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## 1

Literary Trauma Theory  
Reconsidered*Michelle Balaev*

The field of trauma studies in literary criticism gained significant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*.<sup>1</sup> Early scholarship shaped the initial course of literary trauma theory by popularizing the idea of trauma as an unrepresentable event. A theoretical trend was introduced by scholars like Caruth, who pioneered a psychoanalytic poststructural approach that suggests trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language. This Lacanian approach crafts a concept of trauma as a recurring sense of absence that sunders knowledge of the extreme experience, thus preventing linguistic value other than a referential expression. For Caruth's deconstructive criticism in particular, the model allows a special emphasis on linguistic indeterminacy, ambiguous referentiality, and aporia.<sup>2</sup> The unspeakable void became the dominant concept in criticism for imagining trauma's function in literature. This classic model of trauma appealed to a range of critics working outside of poststructuralism as well due to the notion of trauma's irreversible damage to the psyche. The assumed inherent neurobiological features of trauma that refuse representation and cause dissociation were significant to arguments that sought to emphasize the extent of profound suffering from an external source, whether that source is an individual perpetrator or collective social practice.<sup>3</sup> While the model is useful to forward claims regarding language's inability to locate the truth of the past, it was quickly accompanied by alternative models and methodologies that revised this foundational claim to suggest determinate value exists in traumatic experience.

2 *Michelle Balaev*

The evolution of trauma theory in literary criticism might best be understood in terms of the changing psychological definitions of trauma as well as the semiotic, rhetorical, and social concerns that are part of the study of trauma in literature and society. The allure of the classic model exists in the pairing of neurobiological theories regarding the processes of the mind and memory together with semiotic theories regarding the processes of language, associations, and symbolization. Yet if the psychological basis of trauma is reexamined, then the classic model fails to fit the laws of structural and post-structural linguistics. This is to suggest that the traditional Lacanian approach only works if the psychological definition of trauma conforms to a particular theoretical recipe that draws from Freud to portray traumatic experience as a pre-linguistic event that universally causes dissociation. In many ways the thrill of the classic model is the apparent marriage of psychological laws that govern trauma's function to the semiotic laws that govern language's meaning.

The history of the concept of trauma is filled with contradictory theories and contentious debates, leaving both psychologists and literary scholars the ability to work with varying definitions of trauma and its effects.<sup>4</sup> Some alternative approaches start with a definition of trauma that allows for a range of representational possibilities. Alternative models challenge the classic model's governing principle that defines trauma in terms of universal characteristics and effects. Critics such as Leys, Cvetkovich, and myself who establish a psychological framework apart from the classic model thus produce different conclusions regarding trauma's influence upon language, perception, and society.<sup>5</sup> Beginning from a different psychological starting point for defining trauma than that established in the traditional approach thus allows critics a renewed focus on trauma's specificity and the processes of remembering. Understanding trauma, for example, by situating it within a larger conceptual framework of social psychology theories in addition to neurobiological theories will produce a particular psychologically informed concept of trauma that acknowledges the range of contextual factors that specify the value of the experience. This stance might therefore consider dubious the assertion of trauma's intrinsic dissociation.

Much of the newest criticism employs psychoanalytic and semiotic theories that restructure how we understand trauma's function in literature. Recent scholarship is more likely to explore the rhetorical

uses of pathological dissociation or silence instead of working through psychological research that will unlikely provide a consensus regarding the empirical validity of trauma's universal pathologizing effects. By focusing on the rhetorical, semiotic, and social implications of trauma, contemporary critics have developed neoLacanian, neoFreudian, and new semiotic approaches. In this collection one finds a neoLacanian approach in Herman Rapaport's chapter, Greg Forter pursues a neoFreudian analysis, and Barry Stampfl elucidates a Peircean semiotic model. This shift in literary trauma theory has produced a set of critical practices that place more focus on the particular social components and cultural contexts of traumatic experience.

