

SEXUAL TRAUMA AND THERAPEUTIC SEXUALITY IN THE WORKS OF

LYDIA KWA

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines sexual trauma in Lydia Kwa's *This Place Called Absence* (2000), *Pulse* (2010), and *The Walking Boy* (2005), and establishes how the domain of sexuality becomes operative in post-trauma healing. This project engages not only the traditional, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder model of trauma, but, using Laura Brown and Maria Root, expands the definition of trauma by drawing attention to the insidious, everyday trauma that affects minority groups and sexual minorities. Kwa's novels reveal the dynamics and complexities of sexual trauma, which encompasses acts of sexual violence such as rape and abuse, but also what is rarely acknowledged – the trauma that queer individuals face in a heteronormative society. This thesis also investigates the possibility of healing sexual trauma and locates viable modes of therapy in the area of sexuality, including sexual intimacy, sexual practices such as erotic bondage, and the formation of queer communities. This project seeks to illuminate the connections between queerness and trauma, and, via Kwa's fiction, considers alternative avenues of healing and therapy beyond the medical field.

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Introduction:

Trauma in Asian North American Literature and Singaporean Diasporic Literature

The prominence of war, colonialism, and various forms of slavery in Asian diasporic history has made the experience of trauma an important theme and concern in Asian North American and Asian diasporic literature. For instance, Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*, a text that details the Japanese occupation of Korea during the Second World War, and in particular, the sexual slavery that Korean women were forced to engage in to satisfy the men in the Japanese military, has been the subject of literary criticism examining the subject of trauma. Indeed, in "Writing Rape, Trauma, and Transnationality onto the Female Body: Matrilineal Em-body-ment in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*," Silvia Schultermandl analyzes the complexities associated with the "trauma [of] wartime sexual slave[ry]" (82) and explores the possibility of recovering from that kind of trauma.

Within Asian Canadian literature, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* is a novel to which many critics refer in order to illustrate the effects of both racial and sexual trauma. In "The Double Wound: Shame and Trauma in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," Sinéad McDermott discusses how Naomi's sexual abuse by Old Man Gower produces "shame [which] translates into silence." She speaks of how this "enforced secrecy" makes Naomi lose "her sense of bodily wholeness and unity." She also directs our attention to the terrifyingly disturbing nightmares that Naomi experiences, which stem from the trauma of

her sexual abuse. McDermott's exploration of shame, secrecy, the loss of bodily integrity, and nightmares are common responses to the debilitating experience of sexual trauma.

While trauma informs a significant part of Asian North American literature, within Asian North American literary studies, Singaporean diasporic literature has garnered little attention in relation to texts written by Americans and Canadians of Chinese and Japanese descent, and to a lesser extent by writers of Korean and Filipino descent. More recently, there has been a focus on writers of Vietnamese and Cambodian descent as refugees arrived in North America after the wars and genocide in those countries; but the presence of Singaporean diasporic literature has virtually been non-existent. Perhaps this is because Singapore is a relatively new country (it gained independence from Malaysia in 1965) with a nascent literary scene, but also because there does not seem to be a recognizable *group* of Singaporean diasporic writers in North America. Indeed, there seems to be a paucity of writers who are from Singapore's diaspora. Notable ones include Fiona Cheong, who is now a professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, also a professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Hwee Hwee Tan, who is perhaps lesser known, now lives in New York, and has produced two novels, *Foreign Bodies* (1997) and *Mammon Inc* (2001).

In the United States and globally, Shirley Lim is probably the most recognized Singaporean diasporic writer, having published fiction, poetry, and literary criticism prolifically. She has also won prestigious literary prizes, including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for her book *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* in 1980 and the

American Book Award for *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* in 1990 and for *Among the Moon White Faces* in 1997. Although Lim is originally from Malacca, Malaysia, she is often considered as part of the Singaporean diaspora. For instance, she is identified as such in “Singapore on My Mind: Fiona Cheong, Lydia Kwa and Shirley Geok-lin Lim Compare Notes,” an interview conducted by The Women’s Review of Books on Singaporean diasporic writers. Her work, too, forges links with Singapore, as in her novel *Joss and Gold*, which is set in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in Westchester County in New York, and in Singapore. Although Ismail Talib (2003) asserts that “the two countries [have] been separated for a few decades and [that their literature] should be treated separately” (105), literature from Singapore and Malaysia often finds itself lumped together. Other than the fact that Singapore was once briefly a part of Malaysia, there are other similarities shared between the two countries and their respective literature, as Talib (2010) notes: “the two countries are geographically close neighbours and have, as a result, a lot of cultural similarities – including the use of English as an important language” (603). Although Singapore and Malaysia are now two separate nations, their regional and cultural connections, as well as authors’ migrations between Malaysia and Singapore and their subsequent writings about *both* countries, make it difficult to demarcate a clear distinction between the literature produced in these countries.

Despite her relative obscurity in the field of Asian North American literature, Lydia Kwa is likely the most well-known Singaporean diasporic writer in Canada. To date, Kwa has published four books. Her first work, *The Colours of Heroines*, is a book of

poetry that was published in 1994. *This Place Called Absence* (2000) was her first novel, followed by *The Walking Boy* (2005), and most recently, *Pulse* (2010). These three novels inform the study I have undertaken in writing this thesis. Although Kwa has been producing literature since 1994, she has rarely been the subject of academic or literary studies, both in Singapore and in North America. Indeed, the essays that have been written about her work are few.

Within the few studies that have examined her texts, her novel *This Place Called Absence* has perhaps been the one that has received the most critical acclaim out of all the ones she has published. It has been analyzed in Donald C. Goellnicht's essay, "'Forays into Acts of Transformation': Queering Chinese-Canadian Diasporic Fictions" (2005), in which he focuses on how Larissa Lai and Kwa "reconfigure the Canadian nation by creating within it space for ethnic Chinese and queer subjectivities," as well as how they "rewrite the history and myths of China and Singapore through the voices of lesbian women" (161). In the essay, Goellnicht pays particular attention to Kwa's treatment of queer diaspora, as well as the dynamics of queer sexuality and subjectivity. In "Interrogating Multiculturalism and Cosmopolitanism in the City-State: Some Recent Singapore Fiction in English" (2010), Philip Holden praises Kwa's sophistication and style in *This Place Called Absence*. Examining the use of two chronotopes in the novel, which alternate between contemporary Vancouver and early twentieth-century Singapore, Holden proclaims the novel's uniqueness. According to him, it not only "combines narratives of in- and out-migration with reference to Singapore"; it also "historicizes them, and gives them social contexts" (287). Like Goellnicht, he, too, draws attention to

Kwa's theme of "queer sexuality" as a point of interest, because it is used to connect the two alternating narratives (287). Eleanor Ty has also discussed Kwa's use of queer sexuality. In *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives* (2010), she explores the abjection and reclamation of agency for the two early twentieth-century prostitutes in *This Place Called Absence*. She asserts that "Kwa's most brilliant and innovative invention is Wu Lan's re-creation of these two... prostitutes as queer lovers" (31). In looking at how the prostitutes in the novel restore their agency, Ty claims, "Kwa enables them to retrieve the parts of their bodies that have been sold by their fathers and their brothel keepers, albeit temporarily, and use them as their own" (32). These studies commend, and find value in, Kwa's engaging and compelling exploration of queer subjects and sexuality.

Queer sexuality, though, is certainly not a novel theme in Asian North American literature; indeed, it has been explored plentifully. In Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*, Jung-Sum discovers his growing homosexuality as he comes to terms with his sexual attraction to boys. Similarly, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* also features male characters who realize their sexual desire for other boys. In Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand*, lesbian sexuality and identity is a crucial component.¹ In Asian American literature, too, queerness is not a foreign concept. Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, for example, is focalized through Binh, a gay Vietnamese cook working for lesbians Gertrude Stein and her live-in partner, Alice B. Toklas, in Paris, France. Like these texts, Kwa's novels also work with the idea of gay and lesbian desire and sexuality, but Kwa goes beyond these

¹ For a more detailed discussion of lesbian sexuality in Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand*, see Donald C. Goellnicht's "Forays into Acts of Transformation": Queering Chinese-Canadian Diasporic Fictions.

categories to include intersex and transgender subjects in the realm of queer sexuality.²

While there has been considerable attention paid towards gay and lesbian sexualities, there has been significantly less awareness about, and consideration directed towards, transgender and intersex subjectivities. In *The Walking Boy*, though, Kwa offers a detailed view of both intersex and transgender identities. In this respect, Kwa assumes an inclusive and expansive approach to the idea of alternative sexual identities.

Queer sexuality, then, is a major theme in Kwa's work. She introduces it in *This Place Called Absence*, and she continues to explore it in her subsequent novels, *Pulse* and *The Walking Boy*. It is unfortunate that there have virtually been no academic studies done on either *Pulse* or *The Walking Boy*, because in these later novels Kwa exhibits a remarkable development in her theme of alternative sexualities and identities that are worthy of consideration. While Kwa explores queer sexuality in creative and laudable ways, what emerges as the most valuable aspect of her work is her exploration of the dynamics and ramifications of sexual trauma, and, in particular, her complex treatment of how queer sexuality *and* sexual trauma intersect in important ways. Like Keller's *Comfort Woman* and Kogawa's *Obasan*, Kwa, too, explores the experience of sexual violence and trauma in her novels. However, Kwa moves beyond the traditional understanding of trauma to include the *insidious* trauma of gender and heterosexual normativity, which afflicts sexual minorities. I will define these terms and explain trauma theory in further detail in Chapter One.

² I use the term queer sexuality to encompass not just gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, but also transgender and intersex subjects. My use of the term also includes queer sexual practices, by which I mean minoritized and stigmatized sexual practices such as erotic bondage that fall outside of mainstream, heteronormative sex.

While there has been considerable academic work done on both trauma and queer sexualities respectively, studies that examine how they converge, and that consider what bearing queer sexuality or subjectivity has on trauma, are rarer. In a multifaceted way, Kwa explores sexual trauma through the complicated intersection of gender, diaspora, and sexuality. In *This Place Called Absence*, *Pulse*, and *The Walking Boy*, Kwa demonstrates how sexual trauma is operative in paralyzing the characters, effectively robbing them of their agency. However, Kwa does not foreclose the possibility of healing sexual trauma for her characters. Rather, she illustrates how the domain of sexuality, which includes queer intimacy, sexual practices, and the formation of sexual minority communities, functions therapeutically to help these characters heal from their trauma. In this way, Kwa's novels offer a critical and innovative lens with which to view and think about the complex dimensions of both sexual trauma and queer sexuality. Her work illuminates novel approaches to trauma and healing, and thus, has important implications for trauma theory, queer theory, and sexuality studies. I will analyze and elucidate the complexities of *how* Kwa engages with the convoluted terrain of sexual trauma and queer sexuality, as well as possible ways of healing that trauma through the sphere of sexuality. To this end, it would be helpful to offer an idea of how I will map out the analysis in my thesis.

In Chapter One, I use the works of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman to establish an understanding of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and trace the evolution of its definition in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. However, I illustrate the possible limitations of this clinical model of trauma when I introduce my

discussion of insidious or everyday trauma, which I flesh out using the theorizations of Ann Cvetkovich, Laura Brown, and Maria Root. In formulating a conceptualization of insidious trauma, though, I note the links that connect both PTSD and insidious trauma, showing how the boundaries between these two types of trauma are not so easily distinguished. Having laid out the theoretical foundations of both PTSD and insidious trauma, I move on to a detailed analysis of how both PTSD and insidious trauma are represented in Kwa's *This Place Called Absence*, *Pulse*, and *The Walking Boy*, and investigate how the imbrication of gender, diaspora, and sexuality complicates sexual trauma. An examination of rape, sexual abuse, and the insidious trauma of hetero and gender normativity for gays and intersexed individuals in Kwa's novels enables an understanding of how these traumas create debilitating affective, spiritual, and psychological ramifications for her characters.

Chapter Two builds on the discussion about the injurious effects of sexual trauma by considering the possibility of healing this trauma. In particular, it observes how sexuality becomes a therapeutic site for those who have endured sexual trauma. I use sexuality as a term that includes sexual intimacy and practices, as well as communities of support for sexual minorities. While I explore the psychological benefits of a more conventional form of sexual intimacy between lesbians in *This Place Called Absence*, in which the relationships are predicated on equality between both partners, I depart from this notion of conventionally equal sexual/intimate relationships in my analysis of *Pulse*. In *Pulse*, I illustrate how sexual relationships based on power imbalances, specifically the art of Kinbaku, a form of Japanese erotic bondage, operate therapeutically for the

sexually traumatized characters. Employing the formulations of a range of theorists who write on sexual power play and BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism), I make a case for how sexual activities that utilize power imbalances between the participants are conducive to emotional and psychological growth, and thus, establish how they offer a path to healing for those who have been exposed to traumatic situations. I also address and deconstruct stigmatizing stereotypes about BDSM and erotic bondage with the intention of creating a better understanding and appreciation of these sexual practices, as well as their therapeutic function and value. In *The Walking Boy*, I look at how the formation of queer communities of understanding and support work to relieve Baoshi, the intersex character, of his shame and trauma. I argue that his friendship with the *jogappas*, a community of transgendered male dancers, offers him a sense of belonging in which he can feel comfortable with his sexual identity.³ In this regard, I consider how communities that are not predicated on blood and kinship, but rather on minoritized sexual identities and queerness, may, in effect, become alternative kinds of families that facilitate healing and a sense of home.

In writing this thesis, I illuminate the various facets and complexities of sexual trauma, an often dense and certainly difficult topic to speak and write about, but one that nevertheless needs to be addressed. In articulating how sexual trauma intersects with queer sexuality, and in examining the possibilities of healing this trauma, I intend to

³ Although I include intersex and transgender individuals under the term “queer,” I am aware of the debates surrounding the collapsing of intersex and transgender identities under the umbrella of queer sexualities. Some intersex and trans people, including scholars, argue against equating intersex and transgender identities with queerness, maintaining that there is a fundamental difference between gender identity and sexuality. However, in this thesis, I use “queer” as a broad term that encompasses both gender and sexual minorities.

create a dialogue about sexual violence and its far-reaching ramifications, as well as encourage creative responses about ways of managing or healing from it. Another significant concern that my thesis speaks to regards the structures of oppression that gendered, queer, and diasporic individuals must face. A fundamental question that arises from my project is how we might resist, challenge, or combat both sexual violence and these structures of oppression. That Kwa engages with these complicated topics and issues in her novels in multi-layered and imaginative ways merits admiration and commendation, and deserves further consideration.

Chapter 1:

Sexual Trauma in Lydia Kwa's *This Place Called Absence*, *Pulse*, and *The Walking Boy*

According to Cathy Caruth, the word “trauma” is derived from the ‘Greek *trauma*,’ which denotes a ‘wound’ that was conceived of as primarily physical in nature, understood as “an injury inflicted on a body” (3). However, Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* has played an influential role in expanding an understanding of trauma in both the medical and psychological fields. In particular, Freud introduced a formulation of trauma as not merely a bodily or physical wound, but, importantly, a wound that afflicts the *mind* as well (Caruth 3). The notion of trauma as a psychological wound – a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” – has significant implications for how trauma is managed and treated (4). Unlike physical or bodily trauma, psychological trauma evades a clear, rational understanding of the source of trauma, and is also not “a simple and healable event” (4). Rather, a wound upon the mind becomes complicated in that it “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). The difficulties of negotiating psychological trauma stem from its epistemological inaccessibility, as Caruth establishes: “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 the survivor later on” (4).

Trauma, then, is characterized by an elusive epistemological structure, but how, one might ask, does psychological trauma emerge? Caruth defines trauma as the complex ramification of “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrollable appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). For instance, experiences like “rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on” are identified and viewed through the lens of “*post-traumatic stress disorder*” (11). In this regard, Caruth’s explanation moves towards a clinical understanding of trauma. Judith Herman, a noted feminist psychologist who has worked significantly to complicate post-traumatic stress disorder and to make it more comprehensive, offers some helpful observations about how female victims of rape and sexual violence suffer from the effects of PTSD, including “insomnia, nausea, startle responses, and nightmares, as well as dissociative or numbing symptoms” (31). She also notes how such symptoms are comparable to the ones afflicting “combat veterans” (31). Indeed, she discusses “the commonality of affliction” between these two groups, claiming that “[t]he hysteria of women and the combat neurosis of men are one” (32). In making this assertion, she hopes to challenge the chasm “that separates the public sphere of war and politics – the world of men – and the private sphere of domestic life – the world of women” (32).

While the work of both Caruth and Herman has been significant to the field of trauma studies, the limitations of their conceptualization(s) of trauma are worth considering. Firstly, although Herman’s feminist aims are laudable, I find her conflation of the public sphere (which she associates with men) and the private sphere (which she

associates with women) to be questionable, as it seems to rely on a problematic kind of gender essentialism. Herman appears to be preoccupied with victims of sexual violence, whom she identifies as primarily female. While her point is well-taken, considering that many who suffer from sexual violence are, indeed, female, her view becomes myopic because it neglects to consider male victims of sexual abuse and violence. Indeed, the idea of male victims of sexual abuse will be dealt with later in this thesis.

