Releasing the Rope: Mourning and Grief in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*

In Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*, Ivah describes her actions after her father has returned from a "dream walk." She says that the rope he used lies spiraled in a heap on the floor; she then tells us,

> "I wrap it around my brother: keep him close to me always. I wrap it around Maisie: come home to us with words. I wrap it around Poppy: dream-walk, but come back to this kitchen. I wrap it around me. The dog drops her head. The light flickers on outside. Mama, let go of the rope."[1]

This novel is a catalogue of deaths, literal and figural. While it dwells on the subject of death itself, it also attempts to work through the process of mourning and the effects of grief. Ivah's description of the rope is a map of the threads woven into the text to express these ideas. Ivah becomes the binding force, like Mama, that secures the ties of her family. To fully accomplish this task, to make her family "healthy" again and convert into the mother figure, Mama has to be cut off. Mama, though lost to her family, is still inextricably tied to them.

At the center of mourning there is the space of loss; a charged center, to say the least, on which scholarship has revolved. The locus for language, the impetus for action, the structurizing force of society, loss is the locomotive of human relations. Death is the ultimate expression of loss. It is also, to some, the ultimate verification of love, through mourning. The fundamental problem of death is that what is dead is still alive through a present absence. The complication that Ivah faces is that Mama will never let go of the rope. Beyond that fact, Poppa will never give up his dream walk (256). The position of the mother has been forever displaced. While the children, Ivah, Blu, and Maisie, can attempt to placehold the mother role, Poppa has no such supplementary response. Psychological literature on grief says that, in the grieving person, there is a tendency to continually search for the "lost" person. Poppa's forays into his dream world are the only place he can search for his wife. We can trace the acts of mourning in the novel, examining the images of the mother, the animal metaphors, the "illness" of grief, the power structure of the grieving process, and the familial roles of Ivah, Blu, Maisie, and Poppy. Ultimately, these threads weave together to culminate in a tapestry of desire for death, and a realization of the inevitable failure of mourning.[2]

The novel begins with a barrage of death images. Ivah introduces the reader to her family:

> " We eat mayonnaise bread for a long time after mama's funeral. It's been two months now and it's still our primary food. Poppy plays "Moon River" over and over on the piano he got from the dead deacon garage sale last Easter. He never cried for our dead mama in front of the three of us" (3).

The first impression we get of the family is of the loss of the mother. The children are subsisting on lack (primarily eating white bread); the time frame is established as shortly following a funeral; Poppy plays a haunting song repeatedly on a piano from a dead man on a day that calls to mind the death of the most famous religious figure in history. We are catapulted into death's realm. This family resides in this realm. One could even argue that the children were born into this realm simply by becoming their parents' children. In chapter ten, Poppy tells Ivah his

history: Poppy and Mama were residents of a leper colony for most of their lives. In 1865, the King of Hawaii signed a law into being that created a leper colony at Kalaupapa. Mama and Poppy were presumably citizens on this island. Hawaiians called leprosy "the separating disease." Most inhabitants were dead to their families. A telling expression of the time was "Prepare for Moloka'I as for the grave."[3] Even if the lepers were not dead in the sense of the physical, socially, and often emotionally, they were lifeless. There is academic conflict over whether or not leprosy was a stigmatizing disease because of the quarantine of the individuals having it or if it was regarded as a disease like any other, the quarantine being used as a safety precaution because the possibility of epidemic was real.

> Poppy equates his illness and his existence with death. He says,
> "I gotta go back. I gotta go back. I dirty still yet. This is only some more of God's punishment on me for being one leper. I no deserve good things in this life. I neva even deserve one good wife who was just like me. I was going spend the rest of my days with Eleanor. But now, she gone. I gotta go find her. I gotta go where she stay. Maybe she over there, waiting for me" (257).

He is unclear whether he means going back to the leper colony or to wherever Eleanor is waiting. For Poppy, going to where Eleanor stays is the same as going back to the leper colony: both are death.

Nevertheless, the repercussions of the isolation are obvious in the novel when we look at the shame that is evidently portrayed by Poppy in the scene when the family has gone to visit Aunty Betty in Hilo. Aunt Betty is raging at Lila Beth, her daughter, for coming home with hickeys all over her. Poppy sees the marks as the marks of shame, similar to his own. Poppy pulls his scarred hands deep into his lap. He says to Uncle Myron, "Must be Lila Beth's red welts make Betty rememba the shame I brought our family—" (86). We also see the single deliberate slur to the children by Icky: "You goddamn filthy kids got leprosy in your veins" (191). Whether the stigmatism was real or imagined is irrelevant to the novel: Poppy and Mama and the community perceive the effects; they are separated, in and of the grave.