There are a number of ways to classify the different approaches that utilize alternative trauma models. These contemporary approaches are wide ranging but could be generally referenced under the umbrella term of the pluralistic model of trauma due to the plurality of theories and approaches employed. Many critics who address the rhetorical components of trauma explore both how and why traumatic experience is represented in literature by combining psychoanalytic theory with postcolonial theory or cultural studies. For example, critics like Rothberg and Forter work within a neoFreudian and postcolonial framework. Critics such as Luckhurst, Mandel, Yaeger, and Visser address the social and political implications of trauma within a variety of frameworks. In this collection Irene Visser employs a social psychology model of trauma within a postcolonial analysis, while chapters by Laurie Vickroy and Paul Arthur situate rhetorical concerns of trauma within a cultural studies framework.

The range of pluralistic models showcased in this collection moves away from the focus on trauma as unrepresentable and toward a focus on the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience. The focus on the specificity of trauma is paired with an analysis that assumes greater skepticism regarding a universal pathological concept of trauma, thus generating more diverse views regarding the relationship between language and experience. Critics who diverge from the classic model may well be called revisionist. The revisionists, however, are not simply forging ahead along the path laid out by the early trauma theorists. Instead, revisionist critics either move away from Freud and Lacan altogether or take up certain Freudian or Lacanian theories while hewing a new theoretical paradigm in analyses that achieve a starkly different destination. In this

fashion the scholars in the following chapters challenge the traditional concept of trauma as unspeakable by starting from a standpoint that concedes trauma's variability in literature and society.

Taking into consideration the variety of approaches to studying trauma in literature, this collection broadens the parameters of literary trauma theory by suggesting that extreme experience cultivates multiple responses and values. Trauma causes a disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time. Rather than viewing literature as a closed psychoanalytic system, the scholars in this book employ theoretical approaches and critical practices that suggest trauma's function in literature and society is more varied and curious than first imagined by early theorists. The idea that knowledge of the past, not just any past but a particular type of past experience, can never be known or remains forever unclaimed by either the individual or society is being challenged by critical approaches that elucidate other possibilities regarding the value of trauma in terms of psychological, linguistic, and social mechanisms. The pluralistic model of trauma suggests that criticism may explore trauma as a subject that invites the study of the relationship between language, the psyche, and behavior without assuming the classic definition of trauma that asserts an unrepresentable and pathological universalism.

The collection thus demonstrates the methodological diversity within literary trauma theory that moves the field beyond a restrictive analysis by demonstrating trauma's varying representations. Criticism within this framework may function to acknowledge the impact of suffering on individuals and communities, to consider the role of literature in a violent world, or to analyze the ways language conveys extreme experiences. Some approaches in the following pages, as mentioned above, pursue a neoLacanian approach that extends the notion of trauma's silence in new directions. Still other approaches in the subsequent chapters challenge the central notion that trauma is a special pathogenic entity that uniquely ruptures knowledge, thus furthering the debate over the relationship between experience, language, and knowledge—a relationship that has vexed theorists for centuries.

Adhering to the dominant concept of trauma as a universal absence furthers certain ethical and aesthetic concerns but severely restricts the exploration of others. Understanding trauma beyond these monikers produces a greater range of questions regarding

experience, representation, and value that this book explores. Authors here consider the multiple meanings of trauma that may be found within and between the spheres of personal and public worlds, thus providing views of both the individual and society, rather than consolidating the experience of trauma into a singular, silent ghost. The following chapters demonstrate the changing landscapes of literary trauma theory which has moved away from the early psychoanalytic methods to a theoretical position that advances a different set of issues, questions, and consequences that arose in part through the interdisciplinary approaches informed by psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory. In a sense the book's critical reach suggests that literature is more diffuse, varied, and less programmatic than the classic model affords.

\* \* \*

Trauma as the ultimate unrepresentable in the classic model maintains a topological hegemony in literary criticism in part due to the theoretically appealing quality of this model to raise larger questions about the relationship between violence experienced by individuals and cultural groups, or the relationships between victim, perpetrator, and witness.<sup>6</sup> For example, in understanding trauma in Freud and Lacan's terms as both the return of the repressed and a sense of absence, Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience* that "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 is precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Caruth's classic trauma model utilizes psychoanalytical referents for a literary criticism that establishes claims about the repressive, repetitive, and dissociative nature of trauma. The claim highlights one of the significant arguments in the book that connects individual trauma to cultural/historical trauma, which is achieved partly by relying upon a particular neurobiological approach in psychiatry that insists upon a causal definition of trauma.<sup>7</sup>

