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Kelly's Trauma in *Your Face in Mine*

While Jess Row's *Your Face in Mine* is most obviously a meditation on race and identity politics, it can also be read as a trauma narrative. As a reverse-passing novel, the plot begins with the narrator's encounter with a white Jewish friend, Martin, who has undergone racial reassignment surgery (RRS) to become a black man. Although Martin's self-diagnosis of racial dysphoria and recount of his childhood trauma is extremely unreliable with crucial omissions, the narrator's own story is one we know we can believe with access to his interiority, which is often cynical but without self-deceit. By the end of the novel, the narrator, Kelly, elects to pass from white to Chinese. What is fascinating is the traumatic neurosis undergirding such a decision. In particular, using the lens of trauma to analyze Kelly's choice to become Chinese and live in China sheds light on the complexity of his white liberal guilt: its historicity, hypocrisy, and fantasy of a return to innocence.

How can we read *Your Face in Mine* as a trauma narrative? In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out—marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness (4-5). At first glance, Kelly suffers from two main wounds: the loss of his wife, Wendy, and daughter, Meimei; and guilt over his unwitting but felonious role in the death of his friend, Alan. The former manifests in Kelly's hallucinations of Wendy even after her death while the latter is an

unknown, forgotten wound that returns to haunt Kelly later on in his adult life. However, the structure of the book into three sections — Dreamtime, Exodus, and Endtime — points to a larger trauma underlying both. Where Kelly sees himself most directly as a victim is in his identity as a white person: his struggle to awake from “white dreamtime” and the unassimilated nature of living with the guilt of this racial privilege. The novel presents this wound as the crisis at the core of its trauma narrative. It asks the urgent question: Can one be someone he is not? Kelly grapples with the race he is born into — entirely outside his wish or control — and the pattern of suffering it causes him. The inevitability or inescapability of race echoes the Freudian concept of how the experience of trauma repeats itself through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his will (Caruth 2). The speculative premise of RRS offers the possibility of escape and an end to the repetition of suffering.

Kelly is plagued by a severe case of white liberal guilt and a desire to shed his whiteness. What unsettles him about his “sheer, everyday whiteness” is the historicity of its relation to blackness (127). When reading Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, Kelly feels guilty in laying any sort of claim on a black writer centuries ago, despite deeply empathizing with what Du Bois is writing. Kelly’s self-policing indicates, at that moment, the opening up of *history*. In one of the three instances of “white dreamtime” in the text, Kelly calls it the time in which all crimes are historical—“back then,” “lessons learned,” and “things are different now” (228). The guilt oscillates between the unbearable nature of white crime against blacks and the unbearable nature of having survived it, namely what Caruth calls a “double telling” (7). In this vein, Kelly’s white racial melancholia lies in the tension between his internalization of the burden of the past and his current passivity towards the black-white racial dichotomy. However, there is another layer of historicity to Kelly’s incapability to move on from the past: his guilt over his accidental hand in

Alan's death. When Martin reveals his knowledge of Kelly's crime in the present, Kelly describes it as "history... [whipping] around" and "[biting]" him (228). In Kelly's story of trauma, it is this double telling, the inextricability of his present from not only his own past but also America's past, that constitutes its historical witness.

Yet, Kelly's hypocrisy is later revealed after his initial awakening from his privileged existence in "white dreamtime" (127). Kelly uses the language of awakening at the end of his confession in Chapter 7, after he proclaims for the first time that he "lived" and "have been living" in "white dreamtime" (63). He poses a Cartesian-like epistemological problem: How can one tell whether one is ever awake? Is this waking but a more profound state of sleep, of palpable dreams? The use of both the past and the present perfect continuous tense echoes his uncertainty over his own awakening. Therein lies the continuity of the trauma. As Caruth suggests, the trauma of the "nightmare" does not simply consist in the experience within the dream, but in "the experience of waking from it"—in having survived without knowing the full extent of violence (64). As such, Kelly's experience of awakening, after his encounter with post-RRS Martin, can be understood as not simply the attempt to grasp the wound, but more fundamentally the attempt to "claim one's own survival" (Caruth 64). This priority of the self and attempt to master this awakening to life is what leads to Kelly's hypocrisy. In Chapter 7, Kelly dissects his white liberal guilt with a self-critical description of the trajectory of a "Good White Person": a devout Democrat who still chooses to live in majority-white neighborhoods, who lives with the "frisson of guilt" that comes from owning an "expensive elaborate security system" aimed at keeping blacks out, who spouts off statistics of African-American incarceration to other white people at parties, who is surprised and offended when told that they're part of the problem (54). The tone is satirical and painfully self-aware, highlighting the superficiality of white

