University of Manitoba, Mosaic (Winnipeg)

June 1, 2008

Pg. 149(18) Vol. 41 No. 2 ISSN: 0027-1276

Trends in literary trauma theory, Balaev, Michelle

This essay examines the dominant psychology model of trauma in literacy criticism, especially intergenerational trauma theory, introducing alternative approaches for analysis of trauma in literature, including place theory. The essay analyzes the function of the traumatized protagonist in fiction and discusses the influence of place in the reformulation of the self.

A central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. This serves as the basis for a larger argument that suggests identity is formed by the intergenerational transmission of trauma. However, a discursive dependence upon a single psychological theory of trauma produces a homogeneous interpretation of the diverse representations in the trauma novel and the interplay that occurs between language, experience, memory, and place. Considering the multiple models of trauma and memory presented in the trauma novel draws attention to the role of place, which functions to portray trauma's effects through metaphoric and material means. Descriptions of the geographic place of traumatic experience and remembrance situate the individual in relation to a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of the self.

The trauma novel demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environments. Novels represent this disruption between the self and others by carefully describing the place of trauma because the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories imbedded in landscapes that define the character's identity and the meaning of the traumatic experience. The primacy of place in the representations of trauma anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context, and, in fact, organizes the memory and meaning of trauma.

Trauma, in my analysis, refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. The term "trauma novel" refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world. The external event that elicits an extreme response from the protagonist is not necessarily bound to a collective human or natural disaster such as war or tsunamis. The event

may include, for example, the intimately personal experience of female sexual violence, such as found in Dorothy Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina and Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, or the unexpected death of a loved one, as found in Edward Abbey's Black Sun.

The popular trauma theory employed today depends upon the abreactive model of trauma, which is used to assert the position that traumatic experience produces a "temporal gap" and a dissolution of the self. For example, in Worlds of Hurt Kali Tal writes: "Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception" (15). This Freudian concept of trauma and memory emphasizes the necessity to recreate or abreact through narrative recall of the experience. Yet, at the same time, this model claims, as Tal makes clear, that the remembrance of trauma is always an approximate account of the past, since traumatic experience precludes knowledge, and, hence, representation. The literary trauma theory articulated by Kali Tal, and critics such as Cathy Caruth, considers the responses to traumatic experience, including cognitive chaos and the possible division of consciousness, as an inherent characteristic of traumatic experience and memory. The idea that traumatic experience pathologically divides identity is employed by the literary scholar as a metaphor to describe the degree of damage done to the individual's coherent sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience. For this reason, I refer to the employment of the abreactive model in literary criticism as the shattering trope.

The prevalent view of literary studies that "trauma stands outside representation altogether" imagines an intrinsic epistemological fissure between traumatic experience and representation (Caruth 17). This notion of trauma leads to the basic framework of the dominant literary trauma theory best articulated by Cathy Caruth in Unclaimed Experience when she says that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature--the way it was precisely not known in the first instance--returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 4). Traumatic experience becomes unrepresentable due to the inability of the brain, understood as the carrier of coherent cognitive schemata, to properly encode and process the event. The origin of traumatic response is forever unknown and unintegrated; yet, the ambiguous, literal event is ever-present and intrusive. This theory argues that trauma is only known through repetitive flashbacks that literally re-enact the event because the mind cannot represent it otherwise: "The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (17). Traumatic experience is understood as a fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place of the brain, but it maintains the ability to interrupt consciousness and maintains the ability to be transferred to non-traumatized individuals and groups. Moreover, this concept of trauma perceives responses as fundamentally pathologic and privileges the act of speaking or narration as the primary avenue to recovery. In other words,

presenting trauma as inherently pathologic perpetuates the notion that all responses to any kind of traumatic experience produce a dissolute consciousness.

Caruth's formulations of trauma and memory, based on the abreactive model and informed primarily by Freud, have become an important source for the theorization of literary trauma studies, especially as a source to support the notion of transhistorical trauma. This form of literary trauma theory makes several important claims about trauma, stating that traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable, yet, it is also a literal, contagious, and mummified event. Caruth argues that "the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will" (2). Caruth understands external events happening to a pure subject, upon which infectious pathogens wiggle into the mind, take a seat, and cause harm. While the experience is isolated in the brain, it still carries the potential to infect another pure and integrated subject through the act of narration, or based upon a shared ancestry or ethnic origins. Caruth suggests that traumatic experience is contagious by stating that trauma "is never simply one's own [...] [but] precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24). This contagion theory of an unidentifiable, yet infectious pathogen leads literary critics such as Caruth to claim that traumatic experience is transhistorically passed across generational gaps, primarily through verbal or written acts of remembering. This standpoint leads to the conclusion by critics such as Kirby Farrell that since traumatic experience is intergenerationally transmitted based on shared social characteristics, then everyone can experience trauma through vicarious means based on one's ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, or economic background, thereby producing a "post-traumatic culture" (3).

