

Higher Education, Memoir Pedagogy and Seeing the Self-in-Coalition:
An Autoethnographic Witnessing of Contemporary Narratives in Trauma and Learning

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Abstract

This dissertation is an autoethnographic witnessing of five contemporary memoirs, each involving themes related to childhood trauma and learning. Through a thematic analysis of the narratives using the coding of structural violence and willfulness, I both analyze emerging subthemes beneath these codes as they relate to trauma, reflecting on my autoethnographic learning through reading the five memoirs as a doctoral student with a trauma history. I connect this learning to research on colonialism and equity in higher education, as relates to gender, race, and space. This project examines how memoir holds the potential to serve as a catalyst in learning about self and other, through witnessing the role of structural violence and willfulness in the lives of individuals. Ultimately, I seek to illustrate how memoir might be leveraged as a tool in contemporary trauma-informed pedagogical practice.

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Chapter 1: Linking Memoir and Learning

The primary endeavour of this dissertation is to explore my autoethnographic learning, as a woman in higher education with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), from memoirs including themes around trauma and learning, specifically structural violence and willfulness, and published between 2005 and 2025. Through conducting a thematic analysis of the memoirs, in conversation with my own experiences as a woman with a trauma history, I explore the potential for the development of a self-in-coalition through autoethnographic witnessing. Using memoir pedagogy as a starting point I employ Fukushima's (2023) autoethnography of witnessing to analyze key themes within a group of contemporary memoirs written by trauma survivors which have resonated with me as a boundary crosser specifically in the space of higher education. I began through conducting an autoethnographic and thematic analysis of three memoirs which served as catalysts for this research: *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls (2005), *Educated* by Tara Westover (2018), and *Breaking the Ocean* by Annahid Dashtgard (2019). Next, I analyzed two additional memoirs which included similar themes of structural violence, willfulness, and learning, written by authors from different cultural and social backgrounds than the first three authors: *We Have Always Been Here* by Samra Habib, and *From the Ashes* by Jesse Thistle. In Chapters 4 and 5, I detail my observations through an autoethnographic witnessing (Fukushima, 2023), as it relates to the overarching codes of structural violence and willfulness within each text. Memoir pedagogy provides an organic starting point for my autoethnographic research; it allows me to root the focus of this dissertation in seeing trauma and learning relationally, by moving beyond my own experiences and enhancing my ability to draw connections between larger social structures and the varying lived experiences of the memoirists.

On the connection between autoethnography and memoir, Carspecken (2023) argues that individuals writing about their experiences are always seeking to make sense of their context, and thus it becomes challenging to separate biography from ethnography. Carspecken invokes Ahmed's (2017) writing on companion texts, those key texts which "might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone" (p. 16). Through discovering and reading the memoirs examined in this research, I began to view myself as a self-in-coalition. In witnessing the stories of the memoirists I felt less alone in my experiences, and more deeply understanding of commonalities (as well as differences) for other trauma survivors in the space of higher education. I apply Fukushima's (2023) discussion of autoethnographic witnessing and the self-in-coalition because I feel a deep connection to the memoirs and therefore a sense of relationality, which has resulted in my being less isolated in my own experiences. Zaytoun (2019) describes the self-in-coalition as a pluralistic self who deepens their awareness of their relationality to others through a form of testimony or "deep listening" (p. 47-48). Within this research, I conceptualize my reading of the memoirs as a deep listening to the testimonies of others who have differing but relatable life experiences to myself, and I explore my own learning as a product of their testimony. Furthermore, I investigate the role of memoir in battling the deep feelings of isolation and shame which accompany C-PTSD, as witnessing the stories analyzed here has allowed me to establish a sense of self-in-coalition and to affirm that my experiences with structural violence and willfulness in higher education are indeed valid, and not only within my own mind.

I begin my analysis with an examination of each memoir as relates to themes of both structural violence and willfulness, as they emerge out of the literature which circulates on bodies out of place in higher education. Next, I employ Fukushima's (2023) concept of

autoethnographic witnessing to examine how my learning from each memoir has significantly shaped my personal reflections on being a PhD student and employee at a mid-size Canadian university living with a “trauma brain.” My exploration began with three key texts that I encountered organically during my first few years in the PhD program. I identified the overarching themes of structural violence and willfulness within these three memoirs and used them to seek out more memoirs that can offer an expanded and more diverse framework. This framework supports my autoethnographic witnessing (Fukushima, 2023) in the university context as a student with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD). Thus, I began my data collection by re-reading *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls (2005), *Educated* by Tara Westover (2018), and *Breaking the Ocean* by Annahid Dashtgard (2019), keeping notes on my own reactions and thoughts during this re-reading in order to go back and organize my responses according to the key themes of structural violence and willfulness, at which point I began to extract key subthemes within each of these concepts.

In this introductory chapter, I define willfulness and structural violence as key theoretical concepts, as well as outline background research on settler colonialism in the Canadian context, which is directly linked to the prevalence and relevance of trauma in the lives of students (and beyond, e.g. staff, faculty) in higher education. I also describe how I came across the three initial memoirs which inspired this research, and draw on my own experiences to illuminate why I have chosen to focus on overarching themes of structural violence and willfulness across the narratives within the memoirs while emphasizing the significance of such topics in the lives of students who have experienced trauma. Through examining the presence of hidden norms within the space of higher education, across varying experiences and narratives, I demonstrate the need for trauma-informed practices which will address the impact of such norms on students who may

be experiencing behaviours related to a history of trauma such as hypervigilance and perfectionism.

A brief example: it is standard practice within certain disciplines, such as STEM, to design courses where the final exam is worth 50% of a student's grade. While this practice might seem pedagogically sound for many educators, it can indeed cause excessive amounts of stress for students, some of whom may already be experiencing difficult circumstances. Information on the StatsCan website indicates a very steep decline in persistence of students in their degree programs between their second and graduating years of university. In 2018/2019 academic year, while almost 78% of students persisted after their second year of study, only 36% of them ultimately graduated. The number of graduates declines even further if adjusting for students enrolled in a STEM program (Statistics Canada, 2025). Significant studies have investigated attrition within STEM programs, finding that approximately half of students who enter STEM programs transfer out before completing, and that there are demographic links between attrition and one's social location (Simon et al., 2015). Furthermore, within the context of Western higher education, it is assumed that students will demonstrate extraordinarily high levels of resilience despite persistent challenges (e.g., poverty, precarious housing, mental or physical health struggles, intimate partner violence); however, research demonstrates that capacity for resilience differs amongst student populations and is significantly impacted by previous traumatic experiences. This is illustrated in a study conducted by Read et al (2011) which demonstrates that 66% of incoming students at university demonstrate a history of trauma exposure, with higher levels of severity in trauma exposure being linked with gender and socio-economic status.

Conceptual Framing: Willfulness, Structural Violence, and Settler Colonialism

I have conceptually framed my research in this dissertation using theory from the literature on structural violence in its varying forms (Ahmed, 2012; Puwar, 2004; Patel, 2021; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2021; Venet, 2021), as well as Ahmed's conceptualizations of willfulness and the feminist killjoy. I employ research surrounding trauma in higher education contexts to demonstrate how students with trauma histories are often framed as willful when they resist structural violence inherent to a settler colonial institution. Within this analysis I apply willfulness according to its conceptualization in Ahmed's (2014, 2010) writing as a state of being wherein an individual is "not persuaded by the reason of others" (Ahmed, 2010, *Getting in the Way* section, para 3). Ahmed traces the emergence of willfulness, and its use by authors such as Alice Walker and Marilyn Frye, to describe audacity and standing against the will that is placed upon those who embody difference, particularly women and women of colour. Importantly, Ahmed describes the consequences on the individual labeled as willful, as "a charge of killing joy" (*Getting in the Way* section, para 7). Thus, the willful individual is framed as a barrier to the happiness of those around them, through their insistence to "go against the flow" (*Getting in the Way* section, para 7). The literature on critical social justice frames "inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society" where certain social groups have increased access to resources and therefore, social privilege (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, xx). Thus, willfulness as a charge is directly linked to the presence of structural violence, and understood to be a consequence of an inability or refusal to move in alignment with the will of others and a presupposed flow.

Recent studies argue that contemporary shifts in university culture and admissions often involve incentives which target marginalized communities (at great benefit to the institution)

while reproducing structural policy and programming that is not conducive to their success (Jones & Nangah, 2021). These institutional barriers and inequities are too often framed as individual failures, and meritocracy is a common consequence of neo-liberal values present in an educational system designed to support individualism and emphasize competition over critical discourse and relationality (Giroux, 2020). Further, Patel (2021) emphasizes the deep linkages between colonial histories and contemporary neoliberal spread, specifically regarding higher education: “recent frameworks such as those tracking individuals with grit or a growth mindset have been used to diagnose the problem within youth, often poor and Black, Indigenous, and/or of migrant families” (p. 65). Patel argues that the resounding messages these studies put forward is that certain communities are lacking in a sense of grit, which they could leverage to “tough their way through intertwined obstacles such as discriminatory housing and employment, poorly resourced K-12 schools, environmental racism, and familial forced separation” (p. 65).

Conversely, marginalized students, especially woman-identifying and students who are Black or Indigenous, who question or refuse university practices that are grounded in neoliberal ideologies are often negatively framed as willful (Ahmed, 2014)). That is to say, “in speaking up or speaking out, [they] upset the situation” (Ahmed, 2010, Introduction section, para 3) where the situation itself is predicated on colonial, neoliberal values. When harm exists but remains unseen by those with power and privilege, naming that harm is recoded as the problem; the under-privileged or outsider is blamed as willful or troublesome for making visible what others did not—or did not wish to—see.

Background of My Story

In this section I provide additional context on the prevalence of trauma in spaces of learning through beginning with a personal story, then I elaborate further on the problem I am

addressing, as well as my research purpose and questions. I began therapy during the second month of my doctoral program and was diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), which is a form of PTSD resulting from exposure to prolonged trauma or stressful experiences and environments. This exposure often, but not always, results in psychological consequences related to affective and pathological changes in one's subjectivity (Herman, 2015). In other words, survivors of C-PTSD often have difficulty relating to the world and people around them due to hypervigilance, anxiety, and agitation. These challenges can result in repeated victimization (Venet, 2021; Haines, 2019; Herman, 2015). In therapy, I began to open my eyes to the ways that my educational journey had been closely linked to my method of relating to the world around me. For example, when I would discuss the grip that addiction has had on my family with my therapist, I was forced to acknowledge that I have my own addictions – they are just more socially accepted and even celebrated in higher education. I realized I was addicted to overworking, hypervigilance, and intellectualizing my feelings through subjugating my emotional and physical self in favour of *thinking*.

As a child, school was both a site of refuge and a place of pain. While I could escape some of the hardships of my home life, I found it difficult to feel seen by my teachers and peers in a manner which fit the image I had of myself. From a young age I viewed myself as someone who belonged at school, and who was curious as well as motivated. However, my primary school teachers seemed to either look right past me or consistently underestimate me. In high school I developed a stronger reputation with my educators, through maintaining consistently high grades and engaging in extra-curriculars. Reflecting on my experiences in K-12, combined with my MA research on my learning from popular culture, I have now come to understand that being praised for achievements was a form of addiction for me, and succeeding in school became my ideal

strategy of survival. Learning was a place where I could elevate my social standing, while being politically engaged regardless of how culturally confused I was. I did not need to have familial roots or a sense of cultural belonging because I was preoccupied with absorbing new information about the world around me and solving global struggles through being an activist. I could be a straight-A student and get into university programs without ever having to look inward, without having to like myself. Beyond surviving in education, I could picture myself thriving because I was used to adapting my own desires to make others around me happy and follow instructions. First, I had to learn how to make my teachers happy, then I could be happy.

I now see that school served as a critical site where I could re-establish a sense of safety and belonging, but only if I was successful at making others happy. This intense relation between my educational success and self-worth came with the caveat that failing would mean I was worthless. Through reflecting on my relationship to learning and willfulness during my first graduate degree (Grover, 2021), I came to realize that trauma and higher education have a delicately balanced relationship in the life of many academics who have experienced marginalization, in that many researchers derive a sense of belonging from finding their place in academia, but this is often accompanied by a mindset of production over wellbeing. Within my MA research, I found that living with a trauma history seemed to make me the ideal candidate for higher education, in that I did not value my personal wellbeing enough to set healthy work boundaries. I also began to see discourses of the willful subject (Ahmed, 2010; 2014), one who refuses (or cannot) to bend to the institutional or general will, as present in my experiences in the educational context. For example, during my undergraduate degree I frequently found myself involved in demonstrations and student groups which were directly opposed to certain university practices, such as movements demanding the university board divest from international arms

development, protesting the monopoly of food services and shutting down of small business vendors on campus, or lobbying for more environmentally conscious practices across the university.

Linking Higher Education and Structural Violence

The oppressive power of the university's institutional will is illustrated incisively in writing by academic women of colour. These researchers argue that spaces of higher education capitalize off marginalized individuals who are seeking a sense of belonging through making them the face of diversity campaigns and EDI initiatives (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2021). This trend becomes even more troublesome when university campuses, boardrooms, classrooms, and hallways act as sites of emotional, cultural, and psychosocial harm for those who embody diversity. When institutions of higher education include marginalized bodies but fail imperviously to address structural violence and to respond appropriately to acts of willfulness from those within marginalized groups, then the relationship becomes exploitative (Ahmed, 2012; Park & Francis, 2024). Ahmed (2010) observes, "happiness is sustained by erasing the signs of not getting along" (Killjoys section, para 4). Within the university context, willfulness can thus signal that those practices which serve to keep the institution running smoothly from a corporate perspective are not in alignment with the needs of its students. This is especially significant for students whose access to academic spaces is conditional or primarily intended to enhance the institution's visual representation of diversity and inclusion. For example, Park and Francis (2024) emphasize the role of Western superiority and economic interest in the increasing internationalization of university campuses with "almost unidirectional student mobility" (p. 3). Simultaneously, their research indicates that international students "may be disproportionately vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence on and off university and college

campuses” (p. 5). Park and Francis link the increased vulnerability that international students face to the settler colonial context of many Western universities, emphasizing the role of space and belonging in the experiences of students who have migrated to study in the Global West.

Research into different forms of trauma, such as trauma from physical or sexual violence (Horsman, 2000; van Ingen, 2020), as well as repeated exposure to acute and ambient trauma caused by racial, sexual, class, and ableist discrimination (King & Brigham, 2023; Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2021; Venet, 2021), has shown that it is prevalent in students conducting post-secondary studies in both Canada and the United States. Many of these studies emphasize the role of social issues such as poverty, unemployment, racism and gender inequity as contributing factors (DeRiviere, 2019; Read et al., 2011). For instance, Park and Francis (2024) summarize research conducted in Quebec, Canada which demonstrates that international students are more likely to experience sexual violence. This research also demonstrates that international students are more exposed to instances of high stress related to fear than their domestic peers. Further, at the host university where Park and Francis conducted their own study, a staff from the sexual violence and support team reported that 30% of cases of sexual violence are reported by international students, who make up only 13.7% of the student population. These studies emphasize the growing need for universities to be equipped to address trauma on campus.

Importantly, many social theorists assert the need to position trauma not as an individualized experience and solely psychological issue, but rather as a product of institutionalized oppression and subjugation (van Ingen, 2020). For example, Haines (2019) defines trauma as “an experience, series of experiences, and/or impacts from social conditions, that break or betray our inherent need for safety, belonging, and dignity” (p. 74). Within this passage, Haines’ use of ‘our’ refers to those groups for whom a healthy relationality to the

external world has been harmed and/or severed by oppressive systems or harmful environments.

Through her research on trauma recovery through boxing, van Ingen (2020) highlights that trauma-informed work must remain contextual and focused on systems of harm. Specifically, trauma recovery “requires bearing witness” as well as “activism and interventions beyond neuroscientific studies rooted in a biomedical model” (van Ingen, 2020, p. 119). Through an autoethnography of witnessing, I remain focused on the context of structural violence and willfulness as it relates to the experiences of trauma survivors in spaces of higher education.

Within this research, I engage with the stories of those whose relationality to their environment has been harmed, as well as groups historically marginalized in the space of higher education due to the systemic colonial violence inherent to the Western university (Patel, 2021; Steinman & Kovats Sánchez, 2021).

Exploring narratives related to trauma and learning within contemporary memoirs (written in the last twenty years), I analyze for subthemes related to the codes of willfulness and structural violence, to identify larger implications for learners with a trauma history. I root this analysis within my autoethnographic witnessing (Fukushima, 2023) of the memoirs examined, where I draw connections between the narratives explored and my own experiences as a student who identifies with the following labels: first generation, mature, queer, racialized, and working-poor. It is important to name these categories as the perceptions associated with them significantly impact my experiences; however, it is equally important that I emphasize the importance of context within my narrative, and do not conflate my experience with another. I draw lines of solidarity between my experiences and the memoirists’, exploring the relationship between trauma and learning. Recurring themes across differing experiences present opportunities for viewing the self-in-coalition. I return to Ahmed’s (2010) discussion of the

feminist killjoy and other willful subjects, and her assertion that “to be willing to cause unhappiness can also be how we immerse ourselves in collective struggle, as we work with and through others who share our points of alienation” (“Killjoys” section, para 3). Perhaps in knowing that we are not isolated in an alien position within such spaces (King & Brigham, 2023), students who are positioned as willful within the institution could begin to witness ourselves and our actions as empowering, through the view of a self-in-coalition.

Fukushima (2023) emphasizes the role of decoloniality in moving autoethnography beyond the self and into a collective and relational way of seeing. Relational ways of seeing emphasize the role of contradiction in one’s decolonial witnessing, as researchers who are, as Fukushima (2023) notes, “shaped by colonial structures – where coloniality is multiple - spatially, historically, and embodied” (p. 138). Thus, those who illuminate the role of colonialism in higher education and seek to oppose it, such as those who draw connections between trauma and learning, form a community “across divisive boundaries” (p. 139).

I distinguish between colonialism –a broad term denoting the forced spread and structural dominance of Western or European intellectualism, customs, and rules globally– and settler colonialism in the Canadian context. Settler colonialism is a distinct theory that recognizes legacies of harm that continue to pervade all social structures and institutions. Settler colonialism reproduces and maintains colonial dominance through rationalizing the theft of Indigenous land and cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples and communities (Park & Francis, 2024). For example, the over-surveillance and disproportionate punishment of Black and Indigenous students in sites of education is both a legacy of colonialism and a product of settler colonialism. A 2013 study conducted by the Toronto District School Board found that Black students were three times more likely to be suspended, in comparison to their white peers. Further, Black

students were expelled at a rate of four times their representation in the student population, and Indigenous students at 3.3 times their rate of representation (James & Turner, 2017).

Recommendations coming out of the study included an increased awareness of non-Eurocentric epistemologies for instructors, staff, and support workers, as well as representation in teaching staff. These patterns which occur in K-12 schooling shape the context for students who enter spaces of higher education (King & Brigham, 2023). When discussing colonialism in the context of the Canadian university, I am referring to these ongoing consequences of settler colonialism, which continue to reinforce the dominance of Eurocentric ways of knowing in spaces of higher education. I expand on decolonial feminism and relationality in Chapter 2: Theorizing ‘Bodies Out of Place.’

In addition to post-secondary education being a site where students with a trauma history may find themselves re-traumatized (King & Brigham, 2023), Bimm and Feldman (2020) highlight how “the university can be a socially toxic environment that produces trauma through its policies” (n.p.). Rather than viewing a student’s inability to perform at high standards or meet the rigid policies and practices of the university context as a personal failing, the literature on trauma-informed pedagogy asks educators to view the institution itself as exclusionary (Bimm & Feldman, 2020). The rigidity and standardization inherent to a neoliberal institution that is focused on maximizing profit and efficiency often contribute to harmful psychological impacts and psychosocial behaviours for students who may be unable to effectively interpret and meet these policies. The recent turn to consumerism in spaces of higher education is discussed in detail by Giroux (2020):

If the politics of economic growth, scientism, and technical relationality influenced public and higher education in the 1980s, a new and more vicious mode of ideology and

teaching, which I call neoliberal pedagogy, has emerged and now dominates education at all levels of schooling. As a pedagogical practice, neoliberal pedagogy also pervades every aspect of the wider culture, stifling critical thought, reducing citizenship to the act of consuming, defining certain marginal populations as contaminated and disposable, and removing the discourse of democracy from any vestige of pedagogy both in and outside of schooling. (p. 7)

Consequences of neoliberal pedagogy include larger class sizes, limited funding for social science, liberal arts, and humanities programs, tightly packed terms with high demands on educators to transfer large amount of information over a short time-frame (Giroux, 2020). Further consequences include increased pressure on faculty and staff supports to meet ever-increasing needs of students who are experiencing high levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. This turn to neoliberal pedagogy can often result in many students not receiving timely support, inability to access resources for various reasons, or experiencing feelings of overwhelm and disillusionment with the lengthy processes and waiting involved in accessing supports – students who ‘fall through the cracks’ in an institution geared towards maximizing sustainable profits (Bimm and Feldman, 2020). Broadly speaking, students for whom the practices of higher education are inequitable may exist within many different and compounding social categories, but this subset of students who ‘fall through the cracks’ often includes an overrepresentation of students from equity-deserving groups (women, racialized students, disabled students, first-generation students) as well as students impacted by significant trauma. One need only examine which demographics of students are over-represented on academic probation records and in retention-based programming to understand that rigid university expectations are inequitable for those students who have not been steeped in the

middle-class cultural codes presumed in the university context (Bimm & Feldman, 2020; James & Taylor, 2023).

In early writings, Bourdieu (1977, as cited by Giroux 2001) argues that educational institutions require an expansive knowledge of the dominant cultural practices, determined by the location and history of the institution itself. According to Bourdieu, these cultural practices often present as norms or cultural codes which only students from dominant social categories would have access to. Typically, this includes those with parents who attended university or 2nd generation students. The concept of cultural capital is further discussed and problematized in Chapter 2, however, in discussing Western education institutions as sites of reproduction for Eurocentrism, the concept of cultural codes is relevant. In addition to those students who do not have equal access to these cultural codes, there are students who have overwhelming responsibilities outside of their studies, or who are undergoing persistent mental health struggles due to their social and economic location or their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

My research is largely predicated on studies which demonstrates that institutions of higher education are colonial institutions, meaning they reproduce and overvalue Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies, as well as continue to uphold white supremacy and patriarchy through policy and practice which center Euro-whiteness and male superiority (Henry et al., 2017; King & Brigham, 2023; Patel, 2021; Tuck, 2018). hooks (2004) describes the interlocking nature of these systems of oppression which are rooted in the institutionally supported dominance of one social category over another. The harms of a university culture that upholds tenets of an “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 2004, p. 17) are largely invisible. These harms emerge in the spaces of seemingly small administrative decisions, incremental changes to provincial and institutional funding, on course outlines with biased

reading lists and exclusionary assessments, and in those institutional policies which are influenced more by a vision of the university as a business rather than an educational institution. As a student immersed in such a culture, I have experienced first-hand how it can be difficult to identify the exact cause of one's distress when there are many compounding inequities happening in real time and mostly ignored or written off by the university administration and faculty as status quo.

Immersion in stressful living conditions, such as living in poverty, experiencing emotional neglect, or being subjected to emotional and physical abuse, does not always presuppose that an individual will recognize signs of threat to their wellbeing. This is of great importance to a conceptual framing of trauma-informed pedagogy. Often within the space of higher education individuals are celebrated for their resilience and grit, normalizing their capacity for subjugating their emotional and physical wellbeing to garner success in their career or academic pursuits (Tuck, 2018; Ahmed, 2012). During a therapy session in the first year of my doctoral studies, my counsellor likened the environment I grew up in to a frog being boiled in a pot. She told me that if I were to put a frog in a pot of tepid water and slowly turn up the heat, I would succeed in boiling the frog. However, if I were to drop a frog into a pot of boiling water, they would quickly jump out. This was when I realized that trauma was a label that could be applied to my childhood experiences, as trauma can also be enacted through consistent instances of slow violence (Nixon, 2011).

Rooted in environmental studies, Nixon describes slow violence as a process of harm which takes place incrementally and often invisibly, but which is so persistent in one's life that it begins to take on an aspect of normalcy. While Nixon conceptualizes slow violence as a phenomenon which allows extreme environmental degradation to become permissible, the

concept helped me to understand that persistent environmental harm applies to one's mental and emotional landscapes. I had adapted to the persistent neglect and chaos of my childhood, and to the classist, sexist, and racist violence faced by myself and family members. I began to adopt behaviours and survival strategies to protect myself and those I love - much like the academic or student who pushes themselves to meet tight deadlines, working over capacity and with limited resources, meeting the demands of harsh policies for misconduct and probation. Slow violence shapes one's relations to the surrounding world; in my case, it significantly structured how I engage with people and institutions, including in education. Through therapy and sustained reflection on the sources of my anxiety and depression, I came to recognize the formative role of slow structural violence in my life. I had to actively assume responsibility for disengaging from the harmful beliefs exacerbated in academic contexts that emotional detachment was either possible or desirable. Ahmed (2010) frames this as a pivotal part of feminist becoming, as it aligns with her argument that "becoming a feminist might mean becoming aware of *just how much* there is to be unhappy about. Feminist consciousness could be understood as consciousness of unhappiness, a consciousness made possible by the refusal to turn away" ("Killjoys" section, para 6, emphasis in original).

In reflection, I can identify that once I had physically removed myself from some of those environments which were harming me, I found I still could not relate to the world in traditionally productive and 'healthy' ways. For me, relating to the world in sometimes 'unhealthy' ways (hypervigilance, dissociation, depression, and anxiety) is to live with a trauma history, and to experience the effects of slow violence in many contexts. For example, due to my experiences growing up in an unstable and sometimes unsafe environment, as an adult I often experience anxiety triggers related to common everyday tasks, such as driving to a new place in the city or

replacing broken household items. Barriers which might be a small occurrence in another person's daily life often become insurmountable catastrophes for my hyperactive nervous system. These persistent triggers mean that I am regularly planning for worst-case scenarios (e.g., car breaking down mid-intersection, a broken vacuum I can't afford to replace) and how I will handle them when they eventually occur. These triggers cause me to live in a state of chronic stress and persistent hypervigilance. In some cases my mental state can lead to difficulty responding to certain *everyday* events: I am often hyper-sensitive in moments where a challenging or unusual circumstance occurs, and I must call into question whether I am overreacting. I internally debate whether my unhappiness is an indicator of my own failings, or a consequence of structural violence. In other words, I have difficulty trusting my own thoughts and emotions. Ahmed (2010) writes,

The figure of the killjoy could be rethought in terms of the politics of willfulness. I suggested earlier that an activist archive is an unhappiness archive, one shaped by the struggles of those who are willing to struggle against happiness. We might redescribe this struggle in terms of those who are willing to be willful. An unhappiness archive is a willfulness archive. ("Getting in the way" section, para 1)

There are pivotal moments throughout my university career where I have felt a deep unhappiness and where I used to interpret this feeling as there being something *wrong with me*. I am now learning to ask myself if my unhappiness is sparked by the slow violence of structural oppression. In the following section, I provide an example from my own experiences to illustrate this point further.

In July of 2022, I was hired by a department at my institution and transitioned from being a full-time student to working for the university full-time, and moving into part-time studies.

During this switch, an error was made in processing the change administratively and I was retroactively switched to part-time status for the term which began three months before my employment. As a consequence of this error, my funding payment was reversed. This change resulted in a large outstanding balance on my student account that went undetected for a full academic term. I admit fault in not noticing the balance sooner, as I was so overwhelmed with a new full-time position, working an additional contract, writing and researching, and living my home life with young children, that I failed to check the status of my student account. When I sought help to understand why I was being asked to repay funding for a term that had been completed *before* I moved to part-time employment, I was told that this was standard practice - the institution had to change my status to part time regardless of whether it was retroactive or not. This is where the existence of my trauma history interfered with my perception, because rather than feeling defiant or brazenly searching for more answers, I was immediately overwhelmed with feelings of shame, fear, and overwhelm. The message in my brain was: You fucked up again, and you will suffer because of it.

Shortly after this discovery of the university changing my financial account into arrears and to protect a new hire from experiencing this same situation, I explained the circumstances to one of my colleagues. She told me it had to be a mistake, having gone through a similar process years before with no issue or reversal of funding. She sent me the official Change of Status Form which clearly indicated that requests needed to be made in advance of academic terms because *retroactive change of status was against the policy*. This pulled me out of the trigger I was experiencing, and I wrote to Graduate Studies to point out the error. I was informed that processing errors ‘sometimes happen’ and that my financial account would be adjusted to reflect the correct change of status in a couple of days. However, I waited several months for the

charges to be reversed, and multiple interest charges accrued while I was waiting for the issue to be resolved. I was presented with a new dilemma: pay \$800 of interest charges or continue to advocate for myself with the staff across the university. I recall how looking at the mess of charges and reversals on my account, and feeling the weight of the decision, made me want to shut down.

In tears, I decided to visit the Registrar's Office. A cold room filled with desks and little privacy for challenging conversations. Just being in the space transported me back to my undergraduate Registrar Office, where I had also appealed to the compassion of a staff member when my student loan installment was late and I couldn't pay my rent. After explaining the current situation and admitting that I could not make sense of my account, the individual behind the desk (who admitted that they also could not make sense of all the charges and reversals) told me they would reach out to finance and email me in a few days. I waited two weeks with no news, and finally I mustered the courage to email the Registrar's Office to enquire further about my case. There is an odd power dynamic associated with entering the email inbox of colleagues with questions about your financial account that have not been addressed. Five days after my enquiry, I received a response informing me that the charges were correct and that the Finance Department recommend I reach out to Graduate Studies for clarification. And then came more tears. Not only was I dealing with this endless back and forth over an error that *someone else* had made, but I had also just found out that I had to start paying back my provincial and federal student loans because being a current part-time student did not exclude me from paying back a decade's worth of full-time loans. For those individuals who have experienced financial insecurity, there is likely a familiarity with the sense of utter helplessness, the sense of drowning

that I began to feel in this moment. When I look at my loan statement it sometimes feels like I am living 20 feet below water, with no escape from the weight above me, nor the depths below.

I could go on and share numerous more emails, but the summary is this: I was treated like a fool, whose poverty was their own problem, and who simply did not understand the rules, repeatedly. When they finally fixed their mistake, I received an email saying, “Great news,” and informing me that they had finally reassessed my account and removed the interest charges. Of course, in lieu of an apology I was reminded to “make a payment as soon as possible to avoid any further interest fees accruing.” There was not a single apology extended, and as evidenced by the email exchanges, there was a lack of empathy throughout the entire exchange. These exchanges reinscribe a cycle of financial triggers, shame, and self-reproach—a pattern many students experience under dehumanizing policies and procedures. At this point in my academic trajectory, informed by scholarship on trauma in higher education, I interpret much of my affective response as a manifestation of a hypervigilant nervous system. Yet this recognition does not absolve institutional responsibility: universities must become more trauma-informed, responsive, and accountable to students as whole human beings.

Statement of Problem and Rationale

Through examining themes consistent across the memoirs, as well as illuminating my own autoethnographic learnings as a PhD student and employee at a midsize Canadian university, I expand on a burgeoning field of literature which calls for trauma-informed practice in spaces of higher education. This study addresses a persistent failure in Canadian higher education: routine policies and interactions that disregard trauma reproduce slow structural violence and dysregulate students’ mental health and coping systems. Using a cross-memoir thematic analysis alongside an autoethnography of witnessing from my position as a PhD student

and employee at a midsize Canadian university, I demonstrate how everyday administrative practices—despite institutional commitments to equity— might regularly precipitate hyper-arousal or more harms for student trauma survivors. While acknowledging my own positional privileges, I document how empathy is withheld, accountability is diffused, and students are recast as the problem rather than the harmed. The rationale for this study is to advance the emerging literature on trauma-informed higher education by specifying mechanisms of harm and outlining implications for policy and practice.

Although I have recently come to hold more privilege in some academic spaces that I inhabit, I continue to witness instances of structural violence impacting students who are trauma survivors that often results in states of hyper-arousal, with potential to re-traumatize, activate trauma symptoms, or trigger a fight/flight response which can lead to a student cheating, becoming aggressive, or removing themselves from formal educational spaces. For example, I have received emails from students in the middle of the night disclosing feelings of overwhelming anxiety or suicidal ideation, and in each instance when I have been able to meet with them, listen to their concerns openly, and to discuss options for peer-to-peer support and emphasize that *they are not alone*, they usually return to class with a renewed sense of motivation. Furthermore, in asking post-secondary students to prioritize intellectualism over wellbeing, academia puts students at risk of experiencing a trauma response in relation to the intense periods of isolation and high stress, amplifying the potential for interpersonal conflict and violence (Bimm and Feldman, 2020). These instances emphasize the role that feelings of safety, belonging, and dignity play in students' overall wellbeing in higher education, in terms of retention and success in their classes, but also in their ability to relate to their peers and feel a sense of fulfilment. Student wellbeing is significantly impacted by structural violence which

denies student harms by framing them as willful subjects in the space of higher education when they are forced to self-advocate.

Scholarship on trauma-informed higher education is rapidly expanding (Bimm & Feldman, 2020; Thomas et al., 2019; Davidson, 2016; Carello & Butler, 2014). This work argues that universities must (1) acknowledge their complicity in harming marginalized students—including the chronic and myriad stressors produced by models that privilege only certain demographics—and (2) reform policies and practices to better support and educate trauma survivors. Building on this, Bimm and Feldman (2020) and Carello and Butler (2014) contend that institutions can mitigate future harm by recognizing the interdependence of oppression and privilege and by shifting from individualized responses toward institutional, collective awareness and action.

I assert that of equal importance is a sense of institutional accountability in providing opportunities for students to view themselves as a self-in-coalition, where they are not isolated through their being unseated from the table of happiness (Ahmed, 2010). In Oliver's (2001) writing on response-ability, she argues that individuals hold an inherent responsibility when bearing witness to another's trauma, or as Fukushima (2023) denotes, witnessing on the side of the oppressed. My goal within this research is to advance the field of trauma-informed pedagogy by exploring the potential of memoir pedagogy and an autoethnography of witnessing as tools for building communities across differing individual experiences. I utilize my experiences and learning from such memoirs to illuminate the nuanced and often contradictory nature of being an academic with a trauma history, while emphasizing the role of self-in-coalition (Fukushima, 2023) in addressing structural violence and finding one's roots in willfulness (Ahmed, 2014).

Scaffolding my research on Horsman's (2004) recognition of the "complex interconnection of all types of violence," this research seeks to examine the ways that educational practice might acknowledge and address the "range of violence in learners' lives" (p. 133) through exploring the nuanced and varied experiences within key memoirs, as well as my personal learning journey as a PhD student in the Canadian southern Ontario context, as it connects to themes from the memoirs. My own learning journey, both in terms of the connection between trauma and learning, as well as facing my own traumatic experiences, was significantly shaped by three pivotal memoirs which center on themes of intergenerational trauma, poverty, belonging, learning, and race. Throughout this research process, and significantly influenced by my learning while reading *The Glass Castle* (Walls, 2005), *Educated* (Westover, 2018) and *Breaking the Ocean* (Dashtgard, 2019), I begin with questions that are more exploratory in nature, and which "seek to uncover the perspectives of an individual, a group, or different groups" and focus on "a *particular* situation with a *particular* person or group" (Agee, 2009, p. 434, italics in original). Employing the zooming in and zooming out method discussed by Taber et al (2017), "whereby the learner goes deeply into the memoirs but must also come out in order to read around it" (p. 32), I zoom in on themes that are present within each memoir and their relevance to my autoethnographic learning, before zooming out and connecting back to wider societal implications through the themes of structural violence and willfulness. As such, my initial analysis focused on my autoethnographic witnessing of the above memoirs, as well as subsequent memoirs I searched for using initial themes which emerge through an analysis of the first three. Following this, I engage in a zooming out (Taber et al, 2017) to connect the thematic analysis to my autoethnographic learnings. Utilizing Fukushima's (2023) conception of autoethnography as witnessing, I hope to address a way forward for higher education in

supporting the community represented in my research and beyond. Furthermore, through drawing connections across my own experiences, and those within the memoirs explored in my research, I demonstrate how relationality, as a form of decolonial praxis (Fukushima, 2023), can be used to impact meaningful change within institutions of higher education.

Research Questions

My main research questions are: 1) What are my autoethnographic learnings from contemporary memoirs that address trauma, structural violence and willfulness? And 2) how does memoir pedagogy shape my view of myself as a self-in-coalition, as a woman in higher education with a trauma history?

Research Purpose

Within this dissertation, I use autoethnographic witnessing (Fukushima, 2023) to examine chosen memoirs which center narratives related to trauma and learning, searching for narrative themes under the overarching codes of structural violence and willfulness in higher education. I analyze the memoirs, putting them in conversation with my own experiences as a PhD student with a trauma history, identifying key patterns and themes across both my experiences and those within the memoirs. I analyze my own experiences in relation to the themes within the memoirs through my application of Taber et al.'s (2017) zooming in, where I will closely examine my own narrative in relation to those within the memoirs by searching for themes consistent across varying stories. Using narrative analysis (Josselson & Hammack, 2021), I highlight the nuanced interactions between each author's trauma history, linked to structural violence, and moments of willfulness. I begin with themes present across the memoirs, grounding my analysis in the literature summarized in Chapter 2, related to trauma and learning, as well as a methodological praxis of autoethnographic witnessing – to be expanded on in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 I engage in

the processes of zooming in and zooming out. I begin through witnessing parts of myself within the stories of others, while still immersed in the culture and community of higher education. This helped me to name experiences which I had previously been unable to process or make sense of. I zoom out through contextualizing the narrative themes within larger social phenomenon and structures - a key catalyst in both an autoethnographic witnessing and decolonial feminist coalition building through relational ways of seeing (Fukushima, 2023). Zooming out often serves as a catalyst for an individual to identify and name structural violence which was more difficult to see while immersed within the institution itself. In Chapter 5 I explore the potential in witnessing of the testimonies of others as means of combatting the isolation which can accompany immersion in harmful structures, as well as the self-in-coalition. Finally, in Chapter 6 I make recommendations for shifting policy and practice in higher education.

I begin this examination with three memoirs that illuminate my learning around themes of structural violence and willfulness: *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls (2005), *Educated* by Tara Westover (2018), and *Breaking the Ocean* by Annahid Dashtgard (2019). Each of these memoirs involves aspects of trauma and its impacts on learning, and each has had its own unique contribution to my own learning surrounding my family history with intergenerational trauma, addiction, and emotional neglect. In *The Glass Castle*, Walls describes candidly her experiences growing up in immense poverty with an alcoholic father and emotionally unstable mother, and there are glimmers of hope in her story when people see her potential as a learner and writer. In *Educated*, Westover shares a similar story of growing up amidst chaos and neglect. The emotional and physical abuse she suffers at the hands of her brother add an additional layer of violence that resonated with me. Like Walls, Westover finds a way out of hardship due to her academic prowess and her brilliant writing. In *Breaking the Ocean*, Dashtgard details her

experiences growing up in a suburb in Edmonton, as a young girl whose family immigrated from Iran, and she illuminates how unhealed trauma can manifest in the form of overachieving, selflessness, and ‘hustle’ or ‘grind’ mentalities. While Dashtgard’s memoir stands out for its focus on race in shaping her experiences of intergenerational trauma, this story engages less with class disparity and instead emphasizes the pitfalls of grit. Each one of these memoirs provided me with a palpable sense of connection, from reading about Walls picking up her father from local dive bars, to Westover internalizing shame and fear due to patriarchal violence, as well as Dashtgard diminishing her own sense of self in order to be palatable as the ‘good girl’ or model minority who would do anything for her community regardless of her own wellbeing.

These three memoirs came into my life organically and I read them all during my time as doctoral student at a midsize university in southern Ontario. First, *Educated*, was a required text for my first doctoral seminar and I read it the month before the course began. I cannot say for sure, but I believe it was chosen as a course text due its theme of education as liberating and transformative. For me, the themes struck a bit differently. I have documentation of my initial response to the text via an Instagram post in June of 2019,

Unbelievably painful and intoxicating. Those are the only words that come to mind after reading this for two days straight. If you’re a trauma survivor I don’t know that I recommend this memoir, but at the same time I find it a beautifully written journey into the necessity of selfhood, PTSD healing and boundary setting. This book and the very real people it’s about will probably haunt me for a while.

As indicated, my first impression of reading *Educated* was that it brought forward some of my own pain regarding my past experiences, both with my family and also in educational settings. I found *Educated* informative in its depiction of intergenerational trauma, healing, and prioritizing

oneself over familial attachment. The impact of reading *Educated* on my life really cannot be overstated. The memoir was a catalyst for me both academically and personally, as I wrote my final paper in the doctoral seminar about my learning from the text shortly after I began to see a therapist and was diagnosed with C-PTSD. I chose to pivot my research to more closely examine the connection between trauma, culture, and learning. Through reading this memoir, I realized that I had indeed grown up steeped in intergenerational trauma, and that these experiences had a lasting impact on the way I related to the world around me, including in the university context.

Soon after this, in the Winter of 2020, I was invited for coffee by a previous mentor from my MA program who wanted to hear more about my plans for the dissertation. I told her I was hoping to investigate the relationship between trauma, culture, and learning, and she noted *Breaking the Ocean* as a “must-read” for me, due its nuanced representation of these three themes from the perspective of a racialized women in Canada. The next time I ran into this mentor in the halls of the department, she ran into her office and came out with a copy of the book for me. Like *Educated*, I found the memoir to be gripping and devoured it quickly. I emailed her as soon as I finished it,

I just finished *Breaking the Ocean*, literally moments ago, and I had to send this note. I’m unable to express just how much this book has meant to me. Often times it was as though someone had been watching my own life from above and found a way to write about the nuances of some of the most painful experiences from my youth.

Not only has it given me renewed passion for my dissertation, these words have found me during a time in my life when I need them most (can’t be a coincidence). Like Annahid, I am learning how to self-regulate and come out of triggers without letting my somatic response affect my family and work life. I consider myself lucky to have had someone

look at my pain and name it as trauma almost a decade before Annahid was given this gift.

Thank you so much for this book, from the bottom of my heart.

Once again, I express reflections of my own experiences within the text and share that reading it has been personally transformative regarding my own struggles with C-PTSD, as during the time of reading the book I was navigating persistent triggers and attempting to manage my workload as a first-year doctoral student.