Secondly, the use of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder model, while helpful for many cases, runs into problems when relied on too exclusively. According to the National Center for PTSD, the American Psychiatric Association included Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980, which was then released as the third edition. In the third edition of the Manual, the APA defined a “traumatic event” as “a catastrophic stressor that was outside the range of usual human experience.” In this formulation, stressors were seen predominantly as exceptionally shocking and overwhelming events, such as “war, torture, rape... natural disasters” (National Center for PTSD). However, the definition of a “traumatic event” as it relates to PTSD was amended in subsequent editions of the manual, namely in the DSM-III-R (1987), DSM-IV (1994), and DSM-IV-TR (2000). This change was prompted by numerous criticisms, primarily from feminist psychotherapists, who asserted that the definition of a traumatic event as being necessarily “outside the range of usual human experience” suffered from severely limited parameters, particularly in relation to what kinds of events are considered “traumatic.” For instance, in Laura Brown’s view, the meaning of “[t]he range of human experience” is measured according to those who

possess social categories of privilege, such as “white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men” who constitute “the dominant class” (101). What this view excludes, however, are the acts of “interpersonal violence,” including incest, domestic, and sexual abuse that girls and women suffer from, at times on a daily basis (111). Brown reminds us that “as many as a third of all girls are sexually abused prior to the age of sixteen” (101), and Diana Russell refers to incest as the “secret trauma” (Russell 1986). According to the DSM’s earlier definitions of what constitutes a traumatic event, the experiences of those who have suffered from interpersonal violence would not be deemed “traumatic” because such experiences would not meet the criteria of being outside the range of “usual human experience.” In later editions of the manual, though, the APA removed the stipulation that the traumatic stressor had to be “catastrophic” and “outside the range of usual human experience.” For instance, in the DSM-IV-TR, Criterion A for a PTSD diagnosis maintains that “[t]he person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following have been present: 1) The person has experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others [and] 2) The person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (National Center for PTSD).

While the APA’s modification of what constitutes a traumatic event is laudable in that the traumatic stressor is no longer considered primarily “catastrophic” in nature, nor need it be “outside the range of usual human experience,” thus broadening the scope of trauma to include experiences such as physical and/or sexual abuse, the PTSD framework nevertheless remains problematic. The criteria for PTSD still privileges situations that

involve direct physical danger or threat to an individual, however, as well as responses that would typically emerge from such perilous situations – namely, “intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” While such criteria would apply to and benefit those who fall within the purview of its framework, they work to produce a narrow understanding of the *range* of forms that trauma can assume.

Indeed, the criteria for PTSD effectively exclude and obscure experiences of what Ann Cvetkovich refers to as “everyday trauma” (19). She invokes Laura Brown’s conceptualization of “insidious trauma” to elaborate on the less conspicuous but nonetheless detrimental forms of trauma. In her essay “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” Laura Brown notes that “insidious trauma” is used to describe “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (107). “Insidious trauma” was formulated by feminist therapist Maria Root, who, in her essay “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality,” introduced it as “usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power, for example, gender, color, sexual orientation, physical ability” (240). For Root,

The frequency of insidious traumas results in a construction of reality in which certain dimensions of security are not very secure; as such, the individual is often alert to potential threat of destruction or death... [in response to] insidious traumas like ageism, homophobia, racism, and sexism. (241)

Root’s theorizations on insidious trauma have had a significant impact on drawing attention to experiences of anxiety and apprehension that afflict minority groups who are

targeted or discriminated against for their differences. While it is held by many that minority groups suffer from various forms of injustice and oppression, rarely do we conceive of these instances of oppression as “traumatic” to those who experience them. There has, though, been a considerable amount of academic research conducted on the psychological well-being of minority groups, since the various instances of prejudice and discrimination that they face render them more vulnerable to emotional and psychological harm. In “Identity, Minority Stress and Psychological Well-being Among Gay Men and Lesbians,” for example, Fingerhut, Peplau, and Gable examine the strain and anxiety associated with being part of a sexual minority. They introduce and explain a term, “minority stress,” which “has been defined as the stress associated with ‘categorically ascribed inferior status and blocked access to legitimate social and economic opportunities’” (102). Indeed, they maintain, “the inferior status ascribed to minorities leads to an increase in stressful life events (e.g. discrimination), which in turn leads to threatened self-esteem and a reduced sense of security. This ultimately results in the physiological and psychological experience of stress” (102). In their study, they found: “[d]ata demonstrate that gay and lesbian individuals experience gay-related stressors and that these stressors are associated with poorer mental health outcomes” (103). While the study supports the view that homophobia and heterosexism play a significant role in exacerbating the psychological and mental health of gays and lesbians, it emphasizes the word “stress” as the primary impairment to the psychological health of queer individuals. I am not expressing skepticism about the validity of the study’s claims and findings, for there is no doubt that gays and lesbians experience distress and poor mental health in a

world that exhibits revulsion and hostility towards their sexual identities. Rather, the problem lies in the accuracy and sufficiency of the term “stress” to describe the experience of sexual minorities and minority groups in general.

Indeed, Root insists that, as a result of encountering persistent instances of oppression and discrimination, minority groups are subject to a kind of trauma that is often overlooked or unacknowledged. This sort of trauma is not necessarily physical, but has equally pernicious effects, if not more so because it is rarely discussed and even less acknowledged in public. The cumulative psychosocial effect of these insidious traumas, which serves to remind stigmatized populations that they do not belong and are not accepted in society, attenuates minority groups’ feeling of safety, making them feel as if they need to be constantly vigilant about injury or harm to their personhood. Building on this idea, Cvetkovich argues that insidious trauma makes visible “the connections between trauma and more systemic forms of oppression” (32). The link that Cvetkovich makes between trauma and systemic or institutional oppression is an apt one, and is in line with Laura Brown’s assertion that, once we realize how many people suffer from insidious trauma, “we must, if we have any morality, question a society that subjects so many of its inhabitants to traumatic stressors” (“Not Outside the Range” 108).

So far, I have established two ostensibly different conceptions of trauma. The first is the large-scale traumatic event that physically threatens or endangers an individual and its accompanying symptoms. This idea of trauma informs Criterion A of a PTSD diagnosis, according to the DSM-IV-TR manual. However, I have pointed out the inadequacies of this model of trauma, which fails to include experiences of quotidian or

insidious trauma that distress stigmatized minority groups. The question that emerges is whether these two conceptions of trauma are necessarily in tension with each other, whether they are mutually exclusive. Is it possible for an individual to experience both a large-scale traumatic event as well as insidious trauma? Because the idea of a large-scale, direct event is so ingrained in dominant conceptions of what constitutes trauma, some might even be reluctant to include the exclusion and oppression of minority populations as “real” traumatic experiences. If insidious trauma were viewed as a “valid” form of trauma, would it be as equally important as a large-scale traumatic event, and would it be taken as seriously?

I would point out that while the PTSD model of trauma and insidious trauma appear distinct from one another, there are certain cases in which the boundaries between them seem to blur. For instance, Root explains that “woman battering is a direct trauma that, in chronic patterns, also entails a form of insidious trauma – psychological threat” (242). In the case presented here, the persistence of the massive, direct trauma creates the conditions for insidious trauma, which produces the victim’s anxiety about the potential psychological threat of being attacked or battered again. Something similar could also be suggested about rape. As Brown explains, insidious trauma can be observed “in a culture where there is a high base rate of sexual assault and where such behaviour is considered normal and erotic by men, as it is in North American culture” (1995, 107). She continues, “Most women in North America today are aware that they may be raped at any time and by anyone... In consequence, many women who have never been raped have symptoms of rape trauma; we are hypervigilant to certain cues, avoid situations that we sense are

high risk” (107). While I find Brown’s claim to be somewhat hyperbolic in that it universalizes the experience of all women, and thus risks denying the importance of specific situations in which some women whose socio-economic backgrounds and other factors might make them more susceptible to sexual violence, her point is nevertheless an important one worth expanding on. In her example, Brown directs our attention to the possibility that massive event trauma (the kind of experience that would meet Criterion A of a PTSD diagnosis), such as rape, can illuminate something larger about the socio-cultural sphere, and, in turn, create awareness about insidious trauma. Brown is careful to note that a female may not have experienced rape herself, but that the knowledge of the *prevalence* of rape in a socio-cultural environment can create a culture of fear and hyperawareness for women who realize that they, too, are potential victims of sexual violence. It becomes clear, then, how a large-scale event trauma can give way to insidious trauma, although “insidious trauma,” as a category, possesses less currency than something like PTSD. The idea of transgenerational trauma, which can be detected in the children of Holocaust survivors, has gained recognition in dominant discourses of trauma, but, according to Brown, “[w]e have yet to admit that it can be spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group as well, when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma” (108). Considering that insidious trauma can very well emerge from high incidences of event trauma, as in the case of rape, or even the frequency of something like woman battering and domestic abuse, the relationship between the two should not be underestimated. The examples offered by both Root and Brown suggest that large-scale traumatic events and insidious trauma may be linked to

one another, making it difficult to completely separate them as two clearly distinct categories of trauma.

In “Insidious Trauma: Examining the Relationship Between Heterosexism and Lesbians’ PTSD Symptoms,” Dawn M. Szymanski and Kimberly F. Balsam conducted a study looking at the kinds of symptoms heterosexual hate crimes that would fulfil Criterion A of the PTSD model and heterosexual situations such as discrimination (which would not meet Criterion A) would produce in lesbian women, a sexual minority that often faces stigmatization. They discovered that “heterosexual events that do not meet the threshold for Criterion A – that is, experiences of discrimination and rejection based on sexual orientation – are unique predictors of PTSD symptoms among lesbians” (9). Examples of the PTSD symptoms discussed in the study include “[r]epeated disturbing dreams of a stressful experience from the past” and “[f]eeling distant or cut off from other people” (7). In other words, experiences of insidious trauma for lesbians possess the potential to generate symptoms of PTSD. Szymanski and Balsam conclude that “discriminatory events that do not pose a threat to one’s physical integrity or life may nevertheless engender a sense of horror, helplessness, and fear and thereby be linked to PTSD symptoms” (9). Again, this study illustrates the possible connections between the PTSD model of trauma and insidious trauma. Although the former conception of trauma emphasizes the enormity of the traumatic event, in cases of insidious trauma, it appears as though the aggregate effect of the chronic, persistent trauma parallels the enormity and powerful force of a massive traumatic stressor, to the extent that victims of insidious trauma are capable of exhibiting PTSD symptoms. It is important to note that, while

PTSD typically emerges from a massive event that overwhelms the individual, in insidious trauma, there may not be a single locatable event that actually causes the trauma. Rather, members of marginalized groups are exposed to repeated instances of othering, ostracism, and discrimination. These acts of exclusion are likely to take different forms, for instance name-calling and teasing, rejection from family and friends, discrimination in the workplace, and more. Each negative situation is enough to cause psychic and spiritual injury to the minority member, and the accumulation and persistence of these circumstances creates an ever-present form of insidious trauma. Those who suffer from insidious trauma have both their comfort and safety compromised, and being placed in such a vulnerable position would likely bring about symptoms of anxiety, dread, and defencelessness. In this respect, insidious trauma is as equally damaging and debilitating as the trauma resulting from an overwhelmingly major event. However, because it has not gained the kind of widespread recognition and awareness that is accorded to PTSD, being an experience that is “all too persistent and normalized” (Cvetkovich 32), many of those for whom insidious trauma is an everyday social reality suffer in silence. Insidious trauma is in no way less deserving of attention, and should not be dismissed as another way in which minority groups can claim they are being oppressed. It is paramount to address insidious trauma and to bring it to the forefront of trauma studies discussions.

Considering the continuities between massive PTSD trauma and insidious trauma, one is compelled to ask what kinds of theoretical implications are at stake. Because there are links between PTSD trauma and insidious trauma, and it has been shown that an event

trauma can create the conditions for a more everyday kind of trauma that afflicts minoritized populations, should the PTSD model of trauma be modified and revised to incorporate the experience of insidious trauma? In “Racism: Emotional Abusiveness and Psychological Trauma for Ethnic Minorities,” Janis V. Sanchez-Hucles documents the intensely devastating effects of cultural racism experienced by ethnic minorities. She sees racism as a source of “emotional abusiveness and psychological trauma for ethnic minorities,” and argues that the PTSD category should be expanded to include “the experiences of primary and secondary racism” (70). In her view, “[u]sing the trauma of racism as a type of PTSD” would “depathologize and destigmatize individuals rather than... give them a new psychological label of disease or illness” (70). While I agree that racism operates as a form of insidious trauma for racialized groups and am cognizant of the demoralizing and very real impact of its effects, I am less eager to lump insidious trauma in with PTSD trauma. I am wary, not because I am concerned about diluting PTSD with a less “serious” form of trauma, as I have been trying to demonstrate that insidious trauma is just as detrimental, if not more, than PTSD event trauma. Instead, my uneasiness lies in my scepticism about the efficacy of the PTSD model to genuinely encompass and encapsulate insidious trauma. While the PTSD category has been very useful to psychotherapists, I see it to be very clinical in nature, and my worry is that the inclusion of insidious trauma in its parameters may produce a narrow, primarily clinical understanding of everyday trauma. Cvetkovich, too, finds the dominant PTSD model of trauma problematic, because it represents the kind of trauma that “becomes too exclusively psychologized or medicalized” (18). For instance, she critiques Herman’s

approach to trauma, claiming that her concentration on “the symptoms of PTSD reflects the tendency of clinical psychology to medicalize psychic pain” (31).

Even some feminist psychologists have expressed qualms about the PTSD model. In “Trauma Talk in Feminist Clinical Practice,” Jeanne Marecek maintains that the PTSD category “offers cause-and-effect explanations that are linear, mechanistic, and mono-causal. It sets aside a client’s understanding of her own experience in favour of a uniform narrative: a single cause reliably (even invariably) produces a fixed set of symptoms” (165). In short, the “medical model” of trauma is seen as “de-humanizing and anti-feminist” (164). While some may see the current PTSD category as too medicalized, too cold and reductive, I do not wish to harp on its shortcomings. The PTSD category is not perfect, but that does not mean that its merits should be dismissed, nor should we completely invalidate or condemn it. I still think that PTSD is a useful category to diagnose those who have experienced huge, traumatic events, but I do not think that it should be the only model of trauma to be recognized and valued. As shown earlier in Szymanski and Balsam’s study, the effects of insidious trauma can resemble PTSD-like symptoms. As such, I want to eschew the either/or approach – the approach that trauma must either be a large event producing symptoms of PTSD *or* that trauma be everyday and insidious, with no relation to PTSD whatsoever. Such an approach is not only narrow, but it erroneously assumes that there is one “correct” definition or view of trauma, when it is clear that trauma studies is not a static field, but rather, a field that is continuously evolving. PTSD and insidious trauma are not mutually exclusive; indeed, as the aforementioned examples demonstrate, they share links with one another. Insidious

trauma can produce symptoms characteristic of PTSD, but I would also argue that it exceeds the bounds of clinical symptomology. In this respect, I would like to employ Cvetkovich's approach to trauma, because she is interested in "how traumatic events refract outward to produce all kinds of affective responses and not just clinical symptoms" (19). Trauma, then, becomes "a category that embraces a range of affects, including not just loss and mourning, but also anger, shame, humor, sentimentality, and more" (48). Cvetkovich posits a conceptualization of trauma that "moves beyond medicalized constructions of PTSD," one that addresses the "systemic forms of oppression" that produce traumatic experiences" (33). In accordance with this, I would like to propose that insidious trauma be another category of trauma, one that informs and is informed by PTSD, and, moreover, is open to various kinds of new approaches and possibilities.

While Caruth and Herman's understanding of trauma differs from that of Cvetkovich, Brown, and Root, I do not see their formulations as necessarily in contention with one another. Too often, theorists and psychologists maintain a certain understanding of trauma and are closed off to other approaches and interpretations. I believe such approaches fail to open up spaces for productive dialogue that could potentially expand and benefit the field of trauma studies as well as our collective understanding of trauma. I will use and work with these approaches to trauma to specifically develop an understanding of what I will call "sexual trauma" in the literary works of Lydia Kwa. For the purposes of my study, sexual trauma encompasses both the event trauma of sexual violence, including sexual abuse and rape, as well as the kind of insidious trauma that

emerges in relation to sexual orientation and difference. As Cvetkovich points out, “The shared origins of trauma and sexual identity in discourses of psychoanalysis suggest the links between the two” (45). In my analysis, I intend to examine the continuities between these two kinds of sexually traumatic experiences, but I will also elucidate how insidious trauma is different and how it is operative, as I think it is a concept that deserves further illumination.

In *This Place Called Absence*, the kind of trauma that the protagonist, Wu Lan, experiences, resembles the “insidious trauma” that Brown and Root write about. This more quotidian form of trauma is so insidious precisely because it lacks the more overt, physical visibility of trauma that a calamitous event would likely produce. In other words, this sort of trauma is largely *invisible*, and difficult to discern, because it is experienced on an *affective* level. That Wu Lan is a Canadian psychologist who, after the discovery of her father’s suicide back in her native Singapore, begins to struggle with her own private trauma and mourning, adds an interesting dimension to my consideration of how trauma functions in the text. Her father’s suicide becomes the catalyst for the sense of malaise and guilt that Wu Lan struggles with, which prompts her to take a leave of absence from work. Wu Lan characterizes her father’s death as “invisible, as indecipherable as a shadow glimpsed around the corner” (6). Its indecipherability frustrates her, and she becomes obsessed with ruminating over the possible reasons that drove him to take his own life. However, her speculations seem to keep returning to, and revolving around, a kind of self-laceration in which she is made to bear the burden of guilt. She admits, “When I saw him in his coffin, his closed eyes, his lifeless body accused me” (17). The

feeling of accusation that she detects from her dead father causes her to believe she is largely culpable for his suicide: “I’m guilty of distancing. First, I left my country. Then I came out to Mahmee, Father and Michael in a joint letter, announcing... that I was a lesbian, had been for thirteen years” (20). In turn, the memory of her family’s response to the revelation of her sexual orientation engenders the kind of insidious trauma that continues to haunt Wu Lan. Her brother Michael phones and tells her that “he didn’t understand how people became homosexual, but he respected that [she] needed to... ‘separate from the herd’” (20). Her mother refers to her coming out letter as the “Big Shock,” and repeatedly reminds Wu Lan about “her longing for a grandchild” (20). And her father, who subscribed to Christian beliefs and who exercised a patriarchal authority over his family, responds with a silence that Wu Lan reads as its own kind of unspoken castigation of her sexuality: “He had never said a word to me about the letter” (20). Indeed, in Donald Goellnicht’s view, Wu Lan’s mother traces her husband’s suicide to “Wu Lan’s failure to marry – the absence of a husband – which in turn results in the absence of (grand)sons, the symbol of the collapse of the traditional Chinese patrilineal family” (172). Her family’s bewilderment over, and disapproval of, her lesbian identity is constitutive of the heteronormative pressures that sexual minorities are subject to, the weight of this censure becoming an encumbrance that generates insidious trauma. This sort of pressure is also replicated, to Wu Lan’s devastation, when her lover Kim leaves her for a man, admitting that she “want[s] a *normal* life with husband and family” (138, emphasis added).

