

RECREATING FORGOTTEN PASTS:

MEMORY AND REPRESENTATION IN KATHRYN HARRISON'S *THE KISS*

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Autobiographies, like all genres of literature, are expected to meet certain standards. They should, for instance, be truthful. An autobiography is expected to be the story of one's life, or some aspect thereof. Since it recalls events that have already happened, it should follow that these events did in fact occur, and that the autobiographer is staying within this frame of truthfulness without embellishments or vast exaggerations. Autobiographies are also expected to be culturally appropriate. There are certain topics which are more sensitive, such as rape and incest, and authors who do not shy away from such topics risk a brutal reaction from critics and public. But what exactly is a true story, and what is deemed appropriate? What happens if life experiences do not fit into these preexisting constraints? Analyzing Kathryn Harrison's memoir *The Kiss* and the debates surrounding its publication regarding its truthfulness and appropriateness, it seems that critics are too quick to judge by these constraints. Leigh Gilmore, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, and Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, all authorities in the field of autobiography, give evidence of the close-minded standards which Harrison's memoir challenges. Critics miss what these scholars argue: that the boundaries of the constraints are much less clear and stable than those by which critics judge Harrison's work. In writing an autobiography, the narrator must grapple with an imperfect memory of the experience and then find a way to represent it within the current narrative paradigms, all while striving to remain as "true" to the actual events as possible.

As recounted in her memoir *The Kiss*, Kathryn Harrison, a young middle-class girl, was cut off from both of her parents. While she tried to cling to her mother, wanting to be loved, her mother pushed her away. Her father was not a part of her early life, and she only knew of him through her mother's obsession with him. When he finally came into her life when she was twenty, she and her father become obsessed with each other until she felt that she was being consumed by him. Harrison's father overwhelmed her with his love for her, and demanded that her entire life be given to him. She did just this, and was not released until she saw her mother's body after she passed away from illness. It was her mother's obsession with her father that fed Harrison's own infatuation, and her mother's neglect for her

daughter that drove Harrison into her spiraling relationship. What started as a kiss in an airport turned into a relationship of incest, and she fell into a state of shame, cutting herself off from friends, family, and the greater community.

When it was published, Harrison's critics created much controversy surrounding the accountability and appropriateness of her work. Narrating a subject so culturally tabooed as incest evoked a harsh reaction, and critics attacked her story by attacking the reliability of her narrative and of herself as an author. Leigh Gilmore, in her article "Jurisdictions: *I, Rigoberta Menchù, The Kiss*, and Scandalous Self-Representation in the Age of Memoir and Trauma," describes some of the criticisms Harrison faced, which accused her of writing an inappropriate story and "fault[ing] her for writing a memoir too aesthetically successful to stand as a believable index of injury" (695). Doubting Harrison's account as a "believable index of injury," some critics challenged her story and asserted that its aesthetical nature was the result of fabrication. Not only did they question its truthfulness, but beyond that, they also made clear that regardless of its believability, they did not want to listen to this "inappropriate story" to begin with. These critics assumed that a "realistic" story of trauma and suffering cannot also be artistic, and that no story of incest would be appropriate to publish, applying cultural taboos to real-world situations that do not fit within acceptable cultural paradigms. Rather than accept that these preconceived notions of narrative standards and suitability are inadequate, these critics assumed the past Harrison recreated was fictitious.

Yet, while some critics condemned Harrison for giving an account of the past which might not be exact, others defended the subjectivity of such stories. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe the process of representation and memory in their work *Reading Autobiography*. They defend the difficulties narrators face in relating stories of trauma, and explain the reasoning behind Harrison's rendition of her life story that critics faulted as unbelievable. In their book, *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges also argue "[t]hat such an event might be 'stored' in memory and return 'absolutely true to the event' has . . . been met with skepticism" (103). But critics who attack Harrison's work expect exactly that. They expect her to be able to recreate events from the past accurately and give a factual account of them. As Patricia Halliday points out in her review of *Telling Incest*, "the telling point that Doane and Hodges make in their work is that 'telling incest' is not the easy thing that some would have us believe" (213).

This statement would probably seem quite obvious to most, yet again, this is exactly what critics of Harrison's work are arguing against. They condemn her for not writing a history book, and why should she? She is dealing with her past: certain events took place, and others did not. Since it is her life, she should know better than anyone what happened and how it took place. Why is there even a question regarding the truthfulness of her work? But they fail to realize just how difficult the subject matter is for Harrison, and that telling such a story in an exact and precise manner may not be possible. The reasons for this difficulty are twofold. First, memory is not exact and precise, especially when the subject matter is as culturally shunned and distressful as Harrison's, and psychological repression impedes exact recollection. Second, narrating such a traumatic experience could never end up as a factual account of experience; it is rather a representation, which, while not exact, may still be true, and reflects rather than replicates the experiences of the subject. These two factors contribute to Kathryn Harrison's ability to recall and recount her experiences, and result in an autobiographical representation of her life story, *The Kiss*, which contests the narrative paradigms to which Harrison's critics hold.

