIA FIRE

In Beloved and Philadelphia Fire, Toni Morrison and John Edgar Wideman explore individual examples of cultural trauma to expose a number of symbolic losses, such as the loss of community, language, and subjectivity. In order to gain access to these losses, the authors use a shifting, ephemeral figure to compose a language of loss, which allows the dead to be both present and absent. In return, this figure disrupts time and bridges the gap between the living and the dead. In Beloved, it is the metaphorical figure of Beloved and the re-envisioned figure of Margaret Garner as Sethe, while in Philadelphia Fire the image of Simba Africa shifts into Wideman’s own son, Shakespeare’s Caliban, and a representative figure for other black males and children. By returning to the historical contexts of slavery and the MOVE bombing of 1985, Beloved and Philadelphia Fire satisfy two of the components of textual mourning discussed in the previous chapter: an ephemeral or spatial presence of the dead due to cultural trauma and the use of cultural narratives, myths, and rituals. If we view the novels together, we can trace the effects of the trauma of slavery found in Beloved to the problems that we find in the modern struggles represented in Philadelphia Fire. My goal however is not to trace these connections, but to argue that the responses to the losses in both instances are similar for both the characters and the authors. Both novels share not only a similar language of loss, but also fragmented narrative structures. Each novel is made up of a number of subplots that combine to tell a related story. It is this collective effort of joining various stories or points of view that aids in bringing meaning back into an otherwise traumatic and dismembering space filled with death and confusion.

Next, by creating texts with historical and, in the case of Philadelphia Fire, autobiographical elements, the texts become spaces where the authors and readers can attempt to work through the traumatic memories of these particular events. This happens by producing texts that reenact many traditional elements of African American ways of mourning to create counter forms of mourning and countermonuments. Morrison and Wideman are not so much intent on burying the dead, but look to the dead who resist burial. The coexistence of the living
and the living dead ruptures natural ways of mourning and “represents a usable set of experiences, cultural artifacts and values” (qtd in Wardi 11). By completing a literary archaeology of loss, or textual mourning, Beloved and Philadelphia Fire mourn the silenced and forgotten by bringing them back to our remembrance and by finding a political function in the inability to mourn. Wideman shares Morrison’s view that narratives are the spaces for retrospection and reflection. Wideman presents a number of motivating factors that influence his works in numerous interviews and essay, but most tellingly in his essay “In Praise of Silence.” He acknowledges that

The sign of silence presides over my work. Characters who can't speak, won't speak, choose never to speak until this world changes. Stories and essays whose explicit subject or theme is silence. My impulse to give voice to the dead, the unborn, to outlaws and outcasts whose voices have been stolen or muted by violence. Alternate forms of speech, in my fiction, which celebrate the body's ingenuity, how it compensates the loss of one expressive sense with eloquence in another. My ongoing attempt to define African-American culture, explicate its heavy debt, its intimacy with silence. (643)

A number of Wideman’s texts also use the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh areas as the historical context in a number of his other works, such as Fever (1989), Two Cities (1998), and Cattle Killing (1996). His return to these cities and themes reveals a melancholic preoccupation with each of the texts containing elements of suffering and modes of storytelling.

I discussed Morrison’s reasons for constructing Beloved in the previous chapter, but we can also locate a common trend of discussing loss in a number of her other novels that deal with the recovery of the interior lives of women or the trauma imposed on her characters. For instance, Sula and Paradise both deal with the secret lives of women and the communities that reject them for any number of reasons. These texts connect with the same issues that we see in Beloved. In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Morrison states, “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary device” (9). Morrison uses her writing to both alleviate her fears and break the silence:

[...] I use the phrase ‘bear witness’ to explain what my work is for. I have this creepy sensation… something is about to be lost and will never be

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14 As in the case of Wright and Baldwin, a number of scholars have studied the central and repetitive themes in the works of Morrison and Wideman.
retrieved…. Our past… if we women, if we black women, if we Third World women in America don’t know it, then, it is not known to anybody at all….and somebody has to tell it (Samuels & Hudson-Weems 17). Morrison recognizes the power of narrative as ways to express and experience the pain of historical violence. In *Beloved*, she tells Margaret Garner’s story.

During January of 1856, Margaret Garner, along with her husband, four children, and a host of other fugitive slaves, attempted to escape from Kentucky to Ohio and to freedom. Before enjoying the benefits of their efforts, however, their pursuers discovered them. Upon discovery, Garner killed a daughter and attempted to kill her other children instead of allowing their return to slavery. Garner’s actions became the topic of discussion in local and national newspapers and placed her in the middle of a popular legal battle, not only for the murder of her child, but also her use as a pawn in the political debates concerning fugitive slave laws. The arguments for the defense of Garner cited the psychological and horrible nature of slavery as the motivating factors for her killing her child. For proslavery supporters, Garner’s action reaffirmed their beliefs that slaves were inhuman and animalistic, but her story reveals the physical losses as well as the social and psychological losses experienced by slaves. The legal battle surrounding Garner raged for a few years, but at the end, she was forced back into slavery and died an unheralded death. At the peak of its popularity, Garner’s story and the resulting trial inspired fictional stories, essays, sermons, poems, and paintings, with the last contemporary mention of it in Frances E.W. Harpers’s 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*. After nearly a century-long silence surrounding her story, Morrison brought Margaret Garner’s story back into public discourse with the publication of *Beloved* in 1987. *Beloved* begins with the factual background of Garner, but it becomes more about the symbolic losses of slave women not being in control of their bodies, children, or freedom.

While Morrison discusses losses experienced during slavery, John Edgar Wideman moves the discussion to a cultural trauma that resounds with the same needs for mourning and remembering. Narrative accounts of the May 13, 1985 bombing of the MOVE organization in Philadelphia, the historical basis of *Philadelphia Fire*, always begin with a litany of losses: eleven dead (five children), sixty-one homes destroyed, 250 people left homeless, and a community unable to forget. The bombing left only two survivors, Ramona and Birdie Africa, but created lasting memories that survived the baptism of fire that engulfed Osage Avenue and
surrounding streets. The narrative resounds with a need for mourning and ways to heal from the trauma of pain that it evokes not only for the members of MOVE, but for the West Philadelphia community, and the nation. Although most news reports or book-length studies of the bombing begin with this methodical listing of the facts, the story of the MOVE bombing begins much earlier; and the incident reflects losses as a cultural trauma even greater than the material elements listed above.

During the early 1970s, the poverty-filled streets of Philadelphia and the far-reaching effects of the Vietnam War influenced Vincent Lephart’s political and sociological opinions. In response, he denounced the faulty ideological foundations of the American society that perpetuated poverty and racial oppression. Lephart, with the help of Donald Glassey, an employee at the University of Pennsylvania, composed a three hundred-page document, “The Guidelines,” which later served as a guidebook for the members of MOVE; he challenged the citizens of Philadelphia to revolt. Lephart changed his name to John Africa and became the leader of a radical organization, which was first known as the Movement, and later known as just MOVE. His beliefs and teachings attracted citizens of Philadelphia who felt similar frustrations with a system whose intent seemed to be to create an atmosphere of urban warfare leveled against the poor and the black. Although the actions and lifestyles of MOVE seemed extreme, the ideological underpinnings of the organization actually posited persuasive ways of combating the traumatic experiences of urban living under the burdens of poverty, drugs, and violent persecution.

Continuous conflicts between MOVE and their neighbors of Osage Avenue and government officials initiated the bombing of 1985, the climactic end to over a decade of incidents involving MOVE and the police. A similar incident of trying to force eviction on members of MOVE had occurred in 1978 and resulted in nine members being sentenced to life in prison for the death of a Philadelphia police officer. By 1985, conflicts between MOVE, the city, police officials, and the community had escalated. The bombing of MOVE was about much more than the destruction of life; it destroyed the threatening voices of hope and resistance that MOVE represented. While the conflict seems simple in this brief recounting of the details, the impact of MOVE’s presence in the city of Philadelphia, the actions of its first black mayor, W. Wilson Goode, and the reaction, or lack of reaction, of the community and nation speak volumes about racial terror, black political leadership, and the nature of resistance in the African
American community. We may consider the bombing of MOVE as a final attempt to burn out the voices of resistance that remained from the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

As a result, the story of MOVE smolders with an intensity that can, and has, burst into flames at moments around the country. The Los Angeles riots of 1992 and the Cincinnati riots of 2001, although in different areas of the country and at different times, all stemmed from issues similar to those leading to the bombing of MOVE. For the majority of the nation, the events of May 13, 1985 have faded from American memory and most notably that of the black community. The views of MOVE and their constant rhetoric against what they saw as an unjust and corrupt society reveals a truth that forces its hearers to listen and confront their guilty role in the forgetting. Their words go unnoticed because they are disseminated in the wrong package by people who are not like “us” with their long, dreaded hair and “back to nature” living.

The trauma of slavery in Beloved reoccurs in a contemporary and urban context in Philadelphia Fire that is haunted by racial terror in social, economic, and political spheres. Although city officials were cited for gross negligence for the bombing and over $42 million has been paid for damages and rebuilding efforts, no one was ever punished for the murders. The story remains omitted in many circles of national history and as a “passed on narrative” in much of the African American community. The lack of closure surrounding the bombing of MOVE remains apparent in the community that still lies in disrepair, riddled by loss and in need of a “fixing” or mourning ceremony. Recent interviews in May 2005 with current and former residents of the affected area reveal that the Philadelphia community remains haunted by the events of that day. Even today, there has been no widespread, collective response by the African American community or the nation regarding the bombing. Wideman offers Philadelphia Fire as a way of breaking the silence and critiquing America’s lack of outrage about the event. His text becomes an oral testament to the trauma the members of MOVE and the community withstood. He does not restrict his creative genius to excavating the losses surrounding the bombing but conflates these issues with his own struggles with his son, the history of Philadelphia race relations, and the political contexts of the aftermaths of the Civil

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15 Karla F.C. Holloway classifies the MOVE bombing as a passed on narrative in Passed On, but the story has not received as much attention as the Emmett Till story.

16 In recent interviews, for instance, on NPR and in USA Today, many citizens of the neighborhood today remember the bombing. One citizen states the need for witnesses: "They want us, the people, physically out," says Gerald Renfrow, a roofer who has lived on the block since 1959. "When we're out, that means there's no one left on Osage to tell the story of what happened."
Rights and the Black Power movements. Wideman addresses all of these issues in *Philadelphia Fire* with an eye on the “funky,” or those things which we as a nation do not want to talk about, too scared of the dirt and stink of American history.

*Beloved* and *Philadelphia Fire* are viable material forms that retain racial memories, function as sites for mourning, and transform the symbolic losses associated with slavery and the MOVE bombing into political forms of resistance. The literary language of the novels allows Morrison and Wideman to look beyond the surface physical losses to access the symbolic losses of community and self-identity. This satisfies the last three components of textual mourning: an evident lack of and need for closure as illustrated by the presence of material memories or haunting images and affect; a revision of the negative affect of these materials to transform them into a means of discussing the political, social, or aesthetic value of loss and trauma; and a resultant display through various speech acts or narratives that celebrate and recover loss through rituals of mourning. The endings of *Beloved* and *Philadelphia Fire* show how the resistant memories of Beloved and the victims of the bombing, also, force us to question the problematic relationship between wanting to “pass on,” to forget, and to remember the past. As both texts demonstrate, trauma resists the meaning that comes through language, but narrative forms and the acts of testifying and bearing witness present avenues of transcending the oppression of traumatic memories. In addition to written narration as a part of the mourning process, moving to the plots of *Philadelphia Fire* and *Beloved* show that testimony and witnessing are crucial to the characters confronting various cultural traumas to regain or revise what has been lost.

*Beloved* concerns the life of Sethe, a fictional re-creation of Garner, who is dealing with the trauma of slavery and the consequences she experiences as a result of obtaining her freedom and attempting to create a viable identity. The “beloved” in the title refers to Sethe’s “crawling already? baby,” whom she kills to prevent from being returned to slavery. Morrison adds another dimension to this representation by making Beloved both the return of the daughter into fleshly form and also an embodiment of the slaves who died during the Middle Passage. In *Beloved*, the inability to mourn operates on a number of levels. For Sethe, the repetition of the losses of her daughter and mother figures connect with her cognitive, physical, and social ideas of self-representation. As a result, forgetting these losses is not a viable option for Sethe because the

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17 See Martha J. Cutter’s “The Story Must Go On and On: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Jazz*” for a summary of the different views of Beloved as daughter and as middle passage survivor.
symbolic losses are connected with her self-identity. Her responses to the losses manifest themselves in a series of physical and mental scars. To explore this claim, I return to three scenes in *Beloved*: the lynching scene of Sethe’s mother, the taking of Sethe’s milk in the barn by Schoolteacher and the nephews, and Sethe’s killing of her daughter in the woodshed. As Mary Helen Washington has suggested, “motherhood, complicated and threatened by racism, is a special kind of motherhood” (6-7). This “special” type of motherhood is key to understanding of the impact that these three scenes have on Sethe’s handling of the belated effects of trauma and how these memories also affect the lives of others, specifically Paul D, a former member of Sethe’s Sweet Home “family”; Denver, Sethe’s baby girl; and Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law. Sethe’s loss and her failure to mourn also connect with their own experiences with loss. I argue that each of their responses to their own memories and postmemory show the available ways in which slaves could choose to deal with the horrors of the past, but that the key to individual and collective mourning lies in “placing their stories next to each other” through witnessing and testifying.

In *Beloved*, trauma is best understood in Sethe’s description of the past’s relationship with the present as rememory. Rememory illustrates how trauma operates in the text and influences the production of material memories as images become gateways to remembrance and allows access to and an engagement with the past. In her description of the “haunting power” of trauma, Cathy Caruth suggests that “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (3). In a conversation where Sethe and Denver are discussing Sweet Home and Denver’s birth, Sethe articulates how the repetition of images forces the remembrance of the traumatic experience through memories, or what she calls “rememories.” Her description elucidates the connection between the belated effects of trauma on others and the actual experiencing of the event: “You hear something or you see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (36). Rememory, therefore, is something that is always there and transferable from one person to another, allowing it to be felt collectively and intergenerationally. Similar to the work of narration or a storyteller, rememory is passed on and felt by others, not as experienced history, but as witnessed history; and it never dies.

Rememory questions the visual politics of trauma and the ability of images, which can be both memories and pictures, allowing access to the felt experiences of trauma. An image allows
one to sustain the relationship between the living and the dead and the past and the present. Rememory is similar to Fred Moten’s idea of the phonic quality that exists in the photograph of Emmett Till’s mangled face discussed in the following chapter. Rememory holds language and memory of the past, so when felt by others; it becomes a generational and collective experience. “A memory [as] a mental picture (phantasm; Latin simulacrum or imago) … which is inscribed in a physical way upon that part of the body which constitutes memory. This phantasm is the final product of the entire process of sense perception, whether its origin be visual or auditory, tactile or olfactory. Every source of sense perception ends up in the form of a phantasm in memory” (qtd in Hallam and Hockey 29). Memories mediate the absence created through traumatic experiences by embedding in the mind images that have been seen, felt, or heard, creating sensory memory. If trauma devastates the ability for one to forget or the wound never heals, then the psychological effects remain. The trauma of the situation forces a repetition of these images with the hopes that it may eventually be worked through. Rememory contains potent memories of the dead within the text, which are compacted by guilt, shame, and trauma. For Sethe, stories of the past are painful “rememories” that she does not want to relive or tell, which results in her being in a constant state of grieving. Sethe’s rememories converge at the scene where she murders her daughter.

Ashraf H. Rushdy notices that much of Morrison’s work contains a primal scene that is significant and recalled by an individual “at the crucial moment when driven to re-evaluate her or his life. A primal scene is, then an opportunity and affective agency for self discovery through memory and through rememory” (138). In *Beloved*, this primal scene is the fictional recreation of Garner’s act of infanticide. As proof that this scene illustrates a traumatized Sethe, I want to describe her physical reactions and the total shutdown of her cognitive ability to move beyond the memories that re-emerge when she sees Schoolteacher’s hat. At the time of her discovery by Schoolteacher, her former overseer, and the slave catchers, Sethe had been at 124 for twenty-eight days of “unslaved life,” just enough time to feel the joy of being a part of a community, having friends, and loving her children. Sethe was proud of herself for getting out of Sweet Home: “I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between” (190). She says that it felt like she loved them more once she was free to

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18 J. Brooks Bouson does an excellent study of the trauma and shame in *Beloved* in *Quiet as it’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. She doesn’t, however, read Sethe as a melancholic figure in regards to her trauma and she does not conflate the multiple losses that Sethe experiences.
love anybody because they were not hers to love while enslaved. “Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (112). Sethe’s ownership of her body is dependent on her role as a mother. She does not or cannot separate the two. Therefore, when Schoolteacher and the slave catcher come to take her back, Sethe understands the cost and what she will have to lose if she returns to enslavement, the ownership that she is gaining over her body, freedom, and children. Sethe alludes to these possible losses, which she believes stems from her decision to escape slavery: “No more running—from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much” (18). She has a scar on her back shaped like a chokecherry tree, which connects with the memories that she has of living at Sweet Home: being compared to animals, the nephews taking her milk, and her beating.

Although the effects of Sethe’s infanticide are present at the start of the novel, the details of the scene come much later. In fact, the narrator complicates the telling of the event by not allowing Sethe to tell her story, but by instead letting the story be told from the limited point of view of Schoolteacher. After Paul D discovers Sethe’s secret, she does provide some insight into what she was thinking and feeling on that day, but her role as a witness is limited. Sethe’s reaction to recognizing Schoolteacher’s hat is telling in the way that it operates as a gateway to the rememory or image of what she experiences at Sweet Home. She knows that she does not want that life for her children, so when she sees the hat, Sethe says that she heard wings and “Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings” (192). We could read the hearing of the wings as a sign that Sethe’s mind is negotiating the terrain of remembrance or she is welcoming the first signs of craziness. Her remembrance, however, forces her into maternal action. Sethe’s memories confirm that Sweet Home is not the place for her children. She responds like a bird protecting its young and “Collect[s] every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place where they would be safe” (192). Instead of providing safety for her children, however, Sethe’s killing of her daughter traumatizes each of her children. Her two boys avoid her, hold hands constantly, and make up die-witch stories about
her. At the beginning of the novel, the two boys, tired of dealing with the ghost, leave 124. Her youngest daughter, Denver, remains, but develops a strained, but needy relationship with her mother. The dehumanizing experience of slavery for Sethe has an intergenerational influence on her children through postmemory or rememories.