Indeed, Cvetkovich claims that “the normalization of sex and gender identities can be seen as a form of insidious trauma, which is effective because it often leaves no sign of a problem” (46). However imperceptible they are, though, it is clear that such heteronormative injunctions *do* become a problem for Wu Lan. The power and pervasiveness of normative heterosexism threaten to compromise Wu Lan’s sense of security, creating feelings of fear and anxiety that are intensified during situations she perceives to be risky. For instance, when she and her lover Francis appear in public together as a couple, Wu Lan finds that she is unable to enjoy the moment because she is too preoccupied with trepidation:

The path through the park: full of people. Francis and I hold hands.
Twinges of panic pass through me, electrical bursts rattling my gut.
Morbid images of women and men, with their bodies bleeding, bruised, or
marked by hate, flash through my mind. Daylight might not protect us.
(158)

A seemingly simple act such as holding hands with one’s significant other in public manages to trigger a feeling of terror for Wu Lan, because she recognizes that both she and Francis are part of a sexual minority who have suffered discrimination and violence throughout history, and who continue to occupy a precarious space within heteronormative society. This passage is particularly illustrative of the *effects* of insidious trauma. Wu Lan experiences feelings of panic and apprehension not because she has been the victim of a heterosexist hate crime; rather, these feelings emerge because she has been suffering from a less observable form of everyday trauma that arises from heterosexism and homophobia on the familial, social, and institutional levels. What Wu Lan sees in her mind, the images of men and women with their bodies injured and “marked by hate” in

various ways seems to be a collective traumatic memory of queer abjection and the numerous hate crimes, many of them violent, perpetrated against gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities that she has read about or heard of. One may see a couple holding hands as a public display of affection, but for Wu Lan, this seemingly innocuous act assumes a more sinister shadow. Indeed, for Wu Lan, holding hands with her partner in full view of other people is tantamount to exposing both herself and Francis to potential ridicule and attack. The insidious effects of heterosexism result in the perceived diminishment of safe spaces for Wu Lan and others who may identify as sexually queer; Wu Lan remains alert to potential dangers, for she is not guaranteed freedom from harm in a homophobic society as a lesbian who is “out.” Wu Lan’s discomfort with, and apprehension about, making her lesbian sexuality public illustrates Ahmed’s point about how queers occupy public space differently:

Dealing with homophobia, as well as the orientation of the world ‘around’ heterosexuality shapes the forms of lesbian contact as a contact that is often concealed within public culture. To act on lesbian desire is a way of reorientating one’s relation not just toward sexual others, but also to a world that has already ‘decided’ how bodies should be orientated in the first place. (102)

She thinks, “How surreal it is to be two women lovers in a crowd of strangers. After all these years as a lesbian, I still feel strange being affectionate in public” (Kwa 158). In effect, affectionate or intimate contact between queers and the physical/social spaces they are able to occupy, are considerably circumscribed by a world that orients itself, and revolves around, heteronormativity. Subjected to a predominantly heterosexist gaze, queer couples are made to feel strange and out of place. To be “out” and to be public about one’s queerness involves the difficult task of carving out spaces in a world that has

assumed a primarily heteronormative shape and direction. Although Canada prides itself on being a welcoming nation that sees itself as “more civilized than all other nations who don’t have a multiculturalism policy, a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, or federal provisions for same-sex unions” (Coleman 25), Kwa refuses to idealize Canada as a nation that offers a completely safe space for gays and lesbians. Wu Lan’s panic attack and uneasiness about public affection exposes the limits of Canada’s self-professed civility.

Beyond feelings of terror, though, I would also like to suggest that Wu Lan’s sexual, insidious trauma is manifested in the feeling of perpetual absence that permeates her life. She speaks of the ineffability of this feeling, a “subtle, inarticulable silence” (148), a cavernous “abyss” that she falls into (207). Convinced that leaving Singapore was “the solution,” her departure has become “a flight into exile, which resulted in internal fissures in the psyche” (123). She finds that after having lived in Canada for “two decades,” there is still a sense of “the unsaid and unsayable swirling inside of [her]” (123). This experience of hollowness functions as the site of Wu Lan’s traumatic lesion, an everyday trauma that inhibits her from comfortably inhabiting her own sexual identity. The demands of heteronormativity make her feel the perceived unnaturalness of her queer sexuality. This can be observed when she reflects on how her brother and sister-in-law will soon be expecting a baby:

Any day now, he and his wife will start a family. But I am childless, and uninterested in breeding. I will not have a direct descendant to survive me. Can I honestly say that I don’t care? Even though I’ve made the decision not to have children, something in me feels the absence that goes along with such a choice. (80)

The sense of melancholic dissonance here emerges from Wu Lan's non-conformity to socially and (hetero)sexually prescriptive codes that are attached to gendered, and particularly female, bodies. As her family's excitement over the new baby and her mother's longing for a grandchild remind her, a woman's body is expected to fulfil its biologically reproductive role – that is, bearing children and continuing the family line. However, such heteronormative values fail to accommodate sexual identities that diverge from this norm, and, in this way, operate as a “systemic form[] of oppression” that becomes implicated in the creation of insidious trauma (Cvetkovich 32). Wu Lan's mother's perplexity and confusion over her daughter's sexual orientation epitomizes the uncompromising rigidity of the heteronormative ideal: “Imagine, she don't want to get married. Now I don't dare ask if she had any intercourse, God forbid, I don't even want to think about it. What do women do together?” (Kwa 21). The idea of same-sex desire and love is so foreign and unfathomable to Mahmee that she hesitates to even imagine it, viewing it with a measure of horror and revulsion.

In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich eloquently articulates her views on what she calls the “institution of heterosexuality” (187). She maintains that compulsory heterosexuality has played a pivotal role in disempowering women, asserting that “[h]eterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women” (195), to the extent that women are made to feel that “marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives” (185). Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner expand on the obligatory nature of heterosexuality:

[h]eteronormativity is more than just ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. (319)

Indeed, the permeation of heterosexism and heteronormativity throughout social and cultural spaces is so strong that heteronormativity “feel[s] hardwired into personhood” (319). Berlant and Warner speak of “heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership” (319). Carole Vance explains how “[p]rivileged forms of sexuality, for example, heterosexuality, marriage, and procreation, are protected and rewarded by the state and subsidized through social and economic incentives” (19). Conversely, “[l]ess privileged forms of sexuality are regulated and interdicted by the state, religion, medicine, and public opinion. Those practicing less privileged forms of sexuality... suffer from stigma and invisibility” (Vance 19). Sara Ahmed contests the ostensible naturalness of heterosexuality as the “correct” sexual orientation: “Heterosexuality is compulsory insofar as it is not prescribed by nature: the heterosexual couple is ‘instituted’ as the form of sociality through force” (84). In commenting on how one assumes a straight or heterosexual orientation, Ahmed directs our attention to “how an orientation, as a direction (taken) toward objects and others, is made compulsory. In other words, subjects are *required* to ‘tend toward’ some objects and not others as a condition of familial as well as social love” (85). Familial and social approval, then, becomes contingent on one’s fulfilment of the heterosexual expectation. For Ahmed, “the failure to orient oneself ‘toward’ the ideal sexual object affects how we live in the world; such a failure is read as a failure to reproduce and therefore as a threat to the social

ordering of life itself” (91). This is evident in *This Place Called Absence*, in which Mahmee is stricken when she discovers Wu Lan’s lesbianism; in her inability to understand and come to terms with alternative sexualities, she calls Wu Lan’s queer sexuality “the Big Shock.” Queer subjects must face the enormous social and familial pressures of a “heterosexualizing imperative” (Eng 13).

Moreover, compulsory heterosexuality is most damaging to women who identify as lesbian: “If we think of heterosexuality as the ‘natural’ emotional and sensual inclination for women, lives such as these [the lives of lesbian women] are seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived” (Rich 195). Rich’s sentiments make clearer Mahmee’s incomprehension towards Wu Lan’s lesbian sexuality. Mahmee’s bafflement about alternative sexual orientations stems from the institution of compulsory heterosexuality; in Mahmee’s mentality, heterosexuality is the *only* option or possibility, the only way to achieve fulfilment, for women. However, the effects of compulsory heterosexuality prove to be the most injurious to Wu Lan. The question that she poses – “Can I honestly say that I don’t care?” – speaks to the forceful impact this normative construct has on her psyche. The “absence” she experiences about not having children suggests that she is made to feel that there is something inherently deviant or wrong about being a lesbian and abstaining from reproduction. Furthermore, this overwhelming sense of absence indicates that Wu Lan is rendered ontologically and figuratively *absent*; her body and sense of self are illegitimate and do not “count” because her queer sexual identification excludes her from the dominant heteronormative ideology. Accordingly, this double invisibility reflects her marginalized positionality.

I would add, too, that Wu Lan's feeling of absence possesses links to the complexities of her gendered diasporic subjectivity, and, in particular, with the demands that are attached to being a female member of the Chinese Singaporean diaspora. Gayatri Gopinath demonstrates that the combination of gender, diaspora, and sexuality makes those who occupy these categories of difference more susceptible to pressure and marginalization. She speaks of the "illegibility and unrepresentability of a non-heteronormative female subject within patriarchal and heterosexual configurations of both nation and diaspora" (16). Gopinath explains how there is a "traditionally hierarchical relation between nation and diaspora, where [the] [diaspora] is seen as merely an impoverished imitation of an originary national culture" (7). Although diaspora is often perceived within nationalist culture as "the abjected and disavowed Other to the nation, the nation also simultaneously recruits the diaspora into its absolutist logic" (Gopinath 7). In this sense, the diaspora demonstrates "adherence and loyalty to nationalist ideologies" (10). Observing the "close relationship between nationalism and heterosexuality (11)," Gopinath contends that "the unthinkability of a queer female diasporic subject is inextricable from the nationalist overvaluation of the heterosexual female body" (19). Indeed, "the coordinates of the female figure remain inevitably fixed as wife, mother, and daughter" (191). For female subjects in both the nation and the diaspora, to deviate from the fixity of these destined roles is anathema. Gopinath comments on how "conventional diasporic and nationalist discourses... forget, excise, and criminalize queer bodies, pleasures, desires, histories, and lives" (187). Thus, she employs the term 'impossible desires' to refer to "the elision of queer female diasporic sexuality and subjectivity" (19),

in which “queer female desire or subjectivity exists, crucially, outside the frame of the possible” (191).

Gender, then, plays a crucial role in the formation of diasporic subjectivity. In discussing the role of gender in diaspora, Floya Anthias claims that “[w]omen are the transmitters and reproducers of ethnic and national ideologies and central in the transmission of cultural rules” (571). In turn, the transmission and reproduction of cultural rules hinges crucially on women’s (hetero)sexuality and their ability to bear children to pass along those ethnic and cultural roots. In *This Place Called Absence*, Wu Lan’s uneasiness with her lesbian sexuality stems from the guilt she feels in failing to conform to the diasporic injunction to preserve cultural traditions. Wu Lan initially thought that leaving Singapore and immigrating to Canada would enable her to explore her queer sexuality: “Proud of my escape from Singapore, I convinced myself that leaving the country was the solution” (123). However, being in Canada is not quite as liberating as she had imagined, for she finds that she still experiences the pull of home in Singapore, still feels the pressure of “homing in on her parents’ needs” (123). Wu Lan’s valuation of “home” in Singapore, then, is conflicted in that it becomes associated primarily with filial obligations, and thus assumes an oppressive nature. This affects Wu Lan’s ability to desire Singapore as a genuine “home.”

Being the target of constant reminders from her mother about her longing for a grandchild, and the news of her brother’s wife’s pregnancy, has Wu Lan experiencing guilt for *not* fulfilling the role of the diasporic female subject to bear children, to continue the family line, and ultimately, to reproduce the ethnic and cultural expectations of the

originary homeland. Wu Lan admits, “Even though I’ve made the decision not to have children, something in me feels the absence that goes along with such a choice” (80). This “absence” not only carries the trauma of heteronormativity, but also the trauma associated with diasporic failure. In other words, Wu Lan experiences a painful absence that emerges from failing to follow the diasporic expectation to enter a heterosexual relationship and to reproduce; in her failure to do this, she effectively breaks the vital link between herself as the diasporic subject and the homeland, and also creates a profound rift between herself and her family. Considering the traditional view in which the diasporic subject is largely defined by nation/homeland and strives to reproduce the “authentic” cultural values in the diaspora, to deviate from these expectations leaves the diasporic subject feeling a sense of diasporic loss or absence, anxiety, and uncertainty. Wu Lan reflects, “Once I had been Lan-Lan, my mother’s precious orchid. Lan-Lan stayed close to home, homing in on her parents’ needs. But who is Wu Lan?” (123). Lily Cho offers an apt description of this diasporic state: “the diasporic subject [possesses] [an] agonized relationship to home [which] engenders a perpetual sense of not quite having left and not quite having arrived” (99). As Donald Goellnicht astutely observes, “this place called absence” becomes “a descriptor for the diasporic state itself” (172). This diasporic state of non-belonging and absence is exacerbated by the suicide of Wu Lan’s father, the death of which Wu Lan’s mother attributes to her failure to marry and have children. The death of her father represents the waning of patriarchal values, and although this is what she sought to escape from when she left Singapore, Wu Lan still grieves his absence. I would agree with Goellnicht’s assessment, in which he contends

that Wu Lan suffers a crisis between “the certainty/oppression of patriarchy and the uncertainty/liberation of lesbian identification” (174). In *This Place Called Absence*, Wu Lan suffers from an insidious sexual trauma, which is complicated by her diasporic loss, and she struggles to confidently inhabit her female, lesbian and diasporic position. Although Kwa writes about Asian Canadian protagonists, she tends to direct her focus much more towards issues of gender, diaspora, and sexuality within Asian North American communities. Race does not appear to be a significant issue of power imbalance, even in the various cross-racial relationships that Wu Lan has with other women. This is not to say that Kwa finds race to be unimportant or irrelevant; rather, she chooses to explore, in detail, how categories such as gendered, diasporic sexuality impact and complicate the experience of sexual trauma. The sexual trauma that Wu Lan experiences, then, becomes the catalyst for the instability and effacement of her body and personhood. Wu Lan’s case of sexual, insidious trauma supports Cvetkovich’s assertion that “trauma manifests itself in everyday sexual lives [wherein] the vulnerability of bodies and psyches is negotiated” (29).

This Place Called Absence operates on two different timelines that shift between the contemporary (Wu Lan in Vancouver, her mother in Singapore) and early twentieth-century Singapore, in which Wu Lan imagines the lives and subjectivities of two prostitutes working in brothels. As the novel progresses, the narratives of the sex trade workers become intimately intertwined with Wu Lan’s. Like Wu Lan, the prostitutes she gives voice to also suffer from the effects of sexual trauma. Originally from a Chinese village, Chow Chat Mui had been a victim of her father’s sexual abuse. She recalls how

he “bound [her] body” (55) and she likens her situation to “living like a captured animal. I was a chicken in a wire cage, slaughtered nightly without bloodshed” (12). She escapes to Singapore with her cousin Ah Loong, only to discover a replication of the sexual violence she had suffered. Initially disguised as a man, her soft-spoken voice betrays her identity, and upon her arrival, she is raped by several men “while [her] body sank into the mud” (14), and is persuaded to enter the sex trade by the son of a brothel owner: “He whispered... [t]hings I had to do to men. Or let them do to me. What he was saying reminded me of what my father did” (27). Chat Mui struggles with the sexual captivity she seems to be condemned to, and her trauma, similar to Wu Lan’s, emerges as a feeling of absence or emptiness: “Who wants me, truly wants me? No tenderness. I may be alive but I’m a shell. A hollow gourd” (188). Moreover, she expresses, “I know I’m not beautiful. With these ugly marks all over my body” (69). What Chat Mui experiences echoes, and is symptomatic of, Cvetkovich’s argument that “sex and trauma [become] forms of bodily violation that destroy the self’s integrity” (35).

Indeed, the kind of sexual trauma that attenuates body, spirit, and self is also shared by Lee Ah Choi, a young woman from a Southern Chinese village who is sold by her father for “three sacks of rice,” and is eventually forced into prostitution in Singapore (Kwa 22). She recalls the time in which she was first “deflowered” at the brothel, an event that is arranged by the brothel owner, in vivid detail:

I stared at his gold tooth in his dirty wide-open mouth when he pushed me down onto the straw mat. His hand pushed against my belly and moved down quickly to separate my legs. The red robe slipped off the bed and onto the floor. His breathing was so heavy that it squeezed out all the air in my chest. The painful glitter of his tooth as he pushed himself into me! (40)

She remembers how “the earth began to shake and echo with every move of his body against mine” (35). Ah Choi’s description captures the shock and violence of her sexually traumatic ordeal. Indeed, her experience is so excruciating that she sits in the cubicle “like a piece of wood for hours” after her deflowering (40). This motif of lifelessness is a recurring one in the narratives of the prostitutes, and it emerges as a result of their sexual violation, but also because of what their bodies come to signify. In servicing her clients, Lee Ah Choi bears the sexual and psychologically damaging brutality of being an *ah ku*, or prostitute. She describes the experience of her sexual labour: “I lie below him, wooden until I fuse with my straw mat, becoming like it, rasping thin and insubstantial. That’s why I sometimes scream. As if something inside me needs to make a sound, to prove I’m still alive” (59). Again, sexual trauma here gives way to an affective feeling of lack, and in Lee Ah Choi’s case, this materializes as an anxiety about her literal ontological absence as a human being. Her feeling of being merged with her straw mat, and essentially being rendered a “wooden,” inanimate object illuminates how the bodies of prostitutes are perceived. Their bodies are identified as “merchandise” for “coarse hands” to run over (9), objects to be “continual[ly] pawn[ed]” (92). In effect, their bodies are utilized for sexual and monetary exploitation, but are devoid of any character, vitality, or spirit – ultimately divested of any human qualities. Assigned value only for their sexual and financial utility, their bodies become automaton-like, as illustrated in Lee Ah Choi’s blunt realization: “I’ve been opening my legs for so many years, it’s as automatic as peeing” (86).

