

RED WATER

A NOVEL AND CRITICAL COMMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

The creative portion of this dissertation, *Red Water*, is a cross-generational novel set in San Francisco. After an earthquake strikes, three female narrators are connected across time through their experiences with trauma and loss and the excavation of heirlooms and histories as they try to piece their lives back together. This thesis is a study of trauma, both experienced by the narrators and the place itself. The research component explores the mapping of trauma through displacement and migration, characterising the city as a traumatised place, and also examines the evolving significance of objects, specifically heirlooms, as they pass between character, time, and place.

PART II

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Writing *Red Water*: The Characterisation of Place, Mapping Trauma, and Trans-Generational Objects

Introduction

The story began with a need to understand the city of San Francisco. During its composition, I found myself walking streets and sidewalks I had never visited physically before, and yet walked a hundred times in my head, discovering newness and familiarity in the same singular locations. The challenge was to respond to San Francisco as if for the first time, while also communicating with the accounts of others before me who had experienced life in a more tumultuous city. In the course of my research, I followed earthquake refugees as they fled from a ruined city on fire to the shelter camps, bringing fragments of their old lives with them in the hopes of piecing them back together. What I found, however, was what I perhaps always knew – namely, that the past can never be put back together in the same way. When it changes, it changes forever, just as the city of San Francisco did in the early morning hours on 18 April 1906. On this day, the people who inhabited those urban spaces were forced to migrate forward and away from everything they knew and trusted – carrying their histories and memories on their backs, moving from ruined homes built on sand-filled marshes to tents and shacks erected on solid rock. I began, then, with place and the life-altering events that occur within it.

This critical portion of my thesis examines the development of a characterised setting, San Francisco, before and after the historical quake and the severe changes to its physical environment. It considers what a characterised city would look like, its interaction with the narrators and other characters, and explores the influence the

characterisation of place exerts on the structure of story elements, plot lines and the individual narratives themselves. I also evaluate the effects of a dynamic setting that interacts closely with characters, and which changes alongside them – changes made more personally authentic through an assessment of my own autoethnographic recollections and explorations as a native of San Francisco.

Also discussed is the interaction between the cross-generational objects in *Red Water* – specifically the passing down of gold – that alters a narrator’s storyline. I examine the changes in significance and worth of an object as it crosses through different time periods and realities, touching on Bill Brown’s *Thing Theory*, mainly the ever-evolving subject-object relation of cross-generational heirlooms, like gold in the case of my novel.¹

Throughout the composition of *Red Water*, I examined how trauma affects the narrators’ voices and consider if their possible unreliability might have a counter effect on the characterised place. Continuing from those points, I wanted to discuss how narrators, who experience trauma, such as after an earthquake or through displacement, would interpret their settings, how trauma would affect their memory and reality, and how those perceptions could be altered when experienced in different situations, individually and collectively, through displacement and migration, as well as how the reader might interact with a narrator who is, or becomes, unreliable as the story unfolds.

The novels studied in this critical commentary, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, and *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich, explore trans-

¹ Bill Brown, ‘Thing Theory.’ *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

generational themes – notably: how the significance of an object or thing both remains the same and is transformed over time; the evolution of place; how place interacts with the story and its elements; the effect that a traumatised place has on those who live within it; and how trauma is experienced and interpreted, especially through actual displacement or the threat of it.

Through my focus on displacement and migration and the subsequent and lingering trauma that narrators would experience, I set out to explore the contemporary literary context of my novel, *Red Water*, while arguing for a place within it. I am also attempting to contribute new voices to the narratives of displaced peoples and striving to convey that the characterisation of place plays a much larger role in affecting the direction of a storyline and the symbiotic relationship between place and character as both experience trauma, particularly narrators, and specifically in the three novels discussed in this dissertation.

During this process, I developed three distinct San Francisco's in *Red Water* constructed from my own autoethnographic memories, research of historical data and personal recounts, as well as understanding how theory shaped the technical questions throughout the drafting process of my novel.

1.0. Creative Development and Analysis: Arriving at San Francisco

The first lesson I learned in writing this thesis was that to effectively write about a place I have experienced first hand, I have to leave it. After drafting three distinct novels set in various places around the world, I came full circle to write about the city I left when I

embarked on my doctoral studies, focusing on its ever-evolving history and an imagined near future wrecked by an earthquake – a natural disaster that San Francisco has known only too well throughout its relatively short history. As he wrote in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway discovered that he needed to be in Paris to write about boyhood in Michigan.² I, too, found it necessary to transplant myself to write about San Francisco. In doing so, in giving the place such significance by focusing on my memories of it, the city became a character, full of life, affected by trauma and forceful change, as dynamic a character as any writer could create. I aimed to guide the reader through the historic streets that I so longed to walk myself and had done many times before. It is along those traumatised, scandal-saturated streets that I found my story – three connected narratives that would span periods of history that were among the city’s most tumultuous, as well as a probable future that matched the destruction of its past. By building the story around place, the city took on a personality of its own. I remembered its alleyways of Chinatown laced with the scent of washing soap and the sounds of ladled water splashing hot woks, San Francisco’s shores made from man-piled sand and forests of eucalyptus, its ever-evolving culture that changes in and around a city that, architecturally, barely changes, those reminiscent Victorian Houses stacked next to each other that is so quintessentially San Franciscan.

It was through my own sensory memories, the interactions with the people living there, and the recounts of past San Franciscans before me that I was able to reconstruct a city that became the forefront of the story itself, cultivating a dynamic

² Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Scribner, 1964), p. 7.

environment that characters could evolve organically in, from pre-earthquake to post-earthquake, from the arrival of the first narrator of *Red Water*, Cora, to the third narrator, Beth's departure from it.

Simultaneously, while developing the tone and characterisation of a traumatised place, I relied on influences from authors including Khaled Hosseini and Louise Erdrich, who have written about displacement and trauma within their work. I focused on the environments around their characters, as those environments changed so drastically burying all that they knew under the ruins around them, just as the characters in my novel experience as they attempt to unearth their memories and build their futures from the rubble.

