

## CHAPTER III

### THE NEW FACE OF INCEST?: RACE, CLASS, AND THE CONTROVERSY OVER KATHRYN HARRISON'S THE KISS<sup>1</sup>

In 1997 Kathryn Harrison published a memoir, The Kiss, which documents her four-year sexual relationship with her father. She was already a writer of considerable renown by then, with three highly acclaimed novels to her credit. Two of these novels also take incest as their subject, and both netted accolades, among them a coveted spot in the annual New York Times Notable Books list; a third book, about a sexually suspect although not outright incestuous relationship between a girl and her father, similarly garnered praise from the critics.<sup>2</sup> Harrison's memoir, by contrast, netted unprecedented controversy, including a host of singularly negative reviews. As one reviewer observes, the accusations leveled against Harrison in the wake of The Kiss have been legion, among them "dishonesty, opportunism, careerism, greed, exhibitionism, narcissism, selfishness, coyness, self-plagiarism and—the ultimate insult—bad mothering" (Linfield).<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to accounting for the cloud of critical disfavor hovering over Harrison's memoir, what the reviewers themselves say, not surprisingly, is that the book is

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this chapter is based on my article of the same name.

<sup>2</sup> The two incest novels are Thicker Than Water and Poison. Exposure, a narrative about a woman who was, as a child, the subject of her artist father's erotic photographs, does not feature the act of incest, but delves into the damaging effects of incestuous desire.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison also has a number of staunch defenders, especially among other writers. See, for example, McPherson.

simply not well-written. Thus Jonathan Yardley, who pans the book as “slimy, repellent, meretricious, cynical...trash from first word to last.” He ends the piece by telling us that “[t]he temptation to go on and on about this book, piling one abuse paragraph upon another, is extreme, but must be resisted. Space is short in this newspaper. Let’s save it for something worth my words and your time” (“Daddy’s Girl”). Yet only five days later he follows this review with an article entitled “‘The Kiss’ of Death for Literature?” in which he argues that Harrison’s memoir is symptomatic of the general decline of the world of arts and letters. Then, when the writer Tobias Wolff specifically names Yardley in an article suggesting that the reviewers are using Harrison as a whipping boy for the memoir genre, Yardley writes a third piece in which he defends himself and reiterates his contempt for The Kiss: “My objections are based entirely and exclusively in the simple, inescapable reality that ‘The Kiss’ is an irredeemably rotten book” (“The Memoirists”). Given Yardley’s venom, it is not surprising that Wolff suspected an agenda on his part. Indeed, all this vitriol, summoned by Yardley in his own defense, actually backfires, since it begs the question of what about The Kiss made him so angry: bad writing alone rarely provokes such ire.

In investigating the reasons for such seemingly unwarranted rage, it is important to keep in mind that controversy is to a certain extent a self-propagating phenomenon; the initial publicity about the book’s contents consequently bears responsibility for at least beginning the conflagration. Thus some reviewers feel compelled to step into the fray because they think that Harrison’s text has gotten attention for its subject matter rather than its literary merits; the heated tone of their critiques, in turn, pushes others to rise up in Harrison’s defense. Furthermore, when combined, the different topics that discussions of

The Kiss touch upon create a toxic brew. Incest is a volatile subject,<sup>4</sup> and in literary circles in recent years, the genre that Harrison chose for this narrative, the memoir, has been as well. As if that were not enough, many of the articles on The Kiss argue that our current culture is characterized by self-absorption and solipsism. Since incest can be read as a narrative of narcissism—“When I look at you, I wonder if I, too, must not be handsome” [Kiss 67], says Harrison’s father, falling in love with himself along with her—and since the memoir has been described as a genre tailor-made for narcissists, we could call this third topic a necessary concomitant to the first two. Incest, the memoir, and narcissism are so provocative as subjects of discussion now that any commentary on The Kiss, even a purportedly straightforward assessment of its quality, tends to be examined in light of them—hence Yardley’s evident (and, in fact, to some degree understandable) frustration at the way in which his readers are second-guessing his motives in trashing Harrison’s memoir.<sup>5</sup>

Further complicating this already complicated mix of inflammatory issues surrounding The Kiss is the fact that Harrison had published this same story in a different form and under a different generic designation. Upon its publication, Thicker Than Water, which was billed as a novel, had been met with the warm and supportive approbation of the critics. But when Harrison published The Kiss, the fact that she had had the temerity to recast and republish her story in an only slightly different package was a source of considerable irritation to many of her critics. So to the possible reasons for the singularly

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<sup>4</sup> Harrison herself acknowledges this fact. Speaking of the reception that her memoir received in her Bookforum interview, she says, “It’s the power of taboo. It’s almost like an autoimmune response.”

<sup>5</sup> In his second piece, Yardley refers to a “genuinely idiotic” letter he had received, which suggested that he had panned Harrison’s book only because he, too, was a victim of incest.

poor reception of the Kiss we must add the crime of self-plagiarism and its even uglier companion, profiteering—the notion that Harrison recycled her tale of family obsession using the more sensationalist and, not so coincidentally, more lucrative label of the memoir.

This chapter and the next will focus on The Kiss and Thicker Than Water to answer a key question: why did the memoir generate a shrill, indeed almost hysterical outcry, when its fictional predecessor received only praise? This is a difficult issue to parse. The various factors that the critics cite to explain their hostile reviews create a tangle that is thick and interconnected. Further complicating the process of analyzing The Kiss is the fact that we can find a plethora of factors accounting for the outrage it provoked without even opening the book. There is the label on the back cover which designates genre; the fact that when Harrison's memoir came out, her novel on the same subject was a widely known and well-documented part of her publishing history; the age Harrison was at the time of the incestuous relationship; her well-known persona, in particular the success she is perceived as having enjoyed in both the professional and domestic spheres; the author photo on the book, which contains all the requisite cues to her class and racial status; and finally the complex, taboo, but also in some ways overexposed topic of her book, incest.

Still, incendiary though all of these external factors are, especially when combined together, the text itself also played a major part in the negative reception of the memoir; the case of The Kiss speaks eloquently to the fact that powerful generic expectations accompany an incest narrative in contemporary American society, and that these expectations are violated only at the storyteller's peril. The Kiss goes farther than The Woman Warrior and Sapphira and the Slave Girl as a revision of the standard incest model—indeed, The Kiss

turns the conventional narrative presentation of incest on its head. Instead of carefully paving the way to the revelation of incest through signs and clues, Harrison begins the memoir with a matter-of-fact mention of the incestuous relationship. As I will argue, by framing the announcement of incest in an offhand remark, by presenting it as a matter barely worthy of note rather than as a dramatic revelation, she suggests that incest is a commonplace occurrence and subject for discussion rather than a taboo act and subject. This structure and its implications, in combination with factors external to the text, proved deeply disturbing to the reviewers and critics.

The imbroglio which greeted The Kiss was ultimately the result of a complex, fascinating, and probably unique set of circumstances. In this chapter I will examine the external factors leading to the reception of the memoir; I will devote chapter four to a close reading of The Kiss as well as Thicker Than Water.

### **Incest, Memoir, Narcissism, Self-Plagiarism**

If Harrison had called The Kiss a novel instead of a memoir, how different would have been the critics' response? While the boundary between memoirs and novels have been shifting in a way that makes it impossible to pinpoint, particularly of late,<sup>6</sup> while books often note the work's genre only in the upper-left-hand corner of the back cover, in print so small it seems to belie the importance of the designation, whether the book is labeled "fiction" or "memoir/autobiography" makes a vital difference. Ostensibly a reflection on how the book

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<sup>6</sup> One article notes that the success of Harrison's book and McCourt's Angela's Ashes is "turning the phrase 'a memoir' into publishing's favorite subtitle," and quotes a publisher on the consequences of the genre's popularity: "Books that once would have been written as novels are now written as memoirs" (Minzesheimer). Henderson similarly suggests that writers are calling their works memoirs for commercial reasons.

was written, speaking only to the issue of whether it drew on memory or imagination, on events that were at least thought to have happened or flights of pure fantasy, this one- or two-word label has a profound impact on how we read. Writing about how the term “autobiography” affects the way the reader approaches the text, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, springing off the work of Philippe Lejeune, tell us that an “autobiographical pact” exists between the narrator and the reader. In their words, “an author guarantees that the name on the book’s cover corresponds to the ‘life’ narrated within; it is a ‘contract of identity...sealed by the proper name’.... In making this claim to the ‘real,’ life narratives solicit a particular mode of reading, since they are claiming not verisimilitude but the ‘truth’ of lived experience, however elusive that may be” (358-59).

In most circumstances it would be difficult to gauge how much, or even whether, the book’s genre influenced the way it was received. In the case of The Kiss, however, Harrison’s publishing history strongly suggests that the genre of the text affected the terms of its reception. When The Kiss was first published, a number of reviewers seized upon how similar it was to Thicker Than Water, published in 1991. I would underscore again that despite having a plot and even whole scenes in common, the two books are not identical, the most obvious difference between them being that the latter version is far more concise. Still, the similarities between the two works, which came out a mere six years apart, were enough that Harrison was roundly excoriated for cannibalizing her earlier novel and also for recycling it specifically into a “true confession” out of self-interest—the argument being that

she had to know that a revelation of this order would have to arrive with the kind of hype that guarantees great book sales, as well as the kind of advance that anticipates them.<sup>7</sup>

Before the release of The Kiss, Harrison's publishers released this statement from her: "'The Kiss' was a book I couldn't avoid, rather than one I set out to write..." (qtd. in Marlowe: M2). Harrison expounds upon this idea in an interview:

one of the motivations for writing The Kiss was that I had [originally] fictionalized the story. Because Thicker Than Water was a typically autobiographical first novel, with aspects changed around and disguised, I felt disappointed in it and in myself: I knew that there was a story that was real and one that needed to be owned. To novelize a story of incest is to participate in the societal imperative to always lie about it, to say it's not happening, or that you made it up. For that reason, I wanted to disown that novel as soon as it was published.  
(Bookforum)

These statements notwithstanding, there has been a lot of conjecture about why Harrison essentially republished her earlier work in a different genre. While her supporters, taking their cue from her publishers, usually suggest that it was a necessary step in her struggle to leave her past behind, her detractors tend to propose careerism, an accusation that Ed Vulliamy, for one, buttresses by noting that it was Harrison's agent, rather than she herself, who came up with the idea to publish a memoir about her affair with her father.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly we cannot easily separate the critics' hostility over the fact that it is almost the same text from their resentment at the fact that in the second instance, it is being

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<sup>7</sup> Linfield and Caldwell suggest that because Harrison is a woman, her financial motives in publishing her memoir have been more subject to question. While this is an intriguing thesis, it does not stand up, since many other women have come forward with autobiographical accounts of a shocking nature, and have not been questioned along these lines. In another, less satisfying attempt to defend Harrison against the accusation of careerism, Lehrman points out that a large number of Harrison's detractors are women, and suggests that rivalry among women is to blame.

<sup>8</sup> There are other explanations as well: Yardley, for example, argues that Harrison was motivated by narcissism; Goring, that it was for revenge.

presented to us as a real-life account rather than a made-up one. Still, given that genre, specifically the question of fact vs. fiction and the elusive line that often seems to lie between them, is an issue that is vital to the ways in which incest is both told and read, I would argue that it is more probably that bone of contention which has stuck in the reviewers' collective craw. Incest accounts, like narratives of the Holocaust, have been routinely met with skepticism about their credibility; while incest deniers may not quite match the numbers or the infamy of those who refuse to believe that the Holocaust happened, they are nevertheless numerous and vocal.<sup>9</sup> As a result incest memoirs almost always have a precarious purchase on the perch of nonfiction, which in turn means that the issue of fact vs. fiction becomes inevitably fraught for the memoirists: there is a political imperative to have their stories accepted as truth. The problem of the skepticism that these writers face is further exacerbated by the fact that, as psychologists such as Dori Laub and Judith Herman point out, the trauma survivors' quest to gain credibility has a real psychological urgency.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson reports that in recent years sociologists have begun to revise their estimates of the frequency of incestuous abuse, with some stating that it has happened to as many as one in six women; accompanying these revised statistics has been a murmur of dissent which has at times swelled into something close to a roar. In Wilson's words, "almost as soon as sexual abuse was 'discovered,' suspicions began to arise as to whether it could actually be as frequent as alleged.... [M]edia outlets have taken widely varying attitudes towards the debate, often in rapid succession, almost always with a 'doubtful' piece following up a piece taking the disclosures seriously" (36).

<sup>10</sup> As Laub says, trauma survivors have a need to tell and so to come to know their story: "The survivors...needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself" (78). Herman tells us that the road to recovery begins with another person hearing and acknowledging the truth of the survivor's story: "When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery" (Trauma 1). I would highlight that Laub's and Herman's words could be applied to incest and Holocaust writers alike: victims of either trauma are similar in their psychological as well as political imperative to tell their stories and have them believed. The similarity in the discourse around narratives of incest and narratives of the Holocaust is remarkable to me. I say remarkable even though they are, of course, both narratives of

Given the memoirists' political and psychological need to have their testimony heard and accepted as fact, and the widespread cultural resistance to doing so, it is not surprising that the label of "memoir" on an incest text is at once valued and contested, the source of considerable anxiety and controversy.

Janice Doane and Devon Hodges assert that in their vexed occupation of a space between nonfiction and fiction, incest narratives are no different than any other kind of story: "As do most narratives, incest narratives exist on a boundary between fact and story" (emphasis mine, 113). This claim seems suspect, especially since they make it just before going on to point out how Dorothy Allison and Sapphire, the writers of two contemporary incest novels, managed to put themselves and their texts more squarely in the limelight by proclaiming that their novels were based in personal experience. Furthermore, Doane and Hodges begin their book by discussing their concern about how incest accounts have historically been met with debates about their truth or falsehood—which, even if it does not necessarily speak to the way incest writers play with the borders of memory and imagination, surely suggests that these stories are read with skepticism about their authenticity or, alternatively, a reluctance to believe that they are fictional. I would also argue that it is no coincidence that the other two texts I focus on in this dissertation, The Woman Warrior and Sapphira and the Slave Girl, play with the boundaries of their respective genres: Kingston's text comes so close to fiction that it is almost never read as straight memoir anymore, and when Cather herself makes a startling cameo appearance at the end of Sapphira, she seems to deny or at least question the narrative's status as fiction.

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trauma, and as such are tagged by similar expectations. For example, as I will discuss in chapter four, the expectation is that both autobiographical Holocaust accounts and nonfictional incest narratives will be raw and ragged.

The fact that the issue of authenticity and credibility in an incest narrative arouses strong emotions increases the chances that it played a part in the reception of The Kiss. For the divergence in the reviews that Harrison's first novel and her memoir received is so dramatic that we have to conclude that there is something powerful afoot. Not only did Thicker Than Water receive overwhelmingly positive reviews, with the high quality of Harrison's writing consistently being mentioned, the tone of these reviews is respectful in a way that contrasts markedly with the tenor of those for The Kiss. A critic for the San Francisco Chronicle calls Thicker Than Water "brilliant" (Radner), and others focus on the sensitivity with which Harrison approaches difficult subjects: to wit, Michiko Kakutani's comment that Harrison tells her story with "candor and compassion." Interestingly, Kakutani praises Harrison's novel by remarking specifically on how it seems to blur the line between fiction and memoir: "It is a story written in hallucinatory, poetic prose, yet a story that possesses the harrowing immediacy—and visceral impact—of a memoir."<sup>11</sup> Considering that Thicker Than Water is essentially a narrative doppelganger to The Kiss, the difference in the reviews the two texts received astonishes.