The connection between the kind of absence operative in Wu Lan's experience of sexual trauma and the absence experienced by Chow Chat Mui and Lee Ah Choi as sex trade workers deserves further elaboration. Wu Lan's sense of absence bespeaks her fundamental exclusion from a heterosexist society. Because of her sexual preference and her decision to abstain from having children, her body is judged to have lost its only valuable function: that of reproduction to continue the family line. Since her sexuality and, accordingly, her body, with its perpetually empty womb, is incompatible with the dominant heterosexist order, she is relegated to its margins, and this "absence" from society is something that Wu Lan experiences on a very profound level. In a similar fashion, the threat of absence or *being absent* is very real for Chow Chat Mui and Lee Ah Choi. Because they are identified and perceived solely as prostitutes – vessels for sexual and commercial manipulation – they, too, are consigned to the subterranean peripheries of society, their unsanctioned, unofficial identities marking them as invisible. Like Wu Lan, though, their bodies, too, constitute a significant part of why they are written out, as it were, from the social order. As prostitutes, their bodies are utilized to offer their male clients sexual pleasure and relief, but their occupation requires that they do not become pregnant. In this respect, their bodies, as is Wu Lan's, are also "non-reproductive," and thus, illegitimate and unworthy of respect. Shannon Bell explains how the "category 'woman'" operates on "an internal dichotomy: virtuous woman/whore" (40). She goes on to discuss how the female body becomes a site for various kinds of rigid dichotomization that function to exercise social control over women. These binaries include the "good girl/bad girl, madonna/whore, normal/abnormal, licit/illicit, wife/prostitute, as well as the

high and low images that have fragmented and categorized the female body” (40). As she elucidates,

The modern discourse on prostitution was part of a broader discursive production of female sexuality which separated the female body into the reproductive body and the un(re)productive body: normal female sexuality was defined in terms of prostitution. Reproductive sexuality, which denied women active sexual desire and pleasure, was the respectable norm; prostitution was its inversion. And it was the mapping of prostitution which made possible the delimitations of this respectable norm. (41)

Under a patriarchal organization which seeks to control, and specifically to contain, female sexuality and pleasure, the bodies of prostitutes, with their perceived wantonness and deviant sexuality, come to represent the “wicked,” unsanctioned category of the bifurcated female body, shaping the limits of acceptable female sexuality, while simultaneously existing outside the borders of social respectability. The social exclusion of prostitutes is illustrated, for instance, when Ah Choi is ignored by Mr. Ong, the owner of a jewellery store she often frequents because she enjoys admiring the luxurious jewellery she hopes she can afford one day: “Mr. Ong ignores me without hesitation whenever a married woman is in the store. He averts his eyes from me” (41-42).

Although the question of socio-economic position and class partially explains the difference between Mr. Ong’s treatment of married women and Ah Choi, I would also contend that the issue of socially accepted/illegitimate bodies is at play here. The body of a married woman is associated with pregnancy and motherhood – that is, reproduction – the conventional social expectations of the function of a woman’s body. By contrast, Ah Choi’s body, the body of a prostitute, represents the antithesis of this role, and accordingly, her social presence is deemed worthless, unwanted and rejected. It

effectively becomes a blight upon the social world, and Ah Choi expresses how people avoid her gaze and presence when she is out in public, even if she is not dressed like a prostitute. As others see it, the brothel is the only appropriate place for her body. As Chat Mui reflects, “Since I came here [the brothel], some of my sisters [the other prostitutes] have died from the dreaded disease eating up their genitals and wombs, others from hanging, or from being beaten to death, or from opium overdose” (42). Although the lives of these prostitutes end atrociously, their bodies are fundamentally dispensable because they possess little social value. In turn, their “absence” from society results in Chat Mui and Ah Choi’s feeling of affective emptiness. In *This Place Called Absence*, it becomes clear that sexual trauma, manifested in acts of sexual violation as well as the insidious trauma of heteronormativity, plays a pivotal role in threatening the figurative existence and very selfhood of its victims.

As in *This Place Called Absence*, *Pulse* is also a novel that incorporates two different time periods, alternating between contemporary Toronto and Singapore and the narrator’s memories of early 1970s Singapore. The theme of sexual trauma is introduced again by way of a suicide at the beginning of the narrative, and it is this suicide that prompts the protagonist, Natalie, to revisit her own wounds, which entails a succumbing to “the force of memories” (27). After learning that her ex-lover’s son, Selim, has taken his own life, Natalie, a Singaporean-born acupuncturist working in Toronto’s Chinatown, returns to Singapore for the memorial service. As she begins to unravel the mystery behind Selim’s suicide, she discovers that both she and Selim possess sexually traumatic histories. In her childhood years in Singapore, Natalie recounts memories of being

sexually abused by her father: “[A]fter Mum went to bed, Papa had snuck into my room and lain next to me. His breath stunk. As always, I pretended to be sound asleep. He squirmed around, making his usual grunting sounds” (108). Natalie’s memories of the abuse, which began when she was six years old, are marked by curiosity, confusion, and disgust: “I could feel the sticky sensation of his erection when he placed my hands on it. I would sneak a look at it sometimes, rising like a snake between his thighs” (176). As a child who could not fully integrate or understand what her father was doing to her, Natalie’s trauma becomes manifested psychosomatically. She begins to suffer from extremely itchy hands, which she would scratch at vigorously until her skin peeled (85). While seemingly an odd response to the abuse, Natalie’s itchy hands suggest the discomfort she was feeling internally and physically about being forced to touch her father sexually. Natalie struggles in isolation with her father’s violation of her, with no recourse and pressured into keeping silent about it because her mother urges her to be a “good girl” (111). In fact, her mother tells her, “You can’t give me anything to worry about, because Mum has too hard a life, and now too late for me. You mustn’t disappoint me, daughter” (111). The burden of secrecy proves to be damaging in its own right, expressed when Natalie thinks, “But I was suffering too, and why didn’t she know it?” (111). She admits,

I’ve lived most of my life feeling like a freak, a misfit. Had to pretend lots, had to hide. I don’t have many secrets, but the handful I keep remain a burden. Like the ones about Papa. How could I have told Mum? She seemed too fragile to handle what was going on. She desperately needed me to be a good daughter. (131)

Indeed, Cvetkovich suggests that “many narratives by survivors of incest and sexual abuse indicate that the trauma resides as much in secrecy as in sexual abuse – the burden not to tell creates its own network of psychic wounds that far exceed the event itself” (94).

As an adult, Natalie still experiences the effects of the childhood sexual abuse she endured at the hands of her father. She describes the

frequent recurring nightmares from which I would awaken confused and terrified. Alone in a dark room, lying on a bed with white sheets, I felt a heavy force push down on my whole being. The bed and I would fall through a deep shaft, toward the centre of the earth. I struggled to free myself, unable to move or speak. (19)

While Natalie exhibits the clinical symptoms of sexual trauma, it becomes evident that the impact of the trauma exceeds the clinical category. That is, her spiritual and affective domains also bear the traces of this trauma. Natalie likens the damage produced by her father’s “nauseating nighttime habit” (108) to “a prolonged episode of possession” (19), and believes that, “because of what he did, my spirit fled to some cold, haunted place” (266-67). Natalie also experiences “[a]nger about what Papa did” (154). This is exacerbated after her father suffers a stroke, which debilitates his basic functioning skills. In taking care of him, Natalie is overcome by frustration and fury: “Tortured by a litany of his past wrongs, I felt the urge to strike or pull him down as I helped him move, eat or lie down” (89). Like Lee Ah Choi, who feels stiff and “wooden,” Natalie, too, is subjected to a debilitating “paralysis” that constrains both her body and spirit (19). Natalie’s return to Singapore furthers this paralysis, as seeing her ex-lover, Faridah, again, ushers in excruciating memories she had tried to repress. One particular memory

that emerges near the end of the novel is the incident that ultimately severed Natalie and Faridah's bond. Natalie recalls her father coming home early and discovering the romantic nature of her relationship with Faridah. Furious, he burns her with an iron, strips her naked and ties her up with rope, after which he proceeds to punish her brutally: "He pushed my bound body against the outer edge of the well. 'You don't deserve to live! You... you... betrayed me!'" (226). During this incident, Natalie remembers the alarm of being "possessed by a fierce tremor. Couldn't stop. I felt as if I couldn't breathe... What if my lungs failed me suddenly?... No one would hear me, be able to rescue me in time. The panic escalated" (225). Her father justifies his punishment of her by asserting his patriarchal authority: "See what happens when you don't obey your father, huh?" (226). In her father's eyes, her relationship with Faridah is a "betrayal" because their lesbian relationship represents a challenge to his authority and the patriarchal order. An especially disturbing part of the memory involves her father's penetratingly violent gaze on her: "Tears streamed from his eyes as he stared at my body. Resting his gaze on my breasts and sex, as if he were about to devour me. I thought, *I don't want this*. My father's lust, his blind rage" (226). The horrific nature of this incident ultimately ends Natalie's relationship with Faridah, creating a deep rift between them.

Natalie's history of sexual abuse and violence parallels that of Selim. Natalie eventually learns through Selim's lover, Philip, that Selim, too, was sexually abused by his father. Because Faridah had suffered a miscarriage prior to giving birth to Selim, Selim's father Adam uses him as a scapegoat for the anger he feels about his first unborn child. Selim himself notes, "*My father never forgave me for being the son who survived*"

(244). Selim's final letter to Philip articulates the unbearable nature of his trauma: "No matter where I turn, I can't escape him... The shadow of his crime darkens our household. His violence, the perverted desire that he won't name... I've had enough" (243-45). Like Natalie, Selim is also forced to bear the crushing weight of secrecy. He claims that the shadow of his father's crime is "[a] shadow my mother has not dared to name. She would rather think that her husband simply needed to be close to the son who survived. I know she's quite terrified of the truth. But I don't blame her. It's just too awful for a mother to contemplate" (244). That Selim's father is an intolerant homophobe who felt the need to physically "discipline" Selim for his queer orientation only intensified Selim's sense of helplessness (209). Indeed, Adam's homophobia is a force that both Selim and Natalie must contend with. Canada's treatment of sexual difference is not the only target of Kwa's critique; Singapore's rigid and obstinate intolerance of sexual minorities also falls under her indictment. Adam's homophobic views come to represent Singapore's position on homosexuality and sexual difference, which, as Kwa reveals, is "still considered illegal" ("Singapore on my Mind"). During a dinner that Natalie shares with Faridah, Adam, and their daughter Christina, Adam articulates his disapproval of Canada's liberalism regarding sexual diversity: "We read that the country now allows marriage for homosexuals" (202). When Christina tells Natalie that her father is looking for reasons not to send her to North America for university, Adam says, "I don't want my daughter to become corrupted by those kinds of values" (203). Adam employs a morally prescriptive rhetoric to suggest that the West, replete with sexual decadence, debauchery, and its leniency towards queers, will lead his impressionable

daughter astray. This frame of logic positions the West and the East (Singapore) as geographical spaces that possess antithetical moral values, with the West as the source of sexual, and, accordingly, moral, degeneracy, and Asia/Singapore producing sexual and moral rectitude. Adam's position echoes what Gopinath articulates in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*: "Within patriarchal diasporic and nationalist logic, the 'lesbian' can only exist outside the 'home' as household, community, and nation of origin, whereas the 'woman' can only exist within it. Indeed the 'lesbian' is seen as 'foreign,' as a product of being too long in the West, and therefore is annexed to the 'host' nation where she may be further elided" (18-19). Here, the "lesbian" and the "woman" are mutually exclusive, and sexual depravity is configured as endemic to the West.

In reference to Adam's homophobia, Natalie remarks, "Fear makes people do and say crazy things" (Kwa 211). Adam exhibits no hesitation in making offensive remarks about gays and lesbians and expressing his homophobic views. For instance, he is anxious to let Natalie know, "I'm not a homo, okay? I just want you to know that. Just because both my wife and my son like people of the same sex" (207). His apprehension about being viewed as queer stems from his belief that homosexuality or queerness is somehow contagious, and he worries that others might assume he has "contracted" it by virtue of his association with his queer family members. Adam continues his pathologization of queerness when he tells Natalie, "I don't mind if you still want to sleep with my wife. I mean, help her get it out of her system" (207). Here, Adam configures homosexuality as a disorder or illness that is capable of eventually being expelled from the body. Adam's

homophobia is not just limited to the disparaging comments he makes, though; indeed, it becomes translated into literal violence that he enacts on Selim. Philip, Selim's boyfriend, tells Natalie that Adam walked in on him and Selim making out in Selim's room: "Mr. Khoo broke down and cried, saying he was heartbroken that his son would not want to marry and have children. He slapped Selim's face" (245-46). As Adam tells Natalie, "It's the attraction between men that's dangerous" (208). Adam "knew that Selim was gay. But he couldn't accept it" (211). He admits that he "had to discipline [Selim]. For his own sake" (209). His prohibitory position on gay sexuality leads him to abuse Selim, both physically and sexually, with devastating consequences.

The ordeal of being sexually violated and physically beaten by his father was so acute as to pervade Selim's existence, and his decision to commit suicide bespeaks an ultimate surrender to the force of this trauma – an apprehension about living itself. Sexual trauma is also accompanied by a sense of betrayal, and this betrayal registers in Selim's perceived absence of genuine love from his father, an irony that undermines the traditional notion that a parent loves his or her child categorically. Selim "*knows what it's like to love someone who won't – can't – love you back. That father from whom we can never receive unconditional love*" (244-45). Herman's assumption that females are the primary victims of sexual abuse and violence is problematic precisely because it does not account for male victims of sexual abuse, and the case of Selim demonstrates that males, too, can be vulnerable to the abuse of sexual power. Like Natalie, Selim becomes "possessed" by the influence and control of his abuser, and similarly, this possession allows him no space to move, effectively paralyzing and eventually destroying him. As

Herman observes, for many victims of sexual abuse and trauma, it becomes almost unfathomable to “imagine themselves in a position of agency or choice” (112).

The Walking Boy is very different from both *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse*, in that it is set in 8th Century China during the period of the Tang Dynasty.

Nevertheless, sexual trauma is a significant concern in the text, especially for Baoshi, an intersex character who struggles with the shame of possessing an indeterminate gender. In this regard, it would be useful to introduce Eve Sedgwick’s formulation, which, according to Cvetkovich, “links sexuality and emotion in using the category of shame to suggest that traumatic experiences of rejection and humiliation are connected to identity formations” (Cvetkovich 47). This idea is particularly apt in relation to how the shame associated with Baoshi’s sexual trauma marks him and impacts the way he views himself. The memory of his father giving him away, indeed even paying Harelip the monk to take him, remains a vivid one that continues to haunt Baoshi. He painfully recalls how his father exposed him for Harelip’s inspection: “Baoshi’s father pushes him onto the table and pries open his legs. Harelip draws close to Baoshi and stares down at his private parts” (38). He remembers his father’s eagerness to be rid of him, expressed when he impatiently asks the monk, “Will you take him?” and presents him with a pouch of coins (38). Being rendered an object of forced exposure and humiliating scrutiny, as well as being reminded that he is an unwanted encumbrance, Baoshi bears the weight of this agonizingly fresh memory with “[t]he chill of shame,” and it shapes how he conceives of himself: as a disgrace to his family and a “burden” (38). The anguishing nature of this memory lodges itself in Baoshi’s psyche: he “cringes as the image of that pouch of silver

flashes through his mind, the one his father dropped onto Harelip's table" (104). In *This Place Called Absence*, Ah Choi is sold off by her father for three sacks of rice; however, in *The Walking Boy*, Baoshi is not only harshly exposed, but the fact that his father was willing to give money away to Harelip in exchange for him to take Baoshi in reinforces Baoshi's rejection by his family, and thus, doubles his sense of shame. Baoshi wonders: "He [my father] couldn't bear to look at my body. Why was my body so reprehensible to him? Just because it carries both male and female within it?" (41). Quoting Michael Franz Basch, Eve Sedgwick writes, "The shame-humiliation response, when it appears, represents the failure or absence of the smile of contact, a reaction to the loss of feedback from others, indicating social isolation and signaling the need for relief from that condition" (36). Sara Ahmed defines shame "as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body" (103). Clearly, shame is a formidable affect – one that possesses the ability to profoundly damage the inner core of one's self, and Baoshi falls victim to this potent feeling.

However, is shame merely a temporary affect that is experienced, or does it have more powerful, profound effects on the self? Sedgwick maintains that "[s]hame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication" (36). Indeed, "shame... makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another" (Sedgwick 36). Shame certainly becomes a constitutive part of Baoshi's identity in the novel. He experiences "vague flashbacks of seeing his mother's naked body, yet never his father's. Glimpses of Harelip

as he washed and changed. Then there have been those who went to Harelip for healing. No one who he has seen naked has a body that looks exactly like his” (87). This realization has the feeling of shame perpetually “wash[ing] over him” (39), and he has the tendency to “hang[] his head low” (Kwa 104), a gesture that “psychologists of shame locate[] [as] the protoform [eyes down, head averted] of this powerful affect” (Sedgwick 36). Parts of Baoshi’s traumatic memory also reappear in his nightmares, with different variations:

he cannot move, his walking stick dropping away from him into an abyss. His father strides toward him, a smirk on his face. When he reaches Baoshi, he tears off his clothes. The villagers have gathered below to witness his nakedness, the glaring contradictions in his body exposed.
(147)

In this nightmare, Baoshi is subjected to a replication of the ignominy he suffered in his original memory. It is important to note here, though, that his bare body becomes the object of a *public* spectacle, and, thus, *public* shame. That the public’s focus is on “the glaring contradictions” of his genitalia, and that this experience produces overwhelming humiliation for him, reinforces Baoshi’s fundamental Otherness from the social world. As Ahmed explains, “To be witnessed in one’s failure is to be ashamed: to have one’s shame witnessed is even more shaming. The bind of shame is that it is intensified by being seen by others *as* shame” (103). Quoting Sartre, Ahmed elucidates the social dynamic of shame: “I am ashamed of myself *as I appear* to the Other” (104). In this nightmare, it becomes evident that Baoshi equates his body with shame; indeed, his body becomes shame itself. That others are witnessing his embodied shame only magnifies his humiliation. When some of the *jogappas*, a community of transgendered dancers, offer to

help him change his clothes because he has sweat profusely from his nightmare, Baoshi, anxious, adamantly “pushes them away” (148). Baoshi thinks,

It was a terrifying nightmare, but it was far more terrifying when they tried to take his clothes off. What would they have done if they had discovered his uneven breasts? Or his lower body parts with its male and female body parts? The thought causes him to feel close to tears. (149)

Ahmed establishes that, in shame, “the ‘apartness’ of the subject is intensified in the return of the gaze; apartness is felt in the moment of exposure to others, an exposure that is wounding” (105). Baoshi is constantly alert to those who may discover his bodily shame and resolves to constantly cover himself, because according to Ahmed, “Shame feels like an exposure... but it also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject turn away from the other and towards itself” (103).