In the Spring of 2023, I was asked to lead a workshop on anti-oppression and trauma-informed practice at a departmental retreat, as part of my role at the university I work for. After the workshop, and likely inspired by the content, my colleague asked if I had read *The Glass Castle*, and I told her I had not. The next day she brought me her copy, and I read it the following week during a long flight overseas. As this colleague and I share an office, I do not have an email record of my reaction to the memoir, but I will share some of what I expressed to her upon returning the book. While my colleague had found resonance with the main character, I expressed more identification with the older sister who is often portrayed as a clear-eyed observer and the first to escape the familial cycle of poverty, addiction, and abuse. What I found particularly striking about this memoir, and my reaction to reading it, was that education (primarily writing) was framed as leverage to disrupt patterns of intergenerational trauma. While this resonates deeply with my own experience, as I too left my family home to pursue an education and have subsequently sought to disrupt patterns of cyclical family trauma, I also wonder whether this framing can be problematized. Although my journey into higher education has led me to a potential path of healing, I often wonder if a different path could have done so in

a more straightforward way, as I have also had to live with the chronic stress of institutional barriers, blurred work and home life boundaries, and an insurmountable amount of student debt.

In reflecting on the themes present within these memoirs, there is a significant gap in the areas of race and sexuality as relates to structural violence and willfulness. For this reason, and based on feedback from my committee during my portfolio defense, a second stage in my analysis involved actively seeking out further memoirs which contained these key themes in their narrative explorations, centering the perspectives of queer and racialized individuals. While the three memoirs discussed above have a focus on gender, intergenerational trauma, and addiction, two of them are written from the perspective of white women growing up in America and therefore present some significant difference from my own social location and context.

Therefore, I have chosen to further explore narratives written from the perspective of individuals in the Canadian context, who discuss their own nuanced experiences with trauma, race, culture and structural violence, primarily where I can identify themes related to spaces of learning. The two memoirs I found in this focused search were *We Have Always Been Here* by Samra Habib (2019), and *From the Ashes* by Jesse Thistle (2019). In *We Have Always Been Here*, Habib shares a coming-of-age story of a young girl observing the role of patriarchy and racial oppression in the lives of the women around her, reflecting on her own journey to discovering her sexuality and subjectivity, free from societal expectations. In *From the Ashes*, Thistle traces his childhood experiences with neglect, abuse, and addiction, illustrating the intergenerational harms of displacement and colonial harms. During this time, I also discovered the journalistic style memoir *They Said This Would Be Fun*, written by Eternity Martis (2020) as a reflection on her experiences at university in London, Ontario. However, I found that Martis' (2020) memoir focused predominantly on the university context and experience, and while quite insightful for

investigating the potential of trauma-informed practice in combatting structural violence, it was less of a ‘fit’ in terms of examining structural violence and willfulness as they interact in the lives of students before seeking to find belonging in spaces of learning. I engage with Martis’ (2020) writing more in Chapter 5, as her experiences are a poignant illustration of the need for transformation in higher education contexts.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore the literature in the areas of trauma as it relates to equity in higher education, decolonial and intersectional feminism as it relates to structural violence and willfulness in spaces of learning, and memoir pedagogy and its connection to autoethnography. I summarize the key theories which have informed the theoretical framing for this research, as well as authors who have contributed to the lens I use to examine these specific memoirs in relation to trauma and learning. I begin in Chapter 2 by exploring theories of gender, race, and space, significantly informed by feminist and decolonial researchers, and then I discuss the Canadian higher education context and the link between higher education and trauma. In Chapter 3, I detail my methodological grounding in autoethnography as witnessing, narrative analysis, and memoir pedagogy. I start by tracing the lineage of autoethnography as a methodology. Next, I explain the role of narrative and memoir pedagogy in an autoethnography of witnessing, concluding Chapter 3 with a description of the methods I use to analyze the chosen memoirs for themes related to structural violence and willfulness, as well as how I examine my own experiences in the university setting against those themes.

In Chapter 4, I summarize my analysis of each memoir, beginning with a zooming in, or self-reflexive reading of each narrative (Josselson & Hammack, 2021), highlighting my personal experience reading the memoir. Next, I engage in a zooming out analysis to examine the specific themes present in each memoir, using both zooming in and zooming out stages to extract the

common themes across the memoirs in a sentence long descriptive theme which “tells a story” (Josselson & Hammack, 2021, p. 36) and connects back to the literature from Chapters 2 and 3. Next, in Chapter 5, I further explore the implications of my own learning from the memoirs, framed around my thematic analysis. Finally, in Chapter 6 I highlight the opportunities for institutions of higher education to leverage memoir pedagogy to engage students in learning around the self-in-coalition and make recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Theory on ‘Bodies Out of Place’

In this section I discuss theories related to higher education and trauma, particularly the role that gender, race, and space all play in experiences of trauma and structural violence within higher education. Through connecting the concepts of willfulness, space invaders, and talking back to the pervasiveness of trauma in the lives of marginalized groups in higher education, I illuminate the connection between an individual’s embodiment and their capacity for willfulness in sites of learning. I also trace the emergence of trauma-informed pedagogy and emphasize its roots in the field of critical pedagogy. Finally, I connect themes of trauma and higher education back to the literature on memoir and narrative as a form of “writing through” difficult experiences, emphasizing how memoirs can act as a site of transformative learning, through the development of a view of the self-in-coalition, as relates to trauma.

Gender, Race and Space

Although I cannot quite recall the exact moment when I realized I was a feminist, I can pinpoint several moments throughout my life where there was a discomfort related to structural violence, that I can now identify as “a sensory event that was too overwhelming to process at the time” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 23). One of the key places where I found myself able to make sense of my experiences, beyond popular culture narratives which I can now identify as including themes of trauma, was in reading critical social theory. Ahmed discusses feminism as being sensational, and inextricably linked to one’s embodiment, due to repeatedly experiencing physical, emotional, and sensory violations. I theorize these sensational moments as threats to one’s ability to relate to the outside world, as potential harms to their safety, and Ahmed roots such a feeling in her discussions of being a willful subject or killjoy (Ahmed, 2010). She wrote, “Experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time, gathering like things in a bag, but the bag is your

body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight” (2017, p. 23). In reading these words and learning more about different intersectional and decolonial feminist theories, I begin to understand the weight I have been carrying from a lifetime of having my self-worth threatened or called into question. Not solely due to sexism or gendered violations, but also racist remarks, misplaced hatred and verbal abuse, as well as class insecurity and microaggressions, beginning before I even understood why I was experiencing these social phenomena. My experiences of being hyper sexualized or racialized are blurred with crystal clear memories of being informed during recess that when God made me he said, “Whoops, I burned another one,” or having a strange boy in the park shout that it’s okay I’m ugly because “you all look the same bent over in the dark.” These dismissals and undervaluation of my self-worth have been consistent in my life, until the voices from outside began to be internalized. These moments are interwoven with the moments where I expected teachers to demonstrate patience and compassion, much like they did with the children around me - seeing that when I made mistakes I was simply doing what *any kid* would do, but instead being disproportionately punished and told by my fourth-grade teacher that I would someday be looking at the world through bars.

My feminist becoming is intricately enmeshed in my consciousness raising surrounding social structures such as gender, race, and class – to name only a few. I was never being abused simply because I was a girl, but a chubby, poor, brown tomboy, whose family was well known in town - and not in a good way. This is not to say my experiences were always worse because of these interlocking systems, only that they were different, and with a complexity that I could barely comprehend. During my initial foray into graduate studies, I started to see how spending my life existing outside of the normative structures of gender, race and class, has meant that historically I have been positioned as a willful subject (Ahmed, 2014) in educational spaces.

Ahmed conceptualizes the willful subject as one who strays from the normative path, who is typically charged as willful by someone external to themselves. The willful subject is one who is read as being “not in tune or who are out of tune,” who does not necessarily follow the will of those around them, and this non-conformity often positions them as obstacles to a social or general will (p. 134). According to Ahmed:

Feminist, queer, and antiracist histories can be thought of as histories of those who are willing to be willful, who are willing to turn a diagnosis into an act of self-description. (p. 134)

Thus, in the institution of higher education, where my physical and emotional presence is often in stark contrast to those for whom such institutions were designed, I am frequently positioned as willful – as out of tune with the overall aim of normative order.

In their writing around how bodies construct and inhabit space, Freidman and van Ingen (2011) argue that “the ability to structure space is a source of considerable social power” (p. 89). Linking their analysis to previous theory around the body as a site of contestation, they emphasize the role of embodiment in subverting dominant discourses around space. This connects to Ahmed’s (2014) arguments around willful subjects, as well as Puwar (2004) on the physicality of being a body which is perceived as out of place. If the body itself is a site of subversion, then the consequences of any embodiments which challenge discourses of exclusion, is a charge of willfulness. Returning to the research conducted by Park and Francis (2024), questions circulate around the experiences of international students who study at Western institutions where private and public space is constructed through the overrepresentation of settler colonial, white Christianity. Freidman and van Ingen (2011) state “the body can resist domination and has the potential to transform the spaces and circumstances in which power

operates” (p. 90). While the research in this dissertation scaffolds on these theories surrounding the body in space, it seeks to ask – at what cost does the body become a site of subversion?

Ahmed (2014) writes, “[t]o be unwilling to obey the will of the sovereign is to accept the charge of willfulness. An acceptance can be a ruin” (p. 137). To embody willfulness in the institution of higher education is to become an obstacle to the perception, and perhaps overall myth of, normative structures of success, inclusion, and cohesion. Often, to be a willful subject is simply to serve as a disruption to another’s understanding of such concepts, and consequently, a willful subject is often associated with feelings of upheaval and unhappiness. For example, James and Taylor’s (2023) research with first generation students illustrates how gender can play a complex role not only in propelling young women into the space of university, but also in impacting their experience while studying.

Their research demonstrates how women from rural communities have come to view higher education as a method of achieving financial independence, as many rural jobs are male dominated. In the example James and Taylor analyze, however, the research participant also faces significant barriers as a young woman attending university, such as pressure to study while caring for her family and surviving amidst persistent domestic violence. My experiences attending post-secondary were similarly nuanced, in that as a young adult I had viewed higher education as a means of escaping a certain trajectory for my life, one which more closely aligned with previous generations of women in my family. However, upon entering university and seeking to find a new pathway outside of these traditional familial roles which were thrust upon me, I have faced persistent financial, emotional, and cultural barriers that are not present for students who come from more privileged social locations. Although I have spent over a decade

in the space of higher education, in various roles, my sense of belonging is significantly impacted by these barriers.

While progress has been made in recent years to address marginalization within institutions of higher education through policy development in the areas of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization (EDID), there is a growing body of research which emphasizes that such policies will not effectively remove harm for equity-deserving groups, without meaningful cultural shifts across the entire structure of post-secondary education (Ahmed, 2012; Henry et al., 2017; King & Brigham, 2023; Kitossa, 2022; Park & Francis, 2024). I argue that this EDID policy ineffectiveness is a direct consequence of change-making that is not centered on addressing structural violence against students with intersecting and culturally fluid identities. As discussed by Henry et al. (2017),

Anti-racism policies, to the extent that they exist in Canadian universities, are geared towards overt racism, or at least to that which can be shown empirically to have systematic effects. Those effects must be demonstrated individually in grievance cases, and even in programs to address chilly-climate issues; the effect must be brought into the open in order to be understood. (p. 20)

Thus, while policy can be developed to address racism, sexism, homophobia and other systemic forms of oppression on a case-by-case basis, the question remains: what is to be done about a culture of marginalization which is more difficult to demonstrate through traditional grievances and complaints? For example, what are the institutional processes for filing a grievance regarding the discomfort of being a body out of place, as the only non-white employee in your department? Henry et al. (2017) emphasize such unspeakable issues, such as the burden of representation that accompanies being the only racialized member of staff or in a cohort of

students, amidst an age of institutional accountability and highlight the difficulty in convincing “policy makers to recognize that the unspeakable issues are part of an overall culture of Whiteness” (p. 20). Furthermore, one must ask what the emotional and psychological burden of reporting such grievances might be, on those who are institutionally marginalized, and whether the burden is worth the desired outcome of such a process. Again, there are direct links to whether or how an individual’s capacity for addressing structural violence through acts of willfulness can happen in spaces of higher education.

Thus, the literature surrounding gender, race, and the space of higher education illustrates that to embody diversity in academic spaces is to bear the weight of institutional expectations and societal stereotypes simultaneously, whether one chooses to engage in inclusion work or not. Ahmed (2012) discusses inclusion work in the university context, and she describes how “diversity becomes associated with certain bodies, shaping how the university comes to appear *as body*” (p. 10, italics in original), and therefore, it follows that seeing diversity as being aligned within certain bodies can often reinforce the university as a white space. Kitossa (2022) extends this conversation further, invoking theorists such as DuBois and Fanon, who have similarly argued that the ontological gaze of whiteness relies on Black *others* to stabilize “white embodiment as an unquestioned and unproblematic cite and site of intelligibility, rationality, and reason” (p. 184). While Kitossa (2022) specifically discusses the experiences of Black scholars, I argue that this phenomenon is persistent across many categories of racial, social, cultural, and political marginalization. He writes,

Blackness is body and emotion, signifier of the feminine and passive, and whiteness is mind and reason, signifier of masculine and active principles. Such a deeply entrenched

raciological schema finds articulation, but not origins, in the architects of the European so-called Enlightenment... (p. 185)

This argument illustrates how whiteness is historically positioned as the norm in the Western university context, which is discussed further below, along with the implication of this legacy of white supremacist ideology that racialized bodies are positioned as complicit in an institution designed to appease what Kitossa terms white existential anxiety.

He states that Black professors are expected to perform “the emotional labour to make white students and sometimes peers experience the world as a safe place in the presence of threatening Blackness” (186). He describes this process as being implicitly asked to “impression manage” (p. 186) so that those in historically privileged categories may feel more comfortable in their presence. This idea relates back to Ahmed’s conception of willful subjects, in that those who refuse to manage the impression they make on others, and who deny responsibility over the perception of others, are frequently framed as being difficult to work with – especially when they are racialized women. The skewed perception of willfulness impacts an individual’s ability to grasp that they are safe, that they belong, and that they are treated with dignity in the space of higher education. At this point it is necessary to more deeply explore the literature on the legacy of spaces of higher education as colonial institutions.

Spaces of Higher Education: The Western University Context

The literature on the social climate and culture of universities in the Global West demonstrates that spaces of higher education in places such as Canada, like many across the globe, were developed with a specific subset of students in mind (King & Brigham, 2023; Patel, 2021; Van Milders, 2019). Tracing the lineage of the Westernized university, Van Milders describes the medieval university as catering towards the interests of the recently emerged

bourgeois class,” and argues that such institutions became both “handmaiden and beneficiary of empire” (p. 44). Further, while it could be argued that representation of marginalized subjectivities both in faculty and student populations on campuses of Western universities has increased, this representation is often intended to benefit those who profit from the marketability of such spaces (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2021; Park & Francis, 2024). As discussed by Patel (2021), “[a]lthough universities that are predominantly white are keen to have their students and faculty of color featured prominently in their marketing materials, that representation upholds the image of a racially diverse and inclusive setting *while reseating white patriarchal power*” (p. 29, emphasis my own). In an institution that finds its roots in colonial domination, students from marginalized communities often become marked as space invaders (Puwar, 2004) due to their physical, emotional, and spiritual embodiments which both sit outside of and are at odds with the norms of the Eurocentric Western university. Being positioned as a space invader, whether passively by institutional policy and practice, or more actively by another person’s words or actions, is at direct odds with one’s development of a sense of belonging and serves to frame them as a willful subject (Ahmed, 2014).

Recent literature demonstrates that within the Westernized university there is a need for anti-discriminatory models of teaching which work to disrupt colonial norms which are largely operating unseen. Key to this disruption is a disavowal of the co-opting and tokenization of diversity and inclusion which work to “appropriate identity politics and the unsubstantiated celebration of diversity in order to obscure issues of raced, gendered, and classed difference and thereby leaves the hegemonic invisibility of whiteness untouched” (Van Milders, 2019, p. 47). When whiteness is left uninterrogated in the physical, spiritual, and emotional space of higher education, it permits the reproduction of harmful barriers predicated on inclusion without any

meaningful change. As a racialized, working-poor, queer woman in a Westernized university, I have found Ahmed's (2007) phenomenology of whiteness particularly useful in conceptualizing and problematizing the role of whiteness as an orientation of both institutions and bodies. In this article Ahmed discusses how "[w]hiteness [can] be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (p. 150). Through illustrating how phenomenology frames whiteness as "an effect of racialization," Ahmed traced the processes wherein bodies and institutions become orientated towards whiteness, "which in turn shapes what it is that bodies 'can do'" (p. 150). In other words, "[i]f the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 153).

Within this article, Ahmed describes the ways in which certain individuals, through their own proximity to whiteness, are granted belonging within institutions where whiteness has been the historical orientation. This text is critical both in its examination of *spaces* as being orientated towards whiteness, as well as its description of whiteness itself as an embodiment that some individuals can be *closer to* than others. For example, as a racialized woman who grew up raised by a white mother and immersed in Canadian culture, I have a higher proximity to whiteness than other racialized women. The research summarized in this section is rooted in contemporary critiques of the Westernized university's emergence as a colonial institution which is orientated towards whiteness, and where bodies fitting other Eurocentric norms (beyond race) are considered in proximity to whiteness (e.g., straight, able-bodied, cisgender). Thus, I write from the lens of a scholar devoted to disrupting the legacy of settler colonialism which pervades formal learning in Canada, in acknowledging that a truly inclusive vision of higher education requires a dismantling and transforming of sites of learning to shift the focus away from

neutrality, into a future where the multiplicity of knowledges is embraced and where all students are supported holistically.

In the Western colonial context, students from marginalized communities often become marked as space invaders (Puwar, 2004) due to their physical, emotional, and spiritual embodiments which both sit outside of and are at odds with the norms of the Eurocentric Western university. Puwar (2004) effectively describes the kind of nuanced hypervisibility/invisibility that space invaders experience in academia when she wrote that “The visibility of marked bodies, either in terms of gender or race or both, and the added scrutiny (‘Super/Vision’) that comes with it requires, as depressingly observed by Fanon, self-surveillance and acute astuteness” (p. 62). Puwar (2004) summarized Mills’ arguments regarding a socio-political racial contract during the enlightenment period:

In a similar vein to feminists who have argued that the exclusion of women from the social contract was not an exception or an accident but was absolutely pivotal to the fraternal contract, Mills states that the racial contract was not a ‘deviation’ or an ‘afterthought’ but rather it was the norm...The colonial project racialized personhood. Just as discourses constituted the female body as an unsuitable occupant of the body politic, certain racialised bodies were also deemed unsuitable participants of the politic. (p. 21)

Puwar elaborates on the two types of racial contract as discussed by Mills, which span across time. The first having existed during the period of European conquest, colonialism, and African enslavement, wherein Black individuals “were excluded from the polity through a formal system of juridical white supremacy” (p. 22). During the contemporary period, the racial contract has ceased to formally exist. However, while “white supremacy is no longer constitutionally and

judicially enshrined...it is rather a matter of social, political, cultural and economic privilege, based on a legacy of colonial conquest” (Puwar, 2004, p. 22). Thus, while race is a social construct, and racism or false racial superiority was born out of this construction, the presence of racial hierarchies in contemporary society persists due to the pervasive nature of colonial structures which continue to privilege certain communities and reproduce inequities.

Within the westernized university, a student’s race is compounded with other facets of identity which can provide privilege or present barriers in accessing a quality education, such as gender, class, and familial background. For example, in their research on the experiences of first-generation students at York University, James and Taylor (2023) found that “although first-generation youth from various marginalized background are enrolling in postsecondary institutions at increasing rates, the very structures that offer them access operate to their disadvantage” (p. xiii). They draw on previous research which suggests that students traditionally marginalized in the space of higher education are now being recruited, without being granted access to forms of knowledge and social capital required to “successfully navigate the university” (James & Taylor, 2023, xiii). Through researching the experiences of students in an access program designed specifically for first generation university students, James and Taylor (2023) found that the students consistently felt the need to identify that they faced specific barriers, and to have them addressed. One student found that she had to constantly make herself visible as low-income and first generation, yet research indicates that this kind of hypervisibility poses an additional emotional risk for students (Brown, 2011, as cited by James & Taylor, 2023). One of these emotional risks, which James and Taylor (2023) discuss in their research, is that of imposter syndrome, which denotes a chronic feeling of being inadequate, despite the presence of markers of success or growth. Once again, this phenomenon is at direct

odds with a student's capacity for feeling belonging in the space of higher education. Often due to imposter syndrome, individuals are unable to view their accomplishments realistically and it should come as no surprise that feelings associated with imposter syndrome have been shown to be more present in individuals who are within equity deserving groups (Feenstra et al., 2020 as cited in James & Taylor, 2023).

In addition to imposter syndrome, James and Taylor highlight the emotional toll that stereotypes and subsequent microaggressions or discrimination play in the educational experience of an individual. Battling stereotypes often causes an emotional strain on students, through harming their sense of self, and often they will expressly avoid any traits or habits which may be stereotypically associated with groups to which they identify. For example, Black women may avoid speaking up for themselves in situations where they are facing discrimination, because they wish to avoid being the stereotypical 'angry Black woman.' Alternatively, students who fall into 'model minority' categories, such as Asian men, may avoid asking for support or admitting when they have reduced capacity, because they feel limited by a social perception of Asians as being 'good students.' In fact, James and Taylor (2023) illustrate how granting historically marginalized groups access to inequitable institutions can lead to a process of marginal differentiation, where they are actively labeled as a space invader (Puwar, 2004) and face heightened exposure to structural violence. This exposure to structural violence is further discussed below and examined in the literature which frames the link between trauma and higher education.

The Link Between Trauma and Higher Education

Rates of trauma are increasingly prevalent in academic communities and spaces, and the sociological research on trauma and its causes indicates a link between social issues such as

poverty, unemployment, racism, and gender inequity, and symptoms associated with both complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (DeRiviere, 2019; Read et al., 2011). Further, research on rates of trauma in higher education indicates that university students are increasingly vulnerable, “with as many as 50% of college students being exposed to a potentially traumatizing event in their first year of college” (Galatzer Levy et al., 2012 cited in Johnson & Gianvito, 2022, p. 6). King and Brigham (2023) emphasize research on students for whom trauma is pervasive in their communities (due to racism and other barriers), finding that focused supports are required during their university experience, to achieve persistence. Overall, studies on trauma and post-secondary education suggests that “the university can be a socially toxic environment that produces trauma through its policies” (Bimm & Feldman, 2020, n/p) and indicates a need for trauma-informed practice (TIP) in university contexts.

Considering the colonial history of institutions of higher education, as well as the role of structural violence in a student’s ability to effectively relate to the world around them, one must ask who the policies referenced by Bimm and Feldman (2020) are designed to benefit? Such policies include but are not limited to those surrounding academic probation and suspension, appealing academic decisions or penalties, accessing accommodations and assistive technologies, policies on hazing and harassment, and backdated course withdrawals. While many education scholars emphasize market and capitalist interest as being the driving force behind the enforcement (or lack) of such policies, Tuck (2018) asserts the “need to see the neoliberalization and privatization of the university as an extension of its settler colonial imperatives” (p. 155). Similarly, King and Brigham (2023) highlight how contemporary moves towards Indigenization within higher education do not require the university structure to change – instead focusing on

supporting students and faculty as they adapt to existing culture. Thus, it becomes necessary to consider how contemporary institutions, some of which have begun to include such goals as integrating trauma-informed practice, reconciliation and decolonization, and equity and inclusion as key pillars in their strategic plans, might enact such priorities when under the iron chokehold of a settler colonial economic design. In addition to policies and practices (or lack thereof) within university culture which may impact safety and dignity, Bourdieu (as cited by Giroux, 2001) theorized the presence of cultural capital as *habitus*, which are the numerous aspects and norms of university culture internalized as codes or habits that are entirely new for students who have had no prior experience with higher education through their family or community and K-12 educational institutions, causing them to feel imposter syndrome or a lack of belonging within the institutional structure.

In his conceptualization of cultural capital, Bourdieu asserted that common practices within certain educational contexts were not available to all students equally, as culture is typically shared through one's socialization within certain family and social class structures. Thus, according to Bourdieu, cultural capital was defined as being "sets of linguistic and cultural competencies that individuals inherit by way of the class-located boundaries of their families" (Giroux, 2001, p. 88). Where this theory might have been mobilized against settler colonialism, in order to address the prioritization of whiteness within the realm of formal education, thus enhancing belonging for those students with different *but equally valuable* cultural codes, cultural capital theory viewed through racist and colonial lenses led to "cultural deficit" models of teaching which actively resist the need to transform a colonial education system. By assuming that students who were unsuccessful in Western higher education contexts were lacking core skills and practices, colonial onto-epistemologies have been permitted to maintain their

dominance. Thus, institutions which began as sites for the reproduction of privilege in education for the white ruling class, continue to perpetuate the same harmful ideologies without addressing their roots in colonialism.

Furthermore, scholars within the intersection of critical race and education have identified forms of cultural capital which are not necessarily favoured or emphasized in Western educational spaces but are crucially resourceful for many communities. Yosso (2005) describes a process by which the valuation of certain knowledges has been employed historically “to silence, marginalize and render People of Colour invisible” and she asserts that that by valuing those *other* knowledges which have been pushed to the margins, educational institutions might begin to view the marginal space as a site of transformative resistance (p. 70). For example, King and Brigham (2023) summarize prior research which demonstrates that Indigenous students consider academic success alongside their capacity to maintain and enhance their cultural integrity. Along this current, culturally relevant teaching or pedagogy (CRT/P) grew as a field out of the intersection of critical race theory and critical pedagogy and as a means of challenging the supposed neutrality of race in formal learning spaces. For example, through her valuation of Black students’ cultural knowledge in the classroom, Ladson-Billings (1995) revolutionized a culturally relevant approach to education through integrating aspects of Black culture (rather than solely Eurocentric culture), effectively emphasizing the importance of addressing structural violence in one’s teaching practice. It is critical to note that such methods rely on educators having a basic knowledge of how social categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality have been socially constructed and hierarchized, as well as knowledge of how such categories are operationalized and valued across different institutions. In the last fifty or so years, there have been numerous responses to deficit models from theorists within equity-deserving groups, in

what Tuck (2018) might call a “refusal” of damage-centred theories, such as settler colonialism. In other words, through abdicating their role in passing on Eurocentric cultural codes, educators who practice culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies are participating in a refusal to reproduce colonial hierarchies.

In theorizing culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), Paris and Alim (2014) build on the notion of culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy by emphasizing that cultural subjectivities are fluid and ever-changing. They argue that “young people are enacting race, ethnicity, language, literacy, and cultural practices in both traditional *and* evolving ways” (p. 90, emphasis in original). Thus, it follows that those models of pedagogy aimed at expanding conceptions of valid knowledge and student capability must acknowledge that membership in cultural groups is constantly shifting and being shaped by one’s existence within intersecting social categories. Paris and Alim write, “[t]o offer youth full access to power, then, we must understand that power is now based in part on one’s ability to communicate effectively to more than ‘standard’ English monolinguals/monoculturals, who are becoming a shrinking share of the U.S. population” (p. 89). Therefore, a marked difference between culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies is the acknowledgement that “national boundaries change, and ethnic populations immigrate across national boundaries and carry with them cultural practices that often become hybridized as they adapt to the new nations” (Lee, 2017, p. 265). With an understanding of culture as fluid, and cultural boundaries as increasingly blurred, an educator’s examination of cultural subjectivity regarding their students must also be malleable. Thus, CSP requires acknowledgement of the social construction of race, culture, and ethnicity, while observing cultural experience and knowledge as valid and always evolving. While fluidity of culture is not inherently negative, increased diasporic identity and cultural hybridization in a colonial

institution may heighten harms to students' sense of self, and cause them to feel increasingly isolated. Research on student experience indicates that a strong connection to one's cultural identity is necessary in academic belonging and persistence (King & Brigham, 2023). I view discussions of student culture and capacity as inextricably linked to those of trauma in higher education. I see the value in framing the experiences of individuals who are within and of equity-deserving groups and attending Western universities as a border-crossing of sorts. The role of border crossing is discussed further in Chapter 3.

As a more recent intervention which bridges differences across culture, race, gender, and sexuality, trauma-informed practice (TIP) approaches trauma from the lens of social and institutionalized oppression, rather than as an individualized experience. In other words, like CRT/P, rather than viewing trauma as psychological deficit of the individual, it is conceptualized as a social phenomenon which can cause barriers for students due to institutional practice or ideology. Within a pedagogical model that is trauma-informed, a focused goal of the educator would be to establish and consistently support student's capacity for willfulness and self-advocacy through critical and culturally sustaining teaching practices. The lineage of TIP can be traced back to critical pedagogical theorists such as Freire (1973), Giroux (2001), and hooks (2003), who have emphasized the role of self-actualization and holistic practice in teaching and learning. As outlined above, critical and culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogies are critical in shifting conversations away from framing students as having cultural deficits, instead highlighting the social, political, and cultural contexts of learning (Giroux, 2020). As Giroux explains,

the pedagogical is inextricably grounded in a notion of hegemony, struggle, and political education articulated through a normative position and project aimed at overcoming the stark inequalities and forms of oppression suffered by subaltern groups. (p. 68)

TIP similarly highlights the link between learning and context. In fact, TIP carries forward the work of critical pedagogy in its assertion that emotional context must also be considered as a factor in both teaching and learning. Thus, in considering Haines' (2019) definition of trauma above as an experience(s) or resulting impact from a context which harms an individual's sense of safety, belonging, and dignity, a trauma-informed approach to teaching and learning is one in which there is acknowledgment of the vast and interconnected nature of both trauma and violence (physical, emotional, and spiritual), from an intersectional and sociological standpoint. A trauma-informed educational practice seeks to effectively integrate "knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization" (SAMHSA, 2014, as cited in Venet, 2021, p. 5) through re-establishing and maintaining those three elements of safety, belonging, and dignity which are crucial to a student's ability to learn effectively.

Furthermore, a trauma-informed practice is one in which students' lived experiences are integrated into the classroom curriculum, in an open acknowledgement of how higher education can be a site of radical social transformation, through educating for critical consciousness (hooks, 1994). Within the current context of Western higher education as a site of increasingly neoliberal values and pedagogical practice, it is crucial to consider the impacts this has on both the students as individuals seeking to find their place in the social stratosphere, as well as on a larger social scale amidst global conflict and tensions. Kawalilak and Groen (2019) argue that Canadian universities are experiencing reduced government support and are therefore seeking

out financial avenues of funding within the private market sector. With closer linkages between the university and the marketplace, we are situated in an intensifying competitive setting, where the quest to respond to market needs is paramount. In their chapter on “Resistance Pedagogies,” hooks and Mesa-Bains (2017) argue that educators in contemporary classrooms are “teaching toward the test because the test is the dominant measure and scores supposedly show whether or not [students are] successful” (p. 49). While the focus of their chapter is mainly on the value of educating for critical consciousness *earlier* than in university and college, the authors pinpoint that there is potential for engaging students and teaching them self-discipline within sites of learning *without* practising militaristic practices or punishment – they argue for a pedagogy of critical consciousness which empowers young populations to take responsibility over their actions and enhances opportunities for students to inform meaningful change. This model is closely connected to a trauma-informed practice in that it is assets-based and focuses on emphasizing the student’s own capacity for acting as a member of community. Thus, by teaching for critical consciousness, educators can provide opportunities for students to develop a deep sense of belonging, safety, and dignity in the space of learning.

The research makes it clear that trauma is present in higher education spaces, as Carello and Butler’s (2014) findings state that “by the time youth reach college, 66% to 85% report lifetime traumatic event exposure and many report multiple exposures...Not only do most students arrive at college with trauma exposure history, but some also experience trauma while there” (p. 157). Many university related trauma statistics focus on the prevalence of sexual violence, however Bimm and Feldman (2020) emphasize instances of other kinds of traumatic incidents which are less discussed: “abuse of power by professors; ableist policies that make it dangerous for students to name their mental health struggles for fear of being put on a mandatory

leave of absence; and the survival of the fittest mentality that perpetuates a culture in which there is no space for failure (n.p.)”. These studies contextualize TIP in the higher education classroom as a disruption and disavowal of neoliberal and colonial educational philosophies:

While those of us in the West may want to believe that we’re living in a post-feminist, post-racial society, there are all too many reminders of how racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, colonialism, and ableism are alive and well. We’d thus like to rewrite Janice Carello and Lisa Butler’s tentative argument that ‘trauma may be endemic to our present political, social, and private worlds’. (Bimm & Feldman, 2020, n.p.)

Horsman (2004) similarly emphasizes the prevalence of various forms of violence inherent to socio-cultural and political structures (sexism, racism, classism, ableism, homophobia), where survivors of trauma are not a rare occurrence, but rather a clear sign that society and education need to undergo critical transformation. Often due to discomfort, educators decline to engage in conversations regarding trauma, and Horsman (2004) argues that such “silence gives a message of complicity with the dominant messages of society that condone violence” (p. 135). Thus, while trauma may not be relevant to the subject matter of many courses, emerging theory illustrates that it is relevant in the landscape of students’ personal lives and should be proactively considered when revising institutional policies, as well as in the methods and modes of student supports, and instructional practices.

A frequent entry point for conversations regarding trauma and learning is the practice of incorporating narrative and aspects of autobiography into one’s curriculum, such as through educational autobiographies or life histories. As noted above, this provides opportunities for developing safety, belonging, and dignity in learning spaces through the valuation of varying lived experience and embodiments. This can also serve to alleviate some of the pressures of

being a willful subject, or space invader in the context of the Western university. When viewed through an institutional lens, a student's supposed lack of cultural capital may be labeled as willfulness, or space invading. Framed through Yosso's (2005) conceptualization of cultural wealth – those skills fostered by lived experience with oppression and inequality— there is a decolonial crack. Thus, when a student's differing lived experiences are viewed through the lens of trauma-informed and culturally sustaining pedagogies, the refusal to bend to the will of a colonial institution could be seen as a form of talking-back to the institution of higher education, or what Yosso defines as “resistance capital” (p. 80).

Talking Back to the Institution: Willfulness as Resistance

The writings of Ahmed and hooks have resonated deeply with my personal experiences as a racialized, lower class, and queer woman in the Canadian education system. Specifically, hooks' *Talking Back*, and Ahmed's writing on topics such as willful subjects, feminist killjoys, being included, and phenomenology of whiteness. In *Talking Back*, hooks wrote:

To know our audience, to know who listens, we must be in dialogue. We must be speaking with and not just speaking to. In hearing responses, we come to understand whether our words act to resist, to transform, to move. (1989, p. 16)

She references Audre Lorde (1978), citing her revolutionary poem “A Litany for Survival,” and asks the reader to consider how they might approach talking back to power with an awareness of how many communities globally risk their lives, or violent punishment, in doing so. She asks, “[c]an their fear be understood solely as shyness or is it an expression of deeply embedded, socially constructed restrictions against speech in a culture of domination” (p. 17). In this way, I believe hooks' writing in *Talking Back* can be connected to contemporary discussions surrounding the concepts I have discussed above as they relate to structural violence and

willfulness in academic spaces. For example, imposter syndrome is commonly understood in academic spaces as that little voice inside of one's head which tells them that they are not good enough, and that they do not belong in academia. Similarly, trauma experiences such as childhood abuse and neglect are also linked to a skewed sense of self-perception and negative self-talk (van der Kolk, 2015; Walker, 2013). Furthermore, as a colonial institution with intricately embedded structural hierarchies, the university is a space where imposter syndrome is exacerbated further for students with a trauma history or past of marginalization. As conversations around white supremacy and colonialism in academia have become more prominent, so too has the shift from identifying imposter syndrome as an individual pathology, to realizing that it is yet another symptom of an oppressive system with built in barriers that reproduce exclusivity and domination (Work, 2022). My internalized image of the white, middle-class academic – slim, straight, and purely professional - provides further evidence of the pervasiveness of what hooks describes as the white supremacist, imperialist, heteropatriarchy. Imposter syndrome is not an unintentional phenomenon, in fact, it is the consequence of a neoliberal ideology (Work, 2022) which values competitive and perfectionist individualized behaviour over an eagerness to grow as a collective.

hooks connected the concept of talking back or asserting one's voice as a member of a marginalized community to the need for a radical paradigm shift. Her proposed renewal of ways of talking, listening, and hearing are central to my research goals. She wrote that,

The struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice – that way of speaking that is no longer determined by one's status as object – as oppressed

being. That way of speaking is characterized by opposition, by resistance. It demands that paradigms shift – that we learn to talk – to listen – to hear in a new way. (1989, p. 15)

This opposition to the objectification of “other” is also prevalent in Ahmed’s writing surrounding willful subjects, where willfulness itself can be witnessed as a necessary act for those who Lorde describes as “never meant to survive” (1995, p. 32). Ahmed describes how marginalized folks in oppressive spaces who undertake this necessary opposition are accused of being assertive and creating problems. She writes,

If some have to be assertive just to be, others are given freedom from the necessity of self-assertion. What are we asserting when we become assertive? In asserting ourselves, we are asserting more than ourselves. If we do not submit our will to the will of the “whole body,” if we do not aim for its restoration, we do not simply leave that body behind us. After all we are exposing the violence that supports that body. (2014, p. 160)

Ahmed’s argument here is encapsulating her work in queer phenomenology and phenomenology of whiteness, as well as her writing on feminist killjoys, into a succinct description of what happens when a body is out of place. If institutions can be oriented towards whiteness, as Ahmed (2007) argues, can a racialized individual entering the institution and asserting their right to be there - be viewed as a re-orientation? This argument becomes particularly relevant to academia when Ahmed (2007) connects willfulness to race, stating “Color can be experienced as a willful intrusion on the unmarked and unremarkable body of whiteness” (p. 161). She also connects willfulness to sexual stigma, and I argue it can be extended into other forms of social hierarchy such as ableism, transphobia, and classism, as she emphasizes “if a certain idea of the right body is in place, then some bodies will and do appear as the wrong bodies” (p. 161). In this way, Ahmed describes willfulness as an outsider status, a disruptive embodiment within a space

orientated toward a particular ideal. However, this is not to suggest that willfulness is solely individualistic; as Ahmed (2010) notes, “willfulness is a collecting together, of those struggling for a different ground for existence” (“Getting in the Way”, para. 5). In willing to defy harmful practices it is important that those who defy feel a sense of collective support, a theme I explore further in my discussion surrounding the self-in-coalition.

Puwar (2004) conceptualizes space invaders, which I connect to Ahmed’s writings on willfulness as both relate to the discomfort of being a body out of place. Specifically, Puwar emphasizes “[t]he fragility of the masculine claim to public space” (p. 14) through the inclusion of racialized women in spaces which were not designed with them in mind. She writes,

...the presence of the feminine as a bodily entity disrupts the partition between the private and the public even if it does not render it altogether invalid. (p. 14)

In the assertion from Puwar that feminine representation in structures which have been historically male dominated serves to dismantle the partition between private and public realms, I find substantiation for my choice to research memoir as a site of autoethnographic witnessing in academic culture. Examining structural violence and willfulness within academia from an intersectional feminist lens is a priority in disrupting patriarchal settler colonialism in the Canadian university context. It is, therefore, crucial to acknowledge the vastly differing experiences of university students with a trauma history, while paying particular attention to the interrelated roots of structural violence within those experiences. Puwar noted that,

...a very specific speaking subject position is made available for racialised minority women. They are expected to impart words of wisdom about alterity, or, as Smith says, class and race. This is a very particular speaking position; the utterances of these people are linked to their bodily existence. Their voices are anchored to what they are seen to

embody. This is a burden and connection that is not the first consideration that comes to mind when a white male body speaks, writes or creates. He just speaks as a human, because race and gender are ex-nominated from his bodily representation. While we can no doubt show how this universal figure of a human, who is commonly assumed to be speaking from nowhere is speaking from somewhere, as an embodied being (in terms of nationality, gender and class, for instance), he nevertheless occupies a position of privilege of invisibility. (2004, p. 73).

Thus, while race and gender become immediately visible for those whose bodies are marked as out of place in the realm of academia, so too does one's ability, sexuality, trans identity, gender expression, and other aspects of physical embodiment. In my analysis of contemporary memoirs, I aim to be open to capturing any/all experiences as they relate to students' willfulness in learning spaces. As Ahmed (2014) argues, "[a] history of willfulness is a history of those who are willing to put their bodies in the way, or to bend their bodies in the way of the will. There is something queer about this will. You bend: you become bent" (p. 161). I explore the ways in which the memoir authors have been asked to bend through structural violence, investigating willfulness in spaces of higher education, to trace connections between the memoirists' experiences and my own negotiations with bending (or refusing to bend) our will to better fit into academia.

For example, in their examination of the impacts that trauma histories can have on educators' own sense of self, and subsequently their ability to relate to their students, Walters and Anderson (2021) emphasize how "the traumas that we have experienced and the ways they have affected our body-mind have implications not only for our personal lives, but also for the lives we lead in higher education" (p. 2). They use autoethnography to examine how their own

varied relationships to the space of higher education are impacted by their history of traumatic experience, and how these relationships manifest in the classroom. The goal for Walters and Anderson (2021) is to highlight the pedagogical implications of teaching with a trauma history, as they argue there is limited academic writing on the subject, and while this is an example that focuses on educators rather than students, I find the implications of their bending significant to the research here.

In further connecting willful subjects and space invaders to the academic realm, I focus on Ahmed's (2014) concept of conditional hospitality described below:

...perhaps hospitality can take the form of a simple address, given without the security of residence: would you like to come along with us? To accept the invitation, you go along with this coming along. Such an ordinary invitation: one could accept it or not. But in being welcomed the "you" is positioned as not part of the "us," or should we say not yet part. *What does it mean, what does it do, for the participation of some to be dependent on an invitation made by others?* (p. 53, emphasis my own)

My research investigates the other side of this relationship, from the perspective of memoir authors writing from within spaces of higher education who may find limited security in their presence as part of the "us." The research summarized in this chapter indicates that those from equity-deserving groups who are integrated into harmful institutional dynamics are hardly ever unaffected. Thus, I am interested in what my autoethnographic learnings from these memoirs can offer in terms of a feminist coalition building (Fukushima, 2023) through learning to see oneself and one's experiences as part of a larger whole, specifically as it relates to transforming the physical and emotional space of post-secondary learning for those students who are positioned as willful. Ahmed (2014) writes, "[f]or some, willfulness might be necessary for an existence to be

possible. When willfulness is necessary another world becomes possible” (p. 160). I argue that willfulness plays out as both a mode of survival and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005), and trace what possibilities emerge through such resistance, in the space of higher education.

Through critically observing my autoethnographic learnings from the memoirs, exploring the tensions of finding the capacity for willfulness while being a border-crosser in spaces of higher education, I illuminate the way forward for trauma-informed pedagogical practice, towards a vision of university culture which is only made possible by the refusals (willfulness) of communities who continue to carve out a place for themselves and bear the burdens of representation. The theory outlined above discussing trends of ‘bodies out of place’ across lines of gender, class, race, and sexuality form the main conceptual framing for my analysis, while the literature on equity in higher education, trauma-informed practice, and autoethnography are complementary to this framing. Willfulness as a social phenomenon which is inextricably linked to being a body out of place is the central thrust of the literature, where higher education is the context for my current analysis. Furthermore, I critically examine my experiences with trauma as a woman invited (as far as program acceptance goes) into the space of academia, drawing connections across the experiences of the memoirists and my own, challenging the isolation which often accompanies the institutional branding of willfulness. Thus, in the second stage of my analysis, through investigating recurring themes between those encapsulated in contemporary memoirs related to trauma and learning, and my own experience in the realm of academia, I will demonstrate the potential for relational ways of seeing through memoir pedagogy.