Another explanation for the way the critics bayed over Harrison's memoir is that its publication tapped into a pre-existing debate about the value of the memoir. Commercially successful and critically beleaguered, the memoir was itself the subject of considerable controversy in the 1990s. A month and a half after The Kiss was published, Margo Jefferson writes of "what is now officially called 'the memoir backlash.'" In this phenomenon, "the

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<sup>11</sup> Spencer similarly points out that "[t]he first two words of Thicker Than Water are 'In truth,' and as the novel plunges into a woman's painfully frank and unsparing revelations about her miserable childhood, and her struggle to awaken from its dank, hypnotic spell, this reader felt, at times, that he was reading a harrowing, fully imagined work of nonfiction."

fact that so many writers are producing memoirs instead of novels becomes the mark of our culture's decline into mass narcissism and exhibitionism"; the genesis of this backlash is traced to what she calls "the vehement, hysterical debate" over the question of whether stories such as The Kiss should be published (C13). To see how closely Harrison's book is intertwined with the ongoing critical battle over the value of the memoir genre, we need only contrast Jefferson's mapping of the debate with Tobias Wolff's defense of Harrison. Wolff contends that the reviewers' "rage" is provoked not by Harrison's book but rather by the genre she has chosen (9); whereas Jefferson thinks that books like Harrison's incite strong reactions to the genre, he thinks that strong reactions to the genre incite anger against her book. Whether The Kiss was the cause of memoir fatigue or the victim of it, it lies in the eye of the storm swirling around the genre.

That The Kiss was denominated a memoir clearly contributed to the furor about it, but a number of other factors also came into play. After all, Harrison's narrative is hardly the first or even the most gruesome personal revelation to hit the public stage. Our culture places a strong emphasis on soul-baring when it comes to the achievement and maintenance of mental and emotional health; as members of a society steeped in the tenets of pop psychology, we are brought up on the idea that keeping a traumatic event to ourselves is the surest course to ruin, that secrets, like sores, begin to fester. And, conveniently, there is a market out there ready to consume and exploit all of our juiciest revelations: many talk shows these days can be described as confessional gab-fests, with hosts such as Oprah Winfrey encouraging guests to reveal dark secrets for ostensibly therapeutic reasons.

Another pertinent factor is the visibility of the transgression that is the focus of Harrison's book. In 1993, Carol Travis was already pointing out that incest is entrenched as

a spectacle in our culture, figuring prominently not only in memoirs and novels but also in self-help books, talk shows, and movies<sup>12</sup>; two years later, Katie Roiphe is bemoaning the frequency with which the taboo turns up in contemporary literature. Appearing shortly after the publication of The Kiss was an article discussing “Incest as a Selling Point” in the “Ideas and Trends” section of the New York Times.<sup>13</sup> Since not only The Kiss but also more than half-a-dozen movies about incest were unleashed on America in 1997,<sup>14</sup> it seems only fitting that the obsession with incest as a pop culture fixture should have culminated in that year, as it did when the transgression was voted “Most Abused Taboo” in Entertainment Weekly’s end-of-the-year issue. Its ubiquity is perhaps best summarized by a New Yorker cartoon by Mort Gerberg that made its appearance in that year: in an office with a soaring window and posters for musicals on the walls, a producer beams, stretching out his arms over his desk toward a writer, who seems at once pleased and bemused. ““Incest: The Musical’! I love it!” reads the caption. Incest had become a part of the landscape, so much so that it had lost much of its transgressive edge. As Roiphe, commenting on the proliferation of incest texts, notes, “After a while we read these scenes with the same numbness we feel watching people being blown up in the movies” (71).

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<sup>12</sup> In an article deploring the overall quality of the books of the incest-recovery movement, Travis writes, “It is no wonder that publishers and talk shows have a thriving business exploiting stories of abuse for commercial reasons, for these are stories that sell.”

<sup>13</sup> In de Witt’s words: “If a dozen movies, television dramas and memoirs are any indication, incest, one of humanity’s last taboos, is taboo no longer. Incest is the plat du jour in the 90s’ marketplace....”

<sup>14</sup> Among them were A Thousand Acres, Eve’s Bayou, Little Boy Blue, The Sweet Hereafter, The House of Yes, This World, then the Fireworks, The Devil’s Advocate, Going All the Way, The Locusts, U-Turn, The Myth of Fingerprints, and Dogtown. And one of the best incest films of the decade, Lone Star, came out in 1996.

When we consider this cultural context, the controversy surrounding Harrison's memoir seems particularly striking. Given that our society encourages the confession of intimate secrets—given, too, that incest is so ubiquitous that we feel numb and perhaps bored when we encounter it in books and film, why is it that The Kiss managed to shock on the scale that it did? Why was it pilloried, when sexually explicit scenes in incest movies such as Angels and Insects elicited nary a murmur of protest? It could be argued, first of all, that Angels and Insects, like Thicker Than Water, does not possess the same power to shock because it is presented to us as a fiction, whereas The Kiss is not. Still, television movies such as Something for Amelia have exposed us to “based-on-a-true-story” incest accounts, and none of them have met with the same opprobrium that Harrison's narrative has encountered. Yet another possible explanation involves the fact that the incestuous relationship portrayed in The Kiss does deviate from the usual pattern in one highly significant way: Harrison was twenty years old—young, perhaps, but legally consensual—when she became sexually involved with her father. That she is an adult, and a sexually active one at that, when the incest begins greatly complicates the issue of abuse. According to some feminist scholars, Herman foremost among them, father-daughter incest epitomizes the evils of the patriarchy, suggesting how women are raised both to be sexually exploited and to lose themselves in servitude to men; Herman persuasively argues in Father-Daughter Incest that father-daughter incest is an issue reflecting a deep power imbalance in our society's gender relations.

As a portrait of a woman engaging in consensual sex with her father, The Kiss might at first blush seem a refutation of Herman's thesis. Yet the narrator of Harrison's memoir makes it abundantly clear that adult though she is, she is forced to have sex with her father.

So when he first initiates genital contact, while they are staying in his mother's house, she may not fight it, but she definitely does not invite or welcome it, or even consent to its happening:

...he lifts the hem of my nightgown. He doesn't speak, and neither do I. Nor do I make any attempt to stay his hands. Beneath the nightgown I am wearing no underpants, and he opens my legs and puts his tongue between them.... What he does feels neither good nor bad. It effects so complete a separation between mind and body that I don't know what I feel. Across this divide, deep and unbridgeable, my body responds independently from my mind. My heart, somewhere between them, plunges. (Kiss 128)

This passage, the most graphic in the memoir, indicates that the sexual contact brings about a schism between the narrator's mind and body, a theme that runs through many other incest narratives.<sup>15</sup> When it comes to assessing the extent of the narrator's complicity in the affair, it is critical to note that this schism is a textbook reaction to the trauma of incest. As Herman tells us, incest victims "[cope] with the sexual episodes by mentally disassociating themselves." Thus one survivor whom she quotes invokes an image similar to Harrison's: "My head just died then" (86).

Also apparent in this passage is the narrator's complete lack of pleasure in the act; the scene is in fact a truly harrowing one. That it is rendered in this way becomes even more notable when we consider the background to the narrator's relationship with her father: throughout her childhood they do not know each other, their only contact the occasional letter and exactly two visits. When she finally meets him as an adult, she has not seen him for ten years; before this encounter, he actually has to tell her what he is wearing so they can find each other at the airport. That he did not raise her nor even play the role of father in any

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Vogel's play, How I Learned to Drive.

conventional sense at all does not, of course, erase the fact that incest occurred, nor does it even begin to diminish the power that he wields in her imagination. In this context it is worthwhile recalling Herman's definition of incest as the embodiment of patriarchal oppression, and how she foregrounds the notion that the abuse of an adult's longtime parental status is at least as important as the idea that a blood tie is being violated through incest. When incest involves two people who are almost strangers, it has the potential, consanguinity notwithstanding, to be a less shocking narrative than one in which the betrayal of a lifetime of intimacy, trust, and dependency also comes into play. The Kiss cannot be accused of understating the horrors of incest; it deserves credit for driving it home to us that incest is a traumatic event even if the victim is grown, even if her father is not someone she has long leaned upon.<sup>16</sup>

Harrison also underscores that she never pursued, courted, or desired her father's advances. Indeed, the scene in which Harrison's father first voices his desire for her, during a trip to the Grand Canyon, is rendered as an event so dire it is rife with apocalyptic detail. "It's dusk when he finally says it. The canyon is dark. The canyon is a river of blood," the narrator tells us; "because when my father says the words I've dreaded—'make love' is the expression he uses—God's heart bursts, it breaks" (Kiss 107). Cataclysmic though these demands are, she is incapable of turning them down; she depicts herself as emotionally stunted, deprived too long of any kind of parental love. "As frightened as I am to be with my father, I can't not see him," she admits. "I can't arrest [my need for him] any more than I could stop myself from falling if, having stepped from a rooftop into the air, I remembered,

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<sup>16</sup> As Harrison notes in her Bookforum interview, "isn't it reductive, even silly, to limit the age at which it's possible to be abused by a parent? To say, if you're under eighteen you're a kid, and if you're over eighteen, you're not? In relation to your parents, you're always a child."

too late, the fact of gravity” (Kiss 119-20)—a description which renders him not just a force of nature, but an immutable law of one; she cannot defy him any more than she can gravity. She tries to flee him, but is just as inexorably drawn back; she emphasizes that it was only because he applied so much psychological pressure that she acceded to his demands. Twenty years old and able-bodied she may have been, but in her narrative she presents herself as helpless as a child when it comes to resisting him, in this way making the case that she is a definite victim of incest abuse. As long as The Kiss is at least casually perused, it is difficult to claim that the memoir has problematic implications for the political issue of a woman’s complicity in incest.

I would argue that the outrage Harrison’s memoir engendered was in large part based on timing—the climate of the culture at the time that it was published. The Kiss became a lightning rod for a number of different anxieties ambient in the culture at the end of the 90s, serving as a convenient target for intellectual and cultural diatribes and a focal point for topical discussion. First, it came at a time when debates about the worth of the memoir and about the value and also the seemliness of baring one’s soul for the enlightenment of both oneself and the world were reaching a head. Second, incest had recently become a less-than-verboten subject, finding its way into pop culture, and American society’s tolerance for the breaking of the taboo about speaking about the taboo was wearing thin. Third, Harrison’s text, an incest narrative about a twenty-year-old protagonist, challenges popular conceptions of what constitutes a victim.

### **The Incest “Victim” of The Kiss**

As Elaine Showalter theorizes in a work that came out the same year as The Kiss, hysteria manifests itself through “psychogenic diseases” in end-of-the-millennium American society: “Contemporary hysterical patients blame external sources—a virus, sexual molestation, chemical warfare, satanic conspiracy, alien infiltration—for psychic problems. A century after Freud, many people...believe psychosomatic disorders are illegitimate and search for physical evidence that firmly places cause and cure outside the self” (4). Another way to look at this phenomenon is as the cult of the victim: the denizens of the nation are in the grip of the notion that they are hapless, helpless targets of misfortune. Harrison is at once one more example of this “epidemic” and a threat to it. Yes, she serves as another self-proclaimed victim to add to the long list that Showalter racks up for us. But because of her age at the time of the incest, the controlled, highly polished prose she is able to command when writing about it, her prolific and impressive career as a writer, and her apparently very happy and highly functional marriage and family, Harrison also, and in a subversive and what appears to be a widely disturbing fashion, turns inside out the very notion of contemporary victimhood.

The issue of victimhood works against Harrison in a complex fashion, and on more than one level.<sup>17</sup> For one, the fact that she writes about herself as a victim and appears in both her text and her personal life as anything but creates a tension that may have riled the reviewers. In The Kiss, Harrison creates a self-portrait in which she engages in incest as an

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<sup>17</sup> See Frost, who similarly suggests that it is Harrison’s attempts to position herself as a victim in her narrative, when she clearly is not, which causes the reviewers to turn against her. In Frost’s words, “If Harrison’s memoir prompted critics to dole out punishment, it was because in her version of a tale of ancient proportions, the violation of the most fundamental sexual taboo, things seemed to have worked out fine for the ‘incestress’ herself. The author seemed to be feigning a victim status in order to capitalize on a publishing trend that was, in turn, presented as the moral high road of expiation” (54).

adult, but in which she absolves herself of any blame or even of any responsibility for the act. In this sense her portrayal of an adult incest participant differs mightily from that found in the first incest narrative of Western literature, Oedipus Rex. I noted in chapter one that early in Sophocles' play we are informed of the price that Oedipus—not to mention all of his subjects—is paying for the fact that he is married to his mother: a blight is devastating the fields and the cattle of Thebes, the women are infertile, and plague is decimating the population. All this despite the fact that Oedipus married Jocasta without any knowledge of the kinship between them. In marked contrast to this literary forbear, the protagonist of The Kiss gets off easy: for her, plagues, cursed kingdoms, the violent death of both parents and self-blinding are not part of the equation.

In Sophocles' telling of the Oedipus myth, punishment does not only come from the powers that be: Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself. As Freud observes, self-punishment plays a critical role in the audience's ability to receive the narrative:

...many men dream of having sexual relations with their mothers, and speak of the fact with indignation and astonishment. It is clearly the key to the tragedy and the complement to the dream of the dreamer's father being dead. The story of Oedipus is the reaction of the imagination to these two typical dreams. And just as these dreams, when dreamt by adults, are accompanied by feelings of repulsion, so too the legend must include horror and self-punishment. (297-98)

Self-punishment and even self-recriminations play no part in The Kiss. Writing a memoir—which is a confessional narrative, with all of the religious connotations of the word intact—is a chance to admit to one's failings and sins in public and, in so doing, to accept responsibility for one's actions, repent, perform penance, and absolve oneself. Yet Harrison does not avail herself of the opportunity to beat her breast and confess her wrongdoings. Whereas Oedipus punishes himself even though he committed incest unwittingly, Harrison,

who was all too aware of the blood ties between herself and her father when she became sexually involved with him, chooses to present herself as a passive victim, helpless and, by extension, innocent of blame when it comes to incest, a character without agency in a story—and, it seems all too easy to conclude, a life—dominated by her strong-willed, almighty parents, in a narrative form in which we are accustomed to self-incriminations, if not outright self-flagellation.<sup>18</sup> Considered in this light, the fact that the reviewers felt unsettled by her book seems less than a stretch.

