Noah Coco

Professor Rogers

Global Fictions

15 December 2015

Trauma Fiction in Modern Literature

The world order was thrown into disarray throughout the twentieth century through regional and world conflicts, and the prevalence of trauma and its psychological effects has left few cultures untouched. This omnipresent affliction of trauma and its effects is but another byproduct of the globalized world that emerged throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Beyond producing trauma, yet still tangential to this phenomenon, processes of globalization work to homogenize cultures and threaten autonomy, sustain generalizations of peoples and cultures, and threaten sovereignty through imperialism and the predominance of a few elite nations. The ensuing identity crisis is a culmination of all these internal and external factors of globalization; cultures struggle to understand themselves while continually facing the onslaught of foreign influences and interventions.

The prevailing notion of time in the modern globalized paradigm is linear, such that it perpetually advances on a unique path, and all of history is contained within this path. However, this model does not take into consideration the marginalized models of time, such as a cyclical model. Modern global authors have begun to take this alternative notion of time and utilize it throughout narratives and narrative structures in order to derive meaning in modern society. A focal point of many of these authors has been explorations of trauma, and its psychological considerations in understanding the globalized world. This literature has been attempting to utilize narratives in order to explore identities following the traumas that afflicted the world in recent history. They call upon contemporary notions of psychoanalysis to explore the psychological effects trauma has had on populations, and how narrative can reflect this. This literature reveals how cultures use trauma narratives as a focal point for defining their identities in the ambiguous globalized world by retroactively reconstructing narratives of the past after a trauma has been afflicted to derive meaning for their circumstances in the present.

A memory is a creation of the mind that is formulated when caches of knowledge or autobiographical accounts are stimulated and send cues to other caches of knowledge and autobiographical accounts to create a chain of associative memories that reach into long-term memory stored in the cortex of the brain. These associated memories are interpreted by the brain to create a narrative that is, ideally, coherent and correspondent. This means that the narrative is appropriate in relation to one’s own conception of self and in relation to history, respectively. However, even when this system is functioning properly, retrieved narratives of memory are never perfectly accurate. On a superficial level this is because memories can never perfectly recreate the experience of being in that moment in history, but it could also be caused by distorted associations of memories, which often occurs in victims of psychological illness or trauma (Conway and Loveday).

The psychological phenomenon of trauma distorts conceptions of the past and present, and in particular, the moment of the trauma; it is in the precise moment of trauma that victims are not conscious of the trauma that is afflicting them, so they must retroactively recall and attempt to define the experience (Caruth). However, this task is difficult because traumas produce a “rupture at the heart of the psyche such that a void is produced in which any representation of the experience becomes impossible,” and victims are thrust into disillusion and confusion (Connoly). The task of the victim becomes reconstructing the past in order to derive some narrative that can explain the disassociated memories of the past in a context that also considers the trauma and the psychological effects of the trauma.

The tenets of Freud’s psychoanalysis can be applied to understand this task of the victims of trauma. Freud proposed that it is not necessarily the events of the past that people can recall, but rather their “psychic processing.” Exact events can be replayed through memory, but it is the impression on victims’ minds that fuels reconstructed memories. Another consideration from Freud’s theories that have found contemporary counterparts is the concept of remodeling memories. Remodeling memories takes the context of the present circumstances and constructs narratives of memory which can incorporate both fact and fiction or fantasy in a way that it is consistent with the psychological impression on the mind. Fragments of memory are associated with each other in the victim’s mind and given plausibility as a coherent narrative, and any gaps that are left by the fragments are filled unconsciously by the mind (Bohleber). Victims of trauma use the moment of trauma to define themselves and often use it to form a “cognitive reference point for the organization of autobiographical knowledge with a continuous impact on the interpretation of non-traumatic experiences and expectations for the future” (Bernsten and Rubin). For many victims, the trauma becomes the lens through which they come to understand themselves and their identities.