After killing her daughter, Sethe’s response to her actions is silence, a strong hold on her dead baby, and a fixed stare leveled at Schoolteacher as if threatening more violence if needed. It is only after Schoolteacher, the nephew, and the slave catcher leave that Sethe makes her first sound, a sigh, but she holds onto her dead daughter, not only physically, but mentally as well. As Sethe is taken to the wagon, she is determined to carry Denver with her to jail. She seems unable to fully acknowledge the ramifications of her actions or articulate some type of meaning for them. Sethe’s traumatic experiences affect her both mentally and physically. Sethe later tries to describes her reactions to Paul D. She reveals that she was not thinking but instead was reacting to the traumatic rememory of what she had experienced in the barn and her remembrance of the lynching of her mother. The scene in the woodshed connects with the barn scene where Schoolteacher and the nephews take Sethe’s milk. In her telling of the story, the beating and resulting scar on her back are not what she considers as being the worst part of the experience, but instead the taking of her milk. As she tells Paul D about it, she concentrates on the fact that she had milk to nurse her baby and the desire to get to her children. As he asks questions about the beating, she responds twice with “And they took my milk!” (20). As Paul D comforts her, she thinks, “the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else’s hands” (21). At the end of the novel, she wonders if Paul D will be able to care for her “exhausted breasts” (321). Later when Paul D tells her that Halle witnesses the taking of her milk; it adds another painful layer onto the already traumatic event and conflates with her feelings of shame. Seeing this was enough to “break” Halle and as a response, he spread clabber and butter over his face, which drove him crazy. She takes the role of protecting her breasts and children into her own hands:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. (296)
The one memory that affects Sethe the most is when she remembers her mother being lynched and her inability to recognize her mother’s tattoo. While telling Beloved and Denver the story about her ma’am, Sethe remembers that one “unreachable” memory. She becomes agitated and begins to fold a sheet that shows the behavioral impact that these events have had on her. “She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross” (73). Sethe begins to wonder why her mother was killed. She thinks that it couldn’t have been for running. She thinks, “Nobody’s ma’am would run off and leave her daughter, would she?” (240). This calls into question whether or not Sethe’s mother was running away and leaving her. Nan tries to persuade her that her mother wanted her and she threw away her other children fathered by whites; but Sethe, as a young girl was “unimpressed,” and as a grown woman, Sethe was “angry.” Sethe’s resistance to these memories causes them to have emotive power and embed in her ego, so that the memories shape her identity. Her role as a mother becomes the way that Sethe chooses to challenge the negative effect of her losses by creating a counter form of motherhood. Sethe, however, becomes unhealthily obsessive in her role as a mother.

Sethe’s counter form of confronting loss does not aid in her working through her loss and the lack of community support inhibits the healing process as well. Sethe breaks the sacred psychic bonds of motherhood and the idea of safety that the relationship suggests. This scene is therefore particularly traumatic as Sethe violates gender and cultural norms by killing her child. There is a social negation of her loss; and the community, which does not support the way Sethe chooses to stop the white man, does not define her murder of her daughter as a loss. After the woodshed incident, the community does not respond with singing or the usual response in times of mourning. The community reads a lack of regret in Sethe’s demeanor upon leaving the shed. The community responds with silence and not the “cape of sound [that] would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way” (179). Instead, there were no words, only humming as she is being led away. There is a denial of the usual collective ways of showing grief and mourning. Ella, who helped Sethe after arriving across the Ohio River, echoes the thoughts of the community when talking with Stamp Paid, the local jack-of-all-trades: “I ain’t got no friends that take a handsaw to their own children” (221). Sethe’s murdering of her daughter is socially unspeakable and unacceptable. The support of the community is not
available to help her work through the pain in the normal rituals of healing. As a result, she is isolated from the community; the bond that may have allowed her to work through the loss is absent; and she falls into a manic-depressive state. Therefore, Sethe’s loss becomes negatively and pathologically felt, which makes her a melancholic figure because she over-identifies with her losses.

As a sign of Sethe’s over-identification with the loss of her crawling already? baby and her mother, she overcompensates in the motherhood function. Sethe justifies her reason, “Not you, not none of mine, and when I tell you you mine, I also mean I’m yours. I wouldn’t draw breath without my children” (240). As Freud’s model of mourning suggests, over-identification and internalization of the lost object into the ego, in this case, a mother figure and the abstract function of motherhood, causes the remembrance of these losses to rage against the superego causing a break in identity formation. The result is the inability for the lost internalized object, the mother and motherhood, to be decathected; therefore it remains as a source of pain. The result, however, is an over-identification with the loss and the development of a counter form of mothering where the loss of Beloved is also the loss of her role as a mother, which she has used to define herself. Sethe is in a constant state of mourning or in a melancholic stupor over the loss of her crawling-already? baby. She does not want to release her because her identity is tied into being a mother. Evidence of this is shown on the day that Sethe refuses to give the dead baby to Baby Suggs in the woodshed. It is only through the pull of her function as a mother that Baby Suggs is able to draw her out of her traumatic trance. On pages 254 through 256, Morrison combines the conversation between Sethe and Beloved and Denver and Beloved into what reads like poetry. In this section, we see the identification that all of them have with each other. They are indistinguishable. “You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter, which is what I wanted to be” (238).

Beloved
You are my sister
Your are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have come back to me
You are my Beloved
You are mine

Sethe continues, “I’m here. I lasted. And my girl come home. Now I can look at things again cause she’s here to see them too. After the shed, I stopped” (237). Sethe reveals the effect that her crawling already? baby’s death had on her.

Sethe’s energy is bound to the past and presents her as being in a continuous state of mourning. Melanie Klein developed the defining characteristic of a manic defense as having the presence of a loss, but a refusal by the traumatized to be introspective or acknowledge the loss.¹⁹ A manic defense leads to the denial of the loss and an increased interest in external environments that allows Sethe to avoid her memories. Sethe constantly wants to stay busy doing the everyday work of making pies, folding clothes, or making dough, which we see as she remembers the memory of her mother or when she stops Paul D from telling his story. Sethe attempts to avoid feeling and to keep her mind occupied and away from the memories she was trying so desperately to forget. Sethe’s psychological pain represented physically, by her constant moving, trying to stay busy, occurs so she does not have to think. Sethe does not want to be introspective. The presence of the ghost allows her to deny the loss, as does not talk about it. She takes interest in a number of impersonal objects, which directs her attention away from the absences in her life. Sethe begs her brain not to remember, but it does because the past was always a part of the present (83).

Sethe views memory as a punishment used to remind her of all of the things she wishes she could forget. When Sethe is confronted with images from the past, she wonders, “Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept?” (83). Sethe calls into question the power that the replaying and presence of memories have on the body, specifically the mind. It is as if the memories are texts that must be read repeatedly, but she thirsts for something that changes these memories. She actually wishes for the insanity that comes to Halle, who goes crazy and puts clabber over his face after seeing Sethe’s milk taken, as a way in which to rid herself of these memories.

The ways in which Sethe chooses to mourn and attempts to confront her memories separately from the community insufficient in healing her pain, especially when she places a

gravestone marker on her baby’s grave. Sethe does not attend the funeral, but instead goes only
to the gravesite where she does not join in with the hymns of the others who sing. As a way of
memorializing the crawling already? baby, Sethe tries to give her a gravestone marker inscribed
with one of the only two words that she heard at the burial services, “beloved.” She barters her
body for ten minutes of sex for what she thought would be “enough to answer one more
preacher, one more abolitionist, and a town full of disgust” (5). This scene connects with her
sexuality and ultimately her role as a mother when she describes it as the most alive that she has
felt: “When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there with you, put your head on my
shoulder and keep you warm, and I would have if Burglar and Howard and Denver didn’t need
me, because my mind was homeless then. I couldn’t lay down nowhere in peace, back then”
(241). The headstone is not enough because the baby shows herself as a ghost, spiteful and mad.
Sethe foregoes all of the usual aspects of a mourning ritual, and her motivation for putting the
headstone on is not for mourning. It is a way to justify her actions and answer the questioning
community. Buying the tombstone inhibits Sethe’s grief process and the need for mourning
remains and appears in other symptoms. This is an outward show of affection, which does not
connect with the real countermourning that she does by becoming obsessive with her maternal
love. She believes that she has failed in her duties just like her mother. She has refused to face
the pain of her loss, thereby allowing it to be re-inscribed constantly in her psyche, causing
additional damage and pain.

Sethe’s inability to mourn puts her into a melancholic state where she is unable or
unwilling to mourn and lose her connection with her baby. Sethe not only loses this, but also
must bear the loss of a social identity and participation in the community. Sethe falls into a
melancholic state where she wishes for solitude without the presence of a community, fixates on
protecting Denver, and makes a life for herself and for Denver inside the walls of 124. She
resists talking about Sweet Home or the happenings inside the shed, which also inhibits a process
of mourning. Speaking about pain promotes healing as the pain connects with a community and
moves from the private recesses of your mind into a public space. The pain is no longer repeated
in attacks on the ego, but it is released. The repetition of pain allows a working through and
telling her story is the outlet that Sethe needs. As Amy, the white girl who helps Sethe to deliver
Denver rightly acknowledges, “Nothing can heal without pain” (92). Although commenting on
the condition of Sethe’s feet, Amy’s assertion is a central metaphor for the healing that comes
through mourning. In order to heal, one must remember the painful moments until the ego is freed from the grasp of these memories and allows one to make connections with other possible love objects.

Instead, Sethe develops a new relationship with the deceased child, one that is not healthy or focused on working through the pain. There is an uncertainty over the loss because of the presence of her baby in ghostly form. She is there to provide her comfort but still functions to disallow proper address of her grief. The representation or mental image of her little girl in the forms of the ghost and through Beloved allows Sethe to hold on to her loss, which is why she stays in the house with the presence of the ghost. It allows the ghost to be near her and allows her to continue in a depressive state where staying busy allows her to prevent her devious mind from thinking of things that she wants to shun. Sethe’s expectation in both cases is that she can explain everything and make everyone understand why she did what she did. Sethe gets her chance when she finally recognizes Beloved as her daughter returned in the flesh: “Think about all I ain’t got to remember no more. Do like Baby said: Think on it then lay it down—for good” (215). This, however, shows a maladaptive way of dealing with her loss. Sethe’s decision oscillates between mourning and with a sense of resignation, which connects with the way in which Peter Homas suggests to mourn symbolic losses. Sethe must hold onto her loss because it defines her and the house, and the presence of the ghost allows this.

Sethe remarks on the strong feeling of the houses and the memories that she has of her children in that house and of Baby Suggs. The house’s material culture and memories are retained in various objects or images that bring back memories that Sethe wishes she could forget. She tries to avoid them, which is a characteristic of the inability to mourn. Sethe acknowledges the deviousness of her mind and the way memories of Sweet Home were embodied in sounds or the sight of certain objects. Material memories become burdens of the past posit hope for a future through revision of the memories, and propel Sethe, Paul D, and Denver not towards completed rituals of mourning but instead towards melancholia. Just as trauma imprints painful memories in the mind, so do objects become imprinted with these memories. Thinking about how she loved the crawling already? baby, Sethe remembers the pink, un-chiseled headstone and the ten minutes of sex she bartered to get the name Beloved. Here Morrison explores how things tied to traumatic events become tied to everyday things, like a smell or a hat. The events can be brought back to mind because things or objects induce
remembrance. After realizing that Beloved is her daughter returned in the flesh, Sethe goes to work for the last day; thoughts of home pulls her to the “no-time waiting for her” (225). Sethe says, “There was no entry now. No crack or crevice available. She had taken pains to keep them out, but knew full well that any moment they could rock her, rip her from her moorings, send the birds twittering back into her hair” (222). Sethe is overjoyed that Beloved is back and that she does not have to remember anymore. She decides that her world is inside the house: “Think about all I ain’t got to remember no more […] the world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all there needs to be” (215).

Sethe feels secure in 124 and comforted with her memories. Along with these memories and the spirit of her baby girl, “There was no room for any other thing or body” (47). The material elements of the house help her to forget by filling up the space. Paul D’s presence shifts things around and makes room. Paul D changes things and creates a space where Sethe can confront her past without being haunted by the memories: “What about inside?” Paul D asks Sethe. “I don’t go inside” (5). It is not until Beloved arrives and asks her to tell her the stories about her diamonds and her woman that Sethe finds joy in the telling of the stories. Sethe was amazed at the delight Beloved received from hearing the stories, for her “everything in it was painful or lost” (69), “unspeakable,” and the “hurt was always there” (69). Sethe is forced to confront and heal through the stories that become borne through the embodied presence of Beloved and Paul D, who brings more stories of pain about “Sweet Home” and Halle. It is within the relationships that we see how storytelling functions for Sethe. Sethe resists the act of storytelling because she does not wish to remember or bear witness. Words and telling, she believes, are useless.

The entrance of Paul D in the house disrupts the womanly space of 124 with his manliness and the memories of the past that reflect in his image for Sethe. He shifts the dynamics of the house and encourages her to face her past. He brings more unwanted memories and the ideas that she could have a life. “Would there be a little space, she wondered, a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness, to push busyness into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two […]” (21). With Paul D’s arrival Sethe’s routine is broken, and she questions whether she could remember and trust in something. After Paul D and Sethe have sex, Sethe is finally able to see colors again. The day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips and that was the last of it” (47). She just hopes that she does not develop a
“permanent craziness” like a woman whose food was full of tears or one that slept under the bed. She asks why the presence of Paul D causes her to question her ability to bear the pain. She decides that she wants Paul D, for “the mind of him that knew her own. Her story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine and tell again. The things neither knew about the other—the things neither had word-shapes for—well it would come in time” (116). It seems as if Sethe will move towards a mode of mourning by completing a narration of her story, but her movement is halted by the effect of the words of the newspaper clipping that discusses the woodshed incident on Paul D. He refuses to bear witness to Sethe’s story, to understand it because it relates too much to his own shame and pain. She says “Paul D dug it up, gave her back her body, kissed her divided back, stirred her rememory and brought her more news: of clabber, of iron, of rooster’s smiling, but when he heard her news, he counted her feet and didn’t even say goodbye” (322).

When Paul D asks her about that day in the woodshed, Sethe finds comfort and safety in Paul D’s eyes so she decides to try to explain her actions. Sethe faces the memories of her crawling? already baby and instead of going into a manic-depressive state at this moment, which would not allow her to feel. She instead goes in a circular motion that brings her in contact with all parts of the story that make up the whole. “The smile broke in two and became a sudden suck of air, but she did not shudder or close her eyes. She wheeled” (188). She connects the present with the past. Significant in the circular pattern is the relationship that it develops between time and circular motion. All things are connected and a part of each other. She brings in her ill knowledge of how to be a mother and that she had to do what she thought was best. “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off—she could never explain” (192). For Sethe the truth was simple. “Otherwise she would have said what the newspaper said she said and no more” (190). Sethe could recognize only seventy-five printed words (half of which appeared in the newspaper clipping), but she knew that the words she did not understand no more power than she had to explain. Again, Sethe echoes the distrust of the written language in giving voice to her pain. Sethe explains the rest of her actions to herself in her mind, but she does not tell Paul D anything more.

After discovering Sethe’s condition and the presence of her dead daughter returned in flesh, a community of women decides that “a rescue was in order” (301). Sethe’s pain connects
with the history of Ella, who helped her off the boat and “didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (302). At the end of the novel, a community of women comes to save Sethe through a “fixing ceremony.” Thirty women with objects they thought would help and a little Christian faith led the march to 124 for the business of a recovery and mourning. The others “stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (305). The community finds a release through the communal experience of pain that goes beyond the inexpressibility of their pain through words. “Building voice upon voice they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut tress. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (308). The community offers Sethe the opportunity to reconnect with it through a traditional display of mourning. Sethe wants to participate as the sounds wash over her because it reminds her of the clearing where she remembers Baby Suggs’s advice on how to live and be in the presence of the community. Both of these things are a part of what first allows Sethe to develop a sense of self. The opportunity is there for her to participate in the “fixing ceremony” and finally gain freedom from the survival of the memories of the traumatic scene in the woodshed. The presence of Edward Bodwin, the owner of Bluestone 124 coming to pick up Denver, however, interferes because Sethe connects him to the memory of Schoolteacher coming eighteen years earlier. Bodwin’s hat reminds Sethe of day of the woodshed incident and the return of Schoolteacher. Thinking that Bodwin is Schoolteacher, Sethe attempts to stab Bodwin with an ice pick. Sethe is not really saved during or because of the ceremony. Sethe’s grief is triggered by the reaction to the other losses, which she has never really mourned, and now by the threat that Beloved will be taken away. This is why we find her still mourning at the end; she still has not fully mourned. If anything, this scene reenacts her leaving of Beloved a second time and Beloved’s leaving of her. This scene comes full circle and connects with the numerous losses that Sethe has experienced.

After this incident, Sethe takes to the keeping room and ponders color like Baby Suggs did during the last days before her death. Sethe is content to stay in the keeping room. “This little place by a window is what I want. And rest. There’s nothing to rub now and no reason to” (322). This is where Paul D finds her. Paul D returns to “put his story next to hers” (322). “Sethe, he says, “me and you we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow’” (322). He tells her “you your best thing” (322). Sethe answers as if she does not
believe him. “Me? Me?” (322). The ability for her to move on is questionable. Sethe has endured a number of losses, many in double degrees. She has not spoken her story and failed to bear witness to it; she has resigned herself to die. Sethe’s responses to each loss are the same. Her inability to cope with the experiences repeat, and she chooses ineffective ways of mourning. The possibility, however, is there for her do as Paul D has done: he tells his story and risks opening up his tobacco tin to hear and confront his rememories.

