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Memoir and Writing and Intergenerational Trauma: The Reparative Power of Personal Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to examine memoir writing as an extension of expressive writing, which can be used to alleviate the psychosocial effects of intergenerational trauma, namely sociocultural dislocation and a lack of agency. With a detailed analysis of two memoirs – *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado and *Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner – in relation to the scholarship on intergenerational trauma and writing, I demonstrate that memoir writing can act as a long-form, communal version of expressive writing, which can help a person suffering from the effects of inherited trauma to reclaim their unique narrative and to begin to restore an individual connection to their cultural history. Throughout both works in memoir, the craft and storytelling choices that Machado and Zauner make allow them to engage with their trauma in a meaningful process of creation, organization, and transformation.

Keywords: expressive writing, memoir writing, inherited trauma, intergenerational trauma, sociocultural dislocation, lack of agency

INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Framework

Before exploring, in the analysis of two particular memoirs, the potential benefits of memoir writing in relation to alleviating the effects of intergenerational trauma, it is important to define and contextualize the key terms and concepts: sociocultural dislocation, a lack of agency or participation, and the overlap between expressive writing and memoir writing. As for this first effect, the collective deleterious impact on interpersonal relationships and a sense of cultural identity that intergenerational trauma can often act as a catalyst for is what I refer to as sociocultural dislocation. According to a study by Lin et al. for *Communication Disorders Quarterly*, this dislocation often results from the inheritance of behaviors and attitudes by successive generations from their traumatized predecessors, such as trauma responses of silence and repression. Of this, the researchers write, “Following sociocultural trauma...silence not only surrounds the survivors but often spreads far beyond to their families, communities, and larger society” (Lin et al. 197). Cindy C. Sangalang and Cindy Vang also describe intergenerational trauma’s effect on one’s sense of sociocultural location in their systematic review for the *Journal for Immigrant and Minority Health*, describing the ways in which trauma’s tendency to silence its victims results in cross-generational

communication issues, which in turn impacts future generations' sense of belonging within their own communities (752). With this dislocation and disconnection, one's ability to trust and connect with others is severely impacted, effectively harming their chances of forming a supportive community.

Intergenerational trauma can also impact one's ability to comprehend or feel in control of their own life. Because of inherited trauma, there often exists an involuntary level of participation by a person in the lives and stories of others, often previous generations, which can eclipse their participation within their own life or obstruct their personal narrative. For example, in a qualitative inquiry about intergenerational trauma and its relationship to mental health care, researchers found that the descendants of Holocaust survivors suffered from, "difficulties with individuation, self and interpersonal functioning" (Isobel et al. 632). And as Dr. Marianne Hirsch, a feminist theorist and memory studies scholar said, "To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors" (5). This consequence of inherited trauma has also been described by researchers like Rachel Lev-Wiesel in terms of a "mission" for future generations to reclaim their own life stories (88). Future generations feel a sense of duty and obligation to fulfill the unfinished or interrupted goals of their predecessors, which can hinder the pursuit of their own personal goals or dissuade them from achieving a better understanding of themselves. These inherited narratives can potentially impart unconscious feelings of victimization or stagnation within the sufferer of intergenerational trauma, which may result in feelings of lost agency or control.

One way to grapple with the consequences of inherited trauma might be the practice of expressive writing. There is a well-documented body of research on expressive writing from researchers like James W. Pennebaker, who has

noted that the therapeutic benefits of expressive writing include the boosting of one's psychological wellbeing and improved aspects of social relationships (Baikie and Wilhelm 339). The practice of expressive writing entails spending a period of time, usually a few days, writing about one traumatic or emotionally challenging event for a length of around 15-20 minutes each day. The purpose of this technique is to allow people to reevaluate the issues in their lives in order to better understand and move past particularly traumatic events.

