Michèle Roberts, author of twelve novels (as well as three volumes of poetry, two short story collections and a memoir) and currently Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, has stated that much of her fiction is concerned with rescuing women “or other ‘lost voices’, people who’ve been written out of history” (Newman 121). Her fifth novel, *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) - recently republished as *Delusion* (2008) - is a historical novel that reflects Roberts’s prevailing concerns: the damaging impact of patriarchy, the social and psychological facets of female oppression, the enduring effect of childhood fears and desires, the workings of the unconscious, and the importance of imagination. Like all her work, *In the Red Kitchen* reimagines the lives of women by rewriting patriarchal narratives, but it also marks the beginning of her focus on historical figures, a shift that entails a questioning of history itself. Various critics have discussed Roberts’s treatment of history in relation to this novel.¹ This essay builds on existing criticism by proposing that *In the Red Kitchen* not only constructs counter-histories that contest a dominant version of the past but also explores how cultural memory is retrieved and transmitted. Further, I show that Roberts underlines connections between the personal and the political by paralleling problems encountered in the recovery of women’s history with the difficulties faced by her female protagonists as they struggle to recover, and recover from, their own painful pasts.

Reading the novel as a trauma narrative, I propose that the central characters are each haunted by a past they are unable to acknowledge consciously and that the spirits and specters that appear to them are symptoms of psychic distress. Marianne
Hirsch notes that “much of the work on trauma and memory has been resistant to
gender differentiation and has not been overtly informed by feminist thinking”
(“Marked” 77). Published when trauma was emerging as a concept in literary and
cultural studies, *In the Red Kitchen* anticipates and addresses this critical lacuna by
presenting patriarchy as source of trauma for women and by asserting a specifically
feminist mode of recovering the past on both an individual and collective level. By
exploring the part that the unconscious and the imagination play in retrieving a past
that is unavailable, the novel bears out Roberts’s belief that “memory and the
imagination are crucially linked inside some kind of ‘inner space’” (*Food* 125). As *In
the Red Kitchen* demonstrates, this belief enables women to become the agents as well
as the subjects of history, ensuring their survival in both personal and historical
contexts.

**The Phallusy of History**

*In the Red Kitchen* interweaves the lives of three central protagonists: Hat, an ancient
Egyptian princess (based on the female pharaoh Hatshepsut), Flora Milk, a Victorian
medium (modeled on Florence Cook), and Hattie King, a cookery book writer living
in late twentieth-century London. Although famous, few details are known about the
two women who inspired Roberts’s historical characters, their exceptional lives
having been either unrecorded or erased from public record. Hat anticipates
obliteration from history when she dreams that details of her life, recorded on her
tomb, are defaced, leaving her, like her historical counterpart, “unwritten. Written out.
Written off” (133). In her influential study of Victorian spiritualism, *The Darkened
Room* (published the year before Roberts’s novel), Alex Owen notes that a similar fate
befell spiritualists like Cook: “women have been virtually written out of a movement
in which they originally held a revered and privileged place” (Introduction, n.p.). Further, what is known of Cook comes from male observers: journalists reporting her séances or scientists investigating spiritualism, most notably William Crookes, who recorded a series of experiments undertaken to ascertain the validity of the medium’s powers following allegations of fraud (and which form the basis of Roberts’s imaginative reconstruction of Florence Cook’s life). Indicating that the record of female lives has been overlooked or controlled by male custodians of the past, at the end of the novel Flora’s autobiography lies unread in a box sealed by “masking tape” (138), whisked away from Hattie’s inquisitive eyes by a male relative. However, by creating a series of first person narrators, Roberts allows those hidden by history to speak, producing a woman-centred “her-story” that refutes the “phallusy” of history, a fallacious version of the past that supports a patriarchal order in the present.

At the same time, the novel is skeptical about the possibility of offering an accurate account of the past. “Truth,” it suggests, is a grand narrative defended by patriarchal institutions, namely, science and religion. As a scientist, William Preston, Flora’s patron, styles himself as a “seeker after truth” (95) and Minny, his wife, consults “Reverend Butler’s little book” in order to ascertain “the great truths of eternity” (4). Likewise, Sister Julian chastises Hattie for “making up stories” at school (135), and her insistence that she learn “a regard for the truth” indicates a binary opposition between truth and fiction that the novel deconstructs (136).

In addition, Roberts’s postmodern narrative employs multiple voices to stress the indeterminacy of historical truth and uses unreliable narration to question the authority of history. For example, Minny calls Flora an “angel” (34), while Rosina, Flora’s sister, condemns her as a monster (1). While the views of the higher classes have traditionally been privileged by history, the authority that accompanies Minny’s
status as a bourgeois lady is undermined by discrepancies between her letters and Flora’s narrative: Minny is convinced that she is “aiding” her protégé (69), but Flora complains that she “suffers” from Minny’s philanthropy (60), and Minny’s belief that Flora “has no secrets” is contradicted by Flora’s affair with her husband (66). It is ironic that Minny wishes to protect Flora from “unscrupulous persons only too ready to be in close proximity to a young, beautiful and innocent girl” because such a threat is posed by her supposedly respectable, middle-class husband. Although Minny presents herself as a devoted wife and mother, her own respectability is called into question by suggestions that she is guilty of adultery and infanticide. Like her patronizing treatment of Flora, the inconsistencies in Minny’s account of the séance betray her snobbery: she claims to experience “that divine feeling which unites women’s hearts across the barriers of class and creed” (52), but moments later shrinks from Mrs. Milk’s face, which is “so very red and coarse” (52). The fallibility of Minny’s memory is another factor that makes her narrative unreliable: although she insists that her account of the séance is “exact,” “sober and factual” (47), she later admits that she cannot recall the names of two women in attendance (50).