The innate causality between trauma and dissociation, the idea that an extreme experience directly produces a dissociative consciousness wherein the truth of the past is hidden, supports Caruth's claim that history functions the same as trauma insofar that "history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (18). And further, "For history to be a history of trauma means that

it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs" (18). At the end of the first chapter Caruth writes that "trauma is never simply one's own" (24). Although the book aims to create connections between the traumatized individual, society, and the historical past, this position rests upon the sacred assumption that trauma is inherently dissociative. The dissociative model of trauma here further supports the claim that "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another" which forwards the notion of trans-historical trauma (8, 141). The claim that trauma "is not known in the first instance" and that trauma "returns to haunt the survivor later on" narrowly conceptualizes the psychological dimensions of trauma and the range of traumatic experience and responses. Psychological research indicates that amnesia, dissociation, or repression *may* be responses to trauma but they are not exclusive responses.<sup>8</sup>

Another problem within the classic model accompanies the dependence upon defining trauma as a deferred, recurrent wounding because this traumatic formulation removes determinate value from the experience. The theoretical binary of the traditional model rotates around an assumed paradox: "that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it" (Caruth 92). This view disallows a specific determinacy of trauma on rhetorical, psychological, and social levels, while at the same time embraces an undying pathological influence on consciousness. One result of trauma's classic conundrum accordingly removes agency from the survivor by disregarding a survivor's knowledge of the experience and the self, which restricts trauma's variability and ignores the diverse values that change over time. In contrast, the pluralistic trauma model that allows determinate value and social specificity, even when a survivor like me had little agency in the moment of violence, thus acknowledges the variability of trauma in its definition and representations, and may emphasize the active potential for meaning in the moment of harm. Although the classic notion of trauma as a silent haunting or an absolute indecipherable is theoretically useful for certain ends, for example it underscores the damage done, the pluralistic approach highlights the ranging values and representations of trauma in literature and society, emphasizing not only the harm caused by a traumatic experience but also the many sources that inform the definitions, representations, and consequences of traumatic experience.

The different ends achieved by contemporary literary approaches underscore another limitation of the classic model that often moves away from the fact of the lived experience of trauma. Rather than claiming that language fails to represent trauma, pluralistic approaches consider linguistic relationships but not at the expense of forgetting that trauma occurs to actual people, in specific bodies, located within particular time periods and places. The above claim that “trauma is never simply one’s own,” and that “we are implicated in each other’s trauma” (Caruth 24), produces a problem involving the assignment of responsibility for violence as well as understanding the relationship between direct and indirect action. The attempt to include everyone as victims of trauma runs the risk of including everyone as perpetrators. Although this was unlikely the intent, the claim veers toward universalizing the experience of trauma as well as collectivizing the instigator of violence, of which both implications serve to make anonymous the actor and recipient of violence. Obviously, actions produce consequences that are experienced directly or indirectly, but the danger of making collective the specific experience of a group or individual in the past is to create an unspecified action and effect as well as an indeterminate meaning of experience. Theoretically expanding the identification of action from a direct experience to indirect experience conflates cause and effect, and thus conceals questions of responsibility and agency.<sup>9</sup> Even with some of the theoretical restrictions of the classic model, it has been important for exploring the specter of a haunting absence and for renewing an interest in the limits and possibilities of language and literature.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary pluralistic approaches in literary trauma theory are more likely to acknowledge both the neurobiological and social contexts of the experience, response, and narratives, as well as the possibilities that language can convey the variable meanings of trauma. Paying attention to the specificity of trauma does not exclude the fact that social, semantic, political, and economic factors are present in the experience and recollection of trauma. The knowledge that social practices are part of the context of even the most private violence differs from the claim that everyone is implicated in each other’s (absent) trauma because the former position accepts the multiple contextual factors of trauma while also indicating that trauma is a lived experience, one that is identifiable to a greater or lesser degree.

If the larger social, political, and economic practices that influence violence are the background contexts or threads in the fabric of a traumatic experience in the first place, then trauma's meaning is locatable rather than permanently lost.