In some understandings of trauma, entire cultures rather than one person can be identified as the victim. Traumas are often left un-confronted by cultures and evidence has shown that this cultural trauma, when no one attempts to understand the culture’s history and put it into context, can be inherited by younger generations who have no direct memory of the trauma and who often suffer from fictional incorporations in the trauma narrative. This is a result of an “incapacity on the part of the survivors to remember, to mourn and to symbolize the trauma” (Connolly). The transmission of cultural trauma is a defining factor of the modern world, and it is this world in which global authors are attempting to give meaning to aid cultures in defining themselves. Authors are affectively putting into context the history of trauma and the psychological processes of recovering the narratives that can aid cultures in understanding themselves and their own identities. Modern authors like Junot Díaz, Tom McCarthy, and Emily St. John Mandel incorporate contemporary theories of psychoanalysis to explore and give meaning to the traumas of world cultures.

The first author and novel that will be considered is Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* which considers the trauma of the Dominican people in a historical context that is applicable in understanding the modern paradigm. Yunior’s own trauma is related to the long historical plight of the Dominican people, and it is through the act of storytelling that Yunior, given voice by Junot Díaz, attempts to define himself and the greater Dominican culture following its traumatic history (Rivera).

The trauma of the Dominican people is understood through the concept of “fukú,” an all-encompassing curse that has manifested itself throughout Dominican history into the many traumas suffered by the Dominican people. Fukú is “carried in the scream of the enslaved; [the] death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world [perishes] and another [begins]; [the] demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles,” and it is widely understood within the context of the Dominican Republic as a “curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (Díaz 1). In this first passage of the book, Díaz establishes the recurring motif of fukú as the intergenerational trauma that has been transmitted throughout history; it is the story of colonialism, dictatorship, and personal suffering. Díaz also expounds a cyclical notion of time to understand this fukú, such that it reflects the changing national identities of the Dominican Republic as political power shifted between political entities through conflict and usurpation. Díaz suggests a repeating pattern of trauma suffered by the Dominican people, who are in turn defined by each subsequent regime.

Within this historical context, Díaz evokes the history of the dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina as the traumatic point of reference from which understanding of the modern world is to be derived. Traumatic events and their emotional intensity are often referenced as turning points from which victims relate their subsequent past (Bernsten and Rubin). Throughout the novel, Díaz returns to this psychological event horizon through the use of foot notes that directly engage the reader and put the context of the story into the greater context of Dominican history and national identity. It establishes the reader as an essential participant in the construction of the story and the creation of meaning that is used to give an identity to the Dominican people. The author starts the dialogue, but it is the role of the audience to interpret meaning that is relevant to the circumstances of the Dominican people (Connolly).

This historical allusion also serves another purpose because the character of Trujillo is often associated with the obliteration of any historical documents. Yunior reveals that “Trujillo and Company didn’t leave a paper trail – they didn’t share their German contemporaries’ lust for documentation,” and this had the effect of producing a “silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction” (Díaz 243). The lack of documented history reflects the experience of trauma victims and their incomplete memory while at the same time serves as a symbol for the silence produced by trauma that promulgates intergenerational transmission of trauma as a result.

During intense traumatic experiences, the ego can lose its observational faculties so that any sustained memories are very distant and fragmented. The result is repressed, disassociated memories that do not create a coherent account (Bohleber). Victims of trauma who suffer from these incomplete historical accounts are often driven to silence because of their lack of narrative and repressed feelings of guilt, shame, or other negative emotions that arise when the trauma is confronted. This silence is then transmitted through generations so that younger generations inherent their parents’ silence and are still unable to create a coherent narrative and derive any meaning from it, which hinders their capabilities of creating meaningful narratives that are “essential for a sense of identity” (Connolly). The lack of historical documentation reflects the Dominicans’ inability to recall any coherent, meaningful narrative from which they can extrapolate meaning for themselves, and this phenomenon is transmitted through generations through fukú. Trauma is continually being inflicted upon the Dominican people both internally and externally, but they are incapable of producing a meaningful narrative that can give purpose to their plight in hope of transcending it.