The way in which the narrator of Harrison's memoir claims or does not claim victim status is a vital point, and one which I will expand upon when I analyze The Kiss in juxtaposition with Thicker Than Water in the next chapter. What is essential to note for now is that when it comes to the controversy surrounding the memoir, the question of how much Kathryn the character is abused by her father, significant though it is, is overshadowed by the question of what happens to Harrison the writer in the wake of her sexual relationship with her father. And what happens to Harrison the writer is this: after pulling herself together and rejecting her father, she flees to graduate school, meets a man who loves her even after she confesses to him that she knowingly engaged in incest, marries him and has a family—the narrative set up as that of a victim triumphing over her travails. All of this information is contained in the memoir. But in a memoir, the narrative is not seen as confined to what occurs in its pages, but rather as ongoing.<sup>19</sup> As a result the well-known facts of Harrison's

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Patchett, who in Truth and Beauty blames herself for her friend Lucy Grealy's decline into drug use and eventual overdose.

<sup>19</sup> This means in turn that the written narrative becomes a critical factor in the ongoing one—the published text is viewed as having consequences for the unpublished life. Thus there is consternation over the thought that Harrison's children might one day read about their mother's and grandfather's affair, and thus the fact that Harrison's husband was

résumé also affect the way in which the memoir is read: it matters that her husband is Colin Harrison, the best-selling writer and the former editor of Harper's, that she is a doting mother with loving and apparently well-adjusted children, and that her literary agent is arguably the most famous in this country.<sup>20</sup>

And when we consider these facts, the evidence seems overwhelming, the conclusion indisputable: Harrison has flourished in spite of incest, and if we weigh in that the subject of so many of her books is the sexually perverse parent-child relationship, arguably even because of incest as well. As Linfield declares, “There is no doubt that if Harrison were a hermit, a bag lady, a drug addict, a prostitute, a nun or, best of all, a suicide—that if, in short, she had been permanently and obviously ruined by her transgressions or was spending her life atoning for them—the reaction to ‘The Kiss’ would be far different.” Harrison’s dual identity as a certified luminary of the literary world and as a happily devoted wife and mother conflicts radically and problematically with our notions about the consequences of indulging in incest. In the words of one puzzled reviewer, “How, given such a history, could [Harrison] have become an academic star, a successful novelist and a wife and mother? How could she have survived at all?” (Lehmann-Haupt).

The vision of the reprisals for engaging in incest as an adult that Harrison’s work and her life offer us is a long, long way from that given by Oedipus Rex. Where are the repercussions for participating with full knowledge in the sin of incest; where is the punishment? Whether or not she writes about herself as a victim, the image that Harrison

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publicly supportive of his wife’s public revelation of incest rivets attention, warranting an interview in Vogue magazine.

<sup>20</sup> Given the considerable overlap between the worlds of literature and book reviewing, the fact that Harrison as well as her husband are celebrities of the literary sort is bound to have had a particular impact on the book reviews The Kiss received.

projects to the public is that of a woman who has been empowered by her writing about her participation in the act of incest. Moreover, as Frost points out, Harrison at one point made a statement which not only flatly contradicts the notion that she took no initiative in the relationship, but also conveys pride, glee, and smugness at her own achievement: “I wanted my father, let’s just say that. And I got him” (qtd. in Frost: 54). Harrison’s lack of punishment and, even more, her self-empowerment after and maybe even through incest clearly accounts for at least some of her readers’ discomfort.

### **The New Face of Incest?**

The notion that Harrison’s personal life becomes an object of interest to the reader brings me to yet another factor influencing the reception of the memoir. I said above that the narrative told in a memoir is seen as continuing beyond the text; another, even more significant way in which novels and memoirs differ is that the author of a memoir becomes far more heavily identified with the story. So strong an identification does not take place between a novelist and her story, since that genre grants distance by virtue of the fact that it is fiction; because film is known to be a collaborative art form, neither does it occur to the same extent between a movie star and his movie. A key result of the identification between the memoirist and her story is that the memoirist’s appearance, like biographical information about her and her characters, become a part of our reading experience. When I read a memoir, I find that I am particularly prone to flipping the back flap of the book jacket to glance at the author’s face; the memoirist’s photograph seems to aid my understanding of the narrative, just as a picture tied to a news article does. To judge by the reviews of [The Kiss](#), I am not the only one paying special attention to this memoirist’s looks: references to

Harrison's beauty, her hair, and even her "taut form" (Jefferson) punctuate discussions of her book.<sup>21</sup> Her jacket photograph has made all the publicity rounds, even to the point of being turned into a David Leavitt caricature in the New York Review of Books, and it reveals Harrison to be very beautiful—svelte, blond, and fair-skinned, with high cheekbones and hair that is swept away from her face.<sup>22</sup>

The woman in this photograph seems both a product and a natural denizen of the world depicted in The Kiss. And as if to bear out this image, within the text the narrator's maternal grandparents, who were responsible for the most part for bringing her up, are described as "awesome in their entitled European condescension, their wealth and property and the solid history implied by antiques that were passed down, not acquired"; the narrator as "raised...to assume their mantle of entitlement" (23-24). Theirs is a world of good schools, fine clothes, and doctors of all kinds, psychologists included. When the narrator's grandparents grow suspicious about her involvement with her father, they can summon plane tickets and Eurail passes to remove her from the danger, and when the narrator returns from Europe and embarks upon the relationship, she and her father meet in airports and fly to cities where no one knows them. This is a relationship that costs, in more ways than one.

The simultaneously moneyed and intellectual milieu described in this text, combined with the iconic image of Harrison herself, provides a provocatively unusual background to

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<sup>21</sup> See also Cheever, who describes her as a young woman "with a slender body and long, long blond hair." According to another critic, Harrison's success is due to the fact that she is telegenic (di Giovanni).

<sup>22</sup> Kingston, another memoirist who has problems with genre and the boundary between her personal life and the text, discusses the importance of the author's image in her essay "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers." As she tells us, she attempts to foil cultural stereotypes by manipulating her image in the author photo, but fails: "Simple-mindedly, I wore a sweat-shirt for the dust-jacket photo, to deny the exotic. I had not calculated how blinding stereotyping is, how stupefying" (95).

the narrative. In chapter one I mentioned Elizabeth Wilson's argument that incest has been ghettoized in today's society. Her discussion of the problems involved in presenting incest in a nonracialized context is relevant here, since the imperilment of treasured cultural assumptions about incest is what underlies the public outcry against The Kiss. Harrison's memoir, a text by an upper-middle-class white woman about her own extended sexual relationship with her father, violently ruptured the public's expectations about what kind of social milieu spawns incest. In so doing it inevitably sparked protest. By publishing a confessional narrative in which she tells us how she engaged in incest, consensually or not, as an adult, Harrison has presented the world with a new face for incest, one that is unacceptable and, even, unbearable to the critics' sense of incest, and perhaps even to their sense of themselves.

Harrison offends in this role on several counts. She and her family are not only wealthy but educated, not only educated but cultured. If Harrison had been African-American or obviously poor and uneducated, it seems clear there would have been far less of an uproar surrounding her book. As she herself notes, "If I were 'poor white trash,' living in a trailer park, with a broken marriage, people would be more willing to forgive me. But they don't want to admit that these things occur among well-heeled, well-educated people who read literary fiction" (qtd. in Kenney). An illuminating contrast to Harrison in this regard is Dorothy Allison. When Allison, a white woman who has also written a novel about incest, publishes accounts of her own experiences as a victim,<sup>23</sup> her revelations do not cause a commotion, and that is because the thought of incest occurring in the context that Allison describes—a poverty-stricken, uneducated Southern family—actually confirms most readers'

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<sup>23</sup> Allison's incest novel is the well-received Bastard Out of Carolina; her autobiographical essays are in Skin.

assumptions about the transgression. In her essays and fiction, Allison foregrounds her class background; one of her books is entitled Trash.<sup>24</sup> She herself suggests more that sexual violence was an inescapable part of the landscape in which she grew up. As she writes in one story, “Almost always, we were raped, my cousins and I. That was some kind of joke, too. What’s a South Carolina virgin? ‘At’s a ten-year-old can run fast” (“River of Names” 15). In an interesting discussion of incest in popular culture, James Twitchell quotes a version of the joke that Allison gives, and speculates that jokes about mountain people and incest are popular because they serve to distance the threat of the transgression in a reassuring way. In his words, “After all, it is only a song; it is only a joke; it only happens in Appalachia” (53-54). This way of thinking has paved the way for Allison’s work. Because stereotypes about inbred white trash proliferate, a confession of incest from her could never provoke the same kind of surprise or anger that Harrison’s did. To the reviewers Allison is a familiar, acceptable face of incest in a way that Harrison cannot be.

At this time and in this culture, Harrison’s author photograph is an insurmountable obstacle to her becoming an acceptable poster-child for incest. As a thin, well-groomed, blond and fair-skinned woman, she looks inevitably patrician. Also important to note is how her being an adult at the time of her experience increases the impact of her photograph. She was 36 when her memoir was published, a mere dozen years lying between her and her last sexual encounter with her father. As most other confessional accounts of incest focus on childhood experiences, we can take comfort in the thought that the face staring out at us from the back of the book has changed dramatically since he or she suffered the abuse. With the refuge of that kind of temporal distance denied to us when we gaze upon Harrison’s

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<sup>24</sup> Allison is not shy about her titles. See also “Violence Against Women Begins at Home.”

photograph, it becomes all but impossible to separate the image of her face from her story. Her revelation of incest contaminates the ideal that her image, pale and pure, offers; conversely, her face violates cherished conceptions about who traffics in incest and who, even more pertinently, does not. When attached to a memoir about incest, the photo of her face undermines the notion that incest is a vice of the poor and the ignorant, and in the process it brings this most horrific of transgressions too close to the reviewers' middle-class homes.

In the end, Harrison's author photograph disturbs because it encapsulates all the different ways in which she is privileged—all the different ways in which she cannot be reduced to fit the usual victim model. The question of whether or not she is a victim is vital to understanding the controversy that Harrison's memoir provoked. That she seems to have escaped punishment for engaging in incest is even more notable when we consider The Kiss in the context of Otto Rank's work on the literary tradition of incest. After examining texts such as Hamlet, Phaedra, and Oedipus, Rank comes to the conclusion that incest narratives contain "defenses"—features which have the effect of making the incest more acceptable to the audience. Such a defense could be "exaggerated fear of retribution, anxiety, horror, disgust, etc." (230-31) and, especially, severe punishment, both self-inflicted and otherwise. As Rank informs us, "In myth we will...encounter the son's killing of the mother after the act of incest (cf. Nero) as the highest expression of defense mechanisms." He writes that another defense would be that the characters are anonymous, their kinship concealed from one another (100); one that I would suggest is the protagonist being too young and too weak to be able to resist. The story that unfolds in The Kiss is, of course, absent all of these defenses. Its protagonist, an able-bodied adult of sound mind, engages knowingly in incest.

She suffers some fears of horror and disgust, but continues to participate in the relationship for years, and then, without inflicting hurt of any lasting kind on either herself or her father, she ends the relationship and becomes a highly functional member of both society and her own family. The narrative of The Kiss is, in short, a success story.

By offering a new twist on what the effects of incest abuse are—some anger and sadness, but no visible pathologies, irremediable signs of trauma, or behavioral patterns that become an enduring obstacle to what at least seems like absolute fulfillment in both the professional and domestic spheres—Harrison defies our expectations of the incest narrative. Even more significantly, she ends up providing us with a redefinition of incest as well: an act which might be a crime and which might even cause great trauma, but one which does not necessarily cause lasting damage to its victim. Through her well-known authorial persona, she undercuts the very seriousness of incest; when we consider that she is an incest victim, it becomes hard for us to conceive of incest as the worst possible transgression, the ur-taboo. The notion that incest is an unspeakable crime with vast repercussions, that it is, indeed, the one and only original sin, is undone by the fact that Harrison not only survives but also thrives after being sexually abused by her father. The facts of her resumé diminish the very horror of incest.

Given that The Kiss can be regarded as a work which shakes incest loose from its long-established position at the top of possible crimes against humanity, the anger and unease which it has provoked does not seem untoward: after all, the proscription against incest is deeply and perhaps even biologically embedded within us as a species. There are many possible culprits for the conflagration that her memoir sparked; there is clearly more than one force at work. But the controversy was too widespread to be contained to those

who actually read the text in question. The outrage the memoir provoked had to include those who had just read about the text, those who were familiar with just the bare facts of the case. For this reason I would submit Harrison's impressive success on the domestic as well as the professional front as the single most powerful factor in the controversy of The Kiss. The concept that incest is actually not too terrible a transgression—that it is a sin from which one can recover without any visible scars—has the potential to be far more offensive than the knowledge that it occurred.

So far my examination of the imbroglio over The Kiss has largely involved matters lying beyond the print inscribed on its pages. What, then, of the actual text and its representation of incest? What does a close reading of The Kiss and its fictional predecessor, Thicker Than Water, reveal about why the novel was greeted with polite acclaim while the memoir was met with censure and, indeed, horror? Or do the subject matter and genre of The Kiss touch upon such a collective nerve that they alone are responsible for the controversy—do they wholly trump what the book actually says as well as how it says it? As I will argue in the next chapter, strikingly similar though the two texts are, there are differences between them—some subtle, some less so, and at least one of them key to our understanding of why the two works were received in such dramatically different ways.

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## CHAPTER IV

### THE DOMESTICATION OF INCEST: KATHRYN HARRISON'S THICKER THAN WATER VS. THE KISS

With a story, a set of themes, multiple scenes and their three main characters in common, Kathryn Harrison's first novel and her memoir could accurately be described as twinned narratives about a long-term consensual relationship between a grown daughter and her father. Yet I will argue in this chapter that there are salient differences in the texts—differences which go some way toward explaining why Thicker Than Water was critically celebrated while The Kiss was roundly panned. For one, there is the quality of the writing. Whereas Thicker Than Water often rambles, the prose of The Kiss is polished, spare, and emotionally restrained. While one might think that the greater artistry of The Kiss would lead to uniform critical praise, I will argue that it serves instead to undermine the narrative's credibility as a genuine account of trauma endured. Then, too, there are a couple of slight but still important divergences in the way the father and the narrator are characterized. Finally, there is the fact that the narrative of The Kiss, in contrast to Thicker Than Water, upends the standard incest model; incest is not presented to us as the long-awaited, surprising resolution to a riddle.

In the last chapter I discussed how factors external to the texts of Thicker Than Water and The Kiss—genre; Harrison's persona, author photograph, and publishing history; cherished cultural assumptions about incest victims, and the like—contributed to the dramatic divergence in the way they were received. Although what lies between the covers

of the two books also had an impact, I would emphasize that this is only because the texts work in conjunction with the external factors. It is because what is written in The Kiss vs. Thicker Than Water reinforces the impression created by factors such as Harrison's author photograph that the memoir proved controversial, while the novel did not. For instance, the well-known details of Harrison's happy marriage and family life cast doubt on her status as a real incest survivor—which makes the idea that The Kiss is too polished to be a factual account of trauma written by a real victim gain more traction. The author photograph and the well-publicized facts about Harrison's background—a wealthy, intellectual family, her education at Stanford and the writing program at Iowa—proved disturbing to reviewers and critics because they served as an insistent reminder that incest does not only take place in ghettos and trailer parks; as I will explain, by adopting a narrative structure that drops the riddle form altogether, Harrison reinforces the sense, disturbing to many, that incest is a common phenomenon. Factors both external and inherent to the text conspired together to create the phenomenon of The Kiss.