Flora and Rosina are equally unreliable narrators. While Rosina claims to tell the “truth” when she denounces her sister as a fraud (1), the revelation that Flora blocked her career as a medium and stole her lover suggests that her defamatory remarks are motivated by a desire for revenge. If Rosina’s version of events is shaped by self-interest, Flora’s is shaped by a lack of self-awareness: she insists that she does not weep at her father’s funeral but, tasting salt, suddenly realizes, “I am crying” (2). Because the multiple narratives have to be read in relation to each other, Roberts illustrates that history is constructed rather than recorded, and always subject to interpretation.
By fictionalizing historical figures, the novel also blurs the boundary between history and fiction, pointing to the creative processes at work in all accounts of the past. The fictional status of history is further suggested by Hattie’s first cookery book, *Leaves from a Convent Kitchen Garden*, as the nuns’ recipes it records - “kidneys in red wine, brains in butter, liver in Calvados with apples and cream” (12) - contrast her memory of eating “bones and gristle and fat, sour greens, soapy carrots” at her convent school (11). Reflecting the conservatism of the heritage industry, Hattie’s book is a success because it hits “just the right note of nostalgic chic” (12). Like *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, a bestseller throughout the 1980s, it romanticizes a putative pre-feminist past, harking back to an era when the traditional structures of gender and class were still firmly in place. Hattie’s book thus highlights how the past is constructed to serve the status quo.

**Spiritualism and Subversion**

Roberts’s concern with the recovery of lost voices is reflected in the novel’s use of spiritualism: the Victorian movement founded on the belief that the spirits of the dead communicate with the living through mediums. In her portrayal of Flora Milk, Roberts echoes and extends established views of the function and significance of nineteenth-century mediumship. Several critics have proposed that spiritualism appealed to spirited women, and offered those dissatisfied with the limits of their gender role a means of escape and empowerment. As the “Author’s Note” makes clear, Roberts draws on the work of Alex Owen, one of the first feminist critics to suggest that spiritualism provided women with a covert means of “circumventing rigid nineteenth-century class and gender norms” (4).
Roberts’s novel complements Owen’s historical analysis of spiritualism in a number of ways. The qualities that Flora requires to be a medium, receptivity and passivity, epitomize normative femininity: “I am open, and I am empty” (63); “I am a hollow stick the spirits blow messages down” (92). Indeed, Minny’s comparison of Flora to an “angel” evokes the Victorian model of womanhood (34), Coventry Patmore’s “Angel of the House.” Yet, spiritualism, which brings fame and fortune, also permits Flora independence, enabling her to resist (at least initially, at least partially) the conventional female identities that she abhors: “I don’t want to be a wife or a mother” (76). Spiritualism likewise fulfils Flora’s “ardent longings for a better life” (67). Refusing to become a “dogsbody and drudge” (32), she dreams of wearing “ballgowns with real bustles” (28), and her powers as a medium make her “worthy of the respect one gives a lady” (81). Spiritualism thus enables Flora to transgress her gender role and class position.

Whereas Janet Oppenheim views Victorian spiritualism as a response to the decline of religion in the face of science, an attempt to counter a Victorian crisis of faith (111), Pamela Thurschwell proposes that psychic phenomena such as mediumship helped to spawn psychoanalysis. She quotes Adam Philips to elaborate on the relationship between the two: “sexuality and the unconscious were the new, scientifically prestigious words for the occult, of that which is beyond our capacity for knowledge, for the weird, unaccountable effects people have on each other. In psychoanalysis, the supernatural returns as the erotic” (Thurschwell 118). Similarly, Roberts suggests that spiritualism enabled the covert expression of female desire. Like many Victorian mediums, Flora is young, pretty, and adored by her audience. Minny comments that Mr. Andrews’s conduct is “governed more by admiration for the young medium’s lovely person than by reverence for my description of the sacred
messages she imparted” (81) and, confirming Rosina’s assertion that Flora is loved by “the ladies as much as the gentlemen” (1), Minny is not immune to Flora’s “maidenly charms” (48). Illustrating that séances “oozed sexuality” and authorized otherwise impermissible acts of physical intimacy (Owen 218), Minny searches Flora before a performance, paying particular attention to her “underclothes” and admiring her “form” which, she confesses, gives her “no small pleasure” (48). Minny describes herself as Flora’s “affectionate” patroness, calling her “My darling,” and convinces herself that their private séances produce an “intimacy” (65). Thus, In the Red Kitchen precedes by nine years Sarah Waters’s neo-Victorian bestseller Affinity (1999), which also underlines the opportunities spiritualism presented for the covert staging of same-sex desire.

A sexual subtext is equally palpable in Flora’s relationship with William. Flora finds William “handsome” and notes his “full red lips” (60). Despite this attraction, there is a suggestion that, having been denounced as a fraud, she implicitly offers herself to him sexually in return for the testimonial that she requires to save her reputation. However, because sexual purity is integral to the ideal of Victorian womanhood and respectability is a crucial component of her professional status, Flora’s sexual advances can only be made obliquely. Flora offers to submit herself to scientific tests, to William’s “penetrating” gaze and “probing” questions, asserting that she “will do anything” to prove her powers (62, emphasis added). William’s eyes flicker over her “mouth,” “throat” and “breast” and Flora trembles with “excitement” as he holds her hand (63). Taboo desire is expressed through body language: “I run my tongue over my lips, to moisten them” (63).

Owen proposes that spirit materialization allowed for a remarkably explicit enactment of the forbidden and that spirits were given permission to behave in ways
that would have been unacceptable in adult women (216). Reflecting this, Hattie, the spirit that Flora manifests, performs a provocative dance, exposes herself and then has sex with William: “Hattie is shameless,” Flora comments, “because she is a spirit” (122). Like Owen, who contends that “spiritualist practice bought to light the hidden and repressed components of the psyche,” revealing “the subversive otherness of the unconscious” (204; 226), Roberts presents Hattie as Flora’s double, the “Other” who embodies the repressed or socially unacceptable aspects of the self. In a state of semi-consciousness, Flora projects what is forbidden (female desire) onto a persona: “Flora would never do what Hattie does. Flora is a good girl” (123). Thus, Flora simultaneously endorses and subverts Victorian ideas about female sexuality.