The concept of trauma as timeless, repetitious, and infectious supports a literary theory of transhistorical trauma by making a parallel causal relationship between the individual and group, as well as between traumatic experience and pathologic responses. The theory indicates that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory. Conversely, individual trauma can be passed to others of the same ethnic, racial, or gender group who did not experience the actual event, but because they share social or biologic similarities, the traumatic experience of the individual and group become one. This leads to the claim that trauma narratives can recreate and abreact the experience for those who were not there--the reader, listener, or witness can experience the historical experience firsthand (Felman and Laub). Therefore, historical traumatic experience is the source that marks and defines contemporary individual identity, as well as racial or cultural identity.

However, the theory of intergenerational trauma limits the meaning of trauma in literature because it conflates the distinctions between personal loss actually experienced by an individual and a historical absence found in one's ancestral lineage. Personal loss can be understood as the

lived experience of a traumatic event by an individual. Historical absence can be understood as a historically documented loss that was experienced by a person's ancestors. Historian Dominick LaCapra elucidates the distinction between loss and absence when he says that people face "particular losses in distinct ways," as opposed to a historical absence of experience that was never there to begin with and therefore cannot be experienced as a lack or loss (700). The theory of intergenerational trauma conflates loss and absence and collapses boundaries between the individual and group, thereby suggesting that a person's contemporary identity can be "vicariously traumatized" by reading about a historical narrative or due to a shared genealogy that affords the ability to righteously claim the social label of "victim" as part of personal or public identity.

In addition, blurring the distinction between absence and loss would lead to the view that both victim and perpetrator maintain the same relationship to a traumatic experience and exhibit the same responses. The conceptualization of the connection between trauma experienced by an individual versus that experienced by a group works within a larger debate regarding identity formation, especially racial identity formation. The theory establishes an essentialist concept of identity organized around a notion of the intergenerational sharing of loss and suffering because the actual event is transmitted to descendants of the same racial, ethnic, religious, or gender group. An example of an experience that could be viewed as producing a historical absence is the socioeconomic institution of slavery in North America, which denied human rights to African slaves and their descendants for decades. Slavery produced a historical absence for the descendants of slaves whose ancestors were not granted citizenship and all ensuing rights and protections. This type of historical absence of citizenship is employed by some to claim that descendants of the group who were oppressed or experienced traumatic events have also experienced the same oppression based on a shared ethnicity or genealogy.

A representative example of the intergenerational trauma theory in literary studies that underlies the concept of a racial identity formation is found in J. Brooks Bouson's Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison. The book argues that the traumatic experience of slavery and "white racist practices" throughout history have produced a "learned cultural shame" that is an inherent quality of contemporary black identity and of the "collective African-American experience," which appears in Morrison's fiction and American culture at large (4).

Bouson offers useful insights on Morrison's writing practices, but maintains an essentialist rhetoric regarding trauma and (racial) identity in an effort to link the current violence and despair of a racial/cultural group in America with the violence and oppression experienced by the same historical racial/cultural group decades ago.

The concept of the infectious potential of a common or universal response to trauma experience supports Bouson's position that a generationally-based experience of violence defines racial

identity. First, she establishes a Freudian concept of trauma that accepts that all responses to trauma are universally pathologic and divisive, thereby upholding a causal relationship between traumatic experience and dissociation: "Morrison represents the speechless terror of trauma in recurring scenes of dissociated violence" (3). The definition of trauma here is based on an abreactive model in which the "speechless terror" of trauma is a term derived from Bessel van der Kolk's 1987 book, Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on the Mind, Body, and Society, which refers to the temporal-linguistic gap induced by the experience. Then, Bouson argues that "dissociation, rather than repression, is common to the trauma experience," and that "traumatic experiences become encoded in an abnormal type of memory" (7, emph. mine). Although pathologic dissociation can indeed occur in relation to violence or a traumatic experience, in psychology studies and literary representations, dissociation and speechlessness are not necessarily a direct result of traumatic events. Different types of traumas produce different responses, such as dissociative amnesia or intrusive recall, which are a result of the social valuation of the traumatic experience, created in a particular culture (Kirmayer 184). In terms of the range of psychology theories, it remains unclear what causes particular traumatic responses in particular individuals. Some traumatic experiences can produce dissociation, while this is not the only response to devastating loss or violence in the trauma novel. (1)