As Sethe suggests in her discussion of rememory and my discussion of cultural trauma, traumatic memories can affect others. Rememory, therefore, connects individual instances of trauma to collective ones with generational effects. Denver, for instance, must deal with the rememory of her mother’s actions in the woodshed as a collective or cultural trauma. Denver experiences a series of her own losses with the loss of her grandmother, her brothers, and her ability to go to school, but she finds comfort in the protectiveness of her mother and in the presence of the ghost. She does not know the details of her mother killing her sister. Denver first learns of it during her school lessons with Lady Jones. Nelson Lord asks Denver, “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?” (123). Nelson’s question brings with it dreams and terrifying feelings about her mother and “the thing that leapt up in her when he asked it was a thing that had been lying there all along” (121). Denver finally musters the courage to ask her mother, but instead of witnessing her answer, Denver makes the decision to be mute and deaf for two years. Denver’s silence shows that she resists the hearing of her mother’s explanation because doing so helps shield her from its impact. Silence and muteness become her way of counteracting the effects of hearing the story and being traumatized by it. She disassociates herself from the world. It also shows the power of words to hurt and heal. Denver’s voice does not return until she hears the sound of the baby ghost trying to come upstairs, which shows her connection with her sister and her implicit guilt.

During this time, Denver finds comfort and a way to focus all of the anger, love and fear she did not understand on the ghost. The ghost pulls her away from the loneliness. Denver feels left out when she is not a part of the memories and resents that everybody’s absences were not hers to bear, but that she still had to live with their effects. Denver gradually receives pieces of the stories of Sweet Home and that day in the woodshed; but as Denver reveals that “[She] hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself” (74). Denver distances herself from the memories of Sethe so that they do overwhelm her. Denver avoids becoming burdened by the
trauma of her mother’s story by bearing witness to it and feeling the pain vicariously that her mother must have felt. As Denver takes on the role of storyteller with Beloved as the listener, Denver embodies Sethe’s position within the story and she cannot be separated from her mother’s story:

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved’s interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. (78)

This allows Denver to mourn with her mother, but also to gain freedom from the past. She disconnects from the house and the bond between her, Beloved, and Sethe. Knowing that to save herself, she must reach out to the community. Denver hesitates because she remembers her mother’s warning about the world out there. Baby Suggs’s words help Denver to “step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (286). Her grandmother’s voice alludes to Denver’s lack of knowledge about the past, “about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that?” (288). Baby Suggs’s suggestion is to know that there is no defense against white folks and the way for her to get over it was to know it and still go on. Denver questions her “But you said there was no defense” (288). Baby Suggs replies “There ain’t […] Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on” (288). Denver seeks the outside communal force of the community because she has borne witness to Sethe’s and Beloved’s stories, and recognizes that she must deal with the story of pain differently than in shame and anger.

Baby Suggs’s response to the trauma of the woodshed differs from Denver. On the last day of Baby Suggs life, she left her bed to which she had resigned herself, skipped to the door where Sethe and Denver were sitting, and said that the lessons she learned in her sixty years as a slave and ten years free was “that there was no bad luck in the world but white people” (105). Earlier, during her Saturday meetings in the Clearing, Baby Suggs presents to the Bluestone community ways of healing and enduring the pain caused by white people. She encourages them to love your flesh, laugh, cry, and dance. Most importantly, she encourages them to “love your heart” (104) and “love it hard” (103). She presents them with her way of mourning and dealing
with the terror of whiteness. As Arlene Keizer argues, Baby Suggs’s ceremony at the clearing is a moment of communion between the individuals present and the collective body. Keizer locates the improvisation of verbal and musical structures as allowing them to represent “broken bodies and broken psyches” (36). She likens this event to Sethe’s remembrance of the antelope dance as the ways in which the “people can experience themselves, re-member themselves, as whole and free, in an individual and communal way” (Keizer 37). Despite Baby Suggs’s promotion of this mourning ritual, as she is talking with Stamp Paid, she acknowledges, “Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed and broke my heartstrings too” (100). After Sethe’s act of infanticide, Baby Suggs questions her words, “her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse” (105). Sethe blames herself for Baby Suggs’s death. She acknowledges that what she did “changed Baby Suggs’s life” (217). Sethe’s overprotective love connects with Baby Suggs’s loss of all of her children and the fact that she had no defense to stop it. Baby Suggs is overwhelmed by her losses and instead chooses death. Although Baby Suggs dies from her grief, Paul D is renewed by finally understanding the way toward healing is confronting his losses and sharing his story with Sethe.

Rushdy argues that Paul D’s story is the male counternarrative to Sethe’s primal scene. Paul D’s story is a series of traumatic experiences, which includes having a bit in his mouth, working on the chain gang, sleeping in the trenches filling with water, and finally escaping along with the other forty-five men on the chain gang. After escaping the chain gang, Paul D heads North and “put[s] Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest” (133). He avoids thinking on the material objects that hold traumatic memories and the images of all he has experienced by hiding them away and not loving anything too much or at all. Paul D’s experiences and reactions to trauma are similar to those of Sethe. He refuses to stay still long; so, he sticks with the basic things necessary to keep living. His memories cause him to keep his heart locked. It is not until he sees Sethe that “The closed portion of his head opened like a greased lock” (49), which suggest that his healing is directly connected with his association with Sethe.

Paul D suggests another way that he, and men like him on the chain gang, dealt with loss by singing: “They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings” (128). Finding Sethe, Paul D
begins to want to share with her his stories. “I never talked about it,” he confesses, “Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul” (85). He begins telling it to Sethe and describes how it felt to see a rooster, an animal, freer than him. Sethe stops him from talking by rubbing his knee. She takes pleasure in the motion because it reminds her of working dough. She thinks, “Nothing better than that to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (86). Paul D wants to share his story, but Sethe stops him. Sethe does not want to witness to anyone else’s news about their pain or sorrow: “She didn’t want any more news about whitefolks; didn’t want to know what Ella knew, and John and Stamp Paid, about the world done up the way whitefolks loved it. All news of them should have stopped with the birds in her hair” (222).

Paul D learns of Sethe’s infanticide from Stamp Paid, and he asks her to explain. As Paul D becomes a witness to Sethe’s story, he becomes aware of the closeness of her voice, which is not so much about the proximity of her to him, as it is about the impact of what she was saying and how it connects with many of his own feelings. Paul D does not want to witness to her story because it reminds him too much of his own shame and pain. Therefore, he reminds Sethe of her animal characteristics. He denies her the comfort of understanding and instead tells her “You got two feet Sethe, not four” (194). He laments his leaving: “Passing by that woman’s life, getting in it and letting it get in him had set him up for this fall. Wanting to live out his life with a whole woman was new, and losing the feeling of it made him want to cry and think deep thoughts that struck nothing solid” (261). A shudder runs through him as he thinks on a series of images that stay in his mind. He asks Stamp Paid “How much is a nigger supposed to take?” (277). Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers” (322). In the end he wants to share his story with Sethe and to gain the possibility of a tomorrow.

Morrison mirrors the final melancholic demeanor of Sethe in the last few pages of the novel, which read like an elegy for Beloved and her dual representation. Morrison challenges her actions as a writer as insufficient in terms of successful mourning by questioning the ability of words to represent pain and trauma through many of the characters’ distrust of narrative. The tone of this ending and the narrator’s insistence that Beloved’s story is “not a story to pass on” forces us to question the ability for the novel to capture the truth of Garner’s or slave experiences. By placing writing as a substitute space of mourning, Morrison, makes narrative a critical step in the healing processes for the characters because even in its inefficiency, narrative
is our only defense to trauma. The thematic context of the characters and the structure of the novel allow Morrison to question loss on a collective and individual level and to explore the value of working through trauma and loss through acts of narration. While Morrison constructs a tale that forces the reader to question the psychic losses created by slavery, her choice of using a ghost, an ephemeral figure that cannot be explained or fully remembered, to propel the characters to confront their own pain and grief leaves the ending and Sethe’s healing ambiguous. Morrison makes a transition from acts of mourning to melancholia in the ambiguous endings that question whether the story of Beloved is a “story not to pass on.” The politicizing or challenging of loss comes in the last few pages of the novel. The narrator suggests several times that this was not a story to “pass on,” which has a different meaning at each inflection. Should we forget? Should we remember? In any case, Beloved remains in the elements of nature and her story, as emphasized by the shifting image of Beloved into photographs or the footprints that fit many others, bears a collective element. Although I have been suggesting that literary language in a theory of textual mourning provides a space for representing trauma in Beloved, the translation of this into action is not a simple process. What Beloved does present is access to the trauma through metaphorical, fictional manipulations of what is possible. In Philadelphia Fire, Wideman, with his fragmented, and often confusing, fusion of various voices and narrative strategies, echoes many of these same issues.

The deaths of the members of MOVE allow Wideman to address the loss of community and the possibility of children, the ineffectiveness of language in voicing the traumatic, and the nature of black radicalism all through the “liberative power” of narration. Wideman examines the remains of their story not only to promote a remembrance of the lives lost in the bombing, but also to invite a necessary critique of issues of loss that plague the black community. Similarly, within the text, Cudjoe faces the same issues in his search for Simba Africa. In a departure from the traumatized figure of Sethe, we find in Philadelphia Fire emphatic witnesses to the trauma of the MOVE bombing that broadens our understanding of how trauma works on collective levels. Not only does the novel deal with the members of MOVE, but Wideman’s

Aaron Gresson defines an act of recovery as: (1) A motive to recover something perceived as lost through violation, failure, or betrayal; (2) the use of narrative to describe a discovery inferred relevance for both one’s own and the Other’s ability to deal with duplicity and uncertainty; and (3) an implicit invitation to identify with and accept the liberative powers of that discovery(5). Wright, Baldwin, Morrison and Wideman and the characters in their texts perform textual mourning, an act of recovery, through the strategies of narrative and the work of mourning.
personal stories and feelings of guilt. The novel’s themes conflate in an examination of a number of symbolic losses that go beyond the surface of the bombing. The novel is made up of three different but interrelated parts. Part one follows Cudjoe, the main character of the novel, who hears about the bombing and returns to his hometown of Philadelphia with the hopes of finding a “story of a fire and a lost boy” (7). Cudjoe’s search for Simba Africa, the only survivor of the bombing in the novel, calls attention to the multiple losses caused by the bombing—a loss of community, a spirit of protest, and the destruction of children—to critique and explore a number of historical and social contexts of the bombing of MOVE.

The sense of loss that Cudjoe feels connects with the loss of his own family and his role in revolutionary intellectual circles during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Simba Africa remains a phantom figure in the text and the symbol of both hope and guilt for Cudjoe. Cudjoe’s healing lies in finding the boy, or at the very least, telling Simba’s story by completing a novel, but again the role of narration is continuously questioned by Cudjoe and overall structure of the novel. The result is a novel that Stephen Casmier reads as a “funky text” that “works to undermine the synthethetic illusions of ocularity, which has hijacked our senses, our imaginations, our experiences and our memories […] to awaken us, prompting us to feel and to remember” (5). Similar to the “funkiness” of the MOVE organization that caused the community to stand up and listen, Wideman forces his readers to consider the veiled, unremembered actions that prompted the bombing and the lingering unresolved losses associated with it. Similar to Morrison’s return to the topic of slavery, Wideman chooses to discuss a cultural trauma that reflects themes of guilt, shame, and cultural politics.

I would also like to consider the role of the relationship between the testifier and the witness and how each plays a role in healing through the character Margaret Jones. She is a revisionist figure of the only adult survivor of the actual bombing, Ramona Africa. She gives first-hand testimony of the bombing and uses the telling of the story to Cudjoe as a process of healing. Their interaction also shows the gulf that exists between Cudjoe and the community. Jones position in the novel is comparable to both Paul D’s and Denver’s response to loss. She finds relief in testifying about her experiences.

Part two of the novel introduces Wideman as a character who acknowledges Cudjoe as “his airy other floating into the shape of story” (122). It deals with Wideman’s struggles as a writer, the loss of his incarcerated son, and his hearing the bombing. Intertwined with
Wideman’s personal story is Cudjoe’s attempt to direct black children in a production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which Wideman cites as the “central event” (132) of the novel. Using *The Tempest* as a frame, Wideman attempts to narrate and harness the power of language to tell the story of not only the MOVE organization, but also the historical contexts of race relations in Philadelphia and the nation which provided the spark for the bombing. The play also shows Cudjoe’s struggles to define his relationship and the community’s relationship to language as a precursor of power and agency. Cudjoe and Wideman are emphatic witnesses to the trauma experienced by the members of MOVE and the West Philadelphia community, which are also intertwined with their own experiences with loss. Cudjoe and Wideman’s responses reveal their guilty associations and intense identifications with the losses, both physical and symbolic, that create an inability to mourn. I also concentrate on the continuous critiques of the ability of language to create meaning by looking at the numerous incidents where narrative fails.

Part three of the novel switches to the character of JB, a homeless man as the narrator. JB is another witness to the destructive nature of the urban community. In this section, the question of who owns language and words reappears in the guise of a book, which may represent MOVE’s “The Guidelines.” It passes through numerous hands, including JB’s, and shifts meaning in each context. The most important aspect of this section is the ending where the narrative reconnects with Cudjoe at a memorial service for the murdered members of MOVE. This scene is crucial to understanding how the resistant memory of the bombing and the symbolic losses create a struggle between wanting to memorialize the dead, and also wanting never to forget. Cudjoe’s unresolved losses and his over-identification with Simba complicate the process. In what follows, I try to understand how trauma and loss serve as the undercurrent in the text and how or if mourning plays a role in addressing them.

Part one of the novel begins with Cudjoe in the idyllic and pastoral setting of an island that has been ravaged by a storm. The narrator encourages the reader to take that image of the “green and dying” island and “set it down in the ‘city of brotherly love’” (5). Wideman mimics this scene of distress and destruction in his portrayal of the city of Philadelphia. The city is presented as a living being, a man, not standing, but “sprawled for miles on his back” (20). At one point in the novel, Cudjoe understands the city as operating in zones: “Everybody had zones. Addicts, prostitutes, porn merchants, derelicts. Even people who were black and poor had a zone. Everybody granted the right to lie in the bed they’d made for themselves. As long
as they didn’t contaminate good citizens who disapproved” (46). In this description, there is a sense of loss of community and safety. It becomes clear that Wideman and Cudjoe view the city as having a negative psychological effect on the lives of city dwellers and the consequences involved in urban living. While Morrison tries to reconnect with the minds and experiences of slaves during the traumatic time of slavery, Wideman attempts to understand the effects of urban decay on the black community. As one critic notices, “Philadelphia Fire is obsessed with the city’s unwholesomeness and with burning, local and general, literal and metaphorical” (Hume 3). The city becomes the space that perpetuates loss and prevents the development of life and relationships. This sense of displacement continues in the fragmented structures of the narrative and of Cudjoe’s life.

The connecting event for these fragmented parts is the bombing, but Wideman uses it only as the means through which he discusses the issues that are inherently connected with it. The fragmentation, caused by the deaths of the eleven members of MOVE, allows a single event to be viewed through a number of frames, which helps to create the multiple meanings and themes at work in the novel. The bombing for Cudjoe and for Wideman connects with the freedom battles of the 1960s and 1970s and the stunted results of that period that promoted a feeling that change was imminent and would happen on the terms of those protesting. Although gains were made, the outcome fell short of the goals that were outlined by the movements. In the novel, therefore, there is the mourning of two related events, the bombing and the dying voices of protest and change.

While Sethe was a traumatized victim through direct experience, Cudjoe does not directly suffer the trauma of the bombing as a MOVE member or even as someone present in the community. Cudjoe’s role in the novel develops into what Dominick LaCapra defines as a secondary witness, one who experiences emphatic unsettlement through exposure to a secondary or muted trauma. The "secondary witness," LaCapra surmises, "should reactivate and transmit not trauma but an unsettlement [...] that manifests empathy (but not full identification) with the victim" (722). Thus Cudjoe reveals: “I could smell the smoke five thousand miles away. Hear kids screaming. We are all trapped in the terrible jaws of something shaking the life out of us” (22). Cudjoe’s memories of the Philadelphia community he grew up in allows him to access through the smoke embodied with images of the dead. They allow him to connect with the pain and suffering of the members of MOVE and community members.
Cudjoe’s active awareness of the trauma that he feels transforms his sense of loss into recognizing the need for action, but his feelings of guilt cause him to over-identify with the murdered victims of MOVE. The trauma of the MOVE bombing affects his role as a secondary witness because he cannot differentiate his loss with that of the MOVE members. For him, the impact is the same, and he guiltily connects it with other losses, therefore, causing an inability to mourn. His identity is questioned and hindered by this association, creating a fragmented Cudjoe that splits into a number of different forms in the other two parts. Wideman understands that “no one gets by without loss.” The reality, inevitability of personal grief and racial insult’s double-whammy, that’s always collective and personal” (113). Loss, like rememory, moves from being personally-experienced to collectively-experienced wounds. Viewing loss in this manner allows Wideman to read in the event affecting Simba his relationship with his son and the plight of his son. Loss inflicted by racism moves the personal into a public space. Understanding this allows the reader to understand the transformation of the MOVE bombing into a politically motivated effort to recover hidden issues that reveal much about the nature of the African American community’s creation of a communal identity.

Cudjoe’s position away from the primal scene of the bombing illustrates how he chooses to respond to the loss that he experienced during his time as a freedom fighter and local activist. Unable to cope with the loss of the intellectual activism that was a part of the 1960s, Cudjoe heads overseas and later resides on an island for ten years where he does a lot of “drinking and hiding and running” (87). He reveals that he read about what was going on and watched “like a spectator from a distance watching my country kill itself” (87). Instead of being a part of the changes, Cudjoe uses avoidance as his defense to the loss of the possibility of change in race relations and social policies. He chooses to mourn on his own, away from a system of support. Cudjoe says that he “felt dirty” and “contaminated,” which shows the negative effect that the loss has on his self-identity (88). Stressed by these feelings of guilt and cut off from his community, Cudjoe’s writing ability diminishes, and he is unable to finish a book that he wanted to write about his belief in a better world. Cudjoe mourns the loss of the completed book and that spirit while talking with Timbo, an old friend from those days, who is now the assistant to the mayor. Timbo encourages him to write the sixties novel and to “Forget the fire. Play with fire you know what happens. You’ll get burnt like the rest of us” (88).
Cudjoe’s guilt, however, influences his decision to search for Simba. It inspires him to do something to counteract his lack of action in response to his previous loss.