Just as Wu Lan, Chat Mui, and Ah Choi are “absent” from heteronormative, patriarchal society because their queer sexuality and their bodies are deemed contradictory to conventional norms, and thus, valueless, Baoshi is reminded that his intersex identity is neither understood nor accepted in a social order that relies on rigid gender norms. According to Sara Davidmann, the term “queer” is “now commonly used as an umbrella term for sexual and gender identities beyond the norm” (186). As Sharon E. Preves maintains, those who are born intersexed also fall under the category of “queer,” in that “their bodies do not conform to an overarching... social expectation that all humans belong to one of two clearly delineated sex categories, female or male” (523). For Jennifer Germon, the “privileging of maleness and femaleness... reinforce[s] the supposed naturalness of existing binary categories” (9). As she explains, “[t]he intersexed are rendered pathological because they defy monosexual categories at a somatic level” (7-

8). Indeed, the intersexed “once fell under the rubric of teratology – the study of monsters” (Germon 11). Baoshi’s cognizance of his own sexual difference emerges as a kind of insidious trauma, for he lives in perpetual fear and anxiety over his body and sex being discovered. Shame becomes the dominant affect that emerges from the insidious trauma of his sexual difference. Baoshi fears scrutiny of, and ridicule over, his body, and although he is not subject to physical violence in either his traumatic memory or his nightmare, I would maintain that the apprehension of being brutally persecuted is an existing but unarticulated anxiety for Baoshi. I make this point with the consideration of how those who are confronted with alternative sexualities or sexual differences react: with fear, hatred, and violence. This can be observed in both *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse*.

A connection between the vulnerability of Baoshi’s body in both his memory and his nightmare and of Natalie’s in *Pulse* and the two prostitutes in *This Place Called Absence* is significant. In these instances, their bodies become the objects of various pernicious gazes that are operative in paralyzing them and violating their integrity. Baoshi’s body is subject to the intrusive and perverse curiosity of others. For the gazes observed in *Pulse* and *This Place Called Absence*, Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze is pertinent. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey contends that, “[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (19). In *Pulse*, Natalie’s body is exposed to the lascivious gaze of her sexually predatory father, and the two prostitutes in *This Place Called Absence* to their clients and their superiors, who view them as sexual

commodities. Ah Choi articulates the nature of the way she is looked at by men: they “cast sidelong glances at me, their eyes flashing ravenous as the night” (11), and they direct their attention towards her “with eyes that wanted to drown me in their gaze” (22). In these instances, the male gaze possesses a sexually voracious appetite for the objectified female, who exists solely for the male’s erotic pleasure. Correspondingly, the theme of paralysis, too, or the inability to exercise any meaningful movement, which is experienced as a result of physical, sexual, and spiritual or affective violence, is a significant one in all three novels. Indeed, in *This Place Called Absence*, *Pulse*, and *The Walking Boy*, sexual trauma wreaks a paralytic effect on the lives of the characters. Thus, they are consigned to a position of stasis and powerlessness, robbed of their agency and unable to *move*, much less move forward. The possibility of healing this trauma, and the reclaiming of power and agency for these characters, will be examined in the following chapter.

Chapter 2:

Alternative Therapeutic Models: Sexuality as a Locus of Healing Sexual Trauma

As established in the preceding chapter, sexual trauma, which includes sexual violation and abuse as well as the insidious trauma of (hetero)normativity, engenders complex ramifications beyond the domain of clinical symptoms for those who have suffered from it. In particular, we see that the characters in Kwa's novels experience the trauma on an affective level as well, consisting of melancholic absence, anger, shame, and spiritual/emotional paralysis. I would also add that their ability to trust and to engage in intimacy with others becomes compromised, as evidenced in *Pulse* when Natalie expresses how her father's sexual abuse of her makes her resolve to forgo intimacy in the future:

I vowed that I would never love anyone. I couldn't help but love Papa when I was a baby. How could I have known he was going to turn out to be so sick with me?... But now that I knew, I promised myself I would grow up to be someone who wouldn't let anyone get that close. Just in case they were going to turn on me. (109)

The primary concern in this chapter, then, is to examine the possibilities that this trauma might be healed, and the ways in which healing might be accomplished, thus allowing the characters to gain some measure of freedom and agency. According to Judith Herman,

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based on the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. (133)

I would agree with Herman's assessment, as it is critical that survivors of trauma do not withdraw into their own damaged, solipsistic worlds. I would add, too, that with something like sexual trauma, a trauma that is produced from interpersonal violence, having a network of support and understanding is essential to facilitate healing. In this respect, the domain of sexuality proves to be an effective site to aid the recovery of sexual trauma. The category of sexuality, which encompasses sexual intimacy and practices, as well as the formation of supportive communities founded on the basis of being part of a sexual minority, offers an ideal opportunity for those who have endured sexual trauma to re-build their trust, reconnect with others, and significantly, to reconnect with themselves and their own bodies.

In *This Place Called Absence*, Kwa foregrounds queer relationality and sexual intimacy as a crucial locus that restores agency to the characters that have been sexually traumatized, allowing them a way out of their affective and spiritual lifelessness. This can be observed in the relationship that is formed between Chat Mui and Ah Choi, the two early twentieth-century prostitutes that Wu Lan brings to life in her imagination. Having been subjected to sexual violation and exploitation, and forced to perform the "distasteful labour" of prostituting their bodies to men (55), Chat Mui and Ah Choi are, at the outset, involved in asymmetrical relations with others in which they possess little power over their own bodies. Their labour is predicated entirely on sexually gratifying their male clients, and Chat Mui initially believes that prostitution will be her route to liberty and independence:

An ah ku is powerful in ways that a wife never could be. I learned the various positions of sex acts, that there are many ways for a woman and a

man to lie together... The more I learned, the more hopeful I became. I had acquired the power that would guarantee my freedom. (36)

However, Chat Mui eventually discovers the naivety of her assumption as she realizes that, as a prostitute, she does not own her own body; rather, it is used for the profit of Sum Toke, their conniving brothel owner. Not only are they not in ownership of their own bodies, but their bodies also come to bear the detrimental consequences of their sexual labour. As Chat Mui conveys, "Sex. My body wars with the scum of their bodies rubbing and spilling disease, sinking me deeper into the mud" (49). Chat Mui uses the language of war and combat to describe her experience of offering her services to men who come visit her at the brothel. She sees their sexual contact with her as an attack on her body, an assault that mirrors and recalls the trauma of the first time she was gang-raped by several men when she first arrived in Singapore, whereupon their violent penetration of her drives her body into the mud. The wounds that are inflicted on her body as a result of this sexual combat are, accordingly, the diseases that the men carry with them and pass onto her. In other words, the bodies of prostitutes are exposed to various kinds of potentially fatal sexually transmitted diseases: "Our private parts burn with pain and itching, they swell and weep with pus" (52). Their bodies, which explicitly manifest their infection and illness, effectively become sites in which their misery and abjection are inscribed. Moreover, the prostitutes themselves do not derive any pleasure from offering sex to men. As Ah Choi articulates, "When will I get used to this work? A man can groan and sweat all he wants, then finally be overcome with his momentary release" (59). However, Chat Mui and Ah Choi do not experience any sense of sexual enjoyment or release in offering their services.

Indeed, it is only in their lesbian relationship with each other that they discover a reprieve from their vortex of helplessness and despair. Their first encounter of intimacy as they kiss is tentative and produces a feeling of curiosity in Ah Choi: “Who fooled whom first? How did we come to our first kiss? I have never seen other women kiss each other. I dare not ask, for isn’t it a strange thing? No one pays us for this pleasure” (48). The two women are so accustomed to having their bodies exploited for both sex and money that they come to assume that intimacy automatically has a price. However, they are pleasantly surprised by the novel experience of kissing one another, an act that each of them engages in willingly, and which offers the other *and* themselves pleasure, but which is not governed by any monetary transactions whatsoever. Their first kiss introduces them to the realization that it is possible to *give* and *receive* pleasure without being paid or paying for it: “There is a labour that doesn’t mark us... the language of secret desires” (58). This is a labour that they freely engage in of their own accord. In contrast to the automaton-like nature of their bodies when they engage in sex for prostitution (Ah Choi’s comparison of her sexual labour with the mechanical nature of urination is a harrowing portrayal of the bleakness of their lives), in their relationship they are in control, and become *autonomous* agents over their own bodies. They struggle to name and define this welcome desire. Chat Mui asks, “How to speak the unspeakable? This desire for her. Without language to name it” (55-56). As they become more attuned to “the language of secret desires,” and to their need for each other, the nature of their lovemaking becomes more passionate, as Ah Choi describes: “This afternoon, she comes to pleasure me. When I try to take her breast into my mouth, she stops me and presses her lips into my throat.

Presses until I feel the mark of her passion enter, become the next words that I will speak” (58). Although their lesbian attraction to each other defies a clear definition, the relationship between Chat Mui and Ah Choi acquires its own vocabulary of intense ardour and ecstasy.

However, as much as they experience enjoyment from being intimate with each other’s bodies, their lovemaking is not solely about carnal, sexual pleasure and satisfaction. As evidenced in Chapter One, the mark of the prostitutes’ sexual trauma is manifested in the stiffness and automaton-like lifelessness of their bodies, and also in their feeling of ontological absence from the world. For instance, Ah Choi is so prostrate with alienation and distress that she doubts her existence and feels compelled to scream in order to prove that she is alive. The weight of their trauma, then, becomes so intense that they doubt their own bodily existence. This fear of their bodily absence is only exacerbated by anxieties about the sexual marketability of their bodies. For instance, Ah Choi is self-conscious about her large, unbound feet. She was spared the pain of having her feet bound, because her family needed her to work in the fields (52). Her sister Ah Fong, though, was forced by their father to have her feet bound, and this decision emerges from their father’s desire to maximize his daughter’s economic profitability: “A pretty face combined with tiny feet would greatly increase the chance of a favourable marriage, meaning a larger dowry” (53). Ah Choi becomes influenced by social perceptions about a male idea of feminine beauty, which causes her to feel insecure about her “lotus boat[]” feet (52). In this respect, the sexual intimacy between Chat Mui and Ah Choi functions as

a way for them to affirm the corporeality and *beauty* of the other. Chat Mui's expression of how she feels about Ah Choi's feet is illuminating:

Her feet. She insults them. She believes the lies, that they're ugly, and she can take comfort only in their ease. What is beautiful in a woman? Only what men want? Such beauty brings pain. But I've a secret. The first time I cupped her feet in my hands, I knew I wanted to feed on them... I've licked each toe's separate thought into memory. I see how my tongue trails pleasure through her body as it moves along the length of a foot, slowed down by the roughened areas, the signs of those early days in the fields... Do men want her feet as I do? I dare not ask. The pleasure of hidden beauty, raw and rugged. (58)

Ah Choi's feet bear witness to her history and the agricultural labour she has performed, and although her feet are conventionally unattractive in a patriarchal society that prizes small and dainty feet in women, Chat Mui greatly relishes and reveres them. That Chat Mui meticulously licks Ah Choi's feet, including the coarsened areas, is a tender gesture that bespeaks her love and care for Ah Choi. Her question about what defines a woman's beauty, and whether feminine beauty is determined solely by the ideology of men, is significant, as it poses a feminist challenge to prevailing male-oriented ideas of what a sexually attractive woman should look like, and what she must do to her body to achieve that ideal. As Chat Mui notes, the measures that a woman takes in order to attain what men see as bodily perfection brings physical pain. Chat Mui assumes a different position on what constitutes beauty, though: she admires Ah Choi's natural form and appearance, takes delight in her "hidden beauty." Her actions reassure Ah Choi that she *is*, indeed, beautiful regardless of what others might think.

This affirmation of the other's beauty is mutual between the two prostitutes. Like Ah Choi, Chat Mui also harbours insecurities about the appearance of her body, but the

affection, sensitivity, and understanding that is shared between them is enough to redeem her sense of self-worth: “Ah Choi. You listen to my fantasies, yield your lips to my fire. Disgust with my diseased body does not hold me back” (49). It becomes clear that their lovemaking carries emotional significance, giving them confidence about themselves and offering them encouragement:

Ah Choi loves me, I’m sure... There’s purity in a feeling. The ugliness falls away when she touches me. She draws out the fiery brightness that lives within. I look into her face and something in me remembers... how simple to want beauty itself, to long for what pleases. (92)

In Chat Mui’s account, the way that Ah Choi touches her and treats her body becomes fundamental in rejuvenating her spirits and in animating her dormant passion and determination. The hitherto coldness and absence that characterized the way the prostitutes felt about themselves and their bodies becomes replaced with warmth and zeal in the face of their lesbian desire and bond with each other, reminding them that they and their bodies are worthy of love, care, and pleasure. This is also illustrated in Chat Mui’s articulation of what Ah Choi does for her: “Her smooth breast caresses my dry lips. Her hands float me above the weight of pain... The contours of her body are like small animals stalking through my solitude” (137). She goes on to say, “She is a fire razing through me. A cool wind awakening my skin to pleasure. Water for thirsty lips. Earth that meets my falling body” (137). Chat Mui’s description combines images of human need with the relief of that need, which she equates with Ah Choi. Accordingly, Ah Choi becomes the essence that revives Chat Mui’s desiccated soul. Their nurturance of, and careful attention to, each other becomes the life force that supports and sustains both

women, awakening their consciousness of themselves as subjects and agents of *value*, capable of experiencing sexual desire, pleasure, and love.

How Chat Mui and Ah Choi look at and *see* each other also deserves consideration. Unlike the aggressive nature of the male gaze that seeks to objectify them, to sexually devour and consume them, the way they gaze at one another is not predicated solely on sexual or erotic appetite, but also on the pleasure of recognizing the other's *subjectivity*. As Ah Choi gazes at Chat Mui, she thinks, "Tall and lanky, her body sways with the music of the opium in her veins. Her eyes are unlike mine. They don't conceal her fury. I enjoy watching her. A private pleasure" (11). In Ah Choi's vision, Chat Mui is not rendered a sexualized object. While there is undoubtedly an erotic element that she experiences as she watches Chat Mui, it is important to note that she sees Chat Mui as her own *person*, replete with all of her liveliness and animated spirit. In watching her with delight, Ah Choi feels a genuine admiration of, and appreciation for, Chat Mui's individual beauty and uniqueness. Indeed, Kwa presents the lesbian romance between Chat Mui and Ah Choi as an infinitely more *equal* relationship than the ones they have with men. Whereas the men they have encountered are responsible for producing their sexual trauma, relations that are predicated on an unequal balance of power, Chat Mui and Ah Choi's lesbian love is a relationship in which both partners carry equal weight and importance. Its genuine quality and pureness renders it free from the impingements of money, abuse, and brutal exploitation. The relationship between Chat Mui and Ah Choi is predicated on the belief that heterosexual, penetrative sex is inherently violent. Indeed, Chat Mui says: "Without the thrusts of men, our skins must be sufficient enough to show

desire. Our tongues and fingers find ways to travel into each other” (49). The juxtaposition between the aggressive “thrusts” of men with the gentle and curious way in which Chat Mui and Ah Choi use their tongues and fingers to probe each other’s bodies, thus giving rise to sexual desire and pleasure, points to Kwa’s argument that heterosexual, penetrative sex is founded on brutal patriarchal power relations. This view echoes what Hélène Cixous articulates in “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

Men still have everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity, from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a ‘dark continent’ to penetrate and to ‘pacify’” (877).

Cixous speaks of male sexual penetration as a kind of “[c]onquering” of the female body (877). Chat Mui and Ah Choi’s relationship operates in opposition to this male sexual aggression; indeed, it is precisely their intimacy and special bond with one another that becomes a route through which both of them heal from their sexual trauma, gaining solace and comfort in each other’s embrace and giving each other the fortitude to revitalize both body and spirit.

While the narrative of the two early twentieth-century prostitutes and the contemporary narrative of Wu Lan may seem disparate in many respects, I want to demonstrate the similarities shared between them and show how they are, in actuality, working in tandem. What bearing does the past have for the present and the future? Jose Esteban Munoz’s theory of a queer utopia and futurity informs my analysis of the role that the historical narrative of the prostitutes plays in Wu Lan’s present story. In critiquing the present, Munoz argues that we are living within “straight time” (22). By

this, he means the present/dominant temporality we inhabit, which is profoundly invested in espousing heteronormative values, a seemingly self-evident temporality insisting that “[t]he only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality” (22). For Sara Ahmed, “[t]he everydayness of compulsory heterosexuality is also its affectiveness, wrapped up as it is with moments of ceremony (birth, marriage, death), which bind families together” (147). The values of straight time also inform gay assimilationist politics, which support ideologically heteronormative values such as marriage (Munoz 21). Indeed, Munoz’s conception of “straight time” is equivalent to the insidious trauma of heteronormativity that Wu Lan experiences in *This Place Called Absence*. Straight time’s celebration of heteronormativity is profoundly alienating for individuals like Wu Lan, who fail to conform to its ideals. Arguing against the “toxic[ity]” of the present for “queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative values, and ‘rational’ expectations” (27), Munoz insists on working towards a queer utopia and futurity, maintaining that we must work towards this goal because “queerness [is] something that is not yet here” (22). Achieving a queer utopia requires becoming attuned to the workings of queer temporality, or becoming aware of how the past, present, and future are imbricated. According to Munoz, “A posterior glance at different moments, objects, and spaces might offer us an anticipatory illumination of queerness” (22). While a utopia is usually conceived of as a place of ideal perfection, Munoz reformulates this by suggesting that a utopia need not be some grand, unattainable state; rather, he stresses that there is a *quotidian* element to utopia. Citing Roland Barthes, Munoz pronounces that “the mark of the utopian is the quotidian” (22),

and points to “moments of queer relational bliss” as an example of a queer utopia (25). For Munoz, past moments of queer intimacy possess the ability to *affectively* empower the present and the future, offering “desire” (26), “hope” (28), and “ecstasy” (32) as a kind of ammunition to combat feelings of fear and anxiety (feelings associated with insidious trauma) experienced in straight time. Munoz claims that “it is important to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things” (28).