In Bouson's model, both the universal response and the contagious quality of trauma suggest that the "collective memories" of slavery are "intergenerationally transmitted" specifically to African Americans (3,5). This suggests that all African Americans in the United States are fundamentally traumatized victims due to slavery in previous decades, because these collective memories of slavery "haunt" descendants of slaves and reinscribe the trauma and shame experienced by a contemporary individual's ancestors through fiction. Moreover, the transhistorical capacity of traumatic experience builds upon an essentialist concept of identity tied to a universally shared (neural-hormonal) response to traumatic experience, indicating that individual identity is defined by a certain historical experience of her or his racial/religious/gender group.

In addition, Bouson suggests that the victimhood of a group categorized under the term African American produces a type of special social status by the ways their (racial) identity is locked within "painful and shameful race matters" (ix). This view depends upon a conflation of traumatic loss and historical absence in order to articulate a concept of identity that is anchored in a belief of transhistorical trauma. It produces a contradictory position because the theory appears to suggest that historical trauma is the basis of identity, which allows for certain peoples who did not experience trauma to appropriate particular traumas by other groups in a movement of identity formation that relies upon traumatic events for "symbolic capital" in society (LaCapra 712). The assumed causal link between collective and individual experience obscures the different forms of violence, torture, and abuse that can produce different responses in different individuals, blurring the boundaries between the categories of "victim" or "perpetrator." Moreover, this model of trauma and memory asserts, on the one hand, that trauma is

hermeneutically sealed or dissociated. On the other hand, it can be passed between generations, which therefore undoes its own referential basis because once trauma is "spoken" and passed to another, it no longer remains unspeakable, and, thus, no longer "traumatic" according to the model's own definition of the term.

The intergenerational theory of trauma and memory offers a rhetorically appealing paradigm with which to examine the function of trauma in literature and the social implications of individual trauma. However, the transhistorical model tends to produce a reductive view of the variety of responses to trauma and the processes of memory and identity formation found in literary representations. Moreover, the assumed causality that the transhistorical theory posits between the individual and group, and between experience and pathology, overlooks an important function of trauma in literature. The causal error might even be attributed to the formal qualities of fiction itself because trauma in fiction is conveyed through a protagonist that functions as a representative cultural figure. The trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet, the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people, either historically based or prospectively imagined. Perhaps for this reason, some critics are quick to employ the transhistorical trauma theory as a means to explain the intersections between personal and social experience.

The traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies. We can see that the trauma novel provides a picture of the individual that suffers, but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an "everyperson" figure. Indeed, a significant purpose of the protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race, or gender, have collectively experienced massive trauma. In this regard, the fictional figure magnifies a historical event in which thousands or millions of people have suffered a similar violence, such as slavery, war, torture, rape, natural disaster, or nuclear devastation. For example, in Leslie Silko's 1977 novel, Ceremony, and Lan Cao's 1997 Monkey Bridge, the protagonist functions as a cultural figure to raise awareness about a historical event, such as the European-American genocide of Native Americans starting in the sixteenth-century, World War II, or civil war in Vietnam and America's increasing military interventions in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this imaginative return to, or evocation of, the historical past in the novel does not indicate that every person associated with that historical group has experienced trauma, or that the historical event is the sole defining feature of a collective or cultural identity.

Moreover, few would disagree that individuals suffer traumatic responses in the context of a culture that ascribes different value to the experience and a person's feelings that surround the experience. If the self is conceived as both a product of culture and individual idiosyncratic tendencies and behaviours, then it follows that the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society. A central thematic dynamic in the trauma novel is thus found in

representations of individual experiences of trauma that necessarily oscillate between private and public meanings, personal and political paradigms.