Yunior makes it clear that “if you’re looking for a full story, [he doesn’t] have it” (Díaz 243). He, too, is a participant in the transmission of the cultural trauma continuum. However, what separates Yunior is that he is given a voice through Junot Díaz to confront the trauma and break the trend of intergenerational trauma, and he does this through the act of storytelling. Yunior’s, and Junot Díaz’s, act of constructing a story is, within the context of the novel, “zafa,” it is “zafa in the hope that the bad luck will not have had time to cohere” (Díaz 7). It is the historicization of trauma combined with literary fiction that gives voice and meaning to the Dominican people. The trauma may have hindered or repressed cultural memories, but those gaps are filled in with fiction to construct a meaningful narrative that puts the Dominican people’s trauma into a context where they can confront it and engage with it in order to establish their identity in a meaningful way and break the trend of intergenerational trauma.

Junot Díaz provides a historical case study of cultural trauma relevant to the Dominican people that can still be extrapolated for its broader themes of confronting trauma through literature and storytelling to create identity. Tom McCarthy in *Remainder* and Emily St. John Mandel in *Station Eleven,* in contrast, use an abstract approach to the phenomenon of trauma that transcends the boundaries of a specific time or place. They consider trauma in a universal context, but with the same motivations that influenced Junot Díaz. They, too, utilize the proponents of contemporary psychoanalysis to establish a model through which cultures can derive identities for themselves.

Tom McCarthy contends that “the Future, culturally speaking, begins with a car crash. Or rather, an account of one: a disaster always already mediated, archived, and replayed” (McCarthy). McCarthy’s sentiments reflect the notions of cyclical time and the psychoanalysis of trauma expounded in modern psychology, and it reinforces the principle that trauma victims reference their life story beginning with the moment of trauma, as though the trauma obscures the sense of self while at the same time inaugurating a new opportunity to construct an identity. Time does not progress linearly, but it moves forward in loops, which are reset by catastrophe and trauma (McCarthy). The notion of a cyclical progression of time closely reflects common ideas about traumatic psychological afflictions and the repetitive nature of traumatic memories. What lies at the center of the psychological drama of McCarthy’s *Remainder* is a sense of lost identity following the trauma and an attempt to reconstruct a narrative that fills in the gaps of memory in the midst of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Regarding the accident, the unnamed narrator remembers very little, it is as if the memory were “a blank: a white slate, a black hole.” He goes on to reflect on the “vague images” and “half-impressions” that are left in his psyche and proposes the questions: “But who’s to say that these are genuine memories? Who’s to say my traumatized mind didn’t just make them up, or pull them out from somewhere else, some other slot, and stick them there to plug the gap – the crater – that the accident had blown?” (*Remainder* 1). From this first passage of the novel, McCarthy reflects on the notions of modern psychoanalysis and of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that he is about to explore. The narrator is established as a victim of trauma who is not conscious in the moment of trauma (Caruth), and who utilizes methods of reconstruction to create a narrative that, as it plays out, promotes coherence but not correspondence (Conway and Loveday).

The goal of the narrator’s reconstructions is to feel real again. The metaphor of a blank page is again employed to establish the same modern psychoanalytical themes of trauma victims’ psychological processing and intergenerational trauma that were espoused in Junot Díaz’s, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The narrator sees before him a blank slate of memory from which he is to reconstruct a narrative that will aid in the psychoanalytical therapy following a traumatic event in order to determine some form of self-identity (Bohleber). The unnamed narrator is universalized in his trauma because his lack of identity transcends boundaries and distinctions so that any number of cultures can project their trauma upon him.

Bohleber contends that when memory transference is primarily concerned with the “here-and-now” rather than a historical context, victims run the risk of constructing narratives that do not reflect the causal traumatic reality and instead incorporate fantasies. However, Connolly further elaborates that it is this use of historical fiction that gives meaning to desultory cultures afflicted with intergenerational trauma who no longer have the capabilities of discerning meaning from their traumatic and fragmented past. These psychoanalytic processes reflect the broader process of globalization that serves a relativizing function that blurs local and foreign, reality and fantasy, causal trauma realities and cultural trauma narratives. It is difficult to derive a meaningful narrative through the ambiguous nature of cultural relativism; it is difficult to discern what aspects of reality genuinely reflect personal and cultural identity.