I will begin my analysis of Thicker than Water and The Kiss by discussing their stylistic differences. I will then move on to an exploration of plot and characterization to investigate how the relatively slight discrepancies between the two texts had an effect on the way they were received.

### **Stylistic Differences**

Harrison published Thicker Than Water, her first book, in 1991, at the age of thirty. When she published The Kiss, her first—and to this date, only—memoir, she was six years older with a total of three novels under her belt. Not surprisingly, she had

grown as a writer by then; the memoir reflects both her greater maturity and literary prowess. While her first book is perfervid, and often repetitious about such concerns as the beauty and thinness of the mother of the protagonist, her fourth is more spare in its use of detail as well as language; it has the same obsessive focus on the same themes as the novel does, but it is tighter and therefore more elegant in its execution.<sup>1</sup> Thicker Than Water is episodic, crammed with various self-contained scenes that could easily be lifted out of the novel without making any real difference to the work as a whole; the different incidents that occur feel jumbled together, the links between them casual rather than causal. Thus the novel opens with the narrator, Isabel, commenting on her mother's looks—"In truth, my mother was not a beautiful woman"—and moves on to a scene in a mall, during which Isabel is stunned to hear that her mother does not share in one of their family's "most cherished myths" (Water 3): she does not consider herself beautiful. This opening passage, just a little longer than a page, is followed by an account of how Isabel's parents met and married, which is followed in turn by a description of the stormy relationship between Isabel's mother and her grandmother. As this account of the beginning suggests, the events in Thicker Than Water feel randomly arranged, without a strong sense of artistic design in its organization—the same way, one might say, events happen in life as opposed to fiction.

In The Kiss, Harrison tells her story—the same story—in a very different way. Elizabeth Marshall discusses how Harrison, by employing the motifs of the fairy tale, crafts a narrative "that simultaneously resonates in a cultural register as a representative tale about sexual violation" (404-05). Indeed, it is as if Harrison has attempted to whittle

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<sup>1</sup> As Frost says, "The most obvious difference between the two narratives is that the novel is a much more elaborate account, both in plot and in prose style" (56).

her story down to the spare renderings of myth; The Kiss, unlike Thicker Than Water, offers few specific details—few clues to give away that this is a particular story which happened to a particular individual. Moreover, in the memoir we are always aware of the sure hand of the author in the unfolding of the story, shaping the events and determining their outcome. In large part because the story is told achronologically, with the juxtaposition of scenes from the past and present offering telling contrasts as well as implicit but nonetheless legible explanations of present behavior, we have the sense that everything is happening for a reason.

So, for instance, the narrator of the memoir tells us that there were only two times her father came to see her when she was a child. During the first visit, when she is five, he and Kathryn's mother seem to fascinate each other: as the narrator remarks, "I am sure, watching as they pack up the beach equipment and walk toward the car, that if I didn't follow, they wouldn't notice I was missing" (Kiss 26). During the next visit, when she is ten, he snaps at her in a museum for touching a statue; at the lunch that follows, she says, "I am on the floor a good deal of the time, retrieving silverware I've nervously dropped. I sense that my father regards me with some curiosity—his child, after all—and little pleasure. I am, as I have been from my birth, the inevitable compromise of my parents' privacy" (Kiss 27). Then, with a skip of a line, the narrator hop-scotches ahead in time.

Ten years later—ten years after the day I look at his black shoes from my vantage under the table—everything has changed. My father mails me cassette tapes he's made, and I play them on my car's tape deck.... His voice fills the car. It rises, falls, begs, breaks. Girl, he calls me. Oh, girl. My girl.... Alone in my car, I put my hands over my face as I listen. I am no less enslaved to him than I have been to my mother.

I play the tape over and over, pushing the rewind button so that I can hear as often as I like the sound of my father telling me he wants me. (Kiss 28)

Through the implicit contrast between the young Kathryn as an obstacle to her parents' desire for each other—the third wheel, ignored and unwanted, even as she literally lies at her father's feet—and the adult Kathryn as the obsessive focus of her father's attention, Harrison goes a long way to answering some very pressing, very complicated questions that we the readers have about her situation: how far she traveled and how much as well as how little her relationship to, and perspective on, her parents changed from the time she was a child to a young adult; why she is vulnerable to her father's desire for her and susceptible to his wish that she return his feelings; why she wants to hear him tell her he wants her again and again, even though, judging from the way she has to put her hands over her face as she listens, she also feels acute shame about what she is both hearing and feeling. Harrison's ability to place these two scenes together to such telling effect is important: the control with which she can write about these traumatic memories, and the delicacy and restraint evident in the way she allows the juxtaposition of these two scenes speak to so much which is left unsaid, reveals her nuanced understanding of—and relative objectivity about—her behavior, and the complex reasons that have led to it.

Juxtaposition of scenes is but one technique Harrison employs in what is overall a careful unfolding of events. The different scenes within the memoir all bear a strong and vital relationship to each other, reinforcing our sense that this is one overarching narrative rather than a collection of small ones: the plotting is tight, the fateful events catapulted forward by a palpable sense of inevitability and doom. The Kiss is, in other words, far more artistically coherent as a narrative than Thicker Than Water. I would go farther and suggest

that another, perhaps more intriguing way to state the difference between the two works is that the novel reads like a memoir, while the memoir reads like a novel. Indeed, in Thicker Than Water, Harrison seems to be winking at us, hinting that the work may be based in fact. Its first two words are “In truth,” and other lines seem to allude coyly to that possibility: “To the question of a stranger, or at least stranger enough to not know this essential fact of my history, I always answer that I met my father when I was eighteen,” the narrator tells us at one point. “This is not strictly true, neither is it a lie” (Water 88). As many reviewers have noted,<sup>2</sup> Thicker Than Water, like many first novels, seems like thinly disguised autobiography, in part because it features a protagonist who bears a close resemblance to the author but also because it reads in its feverish intensity as if the author is reliving her life as she writes about it. The Kiss, by contrast, seems surprisingly emotionally distant, especially when we take into account that it is a first-person, present-tense narrative as well as a memoir, a genre in which the writer is expected to talk directly and truthfully of personal matters.

Perhaps the primary reason for this sense of emotional distance is the theme of head vs. body, which I mentioned in the last chapter in relation to the scene in which Kathryn’s father rapes her with his tongue in his mother’s house. More specifically, Kathryn’s distress becomes inscribed on her body rather than articulated through her voice or even registered by her mind. For example, after her father tells her that he wants to have sex with her, Kathryn goes home in a state of shock and tells neither her boyfriend nor her best friend what has transpired. “I am beginning to learn what it means: unspeakable” (emphasis hers). But when she develops a case of shingles soon afterwards, she realizes that speech can take

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Spencer.

forms other than words: “And yet, for as long as we live, we express ourselves. With or without words, we speak. There are stories of mad people, of people possessed: on their bodies writing appears to tell of the anguish they hold inside.... The skin on my neck breaks out in blisters, each the size of a match head and clustered in patches of twenty or more that open to form raw sores” (Kiss 117). When she goes to see a doctor, he says, “rais[ing] his eyebrows meaningfully” at her (Kiss 118), that stress is responsible for the infection, and tries to make her talk about what is going on in her life—an endeavor which fails.<sup>3</sup>

The anguish that Kathryn is suffering does not manifest itself in the words she utters to her friends or her doctor; nor is it apparent in the words she sets down on the page for us to peruse. The sores, which are graphically albeit briefly described, are meant to speak for her; they are exhibit A, the most important and in fact the only real evidence she supplies to show us that her father’s proclamation of his desires traumatizes her. The displacement of a character’s emotions onto her body—the idea that a body can be written upon—is an oft-used literary technique, of course, and it is elegantly executed here, but its use comes at a cost: not only are we deprived of the opportunity to observe how the knowledge of her father’s lust directly affects Kathryn the character, we also believe we see, in the masterly control wielded by Harrison the writer, how emotionally in control she is.

Another, even more interesting example of Kathryn’s emotions being inscribed on her body involves her resistance to learning French as a child. In her view French serves as “[the] language of conflict, the one in which my mother and grandmother fight, and which when allied they use to secretly eviscerate their foes” (Kiss 19), and so, apt pupil though she

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<sup>3</sup> Isabel, in Thicker Than Water, also comes down with shingles. But while she mentions that this happens “just one month after I met my father” (Water 169), she does not make a connection, medical or otherwise, between the two events.

is when it comes to other subjects, she does not progress beyond a couple of words after years of study. Faced with pressure from her mother, Kathryn cheats on a test and finds that “[her] mother’s excitement over [her] perfect score is devastating” (Kiss 20). Finally, Kathryn pulls out of her mother’s embrace, sobbing, and confesses that she cheated. While this response seems normal enough, what follows after she gets taken to school to confess her wrongdoing is less so:

That night, I come down with an illness no one can define or cure. It begins like the stomach flu but doesn’t stop. It goes on for weeks, until the day I overhear the pediatrician tell my grandmother that I’m so dehydrated I’ll have to be hospitalized, and then it does stop, as suddenly as it began.

I return to school not just thinner but seemingly smaller than I was before I left, pale, and with my hair cut very short to keep it clean while I was sick.

...”She’s a different child! Who is this child!” I hear it ten or more times. (Kiss 20-21)

Here Kathryn’s distress is made physically manifest through the act of vomiting. In that this is an act which involves the mouth, there is a relation set up with her refusal to learn a new language: her inability to take in and retain French is paralleled by her inability to take in and retain food.

Also worthy of note is how the idea of secrets plays into this passage. The confession that she cheated on the exam rushes out of her along with her sobs—it is almost vomited out. It is difficult to assess what regurgitation means for the health of a body: it can be interpreted as a symptom of disease, but at the same time it can also be the body’s way of purging itself of pollutants. So when Kathryn begins vomiting after confessing to her mother what she has done, is it a sign that she is ill, or is it the first step toward her recovery; is her vomiting a violent action that racks the body and yet brings relief and comfort and even restored health? The answer to this question is ambiguous, which is fitting given that in The

Kiss Harrison makes it evident that telling the truth about incest or, we can surmise, any secret at all is a complicated affair, to say the least: she suggests that while confessing is important, perhaps even necessary for survival, it is not an act which brings release or even relief from the heavy burden of the secret.

When Kathryn, ill with stomach flu, overhears that she might be put into the hospital, she immediately recovers, and her illness leaves her “different.” In terms of gauging what this difference means, it is worthwhile recalling that Harrison suggests that the shingles attack she had was a kind of writing on her body. After Kathryn has the stomach flu, she is thinner, smaller, short-haired and, most revealingly of all, pale, white as if her body were made anew into a blank piece of paper, one ready for further inscription. And as if her mind as well as her body has been purged of pollutants, she is able to learn French, never, as she says, “with the ease of other subjects and never with pleasure, but I learn it well enough so that I can still read a French novel” (Kiss 21). What this passage finally seems to tell us is that it is upon her body rather than the page that her emotions will be written; we need to read and understand what is imprinted upon her body in order to grasp the true impact that incest had upon her. The idea is that she has been stunned and traumatized by the incestuous relationship, and so rendered incapable of processing or discussing her feelings; she has to allow her body to speak for her.

It is interesting that Kathryn tells us that it is during the rape scene at her paternal grandmother’s house that her body and mind become disconnected, and that both the shingles and the stomach flu incidents take place before that scene. If we take her at her word, then it is possible that she did not actually experience these two illnesses as a displacement of her emotions from her mind to her body; perhaps this disconnect only takes

place in retrospect, and she just writes as if this were the case. Whichever is true, Harrison is clearly making a point in The Kiss about the damage that she sustained at the hands of her father: the experience of incest was so traumatic that her writing is devoid of emotion; her emotions are writ upon the body rather than felt by her mind and relayed to the page. This is an intriguing point, but it is also subtle, complex, and not immediately apparent; it is all too easy to arrive at the conclusion, as many reviewers did, that the writing in The Kiss, as opposed to the writing in Thicker Than Water, is cold and unfeeling.

What kind of effect did The Kiss's tight construction and use of literary techniques have on its critical reception, and how does it compare with the way that Thicker Than Water was written and received? And how should we read the fact that it feels as if the generic labels of the two works have been switched? I would point out, first of all, that the qualitative comparison between the two books is important in that it establishes, once again, that the argument that The Kiss has been castigated for poor writing is without merit. While the memoir could fairly be characterized as a little overwrought, the novel is a far worse case. But the reputation of Thicker Than Water, unlike that of The Kiss, remains untarnished by accusations that it lacks literary merit. Second, the comparatively artistic structure and deft plotting of the memoir, the polished quality of its prose, and the carefully constructed theme of the disconnect between the mind and body have the effect of undercutting the credibility of the text as a historical document: there is too much emotional control in the way Harrison writes her memoir to satisfy the expectations of the genre. I mentioned that the high polish of her prose and the control and restraint of her technique may suggest to some readers that Harrison is not acting enough like a victim; these features may also have the effect of diminishing the reader's sense that this is an authentic memoir of trauma.

Theorists writing about trauma and its narratives have long been proclaiming the difficulty of telling trauma. According to Dori Laub, the “imperative to tell” is coupled with the impossibility of doing so, and as a result, “silence about the truth commonly prevails.” As an example of the difficulty of testimony, he cites the fact that “[m]any of the [Holocaust] survivors interviewed at the Yale Video Archive realize that they have only begun the long process of witnessing now—forty years after the event” (79). In the words of a man who listened to the interviews, a student of Laub’s co-author Shoshana Felman, “Caught by two contradictory wishes at once, to speak or not to speak, I can only stammer” (56).<sup>4</sup> Given how fraught testimony is, it is all too possible that the text which results is fragmented, rough, and stammering. But I would emphasize that choppy and incoherent testimony is but one possibility: a smooth, coherent account of a disturbing event should not be discredited or even considered suspect.

As Holocaust literature critics such as James E. Young observe, survivors writing about the Holocaust often feel that the more polished their writing is, the less likely their testimony is to be believed: “For the survivor’s witness to be credible, it must seem natural and unconstructed” (17).<sup>5</sup> Rita Felski similarly submits that

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<sup>4</sup> Herman also testifies to the difficulty and perhaps even impossibility of speaking about trauma: “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable” (1).

<sup>5</sup> I would also offer the recent case of Binjamin Wilkomirski, who came out with a harrowing and highly acclaimed Holocaust memoir which was subsequently proven to be false, as a fascinating example of how quick people are to equate narrative incoherence with authenticity. As Gourevitch writes in his engrossing article “The Memory Thief,” Wilkomirski seemed “the purest form of victim: a child whose identity had been erased in the Holocaust, but who was condemned to remain alive...his clipped, broken, and often breathless prose telegraphs unadulterated violation.” Gourevitch goes on to quote Jonathan Kozol, who remarks that “Fragments [was] so morally important, and so free from literary artifice of any kind at all that I wonder if I even have the right to try to offer

Aesthetic criteria [in feminist confession] are rejected as irrelevant: a conscious artistic structure is in fact suspect insofar as it implies distance and control rather than an unmediated baring of the soul.... The more obviously “literary” the text—the more clearly it signals its fictional status through such textual features as irony, parody, and self-reflexivity, extended use of symbolic and “poetic” language, or elaborated narrative structures—the less likely the reader is to respond to the text as the authentic self-expression of an authorial subject. (86)

The sophisticated literary devices detract from the illusion, so necessary to the reader’s investment and pleasure in the text, that the author is speaking directly and truthfully. In this context it is worth remembering that according to some reviewers, The Kiss is too artistic; they argue that it does not seem like a spontaneous outpouring of a painfully traumatic event, and that it would be a better work if its tone were edgier, more ragged and raw (Halpern, Lehmann-Haupt). Harrison herself says that she deliberately attempted to replicate the effects of trauma in her own writing: “The Kiss is intentionally stripped down because I wanted to reveal that archetypal triangle of the parents and the child. The shell-shocked, present-tense narration reveals some of the experience of being in a relationship like that, in which you are in a kind of cottony, emotionally vacant state—it’s the only way you get through things like that” (Bookforum interview). Because this effect too clearly required a large degree of writerly control, it backfires; it loses her credibility and, in the process, narrative authority and an emotional connection with the reader.