In Erdrich's novel, *Tracks*, the main character, Fleur, a Native American woman of the Anishinaabe peoples, is faced with the threat of displacement and the destruction of her environment by land developers and so, in direct interaction with place, she uses that land to destroy those that threaten to destroy all that she knows and loves, by partially felling the trees the developers aimed to cut down, letting those same trees demolish the equipment of the loggers. Erdrich depicts a scene of vengeance as Fleur lets the trees fall around and finally, around the group of men that are there to clear her land as it's taken from her and her family:

Another tree, a large one, pitched loud and long, closer to where we stood. The earth jumped and the shudder plucked nerves in the bodies of men who milled about, whining softly to each other like nervous cattle...It was then I understood...Each tree was sawed through at the base.

One man laughed and leaned against a box elder. Down it fell, crushed a wagon. The wind shrieked and broke, tore through the brush,

swept full force upon us...With one thunderstroke the trees surrounding Fleur's cabin cracked off and fell away from us in a circle, pinning beneath their branches the roaring men, the horses. ³

Fleur's deliberate destruction of her environment differs from the ineludible destruction of the earthquake in *Red Water*, where the city and its evolution alter the narrator's paths, Fleur alters her path by actively modifying her environment. She allows her environment to empower her to retaliate against her suppressors. However, regardless of passive or active responses to the circumstances that Fleur or the three narrators of *Red Water* – Cora, Evelyn, and Beth – find themselves in, the similarities in character adaptation are similar out of necessity. Beth's navigation of a post-apocalyptic San Francisco in *Red Water* is facilitated by her ability to adapt to her new environment, much like Fleur does when she executes her retribution, but Beth's reaction to her new environment also mirrors that of the city itself, changing shape, being ruined and rebuilt in different ways:

An old traffic light stood tall at the end of what used to be Lombard Street. Signs had been repainted to direct travelers towards the new neighborhoods of San Francisco, even though most of them had retained their names...Shacks had been built up from corrugated metal sheets, plywood, and cardboard, like the fence that surrounded the camps...

Make-shift oil lamps hung from poles, illuminating a way through Little Italy. Montgomery Street, as it was once called, was filled with pop-up shops that brought droves of San Franciscan's. ⁴

³ Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), pp. 222-3.

⁴ Natalie Taylor, *Red Water* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Aberystwyth University, 2017), p.37.

In my own novel, I wanted to create an environment that would require the narrators to constantly evolve and adapt, not only for plot purposes, but also to demonstrate how the changes of San Francisco and its inhabitants throughout its history correlated with the motions of displaced peoples as is demonstrated in all three of the texts I've studied – *The Joy Luck Club* where four women flee a war-torn China during the 1940s, *The Kite Runner* where a father and son leave the Soviet military intervention of Afghanistan, and *Tracks* where a woman and her family have to leave their native land in North Dakota behind due to deception and suppression – explicitly the trauma that forced migration can cause. In piecing together the past through personal recounts and histories, I was able to navigate the motions and evolutions of the city and what it might look like in the near-future.

1.1. Navigating San Francisco's Past and Predicting its Future

The American poet Kenneth Rexroth's account of Chinatown, who had first arrived in San Francisco in 1927 and lived there for most of his life, watched the city change over the decades. He wrote about how much the city had changed before the earthquake, to pre-Depression era San Francisco, and finally into the present San Francisco at the time of writing the essay in 1973. However, he discovered that the Chinese in "Old Chinatown" lingered in their traditions, especially their respective aesthetics from the rest of the city which enriched the development and authenticity of a Chinese Quarter

in *Red Water*. Rexroth stated in his essay, that many of the scenes had been the same since before the 1906 earthquake:

An acupuncturist used to operate on the street, and it was common to see somebody sitting quietly against the wall, stuck full of needles. One of the most fascinating characters was a little old man with a sublimely happy face surrounded with...quite bushy white hair and beard. He was a trapper in the marshes near the head of the Bay, and each week he brought in a raccoon or a possum or a wildcat or a gray fox, two animals at a time, rolled alive in chicken wire and suspended from a yoke over his shoulder. These he sold to customers... ⁵

His familiarity with Chinatown, though culturally insensitive at times, a reflection of his era, enabled many of the visions of the Chinatown in *Red Water* – an exotic quarter that lived between and in alleyways and urban legends. I wanted to find the richness in the everyday and mundane of life in this small quarter of San Francisco and through accounts like Rexroth's, I was able to piece together a puzzle of scenes that were authentic, creating a clear vision for the reader. The scene below of 1870s Chinatown from *Red Water*, demonstrates the sensory detail I endeavored to create:

The landscape here was towering and dark and every hutong smelled of mildew from the sea and boiling lye from the launders. Small shop fronts were busy with baskets of green leaves and various long reeds. A man bit into one that was fibrous and green. When he wasn't satisfied, he put it

⁵ Kenneth Rexroth, 'Rexroth's San Francisco' (San Francisco: *San Francisco Magazine*, 1973) <[http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/sf/1973-74.htm#Old Chinatown](http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/sf/1973-74.htm#Old%20Chinatown)> [14 June 2016]

back in the basket where he found it and walked away, his bite marks left in the reed.

Papers pasted on walls with Chinese characters were being read by men in black sateen suits with long braids that fell past their waists. Some of the men smoked what smelled like floral tobacco out of bamboo pipes as they skimmed up and down through the papers. They discussed the news loudly between them, shouting incoherently at each other from either ends of the wall of announcements.⁶

When navigating my way around the city's past through archives of personal accounts and articles through the decades of San Francisco, the strategy was to find specific places, places that were, or would be, affected by an earthquake like the marina (waterfront) that was built on sand, places that would be rebuilt quickly after like downtown (city centre), new settlements caused by displacement (such as the refugee camps all around the city), neighborhoods that wouldn't be affected at all like those neighborhoods that were built on solid rock, areas that reflected the society and culture of the three distinct time periods whether it be a luxury hotel downtown or Carville, a bohemian suburb made of horse-drawn trolleys, and places that would entice inevitable conflict and action like the Barbary Coast in the 1870s or a racially motivated quarantine of the Chinese Quarter which was used in *Red Water* to foreshadow the great earthquake. As the National Park Service of the United States described in an essay about the Chinatown quarantine during a bubonic plague outbreak in the city of San Francisco in March of 1900:

⁶ Taylor, p. 28.

Once in San Francisco, they [Chinese Americans] could not live where they pleased, but had to crowd together in one section of the city, the so-called “Chinese Quarter,” later referred to as Chinatown. The quarantine represented the final step in segregation of San Francisco’s Chinese Americans. The symbolism of the rope cordon was carried forth for four decades as an invisible boundary, beyond which Chinese Americans dared not pass without the risk of being insulted and even physically abused.⁷

Chinese Americans have inhabited a large percentage of the city since its beginning. The neighborhood they were forced to inhabit, and still to this day inhabit, though no longer by force, has been at the forefront of the trade that came into and out of the city’s ports, making it a central point of importance for San Francisco. Chinatown and its inhabitants were also significantly affected by the 1906 earthquake.

