

Buried Voices, Returning Girls: The Well as Narrative Space Across Memoir and Film

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Abstract

This paper discusses the repetitive image of the well in *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Fault Lines* by Meena Alexander, and the film *The Ring* as a narrative space in which suppressed girlhood testifies to rebirths. Theoretically, the paper relies on Leigh Gilmore's concept of child witness, theories of speech as resistance by bell hooks, and the concept of interpellation in the work of Louis Althusser. To this is linked Kingston and Alexander's reinstated silenced feminine voices showcased through story fragments, mythic images, and cultural memory fragments. The narrative is a point of retrieval and revelation of the traumatic events as the well serving as a site of symbolic container. Comparing the two memoirs to *The Ring*, the analysis shows that there are common themes of shame, erasure, retribution, and the torments of stifled voices that haunt these narratives. Collectively, these works highlight both the ideological work that narrative acts of witnessing promote and their capacity to reestablish agency and remake silenced girlhood into an effective location of truth-telling and witnessing.

Keywords: Memoir; Asian American Women; Child Witness; Interpellation; Narrative Theory

Introduction

"She just wanted to be heard," the character Rachel Keller says to Noah in the movie *The Ring* (2002), after they rescue a young girl's

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dead body. Samara Morgan, the dead girl, haunts and terrorizes whoever watches a tape that consists of fragments from her parents' lives and her own. In a tragic scene, this small girl with weed-like hair, dripping wet, is shown to be thrown into a well by her mother. The little girl stayed alive for seven days inside the darkness; that is how long it takes for someone who watches the mysterious tape to succumb to their death. Towards the end of the film, Samara exits the television on all fours and reaches for Noah, the male protagonist.

The Ring, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Fault Lines* preempt trauma in girlhood through narrative space, transforming silenced experiences into testimony. The well of Samara in *The Ring*; the silence of cultural shame and intergenerational silence in Kingston's "No Name Woman"; the psychic and social disjunction between continents in *Fault Lines* by Alexander, symbolize the reappearance of haunted trauma as the suppressed. These texts employ fragmentation, mythic reconstruction, and symbolic imagery to make personal trauma readable, thus allowing extensive voices of marginalized females to reclaim their power. These works, taken together, create a comparative structure for how narrative form makes girlhood trauma speakable in media, culture, and genre.

For this purpose, the paper draws on Leigh Gilmore's concept of child witness, theories of speech as resistance by bell hooks, and the concept of interpellation in the work of Louis Althusser. Furthermore, considering complex narratives, narrative theory forms the foundation to see these elements not just as stories, but as structures that shape how girlhood trauma becomes speakable. When a narrative breaks, circles back, or refuses to resolve, it tells us something about the pressures surrounding the storyteller. It brings to light the hidden details that would otherwise be merely ignored. The narrative theory lens helps to establish an understanding of how wells, silences, and hauntings become the architecture through which authors showcase girls' experiences.

Thus, this article argues that the recurring image of the well in *The Ring*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Fault Lines* functions as a narrative space where suppressed girlhood testimony is fused into the fabric of discovery.

There is a hidden nature of girlhood trauma; however, the space of narratives offers a way through which these experiences can be expressed. In this paper, *The Ring*, *The Woman Warrior*, as well as *Fault Lines* are explored, with a focus on how such themes as wells and water characterize repression into testimony. Part one provides the theoretical framework that relies on Gilmore, hooks, and Althusser. The second part examines the narrative modes of each text in addressing trauma as a speakable issue. The third section offers a cross-textual analysis of shared themes—such as shame, interpellation, and witnessing—while the conclusion shows how these narratives demonstrate that storytelling, across generations and borders, serves as a means of reclaiming girls' experiences and insisting on their recognition. The article argues that through fragmented storytelling, mythic reconstruction, and child-witness framing, as well as the image of the well, these narratives expose the ideological forces that render young women unspeakable as they reclaim agency through forms of narrative haunting.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how narratives of girlhood trauma become speakable, it is essential to begin with the theoretical conversations that shape the ways these stories are read and interpreted. Before turning to the film and memoirs themselves, there is a need to establish the theoretical foundations that frame this discussion. These concepts, ranging from interpellation and invisibility to witnessing and identificatory exchange, clarify how power, memory, and silence operate within narratives of girlhood. An effective way to begin the analysis of *The Ring*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *Fault Lines* is by developing a theoretical framework that explains how the girlhood

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testimony is finally silenced and reactivated by the narrative structure.