Therefore, the protagonist carries out a significant component of trauma in fiction by demonstrating the ways that the experience and remembrance of trauma are situated in relation to a specific culture and place. If trauma is represented in relation to the intersection of personal and political identities and experiences, then the individual experiences in the novel are often a result of larger cultural forces. For example, the mother in Lan Cao's Monkey Bridge experiences trauma as a specific event of being wounded as a civilian in a wartime battle, as well as a result of larger karmic cycles in the universe that she believes have doomed her to suffer. Similarly, the protagonist in Ceremony views his trauma as resulting from both a specific war experience, and a Laguna-mythic battle between good and evil. In this respect, the protagonist conveys manifold meanings that function on individual, cultural, and rhetorical levels.

Taking into account these varied functions and meanings of the protagonist would allow for other analyses of the trauma in literature that include, but move beyond, a pathologic paradigm. To claim that the traumatized protagonist expresses a specific, idiosyncratic response to trauma, while also functioning as representative figure of a social group in order to relate the actions in the novel to a historical event, does not suggest that the protagonist asserts an essentialist, intergenerational identity based on a decades-old event. The novel demonstrates the ways that an experience disrupts the individual conceptualizations of self and connections to family and community, but the values attributed to the traumatic experience are largely shaped by cultural forces created within the world of the novel. Although psychiatrists and psychologists disagree over the effects of extreme experience on the survivor's memory and identity, there is general agreement that traumatic experience can disrupt or alter consciousness, memory, sense of self, and relation to community (Williams and Banyard xi). Yet, to what degree traumatic experience disrupts memory, self, and relation to others is mediated by cultural values and narrative forms rooted in a place that allows or disallows certain emotions to be expressed. Psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer explains the ways society influences comprehension of trauma: "Registration, rehearsal, and recall [of traumatic events] are governed by social contexts and cultural models for memories, narratives, and life stories. Such cultural models influence what is viewed as salient, how it is interpreted and encoded at the time of registration, and, most important for long-term memories that serve autobiographical functions, what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged" (191). Thus, the "speakability" of traumatic experience is strongly influenced by cultural models in the novel that identify the most important aspects to remember. This perspective reminds us that the "unspeakability" of trauma claimed by so many literary critics today can be understood less as an epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact, but more as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies.

Considering the multiple functions of the traumatized protagonist in this light allows for an alternative analysis to that of Bouson's regarding the representations of violence and suffering in

Toni Morrison's novels. For example, in Beloved, Morrison's portrayal of African American life in post-1865 Ohio is expressed by a traumatized protagonist, Sethe, who highlights the damaging social institution of slavery in America and the massive suffering of Africans and African Americans. To a certain extent, Morrison's construction of female African American oppression and survival relies upon narrative conventions of nineteenth-century American slave narratives that portray the agony of slavery for African and African American women. The cruelty experienced by female characters in Beloved references and modifies the slave narrative themes of violence, enslavement, and resistance, which are elucidated in, among other texts,

Harriet Jacobs's memoir, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Her memoir provides cultural models and social templates regarding the construction of black female identity that address the oppression and sexual violence experienced by enslaved women.

Harriet Jacobs (pseudonym, Linda Brent) writes about being abused and raped by her slave master, similar to the experience of the traumatized protagonist in Morrison's novel. Jacobs explains in her narrative that she tries to tell her grandmother about these experiences of violation: “My lips moved to make confession, but the words stuck in my throat.”

I sat down in the shade of a tree at her door and began to sew" (387). Later, she writes: "He came every day; and I was subjected to such insults as no pen can describe. I would not describe them if I could; they were too low, too revolting" (405). When Jacobs writes that she cannot describe the physical and sexual abuse because they were "too revolting," she is employing directives of current social values that stress what is important to convey or what should be withheld by using a rhetorical technique that implements silence and ambiguity, rather than corporeal description. A critical interpretation that steps outside an abreactive model of trauma suggests that Jacobs makes a choice to tell or not to tell the reader about the experience with graphic details. What is withheld from the reader regarding traumatic experience is conditioned by social standards and narrative conventions available to the writer at the time of composition, which suggests other reasons for the silence or lack of vivid description of the exact experience than those based on an abreactive model of trauma that claim it is the "speechless terror," the pre-linguistic, contagious, or ontological void of the experience that produces narrative omission. Moreover, Jacob's use of silence is a strategy to maintain agency, authorship, and control over the experience by saying in certain regards, "Trust me, you don't want to hear the awful truth of the experience, but I will let you imagine it yourself." By withholding an explicit account, the writer creates greater suspense and repulsion because it allows the reader to imagine her or his own worst fears of abuse and violation.