Virtually all buildings in Chinatown were destroyed, and efforts were made to relocate Chinese Americans from the downtown area to less desirable portions of the city. These efforts failed, and thus represent a turning point in the fortunes of Chinese Americans. Destruction of birth certificates in the earthquake enabled some Chinese Americans to claim citizenship by reason of birth in this country.⁸

As a result of Chinatown’s impact on the daily life of the city and its growth throughout history, Chinatown plays a large role in *Red Water*, from the 1870s wooden, hutong

⁷ National Park Service, “The History of Chinese Americans in California: The 1900s”, 2004 <https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/5views/5views3g.htm> [18 August 2016]

⁸ Corinne K. Hoexter, *From Canton to California* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1976), p. 212.

alleyways and red lantern-lit theatres, to the 1900s wrongfully quarantined quarter and opium dens, to the near future's center of crime, trade, and prosperity in a post-apocalyptic city. Chinatown and the Chinese-American population that reside there have changed along with the city, adapting to its changes in and around, just as the narrators in *Red Water* do, while remaining devoted to their traditions.

Deciding on those specific places, like Chinatown, allowed me to piece together, from images, maps, and my memories, those detailed streets and landscapes like “air [that] smelled of mint as she crushed eucalyptus gum nuts under her feet as she walked,”⁹ in Beth's overgrown and wild, post-apocalyptic San Francisco to the “jars of sprouting yams in water and white and yellow chrysanthemums, their petals long and wild like an old woman's hair,”¹⁰ that sat on the windowsills of Chinatown in Evelyn's more refined pre-earthquake San Francisco. These details also strengthened the differentiation between each of the three time periods, discovering different San Francisco's through each of the three narratives.

1.2. The Narrative Development of Three Generations

Knowing that I wanted my narrative to span at least two historical generations of San Francisco's history to demonstrate the constant evolution of the city and its inhabitants, I began with a character who had nothing and her descendent who started with everything. However, to truly accentuate the parallels within a transformative city,

⁹ Taylor, p. 238.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 33.

the need for a third character, far removed through time, was essential to linking the timelessness of generations. Which is why, while I am arguing for a place within the historical genre, I am also aiming to bring something new to trans-generational literature, a topic in literature that is becoming more and more prevalent as we seek to convey our universal connection with our past, present and future, not just by blood or the linear line of time we live through (where events occur one after the next and are affected by what came before), but also through the objects, places and trauma that transcend time – the interaction with a dimension that is not actually linear at all but interactive all at once, or so the theory of simultaneous relativity suggests. The chronology of the narratives is interwoven, creating a multidimensional recount of historically traumatic events, like an earthquake, making the near-future plot line temporally recursive in a multi-generational narrative.

In that interactive timeline, I desired to convey the illusion of time as well – the idea that time only exists as the illusion, a construct, collective and individual, that exists in our consciousness. This is true in Beth's subconscious and conscious worlds, her time in a coma and the time that follows it – the confusion of what her reality is and how to navigate through what becomes her present, while perceptively feeling closer to her past and trying to find a future in it – that grappling for a constant that cements her perception of time and being can be found through the tenseness of the other narratives as well. However, that constant is found in many things – in the gold coins that, as they pass between the time periods and the narrators possession, represent the chance of a future of freedom.

The city itself represents not just as a place, but a living, breathing character navigating through all three timelines, in between and beyond, wrought with the same ruin and trauma that mirrors what each of the three narrators face: Cora with decisions that teeter on what is moral and immoral and the consequences that follow her decisions, Evelyn with finding a future in the literal ruins of a city after losing nearly everything, and Beth in the wrestle of her two realities and subsequently, her sanity when she has trouble finding her footing in either world.

When I had finally decided to write a novel set in a historical San Francisco, I felt no desire to write about the earthquake. So many stories, in fact nearly all stories about San Francisco center around one of its earthquakes. I wanted to tell a different story – to give a vision of San Francisco that did not depend for narrative tension on its quakes. However, the more I wrote, the more I realised that such a San Francisco doesn't exist.

As a Californian, I have grown up with the understanding that earthquakes are a daily part of life, whether physically felt or not. The psychological readiness aligned with a realisation of the futility of preparedness, are known all too well. In the early hours of 18 April 1906, San Francisco was struck with a 7.8 magnitude earthquake. The subsequent devastation counts to this day as among the worst natural disasters in United States history, killing 3,000 people and destroying over eighty percent of the city. It was just one of many devastating earthquakes in San Francisco, giving the city a never-ending sense of fear and inefficacy, which has, overtime, affected the changing culture of the its population – the effects of the quakes so strong, I could no longer ignore them. Their forcefulness created a central point from which to build my story.

In a chapter entitled “On Some Mental Effects of the Earthquake” in William James’s account of the 1906 quake, *Memories and Studies*, the earthquake is described as taking on a life and personality of itself – as making conscious decisions as to when it will strike and how hard. James commented: “It [the earthquake] wanted simply to manifest the full meaning of its *name*...for me *the* earthquake was the *cause* of disturbances, and the perception of it as a living agent was irresistible. It had an overpowering dramatic convincingness.”¹¹ He notes that because of his experience of the earthquake and his realization of its great power, he could better understand how the perception of natural disasters during ancient times could be perceived as “supernatural warnings or retributions.”¹² I felt something similar. Having experienced more than my fair share of earthquakes, including the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake (the last major earthquake San Francisco endured), the idea of the earth sending a great “retribution” feels accurate and with it, the great, subsequent fear and helplessness that plagues the city and its inhabitants.

San Franciscans are not San Franciscans without the earthquakes. San Franciscans without the knowledge of the proximity of destruction and devastation, without their familiarity with that deep roar and rumble of the moving earth beneath them, or without their sense of aftermath: fear and shock and buried trauma, simply do not exist. We carry it within us as a people – that shake that has reverberated through every generation of the city, and resulted in a continuous thread of change and somehow, sturdiness all at once. I realised that the story I wanted to tell was one of that resilience, of industry, survival, ruggedness, perseverance, and solidarity – all the

¹¹ William James, *Memories and Stories* (New York: Longmans, Green: 1911), p. 212-3.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 213.

accompanying traits of a culture that has lived with and through trauma. As it always does in the moment it strikes, the earthquake took over everything and connected all the narrative threads together, the reverberation of the traumatised.