Cudjoe reveals that he “need[s] to hear [Simba’s] story [….] I want to do something about the silence” (19). Wideman describes the boy as a “brother, son, a lost limb haunting him since he read about the fire in a magazine” (8). Later, Cudjoe continues to refer to the boy as both an absent and haunting presence. Although Cudjoe acknowledges the insufficiency of words to give shape to absence, he places his hopes for healing in finding the lost boy:

He must find the child to be whole again. Cudjoe can’t account for the force drawing him to the story nor why he indulges a fantasy of identification with the boy who escaped the massacre. He knows he must find him. He knows the ache of absence, the phantom presence of pain that tricks him into reaching down again and again to stroke the emptiness. He’s stopped asking why. His identification with the boy persists like a discredited rumor. (8)

Cudjoe remains haunted by the figure of Simba. Although Simba is lost and never found, he remains a figure that allows Cudjoe and Wideman as character to examine the symbolic losses. Similar to the memories of Beloved in *Beloved*, Simba becomes not only Cudjoe’s sons, but also Wideman’s and the symbol of hope. Simba’s characterization becomes tied with the function of language and the inability to articulate what has been lost. Simba shifts into a different form in each part of the novel. In *Beloved*, the character Beloved works in a similar way by resisting meaning as well, and she becomes the key to healing for many of the main characters.

At the end of part one, for instance, Cudjoe describes a dream that he had about a young boy, lynched and hanging from a basketball goal in the park. As he tells his old friend Timbo about the dream, he remembers hearing singing that he can’t understand, but he recognizes it as a fighting, freedom song from the movement. Cudjoe connects the scene with the atmosphere of the previous movement. He moves through a series of changes. It is dark and he starts walking towards the light, loses his way in the dark, and then daylight comes followed by silence. He is at a basketball court; He falls down and half of his legs are gone, he is rolling on the ground, but also a witness, upright, floating, staring at a lynched boy hanging from the basketball goal. He says, “It’s me and every black boy I’ve ever seen running up and down playing ball and I’m screaming for help and frozen in my tracks and can’t believe it” (93). He doesn’t remember much else about the dream except for the weight in his arms and that he can bear the weight.
“What I’m left with, what I’m certain of is not very much at all. But indelible. Real. The singing. The broken neck and slumped body. The weight” (94). “Thought telling you might help. But it doesn’t. I feel myself beginning to invent. Filling in the blanks but the blanks are real. Part of the dream” (my italics; 94).

The location of this dream, the basketball court, in its representation of the community, also connects with Cudjoe’s previous attempt at playing basketball to reconnect with the community. When Cudjoe tries to play basketball upon returning to Philadelphia, he notices the changes in the style of play and in his abilities. “Game was rag ass. Too much like one on one” (35). Cudjoe bemoans the absence of the team play that he knew. He surmises “No wheels. Knew what I wanted to do but my wheels just wouldn’t turn” (38). The game reenacts what could be a modified type of mourning, a period of communion. After the game he thinks

If he told his story to the other men, if he wasn’t a newcomer content to listen to the others, if he wasn’t too tired and beat to say his own name three times in a row, his story would be about night dropping on the city, how deep and how quietly it settles over the park. Nothing the same now. (my italics; 40)

Cudjoe also wants to hear their stories to create a communal story, “[a]nd [he] knows it would make a good story. They’d all be in it. Would the players testify, help him tell his story as they cool out after the game?” (41). Cudjoe seems intent on justifying his leaving and telling everybody his story. He mentions this idea to Margaret and the men on the basketball court, but his distance and absence from the community prevent him from realizing it. Wideman uses basketball as a metaphor for the structure of the community, which questions the inability for one person to repair the loss; instead it takes an entire body working together. In addition to this presentation of the community, the dream also indicates his guilt and role in preserving the community.

The dream connects all of the strands of the story and the various losses presented in the novel. It highlights the loss of meaning and darkness that Cudjoe feels. The journey towards the boy represents his own struggles as well as his failure to make it to the light and generate change in terms of writing the novel and staying involved in the intellectual movement. The symbolism of the loss of legs connects with Cudjoe’s description of Simba as a lost limb, an amputated leg and highlight that a part of the community is missing from the whole. But this time, Cudjoe’s legs are also briefly lost, which indicates that there is hope in his survival; he was only briefly
disconnected from the community. Cudjoe wonders, however, if he can bear the weight of being the survivor and continue the fight. Cudjoe also makes the association between the lynched boy and all black boys, which allows him to see himself in Simba. Later, as Simba shifts into Wideman, Caliban, Wideman’s son, and possibly JB, the universality of the figure in the dream shows the link between this individual of a lost boy to what has been lost by the collective body: safety and the sense of community. Cudjoe thinks that articulating his loss by discussing the dream would give him safety and healing, but finds that it does not; and once again language fails him. As we move into the second part of the novel, this lack of narrative ability continues as Wideman the character struggles to tell the story of his son and to name his loss.

Wideman’s son is in jail and he is described as mentally ill, “unable to treat himself, no outside help is provided” (116). He wonders why his son is “left alone to suffer” (116) and if he would ever be able to write his son’s story. Cudjoe describes his feelings as “the parent who grieves for the lost child owns an emptiness as tangible as a photo. You carry it around” (119). The loss is presented as indelible and unexplainable. Describing the connections between generations of families and a lost child that cancels the natural order and breaks the circle, Wideman observes the loss of meaning that occurs:

You say nothing. Because the emptiness has no name, no place. A negative marvel, a phantom pain incomprehensible, inexplicable while the orphaned photo makes its circuit, and you stand tongue-tied, wondering why you exposed it again. Think of a leg that’s been amputated. Then think of the emptiness where it once was. (119-120)

Wideman’s description of this loss connects with his characterization of Simba as a lost and haunting limb. Even in his bodily absence the pain is still there. Neither Cudjoe nor Wideman has the words to explain the absence. Each recognizes that the power of understanding and representation resides in the capabilities of words to express opinions, change meaning, and offer new ways of thinking. The novel attempts to explain the unspeakable through the impossibility of language. The inability of Cudjoe, or Wideman, to create narratives that straightforwardly account and name their losses leaves them in a state of continuous mourning. As melancholic figures, each moves to writing to create a sublimate form of mourning.

The quote by Mazisi Kunene from *Ancient Bonds* that appears in part two suggests that Wideman agrees with Paul Gilroy’s assertion that these stories of loss, which suggest a rapport with death, must continue to be told. He considers the role of storytelling in the tradition of
African American communities as the way to counteract the destruction by fire: “Our love must survive through the ancient flames/We must congregate here around the sitting mat,/to narrate endlessly the stories of distant worlds./ It is enough to do so,/To give our tale the grandeur of an ancient heritage/And then to clap our hands for those who are younger […]” (109). Storytelling provides a means of reminding the community of its necessary connection and of its job for teaching future generations. Cudjoe’s actions and the inclusion of these quotes suggest that Wideman sees hope of successfully mourning the victims by retaining and reattaching communal relationships and through self-imposed critiques of the black community that question individual responsibility.

Creating memory links between the generations and influences Cudjoe’s choice to use a group of black students to put on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. He wants to give the children the strength to have the power over language. Wideman, as character tells the reader that tempest represents out of time or no time, thus, time is presented as circular with the past linked to the present. Cudjoe observes: “Centuries out of kilter, askew, but no one understanding the problem. Just this queasiness, this uneasiness. This tilt and slow falling. You are in a city. You look up and can’t see the stars and that doesn’t bother you as much as it should. You don’t know what’s wrong but maybe more’s wrong than you want to know” (43). Cudjoe reiterates the city’s effect on disguising the problems that go beyond the peripheral vision. These symbolic losses remain linked to the community’s inability to articulate it. The play becomes Cudjoe’s and Wideman’s way of investigating these issues.

After Cudjoe’s speech to the children during his introduction of the play, Wideman breaks in with an authorial intrusion noting the play is the central event to everything that he writes about the fire. The play is a gift to the community and a way of saving the children by giving them command of the King’s English so that they can define themselves. Therefore, the children would have control over language and be able to define themselves and speak their own existence. The play is not performed; it is rained out. The narrator notes, however, that the effect of trying is not lost:

Begin with a double meaning. If Cudjoe did not live to see his play hatched, he did spin from the endless circle of its possibility that second meaning cached in the drama’s title: time. Borrowed time, bought time, saved time. So this narrative is a sport of time, what it’s about is stopping time, catching time. (133)
Cudjoe hopes that in time the children will understand and continue to speak the words from the play. Cudjoe revises the story of Caliban into one that allows the tales “of an ancient heritage” to be reclaimed. In doing so, Cudjoe disrupts the power structure of discourse and language to redefine the lives of the children. A number of critics have read Wideman’s use of *The Tempest* in the novel as alluding to the common perception that the play is about colonialism and have questioned who owns the power of language and subject-hood. I echo those sentiments, but also extend them to include the possibility that trauma acknowledges language’s inability to make meaning. If we look at Caliban’s life in *The Tempest*, the white man steals his land, his language, his community, and his way of life. In comparison, the members of MOVE claimed ownership of their lives and chose not to live under the demand of society, but others were unwilling to allow them to do this. By placing *The Tempest* as central to the text, Wideman suggests that the house on Osage Avenue becomes an island for the people of MOVE. It was here that they attempted to reclaim their land, language, and way of living.

Jones gives insight into the working of MOVE, the teachings of King, the leader of MOVE in the novel, and the ideologies found in the Book of Life. She serves as a survivor of the bombing. Although she is resentful of Cudjoe, she finds the opportunity to tell MOVE’s side of the story appealing. She seems lost in the memories as she testifies to Cudjoe. She says that King viewed the city as a death force that fed on the weak and the sick. “Society’s about stealing your life juices and making you sick so the Tree dies” (10). He taught the members to love and respect themselves and to protect life, so that it could be passed on so that the Tree never dies. In the teachings of MOVE, society kills everything: babies, air, earth, water, people’s bodies and minds. Jones says, “He taught us we are the seeds. We got to carry forward the Life in us. When society dies from the poison in its guts, we’ll be there and the Tree will grow bigger and bigger till the whole wide earth a peaceful garden under its branches. He taught us to praise Life and be Life” (10-11). The members of MOVE attempted to create an island in the middle of the city where they controlled their way of living. “King had his ways. We all had our ways. If you didn’t like it, you could pass on by. That’s all anybody had to do, pass us by. Hold your nose, your breath if you got to, but pass on by and leave us alone, then we leave you alone and

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21 James Coleman, for instance, reads Wideman’s portrayal of Cudjoe’s putting on the play as the central element of the text and relates it to Cudjoe’s ability to write a book about the bombing and Caliban’s learning of a new language.
everybody happy as they spozed to be” (17). The group does not fit into the ideal “city on the hill” that William Penn describes in the epigraph that Wideman uses for the novel:

Let every house be placed, if the Person pleases, in the middle of its platt…so there may be ground on each side, for Gardens or Orchards or fields, that it may be a greene Country Towne, wch will never be burnt, and always wholsome

Encouraging Cudjoe to look around the neighborhood, Jones asks:

Where’s the houses, the old people on their stoops, the children playing in the street? Nobody cares. The whole city seen the flames, smelled the smoke, counted the body bags. Whole world knows children murdered here. But it’s quiet as a grave, ain’t it? Not a mumbling word. Losing the only thing they got worth a good goddamn, the children the Lord give them for free, and they ain’t got the good sense to keep. (19)

Jones highlights the symbolic losses experienced because of the fire that manifests itself into silence, a loss of a sense of community. The bombing is laden with negative repercussions, which affect the entire West Philadelphia community and especially those living on Osage and the surrounding street. The bombing destroyed a viable working class black neighborhood. In the actual story of MOVE, the absence of people on Osage did not only occur after the fire, but even now the community remains vacant as a result of families selling the shoddy houses that were built to replace their lost houses.

Returning to the actual day of the bombing, Jones says she still can’t believe that eleven people were murdered, burned “them up like you burn garbage?” (17). Jones watched behind a barricade the whole time. “Watched it all happening. Almost lost my mind. Just couldn’t believe it. I saw it happening and couldn’t believe my eyes” (17). Jones asks, “Why’d they have to kill them two times, three times, four times? Bullets, bombs, water, fire. Shot, blewed up, burnt, drowned. Nothing in those sacks but ashes and a guilty conscience” (18). Jones’s disbelief registers as the visual images of that day have been ingrained into her memory. Jones describes the scene of the bombing and her response as they removed her brothers and sisters. She notices that a woman next to her screams and faints and she says, “Almost fell out my ownself watching them stack the stretchers in ambulances” (18). The physical reactions by Jones and the community member show the impact that the scene has on their minds, which prompts one of them to faint. Jones alludes to the physical remains as evidence of what occurred on Osage street. She tells Cudjoe, “Don’t need a book. Anybody wants to know what it means
bring them through here. Tell them these bombed streets used to be full of people’s homes. Tell
them babies’ bones mixed up in this ash they smell” (19). The dead become remains that are
present in the absence of the houses and the people populating the street; they became a part of
the elements of nature:

Twenty blocks west the fire had burned. If the wind right, smoke would have drifted
here, settled on leaves, grass, bushes. Things that eat leaves and buds must have tasted
smoke. Dark clouds drifting this way carried the ashy taste of incinerated children’s
flesh. Could you still smell it? Was the taste still part of what grew in the park? Would
it ever go away? (28)

The bombing continues as a social presence through memories and a part of the elements of
nature. The dead members of MOVE are embodied in the smoke. Smoke is as an irritant that
forces the community to acknowledge the past. Images of smoke and ash that are present
throughout the novel are painful reminders that the problem of urban decay still exists. The
traces of the past and the smell bring the bombing back to remembrance, which allows further
interaction with the losses, both symbolic and physical.

The title of the novel creates another layer to understanding how the memories of the
event can be explained by understanding how fire works. In part two, a quote appears by Gaston
Bachelard: “At all times and in all fields the explanation by fire is a rich explanation” (109).
Bachelard continues in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* to describe fire as “intimate” and “universal.”
He notes that, “It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance
and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into the substance and hide
there, latent and pent-up, like hate and vengeance” (67). Fire can be understood as both a
destructive force and also a means of renewal. The novel operates as a form of renewal for both
Wideman and Cudjoe. Each works toward creating a counter memory of the bombing into one
that documents the events, heals, and leads the way to a brighter future. The lack of discussion
about the MOVE bombing does not heal the wounds that remain buried. Material elements, like
smoke, ash, and the novel hold the meaning of things. For instance while Jones is testifying,
Cudjoe sniffs Jones trying to smell the “scent of the sacred residue” (15). He thinks, “Not nice to
nose under someone’s clothes. Cudjoe knows better. He had cheated, sniffing his witness like
some kind of evil blood hound” (16). The residue of funk in her material things allows him
access to the story. Similarly, Wideman represents the deceased members of MOVE as being a
part of nature, embodied in ashes, smoke, and the wind. This allows the relationship between the living and the dead and the past and the present to remain. A disconnect exists, however, in the community that prevents a recognition of the losses represented by the MOVE bombing.

At the end of the novel, the narrative returns to the actual bombing of MOVE. The scene opens with Cudjoe in Independence Square in downtown Philadelphia for a memorial service for the murdered members. Cudjoe connects the scene to an 1805 riot in the same square where slaves were targeted and killed by whites during an Independence Day celebration. A rememory of the slave deaths connects with the deaths of the members of MOVE. There is an absence of the community at the gathering. Cudjoe wonders “why wasn’t the entire city mourning?” (195). Cudjoe wonders if something happened to make no one show up. He feels as if he is “exposed, out of place, out of sync, like the few chumps mulling around the square” (191). Cudjoe was hoping for a large crowd so that he could be hidden. Cudjoe is oddly outside of the bounds of the community. Noting the lack of people, Cudjoe thinks that he should become the pied piper and encourage the people to participate by reminding them that the celebration was about them, and it could have possibly been them. The people on the streets are foreign to Cudjoe, and he is disconnected from them, their music, and dress. He begins to remember what it was like in the past. He doesn’t know what to say to them: “He doesn’t speak. They don’t answer [...] The burden of returning is remembering he has no secrets no answers [...] Exchanging nary a word. A mumble” (193). Again, narrative fails to create a feeling of community. Cudjoe calls himself a spy, a non combatant and teeters between being part of the gathering and being outside of it. The disconnect between Cudjoe as storyteller or a leader figure mirrors the symbolic losses that are inherent in the actual story of the MOVE bombing in that the spirit of protest is lost amid the ambivalence of black leaders.

The memorial contains the usual elements of mourning. The program reads “through observance, atonement, education, and cultural expression we aim to confront and move beyond the horrors of that terrible day, to contribute to healing the wounds of our city and its inhabitants, and to aid in the development of humane and peaceful methods of resolving our community’s problems” (191). The service begins with the beating of drums that play “a hymn to death and rebirth by fire” (196). Cudjoe notices: “Then there were no more words, only the power of the pounding drums” (196). Others on the program read poems and elegies. There is an attempt to reclaim the murdered victims, the “ones gone who must not be forgotten whose
names face us today crying for vengeance, justice, for vindication, and peace” (197). This occurs through various modes of narrative: the singing, speaking of poems, and playing of music. A collection of balloons, representing the lost members of MOVE, are released into the air. Three balloons resist the ascent into the air suggesting a need to remain present, visible, and remembered, which is what the bombing of MOVE demands. Cudjoe notices, “As the balloons raced away they emptied him. His lungs. His heart. He knew the precise moment when the string snapped. A kind of twang, pop. He has no more to give” (198). Cudjoe is unsure if he can continue in the role as witness and promoter of change. He has developed his role through finding Simba and memorializing the murdered members of MOVE, but now he questions his ability to do that. The victims’ names are recited and Cudjoe questions the heaviness of them. “Words are shell, husk, earthbound” (198). Although he tries to remember the names of the dead, he cannot.

He wonders “What had those balloons been to him? Why had he been tied to them, drawn after them, emptied, when they swept away?” (198). As an emphatic witness, Cudjoe has over-identified with the loss that threatens his role as a witness. Again he questions his connection with the balloons and why he can’t remember the names of the eleven that died. “They became something else, whisked away, elsewhere, where they would always be, waiting, gone” (198). That something else becomes the elements of fire, water, earth, and air. Beloved and Philadelphia Fire shares the use of the language of nature to explain the unexplainable. Instead of providing one definitive way for coping with loss, Morrison and Wideman relate the events to unexplainable degrees of nature. Despite the lack of remembrance, the memories of the bombing remain as unconsciously felt through the always present elements of nature. No other meaning is available, but through an explanation of what is unexplainable, as the life-giving forces of nature. This scene connects with the ending of Beloved as Beloved transforms into the elements of nature that caused the members of the community to feel and unconsciously remember. Therefore, the trauma of the events remains in the symbolic losses that have no explanation, but that still affect our lives.