Numerous studies speak to the efficacy of expressive writing as a complimentary therapeutic practice. One article in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* explores the benefits of expressive writing for those diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) (Krupan et al.). In this study, a group of forty people formally diagnosed with MDD participated in two different kinds of writing exercises. The control group, after answering questionnaires and participating in cognitive tests, were asked to write about regular, daily events for 20 minutes for three consecutive days. The other group in this study, referred to as the expressive group, were asked to write for the same duration of time, but about their deepest thoughts and feelings on particularly emotional events that had happened to them. The study found that the expressive group had lower scores of depression after being tested both immediately after the exercise as well as four weeks afterwards. It is important to note that although both groups showed a decrease in depression levels, the expressive group showed significant improvement. The researchers also noted that the study cannot be considered conclusive, in that there is a possibility that gender, comorbidities, and/or medication might have an effect on expressive writing as therapy. This study goes to show the potential for expressive writing to act as a complementary form of treatment for those experiencing depression. Like many of the studies dealing with expressive writing, however, the authors noted that there was a potential for the rehashing of negative emotion to lead to rumination which could be

anti-productive. The researchers also noted that a larger group that is more randomly selected would be beneficial to dive deeper into the benefits of expressive writing for depression.

An analysis of the benefits of expressive writing on sociocultural dislocation that is more focused on the creative elements of the craft is one written by Anne Ovaska, in her article, "Detuned Selves: Evoking and Conveying Affects and Emotions in Depression Writing." In this article, Anne Ovaska writes about the benefits of what she names "depression writing" both for the writer and for the reader. Firstly, Ovaska talks about how society needs to fundamentally rethink the way that depression is defined, moving from describing it as a pathology of the mind to something which affects social relationships and the way that people interact with the world. Ovaska emphasizes the need to think of depression as an embodied condition, and reinforces the notion of seeing the body, the mind, and the social world as interconnected, in opposition to more Cartesian modes of thinking. From this standpoint of embodied cognition, Ovaska asserts that depression writing can be therapeutic in that it can help to restore one's connection to others and the world, as that is something that is often lost due to the condition, much like in cases of intergenerational trauma and sociocultural dislocation. According to Ovaska, this therapeutic effect is achieved by two main aspects of the writing. Firstly, emotional words and images evoke "spontaneous corporeal reactions" in the readers, helping them to empathize with the writers of the text on a physical level. Secondly, non-verbal elements of the writing, including changing the typography, spacing, and other visual aspects of the texts, inspire kinesthetic experiences in the reader, helping them to better understand the symptoms of depression that depressed people are often unable to communicate through language. In this way, depressed people can help to address feelings of social alienation and bodily disconnection that are inherent in depressed thinking. Ovaska's article acts as an important foundational text for this research, as she provides an excellent framework for exploring

specific components of writing as a craft and a tool for understanding the self, and by extension, the larger world.

As for what role memoir writing plays in my research, I understand memoir writing as an extension of expressive writing, which, while providing the same psychosocial benefits, also includes the added boon of sharing these experiences with an audience of readers who can benefit from and relate to the story written by the memoirist. What memoir writing and expressive writing share is a focus on a specific event or theme, the careful consideration of one's interiority, including their thoughts, feelings, and reactions, as well as the goal of reclamation of one's own narrative. Where they differ is that expressive writing is most often private writing, whereas memoir writing is shared widely with any readers who choose to engage with such a text.

Literature Review

It is important to note that while current research demonstrates the effectiveness of expressive writing as a complementary form of treatment for those who have suffered trauma, it is unable, within the limits of quantitative method, to show how the practice of expressive writing works, in particular cases, to help people to confront trauma. Pennebaker himself suggested, in a 2017 article, that it might be difficult to explain the therapeutic effects of expressive writing within the health and psychology fields, writing: "By the mid-1990s, a consistent literature was beginning to emerge in health, clinical, and social psychology that validated the effectiveness of expressive writing in improving health. The underlying explanation of the effect was still debated—and continues to be debated today" (227). My first research question, then, as a creative writer and Literature student, was to ask if a humanistic perspective and a qualitative approach to this research might offer a potential explanation for understanding the effectiveness of expressive writing.

From my humanistic perspective, I referenced Michelle Balaev's review of "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" and Roberta Culbertson's "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self," using the texts as a framework to analyze two recent works in memoir—In the Dream House by Carmen Maria Machado and Crying in H Mart by Michelle Zauner—and to explore, in these works, the more concrete ways in which expressive writing responds to the psychosocial needs of those who have experienced intergenerational trauma. Machado's memoir recounts the course of her relationship with an abusive partner, making use of unorthodox methods of storytelling and organization to convey the tale. In Crying in H Mart, Zauner attempts to salvage and archive the memories that she shared with her mother, who passed away from cancer. Across both narratives, the craft and storytelling choices that Machado and Zauner make allow them to meaningfully engage with their trauma in a careful process of creation, organization, and transformation. My findings demonstrate the unique and important contribution that literary analysis can make to research in the health sciences fields, especially when mental health is a component of that research.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