**Spiritualism and Trauma**

However, unlike Owen, Roberts suggests that spiritualism signifies unconscious pain as well as protest. While *In the Red Kitchen* points to the medium’s potential for transgression, echoing the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, it also presents supernatural voices and visions as symptoms of trauma, specifically the trauma of child abuse. Ferenczi believed that in the struggle to avoid sexual violence an abused child could develop an acute sensitivity, learning to read other people’s minds like a medium (Masson 184). As Thurschwell explains, in Ferenczi’s view, childhood sexual trauma can thus initiate clairvoyant or telepathic hypersensitivity (146). Just as Roberts’s representation of spiritualism anticipates that of Waters, so it also precedes (by fifteen years) Hilary Mantel’s critically acclaimed novel *Beyond Black* (2005), which likewise explores the relationship between mediumship and sexual trauma.

Shoshana Felman defines trauma as an overwhelming experience that cannot be fully apprehended or processed. Traumatic occurrences are those that “have
not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference” (Felman and Laub 5). Because trauma is, in Cathy Caruth’s terms, “unclaimed experience” (10), it cannot be referenced in any straightforward way. Although never stated directly, Flora’s narrative suggests that she has been sexually abused by her father: “that lap in the exhausted armchair can sometimes be safely climbed into. Power over those hands, that lap, that kissing mouth, it comes and goes” (18, emphasis added). However, repressing painful memories of the past, Flora continues to adore her father, whom she describes as “my dear one” (3). Flora admits that her childhood memories are incomplete, especially those that evoke pain, and repression is indicated not only by her delayed acknowledgement of tears at the funeral but also by the fact that she cannot recall details of the distressing episode when, as a child, she was punished for being naughty by being shut in a cupboard, and subsequently forgotten: “Only after a long time did someone come and let me out, one of the neighbours I think it was, I don’t remember” (2).

Flora’s trauma is compounded by the revelation that her father never wanted her to be born and encouraged her mother to induce a miscarriage. While Flora receives this upsetting news at her father’s funeral, it is not revealed until later in the narrative due to repression: “terror wants to be wax plugging my ears” (125). In the moment when the news is first delivered, Flora focuses on a worm destroyed by a thrush, symbolizing her mother’s attempt to abort her pregnancy: “one dart of the sharp beak and the bloodied broken body is tossed onto the bright green grass” (2). The phallic beak also suggests sexual assault, like other disturbing images that pervade the funeral scene, articulating Flora’s unconscious memories of incest: “Ivy snakes everywhere, grasping strongly at stone crosses, hairy suckers reaching down
through fissures in granite slabs to claw at the rotting bodies beneath” (3). The unspeakability of trauma is symbolised by the “harsh black mesh” of the funeral veil that “stretches tightly across” her mouth (2).

Haunting and possession are metaphors commonly invoked to describe the effect of trauma. Laurie Vickroy suggests that, for a traumatised subject, “the past lingers unresolved” (12), and Caruth asserts that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (5). Flora compares mediumship to “possession” (91), although the novel suggests that she is possessed not by spirits but her own traumatic past. Reflecting that trauma, Flora finds communicating with the spirits painful: “It hurts. It frightens me” (92). The onset of Flora’s visions at her father’s funeral and the appearance of spirits a week later, on his birthday, indicate that he is the cause of her pain (76). Further implying that Flora’s psychic powers are related to her father, she feels his spirit hovering behind her the first time that she uses a ouija board (45). Although Flora claims to mourn her father, she also feels “bile rising” at his funeral (2), and later states that Hattie “keeps the secret, that Flora is angry” (128). Thus, the spirits that Flora conjures up represent the return of the repressed, a manifestation of her unspeakable rage and pain.

Trauma is also suggested by the locations in which Flora manifests spirits. She conducts séances at the same kitchen table from which her mother repeatedly jumped, trying to terminate her pregnancy, and conjures up Hattie from a cupboard, enabling Flora to disappear. That the desire for invisibility is a common response to terror is demonstrated by her childhood response to maternal disapproval: she wants to “vanish, to disappear” (130). Further, Flora unconsciously projects the painful knowledge that her mother tried to abort her pregnancy onto Rosalie, William and Minny’s dead daughter, who, speaking through Flora, announces, “Mother, you
smothered me” (94). Flora is haunted by Rosalie because she represents her own unprocessed grief: “the wailing surrounds me as though the miserable baby were in the room” (90-91).

**The Repetition of the Past**

Caruth argues that one symptom of trauma is “the unwitting enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (2). As trauma that has not been integrated into conscious knowledge returns, demanding recognition, repetition denotes psychic distress. During performances that feature full-form materialization Flora returns to the same “cabinet” in which she was locked as a child (48). The sense of paralysis fundamental to traumatic experience is recreated when, in order to discount trickery, she is tied up. Moreover, Flora’s incestuous relationship with her father is restaged in her liaison with William, who notes that he is old enough to be her father and assumes a paternal role: “I certainly should not like either of my daughters to be in your predicament” (62). When William forces himself on Hattie, Flora’s spirit guide, she resists, insisting “I’m a good girl daddy” (122). Judith Herman notes that an abused girl often prefers to believe that abuse is not taking place and, to keep the abuse secret from herself, develops dissociative states (*Trauma* 43; 102). In an attempt to protect herself from pain and helplessness, Flora enters a trance-like state and splits herself in two, creating Hattie: “William puts his fingers inside Hattie, while Flora lies unconscious on the sofa next door…. Flora knows nothing” (122-23). Flora unconsciously invents Hattie to “comfort and sustain me, hold me… hold me up and hold my pain” (131).

At La Salpetrière (a fictional reconstruction of Charcot’s clinic at La Salpêtrière), the relationship between male doctors and “their darlings” (128), the
female patients, mirrors that between father and daughter: Flora undresses and dances for the doctors “just like she dances for her daddy” (127). Flora later marries George, a man who resembles her father, and when George dies Flora expresses her fury for her father by destroying her wedding photographs: “My grief eased itself a little through jabbing at grey shiny cardboard, ripping my mouth in two, crushing George’s face between my hands” (139). Repetition occurs not just in Flora’s own life but also between generations of women in her family. Like her mother before her, Flora is forced to marry a man who resents her because she is pregnant, and her daughter grows up feeling inadequately nurtured by a mother who never wanted her to be born. Subsequently, Lily, like Flora, is “angry about the past” (141). Repetition thus indicates that those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it.