Memoir Pedagogy and Narrative as a Site of Social Transformation

Along these lines of talking back as a form of placing oneself in coalition and alleviating some of the burden of representation, a growing body of research in the field of education has

emphasized the link between narrative, pedagogy, and social transformation. Taber et al. (2017) have expertly illustrated this connection in their conceptualization of memoir pedagogy and discuss the role of learning from narrative in advancing “a form of public consciousness” (p. 21). Adult education practice emphasizes the role of story as a means of seeing ourselves and others in a more reflexive manner (Brigham, 2011). I connect the concept of memoir pedagogy to addressing structural violence in spaces of higher education - through the act of talking back. Brigham’s research around story and arts-based methods is further relevant as there is emphasis placed on storying as a catalyst to the kind of collective action which is inherent to talking back to power. Talking back in the context of this research is to tell one’s story and engage in an autoethnography of witnessing the stories of others. This process can lead to the witness viewing themselves as being in-coalition with those others, who have also talked back, thus revealing the intricacies of structural violence.

Working with focus groups, Taber et al. advance memoir pedagogy as a process through which their participants connect the memoirs back to their own “social and historical understandings of the texts” and they describe how they “read and discussed women’s memoirs as both living texts of society, culture, and history and as an exploration of our consciousness” (p. 22). In these focus groups, Taber et al. prompted the participants according to what they learned, which individual experiences could be connected to collective history, how different issues were raised relating to gender, race, culture, class, religion, and power, and finally analyzing themes of survival, resistance, and coping (p. 23). This research exemplifies the value of memoir pedagogy in not only personal growth, but the potential for social transformation, and I find the prompts useful in my own reflections on memoir pedagogy as relates to *The Glass Castle*, *Educated*, *Breaking the Ocean*, *We Have Always Been Here*, and *From the Ashes*.

In her research on the role of researchers as whole beings, Taber (2012) asserts that “[r]esearchers’ lived bodies come not only with minds (which are often privileged above all else in academia) but with spirits, emotions, and whole lives” (p.77). This inextricable link between body, mind, spirit, and emotion, is precisely why I emphasize trauma, memoir, and witnessing throughout this research. My intellectual capacity as a researcher, as a curriculum developer, as an instructor, as a student, as an activist and citizen, are all intensely tied up with my emotional landscape and the health of my spirit - and these things rely on a solid foundation of safety, belonging, and dignity, that is often not present for me as a trauma survivor. However, as demonstrated by the research of Mojab and Taber (2015) on memoir pedagogy,

Community begins to be re-established when people are able to remember together, giving testimony to their experiences and having others bear witness to their experiences. Individuals and communities can form a sense of purpose by transforming the act of remembering and witnessing to a living document for social action. The living document can restore and renew the sense of collective struggle for common good. (p. 32)

I feel a renewed sense of purpose in reading this passage, as I come to make sense of the connection I feel to the memoirs written by Walls, Westover, Dashtgard, Habib, and Thistle. In witnessing the stories of other space invaders, willful subjects, and those compelled to talk back to structural violence, I feel a sense of relational being. I feel like I am on my way to repairing my sense of self-in-coalition within learning spaces where there may be others for whom these stories resonate. In bearing witness to the stories of the memoirists who underwent intense psychological and physical traumas, I come to see myself and the world around me with more clarity, and I am moved to feel a sense of solidarity and collective struggle with all those whose stories align with ours, a public consciousness begins to form through memoir pedagogy.

Of importance, Taber et al. (2017) assert that a pedagogy rooted in memoirs must be intertwined with a study of the historical, cultural, and social context within which the memoirs take place. They discuss a dialectic practice termed “zooming in and zooming out,” wherein the learner explores not only the memoirs, but the surrounding context to “read around [the memoir]” (p. 32) and fully grasp the meaning and implications of a text. This process of zooming in and out is particularly relevant when one considers that memoir itself is a process of creating renewed meaning from experience, through examining the past through the lens of the present (Taber et al., 2017). Taber et al. draw from the work by Smith and Watson (2010) who highlight the duality of past/present, self/social, which is inherent to memoir writing, through their discussion of Stephen Sander:

Stephen Sander suggested that the life writer confronts not one life but two. One is the self that others see – the social historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships. These are “real” attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the self experienced only by that person, the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get “outside of.” The “inside,” or personally experienced self has a history.

While it may not be meaningful as an objective “history of the times,” it is a record of self-observation, not a history observed by others. (p. 6)

The dialogical relationships between past and present, as well as self and social, are critical to a memoir pedagogy and highlight how a focused reading of one person’s experiences in the world can be instructive. This relationality illuminates the impact of larger social structures on the inner life of an individual, but also the learning which can take place when an individual has distance from past experiences. There is power in being granted with new language and frameworks for re-interpreting past events.

For example, a common theme across the memoirs is an immersion in unhealthy environments because of structural violence. However, each of the memoir authors could not effectively name structural violence as the cause until they achieved some amount of distance from their environments. It was not until the self in context was able to communicate with the self as experienced by the individual that the stories shared became a catalyst both for individual and social learning. I explore the potential of autoethnographic witnessing in tandem with memoir pedagogy, as a useful tool in ‘zooming out’ and establishing a self-in-coalition, and thus furthering potential opportunities for a collective willfulness. Similarly, Taber et al. (2017) describe a common theme of coalition building across experiences with structural violence in their research on memoir pedagogy, stating that “while the contexts, settings, and geographic regions vary in the texts, the theme of structural violence remained the same” and they highlight how this thread throughout each memoir used in their study allowed participants to understand “the universality of some of the themes in relation to the experience of patriarchy, racism, colonialism, religion, and capitalism as well as silence, hope, resistance, community, and arts” (p. 33).

They expand on this relationship below:

... memoirs have an epistemic potential that dynamically and radically interrogates historical objectification such that they bring to the fore those lived lives theorized in that history. Memoirs can be powerful inasmuch as they are used as part of a wider selection of resources to learn about a particular moment in history, about resistance and resilience, and to build community and solidarity in the process. (Taber et al., 2017, p. 34)

My proposed research is scaffolded on the assertion above from Taber et al. (2017) that memoirs are incredibly powerful catalysts for both learning and coalition building, and I will explore this

relationship further through an autoethnography of witnessing rooted in memoir pedagogy and narrative thematic analysis. Through engaging in a zooming-in between the rich narratives present in the different memoirs I have collected, and a zooming out to draw on connections between the memoirs, as well as my own experiences as a trauma survivor and PhD candidate, I explore themes under the umbrellas of structural violence and willfulness, as related to the research on trauma and higher education. My methodological framework is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Memoir Pedagogy and Autoethnographic Witnessing

My methods of data collection and analysis are grounded in autoethnography of witnessing described by Fukushima (2023) as an autoethnographic analysis which “facilitates opportunities to find the cracks even within colonial structures,” through inhabiting the perspective of a border crosser and a self-in-coalition (p. 146). Through collecting and examining contemporary memoirs related to trauma and learning, as a student in the higher education space with a trauma history, I use Josselson and Hammack’s (2021) framework of narrative thematic analysis to search for and analyze emerging subthemes within each memoir. These subthemes are intricately related to the pre-identified codes of structural violence and willfulness, thus illuminating further the nuanced experience of being a “body out of place,” (Puwar, 2004) through an autoethnography of witnessing. Through engaging in a self-reflexive examination of the narratives, analyzing my own learning from the texts as it relates to the literature in Chapter 2, I also explore the role of memoir pedagogy in developing relational ways of seeing or coming to view oneself as being coalition with others, through engaging with shared narratives. To this end, my research employs Fukushima’s model of witnessing through autoethnography, as it holds profound possibility for centering the embodied, contradictory, and relational experiences of a border crosser, a willful subject, an individual talking back to institutional power. I use thematic narrative analysis to answer the following questions: What are my autoethnographic learnings from contemporary memoirs that address trauma, structural violence and willfulness? And how does memoir pedagogy shape my view of myself as a self-in-coalition, as a woman in higher education with a trauma history?

Autoethnography is a vast field of research and my influences in this regard are mainly feminist, racialized, and queer authors who have written about their lives from within the

margins - critical visionaries who have spent their lives “talking back” (hooks, 1989) to those who hold power, whether it is institutional or individual. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has built on hooks’ concept of talking back and developed her own argument for the power of “researching back,” which she describes as a struggle for self-determination within systems of domination and colonization. The memoirists in this study embark on journeys of self-knowledge and critical consciousness-raising. By exploring the themes of structural violence and willfulness in their narratives, I also examine my own learning surrounding trauma and learning, particularly as it pertains to relationality between learners, across varying experiences with trauma.

In this chapter, I summarize autoethnography as a methodology, tracing its emergence as a qualitative study of the self. I then highlight some contemporary uses of autoethnographic elements in writing as a method of undergoing personal and collective transformation. Next, I discuss feminist decolonial praxis as it relates to the work of an autoethnography of witnessing aimed toward relational seeing or viewing the self-in-coalition. By connecting the methodological theories related to autoethnographic witnessing back to my own embodied experiences as a queer, poor, racialized woman with C-PTSD, I investigate my autoethnographic learnings surrounding structural violence and willfulness, as a student and staff member at a midsize Canadian university. Then, I summarize existing autoethnographic research that has been conducted related to themes of trauma and learning, which can inform both my own research, as well as broader research surrounding trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education. Finally, I review literature on memoir, narrative, and learning, exploring the ways in which storytelling and story sharing can be instrumental in establishing a sense of self-in-

coalition with a community. I close the chapter with a detailed description of the methods I employed for data collection and analysis.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography as a method brings together aspects of autobiography and ethnography, where an autobiographer “selectively writes about past experiences” and an ethnographer examines “a culture’s relational practices” (Ellis et al., 2011, para 2.1-2.3). Ethnography can be done through participant observation, case study, or interviews, but autoethnography requires membership within the group(s) being explored. An autoethnographer does not simply *tell* about their experiences, they are expected to also *analyze* their experiences using a set of theoretical and methodological tools (Ellis et al., 2011). The primary goal of autoethnography is thus to “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis et al., 2011, para 2.4). According to Ellis et al. (2011), this familiarity is accomplished through examining data based on one’s experiences, collecting notes and artefacts, identifying key patterns which speak to cultural experience, and disseminating these patterns in an accessible way for readers - often through storytelling.

In her definitive text on autoethnography, Reed-Danahay (1997) describes the autoethnographer as a boundary crosser and notes that they carry a dual identity. Reflecting on the writing of W.E.B. DuBois and his notion of double consciousness, she writes that “[t]he notion of autoethnography foregrounds the multiple nature of selfhood and opens up new ways of writing about social life” (p. 3). Reed-Danahay posits that multiplicity, rather than duality, should be the focus of autoethnographic examinations, and I find this striking as it connects to the concept of cultural sustaining pedagogy and its foundational premise of shifting subjectivity.

In fact, she describes autoethnography as “a useful term with which to question the binary conventions of a self/society split, as well as the boundary between the objective and the subjective” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). I find the connection between autoethnography and the fluidity of the subjective experience promising, in that there is much opportunity to capture the nuances of the memoirists’ and my own experiences with structural violence. This violence is associated with cultural diaspora, classism, racism, and sexism, and viewed through the lens of trauma. The chapters in Reed-Danahay’s (1997) text on autoethnography all function as “self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (p. 9), and as Richardson (2000) has asserted:

Ethnography is always situated in human activity, bearing both the strengths and limitation of human perspective and feelings. Ethnography is always created through research practices. Science offers some practices, literature, creative arts, introspection, and memory-work offer others. (p. 254)

Like Richardson, I operate out of an intense acknowledgement that combining both a scientific and creative lens provides a more holistic view of a phenomenon, especially in exploring themes related to border crossing/living in-between worlds. This combination is evidenced by the brilliant work of Anzaldúa (2021) in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which I will discuss in more detail below.

Walters and Anderson (2021) define autoethnographic analysis as an examination of oneself that is “embedded within specific historical, political, social, and cultural institutions” and describe it as “an exercise in articulating embedded experience that is informed by power and personal reactions, responses, and experiences” (p. 3). This articulation of the relationship between power and everyday embodied experiences of students in higher education, as well as

the role of coalition and community in empowering students, is a critical focus of my research. I am interested in illustrating the transference of history and individual experience within every moment which occurs in spaces of higher education, and I draw on Fukushima's (2023) witnessing through autoethnography to inform my methodological framing. I adopt Fukushima's concept of witnessing specifically to examine how trauma and structural violence shape experiences, and to frame memoir pedagogy as a trauma-informed relational practice of self-in-coalition.

Similarly, in her writing on performative autoethnography (which I draw from since performance presupposes a witness), Spry (2011) recognizes the act of becoming, or being in transition, through writing ourselves in place and time. This becoming is inherently intersectional in that who one becomes through the act of autoethnography is inextricably linked to cultural place and space, to the power dynamics and relationships at play in each moment, which "are effected by varying notions of temporality and history" (Spry, 2011, p. 501). In other words, to perform and witness narrative through memoir writing is to learn of the nuances of acts of willfulness which arise in the life of a border crosser in the university space. According to Spry,

It is the intentional and critically reflexive connection of this narrative [of self] to larger social issues, to the politics, pleasure, and pain of other people, that distinguishes performative autoethnography as a methodology grounded in forging knowledge with others to dismantle and transform the inequities of power structures. (2011, p. 498)

This forging of knowledge described by Spry occurs in the process of meaning-making through writing to capture a specific context, in writing to represent oneself and to build community with others. In the analysis here, I forge knowledge surrounding trauma and learning across the memoirs and my own experiences, as a method of witnessing on the side of the oppressed

(Fukushima, 2023) aimed at building a vision of the self-in-coalition. My goal is to emphasize the opportunity inherent to an autoethnography of witnessing *through* memoir pedagogy for trauma-informed practice in spaces of higher education. A key intervention of Spry's writing for the purposes of my argument here is her emphasis on the performance of autoethnography as a process of relationality. I believe this theory adeptly illustrates how memoir works to position an individual narrative within a larger social and relational context, allowing for the development of a self-in-coalition.

While Spry describes performative autoethnography as a method of inquiry aimed at dismantling power, she also argues that there must be a recognition of the act of representation and the power involved in such a process. I apply her conceptualization here as I believe this tension is present in one's existence as a border crosser, or space invader, as well. The burden of representation is an emergent theme across the memoirs in my analysis, as well as my own experiences within higher education. Furthermore, it is a central theme in Martis (2020) reflection on her university experience. As it relates to memoir and narrative, performative autoethnography repositions the autoethnographer as an embodied storyteller who is performing a representation of history: an authority on their own experience only. It is critical here that I frame performance as the act of engaging an audience in witnessing one's embodiment, not a fabrication of one's experience. Spry quotes Denzin in her description of this process, as he illuminates the pedagogical foundation of ethnography itself:

Ethnography is not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through writing and our talk, we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this work and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a

way of seeing and being, it challenges, contexts, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other. (Denzin, 2006, p. 422 as cited in Spry, 2011)

I employ aspects of performative autoethnography in this research as a method of holding onto this tension between being an authorial figure in the construction of specific representations of historical, social, cultural contexts, and being a fallible narrator of embodied experiences in temporal places and spaces.

While research practice and writing are framed as performative, there are aspects of representation which are inherent to one's embodiment – and I believe this is an important tension in autoethnographic research. As hooks (1999) describes,

It is necessary for us to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized). It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist - the potential victim within that we must refuse - otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation. (p. 21)

I engage autoethnography, memoir, and narrative in the hopes that I can operate from a place where these tensions between multiple and fluid subjectivities can be held, in a manner that allows for an autoethnography of witnessing, a refusal and a cracking, without over simplifying or essentializing experiences as good or bad - but capturing the nuance of existing as a border crosser, with memoir pedagogy holding the potential to act as a bridge between worlds.

Feminist Coalition Building: Witnessing, Trauma, and Higher Education

Reading Fukushima's (2023) work on autoethnography and witnessing was yet another 'click' in a series of clicks that have set my research gears in motion and ignited a spark of inspiration. Central to Fukushima's model of autoethnographic witnessing is the assertion that

witnessing “enables the witness to see communities for their complex personhood, beyond the narratives that construct them as other, and a subject to be pitied” (p. 136). And this model is driven by the aim of a *coalition* between self and collective through relational ways of seeing experiences with trauma and learning. Rooted in the theory of decolonial feminism as a method of witnessing outside of the confines of hierarchies, as deeply relational, Fukushima integrates the work of Walsh (2018) and Anzaldúa (2021) who describe decolonial cracks – places where those who are othered are able to see and step outside of the colonial system, a liminal space where the everyday struggles of willful subjects and space invaders come together to create a lens for an unsettled form of witnessing. Fukushima (2023) writes,

To speak to witnessing is to grapple with narrative, storytelling, listening, testimonio, and subjectivity. Normative forms of witnessing reinscribe what it means to be legible.

Therefore, new forms of witnessing are needed, forms that do not reify colonial dualities...An unsettled witnessing is a commitment to witnessing without being settled with what one is seeing (p. 136).

Fukushima describes seeing decolonial cracks due to being “raised by a working-class immigrant mother whose family was shaped by Japanese colonization” (p. 137). I employ this theory of viewing decolonial cracks to the memoirs discussed in this research, as well as through my own lens as a border crosser. Of critical importance in considering decolonial cracks, is that there does not seem to be a choice on the part of the *seer* involved, rather, a decolonial crack seems to once again be rooted in an outsider’s embodiment and deeply connected to the experience of being a willful subject (Ahmed, 2012), or space invader (Puwar, 2004). As described by Pryer (2011), “[t]hose who dwell on the margins of the academy – intellectual liminars – are the most likely to notice its social, cultural, and intellectual norms and boundaries” (p. 8). Such noticing

of the norms and decolonial cracks invites possibilities for envisioning an alternate futurity, as witnessing the discourses which shape our subjectivity allows those within the margins to leverage, refuse, or accept based on their vision for change.

Autoethnographic Witnessing

I draw on this methodological lens of autoethnographic witnessing in large part due to its ability to build coalitions across boundaries through relational ways of seeing, as Fukushima (2023) gestures to Zaytoun (2019) and the concept of the self-in-coalition in her analysis (p. 139), positing that the self-in-coalition can be brought forward through acts of autoethnographic witnessing despite boundaries, borders, and “in spite of” internal hierarchies. For example, through acts of relational witnessing, Fukushima expands the grouping of women in her activism and research to include transgender and genderqueer individuals. It is of immense interest that more recent researchers in the areas of autoethnography and witnessing are examining the role of self-in-coalition in disrupting boundaries between equity deserving groups, as traditional critiques of autoethnography have typically been lofted at its singular and individualistic nature. Fukushima (2023) states

If trauma breaks our connection to ourselves and community, the work to heal from colonial violence are connections. And to work to resist the violence of racism and internalized violence in our communities, I endeavor to do this work in coalition with a commitment to witnessing on the side of the oppressed, even if imperfectly, at times limited and bounded, and in other cases also experiencing failure. (p. 147)

I apply Fukushima’s theory of witnessing to explore my autoethnographic learnings from memoirs written by individuals who have nuanced experiences with structural violence and learning, thus “witnessing on the side of the oppressed” (p. 147), paying particular attention to

opportunities for relationality, or establishing a sense of self-in-coalition. It would be negligent of me as a researcher to deny my privileges in being a settler, formally recognized as a Canadian citizen, speaking English as a first language, being in a long-term partnership and building my family with a cis, white man. However, there are ways in which I seek to connect parts of my story with those of others who have felt simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible in places of learning, in order to feel more connection to a community of learners who act as witness to the colonial harms of an institution that requires transforming, reshaping, or perhaps dismantling. In her chapter within *Dissident Knowledge in Higher Education*, Tuck (2018) writes,

There are parts of the higher education project that are too invested in settler colonialism to be rescued. I offer that here is a truism... There are parts of academic labour that might be refused in order to generate new possibilities: another truism. (p. 149)

Within the memoirs examined in this research, I found evidence of both parts of academic labour emphasized by Tuck: those acts that cannot and should not be rescued, and those that may be refused. There is a call to action in Tuck's (2018) argument that "calibrating our theories of change is a worthwhile activity for researchers, community organizers, communities, collectives, and all of us seeking to influence social change" (p. 150). In Chapters 5 and 6, I argue that educators and adult learners might engage with memoir pedagogy to take up this call, opening our collective consciousness and embrace relationality.

Attending university has never solely been about the classroom learning for me, as I have also been heavily involved in the community on campus and in the cities within which I am studying as an activist and organizer. This is where the praxis portion of the methodology outlined by Fukushima (2023) becomes so relevant, as there is a responsibility (Oliver, 2001) inherent to witnessing – perhaps even more so when witnessing on the side of the oppressed as

Fukushima describes. I hope to recalibrate the overall ‘call to arms’ within the theories presented here and emphasize the role of seeing the self-in-coalition, across the varied experiences explored through memoir pedagogy and an autoethnography of witnessing, to emphasize those decolonial cracks or areas for refusal in higher education. Through seeing the self-in-coalition, perhaps we are better able to grasp how the choices we make as students, as researchers, as educators, and as community members, can truly promote change in the university. Tuck expertly asserts this question in the most human way possible, asking “[h]ow shall we live?” (p. 157). This question has been pivotal in my journey to transform my learned survival strategies, addressing the impacts of trauma on my relationship to work, land, relationships, and myself. Importantly, the path forward is one where those individuals who are most privileged by the settler colonial institution of higher education must also seek to ask themselves: how shall we live? Thus, Tuck’s theory surrounding futurities and possibilities became a central decolonial framing for my research, as I too am driven by the opportunity to ask, as educators and learners in an increasingly divided world, how we might navigate ourselves in the space of higher education, to exist more in alignment with our interconnected nature.

Trauma and the BodyMind

Autoethnography is becoming increasingly common in research studies which involve some aspect of trauma or spatial violence (Walters & Anderson, 2021; Greene, 2020; Robertson, 2020; Olzman, 2020), and I posit that this prevalence is connected to the role of witnessing in producing and harnessing narratives for changemaking. Trauma has a profound impact on an individual’s physical and emotional sense of self, and a method of self-examination that captures the nuance of cultural experience while placing emphasis on the value of embodied experience and knowledge is critical to understanding the impacts of spatial violence and repairing after

harm. Here, I return to Walters and Anderson (2021), and their autoethnographic account of teaching while traumatized. The researchers make specific note of the concept of body/mind, defined as the inseparable connection between one's psyche and the physical manifestations of their emotions. As exemplified by authors writing about trauma and autoethnography, beginning with one's embodied experiences can be powerful both in its execution as a critical cultural commentary, as well as a form of bodymind healing. Robertson (2020) describes how his autoethnographic writing helped him to remember two of the most important people in his life amidst the chaos of his mind and memories upon losing them. Similarly, Greene (2020) illustrates how autoethnography can be a method of working through grief, specifically grief caused by prolonged oppression, which is often less evident and lacks institutionalized systems of support.

Greene's discussion surrounding grief and healing connects to Spry (2011) and her description of how performative autoethnography takes place through "the agency of *telling*" and "the critical assignment of language to experience" (p. 502, emphasis in original). While performance is not quite the same creative process as storytelling, here I connect Spry's discussion of agency back to the act of self-witnessing as a decolonial feminist praxis. Memoir and autoethnography are intricately tied up in the translation of embodied knowledge into something tangible through which others can see themselves, as well as wider cultural patterns, reflected. As noted in Chapter 1, trauma often results in the development of hyper vigilance on part of the survivor, and this hyper vigilance shows up in one's body/mind, and their methods of engaging with the outside world. To engage in performative autoethnography is to explore "alternate versions and options of reacting to and experiencing sociocultural expectations, thereby resisting and intervening on normative constructs of human being and reified structures

of power” (Spry, 2011, p. 504). This theory is quite similar to Fukushima’s (2023) assertion that the act of unsettled witnessing requires “raising questions about normative aspects of events and examining the politics of representation as infused with the discourses surrounding nationhood, race, and gender” (p.136). Thus, both performative autoethnography and an autoethnography of witnessing inform this research regarding disrupting the normative patterns of relationality, often characterized by trauma’s emergence in the individual’s body/mind through hyper vigilance, shame, and isolation.

This methodological blending opens space for witnessing the decolonial cracks, building coalitions across difference, and for an exploration of the ways in which structural violence positions marginalized groups as willful subjects or killjoys in places of learning. Fukushima (2023) identifies that there are three central practices to a decolonial feminist witnessing, stating that it embraces relational ways of seeing, centralizes a nepantlera (border crosser) status, and inhabits contradiction. Therefore, in my analysis I examine themes from memoirs with keen attention paid to the role of border crossers – those framed as space invaders - examining connections, tensions, and contradictions between the memoirs, and emphasizing the role of self-in-coalition as a path forward for addressing structural violence and supporting willfulness for learners with a trauma history.

Decolonial Cracks: Trauma in the Higher Education Context

Interviews, case studies, surveys, and/or narrative methods are commonly employed to examine the experiences of groups who are historically marginalized within academic institutions, while in recent decades autoethnography and ethnography are becoming more commonly used by researchers who are interested in examining lived experiences in conjunction to social and cultural contexts within higher education (James & Taylor, 2023; Phelps-Ward et

al., 2021; Walters & Anderson, 2021; Brim, 2020; Greene, 2020; Robertson, 2020). In their research with first-generation students from an academic program at York University, James and Taylor (2023) highlight the increasingly critical role of student's lived experience in shifting the space of higher education. They write,

To understand how universities might support first-generation students ... in their pursuit of higher education, we must learn about, comprehend, and appreciate their lived experiences and the complexities of their lives as shaped by the underlying structural forces that regulate their needs, interests, expectations, and hopes - all of which guide their interactions, choices, and aspirations. (p. xiv)

This research illuminates that students who were historically underrepresented in academic institutions are enrolling at increasingly higher rates, and therefore, emerging research aimed at supporting such groups “must also take into account the complex ways in which students are positioned within and outside university contexts” (p. xiv). In the example of the collaborative autoethnography conducted by Phelps-Ward et al. (2021), the researchers found that institutionally driven solutions to inequity “do not undo or adequately address the pain, isolation, and dehumanization of existing as a Black person at a historically and predominantly white institution” (p. 11). They autoethnographically reflect on how research could be a healing place for Black academics, discuss their reflections as a group, and determined the recurring four themes of visibility, recognizing shared realities, being authentic, and being in community. The process of engaging in autoethnography collaboratively fostered a critical space of healing for the researchers involved, a space where they could transcend the institutional limits of the academy. Like these authors who have employed forms of autoethnography in their research on higher education and experiences of marginalization, I aim to emphasize the possibilities for

witnessing ourselves within and outside of the stories of others, and thus the role of memoir and storytelling in refusals, healing, and ultimately transforming harmful structures.

Examining the experiences of his students at an inner-city college in New York, Brim (2020) argues that “students are sorted on the basis of socioeconomic class by colleges that are themselves increasingly stratified by wealth-based rankings” (p. 3). He uses Virginia Woolf’s famous connection between eating and intellectualizing to introduce his critical exploration of the resources afforded to poor and queer students in the higher education setting. In *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf (1929) wrote, “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well” (p. 18), exemplifying that memoir elements are often found in feminist literary criticism, ethnographies, essays, or autoethnographies. This phenomenon is discussed by Taber (2012) who argues that critical researchers have a responsibility to acknowledge the role of their social positioning in framing their researching. She states that “an autoethnographic lens should therefore start with the self in order to critique the social” (p. 81). Furthermore, Taber identifies the ways in which autoethnography as a research lens can assist researchers in engaging with self-reflexivity and framing their connection to their research area as being valid and useful.

For example, while Brim’s book is described as an ethnography, he employs elements of both memoir and autoethnography, as his own experiences serve as a lens through which he analyzes diversity work, Queer Studies, and student experience in higher education. He discusses his positioning as a gay man who grew up in rural Indiana and describes his socio-economic class in relation to his students. Like myself, and most of the authors whose memoirs I discuss in this dissertation, Brim views his academic success and progress as “a way out” of a place that was harmful to him (p. 59). He shares that his own mother was often homophobic and met his coming out with the assertion that if she had known sooner, she would have subjected him to

conversion therapy. Brim also notes that working in the city of New York, where thousands of people have died due to the AIDS crisis, one might expect that his prescriptions as an HIV+ professor would be covered by his benefits, however, the drug plan covers only 1/3 of the \$30,000 in costs for his HIV medicine each year.

Brim's book is exemplary in its execution of embodied telling and (auto)ethnographic analysis. Describing a commencement speech which took place in 2018, where the student speaker highlighted the need for new heating and A/C on campus, Brim states,

Freezing and sweating through years of classes seems to have left a strong impression on him about how to improve higher education. When a smart student from a poor college connects learning to the physical environment in these terms, he reveals the short-sightedness of debates in higher education about consumer students or pampered students or sensitive students - a favorite preoccupation of Rich Queer Studies. He draws us back to the reality of the vending machine dinner, not the new recreation centre or fancy dorms or the question of doing queer work 'in the community,' all of which speak not only to the ways the built environment of rich schools structure thought at those schools but also to the ways that those thoughts get transposed from provincial hieroglyph to the lingua franca of Queer studies. (p. 35)

This passage illustrates the need for methods of research in higher education which begin with the lived experiences of students who are the furthest from privilege. Only then can education researchers begin to better fully see the ways that policy plays out in the everyday, and the consequences of underfunding, lack of representation, high costs, socially isolating atmospheres, and intimidating bureaucracies. I return to Tuck (2018) and her question of "how shall we live" (p. 157)? There is a wealth of information in the stories made available to us as educators and

researchers, and through witnessing such stories, institutions of higher education have a response-ability beyond simply recognizing marginalized communities as existing (Oliver, 2001), and those of us with institutional privilege hold a responsibility for engaging in refusals and changemaking.

Autoethnography and Memoir

As someone whose main source of healing has always been through writing and storytelling, I am expressly interested in investigating the role of memoir in making the relationship between narrative and healing more discernible. The methodological interventions discussed in this section frame my reading of the memoirs and my thinking throughout the analytic process in Chapter 4, guiding my thematic understanding of each narrative. In memoir writing, the author is engaging in forms of autoethnography which create new histories and often co-construct an understanding of contexts with the reader. A memoir draws readers into the narrator's story, understanding that their narrative may at times be fallible, but it their version of events. Thus, memoir is a performative act in that it "starts with a body, in a place, and in a time" (Spry, 2011, 500). There is a dialogical process which takes place in memoir and coincides with Spry's definition of performative autoethnography. She writes,

Performative autoethnography can interrupt master narratives that become "stuck in time" through its continual re/creation of knowledge by critically reflecting back on who we are, and where, and when. This kind of reflection constitutes a continual opening to the natures of temporality and its socio-cultural representations... (p. 501)

It is unclear who the "we" is in Spry's detailing of performative autoethnography, and this is where I find Fukushima's description of decolonial feminist witnessing particularly powerful, as she asserts such witnessing is undergone only by those who inhabit (or embody) a nepantlera or

border crosser perspective – those who are “committed to the self-in-coalition, to being in coalition with the many” (p. 146). While examining literature on memoir, autobiography, and auto/ethnography, it becomes evident that not all writers who delve into autoethnographic research explicitly label it as such. In many cases, it is referred to as memoir. However, returning to Ellis’ arguments which I summarized in Chapter 2, autoethnography involves moving beyond the act of telling and into analyzing one’s experiences, and interestingly I found this entanglement between telling and analyzing to be more prevalent in the memoirs written by racialized authors such as Dashtgard (2019), Habib (2019) and Thistle (2019). Not all memoir authors who are writing about experiences that would be deemed traumatic, according to psychological and sociological definitions, name them as such. I found this to be true in Walls’ (2005) more journalistic method of storytelling. So then – what is it within the narratives that engages my own reflexivity and provides opportunity for viewing the self-in-coalition, between myself and the memoirists? What are the bonds that connect me to the authors of the memoirs, and how have they significantly impacted my ability to process the decolonial cracks I witness? I explore these questions more in Chapter 5, where I summarize the implications of the research presented here.

Febos (2022) asserts that memoirs do the work of “writing the history that we could not find in any other book” and that authors of memoir are often “giving this proof of our survival to each other” (p. 27). In this way, certain forms of memoir focus on telling a person’s story in context, without making them an innocent observer or narrator. In fact, reading the work of authors such Robertson (2020) and Olzman (2020), I was reminded of the memoirs I have read which have significantly contributed to my own processing of past experiences. Robertson (2020) describes processing his grief following the death of his best friend and father during his

PhD course work, and Olzman (2020) details her experiences over ten weeks of taking dance classes as a fat queer woman in a mainstream (fat phobic and heteronormative) dance studio. Both authors' writing illustrates the power of witnessing narrative in forging connections and feeling less isolated by experiences with structural violence.

As a feminist scholar and researcher at my roots, I can never escape the voice in my head which consistently recites the words: the personal *is* political. There is no radical or critically transformative theoretical text that I have ever read which was not borne out of a deep acknowledgement of this truth. Much like Febos' (2022) argument above for the necessity of lived experience in informing and mobilizing social justice research, I assert that it is through personal narrative that we can come to understand one another and how we experience the world more fulsomely. In fact, Febos presents a passionate defence for the importance of memoir:

Social justice has always depended upon the testimonials of the oppressed. We cannot fully acknowledge the harms of patriarchy without a subsequent women's liberation movement, just as we cannot fully acknowledge the harms and continued existence of white supremacist structures in our society without an anti-racist civil rights movement. We cannot fully acknowledge the harms committed against LGBTQI [sic] people without a queer liberation movement. We cannot fully acknowledge the violence perpetrated against trans women of colour without a movement that affirms the humanity of and demands civil rights for these women. It is not enough for the people of such identities to cast off shame and demand justice. The listeners must join them, and for that, we need to hear their stories. (2022, p. 17)

I do not seek to do research for the sake of doing research, nor for the degree at the end. I seek to change the operations and procedures which subjugate certain groups of individuals and limit them from accessing education beyond certain settings.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Autoethnographic, memoir and narrative ethnographic studies use a multitude of data collection and analysis methods, many of which are rooted in observational and emergent textual analysis such as coding and thematic categorization. Within this research, I aim to stay rooted in the literature on trauma, higher education, and autoethnographic witnessing, which circulates around the importance of beginning with lived experience and emphasizing nuance, tensions, and fluid subjectivities. Therefore, I have chosen to adhere to narrative methods of emergent thematic analysis, guided by the key codes of structural violence and willfulness, which have emerged out of the literature on gender, race, and space and trauma-informed pedagogies. As discussed by Josselson and Hammack (2021), “[n]arrative analysis is an inductive method that contextualizes understanding in relation to the narrative as a whole, to its constituent parts, and to the social location(s) of the participants” (p. 7). Throughout my various readings of each memoir, I recorded notes in an Excel spreadsheet, labeled according to each stage of the analysis (i.e. zooming in (autoethnographic witnessing), zooming out (thematic analysis)), and in the final column of the spreadsheet I recorded notes based on the emerging connections across all of the memoirs, and my experience. These connections across the different stages of my analysis, and to my own learning around trauma, willfulness, and structural violence, formed coherent sentence-long statements which became my central themes.

Ethical Review – File 24-179 Taber

A critical stage in my research process was to apply for ethical clearance due to the autoethnographic elements of my analysis, which could pose potential risks to myself as researcher, as well as any individual identified in my narratives. While previous autoethnographic research had been conducted by researchers at my institution without a need for ethics clearance, the increase in use of this methodology seems to have expanded an awareness of the risks, and thus I was required to apply for ethics review. Specifically, I was asked to reflect on the risks and benefits of my research, as well as the processes for withdrawal of consent and maintaining confidentiality.

The risks outlined in my application all related to sharing my narrative and inadvertently exposing myself or another individual. While I understand the risks inherent to telling my own story, I choose to accept these in engaging with autoethnography as a methodology. Furthermore, I recognize my privileged positioning as a researcher who has previously conducted an autoethnographic analysis (Grover, 2019). Importantly, I also feel supported in engaging with an autoethnography and addressing potential risks to myself as researcher, due to having a strong community around me. For example, I am more aware of how shame can contribute to isolation for people living with C-PTSD, and therefore I avoid the instinct to keep feelings of stress to myself. When stressors come up for me in doing this work, I have a close circle of people I can rely on to help me process, as well as access to therapy if needed.

Addressing the risks to others in my research, I maintained confidentiality of other individuals by using vague language around their relationship to me, wherever possible. At times, I offer small details regarding individuals in my life, but the purpose of doing so will be to add context to my personal experiences. The benefits of my research relate to my own processing

of my trauma history, as well as contribution to the field of trauma-informed practice in higher education in the form of memoir as pedagogical tool. Finally, if I chose to withdraw my research project before it was complete, I explained how I would proceed to destroy any data I have collected as well as all drafts of my dissertation. After outlining in detail how I would ensure the safety of myself and others in the data collection, analysis, and dissemination processes, my application was approved. Importantly, this research project engages with public texts in the form of published memoirs, in conjunction with my own learning around trauma, structural violence, and willfulness. The public nature of the memoirs allows me to address power differentials inherent to researcher/participant relationships in a meaningful way, while still engaging in a dialogical process of co-witnessing between the experiences of the memoirists and my own fraught experiences within spaces of higher education. Thus, I emphasize the diverse nature of structural violence across lived experience with trauma, in a manner which minimized risk to any subjects.

Data Collection and Analysis

Emulating a similar method of data analysis as that discussed by Josselson and Hammack (2021), I engaged in 4 sequential readings of the memoirs collected, in order to: 1) zoom in (Taber et al, 2017) and make notations regarding my own reflections and personal learning from the narratives; 2) zoom out, determining themes embedded under each of the codes of structural violence and willfulness; 3) identify links between the themes emerging from the memoirs and the theory discussed above whilst simultaneously searching for patterns across the collection of memoirs, and; 4) to identify areas of resonance and conflict, across all five memoirs, with my own narrative experiences, as relates to my learning as a witness. Throughout all four readings of the texts, I followed Josselson and Hammack's suggestion of writing memos regarding themes

and patterns while reading, and as discussed above, I kept these organized using Microsoft Excel to delineate each reading from the next. Patterns identified across narratives took the form of full sentence thematic observations (telling a story) based on my initial notes, versus the conceptual codes (structural violence, willfulness) used to initially section and analyze the memoirs (Josselson & Hammack, 2021; Saldaña, 2020). According to Josselson and Hammack (2021), beginning with the individual contexts and narratives before moving to aggregate analysis across individual narratives is a key component of narrative research as it emphasizes “particularity and diversity in human experience” (p. 9). They assert that in narrative analysis, researchers identify “units of meaning related to the conceptual question” (p. 10) through multiple readings of the texts, thus I engaged in the sequential readings in order to interpret emerging themes which answer the question: what are my autoethnographic learnings from contemporary memoirs, which includes themes related to trauma and learning – specifically structural violence and willful subjects – as a racialized, queer, and working poor woman in higher education?

To begin, I had already collected and read the initial three memoirs. Upon the approval of my dissertation proposal by my committee, I re-read each of the first three memoirs, making notations within the books, utilizing methods discussed by Saldaña (2020): highlighting, and noting passages of salience which fall under the initial themes emerging from my literature review: structural violence and willfulness. First, I highlighted and marked passages with sticky notes, so I could return to them throughout the analysis. Next, I recorded a note in my spreadsheet which corresponded to each sticky note and connects the theme back to structural violence or willfulness. I transferred or noted key passages within my own notes. I chose to highlight within the physical texts, as well as to jot notes in the margins and on sticky notes, as this allowed me to stay immersed in the stories, rather than moving back and forth between the

physical memoirs and my analysis spreadsheet. Other researchers emulating a similar method may choose to follow different methods, depending on what would allow them to maintain a focus on the narrative, for example if reading the text on their computer they may prefer digital notetaking. I engaged in a zooming in on each contextual narrative through engaging in this initial re-reading of the three memoirs I had begun with, making detailed notes on my experience reading, and categorizing key narrative components (ones which are repeated throughout the texts, emerging as central to the narrative) as they fell under the themes of structural violence and willfulness.

Based on feedback from my committee members on my dissertation proposal, I sought to find memoirs that would expand the diversity of lived experience of the authors examined, across categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. I used search terms related to the emerging themes of structural violence and willfulness; however, I noticed that within the memoir genre there are certain terms that are less commonly used to describe narratives. Therefore, I adjusted my search terms to include the following: trauma, learning, race, sexuality, and memoir. Recognizing that two of the three authors I had already been examining in the analysis were straight white women located in the United States, I wanted to find memoirs written by non-white Canadian authors, as well as narratives which explored heteronormativity as a theme. Using the above search terms, I found *Habib* and *Thistle* as Canada Reads ¹Award contenders for 2020, as both memoirs has been published in 2019. These memoirs brought in more contemporary voices writing about themes of intergenerational trauma and belonging, in the Canadian context. I was excited at the potential widening the lens of my research, in

¹ Canada Reads is an annual literary competition wherein Canadian celebrities champion certain titles and panellists vote each day to eliminate one book, until only the last title that remains is deemed the winner for the year. For more information see the CBC description here: <https://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/about-canada-reads-1.4025711>

examining a memoir written by Habib, a queer woman of colour, and Thistle, a Cree-Métis man whose memoir was framed in relation to both structural violence and intergenerational trauma. Thus, I added the two memoirs written by Habib (2019) and Thistle (2019) into my research plan and engaged in the same process of reading, zooming in/out, and keeping notes on my own reflections, paying attention to the key questions discussed by Josselson and Hammack (2021): “What are [my] associations to the narrative? What is [my] social location in relation to the [author]? How might [my] response affect [my] understanding of the person and the stories being told” (p. 29)? These questions framed my initial stage of the analysis and are emphasized in my “zooming in” subheadings throughout Chapter 4, which centre on my own learning from each memoir, rather than providing an objective synopsis.