The two narratives in *This Place Called Absence* conform to Munoz’s conceptualization of a queer utopia: the narrative of Chat Mui and Ah Choi constitutes “past” moments of queer relationality even though it is being imagined by Wu Lan herself, and thus becomes operative in helping her to heal her insidious trauma. The end of her relationship with her lover Kim, who leaves her for a mutual male co-worker of theirs, not only leaves Wu Lan feeling guarded and hesitant to find another partner, but also causes her a sense of unease about her own sexual identity. However, creating and imagining the historical narrative of Chat Mui and Ah Choi as early twentieth-century prostitutes whose relationship is characterized by the tender intimacy they share with one another, functions as a site where the healing of her sexual trauma begins. The sexual, intersubjective intimacy between Chat Mui and Ah Choi, as imagined by Wu Lan, illuminates the valuable *affective* work that the past performs for the present and the future in its illustration of ecstasy, desire, and hope as affective registers that enable the imagination of a queer futurity. For Munoz, a queer utopia is also founded on a “relational and collective modality of endurance and support” (91). Chat Mui and Ah

Choi's persistence in continuing to see each other, despite their recognition of the verboten nature of their lesbian relationship ("they'll name our desire sick and despicable, crush it under the hateful weight of their gossip" [Kwa 102]) speaks to the strength and endurance of their bond with each other. In turn, Chat Mui and Ah Choi's determination to continue their relationship in spite of the consequences of being discovered, exemplifies their conviction about the rightness and intensity of their love, and this powerful model of a queer utopia has a profound impact on Wu Lan.

Imagining the story of these historical characters, these two lesbian lovers, encourages and *gives courage* to Wu Lan to open herself up to others, to offer and to receive trust and affection. This is most apparent in her relationship with Francis, a sensitive and understanding woman she meets at a café, and to whom she feels an attraction. Their intimacy retains a quotidian quality while mirroring the tender affection that characterizes Chat Mui and Ah Choi's romance:

We undress each other to the slow, rhythmic drip of the kitchen tap. One button, another, then another. Peeling away time and hesitation. The unhurried conversation of gestures. The needs of my skin, to remember how to welcome another's touch, to shed resistance. Her crimson bra strap releases quietly in my hands. I cradle the weight of her breasts. (160)

Wu Lan's act of cradling Francis' breasts recalls Chat Mui's licking of Ah Choi's feet. In attending to, and offering sensual pleasure to a particular part of Francis' body, Wu Lan, like Chat Mui, treasures and affirms the beauty of her partner's corporeality. The act of cradling someone's breasts is also symbolic of helping to carry someone's burden, suggesting that Wu Lan is willing to support Francis, to share the weight of her troubles if need be. When Francis reveals to Wu Lan that she was sexually molested as a child by

her uncle, Wu Lan responds by “tast[ing] her tears, licking them off her face” (165). Wu Lan’s response is both supportive and deeply caring; by licking her tears and consuming them, Wu Lan shares Francis’ pain *and* offers comfort to her. This sense of understanding and sensitivity is reciprocal between Wu Lan and Francis. When Wu Lan makes it known to Francis that her father committed suicide, what ensues confirms the closeness of their bond:

All the words I couldn’t speak. I am the snake struggling against herself... Finally I let go, and collapse against the pillow, heavy with exhaustion. [Francis] bends down and kisses me lightly on the mouth. The fluttering flight of a butterfly, the *awakening relief* of a sudden breeze. (168, emphasis added)

Wu Lan’s revelation of the private crisis she has been struggling with relieves her cathartic tension, and Francis’ affectionate gesture offers her the kind of care and support that she needs. Afterwards, Wu Lan boldly asks Francis to “[m]ake love to [her]” (168), and Francis responds with alacrity. Their intimacy is intensified in their lovemaking, which is often described using natural imagery: “With my hand, I part her. Separate surface from depth where her thighs meet, where rivers of longing culminate. Sentiments, sediments. I taste her dense salt-drenched delta, and open her particular history with speech” (160). The use of nature imagery, and in particular bodies of water in this passage, suggests the pure and unadulterated nature of their love; it is a genuine relationship between two women without artificiality or pretense. The metaphor of her opening Francis’ history with speech implies a probing of the other’s deepest and most personal secrets. However, this probing possesses no trace of violation or violence; rather, the impression is that Wu Lan realizes the responsibility she bears in becoming privy to

such openness and vulnerability. Moreover, in assuming this role, she, too, becomes part of Francis' history, her story. A link can be made between Wu Lan's "careful attention," and indeed, opening, of Francis' "particular history" and what Walter Benjamin discusses in relation to the Angel of History in his essay "On the Concept of History." Benjamin describes the image of the angel:

His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment... to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing... The storm drives him irresistibly into the future... That which we call progress, is this storm. (IX)

Benjamin creates an opposition between the dominant view of history, which is predicated on the idea of continuity and progress, and the ever-accumulating debris that the angel witnesses. Benjamin, though, is critical of "the concept of progress" (XIII), and speaks of how the "materialist writing of history" consists of "a mass of facts, in order to fill up a homogenous and empty time" (XVII). This hollow and meaningless view of time, which keeps up the illusion of progress and happiness, resembles Munoz's idea of the toxicity of "straight time." Both these conceptions of time seem to belong to what Benjamin calls "the victor[s]" (IV), those who exercise power and dominion over others. In comparison, the histories of the struggling and the oppressed are deemed insignificant, and relegated to the margins of history. However, in attending to and opening Francis' "particular history," Wu Lan works against empty and homogenous time; she demonstrates the *significance* of returning to those smaller histories, the debris, as it were, and invests Francis' history with meaning. By attending to the individual history of the other, Wu Lan effectively performs a "queering" of time that challenges the temporality

of the victors. Here, as in the relationship between Chat Mui and Ah Choi, sensual and erotic pleasure derived from Wu Lan and Francis' sexual union possesses emotional resonances for them both. Indeed, both Francis and Wu Lan open themselves up to each other, because their faith and trust in each other allows them to do so. Their shared sense of care and trust is not just limited to their love-making, though. It can also be witnessed in their everyday moments of "queer relational bliss." For instance, Wu Lan is embraced warmly by Francis: "Francis draws me close to her and wraps her arms and legs around me. We're safe... In this private temple of our own making" (168). The bodily contact between Wu Lan and Francis, which becomes their own private haven, indicates a move from Wu Lan's initial sense of absence towards some form of substance, the beginning of healing and a path to wholeness. Like Chat Mui and Ah Choi's relationship, theirs is also informed by the qualities of endurance and support, two qualities fundamental to a queer utopia.

Moreover, this seemingly simple image of two lovers entangled in an embrace speaks to what Munoz tries to convey when quoting Roland Barthes: "the mark of the utopian is the quotidian" (22). To elaborate, even small, everyday gestures, such as a hug, a smile, or a wink can function as utopian gestures – actions that mobilize the "operative principle of hope" for a queer futurity (26), which is founded on the "desire for... a better world [and] freedom, but also, more immediately, better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure" (Munoz 30). For Munoz, these quotidian moments of queer relational bliss generate hope, which constitutes a crucial prerequisite for the formation of a queer futurity, which, although "*epistemologically and ontologically*

humble” (28), remains a state that sexual minorities should strive towards, for the potentiality of a better and more liberating future for those who identify as queer is at stake. Indeed, it is the affective power of utopian moments, moments of queer relationality and (sexual) intimacy that are imbued with tenderness, care, and love that enable the therapeutic healing of sexual trauma in *This Place Called Absence*. It should be noted, though, that healing for survivors of sexual trauma does not simply involve them being the recipients of care, support, and pleasure from others; they, too, must exercise the ability to attend to, and care for, others. In other words, they must demonstrate that they themselves are capable of being a loving and devoted partner, for it is in the creation of *equal* relationships based on mutual trust and love that genuine healing and liberation emerges for the characters. The care that Chat Mui and Ah Choi exhibit towards one another resembles the ethics of care that feminist philosopher Virginia Held espouses. Working against traditional moral theories in which individuals are viewed as autonomous and independent, Held conceives of the self as primarily interdependent and relational, and proposes that we have a moral obligation to care for others. The ethics of care places value in emotions such as “sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness” (Held 10). Held maintains,

Those who conscientiously care for others are not seeking primarily to further their own *individual* interests; their interests are intertwined with the persons they care for... they seek to preserve or promote an actual human relation between themselves and *particular others*. Persons in caring relations are acting for self-and-other together. (12)

The interrelationality and intersubjectivity that Chat Mui and Ah Choi share suggests that their identities are partially constituted by the other, and they are motivated by the mutual

care that they freely offer to each other – loving care that ultimately nourishes and heals them.

Whereas Kwa portrays the psychological and emotional benefits of forming meaningful relationships of *equality* between both partners to recover from sexual trauma in *This Place Called Absence*, in *Pulse*, she departs from this to explore the healing potential of sexual practices that operate on asymmetrical power relations. Indeed, *Pulse* reveals Kwa's progression with theory about human sexuality. In the novel, she demonstrates that power imbalances in sexual relationships need not be tantamount to abuse and exploitation, but that they may actually possess *therapeutic* value. In the beginning of this chapter, I noted how Natalie's childhood history of sexual abuse makes her develop a guardedly cautious mentality in which she is determined not to let anyone betray or hurt her again like her father did. While her attitude casts doubt on whether or not she will be able to engage in loving relationships and sexual intimacy with others, in the novel she is first introduced to Kinbaku, a Japanese form of erotic bondage, through a client who had visited her acupuncture clinic. As a practitioner of Kinbaku, the man requested Natalie to insert needles "at the points where the [rope] marks [on his body] intersect[ed]," in the hopes that doing so would "tonify and regulate the blood or to disperse energy blockages" (95). Fascinated by his "energy" and "raw enthusiasm," Natalie agrees only if he is willing to teach her Kinbaku (95). Prior to practicing Kinbaku, though, Natalie admits, "I had all kinds of notions about it, none of them positive. I thought, *It's dark, it's weird, and it hurts*" (127). Natalie's initial attitude towards Kinbaku is a widespread one among people who feel that erotic bondage, or BDSM

(Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism) in general, is “abusive, perverted, or wrong – in short, a ‘bad’ way to express your eroticism” (Haine 191). Indeed, Danielle Lindemann comments on how sado-masochism has historically been pathologized (151). She notes how psychologist William Stekel referred to sado-masochism as “‘wandering through [the] kingdom of hell,’” and called individuals who practiced sado-masochism “‘criminals,’” linking their behaviour to “‘cannibalism, necrophilism, and vampirism’” (151-52). Because such perceptions about BDSM persist today, it remains a minoritized sexual practice, although it has become a subculture in its own right.

Part of the repulsion that people experience towards BDSM stems from the concern that it combines “sex with what looks like violence” (Haine 193). This is an especially sensitive and contentious issue in relation to survivors of abuse and trauma, since there is a risk that those who have experienced violation and violence in their own lives may act out or replicate the violence and abuse to their own psychological and emotional detriment, perpetuating their sense of captivity and victimization. While this is certainly a serious and legitimate concern, and while survivors of abuse may repeat their abuse in their BDSM play, Cvetkovich points to the importance of

direct[ing] attention away from the question of whether those practicing S/M are acting out abuse in favour of considering whether they’re doing so in a way that is healing. As such, acting out is not automatically associated with retraumatization – a crucial conceptual separation. (113)

Cvetkovich’s suggestion is one that merits consideration, as it complicates the rigid binary between abuse and healing, wherein the two are seen as separate categories that must be kept distinct from one another. However, such an approach is limiting, as it fails to take into account the possible relationships that exist between the abuse and the

healing, especially sexual abuse and violence, including the possibility that ostensibly replicating the abuse may contribute to the recovery of the survivor. Cvetkovich herself elaborates further on the shortcomings of this binary:

Too often, lesbian subcultures that focus on healing from abuse and those that encourage sexual exploration have been constructed, and have constructed themselves, as mutually exclusive, repeating anew the schism between pleasure and danger, and ignoring the fact that one of the most interesting things about sex is that it so frequently refuses that distinction. (88)

Staci Haines, author of *Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma*, echoes Cvetkovich's approach about the potentially liberating qualities of sexual exploration:

Many of the arguments used against people who eroticize power play are the same ones that are used against gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. And these same arguments have been used against women who have wanted to empower themselves sexually, and against sex itself. (191)

Haines' argument illuminates the important links between the stigmatization of sexual minorities and the vilification of BDSM, namely that the minoritization of both groups stems from patriarchal misogyny and sexual conservatism. Those who subscribe to these views invariably see both sexual minorities and practitioners of BDSM as perverse sexual deviants who fall outside heteronormative, heterosexual, and traditional forms of sexuality. I think, too, that part of why people express an aversion towards BDSM can be attributed to the fact that they may lack knowledge about these practices, and of course, also because of the various misconceptions that abound about it, one of them being that BDSM constitutes sexual violence. Haines addresses this concern and offers some insight on how BDSM is practiced:

S/M... is *not* sexual violence. First, S/M is consensual sexual play between adults. Second, S/M partners negotiate their scenes as equal partners. Third, S/M players employ safewords to stop the play immediately when necessary. Choice and control remain intact in the S/M experience. The bottom is not *really* out of control, and the scene may look more intense from the outside than it actually is. Violence allows for neither choice nor control. (194)

Lindemann, too, emphasizes that “the element of consensuality is crucial both within the BDSM community and within the literature surrounding such activities” (153). Choice and control, then, are identified as the crucial factors that distinguish BDSM from sexual violence, which is coercive in nature.

But is BDSM simply a different sexual culture and practice, another way for people to explore their sexual natures? As I have alluded to earlier, practicing BDSM can serve an alternative purpose as well: becoming a therapeutic avenue through which to heal from abuse and trauma. Other scholars have also shared this view about the psychological and emotional benefits of engaging in BDSM. Describing what they term as a “healing narrative” of BDSM, Meg Barker et al. write of the different ways in which BDSM

may take a person on a journey from physical ill health to healing, from psychological problems to confidence and happiness, from abuse to positive relationships, from feeling powerless in the face of illness and/or disability to self-control, from painful self-injury to sexual pleasure and from trauma and shame towards enlightenment and transcendence. (205)

In her study, “BDSM as Therapy?”, Danielle Lindemann discovered that pro-dommes (women who engage in ‘erotic labour,’ and who are paid to be the dominant partner in a BDSM session) saw themselves as therapists. In the interviews that Lindemann conducted with pro-dommes, they “discussed sessions as healthful alternatives to sexual repression,

as atonement rituals, as mechanisms for gaining control over prior trauma” (156-57). The pro-dommes claimed that clients visited them with the hopes of “work[ing] through wrongs which had been inflicted *upon* them – reliving traumatic experiences in order to gain control over them” (158). Lindemann’s findings have significant implications for traditional conceptions about what “therapy” constitutes, as they point out the “increasing importance of notions of ‘the therapeutic’ within spheres of social life outside the healthcare industry” (154). They also “reframe a form of pathologized sexuality as a psychological treatment” (155). Although Lindemann’s study examines BDSM in the perspective of it being a commercial practice in which clients pay pro-dommes for their labour, I would argue that the idea of BDSM as potential therapy is applicable to *all* practitioners of BDSM, including those who engage in it with their respective lovers and partners. In “The Psychodynamics of Consensual Sadomasochistic and Dominant-Submissive Sexual Games,” Katharine-Lee H. Weille deconstructs stereotypes about S/M and D/S games and contends that these games are instrumental to emotional growth and enhanced intimacy between partners:

On one hand it appears in the play that the dominant player sadistically controls and uses the submissive partner as a projective container, as in the nonconsenting act of rape. In this situation, however, *both* players are functioning together, and for each other, as containers, because both players have collaborated in setting up, planning, and negotiating (as well as consenting to) the containing boundaries of the play itself. But even more important, such playing *by nature* involves the mutual recognition of subjectivity – as demonstrated by the respect and listening involved in prior negotiation and the intense, loving intimacy after a scene. (155-56)

Weille draws our attention to the level of care and respect that both partners in a BDSM scene possess for each other. From the mutually discussed and agreed upon arrangement

of the play to the closeness and bonding that ensues afterwards, the practice of BDSM certainly seems to promote very dialogical and intimate relationships. Weille also touches upon how BDSM functions for those who have experienced trauma:

the conditions for growth in consensual SMDS play may be conceptualized as operating metaphorically on the principles of homeopathy medicine, in which a tiny, but significant enough dosage of the toxic past/conflict awakens the physical and emotional systems that will organize a curative response. Containment in the crucial context of a loving and secure relationship forms the required metaphorical holding frame in which this homeopathic process can occur. (156)