Rather than indicating an ahistorical view of a universal patriarchy, parallels between protagonists located in different times and places underline the persistence of the past in the present. Just as the absence of chapters merges the multiple narratives into one, various factors connect the women: Flora’s spirit guide is an ancient Egyptian princess, and Hattie writes a cookery book inspired by the Tutankhamun exhibition catalogue; at points, both women wear a “turban” that makes them resemble Hat (57; 96); while Hat is a princess, Sister Julian describes Hattie as a “spoilt little princess” (135). Hattie not only lives in the house that was formerly inhabited by Flora and works in the Hannibal Dining Rooms, where Flora meets Mr. Potson, but the two women also “become” ancient Egyptian royals, employing fantasy / phantasy to feel empowered. Like Hat, who declares herself a man in order to take the throne, as a child Hattie wishes to be an ancient Egyptian “king” (135). Hattie’s association of power with men evokes the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, whose masculine image was satirized in the television show
Spitting Image, which depicted her wearing a pin-striped suit and smoking a cigar. Such links point to the enduring power of patriarchy, regardless of its socio-historically specific forms.

Parallels between Flora and Hattie likewise point to the persistence of patriarchy. Both women perform roles devised by men: Flora mimes the role of hysteric at La Salpetrière – “I copy some of the gestures of the girls in the white nightdress in the photographs” (127) – and, working as a prostitute, Hattie discovers that she is a good “actress” who “could be the degraded angel, the ever-welcoming mother, the tart with the heart of gold, the severe nanny, whatever the men required” (14). Illustrating that patriarchy punishes those who defy the norms of gender, when they refuse to conform to a male-defined feminine ideal, both women are accused of monstrosity: Rosina condemns Flora as a “monster in silk skirts” (1), and Hattie’s lover accuses her of being a “feminine monster” (103).

The most significant connection between the three main protagonists, and one that underlines the continuing power of male hegemony, is their status as victims of sexual abuse. Like Flora, both Hat and Hattie are traumatised by a painful past that produces unconscious symptoms of distress. Hat, the ancient Egyptian princess, becomes her father’s lover and then his wife. Although she does not repress knowledge of this incestuous relationship, Hat cannot “claim” it in a psychoanalytic sense because she is unable to conceive it as abuse. This is partly because, as Jack Goody explains, there was no taboo against father-daughter incest amongst pharaohs in ancient Egypt (129). Also, Hat realizes that knowledge is linked to language – writing makes scribes “wise” (24) – and that language is man-made: writing is a male preserve, and Hat’s father dons the guise of Thoth, the god of writing. Thus,
patriarchal systems of language and knowledge prevent Hat from acknowledging her abuse.

Although Hat is unable to acknowledge her abuse and ostensibly rejoices in a relationship that brings power and status, her narrative nonetheless intimates trauma. She compares her sexual initiation to death and expresses terror despite her assertion that she does not feel afraid: when her father appears dressed as Thoth, she focuses on his “sharp bird claws” and a “harsh jutting beak” (72), just as Flora concentrates on the “sharp beak” of a bird as it destroys a worm at her father’s funeral (2). In addition, Hat’s narrative contains gaps created by what is unspeakable: “No. I can’t say it. I can’t bear to say it” (133). A reference to “nightmares” likewise indicates unconscious distress (133). Further, the “O” (146) that Hat becomes when she is erased from history invokes Breuer’s patient Anna O. (Bertha Pappenheim), whose case history he published with Freud in Studies on Hysteria. Breuer’s analysis of Anna O. led Freud to argue in “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” an essay outlining his seduction theory, that hysteria was caused by childhood sexual trauma.6

Hattie, the contemporary protagonist, expresses a sense of vulnerability that suggests trauma early on in her narrative: “I know that the deep dark pit waits just in front of my feet; I have fallen into it often enough” (27). However, having repressed memories of sexual abuse by her uncle, she cannot confront the past: “I never let myself think of my aunt and uncle” (26); “Mine has been a history of breakages, of losses. I want to forget all that” (101). Although Hattie is abused by her uncle, rather than her father, he embodies both roles, like Charles Redburn in the nineteenth-century strand of the narrative: Redburn professes “paternal” feelings for Flora and adopts an “avuncular” tone in his letters to her (67). Hattie is further traumatized by a miscarriage, and, as her response to this tragedy demonstrates, repression functions as
a self-protective strategy: “it’s not only other people who would prefer me not mention it. I myself don’t want to have to feel it” (88). As a cook, she uses food as “a drug to dull memory and pain” and, as painting over old wallpaper in the house that she is renovating symbolizes, she works hard to make the past “disappear” (87; 26). Like Flora, Hattie is unconsciously compelled to repeat the pattern of abuse and falls into prostitution without being fully aware of her actions: “I didn’t admit to myself what I was up to” (14). Her inability to name the act of prostitution underlines the unspeakability of trauma: “I didn’t call it prostitution. I simply charged men for sex” (14). Likewise, having been taught that incest is a sin “too wicked to mention” (87), as a child Hattie is unable to tell a priest about her abuse because she “couldn’t get the words out” (137).