This strategy is based on the critical interventions that are found in the works of Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall, which are included in the 2019 publication *Witnessing Girlhood*. The research that they have conducted demonstrates that the visible characteristics of marginalized girlhood in autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives are determined by survival and witness. Drawing on an intersectional tradition of life writing, Gilmore and Marshall urge scholars to more fully interrogate the largely overlooked and painful experiences of girls and young women. Their work underscores the need to account for the structuring forces of childhood and its conditions of vulnerability when reading narratives of girlhood. At the heart of this structure is the idea of the child witness; a character who retells childhood stories of violence and structural inequality in a manner that prefigures both the vulnerability and dominance of girlhood knowledge. The narratives of autobiographical childhood are culturally valued as places of expectations of truth-telling and verifiability. Therefore, the child witness generates a strong place in which the demands of justice can be expressed by the adult authors who turn back to the young authors.

This theoretical foundation is further expanded in writing by Gilmore, who defines the term “witnessing” in a broader way. To witness means to experience, to observe, and to testify, that is, to bear knowledge in the body and in the community, even where the conditions are unspeakable. The personal and the collective, therefore, are mediated through witnessing since personal stories of the trauma of girlhood emerge as testimonies that reveal the ideological systems, determining who is believed. Gilmore makes it clear that such narratives are not only personal and personal stories, they are constitutive of the social perceptions of injustice, and how

these young female subjects make their way in the silence, danger, and survival.

This framework is further developed by drawing on bell hooks's concepts of voice, marginality, and resistance because of the transformative analysis of speaking. In *Talking Back*, hooks explains how passing through silence to speech is an act of resistance that brings healing and creates a new life. To girls and women on the margins, speech is a difficulty to systems of domination that demand their silent compliance. She asserts: "the longing to tell one's story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release" (hooks, 2014, p. 158). Also, speech presents a location of resistance and identification rather than a location of deprivation. Influenced by the idea of speaking on the fringe makes the dominant group feel queer about the minoritized subjects. As a result, speech has to be confined to the discourse of injury or absence, rather than used to testify to the empowerment of another group or to articulate a coherent political line.

Lastly, Louis Althusser's idea of interpellation offers an important ideological aspect to this framework. The process of subjects being hailed into social identities and norms by the absence of direct surveillance is referred to as interpellation. In the case of marginalized girls, the process limits behaviour, the type of narratives they are allowed to recount, and the type of responses they obtain to them. However, the ideological containment can be fought off by the readers through what is referred to by Riley and Pearce as "identificatory exchange," (2018, p.163) where people read themselves into the life stories of others. This interaction makes life writing a community of recognition to enhance solidarity and consciousness. Literature and self are social constructs rooted in ideology. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim writes: "In so far as literature is a social construct, the self which is expressed in it is also a social construct. Social constructs are organized ideologically; that is, they

are created by, express, and reinforce the ideology (the visible assumptions and rules that society uses to make meaning of its existence) of their society” (Lim 24). This means that social constructs are neither arbitrary nor neutral; they are structured by ideological principles, for instance, the American idea of meritocracy, which says that success comes from hard work and ability, and that anyone can reach their goals with enough determination and effort. Thus, together, these theories offer a unified approach to the study of how narratives of girlhood negotiate silence, reassert agency, and reveal the ideological pressures among young women.

Textual Analysis

The Ring

To begin with, *The Ring* is a horror movie, which breaks the traditions of this genre by exploring the theme of motherhood, betrayal, desperation, and the ghostly insistence of the dead to be recognized. Its repeated imagery of the well operates not as part of a horror strategy, but as a space of narration which replicates processes outlined in narrative theory and life-writing studies. Through literary and filmic traditions, a well is a symbol of a loss within, a place where one can keep suppressed memories, untouchable trauma, and feelings unable to come out into the open.