From the beginning of the novel's composition, the narrative focus was on writing a trans-generational piece of fiction, connecting time through the passing of objects and occurrence of traumatic events. With that connection also came the need for distinctiveness between the time periods, between each woman's voice as her narrative was told. Specifically, I worked on increasing the sense of distinctiveness between Cora as a young woman in her own narrative and Cora as an older woman in Evelyn's narrative, far removed from the life of the city and her youthful ambitions to Carville to live out her days with her trauma, a shadow of herself until her history comes full circle to haunt her and break down the safety she built around herself and her family.¹³ Cora's connection to her past arrives in correlation with the arrival of her brother, Cade.

While Cade's evolution in the novel is stagnant, as he stays consistent in his scheming and treacherous ways, the evolution of his character while writing him changed quite a bit. In the beginning, I believed that Cade needed to exude more of a menacing tone but eventually his ineffectual, lackadaisical nature turned him into someone who was not so menacing at all but rather just unruly. As someone who was originally abusive to Cora, he became more of a burden to her, which consequently enhanced the relationship between Cora and her brother, making his final betrayal more unexpected. And towards the end of their lives, he comes back, hardened by life

¹³ Taylor, p. 136.

away, and in his desperation comes to show his true nature once again through greed during his interactions with Evelyn.¹⁴

The terror activated in him by the thought of Cora's daughters and the gold that she still has hidden away, reflects the larger terror experienced by the inhabitants of San Francisco after the earthquake, who were displaced and forced to congregate in refugee camps around the city. What little they were able to salvage of their belongings were piled up in their tents. Much of the conflict and movement in the novel derives from displacement, which is a key structuring theme. Indeed the concept of displacement, together with the trauma associated with it, informs *Red Water's* narrative development and plot structure throughout. Even Cora, who does not experience an earthquake during her narrative set in the 1870s – though is caught later in one of these events her daughter, Evelyn's narrative set in 1906 – still experiences a significant change in her surroundings, and is forced to leave behind all she knows and had depended on in Sacramento for a new life in San Francisco.¹⁵

The refugee camps became the new cultural center of the novel in post-earthquake San Francisco, prompting a change in Evelyn, from a young, sheltered girl, to a woman who lost her mother and with that loss, the protection and security that she had felt to this point. She was untethered, as was Beth in her post-earthquake world, trying to find purpose in the wreckage of her life and surroundings and in the wake of her trauma, much as the city around her was experiencing, the city streets reflecting the trauma felt by its refugee inhabitants. While Evelyn settled into her new home as a refugee, Beth's transformation came when she awoke from her coma world

¹⁴ Taylor, pp. 217-9.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 6-8.

to a new reality, where she was forced to mourn the loss of her child all over again alongside the loss of a life she had adapted to and felt purpose in scavenging through the city daily for survival. One night, sitting in front of a fire with her husband, she asks, “What did I do to keep busy? To be productive?”, before recalling her old, busy and productive life –

“In her mind she used to work in the fields of the Presidio camp and make soups in the kitchen tent, she went on drug runs to Chinatown and spent the day hiking. Now, she sat around, staring out of windows and into fires.”¹⁶

Her new life is no longer dictated by the need to survive in a traumatised city and she must adapt to this new existence, just as her ancestors had to do in their altered existences. In becoming a refugee, she adapted to find comfort where there was discomfort and discomfort where there was comfort.

2.0. Object Theory: The Relative Value of Trans-Generational Objects

In *Red Water*, the three narrators unknowingly interact with each other by a large sum of gold coins. These coins, stolen from the San Francisco Mint by a character in Cora’s narrative, Thom Merrick, become the catalyst that motivates each narrator to make a decision about their futures. Each one of them chooses to change their lives entirely when the coins are in their possession. In this section, I examine the changes in

¹⁶ Taylor, p. 237.

significance and worth of an object as it crosses through three time periods, realities, and through coin-narrator interactions.

Bill Brown states in his essay “Thing Theory” that the distinction between things and objects is the way in which they interact with the subject. He writes, “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.”¹⁷ The “thing” is essentially an object that either represents no significance or value at the time, or no longer has worth in relation to the subject, just as there is an ever-evolving subject-object relation of cross-generational heirlooms, like the gold coins in *Red Water*. The coins become the identifiable object, something concrete with worth, whereas before, Cora’s need for something that would propel her out of her life and into a new one was unidentifiable. When the gold coins become apart of Cora’s life, and subsequently the lives of her descendants, her entire world is changed, not only in how she views her future, but also how the world will now view her. The gold coins give her the chance to get away from the only choice she had for her future – prostitution. Brown states that:

The quest for things may be a quest for a kind of certainty, but things is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable...

¹⁷ Brown, p. 4.

You could imagine things ... as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values ... Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency. ¹⁸

Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club* uses objects to represent sentimental and spiritual meaning in traditional Chinese culture and a way for the four mothers to relate to their daughters and pass on beliefs. One object in particular is the jade pendant given from one of the characters, Suyuan, to her daughter, Jing-mei. Suyuan says that it is Jing-mei describes her dislike of the pendant which makes it useless to her.

The pendant was not a piece of jewelry I would have chosen for myself. It was almost the size of my little finger, a mottled green and white color, intricately carved. To me, the whole effect looked wrong: too large, too green, too garishly ornate. I stuffed the necklace in my lacquer box and forgot about it.¹⁹

Jing-mei decides that she doesn't have use for the object, disposing of it until she discovers its worth. When her mother dies, Jing-mei decides to wear it everyday, pondering as to the meaning of the carvings, saying that "shapes and details...always mean something to Chinese people."²⁰

Jing-Mei finds meaning beyond the physical pendant and in a similar way, Amir finds an introspective meaning within the kite. Hosseini uses the kite to symbolize

¹⁸ Brown, pp. 4-5.

¹⁹ Tan, p. 219.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 219.