I then engaged in a second reading of each memoir to zoom out, recording notes in my Excel document following Josselson and Hammack’s framework and examining “the voices, discourses, and master narratives with which the text is in dialogue” (p. 35). This reading involved paying particular attention to implicit meanings, considering the cultural, political, and social contexts of each text – significantly informed by the literature from Chapter 2, related to race, gender, space, and trauma. I mapped the method of zooming in and out onto Josselson and Hammack’s framework of using guiding questions to examine the researcher’s connection to the narrative in the first reading, and then examining larger discourses and social context in the second reading. Further research in narrative analysis could focus on developing guiding questions to support the process of zooming in and out in the thematic analysis, as it can be helpful to have a more detailed framework to support one’s examination of patterns. Next, I reviewed my notes for consistent subthemes *across* the narratives, examining tensions, contradictions, and similarities between the different texts. I skimmed through each memoir

again scanning for subthemes underneath the conceptual themes of structural violence and willfulness, as well as making note of key narrative components and passages in my Excel document. This is when I began to search for patterns which could be summarized in a sentence, each telling a story (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). I reviewed my zooming in and zooming out notes, examining my autoethnographic learnings through witnessing the narratives, and then re-read them and drew connections between all the memoirs and my own experiences, and the theoretical framing around race, gender, space, trauma, and higher education. During this stage, I engaged in the thematic analysis and connection to literature which Josselson and Hammack (2021) have argued comes naturally to the process. As they write, “Readings 3 and 4 will be integrated such that interpretations of the patterns are presented along with the data” (p. 60). Finally, I reviewed my notes and the memoirs once more, summarizing areas of resonance from each memoir, as a trauma survivor in higher education, to demonstrate where there are (or are not) opportunities for memoir pedagogy to support relational ways of seeing.

Writing on autoethnography as a methodological framework, Chang (2008) discusses the practice of reflecting on border crossings in one’s life; a time when “you place yourself in unfamiliar places or situations” (p. 73). I connect this concept to Anzaldúa’s (2021) definition of a border as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary,” as well as being “in a constant state of transition” (p. 57). I found this conceptualization of a border especially useful in the second stage of my research, where I examined the narrative themes from the memoirs in relation to moments related to structural violence in the higher education context. I held a consideration of Anzaldúa’s assertion that the only legitimate inhabitants of a borderlands are the individuals who hold power. She writes, “[t]ension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus” (p. 58). Using the thematic

findings which arise from the memoirists' experiences with structural violence and willfulness, as border crossers in the space of higher education, I analyze these initial findings in comparison to my own experiences as a student and trauma survivor (zooming in). I put my experiences in dialogue with the experiences shared by Walls (2005), Westover (2018), Dashtgard (2019), Habib (2019) and Thistle (2019), as they relate to the themes embedded underneath the initial codes. Writing through these tensions as a method of illuminating a path forward, I sought to discover how memoir pedagogy might support relationality across differences, for myself (and potentially others) as a learner in the Canadian higher education context who live with a trauma history.

To holistically examine themes consistent or in tension across all the memoirs and my own experience, I revisited my journals and writing from the past six years since I began the doctoral program and engaged in the process of reflexive engagement with my past thinking, as well as my contemporary learnings from the texts. Drawing on the larger social and cultural patterns discussed in the literature on higher education, trauma, and autoethnography, I explore the themes of structural violence and willfulness, paying attention to recurring tensions and subthemes across the narratives and my own experiences. I highlight key areas where I witness decolonial cracks, refusals, and opportunities for seeing the self-in-coalition across differing experiences. In Chapter 5, I shift these observations into clear implications for the higher education community around the central question of how we can come together in community to address trauma in learners' lives, as academics, researchers, students, and community members, and in Chapter 6 I acknowledge emerging recommendations out of this research.

Discussing narrative ethnography as it relates to memoir, Tedlock (2011) writes, "we see ourselves reflected in the vacuous center of the canvas. This creates an anomalous third space

between self and other, interior and exterior, thought and emotion, truth and illusion” (p. 331). In witnessing these memoirs, I operate from a place within my own experience and in the university context that is borderlands of sorts – in that I am a part of the institution yet remain an outsider. Within the institution I am staff, instructor, part-time student, with no home in a singular place, just as I am biracial without a rootedness to my Indian and Pakistani heritage, and a working-poor individual with over one hundred thousand dollars of student loans, who makes a salary wage at a midsize university. No person is ever one thing, no story one dimensional, and this project is one which will take place in the borderlands described by Tedlock, where the boundaries between differing experiences are explored for their potential to birth community and coalition, in order to refuse the settler colonialism inherent to Western university cultures and talk *back* to institutions of higher education while talking *across* to one another.

Chapter 4: Zooming In and Out on Structural Violence and Willfulness

I began the analysis by re-reading each of the three memoirs that initiated this journey, recording notes on passages relevant to the concepts of structural violence (as related to sexism, racism, ableism, as well as other forms of systemic oppression) and willfulness. Next, I expanded the dataset by reading two additional memoirs, selected for their focus on themes in this research, namely trauma, structural violence, and learning. In this chapter, I provide a brief synopsis of each memoir and summarize the emerging themes I recorded during this first (zooming in), and second (zooming out) stages of the analysis, seeking to illustrate the themes present within each separate memoir, as well as what patterns exist across the books, and which themes were less common or seemingly not present where I had expected them to be.

My analytic process followed two stages. In the first, or zooming in, I highlighted key passages in each text and recorded why they resonated with my theoretical framing or with my own experience. I organized these notes in an Excel spreadsheet, creating a record of emerging subthemes within each memoir. In the second, or zooming out, I compared my notes across the memoirs, connecting individual experiences to broader themes drawn from the literature in Chapter 2. From this iterative process of close and comparative reading, four themes emerged across the five memoirs:

1. There is an explicit link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma, particularly through the emergence of patriarchal violence and addiction.
2. Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of the survivor's inner voice as a young adult and adult.

3. Shame serves as a catalyst (and foundation) for survivor's consequent isolation and self-doubt; thus, education doesn't always feel like safe place to grow but ultimately offers potential to escape life narrative.
4. Willfulness becomes a brand used by others to dismiss and abuse survivors, but this label also has potential to become a powerful refusal when embraced and when stories are shared.

In the sections that follow, I elaborate on how each theme is in evidence in the memoirs, analyzing them through the lens of the theoretical (Chapter 2) and methodological (Chapter 3) framing. These themes not only capture the core insights of this study but also suggest implications for the field of trauma and learning.

I begin the following chapter by briefly summarizing the narrative arc of each memoir. Next, I describe how I engaged in a zooming in for each text, as I reflect on my autoethnographic learning, analyzing how I read each narrative through my unique lens of experience. Finally, I discuss the zooming out, a thematic analysis using my notes as a starting point but seeking to explore repeated themes across the memoirs and underneath the two codes of structural violence and willfulness. The zooming out stage allowed me to trace connections to the literature from Chapter 2 on trauma, structural violence, willfulness, and learning. My analysis begins with *Educated* (Westover, 2018), the first memoir I encountered during my very first doctoral course. Next, I discuss *Breaking the Ocean* (Dashtgard, 2019), followed by *The Glass Castle* (Walls, 2005), *We Have Always Been Here* (Habib, 2019), and lastly *From the Ashes* (Thistle, 2019). Each memoir is discussed in the order that they entered both my life and my research process, reflecting the evolving nature of my engagement with them. *From the Ashes* diverges from the other four memoirs in that it is written from the lived experience of a man, whereas the other

four memoirs were written by women. The primary focus of this memoir is on Thistle's (2019) experiences with intergenerational trauma as a young Cree-Métis man who mainly grew up in Ontario, Canada. Thus, Thistle's memoir in particular illuminates the fraught nature of education in the Canadian context, as traditional schooling has emerged out of the residential school system. Further, this memoir contains less of a focus on his childhood and more on his young adult coming-of-age under the grip of significant mental health struggles and addiction, which is a slight variation on the trajectories of the other memoir authors, but which presented critical insights for me regarding autoethnographic learnings. Furthermore, while the other memoirs gesture towards themes of intergenerational trauma, Thistle's (2019) narrative interrogates the lasting impacts of settler colonialism on his family and traces the pervasiveness of structural violence for a young man who has a fraught history with the education system. Important to note is that Thistle is currently a professor in the History department at York University, where I completed my undergraduate degree, marking another significant component of his narrative in that he, too, found a lasting - yet perhaps complicated - place for himself in the realm of Canadian higher education.

Below, I provide an example of the analytic process from my exploration of subthemes embedded within each of the main codes, across the memoirs.

Code	Definition	Example	Analytic Link
Structural Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyday experiences linked to oppression and embedded in relationships/institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walls and siblings malnourished and living without protection from elements • Linked to a lack of generational wealth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illuminates intergenerational impacts of class • Parents have limited choice in providing for their children • Leads to traumatic life experiences (in the form of slow violence)

			for Walls and her siblings
Willfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refusal to go along with suggested pathway, by choice or inability as existing in opposition to the inherited trajectory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habib (2019) details clear pathway before - involves a heteropatriarchal marriage, loss of self • Describes inability (refusal) to follow this pathway 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unwillingness to be swayed by social expectations of family and community • Habib labeled an outsider (willful) • Ultimately embraces status, initially felt shame

Table 1: An example of the thematic analysis undertaken under main codes of structural violence and willfulness.

This table offers a brief overview of my analytic process, where the analysis for each of the memoirs is discussed in more detail below. Within each of the sections devoted to a single memoir, I include additional tables to provide a snapshot of the central examples connected to the subthemes which emerged during my analysis.

Educated

Educated (2018) is a memoir written by Tara Westover, a white woman who was raised in rural Idaho. The book traces her experiences being isolated from society and forbidden from attending formal schooling. It also illuminates the impacts of being raised by a neglectful mother and paranoid father. Westover describes a childhood living in a non-conventional household, engaging in difficult physical labour, and growing up immersed in her family's unique version of Mormonism which included a high distrust of government and public schools. Despite coming-of-age within the grip of a deeply patriarchal and abusive household, she continues to have a passion for learning and is encouraged by one of her older brothers to pursue it more formally. Once at college, Westover continues to face significant barriers due to her internalized ideas

around her self-worth and non-Mormon practices, which cause her to struggle in her first years of studying. Eventually, she finds a path towards healing and accepting the fractured relationship with her family, and education serves as a catalyst for her in this journey.

Through my analysis of each memoir, and then across the five memoirs, I pinpointed the presence of the four subthemes. These subthemes, embedded under the codes of structural violence and willfulness, are briefly outlined in the table below as relates to *Educated*:

Subtheme	Example	Analytic Links
1. Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Westover describes father's patriarchal views • Mother/siblings as enablers or additional source of abuse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linked role of patriarchy family structure • Brother's physical violence - uses her interest in femininity and education as reason to position her as willful (Ahmed, 2014)
2. Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Westover loses trust in inner voice and memory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process damage to relational safety (Haines, 2019) • Westover makes sense of abuse and neglect through bypassing own perception
3. Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In spaces of higher education Westover is often unwilling to be seen or vulnerable • Would rather be alone in her shame 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link between self-advocacy and discomfort (Ahmed, 2010) Similarly, • Survivors often left with a sense of shame (Haines, 2019)
4. Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male patriarchs punish Westover when she acts outside of rigid views • Causes Westover to sublimate her willfulness, later in life emboldens her 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feminist becoming (Ahmed, 2017) meaningful frame for breaking point in Westover's sublimation of will • Describes being unable to send out younger version of herself to bear her brother's abuse • Self-growth cannot be reversed

Table 2: A breakdown of the thematic analysis of *Educated*.

Zooming In: Autoethnographic Analysis of Educated

Using both willfulness and structural violence as key coding mechanisms in reading *Educated*, certain themes emerged related to both concepts. Willfulness, as a willing against a social expectation which is placed on an individual, might encompass many different actions. In this memoir, it denotes the author's refusal to follow the general will (Ahmed, 2014) of their oppressor, as well as their questioning and rebelling against structural barriers. I argue that the act of questioning is often used as a tool by those around them to frame them as willful. Ahmed (2017) describes how "feminists acquire willful tongues from the very act of speaking out" (p. 191), and throughout *Educated*, I identify pivotal moments wherein Westover's actions signify a symbolic speaking out against the values of the patriarchs in her family. She thus becomes branded as willful ("slut" is the chosen term by her brother Shawn) and punished in the form of physical and emotional abuse. Importantly, the goal of the abuse is clear in how Shawn is attempting to send a message: the pain will stop when she embraces what he perceives as the right or normative set of values as dictated by the patriarchs (men) in the family. The punishment will stop when Westover accepts the life set out for her by her family and their religion, diminishing any sense of independent self which causes her to strive for more. Reading Westover's story and examining her narrative through the lens of my experience brought forward two themes under the codes of willfulness and structural violence: 1) the link between structural violence and the reproduction of intergenerational trauma, and 2) childhood abuse and gaslighting leading to a distrust of the author's inner voice as an adult.

Theme 1: Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma

My notes from the analytic reading of *Educated* mostly illuminate a stressful and tension filled family dynamic wherein a patriarchal head of household uses emotional abuse and neglect as a tool of manipulation to control his wife and children. For example, Westover (2018) writes,

As an adult, Dad would develop fierce opinions about women working, radical even for our rural Mormon community. “A woman’s place is in the home,” he would say every time he saw a married woman working in town. Now I’m older, I sometimes wonder if Dad’s fervor had more to do with his own mother than with the doctrine. I wonder if he just wished that *she* had been home so he wouldn’t have been left for all those long hours with Grandpa’s temper. (p. 26)

This passage demonstrates both the patriarchal oppression present in Westover’s childhood home, with her dad asserting his will over the rest of the family. These experiences in Westover’s story display the power of deeply engrained ideologies around gender and parenting, as well as their impact on the development of children. Doucet (2009) describes such patterns as a form of ‘habitus’ – a concept borrowed from Bourdieu – which acknowledges the commonsense practices an individual inherits from their environment.

In these moments, Ahmed’s (2014) description of the force of the institutionalized will is demonstrated, through the normalization of patriarchal domination and abuse in Westover’s community. Interestingly, the passage humanizes him simultaneously, honouring his own painful upbringing and the inevitable consequence and reproduction of violence which takes place over generations. This contradiction aligns with Fukushima’s (2023) conception of the decolonial crack, in that those who are captured within the legacies of intergenerational trauma can more readily identify the patterns.

Some other key moments in *Educated* that I examined more closely relate to Westover's (2018) perceptions of curiosity and personal goals as luxuries afforded to only the wealthy (p. 203). Since her family frequently struggled to make ends meet, Westover and her siblings were required to work in the scrapyard or on other odd jobs, and from an early age she develops a sense of duty around doing what is best for her family. Like Westover, I also worked from a very young age, cooking meals and taking care of household responsibilities. This parallel highlights how structural violence in working-class households can normalize children's adult-like responsibilities, which links to Ahmed's (2014) discussion of how willfulness is punished when one's needs diverge from family survival demands. For Westover (2018) this ultimately manifests in a sense of prioritization of her family's needs over her own, and Westover feels guilty later in life when she pursues an education and leaves her childhood home behind (p. 280). The loss of curiosity and sense of self which accompany a childhood of emotional neglect (often linked to structural violence) are paramount in Westover's narrative and seem to culminate in an inability to see her own brilliance or perceive her capacity as a learner accurately. This also resonated with me, as I often feel as though I rely too heavily on external validation to feel a sense of accomplishment, and when I feel an absence of validation, I worry that something is wrong with me. As outlined in Chapter 2, Haines (2019) posits that shame is a frequent consequence of harm done to an individual's sense of safety, belonging, or dignity, often through the impacts and everyday experience of structural violence.

Regarding willfulness, Westover's parents push extreme idealism onto her surrounding the negative influence of formal schooling, not trusting the public education system to instill Mormon values. Westover also describes witnessing the relationship between her mother and father, watching her father frequently exert power over her mother, as well as over everyone else

in their household. Westover (2018) details how her father played the role of a stereotypical patriarch, *unwilling* to accept or entertain anyone else's views when they challenged his own. For example, despite her interest in going to school, Westover is consistently forced to work in her father's scrapyard due to the financial pressures facing her family as well as their distrust of secular schooling. The physical nature of this work puts Westover (as well as her siblings) in harm's way many times, and in such moments the neglect present in her childhood is clearly illuminated. Again, Ahmed's (2014) conception of willfulness is poignant, particularly her discussion of willful body parts which refuse to bend to the will of their dominator. Westover (2018) and her brothers experience various injuries during their time working for their father, illuminating the very real impact of their father forcing his will onto his children.

I found myself consistently connecting Westover's context to my own childhood experience, as I was encouraged to be as financially independent as possible from a young age, and to contribute to the household as soon as possible. My mother worked the evening shift because it paid more, so I was often left with instructions for cooking dinner and a list of chores. I began working as a babysitter when I was 11 (older than Westover), and by age 13, I was working full-time during the summer, traveling across Ontario to survey traffic (getting paid "under the table"). As she grows older, Westover starts to feel as though she is missing something through not attending school and uses her older brother's textbooks to teach herself certain subjects. She also starts to enjoy performing in choir and local plays, as well as talking to boys her age. Her older brother, Shawn, despises her interests in performing or talking to boys, and consistently punishes her willful (as in willing against the values of the patriarchs of her family) behaviour through exerting violence and abuse. On multiple occasions during my childhood when I would not bend to the will of a particular family member, they had lashed out

at me so harshly that the memories of their abuse continue to be clear in my mind. Like Westover, the circumstances for these moments typically revolved around me disrupting their desires through having or expressing my own needs or wants.

Once Westover leaves her childhood home and pursues a university education, she begins to feel as if she does not quite belong in the space of formal higher education, and she struggles to escape her own inner demons which keep her trapped in the cycle of intergenerational trauma and abuse. When reading these sections, I was transported back to phone calls with my family during my first few years of university, getting updates on what was happening with certain relatives who were struggling and feeling like I could never escape the reality of my upbringing (strongly connected to structural violence) and who I really was. So many people around me in university were thriving, relishing their independence and finding a sense of purpose, and while these things existed for me on a smaller scale, it felt like it was coming at the expense of my responsibility to my family. Interestingly, tasks associated with mothering in my family dynamic had become part of my habitus (Doucet, 2009), and moving away from home disrupted this pattern for me. It felt like each time my world would expand, my eyes being opened through my classes and meeting new people, a phone call would come from a family member that would remind me that good things did not happen for people like me, shrinking my focus right back down to their needs and the wellbeing of people back at home.

Theme 2: Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice

Westover's (2018) story examines the role that emotional neglect and abuse from parents play in the development of one's relationship to, and internalization of shame. She describes the root of shame taking hold in having parents who do not see you or protect you (p. 273), as she was consistently put in situations where her wellbeing was not a priority against her parent's

desire to maintain their religious ethics, patriarchal control, or economic stability. Her narrative centres around themes of women being forced into a state of victimhood, where they are powerless to the whims of violent men who regard them as *willful*, needing to be controlled, silenced, and tamed. These themes reminded me of the trajectory of women in my lineage, and how I have witnessed women lose their sense of self and their power to abusive men, repeatedly. Women whose paths were seemingly pre-determined by structural violence and the imprint of the relationship between their parents, where typically the men would go to work and then come home and drink, and the women would take care of them and the household. Any time one of the women before me would attempt to disrupt this cycle, she was met with structural or interpersonal harm. As a child, to avoid aggression from her father and older brother, Westover embraces a life that is for others (in that it benefits those in power over her) in order for her to feel love and belonging. Conversely, Ahmed (2017) describes the *willful* subject as an individual who is willing to not be made happy by that which makes others happy, and to face the consequences of this not willing.

Westover's story demonstrates that for a child who is seeking a sense of belonging in their childhood home, this *willfulness* often feels like less of a possibility. It is often not safe for a child to will against the will of their family, as often the punishment is emotional or physical abuse. The punishments which she often faced when making herself visible, contributed to Westover (2018) not wanting to be present in her body/mind because it posed genuine risk and felt unsafe; thus, she begins to dissociate and subjugate her physical and emotional wellbeing to survive. This leads Westover to relying on external voices to understand what is normal versus abnormal. It is only when people she meets, and begins to trust, who are external to her abnormal upbringing (those who are outside of the structurally embedded harms), point to aspects of her

life and challenge their acceptability that she considers a different narrative may be at play. For example, her first boyfriend tries to express to her that Shawn's abuse is not normal, and while it causes a rift between them, it does slowly begin to chip away at her denial.

I cannot recount the number of times I have had moments like this, where I had thought aspects of my life were not unusual, especially the violent men and angry family members. Once I began to spend more time at my friends' houses and learn more about the lives of my peers at school, I began to realize that I was working hard to ignore the voice in my head telling me that things felt wrong or unsafe. Westover describes how someone else choosing to put her emotions and needs first, became a reason to finally choose herself too (p. 316), once again due to a romantic partner expressing to her that what her family wants from her does not need to be her priority. This pattern illuminates Fukushima's (2023) decolonial cracks through emphasizing the power inherent to making structural violence visible to those who may exist or temporarily be outside of such harms. Applying Fukushima's theory here invokes the power of witnessing to act as a catalyst for healing the shame and isolation, which are often a result of childhood trauma inherently linked to structural violence. Often in Westover's life she denies her inner voice (willfulness) and its insistence that her family's treatment of her is unacceptable. However, in moments where other individuals who she has come to trust look at the actions of her family and mirror them back to her from their perspective, she begins to see things in a new light – finding her way back to her willful subjectivity as an honouring of self.

As noted above, Westover (2018) details moments in her life which expertly illustrate how willfulness can be dangerous in the lives of young women who exist in a patriarchal setting. She is frequently punished, through physical or verbal abuse, for standing out, such as drawing attention from a boy, or inadvertently presenting a challenge to the ideals of her father or brother.

Growing up, most of the adult men in my life who fit into caregiving roles were abusive alcoholics. Witnessing Westover's story brought to light for me the ways in which men both subtly and overtly abuse power in the household, to make women, girls, and often all children, shrink smaller and obey their rules. Punishments for attracting boys' attention or for needs that do not align with household values lead Westover (2018) to internalize a reverence in pain, seeing it "as necessary and untouchable" (p.183). Consequently, when she struggles, she is taught to forgo help and instead make herself as small as possible. This struck a deep chord with me, having been celebrated most of my childhood for my maturity and independence. However, Westover is also punished for being herself, for being curious and feminine. For example, when she experiments with wearing makeup her brother calls her names and soon after physically harms her while criticizing such choices. Moreover, she begins to feel shame around her most basic needs and desires, choosing instead to subjugate her own interests, denying her *willfulness*, in favour of keeping those around her happy and mitigating harm. At one point she describes being branded a feminist "as a signal that you have lost" (p. 258).

Maintaining the illusion of safety through hypervigilance and control is a pattern I had not noticed in my own life until reading *Educated*. As noted above, Westover describes writing about the abuse Shawn has subjected her to in her journal and attempting to make sense of his actions, she recalls the following: "I decide that if I had asked differently, been more calm, he would have stopped" (p. 195). I noted this passage with emphasis and wrote my own reflection in my analytical notes which reads: "at least if I'm the problem it's within my control." Slightly further up the page when Westover describes her father not noticing how dishevelled and upset she appears after the above altercation I noted another reflection in response to Westover's words, which reads: "being invisible to your parents."

These two threads of neglect/invisibility and wanting to be in control strike me as being related. As though being able to maintain control over your life and your emotions will keep you safe, even when you cannot trust your guardians to do so. Westover's reflection above resonated very deeply with me as someone who experienced emotional abuse and neglect. While reading, I was often struck by vivid memories of a loved one being incited to anger anytime I said no to doing things for them, and was overwhelmed with images of this individual screaming at me and telling me how awful I was, and the desire as a young girl to be able to gain some sense of control over the situation. This was a person who represented significant attachment to me, but all it took was one mistake or refusal to bend to their will on my part, and it felt as though our connection could be rendered meaningless. Reading *Educated* helped me understand how these moments continue to live within me today, in my inability to see myself accurately, my unwillingness to upset others for my own benefit, and to relinquish control over minor aspects of my everyday life. Like Westover, I often struggle to trust my own perception on situations. It often feels as though it is my job to ensure that no mistakes are made in any aspect of my life, so I can prove I am worthy of being treated well. When I do make mistakes, they feel like a personal failing that no amount of "fixing" could possibly make up for.

This lack of trusting myself connects to another key aspect of structural violence emphasized in this memoir, which is the role of internalized oppression on the human psyche. Even after escaping the violence and neglect of her childhood home, Westover carries the voice of her father and brother in her own mind well into adulthood. She describes a moment where a professor at Cambridge is praising her writing, and the discomfort she feels at such an assessment,

I could tolerate any form of cruelty better than kindness. Praise was a poison to me; I choked on it. I wanted the professor to shout at me, wanted it so deeply I felt dizzy from the deprivation. The ugliness of me had to be given expression. If it was not expressed in his voice, I would need to express it in mine. (p. 240)

Before reading this memoir, I had not quite understood why it made me so uncomfortable to be praised for my skills and strengths. Upon learning more about trauma and trauma responses in the lives of adults who have grown out of adverse childhood experiences, I now understand more about the role that shame plays in internalizing a sense of negative self-worth.

Shame is present in Westover's story through her rationalization of the emotional neglect and abuse committed by her loved ones, as she would often play down the violence Shawn inflicted or make excuses for the neglect of her parents, to feel less of a sense of deep betrayal and loneliness as a child. I realized upon reading this memoir that Westover's deferral was like my general avoidance of my own memories, and my choice to accept my friends' descriptions of our childhood experiences as being more accurate than my own. It had been safer for me to not dwell in the past, and through refusing to hold onto any memories, I was making an unconscious decision to not face other memories that were more painful for me to reflect on. This pattern connects back to Febos (2022) who describes how "[f]ear, like pain, can narrow perspective to a pinprick" (p. 101). It can be hard to see our experiences contextually or holistically, when we are still operating out of a place of fear. This pattern carries forward into my current life in the form of self-gaslighting where I frequently tell myself I am making a bigger deal out of something than is necessary, or that I must be misinterpreting situations, out of a fear of the implications if my interpretation is correct. In my adult life I have struggled to trust my inner voice, and only through reading memoirs such as *Educated* have I begun to understand that this struggle has

been rooted in my inability to face the realities of emotional neglect. Linking this back to Febos (2022) for trauma survivors it is crucial to feel supported relationally, through psychological and physical safety, before being able to come to terms with structural violence. It is hard to trust your own perception, to engage with your willfulness, when to accept your reality would mean to accept that the people you love, the people you are surrounded by, and the spaces you exist in daily, are not safe.

Zooming Out: Thematic Analysis of Educated

An overarching theme throughout Westover's memoir is that of intense emotional neglect and subsequent shame and invisibility as she develops into a young adult. Engaging in a zooming out reading, I analyze *Educated* through the academic literature and with the theoretical lenses of trauma and higher learning. Specifically, I investigate where there are moments of overlap between the theory on trauma, learning, and structural violence as relates to race, gender, and sexuality. Themes begin to emerge under the coding of willfulness and structural violence and are common across all five of the memoirs. These are themes 3 & 4 emerging from my analysis, which are: 3) Shames serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt, and 4) Willfulness becomes a brand used by others to dismiss and abuse trauma survivors, however, the brand has potential to become a powerful refusal when it is embraced the author.

Theme 3: Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt

Westover describes many moments where she is put in the path of extreme harm by her father, and the reader is granted insight into the reality of a child whose guardian struggles with mental health and their own childhood trauma – this is linked inherently to structural violence. Westover documents several moments with her father and older brother Shawn, which I connect back to Ahmed's (2017) concept of feminist becoming or consciousness, and the heaviness of

carrying the weight of moments of dissonance. Ahmed (2017) describes how experiencing a violent world changes an individual, arguing that they come to expect violence and “learn to inhabit [their] body differently through this expectation” as well as how one “might withdraw in anticipation that what happened before will happen again” (p. 24). In such moments with her older brother Shawn, who physically abuses her, Westover illuminates the internal consequences of *patriarchal* structural violence so vividly, through linking it with her shame.

A key consequence of abuse in people’s everyday lives is demonstrated by an inability to trust their perspective on a situation, to honour their own inner voice. In some cases, abuse and/or trauma may result in a complete loss of an inner voice. I argue that there is an inherent connection between one’s inner voice and their willful subjectivity, positioning their willingness or refusal to honour their inner voice as connected to self-preservation. Sweet (2019) describes the connection between structural violence and gaslighting, calling it a “social phenomenon” (p. 852) wherein an abuser using structural inequality and institutional power to encourage the victim of their abuse that their perception of the experience is incorrect. Through using gender-based stereotypes and being in a position of social power over Westover, her brother works to convince her that she deserved his abusive behaviour. Reflecting on an experience where her older brother Shawn dragged her violently out of her vehicle and pinned her onto the ground, partially removing her clothing in the process, Westover gives the reader insight into this process of rewriting experiences in order to make sense out of them, in order to make them align with a vision of yourself and others that feels safer. She writes,

I begin to reason with myself, to doubt whether I had spoken clearly: what had I whispered and what had I screamed? I decide that if I had asked differently, been more calm, he would have stopped. I write this until I believe it, which doesn’t take long because I *want*

to believe it. It's comforting to think the defect is mine, because that means it is under my power. (p. 195)

This is an incredibly illuminating passage in Westover's memoir, in that she describes the dissonance often experienced by those who experience violence at the hands of people they love, and the desire to feel some aspect of control in an atmosphere where your needs are so deeply neglected that you would rather feel responsible for your own abuse than accept that you are trapped and alone, unworthy of love. Subsequently, Westover develops an unwillingness, or perhaps *unwillfulness*, to trust her own memories and inner voice, instead deferring to others to make choices and judgements. She describes deferring to her partner's memories in the following passage:

I began to defer, always, to the judgement of others. If [my partner] remembered something differently than I did, I would immediately concede the point. I began to rely on [my partner] to tell me the facts of our lives. I took pleasure in doubting myself about whether we'd seen a particular friend last week or the week before, or whether our favourite *creperie* was next to the library or the museum. Questioning these trivial facts, and my ability to grasp them, allowed me to doubt whether anything I remembered had happened at all. (p. 294)

Westover's unwillingness to trust her own memory of events aligns with the literature on trauma and abuse, as van der Kolk (2015) emphasizes that "trauma robs you of the feeling that you are in charge of yourself" (p. 205). This illuminates a linkage between one feeling in charge of their self and willfulness as subjectivity. Children who experience unsafe conditions with their parents or guardians often demonstrate a unique map of reality which is different from those without such adverse experiences, and this can cause them to engage in self-damaging behaviour as

adults (van der Kolk, 2015). This pattern of behaviour can be traced in *Educated*, as Westover often struggles to seek support amidst challenging circumstances.

As she details her struggles attending college and living in poverty, refusing to accept financial support from the church and ignoring her own physical wellbeing to maintain her studies, Westover illuminates the very subversive nature of internalized dominance and emotional neglect in the lives of adults who have experienced trauma. After an altercation with her brother leaves her toe broken, Westover refuses to get an x-ray or see a counsellor while back at school, despite her roommate's persistence. She describes her thought process in those moments stating, "I could *not* see a counselor. To see one would be to ask for help, and I believed myself invincible" (p. 191, emphasis in original).

Westover's refusal to admit that she is not invincible seems to align with the theoretical literature on the burden of representation. Puwar (2004) describes such a burden through framing it as being hyper visible and therefore without the power of invisibility, writing that "ideal representatives of humanity are those who are not marked by their body and who are, in an embodied sense, invisible" (p. 58). I argue that the burden on Westover here is twofold, in that she seeks invisibility due to her emotional neglect as a child (to be visible is to be a problem, to be willful) but also because in the context of being a student at university who is struggling, she feels like requiring additional support impacts her sense of belonging. Puwar (2004) argues "[w]hen a body is emptied of its gender or race, this is a mark of how its position is the privileged norm" (p. 57). I extend this argument to include those bodies which are privileged due other markers of social positioning such as class, sexuality, and ability. In this case, Westover's body is marked as outsider due her trauma history, which is less commonly discussed as a significant social positioning – that of the trauma or abuse survivor. In my analytical notes, I

have highlighted Westover's thought process and justification for not accepting help, and my note reads: "admitting that I need help would make it my fault." This represents an interesting flipside to the subsequent desire for control/hypervigilance which can accompany emotional neglect, which is that bad things happening to you, or even around you, often feel like your fault.

Theme 4: Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal

There is an interesting thread which comes into focus between shame as a trauma response, and the structural violence of being labeled willful or a killjoy. Not only do individuals seem to make sense of adverse childhood experiences through telling themselves they are to blame for their abuse, but structures of power also seem to collude to allow for such internalization to take place, through positioning those who point out problems as being willful through disrupting the status quo. Ahmed (2017) highlights how this transference of responsibility takes place. As she grows older, Westover begins to demonstrate more willfulness, through her moves to garner more respect and safety amidst the danger of her daily life, and this often leads to punishment or exclusion from the family structure. I apply Ahmed's (2017) conception of the feminist killjoy as well as her theory around willfulness where women are made to feel like they are 'the problem' when they are attempting to draw attention to the existence of a problem.

Westover describes foreseeing the exact trajectory for her life at a young age, getting married at eighteen or nineteen and raising a family on the same property as her parents, and pursuing midwifery like her mother. However, when she begins to learn math, she finds a sense of comfort in knowing that "reality was not wholly volatile" and "could be made to make sense" (p. 125). Upon realizing that she plans to enroll in college, her father reports to her that he has been called upon by the Lord to testify and states: "He [the Lord] is displeased. You can have cast aside His blessings to whore after man's knowledge. His wrath is stirred against you. It will

not be long in coming” (p. 133). She describes her father threatening her with the wrath of God, for choosing a different life for herself and attempting to escape the emotional and physical abuse of their family home. This demonstrates vividly the phenomenon of willfulness as stepping outside of the happiness project that others have deemed as right for you. Ahmed (2017) describes such a moment as a feminist snap, a breaking point, or a crisis, wherein there is opportunity to find a new way to proceed. She writes, “[s]ometimes we have to struggle to snap bonds, including familial bonds, those that are damaging or at least compromising of a possibility that you are not ready to give up” (p. 188). Westover’s story illuminates a strong link between the feminist snap, the breaking points which detach one from their inherited pathway toward happiness, and the subsequent shame which follows willfulness as a refusal to compromise a possibility.

As Ahmed (2017) describes, “[a] bond can be violent. What can make living with violence hard is how hard it is even to imagine or think the possibility of its overcoming” as often those who suffer abuse are in situations where they are isolated, dependent, or emotionally attached to their abuser (p. 198). Importantly, Ahmed (2017) emphasizes how a snapped bond can be experienced as a loss of part of yourself, and when an individual has experienced so much abuse and gaslighting – often a consequence of structural violence - that they have no sense of self, this can be a challenge. Westover snaps those familial bonds only after she begins to trust her own voice, finding more bonds that allow her to do so, and in *Educated* she connects her journey of re-learning to trust her inner voice to her educational journey. Her willfulness begins to feel right, and thus she chooses herself.

Again, there seems to be a strong link between embodying willfulness in one’s family structure, and the subsequent sense of shame which accompanies this role. Ahmed (2017) writes,

“[w]hen you are assumed to be for others, then not being for others is judged as being for yourself. Perhaps this willfulness could be summarized thus: not being willing to be owned” (p. 74). Westover’s story illustrates the consequences of feeling that you are so unlike others, or unwilling to subjugate your needs, you fail to meet external expectations. Furthermore, her narrative demonstrates how shame can emerge from a deep knowing that your family, and more widely the world around you, wants you to ignore your needs, feelings, desires, to allow for the will of others to take priority. Westover illustrates this connection very effectively towards the end of her memoir, when she writes about the shame of having a father who was willing to put her in harm’s way in order to have an efficient worker on the family scrapyard, and a mother who willingly ignored her daughter’s pleas for help from the next room, where she was being physically abused by her brother. My use of forms of will as verbs here is intentional, as there is a power in willing. She sums this up towards the end of her memoir, writing:

Only then did I understand where the shame had come from: it wasn’t that I hadn’t studied in a marble conservatory, or that my father wasn’t a diplomat. It wasn’t that Dad was half out of his mind, or that Mother followed him. It had come from having a father who shoved me towards the chomping blades of the Shear, instead of pulling me away from them. It had come from those moments on the floor, from knowing that Mother was in the next room, closing her eyes and ears to me, and choosing, for that moment, not to be my mother at all. (p. 273)

In this moment, Westover is drawing a clear line between the emotional neglect she faced as a child and young woman at the hands of her parents, and her shame as an adult surrounding her upbringing. I highlight this passage because I think it exemplifies the shift in Westover’s thinking, from being branded willful, to embracing the label of willful. In writing this reflection,

she is naming her parent's abuse, she is removing the blame from her own shoulders, and she is identifying the root of her internalized shame. These themes of shame, willfulness, and structural violence in Westover's narrative not only mirror my own experiences, but also foreshadow broader questions this dissertation explores in later chapters: how the layers of structural violence—family, class, religion, and educational institutions—intersect in shaping access to higher education, and how personal reflection can function as an analytic lens within memoir pedagogy to build coalition across difference.

Breaking the Ocean

Written by Annahid Dashtgard and published in 2019, *Breaking the Ocean* centres on the experience of moving from Iran to England, and then to rural Canada as a young girl, as well as growing up as a child of interracial and intercultural marriage, in a time of great upheaval around traditional family structures and patriarchal values. Like *Educated*, *Breaking the Ocean* is a coming-of-age memoir centered on a young woman. However, where Westover's (2018) story is rooted in the religious fundamentalism of rural Utah, Dashtgard's tale is one of displacement and disconnection, as a first-generation Canadian whose family immigrated from Iran in her early adolescence. As a child, Dashtgard describes a deep feeling of not belonging, at home or at school, and connects these feelings to her struggles with Bulimia and OCD. As a young adult, she begins to find a place for herself in community activism but reflects on how this belonging still comes at the price of subjugating her own physical and emotional well-being, a pattern she learned as a child to keep her parents happy.

Breaking the Ocean examines how it feels to be in a borderland, stuck between worlds and never feeling like you belong in either. Like Westover (2018), Dashtgard seeks to reconcile her past and present, and this involves an examination of how her families' experience immigrating

to Canada impacted her. The memoir illuminates the lasting impact of intergenerational trauma due to racism, discrimination, and sexism, in a manner which focuses on both family dynamics and personal transformation. *Breaking the Ocean* traces Dashtgard's migration and racialization across borders, as she seeks to find a way to face her past and find a sense of belonging within herself.

Below, I briefly summarize some of the analytic work from *Breaking the Ocean* through providing succinct examples connected to each subtheme. This is followed by an in-depth analytical summary of my autoethnographic and thematic findings from reading the memoir.

Subtheme	Example	Analytic Links
1. Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dashtgard's family immigrates due to political unrest • Parent's grief results in neglect and harsh expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent who feels out of place (Puwar, 2004) and under pressure to conform (Ahmed, 2014) • Inability to be emotionally present Dashtgard as child
2. Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaslighting from father and teachers • Adopts role of mediator and emotional interpreter at home and thus prefers to sublimate own needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describes feeling responsible for any/all suffering (Walker, 2013) • Self-worth comes from feeling useful to others/having limited needs (Walker, 2013) and this resonated deeply with my childhood experiences
3. Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels excluded in home, not able to meet father's high expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shame caused by father's disappointment/exclusion leads to inability to trust own self-perception (Herman, 2015) • Resonated with my own experience of not meeting too-high expectations
4. Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dashtgard finds a place in activist organizations, fighting for others and seen as voice for change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift from feeling self-worth through usefulness to others (Walker, 2013)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dashtgard begins to care for self and heal relationally (Haines, 2019)
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Table 3: A breakdown of the thematic analysis of *Breaking the Ocean*.

Zooming In: Autoethnographic Analysis of Breaking the Ocean

Dashtgard's reflections often gave me pause. Dashtgard illuminates the pain of growing up with a father who faces pressure to assimilate, intricately linked to structural violence in the lives of immigrant families (Slade, 2015). I could not help but wonder what it might have been like to be around my father full time and get the opportunity to ask questions about his cultural practices or pick up some Hindi words. In contrast to *Educated*, I notice patterns in *Breaking the Ocean* which relate to the themes that had emerged from Westover's story. While they came through differently in *Breaking the Ocean*, my zooming in on the text connected to overarching themes from my analysis of *Educated*, which are outlined further in the sections below.

Theme 2: Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice

Dashtgard traces the role of shame, as well as the burden of being the child of immigrants, throughout her young adulthood and into adulthood. Dashtgard (2019) writes about her addiction to serving those around her and working hard for their praise and love, she writes "[i]f I didn't have to earn love, it lost its appeal" (p. 116). This desire to subjugate her own needs, and to live without an awareness of her physical wellbeing, leads Dashtgard into a life of political organizing and activism. She describes using activism as a means of denial around her own inner monologue, her *willful* self-preservation, and self-deprecation:

I didn't feel any self-doubt or inadequacy when I was in "Supergirl" mode. I had found my voice; I felt infallible. On the flip side, however, the role I was playing was dangerously

similar to the one I'd played growing up in my family. I felt responsible for any form of suffering I came across...(p. 130)

This desire to make oneself useful to feel a sense of self-worth is a theme in *Breaking the Ocean* that kept me reading, as it helped me to realize that I was avoiding my own thoughts and feelings on purpose. Like Dashtgard, busying myself with other's needs, including through community activism, meant that I was a good person without ever having to face down my own demons. Reflecting on my choice to pursue higher education during my initial years of therapy, it struck me that I was chasing some semblance of self-worth through my ability to feel like a "good" student. I could get high grades, keep myself involved in important work in the community, all while completely subjugating my own inner world. It was not until I was given this book during the first year of my doctoral program that I began to recognize similar patterns of erasing myself through focusing on "helping" others, in my own life.

A related theme in *Breaking the Ocean* is the pattern Dashtgard develops in her childhood of subjugating her own needs and wants (refusing willfulness), to make life easier for those around her. As a young adult she describes one of her romantic partners breaking up with her, and her focus being on his ability to be "entitled to name and honour his feelings" (Dashtgard, 2019, p. 194). She reflects on the situation and asks, "[h]ow could he do that...It seemed such a luxury" (p. 194). Reading this passage feels like a physical punch to my gut, in that I realize how wrong it is to think about feeling your feelings as a luxury, while I simultaneously know exactly what she means. The very framing of feeling emotions as a luxurious act, which is consistent across Westover and Dashtgard's writing, reinforces my own subconscious need to shrink oneself for the benefit of others. Examined through the lens of Puwar's (2004) writing on space invaders I connect this framing of emotions as a luxury to the structural violence inherent to

being a body out of place, and therefore already hyper visible and overly scrutinized. The avoidance of her own emotions is a frequent theme in Dashtgard's writing, as she finds some semblance of personal power in community activism, but continues to channel all her energy into advocating for others but never herself. She writes, "I didn't know how to care for myself properly. On a deeper level, I didn't believe I was worthy of it" (p.130).

Many of my analytical notes from the first read-through I completed of *Breaking the Ocean* come back to this concept of self-worth and the connection it seems to have to one's choice to be an activist. My notes on this passage read: "responsible for everything but yourself → avoidance." I connect both Westover (2018) and Dashtgard's willingness to put others' needs before their own to Walker's (2013) theory on the fawn trauma response. As an addition to the flight/fight/freeze response, Walker theorizes fawn as a response to complex post-traumatic disorder in which a child is "put in charge of keeping his parents happy" (p. 122). Dashtgard writes about her childhood anger over being excluded, shamed, neglected – often linked to structural violence inherent to racism, and sexism - and describes this anger as channeled into her advocacy. This re-channeling of intense emotion aligns with Walker's theory on responding to one's neglect through co-dependent behaviours. Walker argues that "[t]he severely neglected child experiences extreme lack of connection as traumatic, and sometimes responds to this fearful condition by overdeveloping the fawn response" (p. 132).