The illness and death realm that haunt Mama and Poppy are reflected in the mourning process. The process and resolution of grief are often affected by a lack of community support and social powerlessness.[4] Vulnerability to loss is socially structured with those who are powerless likely to experience more grief than those with more control or power. This Foucouldian sense of grief ties in with the sense that grief is an illness. It links an individual's sense of having resources to meet life's demands with a sense of coherence and control that are key conceptions of the construct of "health."[5] Social position, then, is important in relation to grieving. Poppy is in a precarious position. While his location is already constituted within the land of illness and death, Mama's death occurs outside of the limits of this land. She exists in the dreamspace: Poppy lives in the lands of illness and death; he knows she is not there. She can never cross over to "normalcy" because of the scars of leprosy. Her death occurs in relation to the community and the "real" world. Poppy is left without the means to understand her death.

With an inability to understand death in any "real" way, the family is left to create it's own method for conceptualizing grief. Animal metaphors serve as one way to connect the "real" with some other "outside" world; one that Poppy has inhabited and the children need to understand. The most prevalent animal to occur is the cat, interestingly often juxtaposed with an image of Mama. The dog, Kasan, is supposed to hold the spirit of Mama. When Ivah rubs the

tears from the dog's eyes into her own and then looks into the dog's eyes, Ivah sees Mama. Mama's present absence is actually instantiated in the presence of Kasan. Ivah knows to do this because her mother told her: "take the makapiapia and tears from the dog's eyes and wipe that mucus in your eye and you see spirits" (51). Mama has fulfilled the word of the mother by being there when Ivah looks. The unproblematic idea that Kasan *is* Mama is disrupted when the images of the cats are recounted. When Ivah has trench mouth, Blu fills in washing the rice and sings "just like Mama" (24). In the next line, Ivah finds her calico cat Hoppy Creetat. The cat has been mutilated: her whiskers have been cut and her paws slashed. Poppy says that "they cut the whiskers so that the cat couldn't find her way home" and they cut the paws for fun (24). The cat shares these characteristics with Mama: she cannot find her way "home" (to heaven) and she is scarred from the leprosy. After Hoppy's babies are killed, Ivah recounts the incident by saying "The cats are dead. Hoppy cried too much. Mama's dead" (34).

The cat occupies a space in the occult that is particular and curious. The Ogata family, being heavily influenced by Western culture, would be susceptible to this mythology. Some anthropologists argue that the cat has endured as a symbol longer and more widespread than almost any other. Its impact is profound on the human imagination.[6] The occult influence of the cat is prevalent today in superstition. Because of the cat's nocturnal nature and stealth, more mysterious associations have been made about it. The identification of felines with shamans is part of a whole system of beliefs concerning human-animal transformation, having the ability to prowl the spirit world and function as a human in the physical world.[7] This connection is used in *Blu's Hanging*. Mama tells Ivah about Cat Haters. She says,

> "there's a breed who hate them because when cats get old, they know what you talk about, and they walk on hind legs like humans. They act like you, talk like you. Cat Haters are *Human Rats* like the Human Rats across the gully" (34).

Rats hate cats because cats eat rats. They are vulnerable to cats. Human Rats must be vulnerable to cats, also: to the powers they possess in the spirit world. Mama also tells Ivah to be good to cats because they exact revenge for the evil done them (35). The cat occupies a privileged space: it is the world of in-between, not death and not life, not human and not animal, not language and not feeling, yet all of these things at the same time. It could be said to occupy a kind of "unconscious" space, the other language, a kind of dreamworld, which forges a passage between the human and animal worlds.[8] Conversely, humans do not have access to this space, or maybe only possibly through dreams. An affect of this lack is the awareness of death as death. Human language invokes the capacity for death, the exemplary moment of the end of metaphoricity, the dream space, without naming it. The animal, then, cannot experience death as death, nor can it speak: it can only incorporate death unnamed.[9] Therefore, the cat can become the body of death (death incorporated), or, in the case of Blu's Hanging, the body of the mother. This body remains unnamed, stuck in the dreamspace.