Amir's happiness of life before the rape of his half-brother, Hassan, and after the rape, the kite becomes a symbol of his guilt, of his selfish reasoning for not intervening (wanting to bring the kite back to Baba, knowing that it would be taken if he intervened). The kite's value is demonstrated through his betrayal of his best friend in the hopes of finally securing the love of his father. Amir is desperate for something that would connect him with his father, Baba, and Amir recognised kite flying as the only way to relate to his champion kite-fighting father: "Baba and I lived in the same house, but in different spheres of existence. Kites were the one paper-thin slice of intersection between those spheres."²¹ However, after Hassan is raped, kites symbolize Amir's betrayal of Hassan and is forced to give up the thing he loved the most as its connotation with happiness and happier times is replaced by his guilt.

Furthermore, expanding the kite's significance to out to a wider perspective, such as the inhabitants of Kabul, or even Afghanistan, the value changes over time – from the happy, prosperous time before the invasion, that Hosseini presents, where the kite represents a time of leisure and enjoyment of daily life to an Afghanistan post-invasion, where the kite has no place due to the new, oppressive nature of daily life. Amir describes his childhood as a time where nothing mattered but his playtime with Hassan, and earning the love of his father, in an Afghanistan that was favorable for a wealthy Pashtun boy like Amir.²²

Flying kites was something that marked the coming of the cold season and the time when Amir would be able to connect with Baba, Hassan, and even the other boys who flew kites in the tournament. Kites were a way for Afghans to come together and

²¹ Hosseini, p. 51.

²² Ibid, p. 54.

celebrate a part of their culture. With the coming of the revolution, that culture deteriorated.²³ The fun and light-heartedness of an Afghanistan where kites were flown in the skies by children becomes a thing of the past and the kite loses its value entirely after the invasion because of it is not an object that can be used for survival or protection. Years later, when Amir redeems himself by saving Hassan's son, Sohrab from the hold of the Taliban, he is able to connect with Sohrab through kite flying, as Hassan had done with his son. The original value of the kite returns after Amir feels he has righted his wrong and remembers his time with Hassan as he flies the kite with Sohrab: "Then I blinked and, for just a moment, the hands holding the spool were the chipped-nailed, calloused hands of a harelipped boy."²⁴ Not only is Amir able to fondly remember his time with Hassan, but the kite's role in connecting Amir and Sohrab mirrors the way Amir connected with his father, Baba. The kite ceases to be a reminder of Amir's guilt.

This same concept of a constant, altering value, or significance, can be applied to the gold coins that are passed between the three narrator's in *Red Water*. The value is dependent on the environment in which it exists. In Beth's world, that she exists in during a coma, gold is useless. In her world where vital resources for basic survival are scarce, the trade of goods like food and drugs is more valuable than gold, which is why the gold coins do not make an appearance in Beth's narrative until they are of value, which is after she wakes:

²³ Kirk Semple, "For Afghan boys and men, kite flying is a way of life," 14 Dec 2007 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/14/world/asia/14iht-kites.4.8751433.html>> [9 Jun 2016]

²⁴ Hosseini, p. 390.

The list was longer this time. Penicillin, amoxicillin, prednisone, xylocaine, lanoxin. It went on and on. Three pages worth of drugs. Well, they hadn't been for a drug run in a long time. With the unpredictable crop yields, they had nothing to trade and the government had ceased all aid of any kind.

Beth recognises that even if she was financially stable in that world, created during her coma, that it would be worthless:

What funds San Francisco did receive had already been spent to rebuild the central areas closer to the ports, mostly the financial district. The city had been reduced to a few skyscrapers in a condensed radius of one mile. Everything that surrounded it was now considered countryside, a land of tribes that had been split up into two refugee camps and one central territory of crime. She could see the centre from every vantage point in the camp; steel giants filled with gold that towered over dirt.²⁵

However, when Beth comes out of her coma, realising she is back in a world where gold is socially accepted and useful, the coins regain their use and worth. The independent freedom the coins represent allows her to see her life clearly for the first time since she awoke, and decide what it is she truly wants. It is through the interaction with a subject that a thing becomes an object, when it becomes something of worth and significance.

3.0. The Characterisation of Place and the Mapping of Trauma

This section explores the conceptualisation of the power of place and the transformation of an urban environment into a characterised place, as established by

²⁵ Taylor, p. 38.

issues connected with trauma and displacement. I will be considering how what we might term a characterised place is developed by authors to reflect the historical, cultural and psychological power of a setting, and specifically in my novel, how San Francisco is transformed by the subsequent trauma felt after the earthquake that significantly alters both the city's own characteristics and the lives of its inhabitants.

In *London: A Biography*, Peter Ackroyd compares London's anatomy to that of a human body, suggesting that the city is a "labyrinth, half of stone and half of flesh," which allows the historical, cultural and even spiritual power of the place itself to become dominant. He says in the opening paragraphs of his book that, "The image of London as a human body is striking and singular," and he traces the idea of the Vatican City as "the mystical body in which Jesus Christ represents its head and the citizens its other member." That socially-constructed spatiality of the place through religion, he argues, represents a city being brought to life. This idea similarly propelled the development of the San Francisco that was created for *Red Water*, a San Francisco with a mind constructed by the people, though their trauma, as well as the rebuilding they would take on. The rebuilding is written in the beginning paragraphs of Beth's narrative in the refugee camp, where the characters are surrounded by memories and ruins of lives they once knew, dictating the momentum of the city in both their grief and hopes to build something new:

Beth had chosen to remain in the camp after the quake instead of rebuilding her house. Those hills of crumbled houses and a jungle of weeds were graveyards in her eyes. Nothing but destruction and death. The water carried the smell of it. She had taken to boiling it a few more

times than the officials said was necessary before drinking it...Large vats of water stood over tall fires now throughout the camp, boiling away the smell of decay in thick, white steam, like the fog that rolled in over the bay at night.

Ackroyd goes on to say that London, through the expansion of “great waves of progress and of confidence,” like that of a young man’s, represents the “heart of London beating warm. The byways of the city resemble thin veins and its parks are like lungs.”²⁶ The imagery of an anatomized city of parts that resembles the human form, leads to the characterisation of that place through its dynamic evolution physically, culturally, and trans-historically.