Creating a Context

Machado makes use of a number of inventive craft strategies in order to convey the story of her survival in the face of domestic violence, in a process that can, in many ways, be related to the work of important trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth. Machado's choice to chronicle her trauma allows her to utter the unutterable and combat trauma behaviors of repression and silence. The first way Machado does this is through her usage of the Dream House as a grounding motif throughout the memoir. With the repetition of "dream house" in each chapter's title (for example, "Dream House as Haunted Mansion," "Dream House as Unreliable Narrator,"

"Dream House as Barn in Upstate New York," and "Dream House as Hypochondria"), Machado expresses a different dimension of the feeling atmosphere produced by different aspects of abuse. Machado's conception of the Dream House extends beyond its material reality, as a concrete feeling space where a romantic relationship ultimately became one of violence and abuse. Here, it takes on several iterations—physical, temporal, metaphysical, metaphorical—allowing Machado to constantly reinvent the site of her trauma so as to better process and understand it. It should be noted that The Dream House in Machado's memoir is a real place. However, beyond this physical location, it also takes on a life of its own. In this way, Machado explores the amorphous nature of trauma—the notion that it cannot be confined to one singular space or period. As Caruth might put it, trauma is contagious; it spreads (Balaev 151). And yet the choice to consign Machado's trauma to an imaginary site of "dreaming" allows her to create a concrete linguistic environment to contain her suffering, and thus, to "...examine both the personal and cultural histories embedded in landscapes that define the character's identity and the meaning of the traumatic experience" (Balaev 150). By containing her suffering in this way, Machado acknowledges the nebulous nature of trauma through the House's many iterations while also creating for herself an easy entry point and exit. Thus, she conquers the contagion.

While Machado uses the motif of the "dream house" to ground her memoir and establish a context for her trauma, Zauner contains her suffering and trauma within a narrative frame of her hybrid cultural identity. One recurring struggle that Zauner confronts throughout Crying in H Mart is the worry and fear that parts of herself and her identity disappeared along with her mother's death. Zauner writes, "Without my mother, did I have any real claim to Korea or her family?" (189). This crisis falls neatly into Balaev's definition of trauma as "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and

the standards by which one evaluates society” (150). As the woman who introduced Zauner to her own notions of her Korean identity, her mother – or so it feels to Zauner – took all her daughter’s rights to Korean culture and experience with her when she passed. When Zauner visits a Korean spa that she and her mother once went to together, she is struck by this fear when the older woman attending to her full-body scrub questions her about her ethnicity. She writes, “For the first time it occurred to me that what she sought in my face might be fading. I no longer had someone whole to stand beside, to make sense of me. I feared whatever contour or color it was that signified that precious half was beginning to wash away, as if without my mother, I no longer had a right to those parts of my face” (216). Despite the recurrence of this fear throughout the memoir, Zauner manages to establish a cultural context that is bolstered by memories of her mother, but not reliant upon them. She documents her attempt to create this individual context, especially through cooking Korean food, in order to highlight the ways in which her cultural identity is inherent and inextricable from who she is. Zauner writes: “Every dish I cooked exhumed a memory. Every scent and taste brought me back for a moment to an unravaged home” (203). Here, Zauner makes use of memoir as reminder—as a cementing of her identity despite the tight envelopment of trauma clouding this part of herself.

Organizing Memory

Another strategy that Machado uses is to systematize her memory in order to enhance believability. Trauma victims often experience fear at the thought of recalling or articulating their suffering, whether due to the worry that they will be turned away by others due to distrust, or because the sufferers of the trauma themselves experience a level of distrust and uncertainty in their own memories. Culbertson explains this effect of experiencing trauma and violation: In short, violence, violation, and trauma, however horrific in their midst, live on in

the victim survivor in ways that confound ordinary notions of memory and narrative, or to which ordinary narrative is simply inadequate. The effect can be that the memories take on a cast of unreality; however deeply known, they are also disbelieved, seem unbelievable, even to the survivor who knows quite well the truth, in his body if not in words (171).