### **Differences in Plot and Characterization**

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praise” (50), and also Norman Manea, a Holocaust survivor and writer, who comments that “[Fragments] doesn’t work as a novel or as nonfiction, but this is the quality I was susceptible to, because there is not the coherence of literature to this book. You don’t have the mind of the artist. So this incoherence felt like a kind of authenticity to me” (54).

The stylistic differences between Harrison's novel and memoir, along with the respective generic expectations for them, make for subtle but nonetheless noteworthy differences in our reading experiences. What, then, of the differences in plot? Once they are reset into their proper chronological order—this qualification a critical point which bears emphasis, and one to which I will return—it becomes clear that the stories in Thicker Than Water and The Kiss have more than broad brushstrokes in common. There is a handful of what I would characterize as relatively minor differences, but overall the two works overlap in many ways, often sharing even minute details about events, setting, and characters. In both works, the cast of important characters comprises the family circle, and all of them are identified by their familial relationship to the narrator—"my father," "my Opa," and the like, a technique that creates the ironic and often unsettling sense that these are archetypes which are being described. Both stories feature a similar protagonist, a young, smart, thin blond woman, born into a privileged Jewish family, who eventually decides she wants to be a writer, and is fragile, sensitive, and neurotic—Isabel in Thicker Than Water and Kathryn, of course, in The Kiss.

In both narratives, the narrator's parents are described as meeting and falling impetuously and fatefully in love; the mother is from a wealthy family, the father from a poor, far less cultured and educated one. They are both very young, and so when the mother gets pregnant with Isabel/Kathryn, the abusively controlling grandmother of the narrator, her mother's mother, steps in: she makes them marry and then, after less than a couple of years in both stories, engineers their divorce as well, invoking the horrors of poverty to coerce her rebellious daughter into obedience. As a baby, the protagonist in both narratives is abandoned by her father, who disappears, as Isabel informs us in the novel, "before he could

leave any imprint upon my childish memory” (Water 10); a few years later, her mother effectively abandons her as well, leaving her to be raised instead by her grandparents.

As a child, the narrator in Thicker Than Water as well as The Kiss is obsessed by her beautiful mother, who treats her with indifference and, at times, malevolence, and she is but dimly aware of her father as a real person. In both works, the narrator converts to Catholicism along with her mother. One day, while playing with her grandmother’s very young Persian kittens, she pulls apart their eyes open in an endeavor to make them see her and ends up blinding them, a crime she regards with horror and great shame, but which she never confesses to anyone. As a teenager, she suffers from eating disorders in both narratives, excels as a student, and has her hymen broken when she goes to a doctor to get fitted for a diaphragm with her mother: he—with her mother’s consent, and in her presence—takes out a graduated set of plastic penises and inserts them one by one, starting with the smallest, into the narrator’s vagina until one comes out with blood on it.

Having met her father just a couple of times during her childhood, the narrator meets him again as a young woman, eighteen in the novel and twenty in the memoir. He kisses her inappropriately when they part, and forthwith begins to pursue her; in both cases she resists at first but eventually succumbs, and they embark upon a sexual relationship which lasts for four years. In both narratives, the mother guesses that there is a sexual relationship between her ex-husband and their daughter, and takes the narrator to her psychiatrist in order to accuse her of incest. What happens in this scene is the same in the novel and the memoir, with the narrator telling the psychiatrist that she is going through a belated Electra complex, and putting in such a good performance that she fools him. “I lie as I have never lied before or since. I’m a bad liar, generally.... I pause at exactly the right moments. My performance

is so good that I'm frightened" (Kiss 142), she tells us in the memoir, and in the novel: "I denied it, for once lying cleverly and coolly.... The doctor believed me...my words were so perfectly articulated, my voice halted and convinced in just the right places" (Water 253). As in this instance, so too in many others: not just the actual events and circumstances but even the phrases being used to describe them are interchangeable in the two works. Finally, in both narratives, the protagonist ends the incestuous relationship after her mother dies of cancer; although her father told her that because of what happened between them, she would never have a healthy relationship, she embarks on a happy, stable relationship with a man who loves her even after she discloses to him her shameful secret.

Thus the plot similarities. Even more remarkably, the psychological motivations of the characters are delineated in the same way, the most notable example of which is the presentation of the family as a vicious love triangle in both narratives; Harrison seems to suggest that it is the implosive force of this triangle which traps and victimizes the narrator, forcing her to act as she does. So at first, the narrator is an obstacle to her parents' romance. Yet all that quickly changes once she becomes an adult, and her father becomes sexually obsessed with her. Both narratives inform us that his passion for her is at least in part a reaction to the way he feels about his ex-wife, her mother. In The Kiss, after her mother dies, the narrator wonders, "Without my mother as witness, do I no longer bewitch him?" (Kiss 201), while in Thicker Than Water, Isabel suggests that her father's desire to possess her is motivated by his anger at his ex-wife: "Our needs were complementary. No, they were the same: he needed to hurt my mother, and so did I. I did have remorse, but not enough to withstand the force of his heavy, grinding lust.... And I allowed myself the

consolation of taking from my mother the one thing she said she had ever cared for: my father's love" (Water 195).

This passage reveals that the triangle that the family forms in the novel provokes not only the father's desires but also the narrator's decision to submit to them. According to Isabel, her incestuous relationship with her father is rooted in her deep rage against her mother—a rage which she recognizes is really a kind of love: "Of course I could never have hated my mother so much, enough to allow her husband to fuck me, had I not loved her so desperately. I would have done anything to get her attention" (Water 238). Similarly, in the memoir, the mother comes to the conclusion that her ex-husband's newfound sexual obsession is not, as she tells the narrator, "about you. It's about me" (Kiss 98), a statement which signals her recognition of the perverse dynamics of the love triangle. The narrator then explains that such a comment actually serves as impetus for her to give in to her father's demands. "By claiming all of my father's devotion, she pushes me toward him," she writes. "Because, if she won't love me, then the only way not to fall into the abyss of the unloved is by clinging to him" (Kiss 99).

The love triangle at the dark heart of both the novel and the memoir is almost a textbook example of Rene Girard's formulations about the triangulation of desire: desire as imitative in nature rather than self-generated, its birth always a triangulated process. In Girard's view, desire is an attempt to reach or even be the mediator more than it is an attempt to attain the ostensible object of fascination.<sup>6</sup> Vying with her mother for her father, the

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<sup>6</sup> Harrison is clearly conscious of the trope of the love triangle, and how she is using it, though whether or not she knows Girard's work is an open question. As her narrator says, "My father identifies the dire triangle that my grandmother, my mother, and I form. He says that I protect my mother against her mother; that she passively protects me...and that my grandmother manipulates the two of us.... He disarms me by naming this

narrator of both The Kiss and Thicker Than Water can only end the incestuous relationship after her mother dies, the triangle shattered with the loss of its most important vertex. “[T]he spell is broken, her death has released me” (Kiss 200), we are told in the memoir, and in the novel, “Although I knew I never wanted to be fucked by him, I thought that I let it happen out of my sacrificial love for him. I thought that was true until my mother was dead and I realized that I didn’t love him anymore” (Water 252).

The narrator’s father, who is so avidly desired by his ex-wife and who successfully coerces his daughter into a sexual relationship, might seem to be the apex of the triangle, its dominating and controlling force, but he is actually just a pawn in the battle that the narrator is waging against her mother, a fact that Harrison seems to be acknowledge when she writes in the novel that “This is a story about desperate women and their unhappy destructiveness. My father was a man manipulated by women” (Water 193). So we can see that in the scene in which Isabel/Kathryn’s hymen is broken, the doctor functions as a stand-in for the father, a surrogate third party to the bitter sexual rivalry between the two women. Even as he wields the implements which will deprive the narrator of her virginity and cause her to bleed, the doctor is being controlled by the mother, himself a tool in the twisted hate-love affair between the mother and daughter.

The similarities between the two works are, it is clear, remarkable when it comes to plot. While the portrayal of the characters in the two texts is also startlingly similar, there are minor differences between them that are of substantial significance in terms of both the overall thrust of the work and its representation of incest. One such difference is that the incestuous abuse in Thicker Than Water is not limited to the father. As Isabel recalls,

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triangle even as he steps in to break it by forming a new one: my mother, my father, and me” (Kiss 79-80).

I am a baby, a child being dressed.... It is too easy to do it to me. [My mother] cannot resist. I never cry or fuss, at least not while it's happening. A finger to start, or better: the handle of a toothbrush, a pencil (the eraser end). Nothing too big, nothing that won't go in easily, nothing that would break me, really. Whatever it is, it slips inside the pink folds of flesh easily: a little disappearing trick. (Water 21)

Later, we find that this abuse has physical repercussions. After describing her obsessive concern with contraception as a young woman, Isabel ends this discussion with an unexpected revelation which is conveyed in a direct address: "And for nothing, Mother. Whatever you did, when I was too small to speak out against you, worked. I shall never have a child, can never conceive or bear a child. But I didn't know that at seventeen or nineteen, or even for years after your death. I spent nearly a decade in a panic of unnecessary birth control" (Water 181).

The narrator of The Kiss, by comparison, gives no hint of any such abuse at the hands of her mother, and she has children whom she writes about lovingly in the text. Given this backdrop, it seems logical to assume that Isabel would consider herself far more of a victim than the protagonist of the memoir would; after all, she was helpless, a victim in every sense of the word, when her mother violated her as a baby, and her infertility gives her added justification to be enraged at those who were supposed to protect her. What happens, though, is something different. Even though Isabel blames her mother squarely in passages such as the above, she does not appear a victim; indeed, unlike Kathryn, she presents herself as playing an active role in her relationship with her father. More precisely, Isabel accepts more complicity for the incest than Kathryn does in The Kiss.

Isabel muses that "When I fell in love with my father I dropped heedlessly into the arms of a madman" (Water 249). Yes, she is describing him as a madman, but the line also

slips in in passing the admission that she was in love with him, and the voice is active—she fell, she dropped—the implication not too far short of the idea that she took the plunge, she jumped into love. Even more tellingly, Isabel says, speaking again of her father, that “He had the fearful energy and seduction of the mentally ill. He spoke and called himself a prophet. He told me that I was God’s gift to him, fruit of his loins, his to relish. Between his anger and madness and my anger and desire for revenge, I allowed it to happen. I was mad, too” (Water 251). At the start of this passage, we hear again of her father’s lunacy, but we also learn how compelling he was, as well as why he compelled, when he urged Isabel to be his lover. Then, toward the end of the passage, we find that she believed she had a choice—she allowed it to happen.

Because the fact that she had a choice means, of course, that she also could have prevented it from happening, the line serves as a genuine acknowledgement of complicity. Warranting attention as well is the last sentence of this passage, “I was mad, too,” in particular the seemingly deliberate ambiguity of its third word. Does this phrase suggest that she was crazy in the same way that her father was, or that she too was angry? The line before includes the phrase “Between his anger and madness,” which implies a distinction between the two terms, and so suggests that “mad” in that sentence must refer to insanity rather than anger. The phrase about his anger and madness is also followed by “and my anger and desire for revenge”: on one level, it seems unlikely that Harrison, an elegant writer, would reiterate the concept of anger so quickly, more evidence that that final line would seem to be about “mad” in the sense of insane.

Still, that Isabel would question her own sanity as she embarked upon a relationship with her own father is in itself an eminently sane thing to do; it seems fair to say that only a

madman such as her father, to reach for a handy example, would not doubt himself and his mental or emotional competence in such a situation. Isabel is also clearly and consciously playing with the double meaning of the word “mad” and the idea that anger can be a form of insanity, and vice versa—and I would highlight that her anger toward her mother is rendered as an almost frighteningly potent force. Isabel’s state of mind in fact appears lucid throughout; she also seems fully aware that even if the accusation of madness is laid at her doorstep with her own hands, it will not stick. According to Isabel herself, at least, she is not crazy, just mad enough to do something mad or, in other, clearer words, angry enough to do something insane: to wit, to allow “it”—the mention of the unspeakable act of incest elided from the sentence—to happen. Which means that she not only accepts that she is complicit in what has occurred, she also rejects the plea of insanity as an excuse.

Indeed, so eager is Isabel to assert that she actively participated in the incestuous relationship with her father that it is hard not to wonder about her limitations as a narrator. “I fell in love with my father,” and “I allowed it to happen”: the use of such phrases, by a woman who as a baby was violated by a toothbrush wielded by her mother, could be the sign of a character so victimized that she unwittingly colludes in her own victimization—she believes she played an active part in her own abuse. “Did it happen,” she asks at one point, again skipping over the word incest with a pronoun, “also because I enjoyed the power I had over my father? I had that power possessed by the sexually desirable, control over those who were not wanted for their bodies, those whose bodies were not wanted” (Water 193). She gloats about her so-called power, but of course by handing her sexually desirable body over to her father, she is all too clearly in his power. Given the way in which she is portrayed, it is not surprising that the readers were sympathetic to her character. What

Thicker Than Water gives us is a portrait of a very flawed narrator, so lacking in self-awareness that she does not realize what the more astute readers will see right away: she is the victim par excellence, so much in thrall to her father that she believes she was his lover of her own free will—so much in thrall that even years later, long free of his physical hold upon her, she continues to make protestations of complicity.

Compare this portrait with the one found in The Kiss. Soon after meeting him again as an adult, Kathryn says that “Looking at him looking at me, I cannot help but fall painfully, precipitously in love” (Kiss 63). Both this line and its context serve to relieve her of responsibility. Not only is her helplessness—“I cannot help but fall”—written into the sentence, but this line is delivered so early in their relationship, before the first fateful kiss they share, before there is any real evidence that his feelings for her are sexual in nature, that it only makes sense to read her statement of growing passion as metaphorical. The only way for her to express how ardent and overwhelming her feelings are for him is to borrow a phrase from the language of eros. Also important to note is that in the memoir Kathryn’s father’s gaze is accorded a power that seems at once awesome and irresistible.<sup>7</sup>

Further contributing to our sense that the memoir’s narrator is a different kind of character from the one found in the novel is the fact that, as Marshall testifies, The Kiss is filled with references to fairytales, prominent among which is the motif of the enchanted sleep. The enchantment begins with the fateful kiss her father presses upon Kathryn at the end of their first meeting: “In years to come, I’ll think of the kiss as a kind of transforming

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<sup>7</sup> Passages in which Kathryn expounds on the power of his gaze proliferate. To take just one example: “My father’s eyes: what is it about them? Their color is utterly familiar—the same as mine, the same as my mother’s—but they burn like no other eyes I’ve ever seen before or since. Burn like a prophet’s, a madman’s, a lover’s. Always shining, always bloodshot, always turned on me with absolute attention. Intelligent eyes, enraptured eyes, luminous, stricken, brilliant, spellbound, spellbinding eyes” (62-3).

sting, like that of a scorpion: a narcotic that spreads from my mouth to my brain. The kiss is the point at which I begin, slowly, inexorably, to fall asleep, to surrender volition, to become paralyzed. It's the drug my father administers in order that he might consume me. That I might desire to be consumed" (Kiss 70). It is interesting to note that in this passage, both her desire "to be consumed" and the surrender of her volition are figured as a result of the toxin; paradoxically, both her desire and her lack of will are engendered in her. They are beyond her control, a result of the sting of the kiss.