It is through this context that the narrator of *Remainder* seeks to discern meaning in his life and feel some sort of authenticity and personal identity amidst a globalized world. The mechanism he utilizes to accomplish this objective is repetition of moments that he believes will give him some sense of authenticity. He seeks to recreate moments in which “[he’d] been real – *been* without first understanding how to try to be...” and it is upon this revelation that he decides to recreate the spaces and moments that will make him feel real again (*Remainder* 67). It is the moments that he can recall and account for to create a narrative that makes him feel real and gives his life a narrative within the context of the trauma. When the narrator recreates his memory and reconstructions of the house he felt it “zinging with significance” as the experience of his memories were retraced (*Remainder* 142).

The narrator, however, begins to mistake other people’s experiences for his own, and this represents modern psychoanalytical theories of incorporating fantasies into a life story. Within the context of discerning meaning for one’s own life, this psychological process is beneficial, but it is potentially harmful since it introduces fictional memories into a narrative that no longer reflects the causality of the traumatic reality (Bohleber). This dichotomy is illuminated as the narrator attempts to reconstruct the murder of a man on the road, the aftermath of which he witnessed. This reconstruction is of a memory that is not his own, but he believes that it will make him feel real so that he may understand his identity within the context of the trauma. Despite the incorporation of false memories into the narrator’s life story and narrative, this reconstruction illuminates the narrator’s obsession with forensics, which relates McCarthy’s broader theme of using a trauma as a reference point to understand identity.

The narrator understands forensics as “records of atrocities. Each line, each figure, every angle – the ink itself vibrates with an almost intolerable violence, darkly screaming from the silence of white paper: something has happened here…” (*Remainder* 185). McCarthy returns to the symbol of the “white paper” or blank page to reaffirm the psychological effects of trauma and intergenerational trauma, but it is referenced within the perspective of forensics. The only thing that guarantees that the imagined world of the psyche will exist is through memory, and forensics allows for a creative narrative of the events of a trauma, the scientific retracing of a memory. The forensic process is used as a metaphor for the greater psychoanalytical process of reconstructing memories that McCarthy is exploring. He proposes that forensics can be a metaphorical tool for individuals or cultures to reconstruct traumatic events so that a coherent narrative can be created, which is then used to give meaning and discern identity.

Emily St. John Mandel, like Tom McCarthy, explores abstract and universal notions of trauma in *Station Eleven*, but she takes a more prescriptive approach; she embarks on a speculative thought experiment to explore the nature of the next trauma, which takes the form of a global apocalypse in her novel. Dystopian narratives focus on ruptures at the brink of civilization, which provides an appropriate setting for the universal exploration of human nature and psychological effects after trauma. It suggests an anti-developmental notion of time that resembles the cyclical time espoused in both Díaz’s and McCarthy’s novels, where trauma is a mechanism that systematically resets time. In the aftermath of the apocalypse, a world-wide trauma, time began progressing referencing the day of the trauma as “Day One, Day Two, Day Forty-eight, Day Ninety, any expectation of a return to normalcy long gone by now...Time had been reset by catastrophe” (Mandel 232). The moment of trauma forms a “cognitive reference point for the organization of other memories and for generating expectations for the future,” so that past, present, and future are understood within the context of the trauma (Bernsten and Rubin). The trauma becomes the point of reference through which the victims determine their identity.

In the aftermath of the apocalypse, the survivors still have memories of the world before the trauma. In the pre-apocalyptic world, however, technology was responsible for cultural memory, and the media utilized technology as a mechanism to influence cultural memory. There remained in the post-apocalyptic world a sense of awe for technology, electricity, and particularly the internet, the vehicle through which cultural memory was preserved. At one point in their journey, Kirsten recalls a man who invented a machine that could produce electricity, but he was in fact searching for internet, and members of the Symphony “felt a little thrill when [they’d] remembered the stories they’d been told about WiFi and the impossible-to-imagine Cloud, wondered if the internet might still be out there somehow, invisible pinpricks of light suspended in the air around them” (Mandel 38). The survivors do not recall their history, which was artificially preserved through technology, and the result is a series of fragmented memories and isolated events that do not create a coherent narrative.