My notes demonstrate that this resonated deeply with my own experiences. I have often felt as though my choice to pursue equity through activism and academia, as a career, was in part a trauma response. As if viewing my life as being in servitude to the well-being of others, seeking to make myself feel valuable or worthwhile, led me to choose this path. Walker (2013) writes, "[o]nce a child realizes that being useful and not requiring anything for herself gets her

some positive attention from her parents, codependency begins to grow” (p. 133). I was often celebrated by my immediate and extended family for being so “mature” and this was a central theme in my childhood once my niece moved in with my mother and me. Caring for her and our home became my purpose, and being good at both made me feel like I was a good daughter and human being.

Describing the subjugation of her basic needs and bodily wellbeing, as the eldest daughter of a racialized immigrant, Dashtgard (2019) illuminates how this relationship to the fawn response develops. Further, Dashtgard’s limitations around honouring her own needs reflects the socially constructed nature of space, as discussed by Freidman and van Ingen (2011). She recounts a memory of being injured while playing rugby in high school and being sent to the hospital with a dislocated shoulder. Dashtgard describes returning days later and having her coach insist she had not dislocated her shoulder, insisting it was not possible. In this moment Dashtgard’s body is subverting the desires of her coach, and his perception of her pain is layered within social constructions around gender, race, class, and ability. Dashtgard explains how her having her experience thrown into question in this way causes her to doubt her self-knowing. Ultimately, she placates the coach and ends up quitting the team. She writes,

Once again, what I lost was trust in myself, belief that my experience mattered, and the ability to know my own boundaries. I lost the ability to calibrate to the right setting in relationships: I either over-exerted or distanced myself. (p.89)

My analysis’ notes flag this part of the memoir and connects it to an emerging theme throughout *Educated* and *Breaking the Ocean* wherein the narrative arcs trace a process of the author developing a distrust of their inner voice due to repeated abuse and gaslighting. Like Westover, Dashtgard’s own emotional responses to stimuli are consistently challenged and dismissed by

parents, teachers, and other figures of authority in her life, to the point that she begins to question whether she perceives her own feelings and physical body in an accurate way.

Likewise, a theme in my own childhood was an erasure of my needs to make life easier for the rest of my household. This corroborates with my understanding of the literature on structural violence connected to gender, race, and space in Chapter 2, specifically regarding Ahmed's writing on willful children. I was acutely aware of the extreme stress my mother was under and was driven by a desire to make life easier for my family through watching after my young niece, contributing to the household budget, as well as cooking and cleaning for the family. Growing up in a single mother household I can trace my parents' separation back my father's struggles immigrating to a new country and facing significant loss. Slade (2015) describes how "transitions into professional life in a new country can involve regressions, dislocations, or progressions" (p. 71). I reflect on the cultural dislocation my father experienced, as well as the devaluing of his professional skills, and see how his mental health suffered.

Furthermore, moving through one's life as a body out of place can contribute to an internalized sense of shame (Haines, 2019), due to an inability to relate to the world in the same way as others, and often this contributes to a desire to bend oneself to the will of others to fit in and be happy. This is especially relevant to educational contexts as this is where many trauma survivors find the kind of external praise and validation (if they bend to the institutional will) they are seeking to feel like they are enough, and that they belong.

Theme 3: Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt

Dashtgard's (2019) memoir illuminates the experiences of a child burdened by her parent's shame around race and class, who feels responsible for managing the emotional landscape of her home and describes how she "became gifted at reading signals" as she felt "responsible for

changing the emotional channel” within her home (p. 13). These reflections transported me back to moments in my adolescence when my mom’s anxiety and depression would permeate the walls of our household. I don’t think my mom would describe herself as suffering from either of these ailments, but looking back with the lens I have now, I can identify how her mental health switched the emotional climate of our home significantly. Similarly, my father struggled to assert himself as a patriarch in a new culture and after a loss of his professional identity (Slade, 2015).

Dashtgard’s writing is also impactful due to her ability to illuminate how her subjugation of self, learned through her role as the emotional interpreter of her home, acted as a pathway into activism in her later life (p. 94). Dashtgard (2019) expertly describes how being “in-between” worlds might allow one to witness decolonial cracks, writing that “[b]eing of mixed race had implicitly taught me that multiple frameworks, or ways of looking at the world, could exist simultaneously, and the work – the magic – was to be found in the overlap” (p. 111). However, she does not reach this embrace of being in-between until her adult years. Instead as a child she internalizes shame around not being wholly Iranian, or Canadian. Growing up mixed-race meant that I was often privy to people’s hateful comments around different racial groups, including my own, whether they realized I was not white or not. Being mixed-race also meant that I witnessed my own family’s internalized racism, such as my mother’s insistence to my father when she was pregnant the first time that her children would be raised “Canadian” according to her words, which I think gestured to our religion, language, and other sociocultural practices.

Scholarship on critical mixed-race terminology adds nuance to these patterns, in that there are arguments to suggest the label of mixed-race tends to “postpone rather than address the paradox of race” (p. 480). This adds a layer of complexity to my analysis in that I can simultaneously find a sense of belonging and coalition with others who feel like an in-between

through the identification with mixed-race, while also collapsing the critical interrogations of what it means to be racialized, reproducing stereotypical conceptions of difference across racial categories. Mahtani (2002) writes “the label, while creating inclusions as the basis for common struggles against static categories of race, can also possess the potential to draw all ‘otherness’ into the whole” (p. 480). This is a tension which I think could be more deeply acknowledged in Dashtgard’s memoir, as the label itself can serve to reproduce a sense of validity around imposed difference. Furthermore, as authors like Mahtani suggest, mixed-race as a label holds the potential to detract attention from an individual’s distinct experiences of racialization, homogenizing the experience under one umbrella when it is in fact impossible to generalize one’s experience of having mixed-race heritage, or to necessarily differentiate it from those who are monoracial.

Like patterns across Westover’s (2018) and Walls’ (2005) writing, Dashtgard (2019) discusses her adolescent desire to take care of everything and everyone but herself (p. 130), because it was too difficult to face a reality wherein she needed support. Earlier in her memoir she discusses feeling excluded in her home, due to not being able to meet the expectations of her father, and due to struggling with her feelings around moving to Canada and starting a new life. She describes the pain of being excluded in her everyday life, as she is shunned by the students at school and made fun of for being different (racialized), in conjunction with being further excluded at home through her parent’s dismissal of her thoughts and feelings (p. 72), all inextricably linked to forms of structural violence. These experiences culminate in the development of shame around her lack of belonging, both at home and outside of the home. Dashtgard subsequently describes developing OCD tendencies and bulimia nervosa. Early in her memoir she describes these disorders as her own body rebelling against her, framing them as a

personal failure. Whereas in her adult life, she recognizes that these disorders develop in connection to her struggles with her mental health.

The literature on childhood neglect connects to Dashtgard's internalization of shame, as a response to not feeling safe to share her true self with her parents, as well as her bodies external expressions of this lack of safety in her everyday life – for example at school where she is faced with both subtle and overt forms of racism. However, her increased need for support as a child struggling with OCD and intense emotional struggles only cause her to be further alienated by her father and as a result the rest of her household. As an adult, Dashtgard reflects on her inability to cope with neediness from others, as it mirrors deep need for acceptance within self and this can be traced back to the gaslighting and neglect she experienced as a child, using the literature on childhood trauma (Walker, 2013). If Dashtgard were to open herself up to the vulnerability of those around her, witnessing and honouring their struggles, it would be harder for her to continue denying her own internal turmoil and pain.

A critical aspect of Dashtgard's narrative which resonated with me is that of being in-between, in a racial and cultural borderland where one is never quite brown enough but also doesn't always pass as white. I made note of a passage later in the memoir which reads, “[n]ot having a fixed racial identity meant that I lacked a consistent community of support” (p. 187). In this moment Dashtgard reflects on the “consistent uncertainty” that is inherent to be a mixed-race child of immigrants, a feeling that you will never truly belong anywhere (p. 187). As a child, I recognize now that I was cocooned in whiteness without any choice, due to my mother's insistence that I be raised “Canadian.”

My childhood was significantly marked by an absence of my father's cultural roots, as I was not exposed to his language, his foods, or his cultural texts, unless I was visiting his home.

Despite this disconnect from half of my ancestral culture, I was still not protected from being reminded at each turn about my existence as *other*. I remember one of the first times attending a pool party with my best friends, who remain my closest friends to this day, and feeling oddly uncomfortable about the way they made fun of the dark hair on my back and arms. Attempting to have critical conversations about these experiences with my mother were fruitless, and my older sister's solution was to bleach, pluck, hide – literally and figuratively.

Dashtgard's memoir serves as a nuanced examination of what it means to live in-between worlds, where even the people closest to you struggle to make sense of the othering you might be experiencing. She captures the nuances of this experience of simultaneous privilege and displacement, an experience which has become a keystone characteristic of my adult life in an academic setting, where I frequently embody both insider and outsider status. In the academic setting, many of my peers strive to connect more deeply to their ancestral heritage, through their learning, research, and activism. I often feel as though I am missing a claim to stake. I have been a witness to peers striving for a cultural rootedness in their research and work interests, for example striving to conduct meaningful research which they can bring back to their home community, and have felt a sense of rootlessness regarding my own purpose. I suppose this is where the label of mixed-race or biracial can be a balm to feelings of inferiority or lacking, allowing me to feel a kinship with others who have been displaced from their cultural roots. Simultaneously, I recognize that my positioning as a white-passing, English-speaking woman affords me benefits connected to institutional privilege. Furthermore, I carry privilege in my access to spaces where my voice might be amplified as someone who works in equity and inclusion, while working and living as a settler on unceded territory. In my experience, mixed-race subjectivities are ones wherein the border crosser is more able to see decolonial cracks, and

to empathize with similar struggles against structural violence, therefore stepping in as ally when needed. Perhaps the view of being in coalition with others, through differing but similar experiences, is what drove me towards the path of activism in my early university years.

Dashtgard reflects on feeling empowered in activist circles as a woman of colour with strong political convictions, while simultaneously feeling disconnected from her own family and culture. She describes a moment as a young adult wherein a partner's unwillingness to bring her to a family function, as she would be the only white person there, left her feeling a sense of disconnect as she is in fact, not white. This can be true, while also feeling like she is not quite Iranian enough to be afforded kinship by those with similar cultural backgrounds. During my initial reading I highlighted the following passage:

Feeling the absence of a community that truly reflected my experience only magnified the pain of isolation. I didn't seem ever to check the right identity boxes to be counted "in." Because of the lingering effects of the past, my parents were also a dead end for emotional support. Talking with my mom wasn't very productive; the larger forces of racism remained in her blind spot, or, if she did see them, she wasn't able to recognize their impact. (p. 190)

My notes on this passage say: "absence of cultural rootedness; parents having their own reasons for distancing themselves from the truth." Reflecting on these notes for the autoethnographic reflection, I ask myself what I meant by "the truth," and I realized I was gesturing to the reality of being a parent raising children without a connection to their homeland, and to their ancestral knowledge. My own mother and father were so viscerally disconnected from their own family and cultural heritage that they did not immediately recognize the impact of such a connection on one's overall wellbeing – at least at the time.

Here, I am brought back to Fukushima's conceptual framing of decolonial cracks, as well as her scaffolding off the work of Anzaldúa, regarding how a life in the borderlands, in between cultural subjectivities, allows one to bear witness to such cracks in the rigidity of Western culture. Anzaldúa (2021) draws on her experiences as *mestiza* to highlight the ambiguity and contradictory nature of living outside of physical and cultural borders which impact one's subjectivity. Of this *mestiza* subjectivity, Anzaldúa writes, "[s]he learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode... Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (p. 148-149). In considering how I might sustain contradictions as a border crosser (being biracial, lower class with a middle-class career, bisexual in a heterosexual marriage), it occurs to me that I have learned a great deal from each of the memoirists in their own experiences within a borderland. I think one of the struggles I have faced in accepting ambiguity is my overwhelming fear of being labeled a fraud. I frequently feel as though I have no right to be writing about equity in higher education, as individuals who meet me now often read me as white, straight, middle class. My existence in the borderlands ultimately depends on whether I allow others to see the truth of who I am. The memoirs ground me in a central truth, that regardless of what I choose to let others see, I will never be free from my borderlands.

Zooming Out: Thematic Analysis of Breaking the Ocean

Dashtgard's reflections in *Breaking the Ocean* often circulate around growing up in an inter-racial household. She describes experiencing a radical shift from being financially comfortable, living in the countryside of Iran and feeling a connection to the land around her, to moving to Western Canada, struggling financially, and feeling disconnected from the people and landscape around her. Themes which emerge from these reflections include the challenges/power

differentials in intercultural marriage and families, as well as the experience of a child who is burdened by her parent's shame around racial, gender, and economic discrimination. A child who feels responsible for the emotional landscape of her home. I identified a strong connection between many of the concepts from Chapter 2, and in linking Dashtgard's story to this theory, I found supporting data for themes 1 and 4: the link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma, as well as the role of willfulness as a brand and powerful refusal when embraced by the memoir author.

Theme 1: Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma

As mentioned above, the narrative framing of *Breaking the Ocean* is one where Dashtgard draws a clear pathway between larger structures of social oppression and her individual struggles, in a more straightforward way than some of the other memoir authors examined in this research such as Westover and Walls. Where other authors focus on their specific emotional and physical environments during their retellings, Dashtgard threads through more analysis of her parent's socio-emotional contexts, to actively make sense of her experience while writing.

Overall, her writing is less descriptive and more analytic. For example, Dashtgard writes,

From its very beginning, [my parents] marriage was marred by my mother's guilt for marrying outside the Christian faith and my father's shame for having the wrong skin colour...I became gifted at reading signals. I learned very early on that I was responsible for changing the emotional channel in our house. (p. 13)

Due to this role of signal reader in her home, Dashtgard explains that she struggled to find a safe and welcoming place where she could process difficult emotions. One such place was through popular culture. By exploring her own feelings through reading books and connecting to the main characters, she could maintain her role in making others in her home happy since she was

processing her emotions through reading, rather than needing support from her parents. This resonated deeply with my own experiences of processing my feelings through willful subjects in popular films (Grover, 2019).

Dashtgard's father's struggles with leaving their home country and the subsequent class and racial oppression he faces (Slade, 2015) took root in the form of a deep unwillingness to discuss their past lives. Dashtgard describes how this process was intensely isolating for her, as she felt as though the first seven years of her life had never happened. Of learning how to fit in and let go of the past, she writes, "I learned two valuable things: how to recognize the invisible power hierarchy around me, and that no one would rescue me from being thrust to the bottom" (p. 29). My thematic notes for *Breaking the Ocean* include the following: "father avoiding reliving trauma and dealing with shame → mother too busy mothering." I was frequently struck by Dashtgard's descriptions of her father as emotionally unavailable, while her mother was capable of such support but was too often busy working, cooking, or caring for others. My experiences were similar, as my father was largely absent from my childhood and despite my mother being a critical figure in my life, she was kept busy with the everyday tasks and challenges of parenting and was often not physically or emotionally present with me. While this analytic note depicts that my personal lens is always present in my examination of the text, it also illustrates how larger structures such as gendered expectations around women and mothering, as well as male vulnerability (especially for racialized and lower-class men) play into the experience of isolation that Dashtgard is describing. These moments hint at the emotional neglect experienced and trace the beginning of internalized shame around one's social location – in a manner which demonstrates the larger social implications of mothers carrying the emotional

burden of their household and fathers shutting down their feelings to maintain the perception of control/power.

hooks (2004) describes this tension as a trade-off of contemporary patriarchy under capitalism arguing that “the perks of manhood that a depressed economy takes away can be redeemed in the realm of the sexual through domination of women” (p. 94-95). In heteronormative relationships this trade-off often translates into men being emotionally, and often physically, absent from the family home. Thus, mothers are overburdened with household maintenance and raising children, plus often their own external work. Emotional neglect from a parent who is preoccupied with providing the necessities of life contributes to traumatization of children in complex and often subtle ways (Walker, 2013). Later in her life, Dashtgard’s father chooses to return to his cultural roots and embrace his history, but she reflects on a shock to her own system as he makes this journey. She explains, “[t]he man of today speaks mostly Farsi, eats Persian food, and hangs out with Iranian friends. I visit the home I grew up in and feel like a foreigner” (p. 195). Her father’s past shame and emotional neglect therefore result in her own displacement from a cultural identity she has longed for; while he was able to eventually find his way back to a sense of rootedness, she is left feeling uprooted. Interestingly, her father finds his way back to his cultural roots during a time when it is more supported in his direct community, after divorcing Dashtgard’s mother and remarrying an Iranian woman, effectively finding a new community who welcome these parts of his subjectivity which he previously subjugated. My own father followed a similar path.

Dashtgard’s writing is deeply illustrative of these larger social implications and makes visible the role that class plays in one’s access to peace, through open outdoor spaces and childhood joy. Before leaving Iran, her family lived on a large piece of land where she was

frequently found outside picking fresh fruit and playing with cousins. Once they arrive in Canada, the reality of their class and race disparities become glaring, and Dashtgard describes the desolate landscapes of Western Canada and the often-crowded feeling of staying with family until her parents can get on their feet financially. Despite being surrounded by people, Dashtgard describes feeling emotionally neglected due to the financial and social pressures on her parents during these years after immigrating. These passages held weight for me, having grown up living in poverty and rarely having access to my own room, or to safe outdoor places to play and explore. Being cramped in this way is troubling for families where parents have existing mental health issues and need space for quiet to regulate their own emotions, and often for me this translated into feeling like I was a nuisance or a bother when I would ask for something. Reading this narrative allowed me to draw clear connections between the kind of heavy emotional labour of families who are struggling financially or socially due to structural violence, and I looked back on my family's generational pattern of alcoholism and addiction with a new lens. As Ahmed (2017) describes, bodies can begin to be shaped by external pressures – especially those bodies which are positioned as *willful*, due to systems of social stratification which deem them out of place.

Walker (2013) theorizes that children who are unable to bring their needs to their parents and have them addressed without contempt grow into children who seek to erase any flaws to maintain their connection to their parents. He writes,

Emotional neglect, alone, causes children to abandon themselves, and to give up on the formation of a self. They do so to preserve an illusion of connection with the parent and to protect themselves from the danger of losing that tenuous connection. (p. 97)

When one lives in a dysfunctional family structure, small and enclosed spaces often increase the level of conflict as there is limited space to isolate and get away from more violent or abusive family members. There was a time in my childhood where we lived in a rural area for a few months, and it was one of the best times of my life. However, upon reflection, my mother was suffering through a relationship with a controlling alcoholic so that we could live in that big country house. She ultimately had to make the decision for us to move in with my sister until we could afford our own place. During this time there were six of us living in a one-bedroom apartment, and I remember struggling to sleep on the floor beside my niece's crib, around the corner from where my sister and her husband slept. There were often many altercations and arguments during this time in my life, as it was impossible to get away from one another for any length of time. During this time, I faced a significant amount of cruelty from one specific family member, and my needs were often diminished, mocked, or ignored altogether. Looking back, I can see that these moments are when I began to shrink myself to avoid conflict.

Theme 4: Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal

Willfulness emerges as a theme in *Breaking the Ocean* primarily after Dashtgard's (2019) family has immigrated to Canada, through her powerful reflections on the hierarchies around class, race, and gender during her childhood and young adult life. Upon arriving in Alberta, Dashtgard describes how her father refuses to discuss their past life in Iran or to speak in Farsi, their native language. She writes, "It was as if the first seven years of my life had been erased" (p. 28), and I interpret Dashtgard's feeling here as a response to her family being unable to process their collective grief over their political and religious displacement from Iran, with their father the least able to communicate his sadness and shame as the family patriarch. Consequently, Dashtgard describes working through her grief while reading an old copy of

Robin Hood and coming to the scene where Maid Marian dies and Robin Hood must persevere despite this significant loss. Here, my notes emphasized the following words from Dashtgard's reflection:

That memory marks one of the first moments of experiencing my feelings through "safe" outlets like books, other characters, lives removed many times over. Neutral places where loss could momentarily be made visible. (p. 28)

My notes reiterate this need to understand and process unfamiliar feelings or experiences through the lives of other/characters, as clear points of resonance between Dashtgard's story and the literature. A few chapters later, Dashtgard describes daydreaming as a "coping mechanism" and states that "[e]scaping into an alternate reality through the pages of a book was preferable to raging at the real world I confronted every day" (p. 48). These moments in *Breaking the Ocean* seem to reinforce feminist notions of "liberatory voice" (hooks, 1989, p. 15), wherein one learns to speak the voice of resistance, understanding oneself as a subject and no longer an object. Despite feeling voiceless in their family structure, an individual may find an outlet through witnessing the stories of others with similar life experiences. The power of witnessing a reflection of our own pain or domination in the narratives of others connects back to Ahmed (2017) and her discussion of a body under pressure. Living under the weight of systems of oppression is not something easily witnessed or externalized, as she describes:

Bodies can be pressed into shape; or are under pressure in being shaped. We learn as well: this pressure is not always something we can witness from the outside. You might experience that pressure only when you are under it, rather like you encounter the wall when you come up against it. The weightiest of experiences are often those that are hardest to convey to those who do not share the experience. (p. 189)

Unable to connect with her family or peers, I read Dashtgard's memoir as the story of a young girl who finds a sense of solace through witnessing other bodies under pressure in the novels that mean so much to her. The pattern of processing using fiction felt very personal to me, as I was once a young girl who similarly sought out stories like mine to feel less unusual. In fact, I focus on this connection I felt while growing up to the feminist killjoy in popular cultural portrayals, such as Sally Owens from the film *Practical Magic* (Dunn, 1998), in an article summarizing my master's research (Grover, 2019). In this research I explored my learning from portrayals of the willful subject in 90s films and came to understand how such characters and the films they were in provided me with a space to process my unusual childhood experiences, and to envision new possibilities for my future. After completing this research, I begin to consider the shift from individual witnessing and understood that stepping outside of my experience into collective witnessing could present a necessary step toward coalition-building and addressing the societal impacts of trauma.

Dashtgard discusses the desire to subjugate one's own needs and subjectivity as a survival strategy or coping mechanism, but she differs from Westover in that she discusses this as a direct response to structural violence, linking it back to the shame associated with being different, and never feeling she is enough. She writes,

I didn't know that saying no to appearances, to requests to speak, or to anything else was an option. I couldn't access any healthy boundaries because I still unconsciously felt that I wasn't entitled to look after my own needs. The shame from my childhood, of being different, of being brown, coloured my view of myself so completely that even in the midst of my powerful activist days I felt that I wasn't doing enough, *wasn't* enough. (p. 169, emphasis in original)

Reading these reflections from Dashtgard assist me in adding depth to Puwar's (2004) conception of the burden of representation, as the disproportionate judgement of error is illuminated as only one side of the intricate relationship between individual and structural violence. Not only are those who are different from the norm "seen to represent the capacities of groups for which they are marked and visible," they also bear the weight of "self-surveillance and acute astuteness" (p. 62). This phenomenon and its subversiveness within the everyday life of the individual is illustrated throughout Dashtgard's memoir, but especially in those moments when she describes an inability to observe her own actions without judgement.

In her adult life, Dashtgard seeks a path toward self-enlightenment and healing, but shares that she struggles with the concept of self-compassion or self-leadership, which is common to a somatic and trauma-informed healing practice. As described by van der Kolk (2015) "[a]t the core of recovery is self-awareness" as being in touch with our "inner world" and acknowledging feelings without being entirely overcome by them is a critical step in healing from past traumas (p. 210). In my analytic reading of *Breaking the Ocean* I noted a passage where Dashtgard reflects on her experiences at a retreat hosted by the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, which states,

I noticed how it was infinitely more challenging for me to tune in to my internal state in front of a small group of people I knew than it was to speak onstage to a crowd of a hundred strangers...The oft-repeated catchphrase of Kripalu's founding guru, "Self-observation without judgement is the key to enlightenment," crossed my mind daily while I was there. I could manage the self-awareness part, but I was not so good at letting go of judgement, particularly towards myself. (p. 207)

In Dashtgard's reflections, I found a significant link between willfulness and disrupting the internalized voice of shame, which is associated with structural violence. Dashtgard often describes feeling unable to face herself or be in quiet moments with her own thoughts, as well as seeing a lack of self-compassion for her struggles. As discussed in my analysis of *Educated*, often children who have experienced emotional neglect will internalize such experiences. However, in Dashtgard's context, she is more of a parentified child (Walker, 2013) who becomes responsible for managing the emotional landscape of her home from a young age.

The parentified child erases their own needs from the equation so that they can better support a narcissistic parent and avoid challenging or disagreeing with them. Through recognizing this pattern, Dashtgard's narrative illustrates the connection between willfulness and a refusal to give in to this cycle of abuse. Through practicing the act of witnessing her thoughts without judgement, and sitting with herself in a place of compassion, Dashtgard displays a quiet embrace of willfulness which signifies a snap (Ahmed, 2017) in that she is unwilling to let external voices mar her self-image any longer. Recovery for those children who have grown up as the parentified child often focuses on strengthening their emotional self-expression (Walker, 2013), and this is a common theme across Westover and Dashtgard's narratives as they begin to embrace their emotions despite what the impact may be on their family structure.

The Glass Castle

Written by Jeannette Walls and published in 2005, *The Glass Castle* is a gripping illustration of the impacts of intergenerational trauma (due to structural violence and addiction) on one's adolescence. Walls (2005) details her experiences growing up with parents who are larger-than-life in their dreams and convictions, but who are both burdened by the demons of their own childhood traumas. Both parents struggle to provide for their family, and thus the bulk

of the memoir is a tale of survival against all odds. Tracing her family's travels across the American mid-west and their slow descent into deeper poverty, Walls begins at a pivotal moment in her young life when she suffered serious burns from catching on fire while cooking hotdogs on the stove, at the age of three. This beginning establishes the book's survival motif.

Throughout *The Glass Castle*, Walls recounts many stories of a childhood shaped by neglect; however, her story displays a sense of loyalty to her parents despite their failings. Like both Westover (2018) and Dashtgard (2019), Walls' story is one of resilience. Walls eventually moves away from her parent's home, to live and go to school in New York with her older sister, and shortly after she begins to work as an intern for a local newspaper. This experience leads to her studying journalism and pursuing more formal schooling, ultimately finding a degree of success as a reporter and storyteller. Overall, this memoir centres on the struggles of living in an unstable and dangerous home, with a dysfunctional family dynamic caused by addiction and what seem to be mental health disorders.

Below, I briefly summarize some of the analytic work from *The Glass Castle* through providing succinct examples connected to each subtheme.

Subtheme	Example	Analytic Links
5. Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family addictions and class create patterns and opportunities for harm, such as with Walls' uncle and grandmother sexually abusing the kids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cycles of intergenerational trauma inextricably linked to oppression and lack of resources/support Environment directly linked to class, race, and family status
6. Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walls experiences abuse by men in her life, dismissed by loved ones when bringing it forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walls and I both learned to quiet inner voice during discomfort (Ahmed, 2017)
7. Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents consistently put Walls in danger, displaying no regret or responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walls developed skewed sense of perception, internalizes neglect (hooks, 1989)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resonated with my experiences being celebrated for resilience
8. Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walls experiences bullying from peers and teachers due to her family's status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ahmed (2014) discusses willfulness as not always intentional

Table 4: A breakdown of the thematic analysis of *The Glass Castle*.

Zooming In: Autoethnographic Analysis of The Glass Castle

Reading this book, I was struck by the similarities between Walls and my own experience. As a child I was praised for being a great support for my mother. This recognition masked the true cause for my maturity, which was rooted in neglect and instability. Within *The Glass Castle*, Walls consistently faces off against the challenges of childhood neglect, due to an alcoholic and violent father, as well as an emotionally absent mother who mentally checks out from her responsibilities as a parent. It was interesting for me to read this book and feel such an intense dislike for the parents, for putting their children in compromising and dangerous situations, while simultaneously being jealous of the creativity they displayed. My initial analytic reading of *The Glass Castle* brought forth significant data in relation to themes 2 and 3: 2) childhood abuse and neglect leading to a distrust of one's inner voice, and 3) the shame of growing up in such circumstances serving as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt.

Theme 2: Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice

Sexual abuse and domination of children are more subtle themes in *The Glass Castle*, but they are themes which are deeply impactful. There are numerous moments in Walls' story where I have identified a process of gaslighting, where she is taught that her own perspective on situations is skewed or overly dramatic. This process of orchestrated self-doubt seems to begin with her parents' emotional neglect but is further cemented in her interactions with other men as she grows older. Gaslighting is described by Sweet (2019) as a consistent undermining of an

individual's sense of self, as a means of distorting their view of reality and imposing another's view in place of it. This process is apparent across the experiences of Westover (2018), Dashtgard (2019), and Walls (2005), who all describe a pattern of feeling as though they could not trust their perception and developed a habit of deferring to the view of those around them. Walls describes a moment with her paternal uncle, where she sits beside him watching TV and feels his hand on her thigh, and upon looking over at him he has his pants unzipped and is touching himself. She does not say anything to him, as she fears reprimand, so she goes to get help from her mother. Her mother tells her that she is probably "imagining it" and says that she feels bad for Stanley who must be "so lonely" (p. 184).

My analytical notes root this experience very explicitly in gender, reading: "your feelings being less important than a man's", demonstrating that this passage resonates with my experiences growing up with abusive men, and draws me back to Ahmed's writing on willfulness and the feminist killjoy. Ahmed (2017) states, "[a] killjoy is willing to live with the consequences of what she is willing. She is thus willing to be the cause of someone else's unhappiness" (p. 258). Herein there is a critical connection to theme 4 which has emerged thus far in my analysis, and that is the shift from being branded willful to embracing one's willfulness, which could be understood as a choice to trust one's own perception of reality, despite this choice yielding negative consequences for others. For example, I can identify a consistent thread throughout my life that has been characterized by my being afraid or upset with the actions of men around me, and being told by my loved ones to let it go, because the safer option was to be quiet. I recall an incident with a stepfather, when I was around the age of 7, where someone had carved that he was an "asshole" onto the banister leading upstairs to the bedrooms. It was only my mother, stepfather, myself, and my brother living in the house. My

brother, who is five years my senior and had much more expansive knowledge of swear words at the time, vehemently denied it was him. I remember my mom smoothing over the interaction and insisting it must have been my brother's friend who sometimes came over. Looking back now, I am confident that the situation likely had consequences I was not aware of, particularly for my brother.

Like those moments in *The Glass Castle* when Walls describes seeing her dad as a hero but being humbled by her siblings' accounts of the same man, I remember thinking to myself in that moment reading the banister, knowing my brother wrote the message, that my brother must live with a different version of my stepdad than I did. Before his alcoholism began to bleed into my everyday life, I hardly took notice of the behaviours he exhibited which seemed to be harming my brother and causing my mother to act differently than usual, shrinking herself. Like Walls, the exciting nature of having this man in my life who would spend time with me doing fun things and making me feel special, was enough to distract me from this reality. The violent version of my stepdad became much more apparent to me after we moved back to our hometown (my mother had known she needed to be closer to her community to escape him) and his violent and drunken outbursts became more visible. There were many nights when my stepdad would come home from the bar after last call, slamming things and screaming, and my mom would slide into bed with me and tell me to keep quiet. She would hold me and explain that he was just looking for money, for booze, and that he would go to sleep soon. Sometimes I wonder if because I was so young at the time of the banister writing, that I often slept through or misunderstood his fits of rage.

Throughout *The Glass Castle*, the reader can follow along with Walls' (2005) growing awareness of the problematic nature of her childhood circumstances, through such instances as

having to dig through the school garbage cans for food at lunch, to dancing with older men at the bar to help her dad hustle a game of pool. At the beginning of the memoir, such instances are discussed with neutrality, and Walls seems to be distanced from the future implications of such neglect. The narrative often discussed frightening childhood experiences through the lens of adventure, and as a mother reading the memoir I was frequently sick to my stomach over how dangerous the circumstances were for Walls and her siblings. However, her re-telling seems to begin from the voice of her childhood self and thus is rooted in a deferral to the knowledge and expertise of the adults in her life – her parents. Furthermore, it strikes me that for children who grow up in poverty, who are more heavily steeped in neglect, often the result is a sense of being “tough as nails” and resilient to a fault.

My reading of Walls’ memoir was very skewed in the direction of respecting her resilience, admiring how much she learned through struggling, almost in a “game recognize game” way. In other words, I was impressed by her ability to provide for herself despite her circumstances and often found myself considering how much meaningful life experience she was gaining through growing up this way. Upon reflection, I think this is an unusual reaction to reading about someone’s childhood neglect, however I recognize how my reaction is caused by my own childhood conditioning around resilience and self-preservation. Importantly, I think the apparent neutrality of Walls’ storytelling leaves room for such interpretations, depending on the reader. For example, Walls and her siblings demonstrate an incredible level of resilience, and their relationship to one another is a clear catalyst for such strength. However, once Walls moves away from her parents and begins her life anew in New York, the reflections on her childhood are framed in her writing with less neutrality and begin to interrogate the implications of childhood neglect.

Walls recounts a story of her family moving, which they frequently did when her father was in trouble with the law, and in this instance her parents rented a U-Haul. Walls' parents explain that she and her three siblings, one of whom is an infant, would need to ride in the back of the U-Haul with the family's furniture and belongings, since there was no room for them in the front. In the telling of this story Walls (2005) describes her mother calling it an adventure, and saying the trip would take upwards of 14 hours because they might take "scenic detours" (p. 48). When she describes what it was like to be in the back of the truck, Walls' writes "Brian and Lori held tight to the Prospector, which Dad had tied securely with ropes. I was holding Maureen, who for some strange reason had stopped crying" (p. 49). While the narration of these events is primarily neutral, in my analysis of this text I could not help but wonder if Walls felt any emotions when she described how her father had secured the Prospector – his big invention that he planned to use to find gold – while leaving his four children to fend for themselves in a massive moving truck while they moved across the state. After hitting a pothole, the doors of the truck, which were unlocked, fall open - and the children spent an undetermined amount of time trying to avoid falling out of the moving vehicle. Ultimately another vehicle approaches and honks, signalling to Walls' parents that the doors are open and their children are in danger of falling out, and they finally pull over. Walls describes her father as being furious, despite the children explaining that it had not been their fault that the doors opened.

In this story Walls has so expertly captured the pattern of gaslighting and neglect that her parents committed, in that they have put their children's lives in the direct path of danger and then blame them when they come close to being seriously hurt. In examining this moment from the lens of emotional abuse and neglect, I was reminded of Westover's (2018) realization in *Educated* that her internalized shame had come from having a father who "shoved me towards

the chomping blades of the Shear” (p. 273) rather than one who sought to protect and care for her. In the moments when Walls describes her parent’s neglect, despite her neutrality regarding remaining detail oriented, she does often gesture toward the manipulation which would take place through recounting the excuses her parents would make for their behaviour.

Theme 3: Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt

Most of my analytical notes from my readings of *The Glass Castle* capture moments of severe neglect, tracing Walls’ love for her parents, her initial acceptance of their neglect, and ultimately witnessing her realization that they are not truly thinking of her wellbeing at all. Furthermore, where *Educated* and *Breaking the Ocean* both include themes related to class, as well as family struggles rooted in parent’s mental health, *The Glass Castle* moves the needle considerably in that the lived reality of poverty is central in Walls’ (2005) narrative. For example, Walls writes that she “lived in a world that at any moment could erupt into fire” (p. 34) and describes moments of severe abuse between her mother and father, all from an observable distance. Interestingly, Walls does not seem to apply the lens of shame onto her experience in the same way that Westover or Dashtgard do, however, there are moments in her story where her internalization of her parent’s neglect is more pronounced in her unwillingness to describe their behaviour as abusive.

Walls recounts an experience from around age 7, when her father threw her into deep water as his way of teaching her to swim. In my analytical notes, I emphasized the section where Walls describes being thrown repeatedly, momentarily captured in her father’s arms only to be tossed back into the water, and his later justification that he ‘knew she could do it.’ “What other reason, he asked, would possibly make him do this” (Walls, 2005, p. 66). My notes flag this passage and read, “why when I read moments like this do I feel such a deep recognition in my belly?” I can

recall similar moments in my childhood where I was easily swayed by the convictions of abusive people in my family, and here the dynamic between Walls and her siblings are important. In one passage, she describes her older brother, Brian, questioning their father and admonishing him for not having a job. Having viewed her father as a hero for most of her life, this seems to make Walls uncomfortable. My analysis document makes note of the exchange as an important factor in challenging the self-doubt which can accompany shame. Further, I identify the role of an older sibling who sees the reality of a context more critically than a child might.

Like Westover's (2018) narrative arc of internalizing childhood neglect as shame around having parents whose priority is not protecting or nurturing their children, Walls' memoir emphasizes the internalization of this sense of abandonment. She describes not feeling seen or welcomed anywhere due to her family's class (p. 135), combined with a fear that her parents would someday not come back home. In my analytical notes I flagged this passage as connected to feelings of shame and self-isolation, as Walls notes feeling like she is a burden in the way of her parent's dreams. Reading *The Glass Castle*, I began to make sense of and piece together the patterns, recognizing a childhood of being asked to shrink or disregard violence, to protect the feelings of men who never deserved a place in our lives to begin with. hooks (1989) describes the internalization of dominance in *Talking Back*, writing that after facing consistent punishment for saying or doing "the wrong thing" she learned through this process to expect certain reactions to her voice. hooks states that it took her years "to feel that [she] could speak without being punished" (p. 162). She connects this process to her development of the pseudonym bell hooks, explaining that the image of this external figure "became a symbol of what I could become" (p. 162). I read this symbolism as deeply tied to the transformation from being branded as willful to

embracing willfulness as an act of refusal - a refusal to bend to the will of those who hold power over us.

Zooming Out: Thematic Analysis of *The Glass Castle*

In reviewing my notes on *The Glass Castle*, I identified a recurring tension between Walls' willfulness and her shame, forces that seemed to work against one another as she grew up and began to view her parents' behaviour through a more critical lens. A strong undercurrent for me while reading this memoir was the role of cultural capital in shaping how we understand and respond to our circumstances, as Walls often felt like her family was special, more adventurous and creative than others she witnessed. However, she begins to see this as more nuanced as she develops language to interpret her parents' own struggles and their neglect as guardians. In connecting my analysis to the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2, I found strong support for themes 1 and 4 when reading *The Glass Castle* through this lens.

Theme 1: Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma

Much of the narrative in *The Glass Castle* revolves around the intense emotional and physical neglect that Walls faces, which is clearly connected to her parents' own trauma histories. For example, later in the memoir Walls and her family move in with her paternal grandparents, and the impact of addiction and abuse on both generations is briefly acknowledged. Walls describes an incident with her paternal grandmother, Erma, who she catches physically assaulting her younger brother, Brian. When confronted, Erma lashes out and begins abusing Walls' older sister, and when their parents return home, their dad is furious with the children and says Brian is a man who can handle himself. However, in reflecting on the sexual nature of Brian's abuse, and the strange way her father responded, Walls recounts asking

her siblings if they thought something similar had ever been done to their father. I emphasized Walls' following passage in my analytical notes:

It was gross and creepy to think about, but it would explain a lot. Why Dad left home as soon as he could. Why he drank so much and why he got so angry. Why he never wanted to visit Welch when we were younger. Why he at first refused to come to West Virginia with us and only at the last possible moment overcame his reluctance and jumped into the car. Why he was shaking his head so hard, almost like he wanted to put his hands over his ears, when I tried to explain what Erma had been doing to Brian. (p. 148)

This moment in Walls' memoir captures the complexity of intergenerational trauma, as it re-emerges in moments of fear and instability with one's own children. Due to his childhood experiences and inability to face what had been done to himself, Walls' father seems to feel unable to protect his own children from similar harms, or unwilling if it means he must face his own history of sexual abuse. In fact, he considers them responsible for the way they refused to bend to Erma's will and allow her abuse to continue, and he externalizes his own inner voice, exerting it on his children in order to convince them that they are wrong – because facing the truth of the situation would be too much for him in those moments. Ahmed (2014) states that “a history of willfulness is a history of those who are willing to put their bodies in the way, or to bend their bodies in the way of the will” (p. 161). In reading such a pivotal moment in the lives of Walls' and her siblings, it occurs to me that her and her sister's willingness to put their bodies in the way to disrupt Erma's abuse positions them as willful, in a manner which is difficult for their father to process, as his own body was bent to the will of Erma as a child. The dissonance Walls' father experiences in this moment with his children feels profound, in that his own childhood response to the sexual abuse he faced was not wrong, just different from his own

children, and faced with their own willfulness, his internalized shame seems to seek to silence their disruption.

Another consistent theme in *The Glass Castle* is the role of class in the upbringing and education of children. While the conceptual framing for my research indicates that class is significantly impacted by other social factors such as race, racial consciousness is only introduced within Walls' memoir when it applies to Black children but not herself as white. She frequently positions herself as a victim of othering, as she does not align racially or culturally with most children in the communities she is in, and this captures the nuances of racial discrimination and its connection to class and gender. Upon moving to West Virginia, Walls describes her surprise at the town of Welch having such a large Black community, when she had imagined mostly "white hillbillies" (p. 137). Pages before she describes how rundown the town is and describes it as "shabby and worn out" (p. 134), and she reflects on her father telling them that the county has no sewer system, so all the waste flows into the river and when the river floods it rises into the streets. Walls herself does not make the connection between the high population of Black residents and the poverty and abandonment of the town by the larger structure of the state. My notes from the second reading of *The Glass Castle*, describe horrible living conditions as connected to not only class, but racism. I write: "explains why the town is in such poor condition, environmental racism" next to a passage about the high Black population at her school. Environmental racism is a field of study which interrogates the high rate of environmental destruction, extraction, and pollution in communities of colour (Salas, 2021). Overall, it is a theory which demonstrates that the impacts of capitalist enterprise are inequitably distributed and offloaded onto racialized neighbourhoods, cities, and countries.