At this point, it is unclear whether the book about Simba and the 1960s, will ever be written. Like the others in the community, Cudjoe seems to want to forget. He wants to run at the thought that nothing will change. As he turns to run, however, the mob behind him call his name, “screaming for blood” (199). Finally, the “Words come to him, cool him, stop him in his
tracks. He’d known them all his life. *Never again. Never again* (author’s emphasis, 199).

Throughout the novel, Cudjoe has been struggling to find the words to tell the stories of Simba and the MOVE bombing. Wideman as author and character also shared the struggle. For Wideman, the enactment of textual mourning is in his attempt to reclaim the voices and the bones from the ashes of the bombing to provide a space for a written public record of mourning to replace the lack of a literal vocal response to the event. “Words fail me because there are no words for what’s happening. I am a witness. All I know is that everything I could say about what I’m seeing is easy, obvious and, therefore doesn’t count for much except to locate me, outside, record my perplexity” (118). The words *never again* show that despite the struggle to articulate and name the losses, it is the responsibility of the artist, the survivors, and the witnesses to continue to remember.

Morrison and Wideman deliberately produced these novels as spaces for memorialization and mourning, which allow the “hidden” stories of loss to sustain social and personal connections over time. By transposing these stories into a material object that documents the loss, apprehends it as productive and necessary in creative work, and provides a space where the stories can be shared, these authors perform the work of mourning and of writing history. As Jennifer Hallam and Elizabeth Hockey observe:

> the life of the inscribed word might overlap with, but may also extend beyond the physical body; materialized words become potent as markers that preserve identity after death; the materials and spaces of writing are as diverse in form as they are in function, articulating gestures of intimacy as well as public statements. (157-158)

The texts observe the many characteristics of African American ways of mourning by making mourning central in the lives of the characters and in the structural goals of the novel, which creates the narrative response and display of emotion associated with mourning.
In “The Killing of Black Boys,” John Edgar Wideman describes the image that haunts his nightmares as “Emmett Till’s face, crushed, chewed, mutilated, gray and swollen, water dripping from holes punched in his skull” (278-79). He continues by considering the resonance of Till’s life with his own, as well as the lives of thousands of black boys in America who have died violently throughout the twentieth century. Wideman concludes that “We have yet to look upon Emmett Till’s face. No apocalyptic encounter, no ritual unveiling, no epiphany has freed us. The nightmare is not cured” (288). The lynched black male body is a source of haunting for Wideman and a number of other writers as a recurring image. The continued literary treatments of Till’s murder symbolize that through narrative responses the authors here attempted to “look” upon Till’s face. The impossibility of facing the true nature of the murder and its continued reenactment in the present day show its condition as a cultural trauma. Till’s murder has been recognized by a number of historians and individuals from that period as a defining moment for black America through its repetition as a mourning story.

Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago, was visiting family members in the small town of Money, Mississippi in August 1955 when he had an encounter with the wife of a white local storeowner. Whether he greeted her with a “wolf whistle” or a “Hey Baby,” his words and actions were enough to cost him his life in segregated Mississippi. Two days after the incident, Till was kidnapped from his uncle’s home by at least two white men, severely beaten, shot, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River with a cotton gin fan tied around his body as an anchor. Days later, Till’s body was found bloated, disfigured, and mangled, and quickly became a visual representation of all lynched black males. After fighting Mississippi officials’ efforts to bury Till’s body quickly and hide the evidence of the crime, his mother had his body shipped to Chicago. By this time, the story had gained national attention and reporters and photographers were on hand to capture a mother’s pain in viewing the remains of her son. Mamie Till Mobley made the decision to leave the casket open so that the world could see the effects of racial terror: “People had to face my son and realize just how twisted, how distorted, how terrifying race
hatred could be. People had to consider all of that as they viewed Emmett’s body; the whole nation had to bear witness to this” (282).

Over a five-day period, hundreds of thousands of people from all over the nation did bear witness to the effects of a racist society as they filed through the small church in Chicago to view Till’s body. Even more people became witnesses when the pictures of his bloated and mangled body were published in JET magazine and in black newspapers around the country. Till’s murder and the subsequent display of his body sparked a community-wide sense of mourning and desire for protest. Many believe that it was Till’s murder that helped to spark the modern Civil Rights Movement. It remains a familiar cultural narrative in the African American community and the nation. Mobley’s decision to display Till’s body cemented his story as a cultural narrative and elevated his body into a symbol of the issues of sexuality, manhood, and blackness that led to the lynching of black males. Till’s funeral became a defining moment of his era. “Emmett Till,” as Christopher Metress argues, “may have lived only fourteen years, but through collective acts of remembrance, he has managed to transcend his tragic and brutal death to be reborn again and again” (226). Despite this show of mourning, what remains is still a feeling of mourning for losses that cannot be mourned easily and that require a different form of mourning.

Till’s death and the resultant “picturing and display, staging and performance, of his death or of him in death” (61) show how the racial trauma associated with Till’s murder is trapped in the language of the photograph of what Fred Moten describes as accessible through a version of mourning that he defines as black mo(ur)nin(g). In black mo’nin,’ the picture of Till’s body creates an “augmentation of mourning by the sound of moaning, by a religious and political formulation of mourning that animates the photograph with a powerfully material resistance” (63) that connects hundreds of thousands of people through its visual message. Moten’s understanding of the mourning process combines gazing at the photographs of Till with the release of the images and sounds of grief trapped in them as “phonic substance,” or as the language of trauma (63). If we view this phonic substance as an act of testimony to the horror of Till’s death and all of the deaths that immediately became identified with it, then all who view it

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22 Memoirs, such as Anne Moody’s Coming of Age in Mississippi, cite Till’s murder as a defining moment for an entire era in their realization of a personal and collective identity.
become a part of a collective mode of witnessing. The transference of the images creates a possible site for material memories.

Moten’s cultural form of mourning inherently acknowledges the ability of the picture to spur grieving processes for a community, not only for the death of Till, but also for the irrecoverable losses in his story: “The ways black mo’nin’ improvises through the opposition of mourning and melancholia disrupt the temporal framework that buttresses that opposition such that an extended, lingering look at—aesthetic response to—the photograph manifests itself as political action” (Moten 72). At the moment of the gaze, one feels the need both to forget and to remember, by creating a type of racial melancholia that allows one to do both. The photos become material evidence that holds racial memory and possesses the ability to connect generations. The narrative becomes passed on through the viewing of the photos. Similarly, writing provides the same type of access and helps to create what Karla F.C. Holloway calls “passed on” narratives.23 Several texts consider the murder of Till in political and aesthetic responses to his death. These span the last half of the twentieth century and either revise or respond to Till’s murder, including Gwendolyn Brooks’s “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” (1960), Audre Lorde’s “Afterimages” (1981), and BeBe Moore Campbell’s Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine (1992).24 Although these texts are diverse in their portrayal of Till, the repetition of the story shows its power as a cultural site of pain. It is a lasting wound and reminder of black America’s struggles to obtain freedom and power. What is our relationship with Emmett Till that his death and body continue to be sites of cultural memory?

By reading Till’s murder through the framework of Neil Smelser’s theory of cultural trauma, we can develop a possible understanding of how responses to Emmett Till’s murder develop through a form of mourning. Cultural trauma “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irreversible ways” (Alexander 1). The repetition of Till’s story and the resonance of it that Wideman sees in today’s context expose a sense of unfinished mourning associated with his story. I argue that this unfinished sense of mourning is due to the symbolic losses inherent in not

23 Holloway, “Cultural Narrative” 32-34.
24 For a full listing of responses of literary considerations of the Till murder, see Christopher Metress’s The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative.
only Till’s death, but also in his representation of all victims of the racialized sexual trauma of lynching. The culturally important ideals or system of symbols that are lost include the development of normal, healthy forms of black masculinity and strong communities. In *Soul on Ice* (1968), Eldridge Cleaver indicates that Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, along with Till’s murder, put into visual forms Cleaver’s own conflicting struggles with white women in conjunction with his sexuality and manhood.\(^{25}\) Cleaver’s reading of the Till murder is not unique; instead, it reinforces a number of views that consider interracial sexual taboos as central to understanding the context of Till’s murder. The core of the African American community’s inability to forget Till’s murder lies in understanding that the symbolic losses of normal male rites of passage are crucial to the well-being of the community.

Various authors who continue to recreate or evoke this memory of Emmett Till shape the ways in which we remember and force us never to forget the event and what was lost. The texts serve as possible media for transcending the pain represented by Till’s murder. They mark his loss as a motivating force in creative processes, thereby completing textual mourning. Richard Wright’s *The Long Dream* and James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie* mourn and revise Till’s story by exploring these issues through the socio-historical context of the double wound, or postmemory, of Till’s murder, which comprises symbolic losses of healthy sexual and social identities via systematic violence against black males.\(^{26}\) In this chapter, I am concerned with how the traumatic memory of the lynched black male body affects Fish in *The Long Dream*, Richard in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, and their respective communities. Fish and Richard share the similar threats and fears of death that complicate their developing conceptions of manhood and sexuality as they relate to their black identities. Each hero experiences a primal scene that leads to a change in his self-identity and in his views of his father and community.\(^{27}\) I investigate how Fish, Richard, and their communities attempt to mourn and recover the losses that threaten to destroy them and how the ability to articulate their loss prevents mourning from occurring. I also determine if Fish, Richard, or their communities create counter forms of mourning and how


\(^{26}\) Wright, in numerous interviews about *The Long Dream*, alludes to the use of stories of lynching from personal memories and current stories. Karla F.C. Holloway, Christopher Metress, and Hazel Rowley suggest that the Emmett Till story was a historical basis for the novel.

\(^{27}\) In this instance, I am using Ashraf H. Rushdy’s definition of a primal scene, which is an event that forces characters to reevaluate themselves from the previous chapter.
or if this might help in politicizing and challenging loss. In each text, the possibility of healing or the lack of healing lies in the creation of communal responses.

For Wright, *The Long Dream* serves as a testimony about the daily existence of blacks. In an interview about *The Long Dream*, Wright reveals that Fish is largely based on his own experiences in the Mississippi that he grew up in. The economic, political, and social functions of black manhood and the effects of the stifling atmosphere in America on fulfilling the role of man are repeated themes in the works of Wright, such as the widely read *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Wright metaphorically describes this phenomenon as “a black human plant forced to grow and live under abnormal conditions” (198). It is in this repetition of thematic concerns that shows Wright’s use of literature as a space for attempting to understand how these abnormal conditions affect black men and for presenting the evidence that such conditions exist. In the case of Baldwin, he makes his purpose for writing *Blues for Mr. Charlie* implicit in the preface to the play, but we also find him discussing similar themes in his other works as well. Baldwin is very verbal in the preface to the play of his intentions to use the play to shock the nation and to unveil the symbolic losses represented in Till’s death. Not only in his fiction, but also in a number of his nonfiction essays, such as “The Fire Next Time” or “Notes of a Native Son,” Baldwin provides a political voice espousing his views on race relations in America. Baldwin’s fixation on the Emmett Till murder remains evident throughout *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, which is a response and case study of the Atlanta child murders of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s.28

Wright’s and Baldwin’s questioning of rites of manhood show that issues of manhood and blackness are imperative in their actualization of an identity and their place within a collective body, Wright and Baldwin continually question the loss of the “normal” rites of passages from boyhood to manhood. As initially understood in African cultures, this was a time of great importance as the boys learned their place in society by gaining a social identity. The middle passage and the resulting enslavement of Africans had the effect of challenging the way the slaves retained identifiable origins, rituals, and traditions of African culture. The idea of

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manhood was specifically challenged for enslaved males and for later generations via the mental wounds of slavery. Orlando Patterson explores the ability of slavery to operate in these ways through three features of power that drive the institution of slavery: social violence, psychological influence, and cultural authority (1-2) which results in the social death of the slave. The enslaved men were reduced to property and were unable to assert themselves in the normal functions as men to help their children or women and usher their sons through the process of the rites of passage from boyhood to manhood.

These practices developed an emotional dimension, a sense of unity, a respect for history and the man’s role in society, and characteristics that would aid in the functions of fatherhood and husbandhood. The intent of these rites of passage was to shape the development of the boys by teaching them their roles in the community. This time in the boys’ life was key in their survival and the survival of the community. It was the role of the fathers to assist their sons from boyhood to manhood. These rites of passage were normally a series of tests or rituals that aided the boys into understanding their roles. When racial terror de-centered this process, the boys learned to deal with issues of race as a part of the rites of passage for black males. Slavery, and later the conditions during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, and the concomitant acts of violence against black men, forced them to regulate their teachings to the tenets of basic survival in the white world. Lynching, therefore, complicates and inhibits these processes.

In *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage traces the sexual myths that powered the increases in lynching after the abolition of slavery. The myths of the sexual prowess of black men and their desire for white women disguised another use of lynching. Having developed on a limited basis as a coercive action to create fear and submission in slaves, lynching continued to operate in this way after slavery. Without the legality of slavery to uphold the imagined hierarchy between blacks and whites, however, lynching became useful in thwarting the challenges that the newly freed men represented the white patriarchy. The increase in lynching after slavery helps support this view. More than four thousand African Americans were lynched between 1882 and 1942 (Mitchell 31). In the South lynching also served as a way of preserving the Southern honor code of manhood. The major symbol of this honor code became that of white feminine virtue. This would then allow white men the opportunity to assert their manhood at any sign of offense against white women so that the honor code would be upheld and black men would be denied the conditions of manhood. Lynching
was never purely about sex or race; it was also a denotative space for power struggles between white supremacy: the white males’ fear of losing it and black males’ attainment of manhood.

As a result, lynching can be read as a racial and sexual trauma in that it affects black male masculinity, which adversely affects the community by “crushing black economic aspirations, squelching black activism, and perpetuating white hegemony over a cowed and inarticulate black population” (Brundage 5). Lynching as a sexual trauma shows how the fear and very real threat of castration influenced how or if black males developed normal and healthy modes of masculinity. As both Wright and Baldwin show, sexual trauma for Fish and Richard disturbs their emotional and cognitive ability to cope with the threats on their manhood and its effects on their fathers. Thus, racial terror operates on two levels: the threat of physical castration and mental castration ruled by fear and desire. Both are modes of emasculation.

In *Black Boy*, Wright speaks of leaving his native south because he had a “hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame” (285). It is evident that Wright believed that such a life could not be lived in the segregated south. In Wright’s last published novel, *The Long Dream*, written while on a self-imposed exile in France, Wright continues to struggle with this notion through the coming of age story of “Fishbelly.” A number of points, events, and experiences coincide with Wright’s life, including Fishbelly’s escape to France at the end of the novel. Wright’s life as an expatriate led many critics to cite the novel as a failure in its stark contrast with *Native Son* and *Black Boy* in terms of the rhetoric of protest. For instance, J. Saunders Redding states that by being in exile, Wright had “cut the emotional umbilical cord through which his art was fed, and all that remains for it to feed is the memory, fading, of righteous love and anger” (Reilly 329). Despite the criticism, the novel comes full circle in a literary career that brings him back to Mississippi and the sociological dilemmas of the construction of black male identity. His literary return to the South in which he grew up connects with the settings and themes which we find in most of his texts.

Redding was right on one level. Wright did make use of his personal memories, which even in the 1950s had connections to current events that included a number of documented lynchings. Although my intention is not to trace the points in the novel that coincide with Wright’s life, I do want to draw attention to the fact that writing becomes a tool and space where he works through and explores his own relationships to the themes of his texts. Wright openly
acknowledged his interest in Freud. In *The Long Dream* we find him adhering to Freud’s concept of the dream-work, which allows him to confront the trauma of whiteness, not directly, but through writing and through Fish’s dreams, because of their ability to access unconscious desires.\(^\text{29}\) Freud states that “Writing, like the dream, is an attempt of ‘His Majesty the Ego’ to fulfill its deepest wishes, which are usually sexual, or at least related to the ego’s drive to power and mastery” (qtd in Parkin-Gounelas 19). Writing and dreaming, therefore, aid in disguising desires in socially acceptable terms, which gain meaning through literal and metaphorical means.

Even if Wright did not have direct access to the Till story, the lynched black male body appears as a motif in many of his works, most poignantly in his poem “Between the World and Me” and his short story “Big Boy Leaves Home.” The lynched black male body holds such a central place in *The Long Dream* that Jeffrey Geiger dedicates an entire essay on how the black body is unmade using Elaine Scarry’s theory of the “body in pain.” He asserts that “for Wright, the black male body is the exemplary site of the contest, disruption, and emergence of African American identity in what might be called his highly personal vision of the South” (197). The black male body is also a centralized space of meaning for Wright’s “literary son,” James Baldwin, in *Blues for Mister Charlie*. The black male body works much like Till’s photograph as it becomes central to the movement of the plots of *Dream* and *Blues* and serves as transitional spaces for Fish and the Blacktown community.

*The Long Dream* is a coming-of-age story that follows Fishbelly, part of a middle class black family in the segregated south, through a series of socializing events. His father, Tyree is an undertaker and the owner of brothels, nightclubs, and tenements through business relationships with the white police chief and others. Fish’s mother is a peripheral character portrayed as overly religious and naïve. The most representative of Fish’s experiences is the lynching of Chris, a friend and hero figure for Fish; whose death haunts Fish as a traumatic memory induced by images of whiteness, specifically white women. Chris’s death becomes a site of entrance to male and cultural rites of passages for Fish, but not under normal circumstances. The threat and fear of death complicate his developing conceptions of his

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\(^{29}\) Arnold Ampersand argues that Wright often made use of contemporary events, as well as his own experiences, in his writing. He cites as an example the case of Robert Nixon of 1938 that Wright used to help shape the character Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. In *The Long Dream*, this trend continues, as Karla F.C. Holloway and Christopher Metress also read a scene in the novel as reminiscent of Mamie Bradley Till’s viewing of Emmett’s body. Wright, however, did not make the assertion. His biographer, Hazel Rowley, has also made the case that Wright stayed in contact through newspapers and other media to what was going on in America.
manhood and sexuality. Just as the Till story repeats in narrative forms and memories as a result of the cultural trauma that it represents, so too does the symbolic death of Chris resonate with Fish in dreams and particular experiences, in terms of their connections with whiteness, trauma, sexuality, and cultural identity. Fish is plagued by dreams that represent repressed desires and images of white women, whom he views as desirable. The repetition of Chris’s death and the images of white women indicate that Fish may be unable to mourn the loss of moving from boyhood to manhood naturally because of racialized sexual trauma. Near the end of the novel, the teenaged Fish must also deal with the death of his father and his realization of how the shame and fear implanted in him by the tactics of the Jim Crow South seem to dictate the course of his life. He is forced to make a decision of continuing his father’s businesses, risking mental and physical castration, or leaving his childhood community.