This collection demonstrates an array of theoretical approaches that include insights from social psychology, cultural studies, and digital culture, as well as from psychoanalytical, semiotic, and post-colonial theories. A single conceptualization of trauma will likely never fit the multiple and often contradictory depictions of trauma in literature because texts cultivate a wide variety of values that reveal individual and cultural understandings of the self, memory, and society. The scholars in this collection further the critical discourse on trauma, literature, and culture by demonstrating diverse methodologies of literary trauma theory. Each chapter indicates the need to examine the monolithic concept of trauma's inexpressibility in order to produce a more rigorous theory and criticism, thus expanding the interpretive potential of trauma theory. The varied values of trauma in literature and the critical regard for the classic model is a common thread among all chapters.

The book begins with an engagement of semiotic theories, followed by chapters that engage postcolonial and cultural theories. The chapters are thematically paired insofar that Stampfl and Rapaport's chapters advance semiotic concerns and poststructural theory, Forter and Visser's chapters extend the growing discourse in postcolonial theory and political contexts, and Vickroy and Arthur's chapters address trauma's social contexts within a cultural studies framework. In chapter two "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma," Barry Stampfl examines the status of trauma in literary criticism and demonstrates the significance of Peirce's theories on the abductive process of thought to understand traumatic experience in semiotic terms. Stampfl analyzes central contemporary concepts such as Mandel's rhetoricity of trauma and Forter's signification trauma alongside Peirce's abductive reasoning. Stampfl shows that Forter's non-punctual model of trauma that emphasizes the "retrodetermination" at work in a traumatic experience, complements Peirce's theories on abductive reasoning, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between consciousness, trauma, and language. The chapter considers the formation of a

unitary self and the “possibilities of recuperation and growth” in the moment of trauma.

In the third chapter, “Secondary Thinking and Trauma: Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*,” Herman Rapaport analyzes trauma’s signification in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel. Rapaport amends Lacanian theory with André Green’s theories on secondary thinking to argue that traumatic experience contains an active vitality that is represented as a “split discourse” which affirms a social identity despite mutual contradictions. Rapaport demonstrates that the “associative irradiation,” which produces the double discourses of trauma, creates a recursive and malleable process of subjectivity in which the traumatized victim may “claim that experience over and over again.” The recursive and repressed nature of trauma does not remove its expressive potential, but rather these elements allow trauma to be articulated.

Greg Forter in chapter four, “Colonial Trauma, Utopian Carnality, Modernist Form: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” extends the boundaries of postcolonial and psychoanalytical theories. Forter argues that novels employ modernist techniques to convey a concept of trauma, contrary to the traditional psychoanalytical view, in which remembrance of the past does not produce a repetitive foreclosure of knowledge but rather produces understanding and healing within a modern postcolonial reality. Forter’s analysis indicates that the psyche is positioned dialectically to historical factors that “insist the condition of traumatic healing is a *social* amelioration by which the causes of past injuries cease to be operative in the present.” The novels of Morrison and Roy indicate the equal importance of locating the traumatic past and utopian future which is a process embedded in a type of social amelioration of suffering.

Irene Visser argues in chapter five, “Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies,” that anthropological and sociological theories that emphasize the cultural-historical specificity of individual and collective trauma are better suited to analyze postcolonial literature because these theories allow for a differentiated understanding of trauma in indigenous narrative traditions. Employing postcolonial, sociological, and anthropological theories, especially the grid-group theory of cultural thought styles by anthropologist Mary Douglas, Visser indicates that collective trauma, even when creating disruption, can also enable social solidarity and cultural identity

rather than inherently fracturing the self. Through an analysis of Zakes Mda's novels *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness*, along with Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, Visser demonstrates that trauma may function as a source of community when traumatic wounding is situated in relation to mechanisms of power and tribal authority.

In chapter six, "Voices of Survivors in Contemporary Fiction," Laurie Vickroy explores the social contexts of traumatic experiences and the narrative strategies writers employ in trauma fiction to engage readers in the ethical dilemmas of trauma. Informed by cognitive psychology, narrative and cultural theories, Vickroy argues that trauma in fiction produces three significant effects: the awareness of the multidimensionality of an extreme experience and particularly the social influences that shape the survivor's personality, the textual modeling of the social aspects of the individual's mind, and the ethics of reading that compel a compassionate correspondence between reader and survivor. The chapter demonstrates these findings through an analysis of novels by Margaret Atwood and Jane Smiley.