However, Ackroyd presents a countering view of London previous to his time period through Daniel Defoe’s depiction of London when the city was experiencing a period of plague. He describes the city as “A swollen and dropsical giant which kills more than it breeds...[It is] A body racked with fever, and choked by ashes, it proceeds from plague to fire.”²⁷ The evolution of a city’s characterisation is clearly demonstrated by the contrasted interpretations of a London that is vibrant through Ackroyd’s eyes and diseased through Defoe’s. Defoe’s distinct London from Ackroyd’s own perception of the city as an ambitious, vivacious young man leads Ackroyd to determine that “We must regard it [London] as a human shape with its own laws of life and growth.” The conception of a place as a human shape, able to change and evolve overtime,

²⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *London: A Biography* (London: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009), pp. 1-2.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 2.

breathing and beating, offers an author the power to let that place interact with its inhabitants, bringing both the place and its characters to life.

In *Red Water*, San Francisco's "anatomy" changes between the generations of the narrators, from pre-earthquake to post-earthquake. The earthquake that occurred in April 1906 forever changed the narrative and overall structure of San Francisco, and its inhabitants. In the post-earthquake city, I was able to track trauma through displacement of the city's population and the migration of refugees to the refugee camps around the city, migrating through collapsed streets on fire, excavating their way through the destruction to piece their lives back together while struggling with metaphorical aftershocks of survival and distress that still resonate through San Francisco's fault lines to this day.

3.1. The City as a Traumatized Place and the Excavation of Memory

Trauma fiction, like Erdrich's *Tracks* and Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, seeks to understand the nature of recollection of a narrator when experiencing trauma, focusing on how, why, and when traumatic experiences return to those who have experienced a traumatic event and how a writer might interpret those experiences and their figurative excavation. The characters of *Red Water* are built on the same conceptualized excavation, as well as the survival, trauma, and adaptation experienced within a new environment, or traumatized place, that they must interact with daily. The accuracy of a narrative is not what is significant when discussing trauma, but rather the explorations of the way in which survivors experience life post-tragedy through trauma. Cathy

Caruth, a leading trauma theorist and the author of the field-defining study, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, defines trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena.” Caruth’s work led me to an understanding of the nonlinear nature of trauma recollection, and enabled me to create narratives in *Red Water* that attempt to represent the irregular chronology of trauma, as described in Caruth’s definition. Caruth states that trauma narratives “attempt to claim [their] own survival,”²⁸ so that even when presented through an unreliable narrator who is experiencing trauma, it is more about how the story pieces that they do recollect, are puzzled together rather than the pieces that are not recollect.

Judith Herman, a clinical psychiatry professor at Harvard University, who has focused her career on understanding traumatic stress, argued in her case study, *Trauma and Recovery*, that “Survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of their present symptoms in the light of past events,” mostly because that is all they have.²⁹ Caruth, analysing how scholars perceive trauma in relation to literature and film, contends that the traumatised “carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”³⁰ It is through Caruth’s theory that the conceptualised connection of trauma and literature intersect, influenced by the

²⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 58.

²⁹ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 3.

³⁰ Caruth, p. 5.

unreliable versions of history from those who are telling their traumatised narratives.³¹ In this state of unsurety and disarray, one must reconcile the construction of nonlinear models of traumatic memory, that can be adjusted later, as Caruth suggests, a model that the trauma narratives in *Red Water* were created from.

However, Caruth's formative interpretation of trauma focuses on the unique experiences of the character suffering through trauma rather than the gaps in their remembrance, or temporal distortion of history, as Anne Whitehead points out in *Trauma Fiction*.³² This disruption of accurate memory is experienced in particular by the near-future narrator of *Red Water*, Beth. She navigates through her imagined world created while she is in a coma, developing a San Francisco that is neither real nor accurate in its depiction of history or spatiality, but is the result of her mental and spiritual traumatic experiences in combination with the physical trauma she has experienced. She has created a world she feels useful in, where she is able to learn new skills and become adaptable, all the while subconsciously coping with the trauma of losing her family in an earthquake – the same earthquake that caused her physical head trauma:

The skills she [Beth] gained over the last two years, though, were more valuable to her in that new world than anything she knew before. She learned how to throw a punch, how to cook a decent meal from scraps and how to stitch up a wound, all skills that she learned during the early days in the camp when chaos and grief were rampant.³³

³¹ Caruth, p. 3.

³² Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 12-29.

³³ Taylor, p. 20.

Beth's San Francisco is a San Francisco that is built from the excavation of a few memories of her life before the traumatic event (earthquake) occurred. As Caruth explains in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* – “the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time,”³⁴ and in those belated dealings with trauma.

In Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Amir, the protagonist, experiences the interpretation of trauma that Caruth talks about, remembering the regret and shame he feels about his decisions as a young boy in Afghanistan. Amir does not recognise the trauma immediately, in fact Caruth argued that it is difficult to understand where trauma comes from specifically, only to reveal itself later in an individual's life: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance— returns to haunt the survivor later on.”³⁵ He excavates through his memories of his childhood and one particular experience where he does not do anything to stop the sexual assault committed against his half-brother and best friend, Hassan:

I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can

³⁴ Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 6.

³⁵ Ibid, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, p. 2.

bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realise I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years.³⁶

Amir lives with his regret of betrayal that occurred during the assault, that was not only traumatic for Hassan, but also for Amir himself. In his shame, he experiences a traumatic reliving of that day, everyday of his life, until his history catches up to his present with a call from Rahim Khan, the business partner and best friend of Amir's late father, propelling him into righting his wrong by returning to Afghanistan. Essentially, Amir must reconcile between the two worlds, between his two Afghanistan's as well, as he trudges through his traumatic memories:

There is a way to be good again. I looked up at those twin kites. I thought about Hassan. Thought about Baba. Ali. Kabul. I thought of the life I had lived until the winter of 1975 came along and changed everything. And made me what I am today.³⁷

In the similar way that Amir must find his way through his trauma and his conflicting worlds, so must Beth in *Red Water*. When Beth wakes from her coma, her reality has shifted again. Everything that she experienced in a comatose state becomes false when she comes to, causing her trauma to be experienced for a second time. However, this second dose of trauma is experienced in a distinct way than her first experiences of distress and anxiety at the loss of her family. She is trying desperately to ascertain which of her worlds is real – the one that had been so vivid in her mind while in a coma or the version where her house is still standing and her husband is still

³⁶ Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), p. 19.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 20.

alive, but her daughter, Klara, is not. Her uncertainty makes her temporally unreliable as a narrator as she navigates her way through her cross-temporal worlds:

She felt steady for the first time since she woke, much like she had before the quake. The thought of Klara was always in her mind, but she felt like herself again. She took out a pen and notepad from her bag and started to write. The words poured out of her onto the page, retelling the things that her mind had made up, the peculiar parallels that had transferred from her dream world to her present reality.³⁸

Beth feels guilt in her inability to assimilate to a life that she had known before, a world where San Francisco had almost entirely returned to its pre-earthquake environment, where people are no longer displaced or refugees, save for the few left without families, and fear and chaos do not threaten every corner. This wider sense of environment, of the culture and social structures, lend a more concrete understanding of what is reality and what was not, if not for Beth, then at least for the reader.