The threat and fear of death that Fish feels in asserting his growing manhood complicates Fish’s developing conceptions of his manhood and sexuality as they relate to his being black. Recognizing the importance of what is transpiring when he learns of Chris’s murder, Fish thinks “This was a ceremony. He did not think it; he felt it, knew it. He was being baptized, initiated; he was moving along the steep dangerous precipice leading from childhood to manhood” (64). As his mother hugs him, Fish feels that he is “taking leave of his childhood, of his innocence” (65). Fish’s renaming ceremony further indicates that this is a novel about rites of passages, social and sexual. After a simple misunderstanding, Rex’s friends crown him “Fishbelly,” which has a number of fitting connotations for a narrative that resolves around rites of passage. In African American folklore Fish are often related to birth; and Rex makes this connection obvious when he notes the similarity of the fish smell with the womanly smell of his mother and the pregnant belly of a neighbor. African American folklore takes on a psychological meaning by showing that Fish’s experiences will oscillate between being reborn and dying in connection with women. At the intersection of birth is the possibility of death and throughout the text, the fear of death marks Fish’s rebirth into the ways of society.

Fish’s initiation begins at the site of the bruised, battered, and castrated black male body of Chris. Although Fish is the main character, it is his friend and hero Chris who dies of the
result of a sexual encounter with a white woman, that recalls the image of in Till’s death.\textsuperscript{30} Through this central event, Wright critiques the white world’s use of sexual myths as tools for shaping the lives of black men. This scene also marks Fish’s indoctrination into what Baldwin describes as the “deathly pursuit” of black manhood in \textit{Blues}. After learning of Chris’s death, Tyree takes Fish to the funeral home to see him, so that he may witness first-hand the consequences of not heeding his warnings that white women represent black male death.

Other than Chris’s mother, Fish seems to be the only one present that has a visceral experience upon seeing Chris’s body. While Chris’s mother screams, the others in the room, including Fish and his father, watch the scene unfold in silence; but Fish stifles a scream that exists just below the surface. Jeffrey Geiger reads this moment as lacking in the linguistic signifiers necessary to narrate the scene (200). Although Wright does not show the reader the actual scene of the lynching, Dr. Bruce, Tyree’s business partner and the local black doctor, performs a methodical recitation of Chris’s scars, presents possible ways in which they were inflicted, and provides social commentary. Geiger argues that

Bruce's measured, clinical approach is not, paradoxically, a distancing strategy, but a necessary mechanism for bringing the event into language and helping the body to testify; his approach is suggestive, even sensitive. The doctor's ‘remaking’ of the last moments of Chris's life, however horrific, returns a semblance of continuity and cause and effect to an act of hysterical violence. (201)

Narration therefore becomes a required action in reclaiming and understanding the visual trauma of viewing Chris’s body. Seeing Chris’s body affects Fish physically, which implies that this is a primal scene of trauma for him. Fish is anxious and transfixed by the image of Chris, as if it is being imprinted into his mind: “Tension gripped Fishbelly, the conflict in his mind between the lifeless, torn form before his eyes and the quick, laughing image of the Chris he had known was too much” (75). Fish’s reactions are evident in both his physical responses of silence and riveted gaze on the image of Chris’s body and his attempts to grasp the meaning of the scene and control his emotional response.

When Fish later learns that a white woman is the cause of Chris’s death, Tyree warns Fish against looking at white women in the first of a series of social behaviors he will try to

\textsuperscript{30} Karla F.C. Holloway and Christopher Metress both cite the scene of Chris’s mother viewing of Chris’s body as being complementary to Mamie Till-Mobley’s viewing of Emmett Till’s murder, but the scene also implies other connections.
impart to Fish. Tyree enlightens him, “When you in the presence of a white woman remember she means death!” (64). To Fish, the idea is ludicrous because he doesn’t even know any white people. Fish escapes to the bathroom to contemplate what has just transpired and to work out his feelings. His eyes are drawn to a picture of a white woman in a brassiere and panties in a newspaper advertisement. He takes the picture and ponders it, wondering how her “laughing white face was so radiantly happy and at the same time charged with dark horror” (69). The incident with Chris “fastened his [Fish’s] imagination upon that seductive white face” and her “image lingered on in his mind” (69). We see the beginning of Fish’s path towards a fixation on the white world through white women, so much so that his life continues on a path influenced by this awareness. He understands later in the novel that “the white man’s sheer prohibitions served to anchor a sense of his women in the consciousness of black men in a bizarre and distorted manner that could rarely ever be eradicated” (388). Fish both alludes to the consequence of sexual trauma and the inability for him ever to destroy its effects. Chris’s death and the reasons for his death are ingrained as lasting memories for Fish as the image of Chris’s body and that of white women merge. Fish’s developing sexual and social identities are mediated through the presence of death and whiteness.

The language used to describe the images of white woman helps to cement their presence as symbols of death and fear for Fish as he continuously questions its power and his ability to transcend it. The image of white women as pure, sexual, and unattainable is crucial in inflicting the double wound of sexual trauma. The images of white women retain a phonic substance similar to what Moten uses to describe the photographs of Till. The language of the women, however, helps in retaining the imagined power structure. Fish is affected by the social and racial politics that drive the structure of society without really understanding the motivation behind it; he is born into it. White women function as haunting, sexualized images even at a young age for Fish and his friends. While attending a county fair at the age of eight, Fish and his friends are interested in seeing a sex show featuring a white woman. Although it is “Colored Day” at the fair, blacks are forbidden to see it. This imposes a boundary marker between black men and white women by setting white women apart. Later at the fair, a white woman offers to have sex with each of them for five dollars apiece. After the woman shows the boys her breasts, the group refuses and runs. Sam, one of Fish’s friends, describes her as “lynchbait” (46). At another time, Fish and his friends scare a white woman from the basement of his father’s funeral.
home. She reacts as if she is participating in some type of sexual act. Again, the group aptly calls the woman a ghostly figure, which describes the haunting image of the white woman as a symbol of sex, fear, and death throughout the novel.

The following scenes are fundamental in showing how the trauma of the scene with Chris connects with the images of white women, fear, and death to shape Fish’s experiences and his self-identity. Caught by the police while trespassing, Fish feels that “a clap of white thunder had split his world in two; he was being snatched from his childhood” (113). Fish’s identity splinters when he encounters the reality of the power of whiteness. Despite being in the presence of white men, Fish unconsciously stares at a white woman and finds that world “alluring, but menacing” (114). He surmises that he does not want a part of the feebleness and fear of the black world. One of the cops catches Fish’s gaze and questions his actions. The experience leads to his disembodiment: “He was losing awareness of his legs, his arms, and his head felt lightly giddy” (115). Fish loses control of his body and his psyche as the threat of whiteness becomes real. Thus, whiteness dictates the functions of his body. When a cop threatens to castrate Fish, he reacts by fainting in the presence of the trauma of whiteness as he dreads that he will succumb to the same fate as Chris. The police are amazed that a “nigger” could faint, something that was normally regarded as a display of a white woman’s virtue. Fish is wide-eyed, anxious, and stiff and on the verge of hysteria, which are all signs of trauma. Again, he remembers the “vision of Chris’s bloody, broken body inert upon the table under the glaring electric bulb” (117). Trauma overwhelms Fish’s ability to cope with the resulting mental stress because of its damaging effects on his cognitive, physical, and emotional stability. The manifestation of these wounds and subsequent losses are visible in Fish’s physical symptoms of fainting and the repetition of the primal scene of trauma. Fish’s reaction to the event causes him to question his previously conceived notions about his parents and life in general, just as is the case in viewing Chris’s body.

In this same scene, Fish feels guilt and fear that the officers will discover the picture of the white woman he keeps in his billfold. He eats the “haunting image” (117). He now thinks that his yearning and lust for white women is now symbolically inside of him, an invisible part of him, which connects with his nickname Fishbelly. As Wright discloses in an interview about The Long Dream. Fish’s nickname also denotes an interest in the white world where the outside is black but in the belly, or the inside Fish is drawn to that white world. This idea is validated by
the “gigantic black curtain [that] hurtled toward his eyes” (123) after the cop threatens him again with castration. The black curtain is metaphorically the black world from which he is trying to escape to stay in the white world that was real.

The cop threatens once again “to cut off what you love” (125). Fish does not faint, but instead uses his hate to thwart the coming black curtain. The threats of castration assist the policemen in trying to make Fish scared and subservient. He has become immune to their threats and does not allow the black curtain to come down. Fish has successfully confronted the image of whiteness and completes the ritual of successfully being able to ground himself in the white world. Fish pledges that “He was wiling to die, but he would never faint again, not as long as he lived. They could not violate him that way anymore” (124). One policeman asks as they turn to leave. “They made a man out you today, didn’t they boy?” (125). The officer implies that Fish’s development of a concept of manhood results from a confrontation with whiteness that leads to racial discovery. Fish’s experiences force him to think about his situation and the meaning in the events. Fish knows that he has learned how to “act” in the presence of white people. These scenes indicate that Fish’s idea of manhood must first be mediated through a veil of whiteness, but also shows Fish as attempting to work through the trauma of Chris’s death given that memories of Chris in relation to himself recur.

Fish’s initiation processes develop through a veil of whiteness promulgated through the image of the white woman as the symbol of white supremacy. Wright uses the image of the white woman to explore the imposed trauma of lynching and racial terror. While sitting in jail at the end of the novel awaiting trial for a false accusation of rape against a white woman, Fish comes to a similar conclusion:

[C]uriously, he felt that he was something, somebody, precisely and simply because of that cold threat of death. The terror of the white world had left no doubt in him about his worth; in fact, that white world had guaranteed his worth in the most brutal and dramatic manner. Most surely he was something, in the eyes of the white world, or it would not have threatened him as it had. That white world, then, threatened as much as it beckoned. Though he did not know it, he was fatally in love with that white world, in love in a way that could never be cured. That white world's attempt to curb him dangerously and irresponsibly claimed him for its own. (165)
Fish feels that this threat of death makes him worth something if the whites fear his actions. The more the white world pushed him, the more it claimed his mind through its constant fascination with his sexuality. Along with the threat of death, the idea of white women as symbols of the oppression of white male patriarchy haunts the black male figure and influences Fish and Richard’s actions.

Fish kills a suffering dog in a symbolic reenactment or performance of Chris’s death as an act of mourning for Chris and as his transition from childhood to the knowledge of the undeniable force of whiteness. This experience gives Fish a new sense of fearlessness and understanding of death. Fish kills the dog because he wants to end its suffering, but the dog’s passing becomes linked to “another vivid dying…the lynched body of Chris” (146) and he wonders about the nature and reality of death. He acts out Dr. Bruce’s procedure from that night and cuts away all of the dog’s organs. “That’s what they did to Chris’, he spoke aloud announcing an emotional discovery” (141). Fish’s action is a symbolic killing of his fear of death by reenacting Chris’s suffering. Now Fish understands and will not fear death; he had “enthroned it in himself in the same manner in which he had swallowed the white woman’s picture” (141). Fish over-identifies with Chris, and he internalizes Chris’s death. Fish is also faced with the task of saving a white man trapped under a car, but he is halted by the hatred and racial terror that exists behind the man’s cries for help. After leaving the scene, Fish, unsure of his place in the world and what is real or a dream, cries as he finally understands the hopelessness of his situation. He waits until “his world grew hard, real once more” (145). He now feels that to some degree his body once again belongs to him as the fear of death leaves him. Fish confronts the physical trauma of Chris’s death, but the symbolic losses remain as confirmed by the haunting image of white women and Chris’s body in his dreams.

Since Fish’s dreams only occur after a coming-of-age experience, his dreams expose his fears and his desires. His actual experiences influence the content of his dreams, which shows how the sexual trauma of lynching impacts his ego and self-perception. The most common subjects in his dreams are Chris, Tyree, a fish, a train, a white woman, and sexual tension. For example, the night after his experience in jail and his first sexual experience, Fish dreams of a white woman smiling at him from a pile of coal while a white engineer looks on and encourages him to keep piling on more coal. He contemplates jumping from the train to escape and finally makes the decision to flee. As he leaps he hears the laughter of both the engineer and Maud.
Williams, the owner of the whorehouse saying, “Honey, you know better’n to try to hide a white woman in a coal pile like that!” (166). Fish’s dream is reminiscent of his experiences of the past couple of days and reveals his fears that his desire for a white woman was too great to stifle and could somehow be seen. Wright’s use of the dream theory, also, presents Fish with an option to work through his trauma in a setting that does not have the possibility of an immediate threat of death. Freud positions dream content and dream-thoughts as the same subject matter, but articulated differently. The original experiences constitute the dream-thoughts and influence the content of one’s dreams. Since Fish’s dreams only occur after a life-altering, coming-of-age experience, making the representation of that experience. Missing the support of the community and his father, Fish believes that that he will be able to function within the race conscious society by sublimating his desires.

After another dream sequence, he awakens with the knowledge that “he had to learn how to live alone with these images of horror” (83). Fish does not have anyone to talk to about his experiences with the trauma of racism. That fact produces feelings of shame. As a result, he is unable to find solace in anyone. His family’s middle class status and his father’s oppressive force on the members in the community do not allow Fish to have an outlet for talking about his experiences. He restricts the process of grieving to the realms of dreams. This connects with Fish’s inability to mourn through narration that would allow him to find solace in a community that has also experienced what he has. When Tyree asks Fish about his jail experience, he leaves out much of what happened because he could not find the words to describe it. At the funeral home with Tyree, Fish’s fears are confirmed as he realizes that Tyree cannot protect him. Fish weeps at the realization that he has no father. Fish “knew in a confused way that no white man would ever need to threaten Tyree with castration; Tyree was already castrated” (165). Earlier at the jail, during Tyree’s visit, Fish thinks about his father with disgust and believes that “all black dreams ain’t dead … some of ‘em live and walk around, but they dead just the same” (147). Fish concludes that Tyree is mentally castrated, which creates a gap between them. “Words no longer had any common meaning” (151). Since Fish does not have an outlet for discussing his experiences, they remain un-worked in his ego, and he defines himself through their presence. The narrator seems to suggest that men like Tyree are socially dead and defined only through their relationships with whites. This scene shows that Fish’s rite of passage is interlaced with the life of his father.
Tyree decides that it is time to teach Fish the ways of the world and of manhood, but this comes too late and with too many images of trauma already embedded in Fish’s mind. After his jail experience, Fish’s father tries to counteract the incident by taking him to a whorehouse where he has his first sexual experience. As the experience begins, all of the “raging tension, the burning shame, the fear, and the hate left him [Fish]” (161), he feels anchored in reality. Tyree is hoping that “a baptism of [Fish’s] senses would wash away any appeal that a white world had made to him” (164). His father asks him if he has forgotten the white folks after having sex, and Fish answers “yes” but only because that is the expected answer. Tyree claims that all women, including white women, are the same and this causes Fish to relate his experience with the prostitute Vera to white women and the “cruel crucifixion of Chris” (165). His father unknowingly sullies Fish’s idea of sexuality by bringing white women into the equation and arguing that all women are the same. By showing him one way of not yielding to the temptation of the white world, his father indirectly adds fuel to the burning image of whiteness for Fish. Unlike the traditional role of the father in rites of passage, Tyree’s motivation is to teach Fish how to survive.

With his alternative businesses and access to money with the white world’s permission, Tyree impresses Fish but also shows one of the consequences of sexual trauma. hooks, in her discussion of black male sexuality, proposes that the denial of manhood through sexual trauma manifests itself as a hypersexuality of the black male body. Presented with no available alternatives besides death, many black males follow a racialized patriarchal script. Consequently black manhood and patriarchal goals, such as making money, are centralized in “fucking” as an expression of being a man (71). The repression of sexuality by lynching led to the vigorous reclamation of it by creating a space where patriarchal maleness could be asserted. hooks suggests that “Equating manhood with fucking, many black men saw status and economic success as synonymous with endless sexual conquest” (71). If hooks’s argument holds true, Tyree combines both of these entities into his definition of himself as a man. When Fish questions that manhood, Tyree responds “I’m a man! I got a business, a home, property, money in the bank…Is my life bad?” (152). Tyree believes that he has used the white world’s restrictions to create an ephemeral vision of manhood, but he is mentally trapped by the idea that money brings him power and safety from the trauma of whiteness. His real fears are revealed in his interactions with Fish and his reaction to Chris’s death. Like his father, Fish is only defined
in social or political terms, and the reader does not see Fish’s internal strife beyond these restricting definers.

Despite his damning conclusions about his father, Fish regulates his manhood to the same pursuits by first becoming a part of Tyree’s businesses and then choosing as his girlfriend Gladys, who looks white and favors Gloria, his father’s girlfriend. By dating her, Fish attempts to recover his sexuality and manhood by using her as a substitute for the image of the white woman he desires. Fish tries to pacify his yearning for the white world by trying to make Gladys into the image of the white woman that was with Chris. Doing this allows Fish the opportunity to live in the black world while satisfying his desire for the other. Gladys, however, dies in a fire at the Grove along with forty-one other victims, a local dancehall that Tyree owns as well as whorehouses and apartments. Fish only really mourns for Gladys and not the other victims of the Grove. He is mourning his chance to teeter on the edge of the line drawn by the white man between Fish and white women. He is disappointed at the loss and the freedom that he had dreamed of with Gladys. He could live in both realms of the world without fear of being killed.

Later Tyree is shaken as he knows that he will have to pay for these deaths. He comes to a full realization that he has been a pawn in the white man’s world and only really given the “white man’s crumbs.” Despite the current conditions, Tyree wishes to pass his legacy of his business on to Fish, but Fish knows his life is a memorial to that of his father and chooses to live on terms not defined by whites. Tyree gives Fish an envelope filled with checks that reveal a partnership between him and the chief of police, Chief Cantley, in running the unsavory businesses of the Black Belt. Tyree believes that he is about to be killed and hands his authority over to Fish: “He was swamped by a feeling akin to religious emotion, for Tyree had performed toward him an act that linked the living with the dead” (301). Tyree, during a planned attack by Cantley, dies after threatening to expose his collaborators. It seems as if Fish is doomed to take over the role of his father, but Fish is reminded of how the presence of whiteness has worked in controlling Tyree’s life.