Hattie exhibits a range of traumatic symptoms: she never loses sight of the door, sleeps with a knife under her pillow, and has recurrent nightmares about a burglar with “wobbly hands” (72), “who tiptoes upstairs in slippered feet and whispers to me to hush” (40), or waits “under my bed in the dark” (135). Towards the end of the narrative, her aversion to answering the phone is explained as another response to trauma: abused by her uncle in the dark, Hattie “tried to pretend that he was just a voice, like on the telephone” (136). Her passion for cookery and DIY can also be read as signs of psychic distress. Vickroy observes that an attempt to create and maintain a sense of agency and order is a common strategy of protagonists in trauma fiction (24). Cookery endows Hattie with a sense of agency and transformative powers – cooking, her hands “destroy, repair, create” (137) - and composing recipes “I unmade and remade the world” (87). Similarly, renovating her house reflects a desire to rebuild her life and impose order on chaos: “I want to create a pattern out of the disorder of this house” (101).
While Hattie, like Flora, claims psychic powers, a “capacity for telepathy” (39), the ghostly figures that she hears and sees around her house can also be read as symptoms of trauma. Ferenczi proposes that for the sexually abused subject, who becomes hypersensitive to paranormal phenomena, hallucinations are “an illusionary working through of real events” (Thurschwell 147). Likewise, Caruth states that, although repressed, trauma “continues to make an appearance,” often in the “delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Despite Hattie’s attempt to push away the past, it “leaps back …in flashes” (17) and, like the sight of the old house standing “strongly” beneath the surface of the new, these apparitions represent “an insistent memory that will keep breaking through” (54). Hattie admits “feeling haunted” (40), but refuses to “believe in ghosts” (40), suggesting that she is haunted not by the dead but by her own history. For example, Hattie’s vision of a young girl, blue with “unspoken and unspeakable rage” (103), holding her breath in the dark as the bedroom door opens and a man prepares to enter, is an unacknowledged memory of childhood: “A haunting I held at arm’s length like a photograph that I wanted to destroy” (104).

Several critics propose that Hat, Flora and Hattie connect and communicate across the boundaries of time and space. However, while Flora appears to see Hat and Hattie appears to see Flora, the novel calls the veracity of these visions into question, contradicting what seems apparent and generating a sense of epistemological uncertainty. The figure that Hattie encounters in the basement and former kitchen may resemble Flora, but she also represents both Hattie’s unborn baby and Hattie’s younger self. Like Flora, who has her first vision of Hat in the cemetery that resembles an “Ancient Egyptian city” and later manifests an Egyptian princess (116), Hattie’s unconscious is shaped by her surroundings: it produces a figure
dressed in Victorian clothes because she represents the past, and Hattie lives in a Victorian house. The first time that Hattie sees the young woman in the basement that is suddenly “brightly lit” by “red flames” (56), she seems to be witnessing Flora as she makes contact with the spirit world using the ouija board. However, words uttered by the figure that Hattie observes suggest that she represents herself: “It’s you, she stammered: it’s you” (57). Further, this vision echoes Hattie’s first, in which she sees a giantess cooking in a “cavernous underground kitchen” (11), a figure with whom Hattie identifies: “I…dreamed I was the big woman in the warm red kitchen underground” (16). Indicating that this figure also represents a longed-for child, Hattie later attributes her vision to pregnancy: “My desire for a daughter getting the better of me” (57).

The second vision, which occurs after Hattie’s miscarriage, is a symptom of mourning. Hattie enters the basement “angry” and full of “hate” (104), feelings that commonly accompany grief, and shortly before the figure appears, wishes that she drove a chariot like Elijah’s, “with knives and flames on the wheels” (88). While this wish expresses fury, the reference to Elijah, a biblical character who raised the dead, also communicates her desire to restore her child, which she does unconsciously through the vision. Although the pieces of “broken type” with which the young girl plays suggest Flora (105), who plays with type as a child, they also evoke Hattie’s baby, who is described as “broken” (73), and Hattie herself, whose history is one of “breakages” (101). Further, the figure identifies herself as “Hattie,” and expresses the feelings of hatred that consume Hattie after her miscarriage, through the words that she spells out: “HATTIE. HATE. I” (105). The age of the girl, who is “ten years old or so” (104), suggests that it cannot be Flora because she sees Hattie - “Finding my face looking into hers, she dropped her bits of type, put a hand up to shield herself”
(105) - whereas Flora does not “see” Hat(tie) until after her father’s death when she is sixteen (32). As Hattie is eight when she tries to tell the chaplain about her abuse, the age of the girl who appears in the basement further suggests that she represents Hattie’s younger self.

The third appearance of the girl once more articulates the sorrow that stems from both incest and miscarriage. Hattie follows the sound of sobbing to the basement, where she finds a girl locked in a cupboard. While the cupboard suggests Flora, who was locked in a cupboard as a child, it also evokes Hattie who attempted to tell a priest about her incestuous relationship with her uncle in a confessional that was “like a little cupboard” (137). Although the distraught girl’s “sodden blue rag” further suggests Flora (119), who bathes herself in a blue light that “washes me out, replaces me” (120), it likewise points to Hattie, who holds “pale blue” rosary beads during confession (137). Hattie even remarks that she feels the girl’s pain “as keenly as though it were my own” (118). As cupboards and ovens are conflated in Hattie’s first vision, which occurs in the “cupboard-like, oven-like confessional” (11), and as Hattie compares the “oven” to a “womb” (thinking of Mary, she states, “Christ leapt in her womb as the bread leapt in the oven” [12]), the image of the girl in the cupboard suggests her unborn child. The subject of Hattie’s initial vision - a giantess cooking an “omelette” in an “underground kitchen” (11) - also suggests fertility through an allusion to eggs. Hattie’s vision of the girl in the cupboard thus represents an unconscious attempt to restore the longed-for daughter lost through miscarriage. As Hattie states, “I wanted her to be mine” (119).

All three protagonists face psychological annihilation, making them, in Suzette Henke’s terms, shattered subjects. The sequence of words that signals Hat’s erasure from history implies psychological breakdown:
As a symbol of circularity (indicative of the traumatised subject’s compulsion to repeat the past) and the vagina (often referred to as a “hole” and perceived in terms of absence and negation by Freud), “O” implicitly links Hat’s breakdown to sexual trauma. Similarly, Flora is “shattered” by the spirits that visit her - “I break up into little pieces” (92) - and Hattie’s history of “breakages” leaves her in “bits” (101). Like the image of broken type, the fragmented structure of the three narratives, which constantly interrupt each other, reflects the fragmentation of the self that results from trauma.