The fairytale-like sleep comes upon the narrator suddenly—"As if under an enchantment, I sink inevitably to the floor"—and no substance of this world, not "[b]lack coffee, No-Doz, [nor] amphetamines" (Kiss 138), can prevent it from occurring. Explaining the phenomenon, the narrator says:

[I sleep because] I want to avoid contemplating the enormity of what we're doing—an act that defines me, that explains who I am, because in it is all the hurt and anger and hunger of my past, and in it, too, is the future.

It's anger that frightens me most. I sleep to escape my rage. Not at him, but at my mother....

The other object of my anger is myself. The good girl who failed...the girl who will shape-shift and perform any self-alchemy to win her mother's love. She failed, and I must destroy her. Obliterate this good daughter with one so bad that what she does is unspeakable. (Kiss 138-39)

In this passage the narrator avoids having to accept responsibility for the act of incest in two ways. First, through the theme of enchantment, the idea that an outside force—an evil fairy, or its like—cast a spell on the narrator, the magic of which has overpowered her, rendering her helpless. This theme neatly allies her with beautiful, royal heroines who are pure of heart and innocent of initiative, which is to say passive, and who are undone by forces beyond

their control. Through the evocation of fairytales, Harrison suggests that her younger counterpart was as helpless and maligned—as much a victim—as Snow White is.

Another way in which Kathryn eschews responsibility for committing incest is that she mentions her anger only to focus on the objects of it, so directing our attention away from the terrible act which it leads her to commit: having sex with her father to spite the mother who, she felt, never loved her enough. It is true that she says she is angry not just at her mother but also at herself. But what she means by that is that her desire to be with her father is in part a self-destructive urge. She is not angry at herself because of what she is doing with her father; she is angry at a former self, the person she was long before the incest started—a girl who tried hard to please her mother but failed. This girl needs to be punished; hence the incest. Again, the assumption is that this is the mother's fault, for if she had been easier to satisfy, the narrator would not act in such a self-destructive fashion. Harrison thus deflects our attention from the question of culpability: the fact that the narrator is voluntarily engaging in incest is not remarked on and so, not surprisingly, it escapes judgment. That Kathryn appears to be executing a kind of dodge to avoid the question of whether she is accountable for her own actions, while Isabel's narration suggests that she fully accepts responsibility for hers, could be viewed as a possible explanation for why the reviewers were critical of the memoir but not the novel.

In terms of the issue of the narrator's complicity in the act of incest, it is also essential to note how the narrator's father coerces her to have a sexual relationship in The Kiss. "God gave you to me" (emphasis hers), narrates Kathryn, repeating in disbelief the words that her father has just uttered.

Does my father believe this? He convinces me that he does,  
that I am his by ordained right, his to do with what he wants. It

doesn't occur to me that his invocation of divine will is the tidiest and most unassailable means of exonerating us both. I never question his sanity; although I will come to the point where it is less painful to regard my father as crazy than to conclude that he has been so canny in his judgment of my character and its frailties that he knows exactly what language to use, what noose of words to cast around my neck. (Kiss 108-9)

Again the question of sanity rears its head, but whereas Isabel directs this query at herself in the novel, the lunacy of the man who is both her father and lover a fact requiring no interrogation, the narrator of The Kiss retrospectively raises the issue in regard to her father. Is he crazy; does he actually believe that she is his to do as he will because that is what God wants? Or is he just smart and devious, depraved only in the moral sense, marshalling twisted arguments about God and religion because he realizes that that is what it takes to make her submit? Either way, she is not being held to account; what she is telling us is that for whatever reason, she cannot take issue with her father when he brings up God. The fact that she does not question her inability to argue against his gross misuse of theological doctrine, and that she does not think to blame herself for having this weakness even as she blames him for taking advantage of it, could have provoked the exasperation of the reviewers; Harrison's text, when considered in this light, does seem yet another example of—and, indeed, perhaps even the epitome of—the memoir as a vehicle for self-justification.

And yet.

While the narrator in The Kiss does indeed take less responsibility for her actions than her predecessor does in Thicker Than Water, there are extenuating circumstances. The many similarities between the two texts notwithstanding, I would argue that the situation that Kathryn is in renders her more helpless, with less choice about whether or not to be in a sexual relationship with her father, than Isabel. In both Thicker Than Water and The Kiss,

specific details which may give away identity—place names, and the names or professions of the characters—have been largely left out of the text.<sup>8</sup> One outstanding exception to this practice is the occupation of the father. In Thicker Than Water, we are told that when the narrator’s father is young, his missionary grandmother wants him to be a priest, but he “[puts] his fist through the plasterboard wall of a cheap little church hall” (Water 194-5) in seminary. Undergoing a mandated treatment of psychotherapy, he figures out that he does not himself have any wish to be a priest, so he quits to become a local politician instead. In this capacity he is, as Harrison tell us, “no less a zealot. When I met him he was still delivering homilies but the topic wasn’t the quality of Christian mercy, but rather air and water safety” (Water 195).

In The Kiss, the father is also pushed into a religious vocation by his missionary grandmother, which he resents her for; he feels that “castration [is] implied by the robes he’s forced to wear (he calls them skirts)” (Kiss 126). In this narrative, too, he punches his fist into a church wall, and is told he cannot be ordained until he goes through psychoanalysis. But the denouement in this case serves as a startling contrast to what happens in the novel. In the memoir he becomes a preacher, plain and simple; a man of God, in a position of moral leadership within the community; a zealot, but one with more at stake than air and water safety, someone who enforces religious strictures and who is responsible for determining what is wrong vs. what is right. The way he attains this status despite the wall-punching

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<sup>8</sup> Because the setting is well-depicted, though, we have the sense as we are reading that her deletion of specific details is probably not quite enough to throw off an enterprising journalist from tracking the scent of those involved—and, indeed, Harrison did not succeed in deflecting such hounds from the trail, since her father was eventually found and interviewed. See John.

incident is as thought-provoking as the position of moral authority that he occupies. As Kathryn observes,

The mind that fascinates me with its nimbleness, its elastic capacity, could outwit most psychiatrists. It can't have taken him long to perceive which behaviors and opinions were appropriate to a minister and which ones he had better keep to himself. If therapy was useful to him, it was that in its context he learned how to create a desirable profile for a pastor, even if, as he says to me, he has "unresolved problems with the church." (Kiss 94)

A man who is ruthless enough to attempt to outwit the medical establishment as well as the church, and smart enough to succeed in so doing: a power to contend with indeed.

Perhaps Harrison changed the father's profession in the novel because she wanted to guard his privacy and, by extension, her own; perhaps because she believed that the idea that such a father was a minister would be too horrifying, and so strain credulity. Whatever the reason, the repercussions of this change are considerable. The idea that he is a man of God is far more dramatic—an example of truth being not just stranger but also more effective than fiction. At the same time Kathryn is, as the memoir emphasizes, enthralled by the mysticism and authority of religion, and so the fact that her father is a minister tilts the balance of the story, the power dynamic between them becoming even more heavily weighted toward him. In Kathryn's words, "When the preacher in my father speaks, I lose what's left of my power to defend myself. The words that might send most people running are the very words to trap me" (Kiss 108).

Because of her father's profession, Kathryn has even less choice about heeding him than Isabel does with her politician father in Thicker Than Water. Take, for instance, the climactic scene of The Kiss, in which the father finally asks Kathryn for what she has been fearing for months. The passage, which is found in a chapter devoted to how influential

religion has been in young Kathryn's life and how large God looms in her psyche, is, as I noted above, apocalyptic: "when my father says the words I've dreaded—'make love' is the expression he uses—God's heart bursts, it breaks." He asks her what she is afraid of, and we are told the answer that she thinks to herself as well as the one that she gives him: "I'm afraid that whatever he wants, I will give him. It's only a matter of time. 'Going to hell,' I say, not really joking." She fears that she will give him what he wants—the active voice and, especially, the verb choice suggest that whether she acquiesces or not is her decision, her body her own to proffer or not as she sees fit. But the idea of a choice is immediately and thoroughly undercut by the next line, "It's only a matter of time," with its sure sense of inevitability; that she will accede to his demands appears predetermined.

As the discussion continues, it becomes ever more apparent that she will not ever be able to win in what is shaping up to be a battle between him. "He laughs to tell me I'm being childish, naïve," says Kathryn. "In his laugh are all his years of studying theology held up against my ignorance of whatever God and His anger might be like" (Kiss 107). In her mind, the man before her conflates the figure—and the power—of the father and the Father. While it might seem as if she is exonerating herself by trotting out religion, the rest of the chapter convincingly establishes the hold that Christianity exerts over her. With the authority of God as well as of paternity behind him, her father is doubly unassailable to her. I would go even farther and suggest that for the narrator, her father's association with the Father becomes physically manifest. In Harrison's words,

...my father's heavy white flesh conveys a voluptuous sorrow in the gravity it demands. It's as if his weight were more a psychic than a physical burden.... [H]is corpulence makes him not sexless but androgynous, adding female to the male.... [W]hile he isn't grossly overweight—in suits he appears big rather than obese—beneath the thin fabric of his shirt a heavy

man's breasts are disconcertingly visible. His large hands are beautiful the way men's rarely are.... We joke about how much prettier are his feet than mine or my mother's. (Kiss 96)

Sorrowful in its demands of gravity, powerful and at the same time beautiful, and most tellingly of all, hermaphroditic: the contradictory ways in which she describes his body make him seem like a god.<sup>9</sup> A pagan deity rather than a Judao-Christian one, perhaps, and one whose flesh is an almost overpowering force, but a god nevertheless. As she marvels at an earlier point in the story, soon after she meets him again as an adult, "How solid he is, how real. Father. My father. The word made flesh" (Kiss 66).

In contrast to the novel, then, the memoir paints the father as a figure almost godlike in his power: able to warp religious doctrine to his ends and justify what is by almost any moral standard, and certainly the Christian one, his repugnant behavior, never mind his years of religious training, the vows that he presumably took as part of his office, the community he serves and the kind of work that he does. Furthermore, the fact that the father of The Kiss became a minister, which he regards as an emasculating profession, because of his grandmother's wishes feeds his deep resentment of women, making him that much angrier and more dangerous of a character. According to the narrator, "his insurrection finds a target in mothers: in mine and in my grandmother, who took away his wife and child; in the church itself, through whose wall he once put his fist; and, of course, in his own mother, with whom he always seems to be fighting over the most trivial matters" (Kiss 126).

I would also underscore that the father's ability to persuade a mental-health professional that he was an appropriate candidate to become a minister, even though he did punch a hole in the wall of the institution which he ostensibly wanted to devote his life to, is

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<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to my student, Dawne Shand, for this insight.

no small feat. Like his daughter, he is intelligent, cunning, and devious enough to fool a psychotherapist into believing that he is psychologically healthy, regardless of signs to the contrary. Which brings us back to Kathryn, and what I have been terming her very real victimization by her father. She, too, is smart, with her own reserves of guile and strength, but she is clearly outmatched by her father. Indeed, in one of the more chilling passages of the memoir, we see that the father manages to win in a certain sense at the end of their relationship by claiming her final victory—her decision to leave him—as his own. “Do you know,” he says to her, “there’s only one person who could have given you the strength to leave me.” He pulls the car over, and she looks at him leaning his head against the steering wheel. “You?” she finally says. “Yes,” he replies (Kiss 192).

The father of Thicker Than Water is a different matter altogether—larger than life, perhaps, but ultimately human, a far cry from the frightening and frighteningly smart character in the memoir. After all, the father of the novel is not perverse and unpredictable enough to have made the choice to become a minister even though he did not want to; nor is he misogynist and generally angry at the world as a result of having done so at the bidding of his grandmother, and there is no evidence to suggest that he is smart and ruthless enough to con a psychotherapist into allowing him to follow through on a professional goal in which he has no interest or vocation. The father of Thicker Than Water is, in short, a far less formidable foe to his daughter than the father of The Kiss is to his—so much so that it only seems to make sense that Isabel claims complicity in her incestuous relationship, while Kathryn does not take even an iota of responsibility for hers.

I have discussed at length how in these two more or less autobiographical texts, the incest victim’s representation of her own agency in the incestuous relationship may have

influenced the readers' sympathies. Still, for all that victimization and complicity in the incest narrative are certainly important issues, in the end the question of how much responsibility the narrator of each work takes for her respective actions constitutes a subtle point. In fact, overall—and this is a matter that cannot be overemphasized—the passages on the narrators' perspectives on their guilt, or lack thereof, are buried so deep in the texts, are rendered so ambivalently and are passed over so comparatively quickly that they can only be felt, let alone untangled, by running a very fine teeth comb indeed through the books, and then more than once. Perhaps we could make the case that the slight differences between Kathryn's and Isabel's responses to their past actions registered subconsciously in the minds of the public and of the reviewers and critics, and that this subliminal disturbance led in turn to a hue and cry which was so loud it resonated far beyond esoteric literary circles—but that would be a rather tenuous case. To go back to my earlier analogy of the toxic brew that accounted for the controversy of Harrison's memoir, the way that the narrator insists on presenting herself as a victim in the incestuous relationship may have added a bitter tang to the drink, but certainly not the killing drop of poison. If we are concentrating on issues within rather than outside of the text, far better to look for another, more immediate and obvious cause for the outcry.

### **Domesticating Incest**

So what, if anything, in the narrative might have triggered the widespread disgust and dismay which greeted The Kiss? I mentioned that it is only after the narratives of Harrison's novel and memoir are placed into chronological order that they exhibit the remarkable similarities that they do. While Thicker Than Water leads up to the revelation of incest

gradually, The Kiss hands it boldly to us up front, right on the first page, in the process subverting the form used by countless incest narratives, among them Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres, A.S. Byatt's Angels and Insects, and Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Unlike these texts, Harrison's memoir does not frame the revelation of the transgression in a riddle. In The Kiss there is a build-up of sorts to the announcement of incest, but it consists of only six sentences, and short ones at that. "We meet at airports," Harrison begins. "We meet in cities where we've never been before. We meet where no one will recognize us." The import of these three sentences seems to reside in their repeated first two words, "we meet," but the paragraph is elliptical, giving rise to more questions than answers: who are "we," why do they meet, and what do they do after they come together? And why are they leading the lives of fugitives, seeking the bland liminal spaces of airports and the anonymity of unknown cities? It would be hard for a new reader to guess at the reason for the insistence on the idea that "we meet"; what will become clear only in the unfurling of the narrative is that the repetition of the phrase conceals within it a hint of drudgery, of duty performed for a reason nigh forgotten, of meaningless but at the same time hypnotic and inescapable compulsion.