You ate, slept, breathed, and lived fear. Somewhere out there in the gray voice was the ever-lurking enemy who shaped your destiny, who curbed your ends, who determined your aims, and who stamped your every action with alien meanings. You existed in the

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31 Again, we find Wright revising a historical event. The Grove fire signifies on the Natchez fire of 1940 that killed more than two hundred people in a nightclub fire. The fire was damaging to the Mississippi community and evoked a number of mourning responses.
bosom of the enemy, shared his ideas, spoke his tongue, fought with his weapons, and
died a death usually of his choosing. (307)

Attacks on Tyree’s social status as a man illustrate the narrator’s belief that social constrictions create a lack of agency for black males in their lives. Because sexuality is socially constructed, a flawed sense of manhood is erected because of the fear of death influences the black family and the community. The Mississippi community and Tyree’s family both show its effects.

Despite this sense of hopelessness, both the funeral for the victims of the fire and Tyree corroborate Holloway’s portrayal of funeralization in African American ways of mourning discussed in the first chapter. Many of the rituals associated with black ways of mourning affect all who lived in the Black Belt. The fire at the Grove creates lasting memories and material evidence in the forms of mementoes and the presence of ghosts at the scene of the fire. The Rev. Ragland, who gives the collective eulogy at the funeral, bellows three times before imploring the crowd to look at the coffins as evidence that death has come “a-riding” and left “his calling cards” (343). His sermon is considered the most memorable in Black Belt memory. The funeral is filled with melancholic hymns and crying. Chris’s death, however, does not receive similar attention. I want to return to Chris’s death to document the community’s response of the community to his death in terms of mourning or their attempt to work through the cultural trauma.

The narrator tells us that his death echoed throughout Mississippi and even in preachers’ sermons that described death “as the work of God’s Mysterious Hand meting out divine justice to the earth’s sinful inhabitants” (84). The three years following Chris’s murder were quiet, due “more to mental paralysis than fear of physical danger” (84). For the most part, the black community responds with silence to the lynching of Chris. As the narrator implies, “the barbarous manner of his death constituted a challenge that could not be met without a total disruption of daily life, and, in the end, nothing happened save bitter cursing” (84). The symbolic losses associated with Chris’s murder would force the black community to question its entire existence and make serious changes. Chris’s death is forgotten. The narrator, however, connects Chris’s death with the natural disasters of drought and heavy rains (98). A similar occurrence of mourning being connected to natural disasters and elements are also found in Beloved and Philadelphia Fire. I suggest that the mourning that occurs in each instance is insufficient and translates into occurrences in nature that reflect an inability to mourn. With the characters and
the texts unable to explain through words, nature provides the only means of understanding. The symbolic losses remain as presences that impact the community. Fish seems to be alone in his remembrance of Chris and his recognition that Chris needs to be mourned. Despite their avoidance of Chris’s death, the symbolic losses exacted from his death still remain. In the community is unable to mourn. Doing so would force an upheaval of current modes of cultural identity. As a result, the community can not provide a place for Fish to heal from the traumatizing images of Chris. In the deaths of the forty-two, however, Fish has the opportunity to claim his community and his place within it.

Despite the display of emotion by the community, there is no reaction by Fish, until he understands that he does not have Tyree to protect him from the white world. While the community presents Fish with the opportunity to mourn his father and the others with them, Fish worries more about the symbolic losses that he must confront because of Tyree’s death:

In the usual sense of mourning, Fishbelly could not grieve for Tyree…He could no more forget Tyree than he could forget himself, for, in a sense, Tyree was that shadow of himself cast by a white world he loved because […] Thus, though he could not grieve for Tyree, his living had to become a kind of grieving monument to his memory and a reluctant tribute to his slayers. (337)

Fish can not mourn for Tyree because Fish’s identity is tied to what Tyree represents. He must find another way to mourn for him. He decides that his living, free from the restrictions of the segregated south, will be a monument to his father.

After his father’s murder, Fish believes that he can handle stepping into Tyree’s shoes, but after feeling pressure from Chief Cantley and his mother, he decides that he must leave Mississippi. Fish believes that his father aided the development of his desire for the white world and wanted to be a man free from constraint: “He closed his eyes and whimpered: “Papa, there ain’t nothing else for me to do! You left something that’s marked me! It’s like it’s in my blood! I can’t live with it here!” (369). Fish is torn between testifying and accepting what he thinks is his reality and continuing to battle against the power of that “Black Belt World.” Before he can leave, however, a white girl comes to his apartment and “a sensation of fear flashed warningly through him, but he resisted the signal” (370). Cantley frames Fish for raping the girl, and Fish fears that they will lynch him as they did Chris. Fish continues his denial of the charge until he realizes that, again, “words were useless” (377). As he talks with Cantley, Fish finds a new-
found strength and passion to stay alive. Fish “felt himself sinking into a cold numbness into which human voices could not penetrate. He did not wish to speak ever again, to look with his eyes again, to listen again. The world had rejected him and he would reject the world” (380). He falls into a melancholic stupor. Fish experiences the realization that he did not have power over words to express his situation or the direction of his life. Instead of sharing his experiences, Fish decides that leaving America is the only way of being able to obtain a self-concept of masculinity and an identity beyond the racial and sexual myths.

Fish rejects the life of his father and the burying of black dreams to live the dreams that have haunted his mind. Instead, Fish attempts to become a countermonument, a political statement against societal standards when he leaves his hometown after spending two years in jail for the France described in his friend Zeke’s letters. While Wright tries to portray an optimistic tone in the last scene of the novel with Fish on a plane headed to France, Fish is still struggling with the deathly image of whiteness. As he looks at the stewardess, he becomes aware of her as a symbol of the “charming trap that could trigger his deepest fears of death” (405). Although he is leaving the South, Fish is unable to escape the traumatic effects of his childhood. Yet Fish’s actions do become some type of monument to his father as he leaves with the hope that he can be free from the restraints that his father faced and from having to be subservient to whites. Fish’s countermonument is to live the black dream that his father could not. Since he believes that his living and ultimately his leaving are testaments against that world, he flees with the hope that his dream of freedom is possible.

Wright makes a strong statement about what he sees as the lack of possibility for the black community in Mississippi in order to help Fish heal from the far-reaching hand of whiteness that makes blacks “cry and grin [like] fools” (150). Although Fish leaves America, he will continue to be haunted by his childhood experiences because he has not worked through his wounds. He continues to be defined by experiences. Just as the Till story repeats in narrative forms and memories as a result of the cultural trauma that it represents, so will the symbolic deaths of Chris and Tyree resonate with Fish, in terms of their connections with whiteness, trauma, sexuality, and modes of identity. Wright ends The Long Dream with a critique of the African American community and suggests that it is only through exile that one can escape the

32 Homas argues that a countermonument is created as a way of resisting silence or bringing forgotten information from the realms of absence and inspires a different view of mourning (Homas 22-26).
trauma of whiteness. Although *Blues for Mister Charlie* shares the historical background of the Emmett Till murder with *The Long Dream*, Baldwin actually exposes the *positive* possibilities that loss has in motivating and politicizing the community. Unlike *The Long Dream*, *Blues for Mister Charlie* shows a community working together to confront the trauma attacking black males. In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Richard must deal with similar traumatic moments, but on many levels, it is the community that must find a way to deal with the death of Richard.

As Baldwin acknowledges in the preface of the play, the Till murder “pressed on his mind” (x). To relieve his trauma, *Blues* became Baldwin’s way of attempting to “bear witness to the reality and the power of light” (xi). Baldwin posits a way of surviving a terror-filled atmosphere that preys on the mind by avoiding the unspeakable and maddening reality of the knowledge of our crimes. The result is a compulsive repetition of the crimes and entrance into an indescribable spiritual darkness (i-ii). By creating an imaginative place in the play for exploring the unspeakable racial situation, Baldwin rejects the safety of madness and instead recognizes the ability to “work through” the pain through writing, which is the goal of textual mourning. C.W.E. Bigsby believes that Baldwin wrote the play out of guilt because of his “remoteness from the front line of the battle to which he [was] committed” (41). Bigsby also reads in Richard, the main character of the play, an autobiographical portrayal of this guilt of not doing more during the Civil Rights Movement.

Baldwin takes the idea of textual mourning a step further by acknowledging that the text also serves as a tribute to Medger Evers, a recognized civil rights activist in Mississippi killed shortly before the writing of the play. The first performance of the play was on April 23, 1964. It was published later that same year. *Blues* followed Baldwin’s first attempt at playwriting, *The Amen Corner*, which many consider the better written of the two plays. Today, *Blues for Mister Charlie* and *The Amen Corner* continue to be performed throughout the United States and are heralded as powerful portrayals of African American experiences. Although criticized for heavy prose and overly drawn caricatures of blacks and whites, *Blues* received a moderate degree of success with audiences. The play is a story whose themes of guilt, shame, and trauma are as much a part of the characters’ attempt to work through the terrains of the Jim Crow south as Baldwin in writing the play. Not only is Baldwin’s guilt evident in the play, but the image of Till continues to haunt him. He mentions him again in his study on the Atlanta child murders of
1979-1981, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) as he compares the death of these children to Till’s.

In *Blues* the main character is Richard Henry, unlike Fish, who has already navigated the deadly terrain of moving from boyhood to manhood. After the death of his mother during his childhood, Richard’s father, Reverend Meridian Henry, ships Richard to the North to escape the stifling and dangerous environment of the South. Baldwin mimics the mythical line of segregation through the theatrical division of the town into Blacktown and Whitetown and the actions on the stage uphold these divisions throughout the play as all of the actions by the whites take place on one side and the actions by the blacks on the other. A cross and a pulpit are also strategically placed in particular scenes to remind the viewers that Christianity, along with segregation, is also on trial. Unable to forget the death of his mother, caused by a white man, and the defeated look on his father’s face, Richard is unable to escape the castigating force of racial and sexual myths even outside the context of the South. He tries to counteract their force by having sex with white women, but this causes him to turn to a life of drugs. Seemingly defeated, Richard returns to his hometown bitter and intent on confronting the societal rules of the South and the ways of “Mister Charlie,” white men. He returns to his father, his grandmother Mrs. Henry, and an old girlfriend Juanita. A local white storeowner, Lyle, kills Richard because he fails to accept the code of manhood as being only applicable to whites. Lyle is tried and acquitted of the murder, but the members of Blacktown use the trial as the opportunity to bear witness to Richard’s life. Richard’s death haunts the members of the community as his presence remains in flashbacks and in their testimony at the trial. Richard’s death serves as a spark for the protest efforts of the community.

While Baldwin avoids the use of psychoanalytical symbols or imagery, he does suggest many of the same effects that images of whiteness can have on the psyche of the black male as seen in *The Long Dream*. Richard’s problems begin when he experiences the primal scene that forces him to question his life, masculinity, and the power of his father. Richard’s perception of his father changes after his mother’s death because Meridian does nothing to demand justice for his wife’s murder that they believe was caused by a white man. Richard is ashamed of his father, but also begins to understand the precarious position of black males in the south. The memories of his mother’s death, or more importantly the helpless look on his father’s face, continue to haunt him, despite his being thousands of miles from the source of the incident. He is sent to
New York to escape the emasculating social reality of the South. He discovers that the North is no different; the attacks occur through drugs and poverty. Going north was an attempt to avoid docility: “I didn’t want to come back here like a whipped dog. One whipped dog running to another whipped dog. I wanted to make my Daddy proud of me—because, the day I left here, I sure as hell wasn’t proud of him” (20). Richard sees firsthand that “manhood is a dangerous pursuit” in the South (103). Richard also implicates the role of the father in his developing perceptions of masculinity.

The sexual myths that fuel the social codes of the south are revealed in the interactions between Lyle and his friends. In a conversation between Lyle’s friends at his home, the talk turns to the sexual nature of blacks. Ellis, one of the friends, says that “they [blacks] got one interest. And it’s just below the belly button” (49). Ellis warns the women present that a “nigger without clothes on” (50) is different than what they know about their husbands: “Ms. Britten, if you was to be raped by an orang-outang [sic] out of the jungle or a stallion couldn’t do you no worse than a nigger. You would be no more good for nobody. I’ve seen it” (50). Ellis serves as a witness to the sexual prowess of the black male and George, one of the other friends, agrees. Ralph responds: “That’s why we men have got to be so vigilant” (50). The white males are vigilant in protecting the perceived purity and sanctity of white women in order to create a visible offense that allows them to act in their role as men and to prevent any assertion of black maleness. Later, Lyle makes the claim that he was not against colored folks, but that he doesn’t want them to mix with whites and end up in bed with his wife Josephine. “I don’t want no big buck nigger lying up next to Josephine and that’s where all this will lead to and you know it as well as I do! I’m against it and I’ll do anything I have to do to stop it, yes, I will” (14). Lyle represents the ideology of white men who use the image of the sanctity of white women to subjugate black males through the fear of death and castration. Inherent in the concern with the sexuality of black males is the fear of white men losing the power of being the epitome of maleness. Lyle believes in the power of the Southern code and even lets it guide him choosing his wife Josephine. It is this adherence to the codes that drives Lyle to kill Richard.

Richard returns from the North, bold and intent on asserting his manhood, which thus far has failed to manifest itself. The distance from the South fails to allow him to grow into the position of manhood that he desires as the same issues that prevent its actualization in the South exist in the North, but in different forms. With clarity, Richard addresses the paradox of societal
rules: “Jive mothers. They can rape and kill our women and we can’t do nothing. But if we touch one of their dried-up, pale-assed women, we get our nuts cut off” (25). In one scene Richard begins to brag about all of the white women that he has had in New York. He makes it seem as if the white girls have no dignity, but wants him to “give [them] a little bit” and will do anything to get it. Juanita relates the conversation between Richard and Pete, Juanita’s boyfriend, about sex with white women to abnormal psychology. She says that it must be a very “bad situation” (26). Richard responds, “Well, I want them to be sad, baby, I want to screw up their minds forever” (27). Richard suggests that his mind is “screwed up” by his experiences and at one point he even calls it a sickness. By suggesting that he is sick, one must question the source of Richard’s sickness. Richard confesses that he hates the white girls whom he “makes” it with and to survive, he begins using cocaine: “And you get out of there and you carry this pain around inside all day and all night long. No way to beat it—no way” (29). Richard seems to propose that the daily attacks on his sexuality and the fear of death not only sicken him, but that there is no way of healing from them. Richard takes on this role of trying to use his “dick” as tool for reclaiming his sexuality, and ultimately, his manhood.

Peter Homas’s description of countermonuments helps in understanding Richard’s reactions to his loss. Countermourning functions as a political means of excavating mythical histories to get to some type of truth. It results in a countermonument that exists as a representation of this truth (22-26). In this case, Richard attempts to gain a masculine and sexual identity by obtaining the object that represents the sexual and social myths. Baldwin’s connection with this psychology indicates that he reads racial terror, in relation to sexuality, affects emotional and cognitive abilities. Baldwin shows the possible visible effects of the trauma of whiteness in Richard’s use of drugs as a coping mechanism to aid in the process of forgetting. He deliberately possesses white women as an act of defiance. Neither choice aids in his forgetting the limitations put on him by whites’ definition of black manhood. Richard seems to propose that the daily attacks on his sexuality and the fear of death not only sicken him, but also offer no way of healing.

33 This is bell hooks’s argument, which seems to hold true in reading Richard’s role. She goes on to say that “Black male public discourse about sexuality pointed the finger at white males and accused them of being pussies who were unable to get it up and keep it up. The black male who could not demolish white male power with weaponry was using his dick to ‘bitch slap’ white men and by do sexually subjugating them” (hooks 77).
He tries to reverse the whites’ tactics in his interactions with Lyle by trying to make him feel inadequate as a man. Instead of the burned images of whiteness in his mind, Richard makes it his job to “mess” with the minds of the whites. Richard makes flirtatious remarks to Jo, Lyle’s wife, and he pokes fun at their inability to make change for a twenty dollar bill for twenty cents in their store. After Lyle orders him to leave, Richard continues: “You don’t own this town, you white motherfucker. You don’t even own twenty dollars” (74). He then goes on to mock Lyle’s manhood when he learns that they have a baby. He asks “How many times did you have to try for it, you no-good, ball-less peckerwood? I’m surprised you could even get it up—look at the way you sweating now” (74). During a scuffle, Lyle is knocked to the ground and Richard stands over him and says “Look at the mighty peckerwood! On his ass, baby—and his woman watching! Now, who you think is the better? Ha-ha! The master race! You let me in that tired white chick’s drawers, she’ll know who’s the master!” (75). Richard makes Lyle feel inadequate on two levels, economic and sexual. Richard threatens Lyle’s perception of himself and his mythical role as protection of an imaginary image of the white woman as pure. Lyle later says: “I had to kill him then. I’m a white man!” Can’t nobody talk that way to me!” (120). Lyle’s words reveal that Richard dies because he dares to question the privilege of white men and to assert his own position as a man.

Richard continues to make these claims in his death scene. Lyle confronts Richard and demands an apology for the earlier affront to his manhood and sexuality; Richard refuses. Instead, Richard suggests that they are both men and that that should solve the problem. Lyle’s role, however, as the patriarchal white male protector of the white woman has been threatened by Richard’s refusal to accept him as the sole holder of the title of being a man. Richard yells at Lyle: “You sick mother! Why can’t you leave me alone? White man! I don’t want nothing from you. You ain’t got nothing to give me” (119). Richard goes on to list the things that Lyle can’t do, such as dance, and the things he doesn’t have, like a woman that can cook, and the knowledge of how to please his woman. In response, Lyle shoots Richard. Richard continues to question Lyle’s actions, “Why have you spent so much time trying to kill me? Why are you always trying to cut off my cock? You worried about it? Why?” (120). Lyle shoots him again and Richard continues, “Okay. Okay. Okay. Keep your old lady home, you hear? Don’t let her near no nigger. She might get to like it. You might get to like it too. Wow!” (120). With that Richard falls down and dies. Lyle says, “I had to kill him then. I’m a white man! Can’t nobody
talk that way to me!” (120). Lyle’s words reveal that Richard dies because he dares to question the privilege of white men and to assert his own position as a man. Richard fails to find a happy medium between the war in his mind and need to assert himself against the rules of the segregated south. At one point, there is hope that Richard will develop a relationship with Juanita and become a part of the community, but his idea of Juanita is that she will be able to save him. Juanita asks after the death of Richard, “Is this how we all get to be mothers so soon? of helpless men—because all the other men perish?” (95). Later on the stand during Lyle’s trial, she states that Lyle killed Richard just “like they been killing all our men, for years, for generations! Our husbands, our fathers, our brothers, our sons!” (99). Juanita conflates the death of Richard with numerous examples from over the years. Richard’s murder, therefore, become an impetus for the community to redefine their roles as they remember the continuous attacks on black males.