Considering the narrative, the well is used as a container story to assemble fragmented or interrupted narratives in a mechanism that resembles the recovery of memory. The falling and throwing and going back to the well of the characters cause the story to also sink, and the surface-level happenings of the story are replaced by the underground, barely unspoken occurrences. Such a process echoes the concept of the child witness as Leigh Gilmore has identified it to be when the past experience of terror is reinforced once again during examination; thus, expressed in such a manner that the reader

or filmgoer can draw their own interpretation of how it was to confront violence, oppression, and survival. The way Samara in *The Ring* is trapped inside the well and the way she haunts other people represent how oppressed voices, such as those of oppressed girls, need to be heard. The well thus emerges as a symbolic as well as a structural tool that allows the characters, as well as the authors, to take back agency through telling of the story, turning personal traumas into evidence.

Elaborating on the thematic roles of the work on the topic of *The Ring*, the movie uses its visual lexis to replicate the structure of traumatic testification. The nonlinear associative reasoning of traumatic memory given by Caruth (2014) and other theorists is reflected in the imagery of the distorted videotape. Each of these frames is a flash of the repressed coming back: the ladder, the mirror, the fingernail, and the well; each of them a fragment of a signifier, which does not give way to an orderly sequence. In terms of the narrative, the tape serves as a fractured testimonial collection. It is a story where Samara is also told not in an ordered exposition, but in a ritualistic repetition, which is a characteristic feature of a trauma story. The viewer, like the reader of a memoir, needs to reconstruct the buried story by putting images together, which were never meant to be so orderly assembled. Trauma, therefore, becomes a medium and a message.

By expanding this lens, the well becomes a gateway between a public identity and a private one, a point of departure, the area between memory, culture, and ideology. It is a place of hazard, discovery, and sustenance: one above-ground is the socially acceptable self, and the one below-ground is the interior, non-official self whose histories are usually shunned. This threshold-crossing is critical to the memoir project, through which the storytelling process is a digging, retrieving, and projecting of meaning. Thinking in conjunction with the claim of bell hooks, the shifting into speech and uttering something in the face of silence is

both an act of resistance and a curative act. When applied to the well, it becomes an act that is a metaphor of risk and empowerment.

Authors and characters become buried in the realm of trauma, challenged by the ideological forces and patriarchal systems, and at the same time produce the stories that cannot be erased. Althusser's concept of interpellation sheds light on these stories, as the girls in them are fated to be silenced by societal rules; their voices are never audible enough to be recognized in narrative, memory, or haunting. This silence becomes a way of denying them the possibility of being fully hailed, marking them instead as subjects who remain unseen. By means of the identificatory exchange introduced by Riley and Pearce, the reader and the audience occupy these stories, discovering something to identify with and consequently experience relatedness and community that builds awareness. Thus, the well becomes not merely a literary or cinematic device; it is a place where unspeakable experiences are witnessed and transformed into a common ground.

Also, the establishment of maternal failure and intergenerational violence in the film places the incarceration of Samara in a larger context of her discursive location of the policing of girlhood. The breakdown of her mother, institutionalization at a psychiatric facility, and the non-intervention of the community act out as an ideologically powerful collective, like the unspeakability of girlhood pain that Gilmore discusses. This unspeakability is eventually given final calculations in the form of the well. Its darkness and sense of imprisonment are indicative, not just of the wall that encircles Samara, but of the whole culture in the failure to recognize a violent intrusion into the domestic realm. Water also enhances this symbolism: water becomes a tool when it comes to the revival of memory, a figurative rebirth of the repressed. When Samara comes out of the well and uses the television, the horror represents the testimony that is suppressed, violating the border between individual trauma and the consciousness of the masses.

The Woman Warrior

Similarly, the book *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston begins with the story of her “No Name Woman”; her relative who suffers the effects of societal disgrace in her conception of a child out of marital union, and ends her life by jumping into the family well. It is a traumatizing story that preconditions a cultural and family setting where female bodies are monitored, subjugated, and penalized. It is a classical element that is added to the stories in order to draw attention towards the possible undermining of the capabilities of the female sex. The mother of Kingston also tells the tale as a kind of warning and a lesson to her daughter; she tells her that “What happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (Kingston, 1989, p. 6). This interpellation could be traced here as Kingston is addressed into the subject position of a young girl whose actions are not only controlled by all the members of her family but also by the wider ideological machine of the village and cultural standards. Here, it is important to note that the past trauma tends to come into existence, which, intentionally or not, the mother is trying to overcome through her daughter.