The emphasis in her narrative provides an alternate model of trauma that reflects the rhetoric of a social movement that wanted to draw attention to the effects of slavery in the nineteenth century in order to abolish the institution and its ideology of racial superiority.

The rhetorical use of silence in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl underscores the dehumanizing and torturous effects of slavery on the human body and psyche, yet emphasizes the inner strength and resiliency of African and African American slaves in North America, which is a perspective articulated more than a century later in Toni Morrison's novel Beloved. The traumatized protagonist in Morrison's novel is shown as a figure who becomes emotionally debilitated and even psychotic at one point, but eventually recovers with the help of her community.

Morrison draws upon a historical figure, Margaret Garner, to guide her construction of the story and the creation of the protagonist Sethe. Similar to the life of Margaret Garner, Morrison's Sethe escapes a slave plantation and threatens to kill her four children when the slave owner finds her, but kills only her infant in order to prevent future enslavement.

The personal experience of slavery, rape, and escape of Morrison's protagonist calls up the experience of a large population from Africa who were forcibly transported and enslaved. The protagonist therefore functions to draw a connection between a collective and personal experience, yet the theoretical leap to claim that this relationship produces a traumatized collective African American identity today depends upon an intergenerational model of trauma and memory. Bouson's argument that contemporary racial identity is defined by the "woundedness of African-American life," is better understood when contextualized within the long history of debate in North America by African American scholars, scientists, and artists over how to represent African American life--as a traumatized culture that is a site of radical dislocation and pathology, or, as a well-functioning culture with adaptive capacities that are fundamentally healthy (Bouson 21). Therefore, in addition to Bouson's interpretation, Morrison's protagonist can be viewed as exemplifying the notion of the inherent strength of a complex human psyche that prevails against traumatic experiences and moves beyond an identity simply defined by a past traumatic event. Moreover, the concluding refrain of Morrison's novel, "This is not a story to pass on," invites a variety of interpretations on the ways that personal and collective traumatic experiences are remembered by individuals and by society (Morrison 275). Rather than suggesting that traumatic experience is a neural-hormonal phenomena with a genetic imprint in memory, an alternate interpretation suggests that the story's meaning changes depending on the historical time and place, and that significant lessons can be learned and passed between generations through the recital of a story about loss and suffering. The intentionally ambiguous refrain of the novel's ending confirms the view that multiple meanings of trauma and memory persist in literary representations.

The trauma novel conveys a diversity of extreme emotional states through an assortment of narrative innovations, such as landscape imagery, temporal fissures, silence, or narrative omission--the withholding of graphic, visceral traumatic detail. Authors employ a nonlinear plot or disruptive temporal sequences to emphasize mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the experience. The narrative strategy of silence may create a "gap" in time or feeling

that allows the reader to imagine what might or could have happened to the protagonist, thereby broadening the meaning and effects of the experience. Although these silences have been seen by literary theorists as a sign of proof that supports the prelinguistic neural-hormonal theories, narrative ellipses must also be viewed as rhetorical strategies that convey the assorted meanings of trauma in fiction. These strategies help the author structure the narrative into a form that attempts to embody the psychological "action" of traumatic memory or dissociation.

Moreover, examining the role of place as a significant formal innovation, especially the metaphoric and material value accorded to landscape imagery in the experience and remembrance of trauma, opens new avenues for a discussion of trauma's meaning for the individual and community, and acknowledges larger cultural and political forces at work in the fictional creation of trauma. The multiplicity of determinate meaning produced within the narrative, and the various new meanings that arise out of the traumatic experience that causes a reformulation of perception of self and world, indicate that each author portrays an alternative perspective on the meaning of traumatic experience that emphasizes the reformulation of identity, not simply the destruction of the self.

Utilizing a theory of place in the application of literary trauma challenges the dominant model based on a pathologic paradigm as an accurate description of fictional representations. The term place refers to a physical environment inhabited, viewed, or imagined by a person who attaches and derives meaning from it. According to cultural geographer Yi-fu Tuan, a physical space becomes defined as a "place" when it is endowed with value: "Place is a special kind of object. It is a concretion of value [...] it is an object in which one can dwell" (12). Yet, place is not only a physical location of experience, but also an entity that organizes memories, feelings, and meaning because it is the site where individual and cultural realities intersect (Walter 21). We can understand place as the locus where nature and culture converge to construct meaning and inform both individual and collective identity. Historian William Lang suggests that place is a dimension of human perception where "natural forces mix dynamically with social and cultural forces to create distinct and recognizable places" (88). Place is not only a location of experience, but, significantly, a facet of perception that organizes memories, feelings, and meaning at the level of the physical environment. To conceive of place as an actor or character in the novel takes into consideration a conception of identity as relational or as a non-binary organizing principle of the self and consciousness. Viewing the protagonist's identity in such a light shows that place gains significance through a relational dynamic between the self and non-self, as well as between the human and non-human.