In the next three sentences, Harrison takes us from the bland sterility of airports to outlandish landscapes: "One of us flies, the other brings a car, and in it we set out for some destination. Increasingly, the places we go are unreal places: the Petrified Forest, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon—places as stark and beautiful and deadly as those revealed in satellite photographs of distant planets. Airless, burning, inhuman." I have spoken about how the memoir contains fairytale motifs. According to Marshall, Harrison, "[u]sing well-known material, the fairy tale...crafts an unconventional personal narrative

that simultaneously resonates in a cultural register as a representative tale about sexual violation” (404-405). That is, the fairytale elements enable Harrison to make her story work as both a specific and an archetypal narrative. The alien strangeness of the landscapes she invokes in this passage creates a sense of the mythic: although these are specific sites, they are so otherworldly, so inhospitable to human habitation, that they seem magical and even implausible, figments of the imagination rather than actual places on this earth. So stripped of recognizable features are these landscapes that they perhaps paradoxically take on a quality of the universal: like the airport and those generic, never-visited-before cities, they seem as if they could be anywhere and anywhen. And from there, it is a short step to the characters seeming like anyone, especially in their namelessness.

“Against such backdrops,” Harrison continues, “my father takes my face in his hands. He tips it up and kisses my closed eyes, my throat. I feel his fingers in the hair at the nape of my neck. I feel his hot breath on my eyelids” (Kiss 3). With this paragraph and its disclosure of the biological relationship between the two characters, the slight suspense effected by the enigmatic prose of the first two paragraphs is resolved: we see that the “we” refers to a daughter and her father who are lovers, and consequently fugitives and even outcasts not only from what and who they know, but also from civilization and humanity itself. It is possible to say, even, that what Harrison has done in these first three paragraphs is to create and answer a riddle narrative around incest, writ very small indeed—so small, in fact, that it does not register in the minds of the readers as anything but a bald, matter-of-fact announcement of long-term, consensual incest between a father and a daughter who is old enough to drive a car.

Harrison's matter-of-fact disclosure of incest shocks in a way that the standard incest model does not. After all, containing incest in a riddle plot both ratifies and reaffirms the status of incest as taboo. It poses incest as a secret that is so dangerous it propels the narrative, and as a discovery that is so astounding it all but derails it; the standard incest model suggests that incest is a topic so incendiary it cannot be broached right away, that it instead has to be approached obliquely, through coy hints and allusions which have the effect of offsetting its impact. In Thicker Than Water, the conventions of the standard incest model are observed: we are taken on a journey to incest, and our path during that journey is paved with ominous warnings and words of doom which function like stepping stones, easing our way and preparing us for what is to come.<sup>10</sup> The narrative structure of the novel cushions us from the impact of incest by preparing us for its revelation.

The way that incest is narrated in Thicker Than Water underscores the power of incest as a taboo subject: how forbidden it is as a topic, how heavy and burdensome as a secret, and how horrifying as a revelation. The Kiss takes a different approach to telling a story about incest. The beginning of the memoir shocks precisely because it does not present incest as a shocking discovery; its occurrence is not a revelation. With her relatively calm and undramatic disclosure of incest, Harrison domesticates this quintessentially domestic of taboos. She tames it by making it seem commonplace; she domesticates it by perhaps paradoxically taking it out of the dark corners of the private domestic setting, and into the open—into the harsh light of the arid southwest landscape and onto the front page of the text.

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<sup>10</sup> These hints are heavy-handed and hard to miss. For instance, Isabel tells us in the first chapter that “my teenage father and mother embarked on a fateful, irreversible flirtation that culminated in pregnancy, wedlock, divorce and perhaps, ultimately, death.... [My mother] said that it was because of [my father] that she no longer wanted to live and that during the last years of her life he had taken his revenge on her, had sullied everything she valued: their love and their only child” (Water 7).

In so doing, she reframes incest. In her refashioning of it, it is not a revelation that needs to be made after much hemming and hawing; it is not a disclosure that is given with the proper expressions of agitation and mortification and disgust. It is, instead, a mere fact, relevant albeit surprising information about the characters, that can be delivered right out of the starting gate. Her deliberate and flagrant failure to observe the conventions of the standard incest model knocks incest cleanly off its perch at the top of the taboo ladder. By refusing to frame incest in a riddle, Harrison diminishes the horror of it; by speaking of it so casually, she renders it something other than the unspeakable—a transformation which goes a long way toward explaining the controversy around the memoir.

I said above that it is Harrison's calm disclosure of incest at the start of her memoir which shocks. I want to stress the word "calm" in that statement, and also to expand upon its significance: the memoir proved unpalatable to many because the narrator makes her announcement of incest in a measured way, the emotional restraint which characterizes The Kiss as a whole in full evidence from its start. For while the sober, cool, and slightly sorrowful presentation of the fact of incest is Harrison's own, beginning a text with incest is not without precedent in the annals of incest narrative.<sup>11</sup> Consider, for instance, Alice Walker's The Color Purple. Incest is boldly announced on the first page of Walker's novel: "He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab

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<sup>11</sup> See also the first few pages of McCarthy's Outer Dark, which I discuss in the preface. In the novel's opening McCarthy explains in an almost offhand way that the poor, uneducated brother and sister of the story had a baby together. Still, their transgression haunts the novel, not least because the sister, Rinthy, hunts so long and so futilely for the issue of this transgression.

hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy” (1). But floating over these words are those famous lines in italics—“You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy”—which inform us that there is a secret and that the narrative to come is a forbidden one. Bold in its presentation of incest though this beginning is, because of the opening two lines, we have the sense that what we are hearing is of grave import: it is dangerous, shocking material, to be approached with due caution and trepidation. Because of those two lines, brief though they are, the disclosure of incest in Walker’s novel could not be more removed from the matter-of-fact announcement of it that Harrison’s narrator makes in The Kiss.<sup>12</sup>

And, too, the world that Walker’s text describes and, especially, the narrator who does the describing are very different from the setting and the protagonist of Harrison’s memoir. The Kiss begins with a reference to airports, after all: these are characters who can afford to travel in style; they belong to a class of people who can get in an airplane to go nowhere at all. In contrast to Walker’s text, which is riddled with spelling and grammatical mistakes even in the short passage quoted above, the very quality of Harrison’s prose, clean to the point of starkness and grammatically impeccable down to its frequently used period, signals her education and class. As I have argued, the cool restraint of her writing is troubling because it makes the text seem less of an authentic confession, but even more

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<sup>12</sup> One of the many ways in which Walker uses the horrific opening scene is to contrast incest with healthy lesbian desire: the horror of incest becomes a way of expanding the parameters of normative sexuality. Though it starts with incest, the novel eventually “riddles” incest out of the picture; a wholly unexpected revelation reveals to us that the man whom Celie thought was her father is in fact only a stepfather. Her real father was lynched; biological incest did not occur. This discovery allows for a rather disappointingly easy resolution in the novel. Berlant, as I discussed in chapter one, offers a different perspective.

because it, like Harrison's author photograph, serves as a constant reminder that this recollection of incest was written by a member of the literary and educational elite.

In that the contrast between The Kiss and The Color Purple takes me back full circle to the subject of Harrison's photograph, an issue which I discussed in chapter three, it speaks to a point that I have underscored throughout this discussion: the outrage that this text provokes is a complicated affair, owing its genesis to not one but many different sources. The unconventional, unflinching way in which Harrison chooses to begin her incest story is a significant factor in the furor over The Kiss, but it is not the only one. A number of different issues worked together to generate the controversy surrounding The Kiss; it is the combination of these factors that made The Kiss such a toxic brew to the public.

#### **A Turn in the Road: Lone Star and the Revelation That Falls Flat on Its Face**

Given the controversy that her memoir stirred, it is difficult to imagine Harrison's casual approach to incest telling as a trend. Yet I would argue that the end of the 1990s marked at least a possible turn in the road of incest narration. In 1996, a year before the publication of The Kiss, John Sayles' Lone Star premiered to general acclaim. A film which ends with a revelation of sibling incest, Lone Star, in stark contrast to the other narratives I have focused on in this project, adheres to the standard incest model until the end. The requisite clues are scattered, the riddle posed and answered, and the revelation delivered: it is not until the aftermath of this incest telling that Sayles subverts the form.

Sam Deeds, a white man newly appointed sheriff of the Texas border town of Frontera, reunites with his old childhood sweetheart, the Latina Pilar Cruz. Sam's father, Buddy Deeds, who is now dead, was also a sheriff, and a legend in the town. At one

point Pilar tells Sam a story about Buddy watching her play in the playground. “I remember him watching me once. When I was little—before you and I...” she says, shrugging, unaware that the story she tells provides a clue about her origins. “I was on the playground with all the other kids, but I thought he was only looking at me. I was afraid he was going to arrest me—he had those eyes, you know...” Another cue is the phrase that Sam hears more than once around town—“Your mother was a saint”—a line which hints that Buddy was not the best of husbands. Most strikingly of all, there is the vehemence with which both Buddy and Pilar’s mother fought Sam and Pilar’s adolescent romance—a vehemence which Sam and Pilar chalk up to their parents’ racism.

In the final scene of the film, Sam tells Pilar of the long-term affair between his father and her mother, and its fallout: she is the illegitimate daughter of his father; they have been committing incest. Pilar is shaken but not, as it turns out, because of the revelation of incest; what upsets her is the possibility that the revelation will have consequences. “So that’s it? You’re not going to want to be with me anymore?” she asks, and then promptly tries to reason with him. “I’m not having any more children. After [the birth of my son] Amado, I had some complications—I can’t get pregnant again, if that’s what the rule is about...” In this brief but effective speech, Pilar reduces incest to a “rule.” Often man-made and therefore arbitrary and negotiable, a rule, if broken, usually provokes nothing more serious than a slap of the wrist. At times, of course, it can be less flexible, and the breaking of it can have more dire consequences—as with a rule of nature, for instance.

Yet as this passage demonstrates, a rule of nature can also be sidestepped. That their union will have no biological consequences seems to sway Sam; in short order he

agrees to continue the relationship. After carefully paving the way to incest with hints over the course of the narrative, Sayles delivers the revelation only to undercut it: this disclosure of incest falls flat on its face.<sup>13</sup> I spoke in chapter two about how the act of naming and telling incest leads to a return of law and due order: familial roles unscramble, characters identify themselves accurately, incest ends and the prohibition against it is reinforced. In Lone Star the incest revelation does not do what it is supposed to do, or at least what it usually does. It does not lead to the termination of the act and a return to the natural order; the recipient of the news does not evince shock and horror, emotions which would reaffirm the taboo. The tepid response that the incest revelation receives in Lone Star lends support to the idea that the interdiction against the transgression is nothing significant.

A “rule” which can be discussed and discarded: when we consider that in Western literature incest has been a sin of Biblical proportions, with repercussions that are passed down for generations; a transgression which calls forth plagues, and a revelation which leads to suicide and blinding, it is clear that Lone Star presents incest in a radical light. I have discussed in this project how Maxine Hong Kingston uses incest,

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<sup>13</sup> From a narrative perspective, Lone Star succeeds in spite of the flopped revelation of the ending partly because the characters’ failure to respond to the incest revelation in expected ways is revelatory in itself, but mostly because the storyline of Sam and Pilar is the less important of two in the film. In the film’s main storyline, Sam tries to unravel the mystery of who killed Charlie Wade. The sheriff before Buddy, Wade disappeared forty years ago. While it was thought he fled town, in the first scene of the film, a human skeleton and a sheriff’s badge in the iconic shape of a star are discovered in the desert. Although Buddy is a hero to the people of the town, Sam, who harbors resentment toward his father because he interfered with his relationship with Pilar, believes that he murdered Wade. The two storylines, both of which center on the mystery of Buddy’s character, are resolved when Sam learns in the same scene that Buddy did not kill Wade, and that he and Mercedes Cruz were lovers. The film delivers a one-two punch, as it were, and the impact of the first punch is enough to make up for any lack in the second.

traditionally the unsayable, as a stepping stone to arrive at another, more forbidden revelation; how Willa Cather uses hints about incest as well as the lack of an incest revelation to try to make a point about slavery; and how Harrison takes away the riddle form and exposes incest just as it is, in all of its unglamorous, unrevelatory glory, right on the front page of her text. These three writers use and manipulate incest's status as the ur-taboo to make their own points, but none of them—Harrison least of all—wants to diminish the horror of incest, as Sayles, by his own lights, wishes to do. He claims that

One of the things I wanted to do with [Lone Star] is ask, “OK, what actually is that rule?” I’m interested in the difference between when people do things because of good practical and emotional human reasons, and when they’re just following the rules.... What [Sam and Pilar are] left with is the realization that, “OK, we have this chance to do something that is going to be seen as enormously antisocial but it’s good for us,” and they choose to cross that border of moral opinion. (7)

Sayles takes care to specify that it is only because certain conditions are met that the incest is acceptable in this instance: not only are Sam and Pilar not going to have children, but they were raised in different households; they are both adults and, since they are the same age, there is no problematic power dynamic between them. Yet the fact remains that Sayles is advocating incest; like his character, he considers the proscription against it a rule, the value of which can be rationally weighed and, after due albeit brief consultation and deliberation, rejected or embraced.

He works hard over the course of the film to persuade us to accept his views.

Lone Star showcases a gradual but systematic erosion of borders of all kinds, with almost

all of the characters moving in the world with greater fluidity by the end,<sup>14</sup> and I would argue that as a result we leave the movie feeling as if the prohibition against incest is not all that different from national borders or bigotry: it is a line in the sand, misbegotten but temporary, which has unnecessarily circumscribed our possibilities and our world. Sayles also has to work to undermine the audience's instinctive revulsion toward incest, as Kim Magowan points out—which she says he does not only by removing the biological imperative behind the taboo, but also by connecting incest with miscegenation. When miscegenation is proven to be an arbitrary rule—hardly a challenging task given that we are talking about sophisticated, independent-film audiences—so is incest: two birds taken down with one stone. In Magowan's words, “The challenges to miscegenation ultimately operate as challenges to incest... The subjectivity embedded in miscegenation, made explicit in [the character] Otis's formulation, ‘Blood only means what you let it,’ works to dismantle the taboo against incest. Like miscegenation, incest is now recast as a dubious taboo. Lone Star pressures the audience to ask, as Sayles and Pilar do, ‘What is that rule about?’” (29).