Furthermore, the marker on the map of the well itself comes out as a young narrative emblem, a literal and metaphorical fall into memory, hazard, and untold facts. The well can be viewed as a place where one can store unspeakable trauma, a doubtful border between the personal, interior world of the self and the external world of identity. It is the representation of danger and, possibly, the source of food, just as water enables living beings; the narration lets Kingston explore the lost history of her family and culture, unearthing hidden histories that would otherwise have been buried. The descent into the well symbolizes the memoir sinking into repressed memory; the envelop of the pit describes the horror, humiliation, and silence of the secret female law-breaking in her ancestral society.

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Simultaneously, with this cultural scaffolding, the storytelling of Kingston is an entrepreneurial way of practicing Gilmore's ideas. The concept transforms an unarticulated childhood tale into a delayed testimonial that requires acknowledgment and redress. When Kingston calls her aunt the "No Name Woman," she is symbolically restoring the lost identity of the relative as the cultures have erased anyone who did not conform to them. The idea that silence is transformed into voice, also provided by hooks, helps see even better the memoir as a healing gesture that allows both the writer and reader to be empowered.

In addition, this reading is supplemented by the narrative, which focuses on how fragmented, myth-laced narratives about Kingston serve to reflect the organization of traumatic memory. The imbuing of autobiography, folklore, and cultural symbolism enables Kingston to create a liminal space in which the trauma is not just narrated, but converted to some form of critical reflection. Through this, the well, the removed aunt, and the maternal warnings have all intersected to present the intricate nature of the interaction of memory, identity, and social control. Kingston makes the memoir both an excavation of the individual and of the collective; she shows how women maneuver through oppression as they recover voice, narrative power, and their moral agency through cultural silencing.

Fault Lines

Another work, Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines*, is a very suggestive and introspective description of her childhood life and early adulthood as she traces her life through India, Sudan, and finally the United States. At the center of her story is the so-called stories she heard about young women who experienced the effects of social stigma, especially in the area of sexuality and pregnancy. These stories build up and form part of a personality for the character, as they have a tendency to influence actions and overall decisions. In a single haunting memory, she writes: "As a young child growing up

in Tiruvella, I heard countless stories of young women, beautiful as lotus blossoms in bud. At dawn, they were discovered, black hair streaming, stretched fine as a spider's filament over the well's mouth, bodies blanched and swollen" (Alexander, 2003, p.69). Still spoken in hushed tones, these stories are the epitome of the meeting of individual trauma and the social stigma.

Even as a child, Alexander is called to realize the high moral and social standards by which female behavior is governed and the retributive measures that women face as a result of violations of social norms. The silence in relation to the described events imposes a sort of ideological control, which is similar to the situation of Kingston in her girlhood as she is being surveilled in *The Woman Warrior*. The cultural shame is transferred onto Alexander, who recognizes the conventions of behavior, yet at the same time, empathizes and understands the suffering of women across generations.

Considering the role of the narrative structure, the well is a characteristically memorable unit in the memoir of Alexander, similar to what it is in the story of Kingston. It signifies a fall into a buried trauma and hidden narratives, places of societal silence and shame where painful realities have been buried. The literal and metaphorical use of water symbolizes memory, existence, and a passage of linking to the past. It is an experience of looking into the well or seeing the drowned women, which is an indication of the face-off with the traumas that are both frightening and critical to consider. The well organizes the story in a similar manner to a container narrative: that is, it harbors a hidden experience but offers an access point to memory. Similar to the fact that the fall into the well of Kingston allows the exploration of the hidden history of the family and the culture, the fact that Alexander enters these stories that she heard, turns the silent, repressed histories into concrete acts of narration. The well functions as a border crossing that exists between the known and the unknown, and the visible and the

invisible; as such, it sets up a narrative that the viewer can explore with the possibility of retrieving the buried trauma.