To conquer this threat of unreality in traumatic memory and to rein in the amorphous, unorganized nature of trauma, Machado makes use of footnotes—an unusual choice in memoir writing. Unlike other forms of nonfiction writing, memoir as a genre demands more than a simple summary of life events or an attempt at a strict engagement with truth. In fact, one of the most interesting considerations when thinking about what distinguishes memoir writing as a genre is its complication of the concept of truth. Reckoning with unreliability is one part of the process, but for victims of trauma, this task is doubly difficult. Footnotes function as a way to alleviate this burden. They carry seventeenth century significance, when they were originally popularized in an attempt to counteract skepticism in relation to knowledge gleaned about the past (Grafton 56). Machado’s usage of footnotes works to penetrate “an aura of unbelievability,” by presenting memories of suffering “as clearly past, real, and fully embodied” (Culbertson 169). Agency is regained for Machado, then, through the use of footnotes in order to make legible and organized that which cannot be easily articulated.

For Zauner, the organization of her narrative takes on a more traditional method. Her chapters are typical of other books in the memoir genre—chronological, with each title hinting at a central theme or recurring motif within each respective chapter. This style of organization, while not inherently unique to Zauner, still does the work of helping her to make sense of her memories in a way that sets memoir apart from other modes of nonfiction writing. What allows memoir to be such a powerful force for self-discovery, after all, is its introspection and analysis. Memoirists are tasked with taking an

unflinching account of pivotal experiences within their lives and presenting them in a form that is accessible to readers, depicting not just a life, but the story of a life. Not only does this help readers to better understand a narrative, but it allows memoirists themselves to better understand the ramifications of certain memories when situated in the context of related moments in time. One example of the power that introspection and organization exert on Zauner's perception of her relationship with her mother exists in her chapter entitled, "Save Your Tears." The chapter details Zauner's analysis of one of her mother's frequent admonishments for Zauner whenever she would cry or mope about a minor injury or a heartbreak. Zauner's mother would say, "Save your tears for when your mother dies" (22). Without context, Zauner found the saying to be cruel and dismissive, writing, "All my life I'd always thought it was a particularly cruel motto, born of my mother's unique style of parenting, an adage on hand for every tantrum I threw, be it a scraped knee or twisted ankle, a messy breakup or fumbled opportunity, the confrontation with mediocrity, my shortcomings, my failures" (192). She continues, "I thought to myself that if I ever had children, I'd never tell them to save their tears. That anyone who'd been hardened with those words would grow to hate them just as much as I did" (193). However, much later in the memoir, in a conversation with Zauner's aunt after her mother passes, Zauner realizes that her mother was also raised hearing this phrase, from Zauner's Halmoni, her maternal grandmother.

When she adds this context to her memory bank, her original recollection of the events reveals her mother as someone who was also once a rebellious daughter—who might have held the same exact opinions about the adage that Zauner herself did. In the same conversation with her aunt, Zauner reminisces about all of the ways that she is rediscovering her mother, even after her death. This makes Zauner ponder the gravity of another phrase that she grew up hearing, "save ten percent of yourself" (23). "What she meant," Zauner explains, "was that no matter how much you thought you loved someone, or

thought they loved you, you never gave all of yourself. Save 10 percent, always, so there was something to fall back on" (24). When thinking of the ways in which certain memories of her mother took on a new meaning when aided by the context of other memories previously unknown to her, Zauner begins to realize that this second phrase has also forced her to expand her notions of her mother, an outcome achieved through the process of organizing her memories and experiences into a memoir. She writes, "I wondered if the 10 percent she kept from the three of us who knew her best—my father, Nami, and me—had all been different, a pattern of deception that together we could reconstruct. I wondered if I could ever know all of her, what other threads she'd left behind to pull" (Zauner 193). Through the process of constructing a narrative compilation of her memories, Zauner approaches her mother's memory with a greater appreciation for her complexity and nuance; it is via writing, sharing memories, and adding context, that Zauner is able to feel as if she is participating in the story of her cultural identity.

Transforming Trauma

Finally, through memoir, stories of trauma are transformed into something new and shared. It's important to note, though, that this transformation is not a process of reduction, but one of expansion. Memoir writing does not magically rid these authors of their trauma; instead, it allows them to find new meaning for and from it. For instance, through willful narrative reconstruction, Machado is able to reassert power over pain in a realm often thought of as unconscious, repetitive, and unavoidable. She takes a scalpel to her memories in order to conquer pain through what Caruth might call "verbal or written acts of remembering" (Balaev 152). Machado best exemplifies this act of resuscitation in the following passage: "The memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists recreate the past, reconstruct dialogue. They summon meaning from events that have long been dormant. They braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together, smash them into a ball, roll them flat. They

manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves, and others, into necessary context.” (Machado 5). This example demonstrates that “reconstruction” is an accurate term for the work that memoirists—and in particular Machado—do and the ways that they create their own context through engaging with and analyzing events of the past seen as unconscious or contagious in trauma theory, as when “Caruth argues that ‘the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will’” (Balaev 151). “Reconstruction,” after all, shows that something is not only being built, it is being repaired.