Despite the nuances of race and class appearing in the pages in her book, Walls still only manages to interrogate race as it applies to others, describing the racial background of school bullies and admonishing her grandmother for using racial slurs. Interestingly, she details significant moments where her class impacts her wellbeing and her treatment at school, but her memoir includes limited reflection on the privilege afforded to her by her race, perhaps because her class status was such a stark subjugation that her privilege was barely recognizable to her as a child. In fact, there is one moment where she describes being beat up by the girls at her school because she is so pale and skinny (p. 45), and my analytical notes from the second reading of *The Glass Castle* read: “complexity of race and class, she’s an outsider, but here it’s all about context.” Where *Breaking the Ocean* examines the role institutionalized racism and oppression have on Dashtgard’s family dynamic and experiences with figures of authority, Walls’ memoir is a unique interrogation into fluidity of one’s social standing about the intersection of race and class, from a more interpersonal perspective. Walls is often an outsider due to her race, however, it is her class position which puts her in such situations, as living in poverty means her family is often living amongst many racialized families in neighbourhoods that are neglected by systems of social welfare, municipal infrastructure, education and institutional care. While her narrative seems to gesture at this connection, implying a recognition of the role that her racial privilege holds in her being an unexpected outsider in such neighbourhoods, schools, and cities, Walls does not openly interrogate this phenomenon in a meaningful way like Dashtgard does, suggesting that her critical social awareness does not go beyond gender and class.

Theme 4: Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal

Like *Educated* and *Breaking the Ocean*, *The Glass Castle* positions formal schooling as both a site of pain and promise, in that Walls faces significant discrimination and bullying in

many of the schools she attends. Due to her family's nomadic tendencies, Walls arrives at school in Welch with no records from previous schools, and the teacher shames her in front of the class, interpreting the family's lack of records as their way of indicating that they are better than others and above following rules. My analytical notes highlight a moment where the teacher openly mocks Walls (2005) in front of her peers, repeating her words back at her in a malicious tone, and my notes read: "teachers being mean/bullying due to class differences, child not understanding why." Important to note is my addition in the note that often a child does not or cannot understand why an adult who is meant to be above such childish behaviour, would treat them in such a way.

I felt resonance with Walls in this moment, as I often felt a similar dissonance between how teachers perceived me as a troublemaker, and my own earnestness in approaching my education. For example, I recall being disproportionately punished for small mistakes as a child in school, such as receiving detention for tossing a boy's shoe back to him after he had whipped it at me in the hallway. I received detention and he did not, as I was told I should have known better. I remember thinking it was odd how the teacher seemed to take my actions so much more personally than the other students, or at least that was how it had felt to me as a six-year-old. hooks (1989) describes a pattern of marginalized individuals suppressing their ideas as a response to being read as oppositional, and I argue that this can help to illuminate how willfulness is often something that marginalized children are branded, without intention on their part, thus swallowing down their subjectivity in order to appease an oppressive institution or figurehead. Ahmed (2014) describes how behaviours which are read as rebellious or willful, may not feel intentional and writes "[o]ur tongues can disobey for us" (p. 176). Much like Westover (2018) and Dashtgard (2019), Walls (2005) is positioned as a willful and disobedient child

simply due to the context in which she finds herself, which is oppositional to her subjective worldview, and thus, she is given the option to bend to the will of the educational institution, or be punished for refusing to do so.

Later in life, Walls has a teacher who sees her potential (a recurring theme across the memoirs) and begins to feel a sense of pride in her writing. She can save money and move away from her parents, following her older sister Lori, and finds a place for herself through a public-school program in New York which provides internships for youth in lieu of attending class. During the internship, Walls develops a passion for journalism and decides to attend college to further her career – upon the advice of an invested individual who sees her potential and pushes her to do the same. She seems to find a deep sense of purpose in the work, and ultimately, in telling stories. The trajectory of willfulness in Walls’ story differs from Westover (2018) and Dashtgard (2019), whose own arcs of willfulness are rooted in freedom through formal education and self-acceptance, respectively. In *The Glass Castle*, Walls is a conscious observer to the perilous and harmful actions of her parents, and her journey is one of a child who moves from being witness to a storyteller. Her willfulness seems to be rooted in her ability to tell stories and illuminate nuances through her perspective as a border crosser, who exists in between social boundaries due to her position as a white woman who grew up in poverty. Walls’ writing expertly illustrates the consequences of neglect, addiction, and poverty in the everyday lives of an average American family and aligns more with *Educated* than *Breaking the Ocean* in its framing of education as an escape from intergenerational trauma. The connection between Walls’ willfulness and her educational journey is a key reason this memoir in particular hit so close to home for me, which I discuss further in the autoethnographic reflections about my next memoir, below.

Ultimately, *The Glass Castle* holds considerable pedagogical potential for learning about intergenerational trauma, as well as the role of sites of education in reproducing or dismantling structural violence for students from historically marginalized groups, specifically in this case, those living in poverty and in dysfunctional family structures. Despite her struggles with formal schooling as a child, Walls ends up finding a place to express her willfulness through storytelling, and much like Westover (2018), this is significantly shaped by her educational experiences and access to education. Despite earlier struggles with formal schooling, Walls eventually feels supported by a critical mentor and therefore is encouraged to pursue writing, leading her to an early career in journalism. She is also able to save money and support herself, to eventually pursue higher education and a later career as a writer.

We Have Always Been Here

Published in 2019 and written by Samra Habib, *We Have Always Been Here*, is a story of a young girl who struggles to find a place in her faith. Habib's (2019) story begins in Lahore, Pakistan, and later moves to Toronto, Canada. The memoir charts faith, gender, and belonging as intersecting struggles. As a young girl enamored by the city smells and sounds, who observes the dynamics of the women in her everyday life with much consideration for their resilience, dreams, and commitment to community. The narrative immerses the reader in the political context for Habib's fear around being an Ahmadi Muslim and details her family's immigration to Canada as political refugees. Habib uses her memoir to illustrate the struggle of being a first-generation eldest daughter in a patriarchal household and striving to reconcile her sexuality and faith. Discovering that her parents have planned for her to marry her cousin Nasir while in high school, Habib begins to question her path in life, which causes a rift in her family dynamic and with her faith. In my analysis I focus on internalization of shame around one's lack of fitting-in.

Like Westover (2018), Dashtgard (2019) and Walls (2005), Habib (2019) also seeks to reconcile her individuality and self-transformation with her upbringing, causing her to feel like she must choose between her family and her own desires. As her narrative unfolds, Habib begins to understand her sexuality and struggles to reconcile her queerness and her faith, as well as her role in her community, due to external pressures around sexual identity.

In adulthood, Habib finds community that is imperfect but sustaining. These tensions mirror a community that is more inclusive, displaying that being queer and Muslim need not be mutually exclusive. The narrative grapples with the reality that there are hegemonic forces at play in many faith-based communities, but not all. For example, there are many colonial influences present in certain theological traditions, such as those which are founded on patriarchal notions of women as property. However, many faiths have evolved and therefore many followers of certain religious teachings have adapted in alignment with social perceptions on such issues. This is relevant to Habib's memoir as understandings of the Islamic faith are often outdated. This story acknowledges the increasingly nuanced nature of religious communities and their adaptations. Ultimately, *We Have Always Been Here* is a memoir about self-acceptance and resilience, despite feeling trapped in cycles of generational trauma and beholden to family or societal expectations.

Below, I briefly summarize some of the analytic work from *We Have Always Been Here* through providing succinct examples connected to each subtheme.

Subtheme	Example	Analytic Links
1. Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grief and trauma from immigrating due to religious oppression in Pakistan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feminist killjoy disrupts happiness of authority figures (Ahmed, 2017) Disrupts cycles of intergenerational trauma due to oppression

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I experienced similar patterns of women stuck in patriarchal cycles leading to trauma patterns
2. Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Habib learns to go along with parents plan to make them happy, despite inner turmoil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ahmed (2017) describes certain bonds as damaging Willful child does not/cannot see this without suffering further Self-perception shifts
3. Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeps struggles at home a secret, especially marriage to Nasir 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Habib is frightened to share truth with peers due to internalized shame Longs to keep peace and assumes something wrong with her (Walker, 2013)
4. Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Habib is coerced into arranged marriage with cousin, and attempt suicide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiences a feminist snap (Ahmed, 2017) and uses voice to end marriage My own snap was different contextually, but similarly self-preserving

Table 5: A breakdown of the thematic analysis of We Have Always Been Here.

Zooming In: Autoethnographic Analysis of We Have Always Been Here

Habib describes the burden of carrying her family's religious beliefs as a secret in an increasingly fundamentalist setting, "[h]iding that I was Ahmadi, as my parents had taught me to do, became part of my everyday reality" (Habib, 2019, p. 36). She describes the process of fleeing Pakistan with her mother and three siblings, as well as her cousin, in the middle of the night, as religious refugees. Upon arriving in Canada, Habib's story has parallels to Dashtgard's (2019) in terms of the experiences of living in a new country, and her family's adjustment to work, school, and everyday life in a new place. However, there is a significant difference between Dashtgard's experiences in small town Alberta, and Habib's experiences in the large city of Toronto, Ontario. Habib describes typical coming-of-age moments such as getting her first period, making new friends at school, as well as coming to terms with her new outsider

status as a visibly racialized young girl living in Toronto. There are also less typical coming-of-age moments for a young girl living in Toronto, such as her arranged marriage to her cousin Nasir, and leaving her family home behind in the middle of night, around the time of her high school graduation. Within *We Have Always Been Here* I found significant data during my analytic read throughs which connected to the codes of structural violence and willfulness, and upon reflecting on my analytical notes I have re-organized much of this data under themes 1 and 4 from my main findings, which are as follows: 1) the link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma, and 4) willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal. I expand on each as relates to my initial reading of the memoir, below.

Theme 1: Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma

Threaded throughout these moments in Habib's story are tales of resilience and comfort in finding others who are similarly positioned as "different" and building a connection to those who come from similar backgrounds, through her ESL classes in school. She writes, "I marvelled at how we could all be from the same continent and yet have taken such different journeys to get to this classroom in Toronto" (p. 57). Habib finds a sense of comfort in meeting other children who had immigrated to Canada, whose religious and cultural practices also represented a deviation from the Eurocentric ones which were normalized in her regular classroom. Habib discusses a pattern present through her adolescence of avoiding home life through engaging in school activities. She writes,

Staying at school even after the final bell rang was the only way I could cope with life. I joined clubs and committees, tutored younger students, and told my parents I was studying at the library when in fact I was attending after-school dances in the gymnasium. At those

dances, I felt empowered to reveal my other side, the fun-loving teenager I wasn't allowed to be in front of my parents. (p. 96)

This theme of finding belonging at school aligns with Westover's (2018) and Walls' (2005) (later in life) experiences and connects to Dashtgard's pursuit of belonging through spaces outside the home. Habib, however, attends school in a culturally diverse neighbourhood in the Greater Toronto Area, and connects with other students whose families had immigrated. As she describes being drawn to "loners," Habib (2019) writes, "our empathy for each other's childhood trauma brought us closer together" (p. 98). I note this in my analysis document as falling within the emerging theme of structural violence being linked to intergenerational trauma, as Habib is explicitly outlining how the experience of immigrating due to social oppression in her home country has led to traumatic experiences for herself and her peers. This is also significant in that the opportunity to connect and find a sense of belonging with others at school seems to rely on this ability to connect through shared experience with the consequences of structural violence, as her friends at school also witness their parents through the lens of patterns of intergenerational trauma. Perhaps this is what was missing for Thistle (2019) and Dashtgard (2019) in their K-12 school experiences and might contribute to their finding such a sense of purpose and belonging in learning during their later life, as there were more people around them with diverse lenses and experience who showed empathy and interest in their lives.

Habib illustrates the critical role of community in her upbringing in Toronto and describes her observations of the roles and rich intersubjectivities of the older women in her neighbourhood. Habib also describes school as a place where she feels seen and supported as a unique and worthwhile individual, writing:

Teachers, I was starting to learn, were my biggest champions. They rooted for me, and I dreaded letting them down. The bullies started being cruel to me only when the teachers looked away, so all I had to do was keep their eyes on me, the immigrant kids exceeding expectations. (p. 59)

This is an interesting departure from the other memoirs, in that the other authors did not find much support from the education system until they were older, but Habib's description illuminates the double-edged sword of being an exception to the teacher's lowered standards, and this resonated with my own story.

Once again, the role of external expectations on an individual's developing sense of self is paramount, as having teachers demonstrate a willingness to support her success seems to have bolstered Habib's resilience throughout struggles elsewhere in her life, such as within the patriarchal dynamic in her household and her being pressured into an arranged marriage. Ahmed (2017) describes the feminist killjoy as "one who does not make the happiness of others her cause" and importantly she claims that through "not willing to make their happiness her cause, she causes unhappiness" (p. 74-75). It occurs to me that the legacy of intergenerational trauma is intricately connected to a legacy of maintaining the structural violence which allows for the happiness of those with certain privileges, while seeking to make invisible the unhappiness of those for whom the structures cause harm. Through maintaining the happiness of her teachers, her father, and those at her mosque, Habib's life becomes a happiness project for those around her, rather than herself.

Representing a departure between my own experience and Habib's, she describes feeling a sense of belonging in her early school experiences, through finding a community of other children who were similarly marked as different. My own experience was quite different, as I

was typically the only racialized, and always the only racialized *and* poor student in my classes, until my high school years. As a child, I often had difficulty understanding why my teachers seemed to celebrate the incredible accomplishments of my classmates, while overlooking my own achievements. At times I would wonder if perhaps my efforts and my work in class were not as good as I thought them to be.

One instance I can recall such an experience was when we read *The Wild Children*, by Felice Holman as a class and were asked to choose a scene from the book to sketch and visualize. Loving the story and the characters (children who grew up in poverty and isolation), I went above and beyond, drawing all the characters for my assignment and sketching out their clothing using diagram-like pictures where I explained my artistic choices. Despite my older siblings all being talented artists, this was an area in which I had never excelled. But this assignment was different, I knew it was, I could not have been prouder of my work. Only, when the teacher handed back our assignments a couple of weeks later, and in typical fashion shared some standout examples with the class, she overlooked mine. I had not even gotten an encouraging note or hand on the shoulder telling me she acknowledged my effort. Instead, she shared the artwork of a boy in the class who was well known as a gifted artist.

Looking back now, I can't help but wonder if her constantly confusing me with my older sister, consistently calling me by her name, can be detached from the apparent disinterest she had in my work. I knew my sister had not been a star student, and I found myself working very hard to scrub the image of her from my teachers' minds when they looked at me. Despite these efforts, it wasn't until I got to high school that I started to feel like the effort I put into learning was being recognized. Of interest, most of this positive attention came from my white male teachers, and while I wish I could say that their praise didn't impact me, but at this point in my

life I had become almost desperate for the feeling of worth and belonging that came from such acknowledgement.

Perhaps the strongest point of resonance between my own past and Habib's story is the pattern of women being lost to the repeating narrative of patriarchal culture, discussed above as the inheritance of cultural and family pathways to happiness, demonstrated through the prioritization of heterosexual partnerships despite abuse and violence. One of the most significant passages in the memoir regarding my own learning describes this pattern and the role of intergenerational trauma in reproducing it. Habib writes,

I wondered whether my mother ever dared to imagine what her best could look like. Did she ever have the luxury to envision a best made up of decisions that were good for her without feeling selfish and guilty? The kind of best that was truly hers and hers alone? *A best that didn't make her feel that if she wasn't living for someone else's happiness, she wasn't worthy of love? A best that didn't ask her to justify her existence by being useful to others? A best that didn't ask her to mute her fire so that someone else's could burn brighter? A best that didn't require that she give away every part of herself, including her daughter, until she had nothing left? A best that didn't demand she sacrifice everything for the promise of heaven's embrace?* My mother had failed to give me a better life than hers because she didn't have the blueprint to show what my best could look like.

I had inherited the fate met by all the women in my family who came before me.

(p. 71, emphasis my own)

The last sentence in my copy of the book is highlighted, circled, and marked with a star. Triply emphasized. My note on this page reads: "women being stuck in patterns of losing themselves to needs of others" with an additional star added to the post it. It's interesting that the language of

giving and losing is used, by Habib and myself, when many patriarchal norms could be interpreted as *taking* from women: taking and taking until they have nothing left. I witnessed the women who I loved being used as caregivers and child bearers by abusive men, repeatedly, being granted insight into heteronormative relationships where men would take from women. When I was young, I was often confused by how these women would push me towards men too old for me, trying to “get me out there” so I could find a potential partner. Similarly, Habib’s return to Islam can be read as a form of willfulness, in her choice to reorient to the faith and find a place for herself as a queer woman, in a refusal of the heteronormative pathway to supposed happiness rooted in her family’s faith (Ahmed, 2017).

Looking back now I understand that the women in my family saw my romantic pairing as a necessary next step into my adult life, and as a means of giving my life purpose through providing and caring for a man, and eventually children. It makes perfect sense to me now, as a wife and a mother, that during these years I was adamant that I would *never* marry nor have children of my own. I did not want to inherit the blueprint of the women who came before me, who while being brilliant, resourceful and compassionate, also consistently sought out violent and manipulative men.

Theme 4: Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal

A central component of Habib’s story is the oppressive nature of patriarchy in women’s lives, as she consistently reflects on a pattern of women giving up their desires and interests once they are married to men. Habib describes her own journey as a young woman, where her actions and desires are often subjugated and understood through the lens of patriarchy. For example, Habib describes hiding books by authors such as Margaret Atwood, Agatha Christie, and Nora Roberts under bed for fear of being punished for their contents, resulting in her cousin and

betrothed finding them and bringing them to her mother out of fear of them “putting impure thoughts in [her] head” (p. 92). When she is punished for reading these books, Habib describes feeling “as though the window to the outside world I so treasured was being boarded up” (p. 93). She also witnesses violent fights between her parents and hears of women from her community being abused by their husbands. She is concerned by the lack of response from those around her, as Nasir suggests that sometimes such behaviour is “necessary” in a marriage. After being coerced into marrying her cousin, facilitated by her desire as a daughter to make her parents happy at any cost, and her mother’s desire to protect her child from the violence of being single in a patriarchal society, this interaction causes Habib to come to terms with the fact that she will have to voice her needs even if it pushes her family away.

Here the reader once again witnesses the feminist snap, not the starting point as Ahmed (2017) argues, but a breaking point. She writes, “we need to show how [the] snap is not the starting point” (p. 189), instead recognizing the persistent experience of being a feminist killjoy, or a willful subject, who “might acquire an aptitude for irritation not because of the nature of her speech or being, but because of how much she has already had to put up with” (p. 190). Upon experiencing her feminist snap, Habib ultimately divorces her cousin and leaves home, finding refuge in another romantic heterosexual relationship, but one where it is safer to explore her personality and interests in more depth. Through attending post-secondary school and cultivating friendships she sought out on her own, Habib develops a stronger sense of self and finds her way back to her Muslim roots with a renewed interest in staking out a place for herself as a queer woman in a historically exclusionary spiritual culture.

My initial reading of *We Have Always Been Here* through the codes of structural violence and willfulness brought forward themes of emotional neglect, as Habib gestures to her mother’s

childhood neglect being reproduced through intergenerational trauma, and patriarchal violence and dominance in the lives of young women. From the very beginning of her memoir, Habib emphasizes that her mother tried to give her a good life based on what she knew, which was limited by her own experiences living within a patriarchal culture. Ahmed (2017) describes how “we are directed by what is in front of us” (p. 48), arguing that we inherit stories through culture, which teach us what will make us happy. She writes that “[h]appiness is a way of being directed toward those things that would or should make you happy” (p. 49). Typically, we invest these narratives and this sense of direction from our family first. A passage from *We Have Always Been Here* emphasized in my analytical notes reads,

So my mother came of age knowing abandonment and neglect intimately. Her experiences taught her that as a woman, fertility, purity, and beauty were the only currencies she could exchange for a better life. (Habib, 2019, p. 17)

Habib illuminates a significant trend within patriarchal cultures where women's lives, including their independence and unique interests carried and developed through their adolescence, are seen to end at marriage. She describes a neighbourhood friend marrying and disappearing from her life, and another passage I noted in the text includes her reflection that “women were expected to leave everything behind once they married, as though their lives before that point had never existed” (Habib, 2019, p. 32). Of course this is not unique to any one culture, it is pervasive across many, as demonstrated by each of the memoirs examined in this research.

Across each memoir there is a pattern of women and children's bodies and wills being bent to accommodate the values of the cultures they are immersed in, being forced down paths which those with power around them find desirable. Again, Ahmed (2017) connects this pattern to her discussion of feminist killjoys, willfulness, and the snap. This pattern of being pushed towards

cultural and social norms around happiness gains significant nuance in *From the Ashes*, which I discuss further below.

Significantly, in *We Have Always Been Here*, as with Westover, Dashtgard, and Walls' memoirs, learning is intricately tied to willfulness in Habib's life, even from a young age. She describes finding a community of students who were in similar social positions as "different in our own ways" but having a similar goal of "working incredibly hard to have a life different from their parents'" (p. 77). While Westover (2018), Walls (2005), and Dashtgard (2019) all struggled during their adolescence to find a place for themselves in sites of formal learning, these institutions ultimately offered each of them a new vision of themselves which was rooted in their own perception, rather than that of abusive or neglectful family. Again, willfulness is of critical importance, as Ahmed (2017) states "becoming feminist is also about generating ideas about the world we encounter" (p. 20). Thus, in addressing the cycles of intergenerational structural violence and its pervasiveness in everyday life, the feminist killjoy and the willful subject can create new pathways to happiness, which leads the way for others.

This theme of willfulness in Habib's story also indicates a trend across Westover, Dashtgard, and Walls' stories, in that teachers and mentors hold a significant power, through witnessing and mirroring back to the memoirists their capacity for using their voice, when they might otherwise feel invisible in their home and social lives. Habib (2019) describes the joy it brought her to make her teachers proud of her learning, and writes, "I just wanted to be told that I was worthy, I was smart and I deserved good things happening to me" (p. 95). One of her teachers suggested she consider a career as a diplomat in the future and her reflection highlights a key pattern across the memoirs in this research, of feeling validated by someone in an authoritative role who is not a parent. Habib states, "[i]t was validating to know that despite my

voice being muted at home, people I respected believed in me and were rooting for me” (p. 95). Connecting back to the literature on childhood attachment and neglect (van der Kolk, 2015; Walker, 2013), it is clear how the presence of a validating voice is pivotal for children who are seeking to discover who they are and what they want out of life, and often this voice comes from a mentor or guide outside of the home, such as the case with Habib.

There are experiences in *We Have Always Been Here* which I could never truly comprehend, as someone who has never had to immigrate under duress, although I frequently wonder how much of these experiences are imprinted in my genetic makeup (thus having physiological consequences) through the experiences of my ancestors, such as my paternal grandmother, who fled Pakistan due to civil war. An aspect of Habib’s story which does resonate more obviously is the reality of her life being flipped upside down by oppressive power and having to flee for safety. In reading Habib’s story, my responses around my own claim to Pakistani heritage caused me to reflect on Dashtgard’s writing around the fear of never being brown enough. These moments, brought forward by Habib’s memoir, forced me to address some internalized stereotypes around what counts as a valid queer Pakistani existence. These pieces resonate with me, as I learned who I was in the larger world under similar circumstances – however, with significantly less community around me. I did not realize I was not white until some peers pointed it out to me while colouring a self-portrait at school, and I frequently dealt with racist remarks or comments on my visible differences. When I asked about these experiences at home, my mother was unable to empathize. As mentioned above, my family’s typical response was that I should change myself: bend (Ahmed, 2014) in order to fit into the image that others held up as ideal.

Growing up in a small town an hour south of Toronto, there was significantly less racial diversity in my hometown, however, I can still identify with Habib's desire to find her place amidst other outcasts. I did forge connections with other girls at school who were bullied for various reasons, who had similar interests to my own which were less conventional, such as our "tomboy" ways of dressing, our love of professional wrestling, and a desire to remain invisible during the school day. Through these friendships I found significant confidence and felt empowered to be my true self. Despite these commonalities, my closest friends were always white, middle class, and from dual parent households. I was usually the "odd one out" and I felt this very deeply as child. I recall visiting my friends' homes where they had big, beautiful backyards, where their parents sat down to eat with them at the family dinner table, and witnessing the love of a father who embraced their child's interests and a mother who was home after school. Typically, I was so uncomfortable visiting their homes that we usually deferred to hanging out at my house. However, as I grew older and began consuming more diverse popular culture, I began to see my status as the "odd one out" as something that could be re-framed, as unique and interesting. Often in the films and television I would consume, such as the film *Practical Magic*, a character's social othering ends up being framed as their strength, lending them power in times of significant duress. I found a home for myself in being labelled different and embraced the opportunities this gave me to live a life outside of the usual trajectory of the women in my lineage.

Zooming Out: Thematic Analysis of We Have Always Been Here

Re-reading *We Have Always Been Here* a second and third time, scanning for connections to the literature from Chapter 2, as well as connections across the memoirs, I found that Habib's (2019) story traces the consequences of cyclical generational trauma related to patriarchal

dominance, wherein women's lives follow the frequently tread pathways of their grandmothers, aunts, and mothers. She expertly illustrates the consequence of emotional neglect in such contexts, demonstrating how young girls often feel invisible to their parents, subjugating their own needs, wants, and desires to appease and please their parents. As a result, there was much in my second reading of *We Have Always Been Here* which connected to/contributed to my central analytic themes 2 and 3: 2) Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice, and 3) Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt.

Theme 2: Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice

Ahmed's (2017) discussion on willfulness and killjoys suggests that patriarchal households often equate being "good" with being silent and submissive, and in her memoir, Habib highlights how her mother frequently assumes she is okay and well-adjusted because she is unable to express how *not okay* she is. Habib uses the example of her marriage to her cousin Nasir, describing how her mother assumed it was okay because she hadn't expressed that she did not want to go through with it. She writes,

The fact that I didn't resist was an indication that I was okay with the arrangement, and this belief absolved her of guilt and shifted some of the accountability onto me. That particular detail and her memory of it would haunt me as I tried to undo the damage it caused. I started to internalize my mother's belief that my lack of resistance was my way of consenting and that I was responsible for what had happened. (Habib, 2019, p. 83)

Like *Educated*, *We Have Always Been Here* is powerful in its demonstration of how willfulness, through an inability or a refusal to be made happy by the same patterns handed down to you by previous generations, could offer emotional healing from one's past traumas. Ahmed (2017) writes that "it is not always self-evident which bonds are damaging" and that a feminist politics

requires us to continually be open to the question “how to live?” (p. 196). Rather than inheriting our pathways to happiness, we should feel empowered to ask questions and to know that “life is open to a decision” (p. 196). This connects back to Tuck’s (2018) powerful theory around refusing those systems which do not benefit us and maintaining the question of “how shall we live” (p. 157)? Habib (2019) describes how in marrying Nasir and having conversations with him surrounding the abuse of a family friend at the hands of her own husband, she realized that she could not “stay with someone who thought it was okay to hit his wife” (p. 95). She explains that she made a conscious decision to not “repeat the cycle of abuse and violence that had plagued the women in [her] family” (p. 95) and this stuck out to me as a critical moment where she begins to learn to trust her inner voice and engages in a process of asking this question of *how to live*. This process represents a form of willfulness being embraced and accepted. Much like those pivotal moments in *Educated*, *Breaking the Ocean*, and *The Glass Castle*, wherein young women make a choice to prioritize their own needs, I was struck with the question: What was the catalyst for these moments of power, despite being embedded in patriarchal households where patterns of structural violence were so pervasive and present. Habib writes,

I wanted a different kind of life. A life where I wasn’t afraid. A life where I didn’t have to ask for a man’s permission to read, to go to university, to drive a car. But I feared that the feminist ideals I had learned from books, teachers, and peers at school wouldn’t register with my parents. (2019, p. 95)

This passage illustrates a critical connection to willfulness present in *We Have Always Been Here*, as Habib describes making a conscious decision to not repeat a cycle of violence and abuse in her own relationships. This acknowledgement of learning from ideas external to one’s home connects back to Ahmed (2017) writing on feminist becoming, as well as the feminist snap. Once

again in this memoir, similar to Westover (2018), Dashtgard (2019), and Walls (2005), I witnessed a young woman being repeatedly asked to choose between her own wellbeing and the desires of her family, and thus how a child grows into an adult who makes a choice to sever familial bonds due to reaching their breaking point. Habib (2019) describes such a breaking point in her attempted suicide, and consequent decision to divorce her cousin Nasir. I theorize that this breaking point, or feminist snap, lead to her finding a deeply buried inner voice. Describing the moment when she tells her parents she will be divorcing Nasir, she writes:

I no longer felt scared to share what I had been feeling for years. In fact, for the first time in my life, I felt brave. I finally knew how it felt to stand by my convictions, unconcerned about the consequences. (p. 103)

This moment seems to echo with the words of Ahmed (2017) that the actions of a feminist killjoy might be renamed as a reaction, she argues that the feminist snap “is not the starting point” (191) and urges one to see the history behind such a moment. Ahmed connects the snap back to willfulness, stating “Perhaps feminists acquire willful tongues from the very act of speaking out. Perhaps we need willful tongues in order to resist being straightened out” (p. 191). In this moment Habib is describing her inability to follow along with the path that has been laid by those before her, which aligns with Ahmed’s (2014) assertion that “[f]or some, willfulness might be necessary for an existence to be possible” (p. 160). After refusing to continue her marriage to Nasir, Habib describes her parents as desperately exerting more control over her to reign in her independence. As Ahmed describes, a polite strategy of power is to create discomfort around one’s willfulness, to create an atmosphere wherein they feel as though they must leave or be forced out of the environment to which they can no longer fit. Upon leaving

Nasir and finding her inner voice, Habib's homelife becomes so uncomfortable that she chooses to leave. This is another pattern present across several of the memoirs, but not all.

Theme 3: Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt

Within *We Have Always Been Here* shame is prominent but not named, and one striking example would be in Habib's reflection on the discomfort she felt when going over to her friend's houses. She notes her initial shock at how her friend's parents are more deeply invested in their children's interests and their hobbies. Habib (2019) describes her unwillingness to let others get to know her, writing that she "kept the details of [her] tumultuous home life a secret from [her] friends and classmates" (p. 104), indicating an unease around their ability to relate and read her situation compassionately. While Habib can recognize that her homelife is restrictive, she does not wish to cause unhappiness for her parents and so she keeps her small rebellions, such as removing her hijab and dancing with boys, secret from her family. Through her desire to stay in her parents' good graces, Habib displays the fawn type trauma response by "merging with the wishes, needs and demands of others" (Walker, 2013, p. 122). This can clearly be seen in the push Habib experiences to marry her cousin, Nasir, and in her inability to refuse despite how much she wants to. Habib does not want to burden her parents or be accused of leading a sinful life, she wants to be seen as good and worthwhile to them, and so she subjugates her inner voice and isolates herself through going along with their choices and marrying Nasir. She, alone, lives with the secret of her unhappiness, and ultimately is not until this secret begins to manifest in the form of a suicide attempt, that Habib is able to face the reality of her situation and be honest with her parents about how unhappy she is with Nasir.

Here I was reminded of Westover (2018) and her description of being pushed towards the shears by her father, of being physically put in harm's way by one's primary caregiver, and the

subsequent self-abandonment which accompanied the realization that your parent did not prioritize your wellbeing. Habib seems to experience a similar awakening during her young adult life, when she makes the choice to end her marriage to Nasir and describes refusing to be wed to a man who could justify abuse of their wife as a necessary means of control. However, even after she has left her family home and begun her post-secondary studies, Habib feels the weight of her mother's unhappiness burdening her choices and ability to see herself clearly. She describes lying to her mother about marrying her boyfriend, so that she would not be viewed as living in a sinful manner, and she writes of the experience "I was frustrated with myself for still not being free of her hold" (Habib, 2019, p. 110). This hold Habib describes aligns with the research on childhood neglect and subsequent co-dependency, as her childhood experiences taught her that her parent's happiness was *her* responsibility (Walker, 2013), and as a parentified child, Habib struggles to let go of this ingrained self-doubt around her life choices and ability to prioritize her own happiness. Like Dashtgard, Habib seeks to find ways to embrace and honour her emotional expression in order to heal from this learned self-abandonment.

From the Ashes

From the Ashes is written by Jesse Thistle and illustrates how one family is torn apart due to ongoing structural colonial violence in a settler-colonial state that results in intergenerational trauma due to patriarchal violence, addiction, and abuse. As mentioned above, *From the Ashes* represents a departure from the other four memoirs in this analysis in that it is written from the perspective of a man, yet I chose this memoir due to its author's description of using addiction to cope or forget generations of intergenerational trauma, the importance of Thistle's (2019) experience as a Cree-Métis boy and man growing up in colonial Canada, as well as a need to interrogate opportunities for coalition across gender, for men and women who are trauma

survivors. Further, Thistle's narrative complicates gendered and racialized expectations around vulnerability and survival, emphasizing important differences between the other authors' experiences with structural violence, and his own as a Cree-Métis man. For example, in Habib's (2019) narrative there is significant illustration of the impacts of intergenerational trauma due to white hetero patriarchy on young girls and women, whereas in Thistle's memoir I was granted insight into how this same social system impacts a young boys and men. As with each other memoirist, Thistle begins his narrative from the time he is a child, describing his sense of safety and belonging in the home of his Kokom and Mushoom (Grandmother and Grandfather in the Cree language), as well as his love for his mother and father in a time before their home life devolves. These themes resonated with me as a reader and researcher, as although I am a settler-Canadian, I also grew up in households where patriarchal dominance, addiction, and violence were prevalent. Early in his childhood, Thistle and his siblings travel to visit with their father in Eastern Ontario, planning only to be temporarily away from their mother who stays back in Saskatchewan. It feels significant to mention that Thistle's mother and maternal grandparents are Cree and Métis, and therefore this departure also represented an upheaval from cultural rootedness in his ancestral traditions, language, and spirituality. Thistle and his two brothers ultimately end up living with their father, who due to his own trauma history is in a state of active addiction. Therefore, the boys live in a situation that involves serious neglect and endangerment, as they are forced to steal food to survive, and are often witness to the frightening reality of their father's addictions. After being removed from their father's apartment, Thistle and his two brothers are placed into foster care, where he alludes to severe sexual abuse, and shortly after, they move in with their paternal grandmother and grandfather. Experiencing emotional neglect and abuse while living with his paternal grandparents ultimately causes Thistle

to develop an unhealthy relationship with alcohol and drugs. His narrative follows his journey battling his addiction and healing from his past to find a way out of the generational cycles of substance use.

Below, I briefly summarize some of the analytic work from *From the Ashes* through providing succinct examples connected to each subtheme.

Subtheme	Example	Analytic Links
1. Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thistle's experience in his paternal grandparents' home coloured by consequences of addiction, poverty, grief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experiences with early caregivers teach us what is safe/not safe van der Kolk (2015) Link between PTSD and substance use/abuse (van der Kolk, 2015) Helped me to feel less shame around alcoholic and abusive men in my life
2. Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disproportionate punishment and abuse, lead to numbing of inner voice with substances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Criminalization of racialized and poor communities (Barnes & Motz, 2018) Linked to burden of representation (Puwar, 2004)
3. Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thistle describes his brother Jerry and an insatiable hunger or void which he fills with food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walker (2013) describes how parental neglect, shame, abandonment can lead to addictive behaviour Where Thistle numbed pain/shame with substances, I worked harder for external validation
4. Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thistle experiences dissonance between self and external perception, internalization of shame/willful brand due to colonial harm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> hooks (1989) theorizes internalization of colonial domination as impacting self-knowledge Thistle embraces willfulness in rebuilding knowledge of self

Table 6: A breakdown of the thematic analysis of *From the Ashes*.

Zooming In: Autoethnographic Analysis of From the Ashes

Reading Thistle's memoir was very educative for me in terms of viewing my own siblings through a more nuanced and compassionate lens. While my own trauma responses to a consistently unstable childhood involved practices more akin to memoir authors such as Westover (2018) who would defer to the judgement of others, or Dashtgard (2019) who would overwork and perform to ignore her own wellbeing, Thistle's trauma response was one of seeking to numb his pain with substances. His story revolves around this critical sense of loss which seems to take root in his heart and spirit, and due to this emptiness, ends up living on the streets and being overtaken by his addiction to toxic substances. Thus, in my initial reading of *From the Ashes*, I found significant thematic data which developed into evidence for themes 1 and 3: 1) Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma and, 3) Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt.

Theme 1: Link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma

Thistle's (2019) memoir is less linear in its retelling than the others, as he traces the moments wherein the overarching themes of his young life seem to take shape, in terms of the sense of home with his Kokum and Mushoom (Cree-Métis grandparents), then the insecurity and fear of living with his father despite the comforting role of his brothers, onto the unsafe experience of foster care and then into the care of his paternal grandparents whose home clearly contains love, in addition to undercurrents of trauma related to patriarchal violence, poverty, and addiction. Thistle illuminates the precariousness of living in a family home which contains love, but suffers under the stresses of poverty, addiction, and grief related to cultural disconnect, highlighting the impacts of structural violence on the family dynamic, and its subsequent link to cycles of trauma. Thistle describes his coming-of-age in his grandparents' home through

moments of dissonance between external and internal perceptions of who he is at his core, and these moments are illustrative of the deep wound that is caused by being abandoned and emotionally neglected by parents and guardians. For example, in his young adult years, Thistle (2019) struggles to feel an intrinsic motivation in completing his schooling, keeping a job, or maintaining pivotal relationships – beyond chasing his next high. van der Kolk (2015) describes a “circular relationship between PTSD and substance abuse” as substances can numb feelings associated with trauma responses, however, the withdrawal from substances enhances feelings of hyperarousal and can ultimately intensify such symptoms over time. Thus, the cycle of substance abuse as a response to past trauma, as well as a cause for subsequent trauma, begins.

Reading *From the Ashes* scanning for codes related to structural violence and willfulness, I found reference to physical and emotional abuse, which aligns with my analysis of each previous memoir in this research. However, where Dashtgard (2019) and Habib (2019) more vaguely gesture to the presence of violence in the lives of parents and/or loved ones, Thistle shares firsthand experience with abuse, neglect, and addiction – like Westover (2018) and Walls (2005). Most of my analytical notes related to theme 1 and extracted from *From the Ashes* accompany moments that made me feel a physical reaction while reading them, such as extreme physical abuse or emotional neglect from Thistle’s father, as well as exposure to drug use and other addictions from a young age. For example, early in the text Thistle describes the context for his formative childhood years writing, “Josh was in charge of Jerry and me whenever Dad left us alone to go on a mission. He was five” (p. 17). The subtext in this passage is that the missions revolved around scoring alcohol or drugs. Another example is when Thistle (2019) describes watching his father inject heroin and fall from the toilet onto the floor afterwards (p. 22), or when he describes the consequences of his grandmother’s ire, such as when she was without

cigarettes (p. 61) or threatening to drop him and his brothers off at Children's Aid because she could not afford to feed them anymore (p. 95). These experiences demonstrate significant links between traumatic childhood experiences and structural violence, as Thistle's grandparents and father struggled with their own trauma history and subsequent addictions. The emotional turmoil and neglect of Thistle's childhood is framed within his memoir as a direct consequence of intergenerational abuse, poverty, and struggle. van der Kolk (2015) emphasizes how our early experiences with our caregivers teach us "what is safe and what is dangerous" (p. 131) informing our internal maps of ourselves and the world around us. Thistle's memoir demonstrates what can happen when a child's inner map of the world around them is significantly marked by danger.

Many of my autoethnographic notes from reading *From the Ashes* relate to Thistle's sense of abandonment and loss, surrounding his parents' neglect and later many others whom he felt should care for his wellbeing but do not seem to. This neglect is linked back to his mother's absence, due to being physically abused, and that she has split from Thistle's father. Furthermore, his father is largely absent or unable to appropriately care for his children, due to his struggles with addictions, which are once again linked back to his childhood abuse. Again, in Thistle's story the intergenerational impacts of structural violence and willfulness are not only demonstrated through his own experiences, but through his parents' choices and/or lack thereof. One particularly striking passage in regard to the psychosocial impact of intergenerational trauma describes Thistle's reasoning for stealing a robin's nest from his friend Brian as a child, and he explains his process of grappling with jealousy over the nurturing of others as a young boy. Thistle writes,

I thought of how much that mother robin loved those eggs and how well she and Brian's family took care of them, and I got jealous. The eggs had their mother, and my brothers

and I didn't anymore. So I took the eggs. I thought that if I had them, in some way I'd have the same love the eggs had, and that would mean that in some way I'd have a mother's love again. (p. 56)

There is so much buried within this story that requires unpacking, but the central connection informing my analytic theme of the link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma, in the process of Thistle's neglect leading to his expression of his sadness is sometimes violence or harmful ways, to himself or others.

Often, Thistle alludes to the abandonment he and his brothers experienced with their mother leaving them with their dad, and then their dad disappearing, but for me as a reader the truly heartbreaking aspect of his story was that once they were finally placed with their paternal grandparents and living in a seemingly stable home, the boys still did not feel a sense of unconditional love. They faced harsh physical punishments, what would now be considered abuse, for their childhood antics, as well as threats of being taken back to foster care due to their basic needs. As a parent myself, I am all too familiar with the always present strain of poverty and overwhelm on my ability to self-regulate. For example, struggling to convince children to eat at mealtimes and not waste food becomes a complicated mental battle between not being able to afford to extra groceries and not wanting to overreact to a child's intuitive eating. Simply put, I cannot afford to allow my children to eat what they want whenever they want, and their entirely average childhood desire to eat only exciting food translates into dinnertime conflicts where I am dysregulated and overwhelmed with thoughts of future eating disorders, health issues, and rising costs of food. I can apply both my experience as well as the literature on structural violence as a framework through which to witness Thistle's description of the instability within his grandparent's home.

The consequence of this instability is highlighted in moments such as the one above with the robin's eggs, or in moments where Thistle describes being jealous of other children whose parents forgive them for making mistakes and steer them on the right path. Describing his hatred for the popular 90s sitcom "Family Ties," Thistle writes,

I couldn't stand to see Michael J. Fox get hugged by his stupid-looking, bearded father after he'd apologized for taking speed and redeemed himself. If I got caught with even a cigarette I'd be practically tarred, feathered, beaten, and grounded for a year.

The punishments Thistle describes are particularly striking when considered alongside his reflections on the abuse his own father faced as a child, growing up in the same household. Furthermore, Thistle often describes his grandfather scrutinizing his behaviour much more harshly than his brothers and comparing him to his father. This abusive treatment seems to emphasize that cycles of generational trauma, are not reserved for young girls whose mothers cannot see an alternative pathway for their daughters but seem to exist for many children who become stuck in the same patterns as their parents, continuing a cycle of abuse, trauma, shame, and subsequent numbing. These patterns speak to Thistle's unique willfulness in refusing to see himself as a repeat of his father, similarly to how Westover and Habib engaged in refusals to follow the pathways of their mothers.

Reading *From the Ashes*, I was struck by Thistle's (2019) description of his mother fleeing from abusive men at different times in her life, such as when he is older and already living with his grandparents and she leaves the father of Thistle's half-brother, Daniel and is forced to move far away from Thistle. Daniel explains why Thistle's mother seemingly disappeared a second time, after re-entering his life when he was a bit older, and I was reminded of the times that my life was flipped upside down by similar moves. When I read this part of the memoir, I was

brought back to a day in the fourth grade when my mom and brother came to pick me up from school, which I thought was odd since my mom never picked me up early and my brother should have been in school himself. I was called to the office, and my mom told me to pack up my desk because we were moving back to our previous town, and I would be returning to my old school. While my brother was overjoyed, as he had not enjoyed living rurally or going to high school with the local farm kids, I was devastated. I loved living out in the country, riding my bike up and down the old country roads, playing outside with friends, and I really enjoyed feeling like I was capable and intelligent at school.