Alexander's memoir can be seen as an example of Gilmore's ideas about the belated testimony when the adult version of the self reflects on traumatic experiences and recounts them. Alexander writes a life that is reclaiming and reconstructive by using the plots of sexual abuse, displacement, and cultural shame. Redressing such suppressed memories enables her to establish control over her history, turning the memories of the suppressed pain into a witness to be heard. The memoir turns out to be a dimension of individual and collective witnessing; thus, the trauma is not only described but also framed, interpreted, and institutionalized. The framework of storytelling as resistance introduced by hooks also sheds more light on the process that Alexander undergoes. It is a transition between silence and speech: healing, confronting the patriarchal authority, and providing defiance to the tradition of culture that attempted to suppress women's voices. The very process of recounting the repercussions of female misconduct, such as the physical and social events of being discovered with a child twice, enables Alexander to challenge and oppose the ideological restraints that dictated her upbringing.

This analysis is further supplemented by narrative theory that presents the poetic and symbolic forms of Alexander. Her self-reflective approach, with its imagery and metaphor, suggests to readers an identificatory dialogue that, according to Riley and Pearce, creates empathy and awareness as audiences locate themselves within the text in comparison with their own experience. The symbolizing effect of the well, water, and the whitened bodies of young women is not only a tool of narration but also a medium of the reader's involvement in the spaces of traumas, secrets, and revelations, enabling the audience to occupy the fringe area of the trauma and secrets. In this context, the memoir of Alexander is a place of resistance and empowerment, with narration being an act of

survival via recalling, akin to Kingston in the memoir *The Woman Warrior*. The authors both repackage cultural silences into a narrative and, on the other hand, a disruptive feminist challenge, recovering the disenfranchised female experience.

Comparative Analysis

There are some radical thematic similarities between Kingston and Alexander, one of the most notable being their treatment of shame, erasure, and the effects of female transgression. Women's bodies in both memoirs are the centers of social examination and oppression: the “No Name Woman” in Kingston’s memoir is thrown away and disgraced publicly, and the retelling of cases by Alexander points to the female deaths caused by the oppression of cultural norms. Both stories reveal the ideologies of their societies, depicting interpellation. The female protagonists have been proclaimed to subject positions that prescribe behaviour, silence transgression, and force an internalization of the cultural norms of shame. Mothers issue warnings in Kingston, which create this surveillance; oral stories she overhears in Alexander inculcate awareness of the danger that is possible and the expectations of society. The way both authors avoid these limitations is by taking personal trauma and turning it into a narrative witness, converting repressed pasts into witnessing actions that demand justice and acknowledgment.

The modes of narration used by the memoirs are also reminiscent of the symbolic elements used in the narrative of *The Ring*, and especially in the imagery of the well. The well in Kingston and Alexander is used as a gateway, a memory and trauma booster, and is a representation of danger, secrets, and life. The well, as in the movie *The Ring*, is an analogous narrative space, where silenced voices can be heard; the descent into the darkness reflects the search for repressed truths in the memoirs. All three works are strong in folklore, mythic reconstruction, and fragmented storytelling, as these constitute scaffolding in the representation of trauma. Kingston interlaces Chinese folklore with autobiography;

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Alexander brings together symbolic imagery and poetic language; *The Ring* works together horror and myth to externalize trauma. In each instance, the well is an intermediary between the personal and the general, the past and the present, silence and speech, which helps to encounter the relapse or inhibited female sensations.

Also, the interplay of interpellation, witnessing, and identificatory exchange make these texts unite. Kingston and Alexander are considered to be witnesses, testifying to a personal and inherited trauma, and *The Ring* makes all the above concepts appear on the screen through the prism of the film: the appearance of the ghost is the announcement of a forced speech of the one who had been quieted down before. Speech can be a way to heal and oppose by using the power of storytelling and memoirs. Such use of speech allows one to reclaim power; in the film, the revelation through narration turns trauma into a visual and narratively confined experience. Readers and viewers capitalize on identificatory exchange, seeing themselves relative to the characters, the ghost, or the histories which are being recounted, therefore, initiating empathy, consciousness, and critical reflection of the social injustices.