Recovery: Remembering and Healing

In spite of the shattering effects of trauma, memory offers a route to recovery. Trauma theorists propose that the pain of the past must be relived - that is, remembered - to be relieved. As Dori Laub states, “One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (Felman and Laub 63). Unable to claim her trauma, peace eludes
Hat: “I am a spirit condemned to roam for ever through the dark, never to find a resting place” (133). Flora forces herself to recall the painful events at La Salpetrière, where she is betrayed by William: “I will force myself to write down what happened. I will go back in there, and remember” (120). However, her capacity to confront distressing experiences is limited. When Flora is reminded that her father wanted “to get rid of the baby” (125), she attempts to avoid the painful knowledge that he willed her destruction by covering her face with a cloth, “So that I can make myself go away” (126). Further, as the image of her ripped mouth on the wedding photograph that she destroys indicates, repression prevails, leaving Flora unable to articulate the truth about her incestuous relationship with her father: “I put all my pain and grief into the wall, sealing it up hard and smooth as ice, and I leave it there” (131). Thus, Flora lives through, but never learns to live with, trauma. Consequently, at the end of her life, she still “hurts” and feels full of “sorrow” (141). Likewise, both Hat and Flora are reduced to “nothing” (4; 146).

However, as her name indicates (Hattie King: the reverse of King Hat), Roberts’s most modern protagonist turns the tragic fate of her historical predecessors around. Encouraged by her lover “to confront the pain of loss” (103), Hattie begins the process of healing when she releases the sobbing girl from the kitchen cupboard, symbolizing the end of repression. Following this scene, Hattie prepares to confront the pain of her past directly: “Inside me was my childhood, alive and demanding, the little girl I’d been frightened of giving space to because of what she made me remember. Now it was time to remember” (119). Illustrating that “remembering involves re-membering” (Roberts, *Food* 125), Hattie dismembers and re-members her uncle. Her fantasy of feeding her abuser’s dismembered limbs to the fire in the kitchen range allows Hattie to both destroy and redeem him: “My task is to purify
him. I have to burn him, to burn off the monstrous bits he doesn’t need, the growths that disfigure him: his second pair of hands, his second mouth and tongue, his second penis” (137). Reflecting her own sense of renewal, Hattie’s uncle emerges from the fire “newborn” (137), and the theme of rebirth is echoed in the revelation that Hattie is pregnant again. This desire for renewal is shared by Hat and Flora before her. When Hat’s father dies, she reflects on the process of mummification: “My father’s body will have been made whole again…His body will be made anew” (37). Similarly, comparing death to sleep at her father’s funeral, Flora comments, “he will rise again, his body will be glorious and new” (3). However, whereas Hat and Flora locate change in the future, Hattie enacts change in the present, breaking the disempowering patterns of the past.

**Repetition and Change**

Like their relationship with the father, the characters’ attitude to the figure of the mother establishes a pattern of repetition and change, which points to women’s progressive emancipation from patriarchy. In *Father-Daughter Incest*, Herman argues that incest occurs most commonly in families where a patriarchal conception of gender, which privileges men over women, prevails: abusive fathers are “perfect patriarchs” and male superiority is unquestioned (71). Underlining that trauma is gendered, Roberts likewise presents incest as the product of patriarchy, which encourages daughters to idolize the father and denigrate the mother. For example, fathers are repeatedly conceived as gods: Hat believes that, after death, her father will “join the gods and become one of them” (35), and the first time that they have sex he presents himself as a god; at La Salpêtrière, Flora declares that Dr Charcot, a paternal figure, is “God” (125); Hattie, who is taught by the church to conceive God as her
“real Father” (86), compares her uncle (and adoptive father) to Christ: “He is the 
body, he is the blood” (137).

In contrast to the special bond that Hat and Flora share with their fathers, 
which develops out of a desire for the power that he represents, mother-daughter 
relations are characterized by hostility. Hat repudiates her mother, denying the part 
that she played in her birth: “It was my Father in his divine form who begot and 
birthed me; his earthly queen being merely the vessel for his power” (54). Just as Hat 
has her father’s lover (a potential step-mother) assassinated, so Flora wishes her 
mother, a rival for her father’s affection, “dead” (128). Likewise, she imagines that 
William, a surrogate father-figure, wants to be rid of Minny, who expresses 
“maternal” feelings for Flora (145): “Mincing Minny. Daddy would like to get rid of 
her but can’t say so” (128). Similarly, Hattie expresses antagonistic feelings when she 
blames her mother for her miscarriage.

Herman points out that abused daughters turn to fathers for love because they 
feel “deprived of maternal affection” (Father 80). Hat and Hattie grow up motherless, 
and Flora is not only the product of an unwanted pregnancy but also feels neglected 
by a mother who is overwhelmed by domestic duties. The absence of maternal 
nurturance is also reflected in Minny’s letters to her mother, which continually look 
forward to a “long-deferred visit” (146). In interview, Roberts has discussed 
adolescence and mother-daughter alienation in terms of trauma (Newman 127), 
evoking what Irigaray terms women’s state of déréliction: the sense of abandonment 
that results when the female subject moves from the Imaginary, a psychic realm 
associated with the mother, to the Symbolic, the patriarchal order dominated by the 
Law of the Father (Irigaray 67-69). As Clare Hanson notes, Roberts’s writing is 
driven by a quest for the lost mother, a quest that has both personal and political
significance (230-31). While both Hat and Flora flirt with and dance seductively for their fathers, the novel suggests that the daughter’s incestuous desire for the father masks a more profound but taboo longing for the mother and maternal nurturance. Hat describes her father in maternal terms - “it is my father who carries me close to his heart, who bears me on his lap, who nurses me on the milk of his wisdom, who nourishes me with his great learning” (53). Moreover, when Hat’s father dies, his body is embalmed and wrapped in linen, thereby transforming her daddy into a mummy. Flora’s surnames - first “Milk” then “Cotter” (evoking a baby’s cot) - suggest a similar desire for maternal nurturance, and Flora’s fantasy about being her father’s “sword” (that is, penis) suggests an unconscious desire to be reunited with her mother: “One night she dreams that thus she can go where he goes: into the warm sweet mother” (128). Indicating that attention from the father offers “compensation” for what is lacking in her relationship with her mother (Herman, Father 83), cuddling her father, Flora focuses on “How far away Mother is” (30). Flora’s desire for maternal nurturance finds unconscious expression in the plea that she “channels” from Rosalie, “Mother me” (95), and in later life Flora admits that she fears the loss of her mother: “Mother is old. Flora is frightened she will die” (127).