While personal trauma is interwoven through trauma fiction, writers like Hosseini, also aim to provide readers with an understanding of history and culture on a wider scale just as Beth does while she navigates her way through both of her worlds. In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini connects the trauma of Amir to the national trauma and conflict of a war-torn Afghanistan. He portrays 1970s Kabul as a prosperous, civilised city that is heavily influenced by America's Hollywood and Coca-Cola:

³⁸ Taylor, p. 220.

We took strolls in the musty-smelling bazaars of the Shar-e-Nau section of Kabul, or the new city, west of the Wazir Akbar Khan district. We talked about whatever film we had just seen and walked amid the bustling crowds of bazarris. We snaked our way among the merchants and the beggars, wandered through narrow alleys cramped with rows of tiny, tightly packed stalls. Baba gave us each a weekly allowance of ten Afghanis and we spent it on warm Coca-Cola and rosewater ice cream topped with crushed pistachios.³⁹

While Hosseini's romanticisation of the pre-Soviet occupation of Afghanistan starkly contrasts the post-sovereignty war-torn Afghanistan through imagery, he does incorporate moments where the racial and national conflicts are highlighted through brutal scenes, namely the beating and rape of Hassan, a young Hazara boy. The picturesque world of Kabul that Amir first describes quickly deteriorates after this event as the Soviets invade Afghanistan soon after. The tone of place changes from bright, colorful streets with pomegranate trees and flying kites to streets that are littered with the Soviet military:

We stayed huddled that way until the early hours of the morning. The shootings and explosions had lasted less than an hour, but they had frightened us badly, because none of us had ever heard gunshots in the streets. They were foreign sounds to us then. The generation of Afghan children whose ears would know nothing but the sounds of bombs and gunfire was not yet born....Russian tanks would roll into the very same

³⁹ Hosseini, p. 62.

streets where Hassan and I played, bringing the death of the Afghanistan I knew and marking the start of a still ongoing era of bloodletting.⁴⁰

The collective trauma of Afghanistan was born out of the drastic change in environment, in the realisation that Kabul, once a place of peace and prosperity, had become a warzone, adding to the individual trauma of Amir and the shame that he felt for not saving Hassan from his own, individually traumatic experience. Through the wider lens of trauma, when examining collective trauma through political, cultural and historical context, we are better able to understand individual trauma that occurs alongside the collective as Anne Whitehead explains:

Such a notion of history implicitly repositions the relationship between language and the world, so that the text shifts from a reflective mode—based on a position of self-awareness and self-understanding—to a performative act, in which the text becomes imbricated in our attempts to perceive and understand the world around us.⁴¹

Hosseini demonstrates this effectively in *The Kite Runner*, allowing for the invasion of a foreign enemy to wipe away the world that Amir knows, robbing him of his land, his pride as an Afghan, but not of the memories that he carries with him and pieces together. With those memories and the memories of the trauma he experiences during the invasion, Amir is more equipped to “understand the world” as Whitehead suggests, just as Beth is able to as her reality and her dream world grow further apart over time.

⁴⁰ Hosseini, p. 69.

⁴¹ Whitehead, p.13.

3.2. Characterising Place Through Displacement and Adaptation

Akroyd's concept of place being comparable to the sentience of a human being, prompted me to spend time carefully and consciously characterising the city of San Francisco to represent the inhabitants of the city, and more specifically the three narrators of *Red Water*. In order to understand the traumatic experiences suffered by the narrators as the city evolved and was destroyed around them, I found it important for each character to be connected to certain places around the city such as Chinatown, which represents the unknown and exotic, the suburb of Carville, which is a safe place for Evelyn (one of *Red Water's* multiple narrators), and a large Victorian house, which represents opportunity as well as stagnation. These places, and others like them, help to construct individual identities as well as the wider social and cultural contexts of each of the three time periods. When displacement forces two of the narrators to retreat to refugee camps, their identities change with their surroundings. They adapt alongside the city, reconstructing their lives while moving away from the old ones out of necessity, participating in an ever-evolving dialogue with place.

Louise Erdrich, a prominent author of Native American fiction, creates a direct interaction between Fleur, the protagonist of *Tracks* and a Chippewa woman of the Anishinabe, and the land that she lives on. While Fleur is not a narrator, her story is told through Nanapush, her adoptive father, and Pauline, a young woman of mixed descent that envies all that Fleur has and is.

Tracks begins with a direct relationship between the people and the land. The Anishinabe people are, like the majority of Native American peoples, directly connected

to the land. They depend on it for survival, but when the land of the Anishinabe is threatened and becomes inevitably impermanent, it affects the health and wellbeing of the people that inhabit that land – the forced migration that Native American peoples know too well from years of oppression. Nanapush, one of two narrators in *Tracks*, tells Fleur’s daughter, Lulu, about the winter that he saved Fleur after an epidemic of consumption had swept through the land of the Anishinabe, how he saw the destruction of his people and his own family during that winter, and that through it he saw how the land became barren overtime. “We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall,”⁴² Nanapush tells her. He says that even after all they had been through to go north, through disease and displacement from the south, they still suffered the constant threat of settlers wanting to develop the land:

I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years’ growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillager [Fleur].⁴³

The land, like the Anishinabe people, experience trauma of constant displacement. Nanapush talks about the old migration from the south and his distrust of the government that caused him and his family so much pain:

⁴² Erdrich, p.1.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 2.

I've seen too much go by – unturned grass below my feet, and overhead, the great white cranes flung south forever. I know this. Land is the only thing that lasts life to life. Money burns like tinder, flows off like water. And as for government promises, the wind is steadier.⁴⁴

When the land becomes barren in winter, the people revert to their survival mode, living off the land as best they can. They are in complete synchronization with the land and its seasons and know how to prepare. Yet, even then, they find it difficult to get by. Nanapush describes the scarcity when he offers Eli Kapshaw, Fleur's husband, something to eat: "I suppose he could see for himself that the meat in the pot was only one poor gopher that should have hibernated while it could."⁴⁵ This speaks to the scarcity and struggle of life for the inhabitants to sustain themselves on land that is barren during the winter. The tone of the story is dictated by the winter and the spring/summer – how love and sex is a part of the spring/summer, when Fleur and Eli become romantically involved, but struggle, strife and survival consumes the winter.