Our memories are not exact because of the way in which memory is stored and retrieved. As Smith and Watson assert,

The process [of memory] is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering. Thus narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered. (243)

When we remember past experiences, we do not simply replay the experiences in our mind as if watching a film. The brain actually stores components of memory in different areas, and chemically reassembles these components to create a whole cohesive memory. The subject quite literally "creates the meaning of the past" in the physical sense of reassembling pieces of a puzzle. But we are always missing pieces, and so past experiences are never complete or exact: they can never be fully recovered. They are instead, as Smith and Watson describe, interpretations of the past. These interpretations are influenced by, among other factors, the way we perceive the events. We often experience this phenomenon when two people have contradictory memories, and yet each person would swear to his account as the truth. Harrison writes about one such occurrence, when she and her father disagree about how much she spent on shampoo. "He insists that at some point during his previous

visit, I spent thirty dollars on a bottle of shampoo We pursue the topic, ridiculous, essential, until we are too exhausted to continue. Nothing I say will convince him of the truth" (92). Their interpretations of the past are influenced by their perceptions, and this example quite eloquently shows their differing views. Harrison prides herself on her lack of extravagance, to contrast herself from the wasteful habits of her mother. She would never admit to spending so much on a bottle of shampoo. But her father looks at her and sees so much of her mother that her mother's excessiveness rubs off on her. To him, spending so much on shampoo is something her mother would do, so it must also follow that her daughter would do it as well. Two people are remembering the same incident in opposite ways. In this incident, Harrison shows the reader that testimonies are not necessarily fact, and that memory is not exact, as if she uses this example to give the reader a disclaimer that minor details may not be correct, and are not of much importance anyway. This incident hits at the core of the unreliability of memory, which in turn inhibits Harrison's ability to accurately relate events of her past.

Memory is not only affected by our personal perceptions and cognitive abilities; it is also heavily influenced by our cultural awareness and pressures to conform. These cultural influences are another way in which the interpretations of memory that Smith and Watson describe are formed. From an early age, we are taught what is and is not appropriate, and that we are to conform to these cultural norms if we expect to have a place within the community. Harrison's experience does not fit the mold of the community, and she knows it from the start: "I am frightened by the kiss. I know it is wrong, and its wrongness is what lets me know, too, that it is a secret" (69). She knows she must keep this a secret, because it goes against what is socially acceptable within her culture. Because of this she keeps from telling others, which ends up including herself as well. "I become one of the people to whom I wouldn't mention such a thing as my father sticking his tongue in my mouth" (75). Harrison wants nothing more than to forget what happened, because, as with all victims placed in a situation that contradicts what is culturally acceptable,

to remember would not only challenge a revered way of life, but would also indict the rememberer as crazy, as madly unable to appreciate and be grateful for such an existence. Obeying rules of middle-class discourse—the demand to keep things sanitized and polite—makes it

hard to rehearse and thus remember events that are so transgressive of the “official story” about how things are. (Doane and Hodges 102-103)

In order to keep this sense of normality, trauma victims can adopt a system of selective memory and repress the act which challenges cultural appropriateness and places them outside of the community. Yet, though her act does not “obey the rules of middle-class discourse,” Harrison cannot completely forget this “transgressive” event. Instead, “the burden of shame remains with the daughter, who must recognize her father’s unnatural request and exile herself from the community” (Marshall 411). She knows she is defying the expectations of her community, and so she has no place in it. Harrison instead finds herself separated and exiled, trapped on the other side of a wall: “It is like a vast, glittering wall between me and everything else, a surface offering no purchase, nor any sign by which to understand it. I can see past and through it to the life I used to have, but, mysteriously, the kiss separates me from that life” (71). The kiss is so drastically different from what her community dictates that she cannot even understand it. It separates her from her old life of normality, just as it separates her from the rest of her community. She knows this separation exists, and will exist, so long as her relationship with her father progresses. It is this relationship which causes her exile, and so it is this relationship which she tries to repress and forget. If she can construct it so the kiss never happened, that it was just her own fantasy, then she can once again come back into society as a member of the community. This conscious effort to forget her past makes it difficult for her to later go back and remember the incidents she blocked from herself.