In all three stories, the well is not only a representation of the hidden truth, but it is a culturally programmed site where girlhood is shaped into a compact guided by the definition of female silence. Although the well-space in Kingston is metaphorical, a fall into the erased archive of Chinese-diaspora girlhood, the well-space of Alexander concerns the psychic descent, the space in which the stories that she heard make their reappearances to haunt her as an adult. The literalization of the well in the tale *The Ring* makes the well a literal possession of the body, voice, and rage of Samara. Analyzing these iterations, it becomes possible to expose how the well adjusts itself to the unique narrative systems, without the need to give up its purpose as the reservoir of things that society avoids. Each of these cases places transgressive girlhood in the well: the aunt of Kingston,

who does not follow the sexual dictates of patriarchy; the child of Alexander, who is the mark of adult attacks, and Samara, who has a supernatural coming back, which indicates the inability to contain female rage. This cross-textual repetition of the well, therefore, dramatizes the manner in which the cultural systems entomb the experience of girlhood so as to enforce order.

Moreover, the preoccupation with violence on the bodies of girls and their narration can be traced in these texts as well. In Kingston, “No Name Woman,” is sent to extinction; in Alexander, the younger one is trained to be quiet; and Samara is literally sent to a world that resembles being locked away and drowned. The interpellation can be handy as a point of transition: both girls are called to a prescribed silence in society, be it family regulation, collective disgrace, or institutional disenfranchisement. However, in both stories, this constraint has been sabotaged through narratives. Kingston recreates the life of her aunt through speculative narration; Alexander recreates the past by revisiting the trauma in the form of a poetic memoir; *The Ring* takes the form of a silenced memory as a ghost story. The theories of witnessing by Gilmore and the radical speech practice by hooks work throughout all three texts, in cases where repression is framing. The well emerges as the location where testimony punctures through, and the submerged voices disturb the surface of the cultural norms. Therefore, the comparative approach shows that haunting, be it metaphoric or supernatural, is the narrative technique of the voices of the text through which all the texts insist that the girlhood testimony cannot be permanently effaced.

Conclusion

Storytelling’s transformative power in confronting and at times transcending the impacts of cultural stigma and marginalization assists in arriving at a place of empowerment, understanding, and collective healing. Narrative theory helps decipher what these stories are doing beneath the surface. A narrative device for

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reshaping trauma into meaning, each well, each silence, and each return to childhood becomes pivotal. By the time these girls speak—whether as memoirists or ghosts—the narrative itself has transformed, offering them a space that once buried them but now allows them to rise.

Combined, the novels of the silenced girlhood, *The Woman Warrior* by Kingston and *Fault Lines* by Alexander, alongside *The Ring*, demonstrate the continued existence of the narrative of silenced girlhood in memoir, folklore, cultural memory, and film. The symbolic well, which can be found in both texts, turns out to be a standard structural device, one that includes the long-buried trauma and also allows a descent into concealed histories. Kingston and Alexander enable us to see what the impact of interpellation bears on the identities of young women, bringing them to the shores of shame, secrecy, and surveillance. But with the help of life writing, they are able to wrestle these restrictions and change inherited silences into forms of their testimony that seek an audience. Agency and survival are facilitated in the narratives as Gilmore outlines the child witness and hooks emphasizes speech as healing. These themes are developed visually and viscerally in *The Ring*, through a dramatization of the re-emergence of silenced voices and the need to address what society is trying to silence.

Thus, this paper has compared and contrasted the use of narrative descent, whether literal or metaphorical, to gain access to marginalized experiences through reading and analyzing works side by side. In the end, what these tales note about speaking out of a place, using memoir or horror film, is that it is a form of protest through a response that reclaims the definition of girlhood as a place of strength and persistence as opposed to obliteration. The intimate nature of memoir allows for a fostering of empathy and understanding as writers reveal vulnerabilities and truths about themselves. Nicole Stamant suggests that memoirs contribute to larger conversations about identity, culture, and society: the form is

“highly flexible, memoir allows for and encourages multiple discourses and transgressed boundaries, as it is able to incorporate many different kinds of self-representation” (Stamant, 2014, p. 13). Whether through the confessional intimacy of memoir or the visual urgency of horror, each work asserts that girlhood speaks most powerfully when allowed to emerge from its silenced depths.

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