While Hat and Flora repudiate the mother, Hattie restores the mother-daughter bond that is, according to Herman, essential to healing in the context of incest (Father 145). In contrast to Flora, Hattie longs for a daughter. However, her connection with a woman in a supermarket demonstrates that a potentially empowering mother-daughter bond need not be biological. Standing in front of the cleaning products, unable to remember what she came to buy, a woman offers Hattie some advice about furniture polish: “That’s the one you want, love. Not this one. That’s beeswax, see? Much better. That’s what my daughter-in-law always says, you can’t beat beeswax” (89).
The value of the maternal bond is indicated by the fact that Hattie later uses the polish (which is not only recommended by a maternal figure but also evokes, through its reference to bees, matriarchy) to restore a “deeply scratched” table that reflects her damaged sense of self: “Some of the scratches disappeared” (90). As Roberts has stated that the house represents the maternal body in her fiction, Hattie’s journey from homelessness to home also reflects her symbolic acceptance of the mother (Bastida Rodriguez 99). Hat, Flora and Hattie all face literal and metaphorical homelessness but overcome the threat of exile with varying degrees of success. Hat ends up homeless: “I have lost the carved and painted house that sheltered my remains” (133). Flora saves enough money to buy her house, but it remains an unheimlich (uncanny/unhomely) space haunted by spirits. Hattie, however, finds a place of safety and makes herself a home in the house that she restores with her lover and in which they prepare to welcome their new baby.

Testimony

Hattie’s recovery rests not only on the rejection of patriarchy, implicit in her affirmation of the mother-daughter bond, but also on her ability to testify. Trauma theorists assert that testimony plays a vital role in the therapeutic process: to “know” one’s story, it is necessary to “tell” one’s story (Felman and Laub 78). As Vickroy points out, testimony is particularly important in relation to crimes like incest that are often either unwitnessed or denied (6). Hat never manages to translate traumatic experience into language, and the result is catastrophic. As Laub states, the “loss of the capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well” (Felman and Laub 82). Hence Hat becomes “NOTHING”
(146). Just as Flora employs body language to express taboo desires, like a hysteric, she expresses trauma through a corporeal discourse - “Since I may not speak… I must let my body shape words for me. My body full of knowledge….I must act my meaning through my body” (127) - but her case history is recorded by male doctors. Consequently, she never approaches recovery. Towards the end of her life Flora begins an autobiography, but she writes to restore the men that she has loved and lost rather than to heal herself: “to pick up my poor son’s shattered body and mend it, to hold my husband in my arms and heal him” (141). Thus, Flora does not find writing therapeutic: “I only get as far as feeling my sorrow all over again” (141). In contrast, Hattie records her memories in her diary, which she keeps because “I want to give myself a history” (17). Her diary bears witness to traumatic events of the past and functions as a form of “scriptotherapy” (Henke 78).

Testimony enables restitution partly because it makes trauma real. Ancient Egyptian Hat realizes that “words cut into the stone walls of the tomb, signifying real things like bread and beer, are real things themselves, more real than the bread and beer, for they remain forever and make the bread and beer endure forever too” (24). However, without the words to construct a testimony, she is unable to realize her trauma. In contrast, recording her miscarriage in her diary makes Hattie’s trauma real: “Why write it down here? To make it real. To make the memory of this time real; should it pass” (86). While In the Red Kitchen thus suggests that, if women do not wish their lives to be mis-read, they must write their own (hi)stories, Roberts also indicates that reading those (hi)stories is a duty that must be shared by all. Illustrating that testimony requires a witness, that “only when the survivor knows he is being heard, will he stop to hear - and listen to - himself” (Felman and Laub 71), Hattie’s diary entries address a figure called “you” who is first her lover and then her unborn
baby (73; 139). As “you” also implicitly addresses the reader, Roberts implies that recovery of the past cannot be a private enterprise and must be a collective rather than an individual responsibility.

**Past and Present**

Like many historical novels, *In the Red Kitchen* employs the past to comment on the present. Published at a time when the silence on incest was being broken, the novel contributes to debates about the veracity of women’s memories of childhood sexual trauma and the relationship between fantasy, reality and truth that emerged in the 1980s, the decade that gave rise to the “memory wars.”

During the 1980s, Alice Miller, whom Roberts identifies as an influence, and Jeffrey Masson both published high-profile critiques of Freud’s renunciation of the seduction theory, arguing that when he shifted his focus from actual incidents of childhood sexual abuse to fantasies or memories of fantasies driven by the infant’s unconscious sexual drives (the Oedipal complex), Freud betrayed “not only his female patients but history as well” (Thurschwell 5). Feminist critics have made similar points about Freud’s treatment of Dora (Ida Bauer). As Elaine Showalter notes, after turning away from the seduction theory, Freud’s earlier sensitivity to female experience was sacrificed for the sake of his emerging psychoanalytic system. By attributing Dora’s hysteria to an incestuous desire for the father, the analyst overlooked the social factors contributing to her illness, that is, patriarchy.