In significant ways, the contemporary trauma novel explores the effects of suffering on the individual and community in terms of the character's relation to place. A traumatic experience disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environments. Novels represent this disruption between self and others by carefully describing the place of

trauma because the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories embedded in landscapes that define the character's identity, and thus influences the meaning of the traumatic experience. The primacy of place in the representations of trauma anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context because place attains its meaningful import based on individual perception and symbolic significance accorded by culture. In different ways, each author situates traumatic events in specific cultural contexts that shape the meaning and remembrance of trauma.

The author who situates traumatic experience in relation to a particular place indicates that trauma is understood as a culturally specific event, in which its meaning remains contingent on factors such as a historically specific moment, or socially ascribed attributes of identity, such as race or gender. The narrative carefully describes the cultural practices that attach particular meanings to locations, which take on symbolic value for the protagonist in the world of the novel.

Lang suggests a useful way to understand place when he writes: "The physical environment is often understood best as a symbol that represents cultural values and perceptions invested in a place" (85). The symbolic import of place extends the function of trauma and its multiple meanings for both the individual protagonist and the collective culture. Thus, the place of trauma draws attention to cultural meanings of a traumatic event that is understood and communicated in terms of racial, ethnic, or gendered identity. For example, the symbolic meaning of place is seen in Lan Cao's novel wherein the site of Thanh's traumatic Vietnam war experience as a civilian is the convergence of family and political conflicts.

The meaning of Thanh's trauma is depicted through a screaming earth that has been bombed with napalm; the violence against the land mirrors the violence visited upon Thanh's body, which was also burned from the napalm. Thanh writes about this experience in a letter to her daughter: "A part of me died forever by that river's edge, and I have never been able to touch it since, that most wounded part that still lies inert beyond my grasp, like the sorrow on my face, seared by fire dropped into the free-fire zone from a plane as I fled from the cemetery toward the safety of the boat. Everything was on fire. I will always remember that moment as the moment the earth screamed its tormented scream" (250).

Thanh's experience is not only that of being a civilian victim of war, but also being forced away from her native ancestral lands and being unable to properly bury her mother in ancestral burial grounds. The traumatic experience is represented both in terms of physical burns and scars, and in terms of her displacement from ancestral lands, all of which inform her sense of self and perception of the meaning of her life after the event. The double trauma of war and refugeedom is a common experience, well documented by historians and psychologists. Emphasizing the cultural influence of religious or mythic beliefs on one's understanding of identity, and the ways trauma alters the self and relation to world, expands a perspective of trauma that moves beyond a

neurobiological paradigm that tends to centre the meaning and effect of trauma largely within the individual mind, creating an isolated and culturally immune image of trauma's impact.

Place, therefore, becomes central to representations of trauma in the novel because the physical place of suffering and remembrance of loss becomes an identifiable source for the author to explicate the multiple meanings of the event. The physical landscape is a referent for the individual's sense of self or identity, and writers often centralize the natural world when the protagonist confronts a traumatic memory in order to demonstrate the internal struggle of the self and the various workings of the mind as the individual attempts to understand, incorporate, and explain the traumatic event.

After the traumatic experience, the natural world affords the protagonist the opportunity to test the boundaries of the self against an external medium in order to experience what is self and non-self, and to differentiate between contemporary reality and traumatic past.

Considering the variety of models of memory and dissociation in the trauma novel leads to a position that reconsiders the claim that trauma is unspeakable. Writers express painful, incoherent, and transcendent emotional states in order to demonstrate the ways traumatic experience restructures perceptions, as well as the ways meaning and value are constructed after the event. In certain trauma novels, such as Edward Abbey's 1971 Black Sun, Beloved, or Ceremony, silence is created through temporal and spatial ellipses to portray the disjointed perception or disparate states of consciousness. In this way, silence is a rhetorical strategy, rather than evidence for the epistemological void created by the experience of trauma.