Baldwin takes the idea of the primal scene a step further through the impact that Richard’s death has on the community. The reader does not get the full account of Richard’s death until the end of the play. The play however opens with Lyle carrying and dropping the body of Richard onto the stage and saying, “And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds!” (2). This allows the body to stay in the minds of the audience. Baldwin forces us to understand all of the actions of the play by knowing why Richard’s life ends in death. By beginning with his dead body, Baldwin signifies the physical attacks on black males. This shifting between absence and presence allows Baldwin to achieve a similar role of the repetition of the traumatic scene of Chris’s death for Fish. In each instance, moving away from traumatic spaces makes it possible way to deal with abstract losses and mental wounds. Although we do not see the actual scene of Richard’s death until the end, Richard’s body becomes a display of the themes addressed in the play. His death relates to the conflated issues of shame, desire, and fear that face Fish, Chris, and Tyree.

Richard’s death leads to a series of questions for many of the other characters, which we see during their flashbacks and in their testimony at the trial of Lyle. In their repetition of memories associated with Richard, we can view his death as primal scene for the community. Richard’s death does not affect an individual person, but an entire community. Baldwin uses his body and memories of him as transitional spaces for the other characters, specifically, Juanita, Richard’s girlfriend, and his father, Meridian. As each character testifies at Lyle’s trial, the
testimonies merge to show the lasting effects of Richard’s death. Again the absence and presence of Richard, through his bodily presence throughout the novel and his influence on other characters, reminds both the reader and the community what has been lost. Richard’s death causes Blacktown to question its existence and the true nature of the loss.

In the eulogy at Richard’s funeral, Meridian verbalizes his sorrow over the murder of his son. He feels that his words echo into a collective feeling of despair with “everyone under the sound of [his] voice, and many more souls than that, feel as I feel, and tremble as I tremble, and bleed as I bleed” (76). The rest of the eulogy continues with no direct mention of Richard, but a series of questions that he has for God. Meridian’s faith is shaken by Richard’s death; he does not know what to tell the younger generations. He admonishes God to “teach us to trust that great gift of life and learn to love one another and dare to walk the earth like men” (78). Richard’s death forces Meridian to question his role in his murder and the protection that he was unable to extend to him. During his testimony, he mentions that he is responsible for the death of his son because all of his praying and struggling were unable to change the world into which Richard was born. In an earlier conversation with Juanita, Meridian says that he had to make choices after seeing his wife’s neck broken “in order not to commit murder. In order not to become monstrous, in order to be some kind of example to my only son” (98-99). Those choices make him feel responsible for Richard’s death. It was his job to protect his son, but instead he was paralyzed by the fear of whiteness. When discussing Richard, he notes that “I just wanted him to live, to have his own life. There’s something you don’t understand about being black, Parnell. If you’re a black man, with a black son, you have to forget all about white people and concentrate on trying to save your child” (40). Meridian’s feelings echo those of Tyree when he takes responsibility for showing Fish the reality of the black male existence. Richard was trying not to live like his father believing in Christianity as the saving power. Richard also implicates the role of the father in his developing perceptions of masculinity. Richard’s father, who is subjugated by societal rules, cannot provide security for his son as he makes the transition from boyhood to manhood. These scenes become complicated because they reveal how this father and son relationships are also tied to the racial terror of whiteness.

Baldwin claims throughout *Blues for Mister Charlie* that Christianity is the second plague on the black community, with race being the first. In many instances, Baldwin equates the principles of Christianity with the effects of racial terror. It presents two forms of castration,
mental and physical, as well. In an earlier scene, Lorenzo shows his condemnation of Christianity by claiming that God is white. “It’s that damn white God that’s been lying to us and burying us and castrating us and raping our women and robbing us of everything that makes a man a man for all these hundreds of years” (4). During his testimony, he indicates that he has evidence of this, but that they would “cut [his] tongue out before you’d let me tell you all that I know about that!” (92). Meridian questions the nature of Christianity during his testimony and during a conversation with Parnell, who is the caricature of Mister Charlie. Meridian observes that before Christ, “black people weren’t raised to turn the other cheek, and in the hope of heaven” and that when they died “they’d didn’t go to heaven, they went to join their ancestors” (38). For his son who is dead and a “sinner,” the bible suggests that he is going to hell, but Meridian wants to believe differently. Unable to grasp the role of the minister during a season of protest, Meridian asks Parnell what he should do. Parnell responds, “You can’t be the man who gives the signal for the holocaust” (39). Meridian responds, “Must I be the man who watches while his people are beaten, chained, starved, clubbed, butchered?” (39). The conversation changes the way Parnell views Meridian. He hears rage and hatred in his voice that hadn’t been there. For Meridian, it had always been there in “all those blues and spirituals and gospel songs” (39) that Parnell claims he loves. The songs are material memories of protest, witnessing, and testifying, just as the testimony at the trial becomes a way towards healing and political statement for the characters.

As Juanita is called to the stand, the scene flashes back to a monologue where she contemplates the presence of Richard in her life. She compares Richard to a rock, heavy and fallen. “He fell on me like life and death” (94). She is recounting a love scene between her and Richard and reads in the act Richard’s attempt to cling to her for escape. She admonishes herself, “Why couldn’t I have held you closer? Held you, held you, borne you, given you life again!” (94). She hopes that she is pregnant so that she can raise the baby to be a man. She hopes that all of the man, Richard, is not gone, vanished into smoke, but will instead rise again in a baby. Previously during a conversation with Parnell, Juanita suggested that there was something that she had to learn from Richard to help her overcome her obstructions. For Juanita, finding Richard was a cathartic experience. “He hit me in someplace where I’d never been touched before” (32). She sees a change in herself and an awakening to feelings and parts of herself she didn’t know before Richard. Juanita is still mourning Richard because she wants to
create a monument to him by having a child. Juanita’s connection to Richard’s memory implies that she cannot fully mourn for him. Instead, his repeats in her mind and influences her actions.

Conversely, Baldwin shows the community mourning the death of Richard in two ways. First, although there is a funeral for Richard, but it lacks the traditional characteristics of African American ways of mourning. The only noticeable signs of mourning are Meridian’s sermon that I discussed earlier and the singing of a spiritual. Second, the Blacktown community follows Fish on a similar path of creating a form of countermourning. The community decides to mourn in other ways, for example, by continuing the protest marches. At the beginning of the play we see the community preparing for a round of protests by using the death of Richard as a motivating image. Meridian encourages them to “Remember all that’s happened. Remember we having a funeral here—tomorrow night. Remember why” (2). Using his loss as a productive force allows the community the opportunity to fight to regain a sense of community and safety. The last act opens with the song, “I Said I Wasn’t Going to Tell Nobody.” The testimony that follows, however, shows that witnessing is a way for the characters to move into a mode of recovery from a sense of loss. He offers hope in the ability of language to help in the healing from a traumatic event. After all of the testimony and the jury’s deliberation, the foreman hands down a “not guilty” verdict. There is cheering in Whitetown and silence in Blacktown. Blacktown’s silence questions the ability of language or freedom songs to combat the symbolic losses associated with black masculinity on the community. The community loses a voice of protest and potential in Richard that is necessary for rebuilding bonds. Both The Long Dream and Blues for Mister Charlie is a mix of resignation and the transformation of physical losses into political forces for examining the symbolic losses involved in the attacks on masculinity. In terms of textual mourning, Blues for Mister Charlie illustrates the positive possibilities of apprehending loss as productive and a motivating force for confronting loss. Through performances of the play and the community’s ending dedication to protest, healing is possible by refusing to deny the presence of symbolic loss.

Blues for Mister Charlie connects with the other texts in the ways in which loss shapes the experiences of Richard and the community. The play also shows how the individual experience of Richard affects the entire community. Baldwin’s play ends differently than Wright’s text, which shows two ways that a community can deal with symbolic losses. Baldwin ends his play by showing the community in stages of protest, searching for understanding after
the acquittal of Richard’s murderer. In *The Long Dream*, however, Fish believes black people are socially dead and incapable of stopping the demise of his manhood, so he escapes to France. Fish is resigned to thinking that all is lost for his people in the South if the trauma of whiteness persists. Just as the memories of the Till murder repeat and affect all who witness the murder, the repetition of memories associated with Chris and Richard for the other characters reminds them of the symbolic value of their lives and deaths. On a symbolic level, the deaths of Chris, Tyree, and later the effect of Richard’s death on the Blacktown community also show the demise of necessary ideals associated with father-son relationships, community, self-identity, and black male sexuality in the presence of the trauma of whiteness. The words of Wright and Baldwin stand as witnesses to Till’s story. They refuse to be silent and reside in the darkness of pain. Wright and Baldwin illustrate the lives of thousands of black men, boys, and fathers by connecting their own struggles with issues of sexuality and masculinity. The works show that their authors are still haunted by these issues and that they use the power of words to heal both himself and their communities.
CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, I have shown how African American ways of mourning suggest alternative ways of confronting trauma and loss when combined with the function of writing. Textual mourning provides an avenue for the work of mourning to take place at times when the losses are a part of the identity of the community and cannot be easily forgotten. If we look at the at slave narratives, the texts were not just forms of entertainment. The authors’ intentions were to establish identities and to refute claims that they were incapable of rational thinking and articulation of their stories. These narratives became the ways in which to establish social selves not defined by their enslavers. Today, African American literary traditions look to these writers and their works as material indicators that literature can question, challenge, and politicize traumatic losses. The future of this project is to establish a literary lineage of African America responses to loss and catastrophe. This project presents a number of questions and possible avenues for future projects. For instance, what language do we use to compose these narratives of trauma and loss? What is the language of catastrophes, both man-made and natural? What are the common characteristics of the language of loss that moves across spatial, cultural, and social boundaries? It is my intention to expand this study by juxtaposing novels, poetry, and images that cross cultural groups and catastrophes, so that we are closer to understanding the shared rhetoric and poetics of loss.

In the introduction, I established a set of guidelines for works that transform the function of mourning and writing into texts that politicize and challenge the normal modes of dealing with loss. Textual mourning contains five key components: (1) an ephemeral or material presence of the dead due to cultural trauma; (2) the use of cultural narratives, myths, and rituals; (3) an evident lack of and need for closure as illustrated by the presence of material memories or haunting images that reflect an inability to mourn; (4) a revision of the negative affect of these materials to accomplish a countermemory that allows a discussion of the political, social, or aesthetic value of loss and trauma; and (5) a resultant display through various speech acts or narratives that celebrate and recover loss through rituals of mourning. In the first and second chapter, I explored how Wright, Baldwin, Morrison, and Wideman use these five components and to what end.
The first condition of textual mourning, the presence and absence of the dead, allows the authors to examine the visible loss and symbolic loss. By providing a shifting form that calls attention to what is present and absent, the authors are able to show how individual experiences can affect a collective body by connecting the body to a common loss. In *Beloved*, the shifting figure of the crawling already? baby into Beloved, a survivor from the middle passage, and later into the forms of others allows Morrison to dissect the traumatic effects of slavery. In *Philadelphia Fire*, the missing and ephemeral presence of Simba Africa, although not dead, shifts into a symbolic son, father, and member of the community. This allows Wideman to question how racial trauma causes the loss of a sense of community and responsibility. In *The Long Dream*, the body of Chris works as a visible reminder of not only the physical losses of lynching, but how sexualized racial trauma restricts Fish’s development of a black masculine identity. *Blues for Mister Charlie* presents Richard and Richard’s body as a mediation point where the effects of sexualized racial trauma converge and can prompt a reexamination of the “laws” of society. The body in each of these texts allows the authors to use literary language to reconstruct the bodies into portals to symbolic losses.

The second component of textual mourning involves the use of cultural stories that resound with an unfinished sense mourning. Each of the historical stories presents the spark for the fictional recreations are foundational moments for understanding the struggles of the black community. They also allow Wright and Baldwin to examine the sexual myths that controls the perception of black males. The rituals of mourning present a systematic and culturally-infused way for reclaiming the losses that remain hidden in the events. The third component relates to the second in that the images and phonic language that remains in the stories, photographs, and the still mourning community provides access to the event. In the texts, these images demarcate a trauma and show that mourning continues. In *Beloved*, Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and Denver are all inhabited by images of loss, either their own or those of others. In *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe is haunted by images of Simba that conflate with his own images of loss. At any given point, the images threaten to restrict how the characters define themselves. The images remain key in understanding how the characters define themselves and if they are able to move to a process of mourning.

The fourth and fifth components of textual mourning combine to understand how the novels and the play work to revise loss and how the characters within the text. I showed how
Beloved, Philadelphia Fire, The Long Dream, and Blues for Mister Charlie In Beloved Sethe remains a traumatized figure, but both Paul D and Denver shows how telling one’s story and connecting with a collective body aids in the healing of trauma. In Philadelphia Fire, the continuous questioning of the function of narration shows its importance in Cudjoe understanding the bombing and his need to write about it. In The Long Dream, Fish remains traumatized by his experiences because he leaves his community and cannot discuss them with anyone. In Blues for Mister Charlie, the characters find healing in the testimony at the trial. Completing the last two components of textual mourning determines the extent to which the community and the individual reestablish the bonds that the trauma destroyed. The need to revise the loss and to tell one’s story becomes important in moving into a melancholic state that is productive, challenges loss, and serves a political function. It is through the process of mourning the dead that there is a renewal or recovery of something that is lost. In many ways, mourning operates on the same premise as recording history, as each attempt to make sense of disputed and often traumatic past.

Textual mourning has a political responsibility that the language of loss automatically becomes involved in during moments of catastrophe in moving towards the reclamation of symbolic losses. While I have been suggesting that the language of loss relies on narrative and images to create the path towards healing, I am aware of the lack of closure that occurs in cultural narratives. Inherent in the language of loss, then, I argue is a resistance towards closure and instead works towards the creation of the space that invites us to continuously engage with these catastrophes in the hopes of regaining the symbolic losses represented through the images of the dead. The “work of mourning” tests reality for evidence that the loss is gone and the ego is able and ready to make other attachments by reinvesting interest and energy into other people and activities. Textual mourning has a relationship with both traditional mourning and melancholia. The creative energies of melancholia allow our continuous engagement with symbolic losses. Writing allows these writers to inscribe healing by provides spaces where these voices and stories can be told, heard, and shared. As a result, writing becomes a way of testifying or bearing witness to unconscious or collective memories. Textual mourning is a writing ritual, a practice of mourning and a remembrance that is contested and socially negotiated within these texts. The social atmospheres influence and change the use and meaning
behind these texts as they become possible ways for the African American community provide cultural forms and occasions for remembering.

Textual mourning is political because it is used to localize collective identity through imaginative mediums. The writer becomes militant in his or her pursuit of the information that lies in the gaps of history books. The narratives, therefore, operate as cultural artifacts that are politicized as objects of memory. The access to history is critical in understanding the transitive power of trauma through generational interrelatedness. Access to these memories is available through the idea of postmemory, which both Marianne Hirsch and James Young each recognize as a generational force. Hirsch defines it as a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because of its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. In her discussion of postmemory, Hirsch provides a possible way for understanding the effect that these narratives can have on future generations: “Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right” (219). This historical memory, therefore, makes strong demands for narratives that disrupt the historical myths at the core of American’s foundation. It demands a narrative that retells and rewrites a history that has been negated and disposed of as invalid and unimportant. The stories we tell and the reasons we tell them blend historical and creative methods with elegiac intentions through the tools of fiction.

Each text connects mourning with narration on three levels: the authors’ experiences with loss that influence their thematic and structural choices in these texts and other texts, the characters’ confrontations with loss and the need for mourning, and the connections between the readers and the texts as vehicles for mourning. Wright and Baldwin weave a novel and a play, respectively, which take their individual struggles with issues of black subjectivity, sexuality, and masculinity and make them a part of a larger collective issue that focuses on the conflation of the fear of death with black male social and sexual identity by using the story of Emmett Till. Morrison’s novel uses a ghost to breach the spaces between the living and the dead to explore the

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34 James Young also provides an appropriate definition of post-memory. Post-memory is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination. . . . Post-memory is anything but absent or evacuated: It is as full and as empty as memory itself” (qtd in Young 15).
psychological and physical effects of slavery through the cultural narrative of Margaret Garner. Wideman’s novel explores social and racial politics and its effects on the urban black community by sifting through the ashes of the bombed members of MOVE. In this brief recount of the historical contexts of these texts, we see that instead of approaching death as an ending, these authors view death as a potential site for gaining meaning and retaining racial memories.

Ultimately, all of the texts of this study arrive at the same conclusion as being unfulfilled in terms of a mourning that fully works through all of the pain generated by trauma. This does not suggest a flaw in textual mourning, but reflects the limits of the text in telling the whole story of trauma. Textual mourning is one way for us to confront trauma and agree on what deserves to be known and recorded for the sake of survival. Mourning is an act of meditation that leads to a brighter future, one that has sufficiently dealt with the past, and moved on to a present and future based on revision. If writing becomes the site where these struggles are reconciled, then it also operates as textual mourning for an African American community and its writers who have struggled to deal with an unbearable and often unspeakable history. Their memories are constantly a part of the present, and acts of writing become memory practices. The act of storytelling infuses the storyteller with individual agency, as they control how their memories are told. Memories are not fixed, but are imaginatively reconstructed, so that the remembered events often remain for future hearers, not as perceived or experience, but as reminders of a disturbing past and troubling awareness and burden. Textual mourning continues the functions of mourning by making writing a way to funeralize the dead, present ways of remembrance, and to transform loss into other viable forms with political power. Mourning practices became a way of acknowledging the loss of someone as important and worthy of a display of emotion to mark that loss. Mourning involves the grief over something that was lost and writing involves the recovery of what was lost. Writing connects to a collective body through its material form in plays, novels, or poems making them conduits for experience that move from individual to collective. Writing can become an act of commemoration. History connecting with writing is remembrance in action.
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