Specifically, Freud failed to take seriously Dora’s sexual exploitation at the hands of her father, who had handed her over to his friend, Herr K., in exchange for tacit permission to continue his affair with Herr K’s wife.
In Roberts’s novel, Minny’s narrative underscores the importance of situating hysteria in its social context. Prior to the publication of Freud’s seduction theory, Victorian doctors, like the ancient Egyptians - “the first to propose that the flight of the uterus from its normal position was the root of female disorders” (Fell 3) - considered the cause of hysteria to be physiological. As William demonstrates, this meant that social determinants of illness were overlooked. While William treats Minny for a nervous disorder, prescribing the rest cure, the text indicates that she is suffering from post-natal depression, caused by the overwhelmingly oppressive role of wife and mother. Minny is the victim of a relentless round of childbearing, which leaves her with an unshakeable sense of “lethargy and depression” that - echoing established feminist views of hysteria as proto-feminist protest - only eases on holiday when she hardly sees her “little monsters” (109; 20). The unspeakability of Minny’s suffering points to trauma - “words cannot express what I endured; it is better perhaps, to draw a veil over [it]” (109) - and trauma that is repressed erupts in “terrifying nightmares” (111). Despite her veiled protest, by submitting Minny to the rest cure, William’s “care” ensures her continuing disempowerment: “total bed rest in a darkened room” and “copious quantities of warm milk” leave Minny diminished (as her name indicates), passive and infantilized (131).

Moreover, Flora’s experience, like her name, echoes that of Dora, indicating that views of hysteria that both preceded and succeeded Freud’s seduction theory led women’s account of sexual trauma to be dismissed as delusion, a theme underscored by the novel’s new title. Owen illustrates that Victorian medical men associated spiritualism with hysteria (149), and, reflecting this, William plans “to compare the physiology of persons endowed with mediumistic gifts with that of those afflicted with hysterical illnesses, having some intuition that the two conditions may, at certain
points, overlap” (112). He also covers up his affair with Flora by taking her to Charcot’s Parisian clinic, where her “wild and fanciful disclosures” are dismissed as “Delloosyon” (129). Minny echoes her husband’s view that hysterics are “deranged” and rejects Flora’s allegations of murder and sexual misconduct as “examples of the dangers of an uncontrolled imagination” (143-44). Like Flora, Hattie is accused of “exaggeration, of faking, of hysteria” after her miscarriage (88). By paralleling the 1890s with the 1980s, Roberts implicitly compares the Victorian view that hysterics suffered delusions with the later contention that women who recover memories of childhood sexual abuse are subject to False Memory Syndrome.¹²

Further, like trauma theorists, Roberts questions what constitutes historical truth. Laub notes that traumatic memories may not correlate directly with historical facts but argues that this does not compromise the truth of those memories (Felman and Laub 62). Similarly, while Roberts acknowledges that memory, like history, is always “a series of fictions” (Food 124), In the Red Kitchen also suggests that fiction has as great a claim to truth as fact. Hattie’s second cookery book, a collection of recipes for meals that she imagines Colette sharing with female friends, points to the crucial role that imagination plays in recovering the truth of an unavailable past. Although this book does not do “quite so well” as Leaves from a Convent Kitchen Garden (12), indicating the dominant order’s preference for fact over fiction, it suggests that creative reconstructions of the past are as authentic and legitimate as official historical records. Published by “a feminist house” (12), Hattie’s book thus offers a woman-centred model of history that affirms an alternative mode of historical truth.

Conclusion
Reflecting on rumours of an affair excited by the collaboration between Florence Cook and William Crookes, Owen states that the “finite details of this episode will probably never be known” (230). *In the Red Kitchen* attempts to recover unrecorded aspects of the past - principally women’s lives - by reading the silences and subtexts in history. In so doing, Roberts not only challenges patriarchal versions of the past that support the socio-political structures of the present, but also asserts a new form of historical memory, one akin to that acknowledged by trauma studies in its affirmation of the imagination and the unconscious as means of retrieving a past that lies out of reach. Further, by paralleling the recovery of history with recovery from trauma induced by male hegemony, *In the Red Kitchen* stresses that, in terms of both women’s history and women’s health, the end of patriarchy is essential to female survival.

1 Susan Rowland demonstrates that the novel is in dialogue with various Victorian discourses and Jeanette King discusses the text in the context of the recent fashion for neo-Victorian fiction. Rosie White (181), Sarah Gamble (7), and Sarah Falcus (141) all draw on Kristeva’s theory of “Women’s Time” to argue that *In the Red Kitchen* challenges the linearity of history.

2 See also Hirsch and Smith.

3 The work of Judith Herman and Laura S. Brown is an exception here. As Brown notes, a feminist analysis of sexual violence against women challenges a definition of trauma based on male experience and draws attention to traumatic events through which “the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated” (102). I am grateful to Victoria Stewart for drawing this essay to my attention.

4 Ann Braude and Diana Basham also offer feminist studies of spiritualism. Marina Warner touches on gender issues in *Phantasmagoria*, although she, like Pamela Thurschwell, is more interested in connections between spiritualism and mediums of communication: the telegraph, the telephone and photography.

5 Once Freud’s closest professional friend, a rift developed between the two when Ferenczi reclaimed Freud’s seduction theory in the 1930s. Whereas Freud abandoned his theory that neurosis is caused by childhood sexual trauma after the publication of “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” asserting in “An Autobiographical Study” that accounts of abuse were “fantasies” that patients “made up” (34), Ferenczi believed that the assaults uncovered in therapy had actually taken place.

6 Breuer disagreed with Freud’s seduction theory but Herman’s observation that, once recovered, Bertha Pappenheim devoted her life to, amongst other things, campaigning against the sexual
exploitation of women and children seems to support Freud’s assessment of the cause of her illness (Trauma 19).

7 See, for example, White (183-85), Gamble (12-13), and Falcus (143).

8 Roberts discusses the pain caused by her own unconsciously incestuous attachment to her father in her essay “Outside My Father’s House.”

9 Judith Herman’s book *Father-Daughter Incest*, the first feminist analysis of the subject, was published in 1981. In Britain, Child Line, a telephone support service for abused children was founded in 1986, and the Cleveland child sexual abuse scandal bought the subject of incest to even greater public prominence in 1987.


11 See Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (147; 60-61).

12 For an example of the argument against the validity of recovered memory, see Elaine Showalter’s *Hystories*.
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