Zauner similarly deals with the exacting and unremitting nature of trauma in her memoir, grappling with the way it bleeds into other aspects of her experience. One particularly poignant portion of Zauner’s memoir highlights this all-consuming nature of trauma:

Now that she was gone, there was no one left to ask about these things. The knowledge left unrecorded died with her. What remained were documents and my memories, and now it was up to me to make sense of myself, aided by the signs she left behind. How cyclical and bittersweet for a child to retrace the image of their mother. For a subject to turn back to document their archivist (213).

In this excerpt, we see that the trauma of Zauner’s mother’s death reverberates across other aspects of her life, affecting her ability to remember, to understand, and to perceive herself. As Caruth writes, “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (qtd. in Balaev 4). What was once a singular traumatic event for Zauner becomes, through writing, a concrete archive of documents and memories organized by an archivist.

To alleviate this trauma, to exorcise the ghost, Zauner’s memoir arranges itself into a careful account of a mother’s love, fears, and secrets—an archive of devotion—a counterattack to trauma’s

tendency to unname and erase. In the face of trauma, that amorphous specter which clouds memory and perception, Zauner uses memoir to concretize her mother’s memory:

The memories I had stored, I could not let fester. Could not let trauma infiltrate and spread, to spoil and render them useless. They were moments to be tended. The culture we shared was active, effervescent in my gut and in my genes, and I had to seize it, foster it so it did not die in me. So that I could pass it on someday. The lessons she imparted, the proof of her life lived on in me, in my every move and deed. I was what she left behind. If I could not be with my mother, I would be her (213).

By positioning herself as part of her mother’s life and legacy, Zauner is able to produce joy and meaning, even out of devastating circumstances. She refuses to allow the echo of trauma to overwhelm her voice; neither, though, does she deny its existence. In fact, part of what makes Zauner’s story so powerful is her unflinching documentation of the sheer impact of such a trauma upon her life and the lives of her loved ones. Despite its far-reaching effects, however, Zauner works to ensure that this trauma is contained within the page and transformed through remembrance and celebration of her mother and all of the traits and memories that they shared.

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates, through close reading and analysis of trauma theory and two works in memoir, that memoir writing can function as an organized, concrete “container” for experiences of trauma, such that memoirists no longer experience the trauma as a nebulous phenomenon dominating their feelings and thoughts. In Machado’s *In the Dream House*, there is the container of the “dream house,” and in Zauner’s *Crying in H Mart*, there is the container of the “archive.” Additionally, Machado and Zauner both contain and structure the trajectory of their trauma into a legible, believable narrative. Finally, by creating this organized, concrete container for their trauma,

Machado and Zauner can extract from it new meanings and possibilities for themselves and their stories, helping them to alleviate and overcome experiences of sociocultural dislocation and a lack of agency induced by intergenerational trauma. Through memoir, the trauma is expressed, contained, and shared with others; it is no longer the amorphous, unlocatable contagion that dominates one's inner world. The next steps in this research would need to be collaborative. How might humanists and writers work collaboratively with psychologists and physicians to bring their interpretive, linguistic, and theoretical skills to research questions about expressive writing?

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Biography:

I am a recent graduate and Chancellor's Associate Program Scholar from Sixth College with a bachelor's degree with departmental honors in Literature & Writing. Currently, I work as a freelance editor and advanced writing tutor for the English Center at San Diego City College. I am in the process of applying to MFA and PhD programs across the country, with hopes to pursue a graduate degree in English or comparative literature. My current research interests, inspired in large part by my research within the McNair program, are: memoir writing, African American literature and culture, trauma theory, gender and sexuality studies, visual culture and media studies, diaspora studies, transnational literature, and contemporary literature.

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“ My goal as a scholar and aspiring professor is to make higher education a more equitable space through the reparative, connective power of storytelling and the personal narrative. ”