Looking back now, I understand that we had moved out there for my stepdad's job, and that my mother was isolated and living with an abusive alcoholic who was bankrupting us. These experiences are so intricately wrapped up in social stratification due to class, race, and gender – as I can look back now and see how my mom was stuck with no means of financially escaping my stepdad, much like Thistle's mother in the beginning of her relationships. Ultimately, Thistle's mother and mine both did leave their abusive partners, but in cases such as these it often requires relying on close family and friends to support such an immediate shift. My mother moved us in with my sister and her husband, where six of us were packed into a one-bedroom apartment, and while this presented its own challenges, not everyone has such options and often ends up having to stay in an abusive relationship.

Reading parallel scenes in *From the Ashes* and *The Glass Castle* crystallized the theme. I have begun to feel less of a sense of shame around the realities of growing up around abusive and alcoholic men, as well as feeling increased grace for women who did their best to raise children around such men – viewing this persistence as another unique form of willful behaviour. Febos (2022) discusses re-integrating traumatic experience in one's life narrative, as a necessary

step in healing from her traumatic experiences. However, an individual is not always ready to participate in such a process. Interestingly, my journey into memoir began during my first year of my doctoral studies, at a time when I was just beginning therapy, and therefore on a pathway towards the healing project which Febos alludes to. Febos argues that “If we try to write the story of trauma before we have established a certain degree of psychological and physical safety, we risk doing ourselves more harm” (p. 124). I feel as though I was not ready to share my own story until I witnessed parts of myself in the narratives of others, other who had shared, opened themselves and their families up to public scrutiny, and survived.

Theme 3: Shame serves as a catalyst for isolation and self-doubt

Through reviewing my notes, I identified a consistent theme present across all the narratives which is more explicitly named in *From the Ashes*, is the struggle of being a child growing up with a guardian who suffers from poor mental health. As with Walls (2005), Thistle’s memoir links these mental health struggles to parental trauma and subsequent addiction issues outright, and there is a particular focus on the subsequent neglect that children growing up around such forms of structural violence may face. In describing the moment his grandmother threatened them with Children’s Aid for eating so many of the groceries, Thistle seems to illuminate the pervasiveness of structural violence and childhood neglect as one ages. He describes the insatiable hunger of his brother Jerry, and writes,

He’d told me how he always felt like he could never get enough food, even when he was full. It was a force that drove us to steal and lie, to eat until we destroyed every hors d’oeuvre plate at every family function my grandparents took us to. My cousins used to tease us about how we consumed everything in sight. They called us pigs, but it was something we had no control over. (Thistle, 2019, p. 96)

My analytical notes flag this passage and read: “Growing in neglect leads to addiction → a hole inside of you?” This question seems of critical importance, as the narratives written by Westover (2018), Dashtgard (2019), Walls (2005), and Habib (2019) tell varying stories of children who grew up facing significant emotional neglect and abuse, linked intricately to structural violence, to develop into young adults who suffered from various mental health disorders such as addiction, anxiety, and depression.

Walker (2013) writes of parental abandonment and argues that it can often lead to a subsequent “insatiable appetite for substances and/or addictive processes” (p. 95). This connects further to Walker’s theorizing on C-PTSD responses from abused or neglected children who “were forced to so thoroughly abandon their protective instincts that they become trapped in what psychologists call *learned helplessness*” (p. 135, emphasis in original). As witnessed across each of the memoirs, when the authors were in their early childhood development, they often experienced a lack of safety in their immediate contexts due to structural violence and thus were forced to adjust their perceptions of reality to make sense of their parents and caregivers’ choices. This adjusted perception could be conceptualized as a form of gaslighting, wherein Thistle, as well as the other memoirists, developed an internal sense of self-doubt around their own perception of safety in their everyday life, causing them to be less able to thrive in their adult life. For Westover (2018) this manifests as an unwillingness to seek medical help when injured, for Dashtgard (2019) an inability to feel her emotions which manifests as bulimia and OCD, for Walls (2005) a distorted sense of self-worth particularly in relationships, and for Habib (2019) it results in her agreeing to marry her cousin, despite her alternate dreams for herself. In Thistle’s (2019) memoir, this self-doubt and shame seem to manifest through his numbing

himself to his feelings, like Dashtgard who uses work and activism to avoid facing her innermost thoughts, Thistle uses substances to drown out the shameful voices in his head.

As with each of the other memoirs, Thistle (2019) does ultimately find a sense of community, as well as an opportunity to trust that he will be taken care of by those in his immediate community. This is major shifting point in his narrative, as he seems to finally move away from his self-isolating habits and embrace the gift of being in relation to others.

Interestingly, this takes place through the friendships he forges with other inmates while in jail. He writes,

As Lauriston said, ‘All people who give to those around them prosper by them, and all those selfish *bloodclaats* that don’t, get nothing but fire.’ I just wish I hadn’t had to go to jail to figure that out – that and so much else. (p. 256, emphasis in original)

Here my analytical notes read: “TRUST,” just like this in all capital letters, and go on to emphasize how Thistle’s opportunity to final find and trust community to keep him safe, came to him in prison of all places. He describes other inmates who he becomes close with as also dealing with forms of structural violence and thus having a sense of the harms that can be done by a social structure that did not support him. Within my notes I express a sense of surprise surrounding jail being a place where Thistle’s community grows, however, I can see now that it makes sense that so many individuals who have firsthand experience with this trust being broken by their first communities (family, teachers, friends) would come to understand the importance of rebuilding such trust in such a tenuous context.

Thus, Thistle’s (2019) memoir is a strong illustration of Haines (2019) argument that “[t]rauma and oppression profoundly affect a person’s and community’s sense of worth” (p. 144).

Not being dignified can leave us with a sense of shame, that something is inherently wrong with us, and that something is wrong with people like us. The odd thing about shame is that most often the person harmed is left with the sense of shame, rather than those harming.

(Haines, 2019, p. 146)

Still today I find myself deeply embarrassed by the story I shared above regarding my financial student account, as well as stories regarding my childhood experiences or my relationship with my family now. During my first doctoral seminar in the Summer of 2019, the cohort was asked to reimagine their research through a new modality, and I was forced to consider how I might tackle my chosen research area through an approach other than writing a lengthy academic paper. Having spent most of my adolescence writing poetry as a means of making sense of my experience and being overwhelmed by a family's members recent sepsis diagnosis, I decided to write a poem and speak it aloud. The experience was incredibly vulnerable, and when I was finished, the room was completely silent. I was immediately filled with regret, as I so often am after sharing glimpses of who I am with the people around me, especially in academic spaces. It feels like I am breaking the rules somehow, as though I'm not supposed to add that kind of weight into the atmosphere, not supposed to bring people down with me.

I was grateful for one of the instructors who brought us all back together after a short break and spoke about the responsibility in witnessing other people's stories. That had never happened to me before in moments such as this, when I had accidentally brought my history barreling into the room with me as an unwanted visitor, but here I was watching someone stress that not only was it okay that I had done it, but it was also an important practice for others in being responsible with such an experience. I frequently thought of this moment while reading Thistle's memoir, because his trauma responses are different from my own and are less socially accepted. For

example, where I channeled my internalized shame into a desire to thrive at school and be recognized by teachers, Thistle numbed his shame through substance use. I found it important to remind myself that I have a responsibility in witnessing someone's narrative in this way, and that there was critical opportunity to build a sense of solidarity between our experiences, despite our different survival strategies.

Zooming Out: Thematic Analysis of From the Ashes

During my analytic readings of *From the Ashes*, I created notes highlighting connections between the narrative themes in the memoir and the theory from Chapter 2, as well as connections across the themes emerging from each memoir. Reflecting on this analytic stage and structuring my writing here, I have found that from these sequential readings the data has helped to firm up themes 2 and 4 from my overall findings in this research: 2) childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice, and 4) willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal. I explore both in more depth below.

Theme 2: Childhood abuse and gaslighting lead to a distrust of inner voice

Again, in this stage of my analysis I returned to the note next to Thistle's description of the insatiable hunger himself and his brothers carry and the link between childhood neglect and a feeling of emptiness as one grows older. In *From the Ashes* this connection seems to circulate in the subtext of moments and interactions which Thistle discusses and seems to be intensely related to a distrust of one's ability to know themselves and their reality. For example, Thistle writes "[d]rugs helped me forget everything I didn't want to think about and made me feel good about myself" (p. 191). When one is suffering from the lingering impacts of childhood neglect and abuse, it is not hard to make sense of why they might want to make themselves forget such suffering and replace it with good feelings, if only temporarily. Although Thistle does not make

a claim regarding trauma as the direct root of addiction, this link is persistent in the subtext of his writing. For instance, towards the end of the memoir, Thistle describes his experiences in a homeless shelter he frequents and shares some brief reflections on a man he has frequently interacted with. He notes that the man “fled Somalia with his family when civil war broke out” and “soon after he’d become an alcoholic” (p. 227). Here, Thistle is seemingly linking the connection between intergenerational trauma and the prison system. This link could be connected back to the hypervisibility of othered bodies discussed by Puwar (2004) in her writing on the burden of representation, as research indicates that racialized individuals face harsher punishments and legal action, and this disproportionate punishment begins as early as school age (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2024). Occasionally theorized in the critical race literature as the school to prison pipeline, this research demonstrates that often the demographic of prison inmates represents societal and systemic failures to support, and reasonably discipline, Black and Indigenous children from a young age and into their adulthood (Barnes & Motz, 2018). Thistle illustrates this trend through his reflections on his time in prison, and through his exchanges with others inside of the prison system. During one such exchange, his friend Priest pontificates on how many individuals end up in prison, stating

‘All of us criminals start out as normal people just like anyone else, but then things happen in life that tear us apart, that make us into something capable of hurting other people. That’s all any of the darkness really is – just love gone bad. We’re just broken-hearted people hurt by life.’ (p. 260)

Again, I find connection between an individual whose sense of self is harmed, and an adult who struggles to fit into society in a healthy way, due to their internalization of shame. Thistle’s compassionate lens opens the reader up to the nuances of a societal structure which punishes

children for being poor, racialized, and often for making the most out of their poor circumstances. In my earlier research on willfulness in 90s popular culture, I describe how deeply Ahmed's (2017) assertion that "[s]ome have to become willful to survive a history" (p. 81) resonated with me, as I had witnessed my own sister fall victim to the trapping of such a cycle of abuse. In this way, Thistle's (2019) writing holds a mirror up to structural violence, to childhood neglect, patriarchal abuse, colonial legacies, and illustrates exactly how a child is torn apart by life, forced to put themselves back together and somehow grapple with the missing or broken pieces.

Relatedly, themes within Thistle's memoir expand on those present in the stories of Westover (2018), Dashtgard (2019), Walls (2005) and Habib (2019), through a nuanced exploration of the abuse and neglect that women face in households where men with their own trauma histories hold financial and social power. *From the Ashes* illuminates the consequences of such violence on children, whether they are directly impacted by abuse and neglect, or suffer generational impacts of such trauma. Thistle's narrative holds additional complexity in that his mother, who is abused by his father and subsequently leaves with the three boys, is an Indigenous woman. The narrative circles around themes of patriarchal violence and abuse of women and children, particularly as relates to race, and class.

"There'd be spit flying everywhere," Daniel said about George's fits of rage. "One day, Mom had enough. She pulled me from school and we went to Saskatoon. We left so fast, Mom only had one shoe and I didn't have a coat." (p. 183)

This is of particular interest as Thistle's mom seems to reach her breaking point, or feminist snap, much sooner than others in the narratives examined here, including Thistle himself. Interpreting this through the lens of the theory looked at in Chapter 2, I posit that Thistle's

mother had more of an internal sense of self, in regard to trusting her inner voice, due to her growing up in a more supportive, and safer childhood home. The abuse inflicted on Thistle's mother from his father, follows the trajectory outlined in the literature on childhood abuse, which argues that often victims of abuse who adopt the fight response "are unconsciously driven by the belief that power and control can create safety, assuage abandonment and secure love" (Walker, 2013, p. 109). Typically, an individual living in this fight response will seek out someone who is more of a fawn type, as this individual tends to "hide behind their helpful personas" (p. 109). This kind of fawn behaviour is demonstrated by Thistle's grandmother, who justifies her husband's violence as a stress response or as necessary to sort of the willful behaviour of Thistle and his siblings.

Theme 4: Willfulness becomes a brand used by others but holds potential for powerful refusal

Like the other memoirs, there is a considerable shift in Thistle's (2019) self-perception and overall life narrative once he finds a place for himself in a learning community. While in a recovery home, he finds a sense of purpose in completing a course led by the University of Ottawa on communication skills, despite taunts from others in the house. He keeps the certificate for completing the course, explaining "I'd done something significant. I'd actually achieved something in my life" (p. 305). My notes read: "A way out? A new story?" Demonstrating how my own lens on the power of such shifts in self-perception is a powerful tool, but perhaps also recognizing the strength that comes from an individual finally seeing themselves as capable of something different. Ahmed's (2017) discussion of the feminist killjoy and pathways to happiness is once again relevant here, as he is addressing the cycle of addiction and abuse for men his paternal lineage, and through this introduction to learning, he seeks a new way.

Thistle ultimately continues to pursue education seemingly due to the pride it brings his grandparents, and once again I am struck by the influence of being told you are good enough by people who have withheld such words in the past. Here the literature on childhood acceptance is relevant, as hooks (1989) writes that for those “whose wounds are inflicted by a loved one, experience an extreme sense of dislocation” (p. 86). This dislocation, understood as a feeling of insecurity in one’s world, is prominent throughout Thistle’s narrative. However, when his grandfather tells him he is proud of him, there is shift in his perception, and a realignment between his view of himself and the external perception of one of his primary caregivers. hooks (1989) describes this on a larger scale, arguing that “domination and colonization attempt to destroy our capacity to know the self” and that an individual disrupts this process when they “seek self-recovery” and “work to reunite fragments of being” (p. 31). My analytical notes flag this moment in the memoir, and lament over the power of four small words, however, this moment is much bigger than those words. As a child, living with his paternal grandparents, Thistle’s impulses were framed as problematic, and thus he was positioned as willful insofar as his actions created unhappiness or stress for his grandfather and grandmother. But the fact remains that as children we only feel as capable as we are told we can be, by those whom we trust to see us most clearly.

After being encouraged to continue his educational journey and apply to university by his partner, Thistle describes feeling out place as a mature student at York University on his first day of class, and he thinks back to his experiences learning with the Chaplain in jail, or the professor from University of Ottawa while he was in addictions recovery. He writes, “maybe it was because I was reaching really deep not to run away, trying to remind myself that I didn’t break then, and that I wouldn’t break now” (Thistle, 2019, p. 324). My analytical notes on the passage

read: “Talking back to the diminishing voices inside.” Thistle goes on to describe how his studies at York brought about an opportunity to revisit his ancestral land as a Cree-Métis man who was disconnected from his family through structural violence, returning to a place he had not been in over thirty years, where he had briefly lived with his maternal grandparents. Walking through the old structures on the land, smelling the scents of his early childhood, Thistle states “I remembered them. I remembered my mother’s people. I remembered who I was” (p. 330). This seems significant given the role that many students with trauma histories feel in spaces of higher education, and especially for Indigenous students given the colonial legacy of educational institutions. For example, many students from equity deserving groups find themselves overburdened with unpaid labour (e.g., serving on equity committees, fielding inappropriate questions regarding their background, facing microaggressions or less subtle hostility, being expected to teach others about their unique cultural or social group) due their status as “diverse” students in the space of higher education (Patel, 2021). This is further nuanced by the fact that being a university student provided Thistle with a pathway to learning about his ancestors, towards potential healing from colonial legacies, through a way to reunite the pieces of himself in community, as discussed by hooks. There is duality in this moment, an ambiguity that one must not look away from.

There are similar moments in *Educated* when Westover (2018) is praised for her brilliance and writing but feels oddly out of place amongst her peers and their seemingly trivial concerns, or in *The Glass Castle* when Walls (2005) describes considering dropping out of school to help support her parents. Walls shares, “It felt unbearably selfish, just downright wrong, to be indulging myself with an education in the liberal arts at a fancy private college while Mom and Dad were on the streets” (p. 258). Dashtgard (2019) and Habib (2019) both find power in their

educational pursuits, as they allow them to venture outside of their family home and explore who they are outside of the confines of the patriarchal household. Each author struggles against their branding of being willful, in choosing their own pathways and existing in the perceived borderland of insider/outsider in spaces of learning, and while higher education seems to empower each of them in different ways, it also carries painful reminders of their inherent difference from those around them.

Chapter 5: Memoir Pedagogy as Trauma-Informed Practice Implications

In this chapter, I extend my analysis through a discussion of the four recurring themes I identified across the five memoirs, discussing their emergence in the narratives as well as how they connect to the literature from Chapter 2. I also highlight what absences I felt within the memoirs, and where I believe there is room for further exploration in similar narratives regarding trauma and learning. I begin by summarizing findings from my analysis, in particular identifying areas of overlap and divergence between the different stories, as well as my own experiences. Then, I discuss implications of these findings for the field of higher education, primarily in the areas of trauma-informed and equity centered (decolonizing, inclusive, diverse) pedagogies, where memoir pedagogy represents an emerging possibility for learning that builds collective consciousness through understanding the self-in-coalition.

First, I discuss the link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma, as it demonstrates significant implications for educators who are seeking to make spaces of higher education more inclusive for marginalized students. As more individuals enter academia with diverse life experiences, there is an increased need for modes and processes of pedagogical practice that include trauma-informed methods. Next, I discuss how childhood trauma and gaslighting led the different memoirists towards a distrust of their inner voice, and this has critical consequences for them in their adult lives, especially in spaces of learning which can be retraumatizing and cause further distrust surrounding one's capacity. Then, I summarize how shame related to one's childhood abuse and neglect caused the memoirists to self-isolate, which translates into students who may struggle to seek out support or community in sites of learning. Finally, I discuss the process of willfulness as a brand used by others to enact structural harm on each author, highlighting how their embrace of their position of willfulness led to a powerful

refusal of a dominance over their lives. This final theme is particularly relevant to the realm of higher education, as institutional norms often work to similarly position those who embody difference as willful, and thus structural change is needed to develop policies and practices which are more rooted in an acknowledgement of diversity.

Link Between Structural Violence and Intergenerational Trauma

Perhaps the most prominent theme across all five of the books is the direct link between structural violence and intergenerational trauma, particularly as relates to the intricate interplay of numerous systems such as patriarchal, gender, racial, gender, and class oppression. I argue that this supports my preposition in Chapter 3, that memoir often serves as a form of autoethnography, as many memoirs contextualize the author within such social structures. Across all five memoirs the role of patriarchal dominance and violence, as well as the subjugation of women and children as subjects with their own needs and inner worlds, is a central tension. As such, in witnessing the memoirs on the side of the oppressed (Fukushima, 2023), the reader is offered an opportunity to engage in feminist coalition building which suggest a responsibility on part of the witness to *act* on their learning, through visioning new futures and considering the question – “how shall we live” (Tuck, 2018, p. 157). The memoirists emphasize a range of possibilities for women, children, non-binary and queer communities, and other vulnerable groups, outside of the normative and violent patterns of those who came before them (most often represented by their parents and caregivers).

In *Educated*, Westover (2017) shares details from a childhood spent under the rule of a dominating father whose own childhood was similar, and this cycle is reproduced (in fact worsened) by her older brother’s patriarchal abuse towards all the women in his life. There are direct links made to the cycles of abuse, neglect, and addiction. Without explicitly stating that

they suffered at the hands of parents and siblings who had also endured abuse, each memoirist draws a complex and nuanced image of their childhood life which demonstrates that their parents and siblings are humans who were also impacted by their context. Dashtgard (2019) describes watching her father lose himself to the emotional turmoil of being an immigrant in rural Canada, struggling to assert himself as the patriarch of his household whilst contending with subtle everyday racism and classism. Walls' (2005) entire childhood is so deeply painted with the brushstrokes of intergenerational trauma, as she seamlessly traces her father's addictions, violence, and mental health struggles back to the abuse he suffered as a child. Habib (2019) and Thistle (2019) both add further nuance to the generational cycles of patriarchy in their observations on women and children's lives being subjugated to violence of men who are desperate to assert power and control due to their own suffering. In *From the Ashes*, Thistle's narrative adds depth to nature of the relationship between structural violence and intergenerational trauma, in that he is open about his own struggles with addiction as a teenager and young adult, granting the reader further insight into the role that childhood trauma due to abuse and neglect can play in shaping the trajectory of one's life.

Returning to Tuck's (2018) assertion that certain structures are meant to be refused not repaired, and connecting this to Fukushima's (2023) writing on decolonial cracks, my analysis and autoethnographic reflections identify a desire to belong to the structures we have immediate access to. In other words, Westover longs to find a place in theatre, choir, with her peers at college, to fit into the world around her. This is similar for Dashtgard, Walls, Habib, and Thistle. The desire whilst living in harmful conditions, to be able to adapt to and find a sense of safety in such conditions is often insurmountable due to ways in which individuals internalize systems of oppression and shame, as demonstrated throughout the analysis in Chapter 4. I can see this

pattern within my own experiences as well. Being confronted by a peer and essentially asked if I truly think my research topic is worthwhile beyond selfish interest, why is my instinct to defend the rigor of my research so that I might be accepted by an individual who is rather entitled, instead of feeling secure in my right to be in a doctoral program without being accepted by people who might view me as without such a right.

Interestingly, I find Thistle's memoir most striking due to his differential trauma response of complete refusal to engage with external expectations, as he seeks out numbing and moves more toward a freeze trauma response (Walker, 2013). Thistle's focus seems to be more on the role that emotional neglect and colonization play on the spirit of children who thus grow up feeling hollow, feeling lost. Thistle challenges the reader to witness his own relationality to those around him on the street and in prison with a compassionate and humanizing lens, and when I read this memoir through a decolonial feminist lens, I felt I was witnessing true enactment of collective consciousness. While stories such as Westover's (2018) and Walls (2005) dealt with similar themes of fathers who struggle with their mental health, Thistle's narrative focuses in explicitly on the humanness of individuals who have committed seemingly unforgivable acts in a manner which forces the reader to acknowledge how structural violence is at the root of an individual's loss of healthy relationality. Each memoir brought into the spotlight the role of healthy relationality to their environment, as it relates to their ability to trust their inner voice, to feel a sense of belonging and power in their willfulness, but Thistle's memoir was especially poignant in relaying this message.

Reflecting on reading Thistle's memoir I am reminded of Anzaldúa's concept of *conocimiento* as "an understanding of how individuals develop consciousness, but also an understanding of how individuals connect this consciousness to other people, socially and

spiritually” (p. 155). Perhaps because Thistle frames his memoir around his own perceived mistakes, he is more willing to engage in this process of illuminating for the reader how he himself enacts a sense of collective consciousness and finds his back into a safe and supported relationality with the human and non-human world around him.

Childhood Trauma and Gaslighting Led to a Distrust of Inner Voice

Within each narrative examined in this research, the memoir authors begin to tell their story from childhood and into their adolescence and young adulthood. Consequently, the reader can trace a pathway between the various forms of trauma each author describes taking place during their early years, directly to their subsequent inability to trust themselves and their perspectives on harmful situations into their older years. For example, Westover (2018) frequently describes writing in a journal while living at home, and how each time she would recount an instance of abuse at the hands of her brother Shawn, she would start off writing the facts but would ultimately end up playing down the violence or making excuses for his behaviour. This is similar to Walls’ (2005) and her siblings’ attempt to make sense of their father’s abuse and their mother’s neglect, through avoiding any acknowledgement of their harmful behaviour or admitting the subsequent impacts on themselves as children. Dashtgard (2019) alludes to this pattern when she describes using popular culture to find safe places to process her emotions, due to being unable to voice and honour them with her parents. The literature on childhood abuse describes this behaviour as a coping mechanism; an attempt to make sense of such a betrayal of one’s inherent self-worth and to rationalize consistent harm done to an individual by someone who claims to love them. Herman (2015) writes,

When it is impossible to avoid the reality of the abuse, the child must construct some system of meaning that justifies it. Inevitably the child concludes that her innate badness is

the cause. The child seizes upon this explanation early and clings to it tenaciously, for it enables her to preserve a sense of meaning, hope and power...

If she has driven her parents to mistreat her, then, if only she tries hard enough, she may some day earn their forgiveness and finally win the protection and care she so desperately needs. (p. 103)

This survival strategy is present across my analysis of all five memoirs, despite only a few discussing their childhood experiences from the lens of abuse or neglect. While Dashtgard's narrative focuses more on the impacts of structural and patriarchal oppression in her childhood, the role such experiences play in her subjugation of her inner voice as an adult is still highlighted. This suggests that trauma itself can result in such a process of gaslighting oneself to feign a sense of control over one's life, including the ambient and consistent trauma of systemic racism, sexism, or classism. Furthermore, I can identify moments in my own life where I have actively sought to rationalize the harmful behaviours of others towards myself in a manner which would protect our relationship. As Herman (2015) explains, this is "congruent with the thought processes of traumatized people of all ages, who search for faults in their own behaviour in an effort to make sense out of what has happened to them" (p. 103).

While this rationalization serves to protect individuals and provide them with a sense of insulation from the reality of being oppressed, abused, or neglected in certain contexts, it can have lasting impacts on their capacity for self-advocacy and perception. For example, when experiencing the issue with my student account discussed in Chapter 1, my initial reaction was (and usually is) that I have made a mistake or done something wrong. Through reading these memoirs and conducting my own non-formal learning around trauma responses and childhood neglect, I have come to understand that my strategies for persevering as a child, namely deferring

to the judgement of those around me, are not necessarily serving me in adulthood. As hooks (1989) describes this survival strategy of self-doubt which the abused or neglected child adopts, morphs into self-abandonment for the adult survivor, and it is only through a process of self-recovery and liberation that an individual may reunite the parts of themselves which they have subjugated.

Anzaldúa (2002) describes empowerment as “the bodily feeling of being able to connect with inner voices” (p. 571) and this research demonstrates the deeply disempowering consequences of shutting down this connection due to childhood trauma. However, Anzaldúa also emphasizes the role of our wounds in opening us to vulnerability and interconnection with others and notes how many who have experienced pain in their lives have turned to forms of spiritual practice which encourage *conocimiento*, such as meditating, praying, breathwork, and writing (p. 572). She remarks,

Through the act of writing you call, like the ancient chamana, the scattered pieces of your soul back to your body. You commence the arduous task of rebuilding yourself, composing a story that more accurately expresses your new identity. You seek out allies and, together, begin building spiritual/political communities that struggle for personal growth and social justice. By *compartiendo historias*, ideas, *las nepantleras* forge bonds across race, gender, and other lines, thus creating a new tribalism. *Éste quehacer* – internal work coupled with commitment to struggle for social transformation – changes your relationship to your body, and, in turn, to other bodies and to the world. And when that happens, you change the world. (p. 574)

The memoirs examined in this research seem to illustrate the process of rebuilding described by Anzaldúa, as the memoirists tell their stories to take control of them, to call all the parts of

themselves back together and heal. This perception is mine as the witness, and witnessing is a crucial part of my learning as trauma survivors can come to *know* through writing, about ourselves and the world we live in. Anzaldúa seems to be arguing that an individual may turn to writing to know themselves, and further, may share this writing to be known by others, and vice versa. When engaging in the process of knowing the self, as well as the self-in-relation to others, there are opportunities for personal healing through reclaiming our voice, but also for collective transformation and coalition building. In this way, memoir pedagogy (Taber et al., 2017) can serve as a catalyst in dismantling the dualism of body/mind and self/other. Through engaging with the narratives of others, learners can develop empathy around experiences which differ from their own, in addition to the self-discovery which often accompanies reading stories with experiences similar to one's own. As Anzaldúa (2002) describes, through their presence in those liminal spaces, where decolonial cracks are more apparent, "nepantleras acknowledge an unmapped common ground: the humanity of the other" (p. 570). Through engaging with memoir as a pedagogical tool, educators and staff working in spaces of higher education have an opportunity to promote the development of self-trust in learners for whom this is an issue.

Shame as a Catalyst for Isolation and Self-Doubt

Within each of the narratives another central theme, which seemed to be intricately tied into the previous theme of distrusting one's inner voice, was the role that shame played in isolating each memoir author from those around them. Westover (2018) frequently describes the way she would begin laughing off her older brother's violence anytime someone other than her parents (who were already complacent in the abuse) would notice and say something. Reflecting on Shawn's abuse and how she would blame herself for his persistence in hurting her, she writes, as I mentioned in my previous chapter, "It's comforting to think the defect is mine, because that

means it is under my control” (p. 195). While this theme has unique nuances across the memoirs, the implication is similar in that each author feels a sense of shame around the emotional neglect they have experienced and the subsequent pain. In *Breaking the Ocean* Dashtgard’s experience in developing this internalized sense of shame is more contingent on the discrimination she experiences at school due to her race, but this is exacerbated by her parents’ unwillingness to provide a safe place for her anger or grief at home. After describing an experience with rejection at school, she writes “I no longer let myself believe that I could be liked” (Dashtgard, 2019, p. 37). This self-doubt is followed directly by a passage wherein her father screams at her about being stupid and worthless when she brings home a bad report card. It is clear there is a feeling buried within both moments, of being unworthy of love and care. The literature on childhood abuse often connects this shame to a sense of perfectionism later in life, tracing the fear of failure back to an individual’s belief that what they can perform is directly connecting to their worth as a person. Herman (2015) describes this trauma response below:

This malignant sense of inner badness is often camouflaged by the abused child’s persistent attempts to be good. In the effort to placate her abusers, the child victim often becomes a super performer. She attempts to do whatever is required of her. She may become an empathetic caretaker for her parents, an efficient housekeeper, an academic achiever, a model of social conformity. She brings to all these tasks a perfectionist zeal, driven by the desperate need to find favor in her parents’ eyes. In adult life, this prematurely forced competence may lead to considerable occupational success. None of her achievements in the world redound to her credit, however, for she usually perceives her performing self as inauthentic and false. Rather, the appreciation of others simply confirms

her conviction that no one can truly know her and that, if her secret and true self were recognized, she would be shunned and reviled. (p. 105)

Dashtgard's memoir is a striking illumination of the pervasiveness of such a trauma response in one's adult life, as she takes the reader on a journey of self-recovery and healing. Although the other memoirists do not describe their journey in quite the same manner, there are similar moments of awareness around the role that shame has played in their lives, and through my analysis I could consistently tease out moments where opening up about their shame allowed them to feel less alone. For example, Habib (2019) discusses joining a community of woman of colour she discovers online, who connect to discuss their experiences with racism and sexism in their everyday life, offering a sense of support to one another. She realizes through attending their gathering that there is immense privilege in being second or even third generation child of immigrants, and when she shares that her biggest struggles have been escaping her arranged marriage and avoiding welfare, she feels a deep sense of shame. She writes, "Weighed down by their silence and inability to connect, I felt even more isolated" (Habib, 2019, p. 118). This moment resonates so deeply, as I have often felt like I bring other people's energy down or "ruin" a good time when I share aspects of my life with other people, even in adulthood. This pattern is consistent across all five memoirs, as each author experiences moments like this, where their pain is a burden they feel they must carry alone, and they become more entrenched in shame and loneliness.

The connection to literature on willful subjects, killjoys, and space invaders is poignant, which I describe below. Through the internalization of shame around differences, individuals often choose to shrink or become invisible, leaning towards a subjugation of their own needs and desires to appear to assimilate with their environment or context.

Willfulness As a Refusal

Each of the memoirists share their own experiences with being labeled and subsequently discriminated against according to these labels. Habib (2019) describes her peers' use of racial slurs to make sense of her difference, the parents at the mosque sharing concern over her troublemaking behaviour. Walls (2005) describes judgement from teachers and peers around her old, worn-in clothing that isn't seasonally appropriate, as well as being called too sentimental by her parents for not wanting to constantly uproot her life. Thistle (2019) is consistently compared to his own father and finds himself attempting to escape the shadow of the man's failures. Westover (2018) is called a slut and a whore by her brother Shawn and faces abandonment from her father for seeking knowledge outside of religion. Dashtgard's (2019) father threatens to throw her out of her childhood home due to her bulimia and OCD (in the form of obsessive urination), both behaviours discussed by Dashtgard as responses to acute stress.

While these labels and struggles against their own holistic needs contributed significantly to shame for each of the memoir authors, this process also opened the possibility for each memoirist to be a witness to their own willfulness. It was often the case that the authors eventually embraced their labels, as well as the differences which others had used to punish and isolate them and found strength in refusing to repeat the same patterns as those around them. Perhaps the moment of critical importance lies in examining the intentionality underlying each author's expression of willfulness. Ahmed (2014) reminds us that willfulness does not necessarily imply conscious intent; rather, individuals or actions are often labeled willful not because of conscious thought but simply due to their presence as a barrier. In this sense, "anything can be attributed as willful if it gets in the way of the completion of an action" (p. 175). Considered in conjunction with an analysis of structural violence however, labels of

willfulness within this research are almost always given by those in power and attributed to those with marginalized social status. Although each of the memoirists had been labeled in a such a way as to emphasize their existence as other, as a barrier to some form of social agreement regarding what is normal, what is the standard, and what is acceptable, their presence as a challenge to these norms opens possibilities for an alternative vision of what could be. As Ahmed (2014) argues,

A rebellious action does not always feel intentional. If our tongues can acquire will by speaking without consent, then we can be willful without being intentional. Our tongues can disobey for us, as a way of being impulsive, a way of summoning an impulse, a summoning which then, perhaps only retrospectively, is given the form of intent. (p. 176)

Ahmed refers to the above process as a gift from the willful parts to those other parts, parts yet to demonstrate willfulness: a feminist or queer gift. I connect this gift to Fukushima's decolonial crack: a refusal, whether intentional or not, creates the possibility for future refusals. It cracks open the door for larger and more impactful refusals.

A similar arc emerges within all five narratives: harm accumulates, coping narrows, and refusal interrupts. This arc supports the shift from non-intentional to intentional willfulness. Each author describes their unique experience of learning more about society and their place in it, both through informal and formal channels, and builds upon this learning to demonstrate how they began to view their childhood experiences from a new lens. My autoethnographic learning is to design pedagogy with the learning objective of self-discovery for students. hooks' (1989) concept of self-recovery is poignant here, as she theorizes the process as one in which an individual seeks to develop their awareness of the systems within which they exist and experience oppression and/or domination. She describes her own process of self-recovery while

writing *Ain't I a Woman* and writes, “[t]he thinking, the writing, was an act of reclamation, enabling me to recover myself, to be whole” (p. 30). hooks discusses the invaluable experience of learning that the self exists in relation to others, emphasizing the interdependence between different individuals and communities. I see a dual process taking place in the lives of each memoirist based on hooks discussion of self-recovery. First, the reader serves as witness to each author’s process of self-recovery, because they learn more about the world outside of their own childhood home and experiences, thus learning more about the social fabric which directly and indirectly impacts them. And second, both the author and reader are learning to see themselves in relation to others, within a larger social fabric. This relational learning is an incredibly eye-opening process for all, but especially for those individuals who have experienced traumatic experiences significantly impacting their ability to relate to the outside world. hooks (1989) argues,

Domination and colonization attempt to destroy our capacity to know the self, to know who we are. We oppose this violation, this dehumanization, when we seek self-recovery, when we work to reunite fragments of being, to recover our history. This process of self-recovery enables us to see ourselves as if for the first time, for our field of vision is no longer shaped and determined solely by the condition of domination. (p. 31)

Through more deeply understanding the structures which have historically been working against their growth and success as individuals in relation to others, each memoirist engages in talking back. They develop an awareness of power wielded over them by others, and the result is an embrace of their willful label.

My Learning from These Themes: Seeing the Self-in-Coalition

My overall learning taking place across these four themes relates to viewing myself in relation to the memoir authors as well as in relation to their nuanced experiences. At times when I did not relate directly an author, I found an aspect of their experience or context which I could connect to. This allowed me to continue to hold onto that liminal space of viewing myself as connected to the narratives. In moments when the author's experiences were so vastly different my own that I did not feel a sense of resonance, I was still able to empathize with and connect to these experiences, due to the space that had been opened in engaging with their narrative. The act of witnessing through reading memoir serves as its own border crossing, where an individual develops their *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2002, as cited in Zaytoun, 2010), that is, comes to view "the self as a system of relational parts" which encourages individuals towards a collective consciousness or a view of themselves in coalition with their human and non-human environments (p. 144).

Addressing my central research questions regarding both my autoethnographic learnings from contemporary memoirs, as well as how memoir pedagogy interacts with my view of myself as a self-in-coalition, my answers emerge naturally out of my implications above. Recognizing how I engaged in learning around how different individuals experience trauma, in addition to the power of memoir as a catalyst for my own self-discovery and re-alignment with my inner voice, I make the argument that memoir is a powerful pedagogical tool which can be leveraged as a critical site of learning surrounding themes of trauma, structural violence, and willfulness. Narrative analysis can be employed in institutions of higher education, as a direct response to ongoing efforts towards decolonization, equity, diversity, and inclusion. This would create

opportunities for students with a trauma history to see themselves in coalition with a community of learners and find a sense of belonging in spaces of higher education.

The following sections detail my autoethnographic learning and its pedagogical implications. I highlight three implications: 1) structural violence can be understood through understanding a body under pressure; 2) embracing contradictions is made possible through witnessing willfulness; and 3) there are pathways to healing through seeing the self-in-coalition.

Structural Violence: A Body Under Pressure

The memoirs examined here illuminate the nuances of structural violence. They also expose the burden of representation (Puwar, 2004). The physical, emotional, and spiritual burden of representing willfulness, directly or indirectly, are emphasized in the narratives. This exploration highlights how autoethnography might engage the storytelling in a restructuring of their story beyond the normative (Spry, 2011). As indicated in Chapter 2: Literature Review, there is vast theoretical framing around the connection between trauma and learning, as pertains to the historical exclusion of certain bodies from academia (James & Taylor, 2023; Patel, 2021; Van Milders, 2019; Henry et al., 2017; Ahmed, 2012) and the subsequent burden of representation which accompanies being a space invader in such institutions (Puwar, 2004). The research here focuses on addressing trauma through sharing histories and narratives in a relational setting, because there is a clear case in the literature on complex post-traumatic stress disorder regarding the value of restoring one's sense of safety, belonging, and dignity (Haines, 2019; van der Kolk, 2015; Walker, 2013) to emotionally overcome and heal from painful moments in one's past. For example, a key learning I experienced when reading the memoirs examined above was that at the root of each author's struggle to embody their willfulness and talk back to structural violence existed a deep feeling of shame. This shame was bred out of, and

deepened by, adverse childhood experiences. Addressing and learning about structural violence and willfulness through exploring shame, such as through relational storytelling, could present a pathway to healing. As Haines writes in *The Politics of Trauma*, “[h]ealing shame, deepening interdependence, and learning to work with conflict as something that can be generative are all essential in healing trauma” (p. 297). Arguing for the transformative power of self-in-coalition, Zaytoun (2010) builds off the writing of Brison (2002) in her memoir *Aftermath*, which is an examination of the process of healing from traumatic violence. Zaytoun summarizes Brison’s findings, writing that “telling the story of trauma, the act of speech itself, can serve as a vehicle for recovery and reconstructing a voice that is silenced after the experience of violence and violation” (p. 142). This dissertation illustrates the immensity of structural violence as it plays out in the lives of the individual, as a weight that they are burdened by. However, there is opportunity for a lightening of such weight, through sharing the burden with those who witness our stories.

After analyzing the chosen memoirs, I have found that a central focus for trauma-informed pedagogy is to reduce harm. Any model of education aimed at reducing harm must first address the role of structural violence in the lives of all individuals, while emphasizing the interdependence between learners and their environments. Bimm and Feldman (2020) write,

we take issue with the ways in which the diagnosis of PTSD fails to acknowledge the systemic issues that cause trauma in the first place, and places the onus of healing on the individual, thus ignoring the vital role that community plays in healing (Trauma Informed Practices, para 4)

Thus, the analysis here is illustrative of both the relationship between structural violence and its connection to trauma in the lives of the individual, as well as the relationship between healing

and community. Because spaces of higher education are seeing higher numbers than ever of students who have a trauma history, it becomes increasingly necessary to engage in pedagogical practices which support those students in their ability to relate to the world around them in a healthy way.

Engaging with trauma-informed practice translates into accepting responsibility for addressing structural violence and its impact on learners' lives from a collective stance. Bimm and Feldman (2020) emphasize how a tendency for "emotions are framed as a disruption to learning, rather than integral to learning, turns the university into a socially toxic environment" (Trauma Informed Practices, para 9). Acknowledging the role of structural violence in contributing to intergenerational trauma, specifically through the development of self-abandonment and shame for survivors, the research here emphasizes the need for a student's emotional expression to be prioritized and supported. This expression is connected to their ability to learn about themselves and others. Furthermore, the research here demonstrates that memoir serves a site of potential transformation for students who may have experienced trauma in their lives, but who have been unwilling or unable to process such experiences. As Ahmed (2010) argues, "willfulness is a collecting together, of those struggling for a different ground for existence. You need to be supported when you are not going the way things are flowing" (Getting in the Way, para. 5). Reading these memoirs offered me a sense of support in going against the flow, empowering me to engage in what Fukushima (2023) labels as "epistemic disobedience" (p. 137). Following a pathway carved out by the memoirists, I embraced a refusal to allow structural violence to isolate me, to breed shame, and to gaslight me into feeling that I cannot trust myself.

Witnessing Willfulness: Ambiguity and Embracing Contradictions

Here I build on the finding that each author experienced a shift in their narrative. Each begins by being positioned as willful due to their pathways not aligning with those inherited from their families (Ahmed, 2017) and I have linked this to their subsequent embrace of choosing an alternate life for themselves. My autoethnographic learning from reading the memoirs demonstrates that witnessing the shift in each narrative, when the memoirists move from an object of their caregiver's dominance into a subject in control of their own life; this act of bearing witness to willful subjects talking back to power can be healing for others who have faced similar oppression. Oftentimes during my life, I have felt as though no one would see the realities of my life and be able to stay with me in the pain. I was convinced that if people knew the truth about who I was they would know I was not worthy of good things. However, reading these memoirs and engaging in this research over the course of the last six years has impacted my life in profound ways.