The cat is also invoked in a sexual sense. Mitchell refers to Blendaline Reyes's "cat with black, wiry fur" that he sees under her skirt (35). This mixing of metaphors of the cat as an occult being and then distinctly connected with the female is telling. The magical powers that the cat possesses are also manifestly female, again linking Mama and the cat. The cat metaphor bonds death, desire, and even illness as it relates to Mama. Most of the characters in *Blu's Hanging* teeter on the precipice of the desire for death. Poppy, we know, is ever desirous of the

dreamspace, the place behind the veil where he can follow the rope and meet Mama. Poppy's repeated dirge is *Moon River*, which helps Ivah identify "where he wants to go and who the dreammaker is." The death/desire connection is endemic to Western culture. Alongside or inside an abject submission to death there is often an arrogant identification with it. Similarly, while the instabilities, anxieties, and contradictions to be found in subjectivity can be truly self-destructive, they are also the precondition, and the incentive, for a desiring identification with death.[10] While it may be very obvious that Poppy has this desire, other characters exhibit it also. As an act of mourning, the novel may be exhibiting this characteristic as part of the grieving process. The incident referred to in the title, Blu's hanging, is a precarious moment in which Blu experiments with the concept of death. Blu, who on the outside seems to be the most full of life with his constant consumption, devouring of popular culture, and compassion for his siblings, internalizes death more than Ivah or Maisie. His follies are a result of a "death drive." For example, his constant flirtation with the Reyes family and his experimentation with animal torture are indicative of a "dark side." When Blu goes back to the Reyes's after being tied up by Uncle Paolo, he brings Ivah's cat with him, relinquishing the magic associated with it, and the mother connection; essentially, selling his soul for sexual privilege with the Human Rats (161).

When Blu hangs himself, he is acting out the two parts of his nature. He plays the good guy and the bad guy:

> "So I wen' steal um and make pretend I was the bad guy and the good guy wen' catch me. Then I wen' turn into the good guy again and wen' throw the rope wit the noose over one kinda high branch on our mango tree. But when I came the bad guy, I no could reach, so I came the good guy again and wen' pile the cement blocks…" (30-31).

He describes his actions as each character: Blu's agency in the hanging is questionable. We tend to see it as a boy's recklessness. Yet, how could one not realize, at least on some level, that there is a real danger there? Blu goes ahead with the hanging anyway, an unconscious desire for death overruling common sense.

Mama's desire for death is in the novel, also. Mama, as a leper, had to take sulfone drugs in order to cure her leprosy. Being cured, she was able to marry Poppy and have the children. Yet, Mama continues to take the drugs well after her recovery. She had no need for them: she had no relapse or recurrence. Poppy tells Ivah she took the drug out of fear of going back to Kalaupapa (the place of separation), in order to always be with her children. She takes the drugs irrationally. There is the question of whether or not, on some level, Mama takes the drug purposefully. Her desire for death may have rooted itself in a need for the sulfones. Powerlessness is an important factor in vulnerability to loss.[11] Mama loved her children; she took the drugs for them. Yet, Poppy says that she abandoned them anyway. "Love wen' kill my Ella" (145). Love is not complete without death.[12]

The novel expresses an idea that there is an interiority to the world that is only accessible through a dreamworld—animals, illness, and death. The work of mourning operates in this interior space. Mourning consists in recognizing that the dead are only "in us."[13] It is an interiorization, an idealizing incorporation, an introjection, a consumption of the other, one could even say, a devouring of the other. Blu's corpulence is a sign of his melancholia—he is, in effect, in a mad dash to consume the other. Yamanaka describes Blu's overweight corporeality as if it is exploding. Blu's body makes visible much of the communal loss, grief, and desire that

his sisters feel but do not voice. Ivah describes Blu's overeating as a strategy, however, that renders him feminized in the cruel world of adolescent boys:

> "He's gained a ton of weight since Mama died. So much fat that his nipples go in and look like two sad brown eyes pulling down on his fleshy breasts… The boys at school call him Cross-Your-Heart, 18-Hour-Bra-Boy, Totoy Boy, Boy-with-Breasts, and Tit-man" (11).

Ivah recognizes Blu's vulnerability, the harm that he and others inflict upon him, as a form of self-sacrifice.[14] Blu, the character who is arguably the most full of life, practices grief in so many ways: his consumption is a way for him to devour the lost other and also a way for him to inscribe his grief upon his body. Blu has spent his life seeing how his parents "wear" their illness. Blu may be trying to do the same. It is the interiorizing "normal" work of mourning that is the taking within the dead other, total interiorization, described with metaphors of digestion and cannibalism: through the taking within oneself of the body and voice of the other, the other's visage and person, ideally *and* quasi-literally devouring them. Successful mourning assimilates or digests the other. But in failed mourning, the other cannot be assimilated.