Yet there is still another factor in Harrison’s case which makes her recollection of her past even harder, and which influences the interpretations of memory she is able to obtain. The sheer extent of emotional and distressful experiences which she went through makes remembering these experiences with any accuracy that much more difficult. Smith and Watson discuss the difficulty in narrating “memories so dreadful they must be repressed for human beings to survive and function in life” (246). Repressing traumatic memories can act as a defense mechanism when the memory is so distressful that the subject would not otherwise be able to function. Harrison actively turns to this defense throughout her memoir: “Privately I forget what my father did. It is as simple as only denial can be. *Don’t think about it*, I tell myself, and I don’t, but it seems to require an enormous effort of will” (74-75). Harrison tries to pretend her father’s kiss never happened. Yet the difficulty in doing

this, as she describes, overwhelms her: "But now I retreat from the cause of my shock. . . . I don't let myself wonder if any of what I feel is in response to his kiss" (75). Harrison suffers from the result of what Smith and Watson would call the "obsessive memories" of trauma victims:

People suffering the agonies of traumatic memory are haunted by memories that obsessively interrupt a present moment and insist on their presence. These memories may come to the surface of consciousness in fits and fragments, again and again. (245)

Harrison tries to deny the source of her haunting, and tries to ignore the memory's insistent presence. Yet it still surfaces, and she is not able to completely escape her experience. "Still, I worry. I think about the kiss all the time"(86). She is not able to completely repress the experience, yet still, her attempts at repression affect her ability to gain full recollection of it later. Harrison's memory is subject to the unreliable way in which it is stored and reconstructed. Her past is made into a mere interpretation of experiences influenced by both her personal perceptions of events and the conscious effort she herself makes to wipe the incidents from her memory. All this is done in reaction to community expectations and personal distress. Her past can never be fully recovered, and she is instead left with an interpretation of past experiences shaped by these factors. The resulting incomplete memory prohibits Harrison from giving a complete account of the events of her past, and instead this interpretation is faulted by critics as untruthful and unbelievable.

Despite trying to forget her past, Harrison's obsessive memory haunts her, and the only way to stop it is to let herself revisit the very past from which she tries to hide. As Suzette Henke describes in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*, "in order to break this torturous circuit of repetition, the victim must reenact the trauma in all its physical, sensory, psychological, and emotional detail" (xiii). One way to "reenact" the trauma she experienced is by recounting it to others. By doing this, she can escape the "torturous circuit of repetition" to which her obsessive memories subject her. Yet how is Harrison to write through her experiences, when "trauma is figured as the unspeakable, the unrepresentable" (Gilmore "Jurisdictions" 702)? Gilmore's idea of "unspeakable" or "unrepresentable" can be explained in two ways: through the trauma she experienced and through the cultural taboos surrounding her relationship with her father. First, language cannot fully express the traumatic nature of experiences such as Harrison's. Gilmore

explains: "The consensus position argues that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language not only fails in the face of trauma, but is mocked by it and confronted with its own insufficiency" ("Limit-Cases" 132). Trauma is "beyond language" not in the sense of a deficiency in our lexicon to explain occurrences, but rather in the insufficient ability to understand and comprehend all the effects of those occurrences. Harrison's difficulty lies not in finding the words to say that her father had sex with her, but rather in giving voice to and portraying all of the emotions and consequences of that act. "Is there a way to tell a stranger that once upon a time I fell from grace, I was lost so deeply in a dark wood that I'm afraid I'll never be seen again?" (174). Harrison feels the burden of her sin, and cannot find a way to describe the effects that burden has on her, and therefore she finds difficulty in voicing her experiences and giving them representation.

Second, trauma is "unspeakable" or "unrepresentable" because of the same cultural taboos that encourage Harrison to try to erase her experiences from her memory. The inappropriateness of the act separates her from the community and gives rise to the question: Even if Harrison could find a way to relate her experiences, would anyone want to listen? Judging by critics' responses to Harrison when she finally does talk about her experiences, the answer appears to be no. Harrison herself recognizes the unspeakable nature of her traumatic experiences even as she is experiencing them. Describing her changed relationship with her boyfriend after the kiss, Harrison says: "The changes wrought in me over the past months have been so profound and, perhaps on a level neither of us can acknowledge, so worrisome that we always find some subject other than what is happening to me. I am beginning to learn what it means: unspeakable" (117). They find that they cannot discuss her experiences, both because of their traumatic nature and the cultural taboos surrounding them. She does not and perhaps can not talk about them, and he has no desire to hear about them. Her experiences become, quite literally, "unspeakable," and hinder Harrison's ability to represent them.