Rather than forwarding a reductive view of identity formation or producing a binary ontologic framework to understand human behaviour and emotions, the trauma novel offers its own theory by demonstrating that how the protagonist views the self before and after the traumatic experience depends upon the type of traumatic event and the place of its occurrence, which highlights the available culturally-informed narrative structures for expressing the experience. These structures are made accessible through social values and practices in the world of the novel. For example, the meaning of trauma often changes each time the protagonist recalls the traumatic event or each time the story of trauma is told to a different individual. This perspective is elucidated in Leslie Silko's novel Ceremony, wherein the protagonist understands his traumatic past differently depending on his audience. When Tayo talks to the traditional Laguna medicine man, Ku'oosh, he is unable to speak about the traumatic events of war, but after he performs a ceremony with a Native biracial medicine man and convenes with his local landscape through direct contact and interactions with the mythic figure Ts'eh, the protagonist comes to the point of being able to tell his story to the Laguna elders in a traditional kiva house.

Moreover, the traumatized protagonist may experience a doubling or self-estrangement, which differs from a shattered identity or dissolute self. The novel indicates that traumatic experience

disrupts the previous framework of reality and the protagonist must reorganize the self in relation to this new view of reality. This reordering is sometimes successful for characters or communities, but other times, the protagonist cannot find relief or remedy. The indistinction between perception of external reality, and the experiences of the internal self and organization of identity, has thus lead to the popular proclamation that traumatic experience "shatters" identity and inherently pathologizes the person. Yet, in the trauma novel, that narrative demonstrates that the protagonist is forced to reorganize perceptions of reality and explores how the event changed previous conceptions of self. Noticing these distinctions regarding the transformation of consciousness allows a perspective of trauma beyond a pathologic paradigm that insists upon the subject's fragmentation, and further encourages a discussion of the effects of trauma in order to avoid an interpretation that exceeds a limited binary paradigm that produces an either/or definition of traumatic experience and memory. In contrast to the abreactive model of the self as a fixed entity that then fragments, the trauma novel demonstrates that the reorganized self is relational and emerges relative to a specific place that produces a specific articulation of a transformed identity. This expression of the self is socially contingent and connected to a place of inhabitation and meaning, not binarily dependent on a linear re-enactment of a traumatic experience. The protagonist's subjectivity is, thus, depicted as a fluid process located in relation to new realities or new knowledge.

The trauma novel produces a diverse array of trauma imagery, suggesting the multiplicity of responses and forms of consciousness, rather than uniformly representing trauma as a timeless or repetitive event, or as an experience only known through somatic symptoms. The protagonist's perception becomes disparate after a traumatic event because the character's view of reality is based upon particular moral truths developed in the novel that are integral to the construction of the self, but this is a different process than one of shattering. Often, the traumatized protagonist exists in relation to a coherent view of reality that is necessarily reorganized through a painful process of reorientation induced by the traumatic event. Leslie Silko portrays the expanded identification of self and the revision of the relationship between self and society that arise from traumatic experience. The protagonist's recovery in Ceremony depends upon accepting his identity as one that is connected to a specific natural landscape and tribal community, both of which contain stories of his role in human society and mythic reality. Significantly, the place of trauma in the novel fore-grounds the social dimensions of individual experience, which shapes the meaning of the event and its narrative form.

Hence, a significant distinction between the narrative portrayals of traumatic events that disorient consciousness and the claim that trauma shatters identity is that the latter presupposes an absolute epistemological and ontological break, which leads to a void or erasure of knowledge. Traumatic events disrupt previous formulations of self and world, yet in many instances this involves an adaptive reordering of perception in response to a violent event caused by a disturbed individual or society. In addition, the trauma novel offers its own model of the impact

of traumatic experience that challenges dominant Euro-American psychological theories. Ceremony shows the impact of trauma from a cross-cultural perspective that combines indigenous Laguna Pueblo and Euro-American worldviews. The protagonist recovers from disruptive memories only by viewing traumatic events through both cultural viewpoints, and especially by comprehending a Laguna tribal paradigm that allows him to understand the complex, intercultural meaning of his individual experience beyond that of a mental "disease" (PTSD) diagnosed by "white" doctors (31).