The assimilation of Mama is the aim of the children. It is the goal that will conclude their mourning and restore them to "health." Ivah and Blu speak many times of becoming Mama. Besides taking up the household chores, they fill mother roles for each other. At Christmas time, Blu, knowing that Ivah has gotten her period and has no female guidance to show her how to properly care for her situation, asks his friends about the situation and purchases the proper equipment for Ivah. Blu does not want her to feel shame. He says,

> "And since us got no mommy to go buy it, I went to Friendly Market and look for sanaterry belt and pads…and I will buy again for you if you want me to" (101).

Blu is also the only one who remembers to kiss Maisie's forehead like Ma did (38). Ivah begs her mother in her thoughts to become more like her, to be able to do the things she once did. She says, "teach me how to be a mama too" (36).

Yet, all of this does not precondition a successful mourning. In order to be successful, mourning must fail.[15] At the end of the novel, at the moment when it seems that mourning would be most successful, there is a dissolution. The children have proclaimed, "Us all can be Mama" (259). Poppa has completely interiorized Mama, and Maisie is on her way to speaking and writing like a "normal" child. However, in the last moment, when Mama is supposedly instantiated in the children, Ivah leaves. Poppy is asleep, lost to the dreamworld. Mama still has the end of the rope. There is a limit to the interiorization of Mama. Mama becomes an image for the family. Interiorization is never completed and remains impossible.

> Ms. Ito says to Ivah, when they are talking about Ivah's leaving to go to Mid-Pac, "Sometimes, you've got to let go. Otherwise, what you're holding onto suffocates and dies. You kill yourself and the ones you love so much" (134).

Just as Mama needs to release the rope for the Ogata family to successfully complete the mourning process, Ivah, too, needs to let go. To make her family whole, Ivah wraps the rope tight around Poppy, Blu, and Maisie. If Ivah does not release the rope, she may get stuck in the dreamworld; if she lets go, Mama may hold onto Poppy, Blu, and Maisie forever.

End Notes

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[1] Page 146 Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*, Perennial 1997. All page references in the text from this point will refer to this edition.

[2] Most grief literature, whether it is in the field of anthropology, literary theory, or psychology, agrees that the present absence is the fundamental problem in dealing with death. Dollimore, in *Death, Desire, and Loss in Western Culture*, Lacan's concept of lack, and Marx's ideas on those who have and those who do not as the indicator of class are thoughts that feed into this dialectic of death. *In Facing Death: Grief, Mourning, and Death Ritual*, Hockney talks about the real cultural implications of these concepts.

[3] http://molokai.aloha-hawaii.com/hawaii/kalaupapa/

[4] Hockney, Jenny. *Facing Death: Grief, Mourning, and Death Ritual* (113).

[5] Ibid. (134).

[6] Saunders, Nicholas. *The Cult of the Cat* (5).

[7] Ibid. (11).

[8] Lippit, Akira Mizuta. "Magnetic Animal: Derrida, Wildlife, *Animetaphor*" (1113).

[9] Ibid (1118).

[10] Dollimore (xxii).

[11] Hockney (66).

[12] Dollimore (xxii).

[13] Derrida, *Work of Mourning* (11).

[14] Parikh, Crystal. "Blue Hawaii: Asian Hawaiian Cultural Production and Racial Melancholia" (200).

[15] Deutscher, Penelope. "Mourning the Other, Cultural Cannibalism, and the Politics of Friendship (Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray)" .

The introjection/incorporation distinction is said to have limited pertinence, insofar as it represents a distinction between successful and failed mourning. What would a successful mourning be? Derrida exchanges that distinction for a paradoxical formulation in which the success of mourning is said to be its failure, and the failure of mourning, its success (166).

We can only live this experience in the form of an aporia: the aporia of mourning and of prosopopeia, where the possible remains impossible. Where *success fails*. And where faithful interiorization bears the other and constitutes him in me . . . It makes the other a *part* of us . . . and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other because we grieve for him and bear him *in us* . . . And inversely, the *failure succeeds:* an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there in his death, outside of us. (*Mémoires* 35).

These themes come together in Derrida's joint declarations: "Faithful mourning of the other must fail *to succeed/ by succeeding* (it fails, precisely, if it succeeds! it fails because of success!). There is no successful introjection, there is no pure and simple incorporation" ("*Istrice 2*" 321). For Abraham and Torok, normal mourning is the successful introjection of the other, and in their terms, successful mourning is when we "take within oneself the part of oneself contained in what has been lost" ("Introjection-Incorporation" 5). On Derrida's gloss, here I kill the other, interiorize the other totally; therefore, faithful mourning fails if it succeeds.

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