In that it posits incest as a valid choice, Lone Star is far more radical in its intent than The Kiss. Why, then, did The Kiss meet with far more controversy? I would submit that even though the words that the characters utter in the final scene of Lone Star are

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<sup>14</sup> Thus the absurdity of geographic borders is suggested by a scene in which a Mexican draws a line in the sand—an image which, as Sayles remarks, references “a famous moment from the history of the Alamo, when Travis drew a line. Of course, the Mexican [of the film] draws the line with a Coca-Cola bottle, but it is still a line drawn in the sand” (2). Sexual, racial, generational and class boundaries are also erased in the film, as are the lines between people of different military rank, and even between legal and illegal Mexican immigrants.

provocative, the images we gaze upon are not.<sup>15</sup> Three quarters of the way through the film, there is a steamy sex scene between Sam and Pilar, but after they find out they are brother and sister and decide to continue with the sexual relationship anyway—a decision which constitutes a renewed commitment to each other, and as such seems to merit a passionate kiss or at least an embrace—they sit quietly side by side. They are holding hands, but in the final image of the film, when the camera pans out to offer a shot of their backs, their hands are not visible; from that vantage point they could be the most decorous pair of siblings. Moreover, because the narrative structure of Lone Star leads up to the incest revelation with requisite care, the impact of this scene is diminished; it is far less subversive than it would have been as one of the beginning scenes of the film. Considered in tandem with The Kiss, Lone Star may mark a turn in the road, but it does not suggest that casual telling will replace the riddle as the standard incest model any time soon.

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<sup>15</sup> Despite what Sayles says about his intentions in the ending, critics remain divided about how optimistic we should be about Sam and Pilar's future. Davis and Womack insist that the ending, which features "the optimistic strains of Patsy Montana's 1935 hit, 'I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart,'" is uplifting: "Sayles once again demonstrates the manner in which his characters opt to revise the narratives of the past...in order to facilitate senses of community and interpersonal connection" (481). Stone, by contrast, contends that too many questions remain at the end of the film: "the ambiguity of the ending thwarts [Sayles'] intention.... [Pilar's mother] Mercedes knows the true story, and it is implied that other people in Frontera know that Pilar's supposed father had been murdered by Charlie Wade long before she was conceived. Sam and Pilar may try to forget their history, but what about Mercedes and the older generation? Will they allow the couple to forget the boundary they have crossed?" (22). Similarly, Magowan argues that when Pilar tells Sam at the end, "Everything that went before, all that stuff, that history—the hell with it, right? ...Forget the Alamo," she is all too obviously making a mistake. This is a film, after all, which deliberately does not mark the line between the past and present through the usual technical conventions. As Magowan says, "By employing panning shots in place of dissolves, Sayles indicates that the border between the present and the past is not just 'fuzzy.' It has entirely collapsed" (27). I would also suggest that as a history teacher, Pilar should know better than to suggest that history could be so easily left behind.

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## CONCLUSION

I began this project with Oedipus Rex, and the idea that from the beginning, Western literature has packaged incest telling in the form of a riddle. In Oedipus, a riddle—why is there a plague on Thebes?—takes the protagonist on a journey of discovery which ends with a dread revelation: because its king is sleeping with his mother. Incest, a secret that needs to be recognized and then solved, hides in the narrative. This dissertation suggests that now, more than 2400 years later, Oedipus is still the archetypal incest story; in fact I refer to the riddle form as the standard incest model. But the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, Willa Cather and Kathryn Harrison has done much to loosen the tenacious grip that the riddle form has held on the incest narrative.

I have argued that the standard incest form reinforces the incest taboo—the taboo against the act of incest but also, and more particularly, against the act of speaking about it. When riddling delays the announcement of incest, the assumption is that telling this transgression is so fraught that it can derail the narrative; we can only approach the revelation of incest obliquely, through coy hints and signs. This careful build-up to the announcement of incest suggests that hearing about the transgression all at once might damage us and, by extension, that telling incest is as vexed and perhaps even as potentially traumatic as the act itself. By subverting the riddle form, the women writers who are the focus of this dissertation have not only challenged the way that incest is traditionally told, they have also redefined what is and what is not sayable. Moreover, they have refashioned the riddle narrative in very different ways, for their own purposes.

In chapter one, “A Stepping Stone to Voice,” I discuss how Kingston’s “No Name Woman,” the first essay in her memoir The Woman Warrior, begins with an injunction that the narrator receives from her mother: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself.’” This beginning, with its reference to a secret, positions the narrative to come both as a confidence and as a betrayal of trust; it also marks “No Name Woman” as part of what I call the forbidden story tradition. An unusually specific variety of the standard incest model, forbidden stories, which include James Weldon Johnson’s novel Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, begin with a reference to a dangerous secret, feature first-person narrators from historically disenfranchised groups, and riddle with the theme of miscegenation as well as incest.

In the forbidden stories of Johnson, Morrison, and Walker, the solution to the narrative’s riddle is unambiguous; we have no doubt about what the secret in question is. In “No Name Woman,” by contrast, it is difficult to divine what the forbidden story is. While the secret that should not be repeated seems at first to involve the narrator’s unnamed aunt, a woman who had an affair with a relative and drowned herself and her illegitimate baby in a well, it turns out that the forbidden secret that the narrator relays in “No Name Woman” is her own rather than her aunt’s. Kingston uses the framing of “No Name Woman” to suggest that the secret she tells is going to be incest, but then overturns the form and our expectations to tell a story that is, in her family and culture, even more forbidden, namely interracial desire.

The narrator's telling of incest is a necessary step in her ongoing struggle to unleash her voice—arguably the most significant theme of The Woman Warrior. By beginning with her mother's directive not to tell, Kingston suggests the many obstacles—familial, cultural, and personal—that her narrator must overcome to achieve speech. First she must break through the strictures against speech; then she must tell her family's forbidden secret, and finally her own. Her telling of incest enables her telling of miscegenation, which in turn empowers her to narrate the rest of the memoir; these steps make up the stepping stones on the journey toward a full-fledged voice that is hers and hers alone. Kingston manipulates the standard incest form in order to tell her own forbidden secret; by replacing the dangerous secret that her mother tells with one of her own, her narrator subverts and co-opts her mother's narrative as well.

The subject of chapter two, “The Revelation of No Revelation,” is Cather's subversion of the riddle form in Sapphira and the Slave Girl. This text also focuses more on interracial desire than on incest. All of the main characters of the novel are obsessed in some way with Nancy, a mulatta and the slave girl of the title. Henry Colbert and his nephew, Martin, lust after her; Sapphira, Henry's wife, who is old and crippled, is violently jealous of her, and Rachel, Henry and Sapphira's daughter, is determined to keep her safe. Nancy is the daughter of Till and an unidentified white man, and early in the narrative, Cather raises the possibility that this man was also a Colbert. As Sapphira tells Henry, “[people] surely talked when black Till bore a yellow child, after two of your brothers had ben hanging around here so much. Some fixed it on Jacob, and some on Guy. Perhaps you have a kind of family feeling about Nancy?” (8-9). While Henry is quick to deny her innuendo—“You know well enough, Sapphira, it was that painter from

Baltimore” (9)—the rumor is never laid to rest, thus leaving open the possibility that Nancy is a Colbert, and that Henry and Martin, in desiring her, are lusting respectively after a niece and a half-sister. As a standard incest model, this is textbook; the requisite cues leading up to the revelation of incest are all neatly in place. Yet the potential of this set-up is never realized. Cather’s characters do not at any point reveal that the disaster they only barely avert, the rape of Nancy by Martin, may be incestuous. The spectre of incest never takes on a concrete form; it remains the never said.

I argue that both by including the possibility of incest and by suppressing the revelation of its threat, Cather is being politically subversive. Nancy’s embodiment of the incest threat contains a critique of the system of slavery; Cather is demonstrating that the masters’ rape of the slave women—a practice which continues over successive generations—may result in unwitting incest. The suppression of the incest theme might seem to call into question the idea that Cather is making such a point. Her failure to capitalize on the explosive potential of the incest threat could be read as a failure of nerve—a desire to back off from a full-throated indictment of slavery. But once we probe the import of not saying incest, we can see that Cather’s decision to elide incest from the text is subversive in itself. When Oedipus discovers that he has been married to his mother, he raves, “she brought forth husband by her husband, children by her own child” (66). His seemingly confused but actually accurate description of his family’s tangled relationships is a trope in incest narratives, often found just before or after the incest revelation. In the climactic scene of Chinatown, another paradoxical description of a familial relationship leads to our dawning understanding of the riddle posed by the film. “She’s my sister,” Mrs. Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) tells Gittes (Jack Nicholson). He slaps

her, and she says, “She’s my daughter.” When he slaps her again, she tells him, “She’s my sister,” and this pattern of statement and punishment repeats until she finally says, “She’s my sister and my daughter.... My father and I—understand? Or is it too tough for you?”

By confusing the individual’s place in the family—the most basic of all social units—incest shatters the individual’s deepest sense of self. This concept highlights the role that recognition, in particular self-recognition, plays in the resolution of many incest narratives. The revelation of incest is strongly linked to an understanding of identity. In works such as Oedipus, A Winter’s Tale, and Song of Solomon, a character’s understanding of who s/he is arrives simultaneously with the realization of incest; these narratives are inherently structured on a climactic moment of recognition that is inseparable from the solving of the riddle. The act of naming and telling incest constitutes a return to law and due order, with familial roles unscrambling, characters properly naming and identifying themselves, and incest itself being terminated, penance meted out and exacted. When the possibility of incest is suppressed in Sapphira, the possibility that Nancy is a Colbert is as well; the origins of characters remain obscure, and family roles stay undefined. The suppression of the incest theme suggests that the white characters are blinded by the racist ideals of the South: because they are unable to see and admit the possibility that they are related to Nancy, they are in danger of committing incest. The fact that incest is never publicly exposed and denounced offers an indictment of the insidious, pervasive racist ideals of the South.

In the next two chapters, I at once build upon and expand the analysis of incest and race to incorporate the issue of class. In chapter three, “The New Face of Incest?” I

parse the controversy over Harrison's memoir The Kiss. In 1991, Harrison published a novel, Thicker Than Water, which tells the story of a young woman's four-year sexual relationship with her father; the memoir was published six years later. The two texts, which share a plot, a set of characters, and a number of scenes and details, are remarkably similar. But while Thicker Than Water was celebrated by reviewers, The Kiss was met with unusual hostility. There are a number of factors which account for the difference in the way the two books were received—among them, the perception that Harrison was trying to republish what was essentially the same book, and the fact that she was calling the new book, in what was viewed as an attempt to garner more attention and therefore more sales, a memoir rather than a novel.

Another factor playing into the reception of her memoir is her author photograph, which reveals Harrison to be very beautiful—svelte, blond, and fair-skinned, with high cheekbones. She looks, in short, patrician. In chapter one, I refer to Elizabeth Wilson's argument that incest has been marginalized in today's society as part of a racist agenda; in order to shore up the hegemony of the white middle class, it has been portrayed as a transgression of the lower classes and of the racial other. Wilson's discussion of the problems involved in presenting incest in a nonracialized, upper-class context speaks to the ways in which Harrison's memoir has been read. The Kiss, a text by an upper-class white woman about her long sexual relationship with her father, violently ruptured the public's expectations about what kind of social milieu spawns incest. The imperilment of treasured cultural assumptions about incest undergirds the public outcry against the text. Harrison has presented the world with a new face for incest, a face which seems almost unbearable to the critics' sense of the transgression, and perhaps even of themselves.

As an incest victim, Harrison offends in other ways as well. An able-bodied adult of sound mind, she engaged in a sexual relationship with her father for years; afterwards, she became a highly functional member of society, a celebrated author and, by all accounts, a happy, beloved wife and mother. Harrison's life story is a success story. By offering a decidedly new twist on what the effects of incest abuse are, Harrison defies our expectations of the incest narrative, and at the same time provides us with a redefinition of incest: an act which might cause great trauma, but may do no lasting harm to its victim. The facts of Harrison's resumé undercut the horror of incest; the notion that it is an unspeakable crime with vast repercussions is undone by the fact that Harrison not only survives but also thrives after being sexually abused by her father. Her success in both the professional and the domestic spheres is the single most significant factor in the controversy of The Kiss. The concept that incest is not too terrible a transgression has the potential to be far more offensive than the knowledge that it occurred.

In chapter four, "The Domestication of Incest," I compare the texts of Thicker Than Water and The Kiss in an effort to understand their critical reception. Whereas Thicker Than Water is episodic, crammed with scenes that could be easily lifted out without making any real difference to the work as a whole, The Kiss is more artistically coherent: it is tightly constructed, each fateful event building upon the last to create a palpable sense of inevitability and doom. The writing of the memoir is also far more polished and spare. I contend that the artistic structure, deft plotting, and carefully restrained writing of The Kiss have the effect of undermining the credibility of the text as a historical document. Because they suggest that Harrison is too much in control, they end up diminishing the reader's sense that this is an authentic memoir of trauma. As the

Holocaust critic James E. Young observes, “For the survivor’s witness to be credible, it must seem natural and unconstructed” (17); the assumption is that authentic testimony of a traumatic event will be ragged and raw. Harrison testifies that she deliberately attempted to replicate the effects of trauma in her own writing: “The shell-shocked, present-tense narration [of The Kiss] reveals some of the experience of being in a relationship like that, in which you are in a kind of cottony, emotionally vacant state” (Bookforum interview). But because rendering this effect too clearly required a large degree of writerly control, it backfires, losing her credibility, narrative authority, and an emotional connection with the reader.

An even more telling factor in the different receptions of Thicker Than Water and The Kiss is the narrative structure of the texts. The story that the two works tell is astonishingly similar, but the order in which they are told is not: while Thicker Than Water leads up to the revelation gradually, in proper riddle form, The Kiss hands it casually to us on the front page, with one bold gesture overhauling the form used by countless incest narratives since Sophocles. Harrison’s matter-of-fact disclosure of incest shocks in a way that the standard incest model does not. After all, containing incest in a riddle plot both ratifies and reaffirms the status of incest as taboo. It poses incest as a secret that is so dangerous it propels the narrative, and as a discovery that is so astounding it all but derails it. In Thicker Than Water, the narrative structure cushions us from the impact of incest by preparing us for its revelation, and thus underscores the power of incest as a taboo subject. In The Kiss we find a wholly different approach to telling incest. The beginning of the memoir shocks precisely because it does not present incest as a shocking discovery; its occurrence is not a revelation. With her relatively

calm and undramatic announcement of incest, Harrison domesticates this quintessentially domestic of taboos; she tames it by making it seem commonplace.

In the last section of chapter four, I focus on John Sayles' film Lone Star, which premiered in 1996, a year before The Kiss was published, and I inquire whether the two texts suggest that casual incest telling is about to replace the standard incest model.

Sayles states that one of his goals in making the movie is to query the proscription against incest: "What [the characters Sam and Pilar are] left with is the realization that, 'OK, we have this chance to do something that is going to be seen as enormously antisocial but it's good for us,' and they choose to cross that border of moral opinion" (7). His film queries the incest taboo by telling an incest story that adheres to the standard model until the end; not until the aftermath of the incest revelation does Sayles subvert the form. Discovering that they are brother and sister, Sam and Pilar, who have loved each other since they were teenagers, decide to continue their relationship, taboo be damned. Sayles' intentions in presenting this decision are clearly radical, but the film met with far less controversy than The Kiss did, and I contend that this is because the images we gaze upon are not provocative: after making the decision to continue with the sexual relationship, Sam and Pilar sit quietly like properly asexual siblings. Then, too, because the narrative leads up to the incest revelation with clues, the impact of the scene is diminished. Together, The Kiss and Lone Star may mark a turn in the road in the way that incest is told, but casual telling will not take the place of the riddle as the standard incest model any time soon.

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