Paul Arthur in chapter seven, "Memory and Commemoration in the Digital Present," argues that online memorials reveal the gaining importance of digital media in performing social rituals that allow new freedom and forms of experience. Arthur considers the contemporary depictions of trauma that move from the physical sites where emotional suffering is expressed, such as a gravesite, to a modern internet space for feeling and communicating traumatic loss. The chapter shows that memory and trauma are conceived in various digital mediums and specific online sites to allow for the "normalization of death through continuing bonds." The essay considers the ways that cyberspace memorials (such as Facebook and MySpace) establish a type of digital self and digital trauma that allows the experience of loss to be attenuated in an ongoing past that paradoxically allows for a sense of closure of traumatic memories and a limit to the grieving process. Trauma is understood by locating its meaning in the new space of the internet—cyber space—that redefines the meaning of traumatic memory and its impact on identity.

The collection signals a shift from the field's inception when it first imagined trauma as inherently indecipherable to a view of trauma as multiply configured with diverse representations in literature and far reaching effects in culture. Today literary trauma theory displays an expansive range of values by allowing the definition of trauma to be contested. The contradictions of trauma reflect the cultural

ambivalence regarding the meaning of trauma in society, how to evaluate the aspects of a lived experience of trauma that are both idiosyncratic and to a certain extent collective, and the ongoing theoretical debate regarding trauma's meanings in literature. The variety of theoretical models and critical practices of literary trauma theory that are found in this book demonstrate the broadening borders of this innovative field.

## Notes

1. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) and Caruth's anthology *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) were significant as well.
2. Freud's traumatic repetition, Lacan's absence, and deMan's distended referentiality figure prominently in Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*. See also Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) for a psychoanalytic post-structural model.
3. See Deborah Horvitz's *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction* (2000) and J. Brooks Bouson's *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (1999).
4. See Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2000). See also Mark Micale and Paul Lerner, *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See in sociology Kai Erikson's *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (1976).
5. For example, Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* begins with a skeptical regard for the idea that trauma is inherently pathological to argue through a cultural studies and feminist framework that traumatic experience is not relegated to the catastrophic, pathologic, or unspoken.
6. See for example the work of such scholars as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, J. Brooks Bouson, Suzette Henke, and Deborah Horvitz. See also *The Future of Trauma Theory* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014).
7. The causality between trauma and dissociation, trauma and repression, or trauma and amnesia has been contested by psychiatrists and psychologists starting with Pierre Janet's doubt about his early conclusions to current psychological debates articulated by Laurence Kirmayer, Bessel van der Kolk, and Richard McNally. A thorough analysis of this debate can be found in Ruth Ley's *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000). See Mark Micale and Paul Lerner's *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. See, for example, Bethany Brand, et al., "Where Are We Going? An Update on Assessment, Treatment, and Neurobiological Research on Dissociative Disorders as We Move

- Toward the DSM-5" *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 13.1 (2012): 9–31. See Ellert Nijenhuis and Otto van der Hart, "Dissociation and Trauma: A New Definition and Comparison with Previous Formulations," *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 12.4 (2011): 416–445. See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
8. See for example the research of Laurence Kirmayer, Frederic Bartlett, Colin Ross, Craig Piers, and Derek Summerfield. See John Briere and Catherine Scott, *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide of Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2006). See Salah Qureshi, et al, "Does PTSD Impair Cognition beyond the Effect of Trauma?" *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 23.1 (2011): 16–28. See Richard McNally, et al, "Does Early Psychological Intervention Promote Recovery from Posttraumatic Stress?" *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 4.2 (2003): 45–79. See Nigel Hunt, *Memory, War, Trauma* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010).
  9. To a certain extent the conflated claims act as a wish fulfillment to imagine a better world where the solitary experience of victimization could be shared with others. The results of violent acts, however, are distinctly different for the victim than the perpetrator, and the individual survivor endures a specific violence within a particular sequence of actions which produce certain consequences.
  10. Cathy Caruth's recent publication *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013) continues exploring these issues.

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