Essentially, Weille illustrates the potential of SMDS play to heal psychological injury and trauma, comparing this process to the workings of homeopathic medicine, but she makes it clear that this healing can occur only in the context of “loving and secure relationship[s].” As she states, in SMDS, “when certain kinds of conditions (loving, playful, symbolizing, paradoxical, homeopathic, etc.) are present, there is a potential for using these psychodramatic sexual scenes in the service of both relational and intrapsychic growth” (157-58). Despite the power imbalance within the sexual relationships of those who practice BDSM, it is important to note that love and affection *can*, indeed, emerge from these relationships. Recovery from trauma, then, is contingent on the formation of caring and supportive relationships. This idea is similar to what can be observed in *This Place Called Absence*, in which the two prostitutes, as well as Wu Lan, enter into positive affective and spiritually therapeutic relationships with people who enable them to overcome the effects of their sexual trauma. However, if we want to consider BDSM as a locus for healing trauma, does the uneven power dynamic between the dominant and submissive partners complicate its therapeutic potential? Although I

have hinted earlier at how my project approaches this question, I want to elaborate on my position by examining the views of actual practitioners of BDSM, and in particular, the perspectives of those who practice rope bondage. In “Bondage and Vulnerability,” Sarah Sloane argues that “bondage is a type of scene that immediately challenges the people playing to confront the issue of vulnerability” (129). According to her,

bondage can give the players an opportunity to create a ‘safe space’ in which they can experience strong emotion and physical reaction. Their anger and rage can be safely contained. They can arch their body and strain against the ropes or straps in an effort to move away from the sensations they are experiencing. (130)

Since practitioners are able to explore the limits of their vulnerability in a safe space, “many people find bondage scenes to be particularly catharsis-inducing, and seek out these scenes specifically as part of the process of doing deeper internal work during BDSM encounters” (130). Sloane highlights the importance of trust in this cathartic process: “Cathartic play... is not a single scene, but an ongoing way to use BDSM as a touchstone for personal growth. Cathartic play, especially with someone we have a deep level of trust in, can give us a chance to walk further down a path of self-knowledge and self-awareness” (131). However, she is aware that the prospect of becoming so vulnerable can be especially troubling for some people: “a bottom who has a history of abject powerlessness in their histories – dealing with abuse or neglect, abandonment, violence aimed at them – will have significant issues in dealing head-on with being vulnerable, not only in the bondage scene but in their life in general” (131-32). However, she encourages us to

experience our vulnerability as something that is not seen as weakness, but rather as strength – being able to come together with our partners and

create an opportunity to release negative emotions in a way that is healing – these take us beyond the mundane into the extraordinary. Anything that we can do to bring ourselves to a point of more healing, more authentic experience of ourselves is an amazing gift. And to be able to do it cooperatively with another person, is an extraordinary joy. (134)

Sloane's point about transforming our perception of vulnerability as sign of weakness and failure into an experience of strength is particularly apposite. Rather than avoiding or rejecting vulnerability, which would be the typical response for most people, BDSM gives one the opportunity to delve into it as an experience, to become more attuned to how it makes one feel and what one's limits are. I think Sloane is trying to illustrate the potency of understanding and becoming harmonized with one's emotions and one's body. In this respect, the unequal power relations between the dominant and the submissive in BDSM do not operate on an abusive level, but, rather, enables the exploration of one's emotion, body, and self, increasing emotional and psychological growth, as well as self-awareness.

Tonbi, an active and avid practitioner of rope bondage, offers useful insight on the relationship between what he sees as the giver (the partner who does the tying of the rope) and the taker (the partner who is being tied). Like Sloane, he identifies "[t]rust" as a "deeply important part of rope bondage, [which] is key to this type of interaction" (45). He also sees rope bondage as a way to create and increase "[p]assion/intimacy" (146). He explains that

[r]ope can become an extension of a touch or caress that stays for a length of time on the bottom's body, the vibration of rope transmitting from one person how they feel about the other. It can assist in the connection between people both as the rope becomes a link between them, and through the contact of bodies that rope bondage causes. (46)

In addition to facilitating ardour and intimacy between partners, rope bondage also makes “[h]ealing” possible (46). For Tonbi, “emotional healing is something that can happen with... rope bondage on various levels, from a healing of both people involved to that of just one individual” (46). I will examine the dynamics and complexities of this healing process in relation to the characters’ practice of Kinbaku in *Pulse*.

In *Pulse*, Natalie’s interest in Kinbaku is something that she attempts to keep secret, and her views about it are expressed only in an online forum for practitioners of Kinbaku. In the forum, under the alias of “Cosmic Pulse,” the name of her grandfather’s Chinese medicine shop in Singapore, she

argue[s] that binding the body with rope allowed us to transform our fears and develop trust; in addition, it [is] an erotic practice that not only g[ives] pleasure in the moment, but also allow[s] further satisfaction after the fact, with the experience of touching or viewing the temporary markings left by the rope on the body. (40)

For Natalie, Kinbaku is a transformative act that produces not just carnal or sexual pleasure, but aesthetic as well as emotional and psychological growth. Natalie’s sentiments about Kinbaku echo the ones presented by Sloane and Tonbi, as it acknowledges how the practice of Kinbaku is conducive to the transcendence of anxiety and trepidation, and how it also facilitates the development of trust in others. She also thinks Kinbaku allows people to become their most natural, authentic selves. As she expresses, “There’s a notion in Kinbaku that goes like this: by binding the body, the true nature of one’s spirit emerges. I’ve seen that with the lovers I’ve bound. The falling away of the superficial, the shedding of the incidental” (128).

How, then, does Natalie benefit from these qualities of Kinbaku? A closer examination of Natalie actually engaging in Kinbaku will offer some illumination to answer this question. In the novel, the only person she practices Kinbaku with is Michelle, Natalie's girlfriend, who works as a librarian. Before Natalie leaves for Singapore to attend Selim's memorial service, she and Michelle have a Kinbaku session in which Natalie creates a pattern called "The Tortoise" on Michelle:

I insert the ends of my rope through the centre point and under it, just below her neck, making sure I've allowed enough slack. Then the separating of the lines and the single overhand knot over the rope on the spine. I pull the ropes, one under each arm, toward her chest, just above her breasts. She draws in a breath, sharp and definite. It behooves a *nawashi* [rope master] to quicken her pace when the need arises. I now move twice as fast... Ropes criss-crossing over vertical lines, then tightened sufficiently to keep them separated. The shape of a tortoise slowly emerges down her torso. I finish the harness at her thighs. Her body glistens with a shimmer of sweat. I touch the small of her back, reaching for the place where the ropes meet, and, winding my fingers around them, pull very slowly to tighten the harness, giving her more pleasure as her breasts are pushed up slightly. She isn't shy, offering a well-timed moan of appreciation. (126)

In this scene, Natalie is the "top" or "dominant," and Michelle is the "bottom" or "submissive" partner. As this passage illustrates, the art of Kinbaku requires meticulous concentration and skill, not only with the interweaving and tying of the rope, but it also involves being sensitive and attentive to the needs of one's partner. The awareness of Michelle's initial response to the work that Natalie is performing on her prompts Natalie to move faster in order to maximize the erotically gratifying sensations that Michelle is experiencing. Natalie demonstrates alertness to Michelle's needs, working with the rope to sexually excite and pleasure her girlfriend. She uses the rope in order to communicate her intimacy towards Michelle, recalling Tonbi's conception of the rope as "an extension

of a touch or caress.” In this respect, Natalie recognizes, and takes seriously the responsibility of having Michelle place her faith and trust in her. I would argue that Natalie’s attitude, which is clear from the devoted way she treats Michelle’s body, exemplifies how BDSM “involves the mutual recognition of subjectivity” (Weille 155). This view undermines assumptions about BDSM as inherently violent, humiliating, and objectifying. It is evident that, despite the power differentials between Natalie and Michelle in their Kinbaku scene, there is nevertheless a great level of respect between them and a genuine appreciation for each other’s subjectivity. In this way, the terms “dominant” and “submissive” may be misleading, as it gives the impression that the dominant disregards the submissive’s subjectivity and exercises complete control over her/him. However, it must be understood that the discrepancy of power between them is part of their sexual role play, but that this power gap is in no way abusive. In fact, it is this power difference that allows practitioners of BDSM to embrace their fears, and which nurtures their emotional and psychological growth.

In regard to how Natalie uses Kinbaku to heal from her sexual trauma, I would contend that she appreciates, and takes comfort in, the way she *uses* the rope. Rope is a potentially traumatic trigger for Natalie, considering her agonizing memory of how her father hurt her and violently tied her up with rope in punishing her for her romance with Faridah. In Kinbaku, Natalie, too, utilizes rope, but the crucial difference between her use of it and how her father used it on her lies in her intention to use the rope in positive ways – that is, to communicate intimacy, to create art (as, for instance, in the tortoise design she weaves into Michelle’s torso), and to give her lover pleasure and sensual enjoyment. By

contrast, her father used rope to tie Natalie up, to discipline/contain her body and, by extension, her sexuality, which he saw as belonging only to himself. His use of rope incited confusion, fear, and abject submission and helplessness in Natalie's young self. Natalie herself says, "I was beaten by Papa but I don't want to experience that kind of pain, nor do I wish to inflict pain" (94). While employing rope in Kinbaku as an adult likely reminds her of her traumatic memory, Natalie's ability to *rewrite* that memory on her own terms, by using rope to forge a non-violent, loving intimacy and relationship, is what offers her relief from her anguish. This allows her to assume some degree of control over her trauma, and, in some ways, to triumph over it with the knowledge that she is not replicating her father's aggression and brutality. She describes how she feels after Kinbaku: "I breathe in the quiet air, feeling the calm spread through me. I feel peaceful. Placated. It's always like this after I do Kinbaku" (127). In practicing Kinbaku, Natalie becomes able to transform the rope from a tool used by her father to inflict pain and punishment on her to a medium that *she* uses for opposite purposes: to create aesthetic works of art, to enhance intimacy and pleasure for someone she values and loves. As Cvetkovich writes, "A queer healing practice would turn negative affect or trauma on its head, but by embracing rather than refusing it" (88-89). Accordingly, Natalie embraces rope for the liberating possibilities that working with it offers her; she becomes a powerful agent instead of a defenceless victim. The most apparent evidence of how much she benefits from practicing Kinbaku can be found in her forgiveness of her father: "'Papa, I forgive you.' I can say it now... The punishing harness has been loosened. I can feel the ropes falling off me, the strength returned to my limbs" (266). She claims that

Kinbaku has strengthened her spiritually: “Neither he nor anyone else can bind my spirit. Once, because of what he did, my spirit fled to some cold, haunted place. I’ve found a way to summon it back. To let it dwell peaceably in my body” (267). Natalie seems to have reclaimed power and agency over that excruciating memory, achieving a sense of harmony between body and spirit. While doing bondage may seem counterintuitive, considering the traumatic significance that rope carries in Natalie’s life, Kinbaku actually makes it possible for her to heal from her ordeal.

While using rope in Kinbaku offers Natalie a therapeutic path towards healing her trauma, it is crucial to point out the limitations of this practice for Natalie’s recovery. Although Natalie enjoys being the dominant partner in Kinbaku, and while her dominant position even becomes a mode of therapy for her, she is unwilling to play the submissive partner. When Michelle asks her why she resists being bound, Natalie is reluctant to answer (124-25). It becomes clear that she has reservations about being bound:

How could I let Michelle bind me? I’m worried that I might feel something ugly when I’m bound. What if I snap? I don’t want that to happen. And maybe I’m also scared that Michelle won’t like what gets revealed if I let her bind me. It’s a gamble. The risk, incalculable. (128)

She admits, “I’m not sure I have the guts to be that vulnerable” (128). Natalie recalls how Selim had once asked her whether she had considered playing the submissive in Kinbaku (43). She had responded with, “I like exercising power in all aspects of my life” (44). Her reluctance to be bound can be attributed to her fear of relinquishing power, but I would add that it can also be traced to her memory of what it felt like to be bound by her father: “When I came to, I couldn’t move. I was on the floor, tied up. The ropes ate into my skin. I winced from the pain. My clothes were strewn all across the living room” (225). Her

feeling of paralysis and helplessness, as well as her feeling of vulnerability in which her body was exposed to her father's violence, renders her unwilling to be bound by anyone again. It is not that she doubts Michelle's love and respect for her, as she herself states: "And even though I trust Michelle's love for me, I have chosen not to tell her what Papa did to me" (131). However, the prospect of being bound up by rope would present an overwhelmingly frightening traumatic trigger for Natalie, would risk appearing or feeling like a repetition of her father's violent abuse. For this reason, she refuses to become the submissive, resists being bound in Kinbaku. In Natalie's aversion to the submissive position, though, she denies herself the opportunity to work through her trauma, her vulnerability and fear. Although Kinbaku has given her the strength to forgive her father for the acts of violence he committed against her, the fact that she is so terrified of being bound suggests that she has not completely healed from her trauma, that it still has a profound effect on her. In this regard, Kwa resists presenting Kinbaku as a therapeutic activity that is capable of *fully* healing her characters. It is evident that Natalie still finds herself in the process of healing.

Unlike Natalie, Selim takes the opposite approach in doing Kinbaku. Whereas Natalie enjoys being the dominant partner, the rope master, Selim relishes being the submissive or bottom partner. Moreover, he takes a delight in experiencing pain when participating in Kinbaku. In the online Kinbaku forum, Selim is "adamant" in insisting "that pain was essential to Kinbaku" (40). In "Power Struggles: Pain and Authenticity in SM Play," Staci Newmahr studies the experience and dynamics of pain in SM circles. Having joined a well-established SM community in the northeastern United States,

Newmahr's ethnographic study of this group yielded some insightful findings about how pain is perceived and transformed among SM practitioners. Because pain is "widely understood as an evolutionary protection against danger, [it] is difficult to understand as an experience that is rewarding unto itself" (Newmahr 391). Indeed, "[t]he largest body of work on pain focuses on pain in the context of disease and disability. From this medicalized view, people suffer pain, live with pain, and give voice to their pain" (389). In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry, a prominent theorist on pain, establishes pain as a primarily detrimental experience. In discussing the "unsharability" of pain, she contends that "[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (12). Thus, pain is primarily understood as a "negative experience" (Newmahr 390). However, from the perspective of some BDSM practitioners, such as Selim, pain is not pathologized as a sensation that hurts. For them, pain can actually be transformed into pleasure.

Newmahr writes,

the desirability of the pain – the pleasure into which it is transformed – renders it something other than actual pain. Here the disavowal of pain is not a denial of the intensity of sensation or of the injury to the body but a denial that the would-be painful sensation *hurts*. Once the pain is not aversive, that is, once it is transformed, it is not pain. This is an active process undertaken by the bottom to change the emotional and ethical context that surrounds the infliction of pain. (400)

She goes on to explain this process:

The recasting of pain as transformed frames the pain in accordance with the hegemonic views of pain, but modifies the pain (and the narrative) by turning it into *not* pain. The participant who modifies pain is actively

changing the sensation, working to claim it and process it differently, toward an eventual understanding of the pain *as* pleasure. (400)

While pain and pleasure are usually dichotomized as polar opposites, the ability of those who practice SM to blur the boundaries between them is quite remarkable. Natalie recalls Selim telling her that “pain isn’t always a bad thing,” and that “[o]ne person’s pain is another’s pleasure” (39). As a submissive, the experience of pain is what he seeks; it is what gratifies him. However, might one assume that Selim’s need for pain has been influenced by his history of abuse? Natalie wonders, “What had created his need to experience pain? Was it because he had been beaten by his father?” (94). While there may be a connection between Selim’s need for pain and his father’s sexual abuse and physical “discipline” of him, I am more interested in how Selim uses Kinbaku to mitigate or relieve his trauma. I would contend that his capacity to convert the pain of being bound into a *pleasurable* and enjoyable sensation represents a way in which Selim works through his trauma. In this transformation of pain into pleasure, Selim reshapes the pain he suffered at the hands of his father into something he possesses control over, with the ability to experience it as something he takes delight in rather than something he fears. In this respect, it is also worth considering the *meaning* of pain for Selim. I would argue that the idea of *consent* is another factor that adds to Selim’s pleasure and transformation of his pain, as it constitutes a critical difference from the coercion of his father’s sexual and physical abuse. The idea of mutual respect and agreement was absent in his relationship with his father, so to be able to possess power over his own pain in Kinbaku represents a triumph for him. Selim’s conversion of pain into enjoyment bears some semblance to what Margot Weiss examines in *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of*

Sexuality: “[BDSM] practitioners who play with trauma such as rape understand their play as recoding or remaking a traumatic experience into a pleasurable one” (147). Weiss suggests that recontextualizing their experiences “might enable practitioners to gain control over their trauma by eroticizing it” (148). Practicing Kinbaku with his boyfriend, Philip, whom he loves and trusts, plays an important role in Selim’s transformation of his pain. Again, being in a secure and caring relationship is a fundamental element that contributes to the healing of trauma. In this regard, like Natalie, Selim is able to reclaim some measure of agency over his suffering.

However, Kinbaku is not a complete solution or panacea for Selim’s trauma. In his suicide note to Philip, Selim writes, “It is undeniable that I’ve enjoyed much pleasure in Kinbaku. Yet those pleasures only leave me craving more. What’s the point of a temporary escape?” (243). Although Kinbaku has been cathartic for Selim, has enabled him to confront his trauma and to gain control over his emotions, unfortunately his insatiable need for pain and his perception of Kinbaku as just a momentary form of relief consumes him, driving him to end his own life. Selim’s suicide indicates the persistence of his trauma, despite how the practice of Kinbaku has helped diminish, in ways however small, its pernicious effects.