Ironically, the only way to work through the unspeakable nature of the trauma is to give it voice. As Smith and Watson assert, "Speaking or writing about trauma becomes a process through which the narrator finds words to give voice to what was previously unspeakable" (246). Giving voice to the unspeakable, as Smith and Watson suggest, is a contradiction which Gilmore acknowledges: "Yet even as the view that one cannot speak about or represent trauma prevails, language is asserted as

that which can and must heal the survivor and the community" ("Limit-Cases" 132). Language lacks the capacity to describe the traumatic nature of events, yet it must somehow be used to do just this. The paradoxical result is given a partial solution by Smith and Watson, who explain that though "narrators struggle to find ways of telling about suffering that defies logic and understanding," there is a way for them to break down the task. First, they must overcome "the problem of recalling and recreating a past life" by "organizing the inescapable but often disabling force of memory" (246). This is no easy task, as previously explained. Yet, the narrator must get past the "disabling force of memory" and "recreate a past life" in the events that occurred, before moving on. Once this is done, the narrator can then work on "negotiating its fragmentary intrusions with increasing, if partial, understanding" (Smith and Watson 246). In this way, the victim can attempt at least a partial understanding of the recovered fragments of the past, and then, as Harrison attempts, work towards giving them voice.

These fragments can be made "speakable," though not cohesively. Smith and Watson explain: "Crises of a personal sort, such as a sexual assault. . . may be speakable only in the halting fragments of traumatic or obsessive memory" (245). This fragmentation is portrayed with the constant and sudden shifts Harrison makes between differing time periods, cohesive scenes broken up with intermittent narrations, and the frequent sentence fragments she uses. She is voicing her experiences within these abrupt, incomplete, and often not related disjunctions. This manner of writing is the only way in which Harrison is able to portray her story, as it is the only way to give the unspeakable traumas she experienced a voice. Because she is forced to write in this way, critics argue that her work does not come across as a factual account of events.

Harrison is able to take these fragmentary pieces and string them together as a single story by incorporating story-like and fairytale elements. She uses the style of fictional literature in a factual genre, which results in a very artistic narration. Harrison describes the initial kiss as placing her under a spell: "The kiss is the point at which I begin, slowly, inexorably, to fall asleep, to surrender volition, to become paralyzed" (70). In fairytale literature, it is usually a kiss which wakes the heroine up from a deep sleep, but here it is the trigger for the rest of her story. She remains under her father's spell until she sees her mother's dead body: "the spell is broken, her death has released me" (200). Her mother's death not only removes the agent of

obsession Harrison witnesses all through her life, but also allows her to finally reach out and touch her mother's body without consequence, giving her closure to her childhood lack of parental love and acceptance. The resulting aesthetical nature of her work gives some critics reason for complaint, but Harrison needs this familiar yet extraordinary groundwork, the fairytale, in order to take the reader through a much more unconventional and even unacceptable tale. Marshall explains that "in her memoir, Harrison relies on 'fantastic' fairytale material to tell her 'impossible' story about father-daughter incest" (413). Her story is "impossible" in that it is unspeakable and unrepresentable. Her use of the fairytale keeps the reader in a familiar place we have all been before to tell a story unfamiliar and unacceptable to us. Moreover, its sense of the "fantastic" also tells of the cultural boundaries we have placed on autobiography. A story such as Harrison's cannot fit within accepted narrative paradigms, and so she must instead mold existing paradigms to her will. She can only tell her story if it is set in a scene where the bizarre and incredible happen every day, where animals talk, evil is personified, and whimsical creatures exist. This is the setting she must use for her story, because our culture would rather disregard what she has to say and assert that father-daughter incest does not happen, just as animals do not really talk in our world. Harrison's portrayal of her experiences is affected by the limited ways in which she can relate a story of trauma which is culturally unacceptable and shunned. This representation of her life is what critics exploit, and yet it is the only way which Harrison has available to tell her story.

Critics of Kathryn Harrison's memoir *The Kiss* fault her for writing and publishing a story that is unbelievable and inappropriate, two qualities which contradict the contemporary standards for autobiography. In looking at memory and representation in traumatic events, it becomes apparent that the idea of a "true" story may not be as simple as critics would like to believe. Not only do factors such as cognitive abilities and psychological processing in memory and representation contribute to Harrison's difficulty in relating her story, but the very cultural prohibitions to which critics attest to in claiming that her memoir is "inappropriate" are also key contributors to the way in which Harrison is able to represent her story. Because father-daughter incest is deemed culturally inappropriate, the subject matter does not fit within current narrative paradigms. It is because of this that Harrison's story is given representation which challenges such paradigms.. She uses elements of the fairytale to piece together the fragments of her story, and to bring the reader to a

familiar place in an otherwise disoriented world. This incorporation of the fantastic also demonstrates the very limitations today's society places on autobiography, and further illustrates the desire to ignore such incidents as incest and disregard them as being just as "fictional" as the fantasy genre. Yet, instead of realizing the inadequacy of cultural ideas, critics instead condemn Harrison. They challenge her work and herself as an author, when what they should really be challenging is the insufficiency of current cultural beliefs.

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