Through acting as witness to the narratives examined here, I felt a sense of connection to their experiences even when my own were quite different. It was as though there was something at the root of their experience which spoke to me. This is evidenced by my initial analytic readings in which I struggled to focus solely on the narrative and not to draw connections between the details and my own internal dialogue. In *Talking Back* hooks describes how “[m]any individuals from oppressed groups learn to suppress ideas, especially those deemed oppositional, as a survival strategy” (p. 161). Through reading and witnessing the stories of each memoirist I was being granted permission to end this suppression of my internal voice, as though their acts of defiance were creating a table at which I could imagine by own seat. Further, in writing this

dissertation I have found a space where I can contribute to the conversation in a meaningful and lasting way, adding more seats to the table for those who come after me.

Given the growing relevance of research around trauma-informed pedagogy in an increasingly divided society, institutions of higher education must consider how autoethnographic witnessing may in fact lend itself to a pedagogy rooted in reading and analyzing memoir. This invokes the concept of critical consciousness raising as discussed by hooks, who discusses critical pedagogy as beginning with the individual commitment to understanding oneself and one's location in the political context. hooks (1994) deepens the concept of critical consciousness by connecting such individual transformation to social liberation, arguing that "[t]o hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition" (p. 41). Evans-Winters and Esposito (2018) describe such a process as an individual choice to "read the world using sociological and psychological tools with the hopes of participating less in my own objectification and moving closer toward subjectification" (p. 869). Importantly, this reading of the world must go beyond pedagogical tools which have been favoured by formal institutions of learning, especially in recognition of the inequitable and oftentimes violent structures which exist in spaces of education.

Returning to Tedlock (2011) and her writing on the third space, I want to emphasize the role of such a space in sites of critical learning through autoethnographic witnessing. Reading these memoirs through the lens of my own experiences meant that I was already deep inside of this third space, consistently ping-ponging back and forth between the author's descriptive writing and my own memory. I have attempted to demonstrate this relationality in the sections where I describe my personal reading of each memoir, as the synopsis is significantly impacted by the lens of my lived experiences. At times, my experience and the experiences discussed by the

memoir authors engage in a form of double consciousness, as I am reading the experiences through the innermost thoughts of another, while inescapably translating these experiences through my own memories. This ambiguity of the self is central to the role of biography or memoir, as discussed by Tedlock who argues that what “these psychologically rich intersubjective documents contribute is an unsettling of the boundaries that were once central to the notion of a self studying another” (p. 336).

Pathways to Healing through Seeing the Self-in-Coalition

Formal spaces of learning are full of such opportunities for crossing borders and embracing ambiguity, as higher education itself is simultaneously both a historical site of colonialism, as well as a contemporary container (spilling over) for many communities’ struggles for increased visibility and justice. Recent research on trends in student belonging and engagement highlight the role of mattering in pedagogical philosophy; for example Gravett et al. (2021) state that “[a] pedagogy of mattering invites educators to think more deeply about the role of the contexts in which learning happens” (p. 395). Thus, the spaces, materials, and values employed by educators effectively and subtly communicate institutional priorities and often represent contradictions between intention and action. Research conducted by Steinman and Kovats-Sánchez (2021) similarly emphasize how a “university’s default curricula, organizational logics, operative procedures, and underlying power structures reflect the settler origins and missions of academic institutions” (p. 10). This research quotes one participant who was actively seeking to provide meaningful programming for Indigenous students who had expressed a need for healing practices, but she was consistently met with bureaucracy around scholarship and rigor.

Furthermore, the higher education research summarized in the literature review on bodies out of place (see Chapter 2) emphasizes the tension of a university structure which remains

tethered to the capitalist market yet strives for equity. Patel (2021) highlights this contradiction in her discussion of how marginalized students are treated as a commodity by institutions which seek to profit from their presence. Patel links this phenomenon to the theory on gift economies, which she describes as “a colonial that imagines some people as worthy only through the benevolence of people with higher status” (p. 40). This analysis can be connected to Wood (2010) and his analysis of emancipation post slavery in the United States, through his theorizing of the horrible gift of freedom. Wood argues that “the fight for freedom is not as difficult as life after the attainment of freedom” (p. 167). Reading this through the lens of my analysis and learning from the memoirs read here, I posit that one such aspect of the gift of freedom lies in the struggle of being a border walker – one who holds unique insights into the consequences of structural violence. Wood (2010) writes,

If a person who has known only one kind of life, consisting of disempowerment and suffering under slavery, is suddenly thrown into a new world of completely different rules, behaviours, and appearances, a world called ‘emancipation,’ this is unlikely to be an experience of simple joy, but a process that will induce extreme suffering or even madness. (p. 367)

There is a decolonial crack present in the composition of higher education for those of us who are familiar with being border walkers. Tedlock (2011) describes walking in balance along the edge of worlds, quoting her Nokomis who taught her that “[t]here is beauty and strength in being both: a double calling, a double love” (p. 337). Here, Tedlock is connecting her experience of being multiracial to the experience of being in between worlds, and I argue this is also applicable to the experience of being an insider/outsider in the space of higher education: there is strength in both, in that it provides one with “opportunities to find the cracks even within colonial

structures” (Fukushima, 2023, p. 146). As Fukushima argues, building off the pivotal writing of Anzaldua, “[t]o see these cracks, one inhabits a nepantlera perspective of a border crosser who is committed to the self-in-coalition, to being in coalition with the many” (p. 146). This research could be carried forward into an exploration of how views of the self-in-coalition can be translated into direct action, perhaps through work with focus groups engaging with memoir individually, and then together to examine the shifts in perception after witnessing memoir. As demonstrated by the research here, finding community and being supported in collective action is a critical next step to learning from memoir. When we *will together*, as a collective of border crossers, space invaders, and willful subjects, there is increased promise in leveraging structures which have traditionally excluded and harmed. We begin collectively engaging in critical consciousness raising and visioning new futures.

A Turn Towards the Absences in the Memoirs

I briefly summarize some noted absences which came up during my analysis of the memoirs, whether I expected to see these topics based on my own experiences, or due to themes in the literature in Chapter 2 discussing ‘bodies out of place.’ Specifically, my interest in absences is driven by an interest in examining how shame and privilege may intersect and work to overshadow certain elements of a story. I noticed an absence of explicit discussion around the role of physical place, ancestral wisdom, and embodiment.

Within most of the memoirs, physical space and connection to land is a subtle thread, mainly in the more idealized and childhood related portions of the narratives. Westover (2018) often describes her physical surroundings in the mountainous landscape she grew up and ultimately describes her childhood spent on the mountains as her first educational experience. Dashtgard (2019) recounts similar memories of a childhood in Iran, and the subsequent

displacement she feels upon moving to rural Canada. While similar experiences are discussed in each memoir, none are explicit in naming displacement from land as a form of trauma and grief, which is not to say that the authors are not holding an awareness of this pain. Perhaps they are choosing not to or are still not able to put into words the damage caused by being physically displaced. When asking how we might choose to shape our lives and the lives of generations after us, I argue the role of place and ecological safety is pertinent. Climate change is, after all, a primary form of slow violence impacting all beings on earth.

While intergenerational trauma is a common theme across all five memoirs, a discussion of elders and ancestral knowledge comes up in only a few of the memoirs, namely *From the Ashes* (Thistle, 2019), *Breaking the Ocean* (Dashtgard, 2019), and more briefly in *We Have Always Been Here* (Habib, 2019). I find this interesting given the different cultural perceptions of elder and ancestral wisdom across the experiences of the memoirists, and I also have experience with being disconnected from one's elders and therefore having limited access to their stories and experience. Perhaps, in much the same way as the physical landscape of one's youth is more subtly acknowledged as a core actor in self-knowledge and safety, the ability to feel a connection to one's elders operates in a similar way. A reader cannot determine the intentions of the writer unless they are discussed openly. For some, like Westover (2018) and Habib (2019), perhaps this disconnection was a necessary price of their own freedom in pursuit of their willfulness. Interestingly, while each of the authors does attend post-secondary institutions of learning, only Westover (2017) and Thistle (2019) seem to name the role of higher education in shifting their perceptions around their trauma histories (my label) and learning. Considered in conjunction with the absence of a discussion on ancestral knowledge sharing, I would be curious to explore a

correlation between cultural diaspora and higher education, as well as the potential for sites of higher learning to serve as guides in gaining access to one's ancestral knowledge.

The final absence of note in my analytic reading of the memoirs relates to physical embodiment and bodies. While each of the memoirs do illuminate the pressure of trauma on a body, such as Dashtgard's (2019) obsessive urinating and purging, or Thistle's (2019) foot injury from an infected wound, these connections emerged for me when reading the memoirs through the lens of the literature of bodies out of place, and thus the explicit connection between trauma and the body is not readily discussed. Again, I think this is less intentional and more a stylistic choice based on the narrative form of memoir, however, one must consider whether the implicit role of structural violence in the experience of a body under pressure would come across to any reader, regardless of their life experience, or if the connections are less visible for certain individuals who are witnessing on the side of the oppressed (Fukushima, 2023).

Chapter 6: Pathways to Healing - Self-in-Coalition

Examining my autoethnographic learning from the memoirs discussed in this research, I can identify the ways in which reading, analyzing, and witnessing the narratives has shifted my own subjectivity. Specifically, reading the memoirs for the first time during my initial years of the doctoral program, as well as during these final stages of writing my dissertation, I have come to understand that reading each narrative has been an exercise in finding and trusting my own inner voice. An interesting theme which emerges in my readings of the memoirs, but which is not discussed as central to the narratives themselves, is the role of place. For the memoirists, feelings of being connected to and in-sync with one's physical surroundings seem to be cut off or severely impacted following traumatic life events, such as moving to a new country or place, or being hurt due to neglect or abuse. In addition to psychological harm, each memoir seems to trace the inherent sense of safety that children develop, as well as critical events which significantly impact this sense of safety, damaging the memoirists' tethers to the outside world. In this chapter I outline memoir's pedagogical capacity as a site of knowledge of self and social, as well as key recommendations for institutional moves for trauma-informed practice, based on my learnings from the analysis.

Styres (2019) writes of the difference between space and place, "Space is empty and abstract, whereas place is concrete, sensed, and grounded in lived experiences and realities...Space requires the substance of culture and stories to render it placeful" (p. 26). Each of the memoir authors begins their story rooted in place, having developed a sense of belonging and subjectivity in relation to their physical surroundings. However, this grounding is impacted within each narrative, in differing ways, resulting in each memoirist losing this sense of connection to place. Acknowledging the displacement and distrust that so often accompany a

trauma history, I argue that sites of learning must address the question of space in a manner fitting those for whom a sense of belonging may not be inherent. As illustrated in the introduction to my research here, I often feel an inherent insecurity in places of learning, due to lingering trauma responses but also the burden of representation.

In witnessing the memoirs examined through this research, I began to feel emboldened to take up space in academia without feeling like an imposter. In connecting the stories of each author to my own varied experiences, my eyes were opened to the ways in which my perception has been manipulated by years of structural violence. Febos (2022) draws from research and writing on various forms of trauma to illustrate a common shape of trauma recovery which includes the processes of “establishment of safety, constructing or completing the narrative of the trauma, and the return to social life” (p. 123). While it is not necessarily the place of a university to re-establish a sense of safety for its students, it should be the responsibility of such an institution to provide opportunities for students to re-establish their own safety and belonging. Perhaps too, it is the responsibility of sites of higher education to provide spaces wherein students can relate to others in a way that feels institutionally encouraged and supported.

I have demonstrated how previous research on memoir pedagogy (Taber et al, 2017; Mojab & Taber, 2015) could play a pivotal role in spaces of higher education, as these studies illustrate that memoir could provide a site of learning where readers feel supported to explore narratives that enhance their critical literacy. For example, Styres describes literacy and self-reflection as a pathway to “gain a better understanding of each other and the ways power, privilege, and colonial relations continue to inform our ways of knowing and being in the world” (p. 26). Furthermore, the conceptual framing of critical literacy being linked to spatial understanding presents a challenge to structures of formal education wherein learning is often disembodied and

void of any personal responsibility for what one will do with the knowledge gained. In an interview between Whetung and Wakefield (2019) in *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education*, Wakefield notes that the historical “impetus to acquire knowledge” is not without its attachment to the impetus for colonizing, “to just look outward and grab a bunch of stuff from other places and try to make it legible to yourself, without necessarily having to be part of it” (p. 150). When learning is situated within the real lives of students, humanized, geared towards seeing the self as existing in relation to all other beings and to the physical place we embody, there is opportunity for creating a future that does not reproduce colonial systems of domination. Thus, my recommendations for future research and those working in higher education are to explore 1) memoir as a tool for self-knowledge and transformation, and 2) memoir as a tool for social knowledge and transformation.

Self-Knowledge and Transformation

While I have sought out to explore the role that relationality plays in witnessing stories and the dialogical process inherent to reading memoir, I have subsequently demonstrated how such a process opens opportunities for the reader to come to know what they did not know they knew (Simmons, 2008). Through exposure to the nuances of other people’s experiences with structural violence and willfulness, I came to understand in a deeper sense how my own trauma history has impacted my current experiences, with higher education and beyond. Through witnessing these narratives, I developed a new and more nuanced lens through which to view and analyze my own experience. For example, in *They Said This Would be Fun*, Martis (2020) describes her avoidance of other students who looked more like she did, namely other Black students, and explains how being hyper visible as the single Black student in a space was already enough pressure. She comes to realize that the reason other Black students she sees while on campus or

out in town are not approaching her or making eye contact is because they are so desperately avoiding attention and seeking to blend in. Pryer (2011) writes of intellectual liminars, those who are marginal to mainstream pedagogical practice, that they learn from those on the margins who have come before them, from those who “have prospered and flourished in the midst of their marginality” (p. 7). Providing and emphasizing opportunities for mentorship and talking back to institutional power is a core recommendation for trauma-informed higher education practice, which I discuss further below.

One of my key learnings from this research has been not only that seeking to remain invisible *is* a response to the trauma inherent to structural violence, but also that it is okay to not blend in, as the memoirists found success and healing in spaces of learning when they gave up on blending in. Through embracing their pasts, they faced their shame and found their ways into communities where they could feel a sense of belonging as their whole selves. Anzaldúa (2021) writes, “I’m trying to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut. I am trying to make peace between what has happened to me, what the world is, and what it should be” (p. 208). To me, this relational processing and healing has been the work of this analysis on memoir as a site of learning.

Memoir pedagogy requires seeing yourself in the stories of others. It is inherently self-exploratory to engage in such a deep manner with another’s subjectivity and to make sense of experience. Further, to reconcile one’s external and internal worlds is to realize that others too, dream of a better world. Of her place in the borderlands, between cultures, Anzaldúa writes, “Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe” (p. 209). This research has illuminated the pathway I have taken in building my own universe and coming back to myself, coming back to my subjectivity in a trusting and

loving way. It's okay to think the way I think, to feel the way I feel, it is okay to be who I am, because who I am is valuable and worthwhile. Finding a way back to these beliefs after having them consistently challenged by structural violence is no easy task, but when done in connection to others who are leading the way, it becomes much more manageable. I am inspired by hooks' writing around the power of personal narrative in the liberation of minds. She argues that "[t]here is much exciting work to be done when we use confession and memory as a way to theorize experience, to deepen our awareness, as part of the process of radical politicization" (p. 111). While much progress has been made in recent decades regarding the valuation of memoir and autoethnography, there is work to be done in addressing the relational role of witnessing such confession, and the linking of stories to actions for liberatory transformation. Memoir has the power to teach us about ourselves, as well as about others, in a manner which opens our consciousness to relational ways of seeing through our difference, and acknowledging that we all have the power to ask ourselves: how shall I live?

Social Knowledge and Transformation

I believe that memoir is a gift, a form of narrative that provides a vulnerable in-between space for readers to witness and feel through the complexities of subjectivity, to grapple with difficult personal and social truths, and to confront their own demons in a manner which feels relational. When certain stories are witnessed during the relevant contexts in our own lives, they can truly be perception-altering. As demonstrated through my own self-discovery in reading the narratives of Westover (2018), Dashtgard (2019), Walls (2005), Habib (2019) and Thistle (2019), memoir pedagogy (Taber et al, 2017; Mojab & Taber, 2015) allows learners to see the self-in-coalition with others, witnessing their unique tapestry of experiences and finding some small threads that reflect their own stories back, even when the differences are striking or

seemingly insurmountable. Additionally, there is a critical strength in the use of memoir, as an individual is not pushed into facing things from their own past before they are ready. Through engaging in this research I discovered that an autoethnography of witnessing through memoir allowed me to navigate the in-between space, the liminality between my own experience and that of each memoir-author, in a self-directed and empowered way. Furthermore, analyzing these narratives which centered on structural violence and willfulness allowed me to witness the connection between colonialism and intergenerational trauma, which inspires a sense of responsibility for me regarding social transformation and action. The concept of responsibility beyond individual transformation is critical. Research into anti-oppression in higher education emphasizes that action focused on addressing individual biases can often function as a distraction from moving towards structural shifts and disrupting power (Srivastava & Francis, 2006).

Zaytoun (2005) writes,

If borderland perspectives bring individuals into states of consciousness that encourage and require social action, could we encourage people to develop such consciousness? Linking individual and collective consciousness presents many possibilities for the study of the psychology of social activism. (p. 154)

Memoir opens our mind to ways in which others experience the same places, times, and cultures as us, in vastly different or shockingly similar ways.

Reading about Walls' (2005) experiences living with her alcoholic father granted me new critical distance from my own experiences longing for a dual parent household, as I can witness the complexity of living with *and* living without a father who suffers from his own unprocessed trauma history. If memoir's primary goal is to make sense of experience (Simmons, 2008), then what is the goal of reading and witnessing memoir, if not to do the same? Simmons cites a

colleague who describes one of the challenging endeavours of educators as being to help students see what *they don't yet realize they know*. Simmons (2008) argues, “it is through the process of introspection and reflection on familiar things, such as happens in conjunction with the writing of memoir, that one learns to know what one already knows – but at a deeper level” (p. 4). While Simmons is discussing memoir writing and the learning that it catalyzes, I push this thinking further in my assertion that reading and engaging with memoir can have this same result: an acknowledgement of a knowing that one has held onto but has not yet turned to face or reconciled with their sense of self. For example, bolstering the use of memoir writing, Simmons describes how the process of writing and sharing their memoirs “took the students to a deep level of understanding and connection with each other” (p. 5). While previous research in the use of memoir for learning has indicated that it can serve as a catalyst for critical literacy surrounding social structures (Mojab & Taber, 2015), the research here suggests that memoir can also hold potential for an individual to further understand and make sense of their own life experiences through witnessing another’s narrative. For example, within my research there are often only small threads of commonality between my experiences and those of the memoirists examined, and despite this, reading the texts was deeply transformative for understanding my own trauma history in a more nuanced way. Further to this, the texts brought me into a relational engagement with the lived experiences of each author, allowing me to understand how we were/are differently impacted by similar social structures.

In their critical analysis of anti-racist and anti-homophobia workshops which use storytelling as a means of education, Srivastava and Francis (2006) investigate the implications of “using personal experience as the ground of knowledge and action” (p. 284). They argue that storytelling as a tool can lead to individualized understandings of structural issues, diverting

attention away from organizational change. However, the research here indicates that increased knowledge of the ways that structural violence plays out in the everyday life of an individual can be useful in informing organizational change. This connects to Srivastava and Francis' argument around exploring *how* we come to knowledge, rather than *what* our knowledge of oppressions may be. For example, an enactment of memoir pedagogy might keep a keen eye on whether the stories we share are helping us to collectively develop “skills, and strategies for promoting and supporting action” around structural violence (Srivastava & Francis, 2006, p. 303). As humans, perhaps the most fundamental lesson memoir can teach us is the unalterable truth that we are all connected despite our varied experiences. Stories can assist us in examining how we come to think of others as different from or similar to ourselves, as well as the value placed on difference.

Shifting Institutional Practice and Policy

Finally, an important implication which comes out of the research here is that trauma survivors seem to find themselves making a place for themselves in spaces of education. Whether as an avenue to escape a dysfunctional family dynamic, a means of embracing their willfulness and rediscovering their inner voice, or with the aim of broadening the scope of their purpose and pathway in life, education was a consistent and often active participant in the narratives of each memoirist, throughout childhood but also in their adult lives. Institutions of higher education must acknowledge that many trauma survivors will turn to education during times in their life when they are learning to re-establish a sense of safety, belonging, and dignity (Haines, 2019). It is therefore necessary for universities to address the legacy of colonialism, as well as other forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, and ableism, which shape contemporary policy and procedure on campus. Below, I outline four key recommendations for university administration, staff, faculty, and students. These recommendations are: 1) emphasize

students' self-worth outside of academics, 2) remain flexible in course design, instruction, deadlines, and assessment, 3) make information on student supports and advocacy groups visible and accessible, and 4) talk back to power both inside and outside of the institution.

Emphasizing Student Self-Worth Outside of Academia

A consistent thread within the narratives examined in this research is a damaged sense of self due to different forms of trauma in the lives of the memoirists, with a subsequent desire to seek external forms of validation for one's goodness and worth. I find it of particular interest that education represented such a pivotal turn in each memoir, illuminating a pathway which diverged from old familial patterns and broadened opportunities outside of the grip of intergenerational trauma. While educational spaces represented a site of conflict for many of the authors in their younger years, each does describe a sense of longing for acceptance and validation from their educators. In later years each of the memoir authors attends university, and while it may not be explicitly stated, this time is clearly formative for them in healing from relational trauma and embracing their willfulness.

I suggest that the desire to feel *good* and worthy of acceptance can cause many trauma survivors to place too much emphasis on academic success, prioritizing it over their personal wellbeing. For example, Dashtgard (2019) frequently describes a desire to be in service to her community as a means of feeling worthwhile and avoiding addressing her own emotional turmoil. Academia is an institution which exploits such a drive towards external validation, through labels such as professionalism and collegiality (Ahmed, 2021). Ahmed (2021; See also Ahmed, 2012) has discussed the precarity of pointing out issues in the institution of higher education, and thus individuals who are able to succeed in a space without complaint or disagreement are more readily promoted and therefore be moved into positions of authority. This

precarity operates within the unspoken culture of colonial institutions wherein “[t]hose who point out restrictions or blockages become identified with the restrictions and blockages they point to” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 180). This affective transference leads to an environment of instability, where individuals fear speaking up at the risk of becoming associated with the problems they address, as well as fear of reprisals from those who benefit from a culture of silence. For survivors who have suffered any form of relational trauma, the impacts of this culture can be devastating, providing an ideal site for trauma survivors to overburden their minds while ignoring or sublimating any personal emotional, physical, or spiritual needs that might be unmet. Universities can address this critical fault in their design, rooted in a colonial separation between body and mind, through designing courses, policies, and programming which allow students to feel a holistic sense of belonging during their studies. Educators can use weekly check-in systems to ‘read the room’, meet students where they are, offering them the opportunity to share any critical life updates.

Universities should place more emphasis on students as a part of their community, inviting local organizations into classrooms, amplifying voices of those in the physical space of the university but beyond the walls of the classroom, and encouraging volunteer work or community care for credit. Thistle’s (2019) narrative is striking evidence in support of positive and lasting impacts of creating a bridge between community and sites of learning, as he was able to visit his ancestral land and reconnect with his Métis roots, through taking a course at university that actually empowered him to travel outside of the walls of the institution and into the world outside, while gaining university credits. Further, research indicates that culturally specific transition programs enhance the quality of experience for students on university campuses (King & Brigham, 2023). Building out student centres and clubs designed specifically

to provide mentorship for students from historically marginalized groups is an inherent responsibility to any post-secondary institution which claims to be equity driven.

Instructors and professors can also cultivate a strong sense of safety for students, by holding office hours, remaining approachable in their demeanour, and meeting student requests with warmth and respect. I often wondered while reading *Educated* what might have happened for Westover (2018) if the professors she was meeting with had no compassion for her personal struggles and wrote off her behaviour as that of a spoiled or entitled youth. Perhaps, her eventual sense of belonging in sites of education came about thanks to a learner-centred approach which has been integrated into global educational policy. Despite the slower timeline for visible benefits of learner-centered teaching, it remains prioritized by global institutions (Britton, Schweisfurth & Slade, 2019). However, practices associated with a holistic and learner-centered teaching approach are often counter-intuitive to the bigger picture of economic growth and competitiveness at the university level. This translates into pressure which lands on the shoulders of the individual educator, and therefore those seeking to support trauma survivors through taking such an approach must remain adaptable while leveraging their institutional privilege.

Through creating meaningful opportunities for students to learn while being active, such as through group hikes, mindfulness activities, and sport, higher education institutions are also placing value on the physical wellbeing of the student's bodymind, beyond their intellectual ability. Diversifying methods of teaching and assessment can be a very effective way of emphasizing the value of physical, emotional, and spiritual learning beyond a student's ability to read, study, and write exams. Dashtgard (2019) and Walls (2004) both described feeling excluded at school, despite their keen interest in learning. While this was in relation to K-12 learning experience for these authors, their journey with higher education was impactful in that

they found a place to combine their creative and community interests with learning. I think those working in higher education can learn from these experiences regarding the value of meeting students where they are and working to their interests or strengths. In addition, more practical approaches that invite students to engage in relational learning from one another, through seminar facilitations, community outreach and activist work, can all root their learning in contexts that will enhance their ability to see the value, as well as inherently honouring the very human and co-dependent nature of learning. Each of the memoir authors spoke of moments wherein their perception of their own life history was stretched and reframed through relation to other people, and most of the time this led them to rediscover a trust for their inner voice which had been sublimated. Perhaps sites of learning can shift their focus to providing more opportunities for students to know themselves, through getting to know their peers and the communities they are a part of.

Remain Flexible in Course Design, Instruction, Deadlines, and Assessment

As noted by Bimm and Feldman (2020), regardless of a student's trauma history when they arrive at university, the policies and practices in institutions of higher education can be trauma inducing due to high levels of stress and an emphasis on meritocracy. For example, research demonstrates that university stressors such as injuries from university athletics, tight deadlines, heavy workloads, rigid assessments, and inaccessible course materials present a greater barrier for students who experience a lack of psychosocial safety due to structural violence (Temel & Özçelik, 2025; Tiet et al., 2025; Sheng et al., 2025). For instance, Temel and Özçelik (2025) found that women athletes in university who suffered an injury displayed less resilience, linked to a lower sense of social safety overall due to their feelings of belonging and quality of interpersonal relationships. This is underscored by the research by Freidman and van

Ingen (2011) around how racialized, gendered, and queer bodies subvert dominant discourses and therefore face different consequences. Further, Tiet et al (2025) demonstrated higher levels of risk for doctoral students who were Black, Indigenous, women, and 2SLGBTQIA+, in terms of experiencing PTSD and subsequent drug or alcohol abuse. The research from these authors, combined with my analysis here on memoir, trauma, and learning, illuminate how students with less of a sense of safety, belonging, and dignity in the university space, may struggle to access the appropriate supports. For authors such as Westover (2018), and Dashtgard (2019), childhood neglect and trauma manifests in a young adult who strives to be hyper individualistic and not in need of support, often linked to a desire to combat the hyper visibility of being within a marginalized group (Puwar, 2004). Flexibility in deadlines and assessments can provide opportunities for students to access supports in a manner which is less stigmatized and allows them to avoid being hyper visible. As hypervisibility is already linked to being a body out of place (Puwar, 2004) and can cause students who are trauma survivors to feel they are not good or intelligent enough for the space of higher education.

In addition to flexible assessments, course and instructional design which incorporates aspects of a student's holistic subjectivity can provide critical opportunities for them to heal from past traumas relationally. Thistle (2019) describes being in a course which allowed him to visit his ancestral lands and re-connect with his roots, feeling connected once more to the land of his mother and grandparents, and of those before them. King and Brigham (2023) conclude their research on Indigenous student experiences at university by asserting that systems of evaluation and assessment must be revised to address collaboration, relationality, and cultural integrity. This connects back to an area I found less explored in the memoirs, in that many trauma survivors are not cognizant of the impacts that place can have on their bodymind. While each author makes

use of striking visual descriptions so the reader can envision their environments, the connection between place and wellbeing is not always as deeply investigated as it is towards the end of Thistle's narrative. Further regarding the need for a holistic sense of student belonging, Habib (2019) describes finding the confidence to reclaim her Muslim faith, through finding others who are queer and continue to practice under Islam, trail blazing where there is not an already predetermined pathway. Higher education can be a site of power for students in imagining and acting on these potential pathways, through allowing engagement with aspects of self through their coursework or social life. This could encourage students to make their learning relevant within their everyday lived experiences.

Make Information on Student Supports and Advocacy Visible and Accessible

Within each of the memoirs discussed here, shame circulates as a pervasive and harmful catalyst in the lives of trauma survivors, convincing them that isolation and denial are safer routes than vulnerability and honesty. Authors such as Walls (2005) and Westover (2018) avoid discussing their family with the people they meet at school, and while Habib (2019) also keeps aspects of her home life a secret from peers, this is discussed in the context of high school more than university. The narratives of Dashtgard (2019) and Thistle (2019) are also of critical importance here, as to me they represented flipsides of the same coin, wherein a trauma survivor either strives to spend their life in service to others at the expense of their wellbeing in order to escape their inner turmoil, or they are so overcome by their fear of facing their own pain that they numb through substance abuse. In either case, the root cause is significantly linked to childhood abuse, neglect, and the subsequent development of shame around one's vulnerability and needs.

Openly discussing student supports such as counselling, accessibility tools, and resources related to security around income, housing, and food could have profound impact on destigmatizing access to such devices of equity. Upon examination of the memoirs in this research, there is a distinguishable pattern of hyper visibility and imposter like feelings due to being underrepresented and under resourced in spaces of higher education. Thus, institutions devoted to teaching and shaping future citizens must consider the pressures associated with the burden of representation (Puwar, 2004) wherein trauma survivors and students from historically marginalized groups experience physical, emotional, and spiritual impacts of *being different* (or having different needs for resources) from those around them. Educators and staff at universities may alleviate some of this pressure through destigmatizing and amplifying avenues for student access and support. It is common for university student unions to do this work, as they are run by students for students and are funded through tuition levies. However, it is unrealistic to depend on these student groups to work against bureaucracy and improve access for all students, since these positions are typically volunteer or part-time, and filled simultaneous to a student's degree studies. Furthermore, in the space of higher education, many decisions regarding departmental and administrative policies are made in a top-down manner, and frequently behind closed doors.

A significant example of the value of making supports visible is discussed in the research by King and Brigham (2023), for which Jesse Thistle was a key informant. As a participant in their research project, Thistle describes feeling like an alien in the space of higher education and says that he felt like he “was from a different world” (p. 48). He explains that many other students around him had gone to university straight from high school, and this combined with his experience living being houseless, cause Thistle to feel like an outsider. However, he explains that once he realized he was not the only alien, that there were others who felt similarly out of

place, he felt less isolated. This highlights how relationality and peer mentorship is a critical component to trauma-informed educational practice. Thus, universities must leverage peer networks to support students who may come into spaces of higher education feeling a lack of belonging.

Talk Back to Power both Inside and Outside the Institution

Finally, across all five of the memoirs examined here, the authors described moments of clarity when other individuals helped them to view their lives in context, naming structural violence and willfulness – although perhaps not in this exact language. For example, once Westover (2018) begins university she meets several people who try to mirror her experiences in a manner which disrupts her self-gaslighting and allows her to witness the abuse she endured through a new lens. In addition to this, she has educators who see her brilliance and encourage her to pursue a pathway outside of those which she has inherited from her family. Further, during his time in prison Thistle (2019) discovers the value of secure relationality and attachment, understanding that there are others around him who can bear witness to the realities of his past, who have similar experiences of their own, and who will not turn away from his pain. Howell (2020) explains that “[e]xperiences of *interpersonal intersubjectivity* promote internal, *intrapersonal subjectivity*,” (p. 181, emphasis in original) meaning that through relationality within a network of safety and belonging, individuals can come to accept disjointed or fragmented pieces of their own consciousness, which previously were too painful to face. This is further argued in the passage below,

If a trusted other is available to help a person process the terror and to realize that it is past and the present is safe (if that is the case) the shock of the trauma and the

dissociative process are much less likely to lead to continuing dissociative outcomes.

(Howell, 2020, p. 37)

The power of being witnessed is therefore monumental to the healing process, and inherent to true relationality and coalition building. This process is only achieved when the individual witnessing is actively operating against the oppression of the trauma survivor. In the higher education context this translates into critical educators who are not only aware of the ways in which structural violence operates within their institution, but who also strive to address such harms through their practice and activism. More specifically, adult education represents a site of opportunity for trauma-informed practice through memoir pedagogy. Adult education practice has been historically linked to social movements, as Groen and Kawalilak (2019) highlight that adult learning “research agendas have gradually and irrefutably taken up the concerns of social inequity and injustices in local, national, and global contexts” (p. 9). Further, Groen and Kawalilak discuss the benefits to Canadian adult education scholarship, when educators remain cognizant of the historical, social, and political roots of adult education practice, and apply these principles across their own institutions and communities. Due to the contemporary constraints of working in higher education, linked to neoliberalization and capitalist ideology, a focus on advocacy can often feel overwhelming when educators are already under significant pressure to perform across the categories of service, teaching, and research. Community is crucial in combatting disillusionment. Kawalilak and Groen (2019) write,

we need to intentionally work toward creating and sustaining authentic communities of work and learning where we reach beyond the fracturing nature of our work and university to sustain each other as integrative and whole people who hold stories needing to be told and received with care and compassion. (p. 780)

Once again, the power of witnessing is emphasized as a means of maintaining our connections and refusing the isolation pervasive in sites of higher education. Kawalilak and Groen (2019) describe the transformative power of relationality and dialogue for educators in persevering despite the corporatization of university space, and I argue that the boundary between student and educator can be crossed in such dialogical relationality – often with positive results.

Each of the memoirists describe significant mentors in their lives who took an interest in their experiences, withheld judgement of their contexts or behaviours, and acted as a mirror for the parts of themselves which they had been denying or were too deep in shame to acknowledge. Westover (2018) has professors who celebrate her writing and bring her around the world. Thistle (2019) meets educators while he is in the prison system and they do not write him off or diminish his capacity for learning. Dashtgard (2019) is celebrated by other activists and policymakers for her political influence in her community. Walls (2005) is encouraged to pursue higher education by her employer at a small-scale newspaper, and Habib (2019) finds support in educators and peers who see her holistically and do not ask her to bend into a preconceived ideal. Whether or not these witnesses understood the full context of each of the authors in the moments when they offered compassion, empathy, and support, is unclear – but the impact of having someone who is so clearly invested in your success is undeniable, especially for a trauma survivor who struggles to feel vulnerable in a relational dynamic due to shame and hypervigilance. Educators can make the choice to get involved on campus and in the community to address systems of oppression which impact their students, as well as to include material in their courses that addresses such power imbalances. This engagement has twofold benefits, as advocating for students often leads to increased engagement across the institution and enhanced academic programming (Groen & Kawalilak, 2019).

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research into trauma-informed practice and decolonial, equity focused pedagogies might further investigate the uses of memoir pedagogy in learning around the self/other, with specific attention paid to the nuances of structural violence in learner's lives as it is connected to intersecting systems of oppression. While the research conducted here has demonstrated an impact as far as my own learning around trauma, learning, structural violence, and willfulness, there is ample opportunity to explore the application of these findings beyond my own experience. This could be done in focus groups and in community activist circles geared towards community healing and reconciliation. Relational and community avenues for healing are relevant when scaffolding on hooks (1989) argument that colonial domination often leads to an internalized sense of shame and disconnect with self-knowledge and self-trust. This is particularly important as an increasingly higher number of individuals choose to pursue university as a pathway and thus there is increased need for knowledge of self, as it connects to a willingness to self-advocate in challenging circumstances. Furthermore, students for whom an over-abundance of self-knowledge and self-trust is present, such as those who benefit from social hierarchies and power dynamics, would benefit from being encouraged to learn more about how their social positioning may provide certain privileges which others are not so easily afforded. In exploring ways past our contemporary social stratification and divides, story could be a pathway forward where students are encouraged to consider how different social structures are experienced by those from communities outside of their own, as well as how their own experiences shape their worldview and relationality.

Perhaps the most meaningful potential for research that builds off the analysis here would be in addressing and witnessing the role of willfulness in spaces of higher education, as acts of

refusal to be moulded, bent, and re-shaped into objects of a colonial institutional will. Patel (2021) describes pivotal moments in history where individuals with public attention and refused to bend to such a will, such as the very literal example of Colin Kapernick who lost his job with NFL for choosing to kneel during the US National Anthem. Another example shared by Patel is that of Du Bois, who famously stated that Harvard should be honoured to have had him as their first Black graduate. According to Patel (2021), “[t]hese actions defy the settler colonial desire to absorb peoples into projects of erasure and containment” (p. 161). Too often, those who name and seek to address structural violence are labeled agitators (willfulness by another name) and are punished by the institutional desire to maintain a silent status quo, rather than having their voices and stories honoured. A crucial component of this, lies in *how* we tell the story of willfulness and how it gets framed as a response to structural violence. Importantly, Patel (2021) argues that many researchers are inadvertently “collapsing structural obstacles of racism and global capitalism and strengthening nationalist narratives of meritocracy” (p. 154). When we witness the willfulness of an individual through the contextual lens from which they have emerged, the story is more fulsome and holistically understood. For Patel, this must include naming the root of violence, and I agree. Each memoirist in the research here told their story honestly, naming moments of abuse which were rooted in religious fundamentalism, intergenerational trauma due to addiction, colonization, grief over lost cultural roots, and mental health struggles that went unaddressed. Despite the varying sources of harm in their lives, the struggles each author faced can be linked back to structural violence rooted in colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism – which all work together within the fabric of Western society to silence and punish voices of dissent. Through engaging with narratives of

willfulness, further research into addressing equity and dismantling colonial harms in academia might better “acknowledge the ways we are indebted to each other” (Patel, 2021, p. 155).

The results of learning through memoir as it relates to structural violence are twofold. One, if more educators were to consider the role of storytelling in their approach to teaching and learning, perhaps future generations of university graduates would have a more nuanced understanding of the roots of violence in their environment, and more of a sense of responsibility to protect their, and by extension someone else’s, right to willful dissent. And two, through valuing the role of narrative in spaces of higher education, educators (and learners) are recognizing and honouring the power of one’s story as a central site of learning, not only in regard to the everyday impacts of violence, but also to how simple acts of willfulness can serve as a refusal to reproduce such violence. Having a co-worker admonish your teaching practice for its inflexibility in deadlines does not have the same impact as engaging with a narrative of a student who might describe their anxiety around deadlines as being linked to their responsibilities at home and work, and might illuminate how accommodations themselves can be an act of refusal within a colonial and capitalist structure, where productivity is prioritized over transformation.

My Shifting Positionality

Through engaging in this research project, I have been granted insight into the ways that new academics are initiated into an institution where structural violence is deeply embedded into the culture and practice. Having begun my research as a full-time student and moved into a permanent staff role during the degree, I feel as though I have gained some meaningful experience into how capitalist and colonial ideologies operate at the everyday level to apply pressure to educators and student support workers, often leading to feelings of hopelessness or

disillusionment and frustration. For example, I began in my role with the best of intentions for developing unique and needed student supports for those facing barriers in academia, but as the past three years have worn on, budget for such programming has become increasingly more precarious. In addition, numerous individuals across the university for which I am employed have been walked off the job due to downsizing and elimination of roles, which makes for a level of income instability that does not really encourage enthusiasm around changemaking and acts of transformation, as people fear reprisal and loss of their job. These experiences have grown my perspective and allowed me to witness the impact of trauma-informed practice for those within the university at all levels, beyond just students.

While shifts in capacity across departments and increased course size have led to more overburdening and overwhelm for contract instructors and employees, this research has kept me grounded in narratives of willfulness as refusal and has allowed me to take much needed pause when I feel a reaction to a student who is challenging course material, not meeting expectations, or reaching out to ask for accommodations around work or deadlines. I will admit that when I have been feeling overwhelmed with work, exhausted by my responsibilities at home, and then received a lengthy email about why so many weeks of work were missed, my initial reaction is usually negative. This is when I return to thoughts of willfulness, refusal, and structural violence, thinking through the ways in which agitation, complaint, and dissent can often be reframed and understood through the lens of the literature on trauma-informed practice as it relates to systems of colonial domination (heteropatriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy). After taking this pause, I may still not choose to meet a student's demands or accept work which does not meet the standard of the class, but I will (almost) always respond from a place which honours complicated

power dynamic inherent to teacher/learner, and which does not assume nefarious intentions on their part.

Another crucial shift for me has been in the validation of the usefulness of sharing my story, as I have often avoided this due to shame. However, throughout this research project I have found that sharing my story has had an impact on how my peers perceive their own experiences in the program, and vice versa. While the first couple of years of the program offered more opportunities for connection between students, the completion of coursework often brings a level of isolation that can be challenging, and I found myself feeling less connected to the collective voice of my cohort and therefore feeling less brave in speaking up in moments of discomfort connected to institutional culture or practice. Ahmed (2021) discusses this as linked to a concept of collegiality, writing “[c]ollegiality can be a promise: you treat some more than others as would-be or could-be colleagues” (p. 198) and I think graduate students in particular are often in this precarious position of feeling isolated from their peers, while seeking to go with the flow of institutional culture and not make waves, in order to make a good impression. Despite this, there were moments when newer students in the program would meet me at events and share that they had read my comprehensive portfolio, or come up to me after I spoke at departmental events, and share that they had felt inspired by my work, permitted to agitate and to trust their own perceptions, choosing to use their voices in moments of discomfort rather than remain silent. An odd consequence of internalized structural violence has been that I have been able to identify the power of narrative and storying when the stories are told by others; however, before engaging in this research I had struggled to see the value of sharing my own story. I think there is a high possibility that there are other trauma survivors within academia who feel this

way, and who would benefit from a learning experience which positions their narrative experience as a site of critical learning.

Concluding Remarks

The central intervention of this research project is to demonstrate the potential for memoir to serve as a site for critical learning around structural violence and willfulness. However, alongside the analysis a few practical recommendations for trauma-informed teaching practices have also emerged. With the number of students who enter the university with an already existing trauma history rapidly rising, in addition to the ample opportunities on campus for traumatic experiences or stressors to occur, it has never been more important for spaces of higher education to address institutional practice from a trauma-informed lens. Social factors such as social media, online streaming platforms, and increasingly intelligent technology, have led to an often-inescapable onslaught of stressors for contemporary youth and young adults, and asking them to invest in an educational experience when the future of the world is grim can be a stretch. All of those working and learning within institutions of higher education have an opportunity to acknowledge and address how structural violence results in bodies under pressure, through seeing students holistically and in context. In making space for and witnessing student willfulness, by adapting policy and procedure at the institutional level, a trauma-informed educational system can provide further pathways to healing through seeing the self-in-coalition. I suggest that a truly revolutionary and trauma-informed turn for the university is to conceptualize an ideological model of higher education as a site where students are encouraged to learn about themselves and others in deeply meaningful ways and ask themselves: how shall I live?

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