As the Anishinabe lands are threatened by land developers, Fleur fights against the threat of displacement. She uses the forest to carry out her plan to halt the loggers from cutting down the forest on her land and around her house.

Like *Tracks*, displacement and migration are themes that runs throughout Hosseini's, *The Kite Runner*. And just as the Anishinabe lands are full of folklore and beauty before the threat of displacement, Amir describes life in Kabul, Afghanistan, before the invasion of the Soviets, as one of magic, especially as the kite-fighting season approached:

⁴⁴ Erdrich, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 96.

By the time the snow melted and the rains of spring swept in, every boy in Kabul bore telltale horizontal gashes on his fingers from a whole winter of fighting kite ... The cuts stung and didn't heal for a couple of weeks, but I didn't mind. They were reminders of a beloved season that had once again passed too quickly.⁴⁶

The seasons of Kabul are marked with movement and flight. The alleyways of the city become the “veins” just as Ackroyd describes London's byways, populated with young boys running through them to catch the kite that is cut in the competition. These happy scenes bring to life a pre-occupation Kabul, where its Pashtun inhabitants are living a relatively prosperous life. However, the racial conflicts within Afghanistan are dominantly discussed throughout the book, with the second-class treatment of Hassan, a young Hazara boy – Hazara being a minority in Afghanistan. Even before the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Amir, the protagonist, mentions the “Kochi” – a nomadic people that would make their way through Kabul to reach the northern mountains – and how Amir, mirroring the national opinion of the Kochi, viewed them:

We chased the Kochi ... We would hear their caravans approaching our neighborhood, the mewling of their sheep, the baaing of their goats, the jingle of bells around their camels' necks. We'd run outside to watch the caravan plod through our street, men with dusty, weather-beaten faces and women dressed in long, colorful shawls, beads, and silver bracelets around their wrists and ankles. We hurled pebbles at their goats.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Hosseini, p. 102.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 60-1.

This passage foreshadows the displacement that Amir will experience as the Soviets invade Kabul and force him and his father, Baba, away from their once, prosperous and comfortable lives, but also as a look at the wider stance of racial and national conflict that resonated through Afghanistan. As the environment of Kabul changes around Amir, he describes the changes that are about to be made to his life:

Huddled together in the dining room and waiting for the sun to rise, none of us had any notion that a way of life had ended. Our way of life. If not quite yet, then at least it was the beginning of the end.⁴⁸

These scenes of war in Afghanistan closely mirror the recollection of the Japanese invasion of Kweilin Island in China by Suyuan, the mother of Jing-Mei who is one of seven narrators in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*:

When the sirens cried out to warn us of bombers, my neighbors and I jumped to our feet and scurried to the deep caves to hide like wild animals. But you can't stay in the dark for so long. Something inside of you starts to fade and you become like a starving person, crazy-hungry for light. Outside I could hear the bombing ... And then the sound of raining rocks ... I could only see the dripping bowels of an ancient hill that might collapse on top of me.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Hosseini, p. 78.

⁴⁹ Tan, p. 24.

The scene above resembles Amir's experience through the use of descriptive words and phrases to describe the characters' physical movements like "huddled" or "to hide like wild animals." The fear and confusion they feel creates a characterised landscape of the breaking of war, reflecting the chaos and destruction that is occurring around them through the viewpoint of Suyuan.

In *Red Water*, Evelyn, the narrator who lives through the great earthquake of 1906, describes a similar sort of terror of her new reality – a post-quake city, destroyed and on fire:

The street was torn up. Jagged edges zigzagged alongside large holes in the pavement. A trolley had been tipped on its side with a few lifeless passengers caught under the poles and wooden seats. A young woman lay on the ground, dead and still, had her arms still wrapped around her crying child protecting her from the rubble that had killed the young man who lay dead next to them. Evelyn saw the fires roaring down at the bayside as she reached the top of the hill the house they had dug the sacks up. The air was filled with thick, black smoke that rose high into the sky, the large waves of the bay flooding the lowlands of the marina.⁵⁰

This scene becomes the catalyst for her trauma. It is the stark realization that her whole world has been turned upside down, that her physical surroundings have been torn up and demolished and that the city that she knew and loved and was thriving was now collectively sick and grieving – a mirror of her individual, traumatised state. This new San Francisco is created through the characters as they move around the city, navigating through the aftermath of the quake.

⁵⁰ Taylor, p. 151.

CONCLUSION

In writing a novel centered around a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, many would assume that the main focus is on action, descriptive details of a grim scene of suffering, loss and destruction. That is not the story that I wanted to tell. That story has been told many times before and it is why I rejected the idea of writing about San Francisco's earthquakes for so long, but as I wrote in the introduction, San Francisco doesn't exist without that story, nor without the haunting idea that the next quake is around the corner.

After accepting that, I discovered through three distinct narratives and timelines, that a city is reliant on its people to bring it to life, the small stories that live in the alleyways and, in the case of San Francisco, on opposite sides of the cracked pavement. In characterising San Francisco, I focused *Red Water* on the movement of its people rather than the city itself, choosing places where the narrators would be forced to adapt to new situations and environments daily. In that movement and adaptation, I discovered that an environment evolves with its people, relying on the decisions they make, their experiences, and the actions they take in altering that environment, characterising societal, physical and sometimes spiritual changes that occur throughout history.

My focus was to respectfully contribute new voices to the narratives of displaced peoples and communicate the symbiotic relationship between place and character in times of trauma. I examined the development of a characterised city suffering from traumatic events and the displacement of its inhabitants. Through those examinations of trauma, I considered what a traumatised city would not only look like, but what it would say about the what is significant in that setting as well as what loses

its value altogether, such as gold in a post-apocalyptic world where resources are insufficient. In understanding the worth of objects, I found that those objects would alter a narrator's storyline, either taking away something of worth or presenting them with an object that would propel them forward, depending on the narrative. This allowed me to demonstrate how the evolution of San Francisco occurred alongside the motions of displaced peoples and how their trauma would shape the future of the city through their interpretations of their setting. Just as a city starts to rebuild, so do its people.

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