The complex view of memory as an active and revisionary process expressed in the trauma novel challenges the predominant model that suggests traumatic experience remains frozen and separated from "normal" memories. Traumatic memory is rarely represented as an exact recalling of events. Rather, the construction of the past includes new details with each telling, or it is constructed from different perspectives, which demonstrates that memories of the traumatic experience are revised and actively rearranged according to the needs of the individual at a particular moment.

For example, in Edward Abbey's Black Sun, the protagonist moulds his memories in each occurrence of recall. In Robert Barclay's 2002 Melal, the traumatic experience of nuclear fallout is only obliquely referenced and revised, and the death and burial of the mother from this radiation--a traumatic loss for the Keju family--is never directly described or recalled in the narrative.

In fact, the trauma novel shows a wide range of variability regarding how much significance is attached to the verbal construction and recall of the past. The trauma novel suggests that the talking cure does not always provide a remedy for the traumatized protagonist by demonstrating that healing is achieved through various behaviours not tied to language, such as direct contact with the natural world. Silko's protagonist in Ceremony recovers first through ritual healing ceremonies and interaction with the local land. Only after these activities can the protagonist talk about the traumatic past to his community. Rather than first talking with another about his traumatic past as Janet advocates for recovery, Tayo must enter and inhabit his local land and come in touch with his tribal and mythic history in order to comprehend the past. Only then is he able to discuss his trauma to Laguna elders and place it within a comprehensive paradigm of understanding that includes tribal mythology.

Trauma, in the novel, lurches the protagonist into a profound inquisitive state, in which the meaning of the experience and the process of conceptualizing the self and world are meticulously evaluated. The trauma novel demonstrates this process of questioning as the crux of the plot in terms of the reconstruction of personal and social knowledge. The traumatized protagonist's inquiry into previous "truths" of the self or formulations of identity produces a change in consciousness, however painful this might be, that takes the protagonist on a transformative journey, one that does not necessarily provide relief from suffering or redemption. Responses to

traumatic events in fiction often cause the protagonist to turn inward and struggle with the past. This inward glance is paired with a growing awareness to the external world outside the individual mind. In this way, trauma is both a personal and cultural experience linked to place because the reorientation of the self is paired with a re-evaluation of one's relation to society, thus expanding the identification between self and world. Moreover, the significance of place in the trauma novel is vital for any discussion addressing the meanings and effects of trauma in literature because it offers new ways to examine the complex social relations that influence the experience and narration of loss. Descriptions of the geographic location of trauma and recovery, as well as the place of traumatic recall or dissociation, bring attention to the wider influences upon the individual processes of memory and the composition and reformulation of the self. Incorporating a broadened approach to the analysis of trauma in literature that moves beyond a singular psychology model offers greater understanding of the multiple meanings of traumatic experience for the individual and for society.

NOTES

(1) Dissociation can be a psychologically normative alteration inconsciousness, which is to say that it is not necessarily an abnormal or pathologic brain function, nor is it demonstrated only in response to a traumatic experience. One may dissociate when driving down the road or when watching a movie. See Lisa Butler and Oxana Palesh,

"Spellbound: Dissociation in the Movies," Journal of Trauma and Dissociation 5.2 (2004): 61-87.

WORKS CITED

Brent, Linda. "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." 1861. Classic Slave Narratives. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Penguin, 1987.

Bouson, J. Brooks. Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison. New York: SUNY P, 2000.

Cao, Lan. Monkey Bridge. New York: Penguin, 1997.

Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed. Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Farrell, Kirby. Post-Traumatic Culture: Inquiry and Interpretation in the Nineties. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998.

Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub, Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Kirmayer, Laurence. "Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation." Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory. Eds. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek. New York: Routledge, 1996. 173-98.

LaCapra, Dominick. Writing History, Writing Trauma. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

Lang, William. "From Where We Are Standing: The Sense of Place and Environmental History." Northwest Lands, Northwest Peoples: Readings in Environmental History. Eds. Dale Goble and Paul Hirt. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1999. 79-95.

Morrison, Toni. Beloved. New York: Penguin, 1987.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. Ceremony. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

Tal, Kali. Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977.

Van der Kolk, Bessel A., Alexander McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth. Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society. New York: Guilford P, 1987.

Walter, E.V. Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.

Williams, Linda and Victoria Banyard. Trauma and Memory. Thousand Oaks: SAGE P, 1999.

MICHELLE BALAEV is Visiting Assistant Professor of American Literature in the English Department at Auburn University. Her book, Literary Trauma Theory and Contemporary American Fiction, is forthcoming in 2009.