Kwa does not assume an absolutist approach; she does not present Kinbaku or erotic bondage as the *only* way for the characters in *Pulse* to heal. Kinbaku has certainly aided both Natalie and Selim in working through their trauma, but this should not be seen as a guarantee of its infallibility. Indeed, Kwa recognizes the obstacles associated with practicing minoritized sexual activities such as Kinbaku. The fact that both Natalie and

Selim practice Kinbaku in a clandestine manner, and considering that the only way they are able to communicate with other Kinbaku practitioners is through the anonymity of an online forum, suggests that Natalie and Selim are aware of the stigma attached to non-normative, “kinky” sexual practices and cultures. Natalie herself states, “Like most practitioners of the rope, we lived underground lives seemingly at odds with our outer personae” (94). The need to conceal their sexual identities speaks to the “hierarchical system of sexual values” that Gayle Rubin discusses (279). Rubin goes on to explain how

sexuality that is ‘good,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial... It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad,’ ‘abnormal,’ or ‘unnatural.’ Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. (280-81)

Those who are “most despised” and susceptible to social castigation and shame include “transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models” (Rubin 279). These “[I]ow status sex practices are vilified as mental diseases or symptoms of defective personality integration” (280). With the prevalence of such hostile and pathologizing attitudes towards sexual minorities, the prospect of queers ever feeling truly at home with their identities and in the spaces they occupy remains questionable. David Eng articulates this very concern in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*: “Suspended between an ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the closet – between origin and destination and private and public space – queer entitlements to home and nation-state remain doubtful” (205).

Rather than claiming that Kinbaku is the only viable therapeutic option, Kwa’s aim is to introduce Kinbaku as a *potential* site of healing sexual trauma. It offers Natalie

and Selim a therapeutic opportunity for them to begin their healing, but this leaves room for other approaches, other modes of therapy for those who have been sexually abused or traumatized. Because the field and discourse of therapy is now expanding into other areas outside the professional/ medical domain, as demonstrated in Lindemann's essay, the conversation about what constitutes therapy remains an open one. In this regard, the activity of Kinbaku in *Pulse* offers a valuable entry point into exploring the healing properties of sexual practices. As Cvetkovich eloquently expresses, "sexuality plays a key role not only as an end in itself but as an activity in and through which traumatic emotional and bodily response can be triggered and healed" (114). Conceptualizing BDSM as a potentially therapeutic practice that *heals* rather than harms destabilizes views that repudiate BDSM as an aberrant and abusive activity. However, I am aware that incorporating BDSM into the discourse of healing and therapy may actually *reinforce* the pathologization it seeks to dispel. In speaking of BDSM as an arena in which sexually traumatized people can seek healing, I do not wish to suggest that BDSM should be viewed solely within the lens of emotional and psychological therapy, nor do I wish to suggest that all practitioners of BDSM are emotionally and psychologically damaged in one way or another. This is a concern that arises from positing the idea of BDSM as healing: "[P]eople may read [healing] narratives [of BDSM] as indicating that all BDSMers have been abused or traumatised in some way, that BDSM is a means to an ends for those who are psychologically damaged" (Barker et al. 211). In response to this, I would contend that it is important to understand that people engage in BDSM for myriad reasons, and that we should be aware of the multiplicity of its functions, including

erotic/sexual gratification, for fun, and also healing. Moreover, not all practitioners of BDSM are victims of abuse or trauma. In *Pulse*, Natalie does not initially explore Kinbaku with the intention of seeking therapy for her sexual trauma; rather, her motive stems from her curiosity and fascination of its art. In order to move beyond such limiting perspectives, we must recognize BDSM in its complex heterogeneity: as potentially sexy, fun, therapeutic, and more. Sexuality may be a powerful locus to heal sexual trauma, but since it cannot be relied on as an exclusive remedy, and although there is no certainty about whether sexual trauma can ever be completely overcome, it behooves us to investigate other possible modes of healing.

Before I proceed to examine how sexuality operates therapeutically in *The Walking Boy*, I want to address a possible question or concern that may arise in relation to the sexuality of the characters in *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse*. Because the characters in both novels experience sexual trauma and are also queer, one might assume or conclude that sexual abuse *causes* one to become queer. The fundamental problem with this question is that, at its core, it pathologizes queerness; to assume a causal relationship between sexual abuse and homosexuality insinuates that queerness is the unwelcome product of sexual abuse and violence. Quoting Laura Davis, co-author with Ellen Bass of *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, Cvetkovich writes,

If child sexual abuse was responsible for women becoming lesbians, then the lesbian population would be far greater than it is today. Sexual abuse may be one factor among many in someone's sexual orientation. But saying sexual abuse causes homosexuality is making an assumption that there's something wrong with being lesbian or gay. (90)

Kwa makes it abundantly clear that her characters are born queer. This is demonstrated when Chat Mui reminisces about her childhood friend, Siew Fan. Calling Siew Fan her “special friend,” Chat Mui goes on to offer a tender description of her:

She wore her long hair in two pigtails rolled up on either side of her face... She was beautiful, her skin not quite as dark as mine – whether because she didn’t have to work in the fields, as I did, or because her skin was naturally fairer, I don’t know I liked the way her white teeth sparkled, even under the shade of a tree. (77)

She fondly recalls how they played together, catching insects and other creatures:

“Whenever one of us found something, we asked the other to close her eyes, then placed the creature into the other’s cupped hands. The small urgent life throbbed against our containing fingers” (77). Although Chat Mui was only nine years old when she and Siew Fan were friends, her account of Siew Fan and the time they shared together suggests that Chat Mui’s feelings for her went beyond that of simple friendship; indeed, her descriptions suggest the beginning of a romantic desire and attraction towards her friend. While Kwa suggests that Chat Mui is romantically inclined towards females even from a young age, and even though she has her characters assert that their sexuality is inherent and cannot be changed, the novels concentrate less on trying to determine what “causes” queerness and more with figuring out ways to address sexual violence and the insidious trauma of heteronormativity.

Whereas in both *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse* the characters engage in sexual intimacy to achieve some measure of healing, *The Walking Boy* differs considerably in that the protagonist, Baoshi, does not end up having sexual relations with anyone. As such, the kind of sexuality that operates therapeutically in *The Walking Boy*

marks a departure from the sexual, physical intimacy seen in *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse*. On his quest to search for his Master's long-lost friend and lover, Ardhanari, Baoshi encounters the *jogappas*, a community of transgender male dancers. When he first sees the *jogappas*, Baoshi thinks they are "women... wearing vermillion muslin antariyas around their hips and saffron crossbands over their breasts" (Kwa 123). He watches as one of them begins to dance "in a slow and sensuous manner, stretching her arms and hands out over her head, then horizontally at her sides, sometimes even making sweeping arc-like movements, the bells around her ankles tinkling as she moves" (124). It is only when he "notices the lumps on their throats moving up and down" that he realizes they are "[m]en! Dressed so convincingly like women" (124). According to Alf Hildebeitel, "Jogappas are transvestites, taking on women's dress and mannerisms, sexually impotent and indifferent to women, theoretically asexual and celibate, who display a 'stereotype of aggressively erotic femininity'" (152). Baoshi expresses his confusion about the *jogappas*, but exhibits a mature attitude towards the ambiguity of their gender: "I saw the bumps on your throats, but then according to how you dress, I'm guessing you're women. My Master said, 'Words are only sounds, and we choose the meanings we impart to them'" (126). Baoshi articulates a view that essentially challenges the rigidity of notions such as what it means to be a "man" or a "woman," exposing the *constructed* nature of these terms. Whereas the gender binary between male/female is often justified and validated by biology and science, Baoshi's Master Harelip teaches him a Buddhist approach that emphasizes the fundamental emptiness of words and how they are open to the creation of meanings to be attached to them. The *jogappas* offer to take Baoshi in

until he can continue his quest to find Ardhanari, offering him shelter and food in exchange for his help at the teashop they work at. Accordingly, Baoshi and the *jogappas* come to forge a genuinely caring relationship with one another.

At one point, Baoshi begins to reflect on the *jogappas*' situation, which is both similar and different to the position he occupies:

One thing he found hard to understand was that the *jogappas*... had left their homeland of their own accord... It troubles him to think that people choose to bid farewell to what was loved and familiar, sever such ties in order to launch themselves on a long journey to an unknown place. (145)

That the *jogappas* chose to leave their homeland is disconcerting to Baoshi, considering that *he* “didn’t get to make that kind of choice when his father took him away” (145). But the one commonality that Baoshi shares with the *jogappas* is their queerness or non-normative gender identities, although the *jogappas* have chosen their queerness, whereas Baoshi was born with it. Because of their perceived sexual deviance, though, the *jogappas*, “motivated by unhappiness and discontent, fled their former lives, lives that had necessitated that they act like other men or else face being reviled and threatened by family members or people in their villages” (146). Baoshi, too, faces the threat of rejection (as he was given away by his father) and persecution because of his sexual difference. For the *jogappas*, though, fleeing their homeland is tantamount to their liberation; leaving is what enables them freedom to be themselves. In their case, their originary home is restrictive and oppressive, forcing them to conform to a rigid sexual norm in order to be accepted. The *jogappas*' narrative constitutes what Anne-Marie Fortier calls “queer migrations [that] are conceived... as a movement towards another site to be called ‘home’” (409). Within a celebratory framework of queer migration, the

notion of “home” is reformulated; home is “not an origin, but rather a destination; there is no return, only arrival” (Fortier 409). Fortier speaks of the “narrative of migration as homecoming... within queer culture [as] establish[ing] an equation between leaving and becoming, and creates a distinctively queer migrant subject: one who is forced to get out in order to come out” (410). In this context, “home” is not an a priori institution, but instead, something that is sought and created. Inherent in queer migrants’ search for home is also the creation of families beyond biological ties and kinship. For queer subjects, this may mean forming a community of other queers or sexual minorities. The *jogappas* exemplify the kind of queer family that falls outside traditional notions of kinship. Although they are not biologically related to each other, they constitute a supportive family unit who are able to laugh and “giggle[]” with each other and, most importantly, feel comfortable with their own sexual identities (125). That they are able to wear elaborate women’s clothing and dance so sensuously in front of a crowd of spectators, effectively performing their sexual identity, attests to their confidence in themselves and their queerness.

Being in the presence of the *jogappas*, and being the recipient of their kindness and care, enables Baoshi to feel more at ease with himself, in addition to making him feel like part of their family. When he suffers the nightmare of being publicly exposed and unable to move, they comfort and soothe him: “Poor boy, don’t worry, we’re all here” (148). Lakshmi “finds his arm and squeezes it gently a few times. She sits down, wraps her arms around him, and rocks him gently, humming quietly. [Baoshi] allows himself to surrender to Lakshmi’s embrace” (148). Lakshmi’s treatment of Baoshi can be read as a

very maternal gesture reminiscent of a mother pacifying her child's cries and rocking him or her to sleep. As they try to calm Baoshi down from his nightmare, Sita's voice "reassures" him, and he can "tell that they're concerned [about] [him]" (149). Baoshi feels "grateful" for their attention and nurturance (149). Baoshi's loving and familial relationship with the *jogappas* presents a significant irony in relation to how Baoshi's father treated him. The *jogappas*, who bear no blood relation to Baoshi, treat him with *more* care, loyalty, and respect than his own biological father, who abandons him and causes him to feel shame and anxiety about himself. In this regard, the *jogappas* become a more genuine family to Baoshi than his own birth father.

In turn, his familial bond with the *jogappas* becomes instrumental in healing Baoshi's sexual trauma of gender normativity. Knowledge of the *jogappas*' chosen queerness, which makes them more sexually ambiguous like himself, assures him that he is not isolated in his sexual anomalousness – that, indeed, some actually *prefer* to inhabit this queer position. Baoshi's realization of this, combined with the trust that he has developed in the *jogappas*, makes him think, "Surely the *jogappas*, of all people in the city, can accept the unusualness of his body. Why should he linger in his fear of being discovered, especially by them?" (151-52). Encouraged by this, Baoshi decides to tell the *jogappas* about himself; he, in essence, "comes out" to them:

I'm a boy like no other I know of. One with the body of both male and female parts... I've struggled... with fears of being shamed and rejected... Rather than surrender to my fears, I've decided to trust those who love me. That's why I'm telling you now. (206)

The familial attachment he forms with the *jogappas*, a community or sexual minority whose members are non-judgmental and understanding of one another, helps Baoshi

overcome his sense of shame and rejection, negative affective experiences that stem from his insidious trauma. Indeed, by the end of the novel, Baoshi no longer experiences humiliation and anxiety about his sexuality. In fact, Baoshi is “honoured that my body *shen* serves as a tribute to our universe’s infinite range of miracles. My Master calls it my Two-in-Oneness” (243). Baoshi learns to *appreciate* his sexual difference, which he sees as an example of the universe’s wonders. He embraces his sexual ambiguity and complexity, and instead of seeing his difference as a source of shame, takes pride in his special uniqueness. Although it does not involve corporeal or erotic intimacy, as in *This Place Called Absence* and *Pulse*, the creation of a sexual minority community in *The Walking Boy* is no less effective at aiding in the recovery of trauma. Indeed, the formation of a familial bond/community facilitates Baoshi’s therapeutic healing from his sexual trauma, enabling him to inhabit his sexual identity with ease and confidence. Like the jogappas, then, “home” and “family,” for Baoshi, are sought and created. Ultimately, Baoshi “comes home” both in the sense of joining the family of the *jogappas* and achieving a sense of “being at home” within himself and his identity. This sense of home constitutes the source of healing in *The Walking Boy*.

While Kwa employs different modes of therapy to heal sexual trauma in *This Place Called Absence*, *The Walking Boy*, and *Pulse*, a site of healing that does seem to connect these three novels can be found in the idea of community. It is particularly interesting to note Kwa’s experimentation with the shifting nature of community from her earliest novel, *This Place Called Absence*, to *Pulse*, her most recent work. In *This Place Called Absence*, Kwa creates small and local, gendered communities in the pairings of

Wu Lan and Francis, and Chat Mui and Ah Choi. These women-centered communities play a crucial role in offering support and love to those who have experienced sexual trauma, enabling them to rediscover intimacy with others and to affirm themselves and their bodies.

In *The Walking Boy*, Kwa establishes a slightly larger, albeit still intimate, community with Baoshi and the *jogappas*. While Baoshi meets the *jogappas* in China, the fact that the *jogappas* migrated to China from their originary homeland (presumably India) introduces a transnational element into the community. The transnationality of the *jogappas*, though, does not affect the closeness of their bond with Baoshi. Indeed, Kwa shows that the *jogappas* actually care *more* for Baoshi than Baoshi's biological parents, taking him in and nurturing him as if he were their child. It is this caring bond that allows Baoshi to recover from his feeling of shame and trauma. Kwa uses *The Walking Boy* to demonstrate the healing and communal potential of a queer diaspora.

Lastly, in *Pulse*, Kwa plays with the idea of an online community. Both Natalie and Selim are members of an online chat room for those interested in Kinbaku, and indeed, they meet through the chat room. Natalie states, "When I first began practising Kinbaku rope techniques, I checked out the website and decided to join the online chat room so that I could exchange ideas with others interested in this art of Japanese erotic bondage" (40). The chat room offers a way for both of them to learn and share rope techniques, as well as to share their views on Kinbaku. While Kwa does not go into great detail about the kinds of discussions that are held in the chat room, the use of a chat room and an online forum in the novel suggests the idea of a global community in which one is

able to connect with others through an anonymous network. In terms of healing, an online community could, in theory, offer support, understanding, and guidance to facilitate recovery from trauma. Although the dynamics of online communities require further research, Natalie and Selim's use of an online chat room in *Pulse* raises interesting questions about the therapeutic potential of online/global communities.

An extension of my discussion of communities, and in particular, queer communities, can be found in the Conclusion of this thesis.

Conclusion:

Of Queer Bonds and Communities: Social and Political Implications

In my consideration of sexual trauma, including its attendant gendered, diasporic, and sexual complexities, as well as the possibilities for healing and therapy, I have attempted to be thorough, but of course, there are many lingering questions and issues that exceed the scope of my project. One of them, which I introduced briefly in my thesis, is the potential of queer communities and queer diasporic formations to offer a sense of belonging and home to individuals who identify with being part of a sexual minority. However, more than just presenting a safe space for queer individuals, I think queer communities hold the promise of being able to mobilize a queer social and political imagination, as well as significant change. To begin to understand this possibility, I would like to turn to Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, in which she has written a section about the social and political implications of queer pleasures. For Ahmed,

Queer pleasures are not just about the coming together of bodies in sexual intimacy. Queer bodies 'gather' in spaces, through the pleasure of opening up to other bodies. These queer gatherings involve forms of activism; ways of claiming back the street, as well as the spaces of clubs, bars, parks and homes. The hope of queer politics is that bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others. (165)

What Ahmed is showing here is that queer pleasures have the potential to occupy a spatial, and, by extension, a social and political dynamic as well. Ahmed seems to gesture towards the formation of a queer community, one that participates in social and political

activism in the hopes of *comfortably* inhabiting space. She even suggests a way to challenge heteronormative space: “the display of queer pleasure may generate discomfort in spaces that remain premised on the pleasures of heterosexuality. For queers, to display pleasure through what we do with our bodies is to make the comforts of heterosexuality less comfortable” (165). Ahmed articulates the interesting and exciting possibilities that a queer collective could enact, possibilities that could potentially change existing queer relations in a heterosexist, heteronormative world.

Eng asks, “How might a queer diaspora provide new methods of contesting traditional kinship structures, of reorganizing communities based not on filiation and biology but on an affiliation and the assumption of a common set of social practices or political commitments such as economic or social justice?” (*Racial Castration* 207). He continues, “What new forms of community could emerge from a diasporic and queer challenge to the linking of home and nation-state?” (207). Eng gives voice to an important concern: how might queer bonds, beyond creating a familial home for queer subjects, work communally to galvanize social and political change?

Gopinath, too, directs our attention towards the idea of how queer diasporic communities can acquire the power to challenge existing systems of oppression: “A consideration of queerness... becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora” (11). Indeed, she speaks of “the range of oppositional practices, subjectivities, and alternative visions of collectivity that fall outside the developmental narratives of colonialism, bourgeois nationalism, mainstream liberal feminism, and mainstream gay

and lesbian politics and theory” (20). The prospect of queer diasporic formations and communities working towards a common vision of social equality and acceptance remains a promising one that deserves further attention. More research done in this area would offer a better idea of the ideas and practices that emerge out of queer diasporic and cultural communities.

On a broader level, though, Kwa’s novels ask the crucial question of how what Eva Mackey calls Canada’s “House of Difference” might be transformed into a *home* that is able to accommodate and welcome difference. Indeed, Kwa invites us to engage critically *and* creatively with our world in an attempt to find ways to carry out this important project.

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