conscience and concern for the black struggle and the incongruence between purported values and actual action. At this point, we can empathize with Kelly's awakening. However, juxtaposing the language here with Kelly's internal thoughts three hundred pages later, we see a glaring hypocrisy that Kelly (perhaps, even the text) is unaware of. As he considers becoming Curtis Wang, Kelly questions himself why he would step out of his white identity, his "gilded prison house of whiteness, with its electric fences, its transparent walls" (358). What is absolutely ironic here is the inadvertent paralleling of the black incarceration (in Chapter 7) with the "gilded prison" of white guilt. The false equivalence of how hard it is to be white with the hardships facing a black person here undermines our sympathy for Kelly's crisis of identity and the earnestness of his self-reflection, which now seems to serve more as opportunistic moments of self-flagellation. By the end of the novel, Kelly's drive for 'survival' pushes him to privilege the difficulties of white existence — his personal trauma — in order to legitimize his decision to undergo RRS. Despite his ironic self-awareness, Kelly ultimately typifies the very Good White Person that he seeks to leave behind.

Understanding the trauma of history and awakening, the question now is: Why did Kelly choose to become a Chinese man? In fact, Kelly admires Martin's choice: "A black man, I'm thinking, is the perfect vehicle, the vessel for every American desire, the vector for every narrative." (271) The answer: Kelly no longer wants to be *American*. He simultaneously recognizes the disparity and injustice between the lived experiences of white and black people, yet also, to his own shame, is incapable of transcending the arbitrary conventions of a white lifestyle. The novel thus uses China as the land where a fantasy of a return to innocence could possibly be fulfilled, where Kelly can finally escape from the black-white racial dichotomy and his own hypocrisy. The white urge to dissociate themselves from the inexorable structures of

race is illustrated by the text in the patterns of white flight, discussed in a conversation between Kelly and his high school girlfriend. The drive behind white departure from a city like Baltimore is that they didn't want to look at "so many poor black people" (143), an accusation that Martin later levels at Kelly—"because you couldn't stand looking at all those hopeless poor black people anymore" (174). Kelly's inability to act — he is "bland," "passive" and "careful," in his wife's words (14) — despite being critical of his unearned privilege causes him to feel that his own real life is elsewhere, deferred, waiting for him to live it once he wakes up from this "white dreamtime". China becomes a place where Kelly seeks to find personal and social innocence, where he can finally fulfill a fantasy of escape or exemption from his guilty hypocrisies. Such a fantasy finds a foothold in his dissertation on Wu Kaiqin, a Chinese poet who depicts the possibility of racial equality and unity through difference, namely *miao*: "the wrong note that harmonizes all human appearances and allows us to forget 'near' and 'far,' 'dark' and 'light,' 'Chinese' and 'barbarian.'" (306) That is his ultimate dream, an alternative "dreamtime" that he fears is "ending" with the blistering disparagement of his senior advisor, the world of the other in which he wants to insist that he belongs (309). His senior advisor's criticism of Kelly's lack of fealty for his own race and his desire for a world that Kelly just isn't *in* brings on one of the strongest moments of self-loathing in the novel. "What does it mean to hate yourself," Kelly asks, "not for what you are but for what you aren't? To hate yourself as a kind of double negative, a self-canceling equation?" (308-309) For Kelly, his inability to continue in the fantasy and innocence of being Chinese — epitomized by his thesis — is not simply loss, but denial and exclusion. His decision to undergo RRS to become Curtis Wang is, therefore, a decision to return, once and for all, to this Chinese dreamtime.

Ultimately, this is a novel that is aware of the narrative limitations of its white protagonist. In a moment of narrative self-referentiality, Kelly questions Robin if the “white observer”, the interlocutor, is in kind of an impossible bind—one between appropriation and ignorance (“false naïveté”) (198). As Kelly himself attempts to refrain from descending into cynicism or optimism, his internal struggle with the two dreamtimes he has — one white, one Chinese — is an enigma of both destruction and survival: the destroying of one identity and the claim to survival in the skin of another; the aversion to visibility in the prison of whiteness and the yearning of visibility in the new world he wants to belong to. However, the wish behind any dream is a basic desire *to not wake up*. That is the paradox of Kelly’s trajectory, as he seeks to wake up from white dreamtime only to delve deep into another dreamtime without ever choosing to encounter the real. That is also the enigma of trauma.

Works Cited

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Row, Jess. *Your Face in Mine*. Riverhead Books, a Member of Penguin Group (USA), 2015.