The structure of the book models this memory of fragmented and incoherent accounts, and Mandel’s exploration of memory in post-traumatic environments through literature gives evidence for the larger theme of using narrative after trauma as a mechanism to define identity. Mandel switches between the stories of Arthur before the apocalypse, the Travelling Symphony after the Apocalypse, and interviews with Kirsten by Francois Diallo that attempt to create an “oral history of the time [they] live in, an oral history of the collapse,” which creates a dichotomy with the idea that technology preserved history and memory before the collapse (Mandel 108). During these interviews, Kirsten tries to relay her experiences and her life story, but the fragmented memories that are a result of the collapse prevail and hinder her from telling a complete narrative, and she often replies with the response, “I actually don’t remember, but my brother told me a little” (Mandel 113). This incomplete set of second-hand memories echoes with the theme of intergenerational trauma, and it is because of these gaps in memory that Kirsten collects magazines and remnants of the pre-apocalyptic life in order to somehow derive a coherent, meaningful narrative from them; she looks for symbols to create a meaningful narrative that explains her place in the world.

What makes this novel prescriptive is that it assumes a universal process of survival after trauma, and from this context explores human nature amidst these circumstances. The solution to trauma and fragmented memories proposed by Mandel is artistic narrative, and the entire novel is a prescription of what literature can do. She contends that what is inherent to human nature is the desire to preserve this artistic tradition, to preserve “‘what is best about the world’” (Mandel 38). Literature fundamentally explores what is essential to human nature, and what is important is its creative potential. This takes the form of Shakespearean literature in the novel, which is meant to evoke the pinnacle of humanity’s artistic expression for its role in exploring human nature which parallels Mandel’s own motivations.

The structure of the novel, itself, reflects the notions of fragmentary memory, and once the fragmented chapters and stories are considered within the context of the entire book they are given meaningful narrative coherency. Mandel uses this model to explore what aspects and qualities of human nature will remain following traumatic events and encourages this exploration by any number of trauma victims, regardless of their circumstances. The recurring mantra in *Station Eleven*,borrowed from Star Trek, is “survival is insufficient.” It is not enough for cultures to remain silent regarding their trauma and allow the transmission of their trauma to future generations. Mandel gives a voice to victims to explore what it is that defines their identity first as humans, and second as a culture.

The overarching theme that unifies the works of Mandel, McCarthy, and Díaz is the construction of a meaningful narrative to determine identity following trauma. Each author takes a different approach to this theme, but they all borrow from and reflect upon contemporary psychoanalytic theory about trauma and the treatment of trauma in individuals through memory and cultures through collective memory. They utilize this science and these theories to start a dialogue with cultures to confront trauma so that they may apply these same methods of psychoanalysis in order to construct meaningful narratives for themselves.

Where at once the authors engage with their audience with modern understandings of psychoanalysis, they also propose the essential role of literature and storytelling in this dialogue between the arts and the sciences in understanding trauma victims. The authors engage with these scientific theories while maintaining the profundity of literature, and they contend that “meaning takes place in the symbolic, is constantly negotiated through language (be this spoken or visual), through the dynamism of metaphor” (McCarthy). The act of storytelling, constructing narratives, and inferring meaning is an inherently artistic practice that cannot be accomplished solely through scientific, psychological therapies. The authors propose that it is through narrative that identity is forged because it allows individuals and cultures to explore what qualities make them inherently unique and derive meaning from these narratives. It is through the act of storytelling that these authors intend to engage with audiences so that they may utilize these models, in addition to those of psychoanalysis, to create a meaningful narrative that determines identity.

Works Cited

Bernsten, Dorthe, and David C. Rubin. "When a Trauma Becomes a Key to Identity: Enhanced Integration of Trauma Memories Predicts Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms." *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 21 (2007): 417-31. *Wiley InterScience*. Web. 13 Dec. 2015. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/acp.1290/epdf>.

Bohleber, Werner. "Remembrance, trauma and collective memory: The battle for memory in psychoanalysis." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 88.2 (2007): 329-52. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 13 Dec. 2015. <http://rt4rf9qn2y.search.serialssolutions.com/>.

Caruth, Cathy. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 181-92. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Dec. 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930251?seq=1#page\_scan\_tab\_contents>.

Connolly, Angela. "Healing the wounds of our fathers: intergenerational trauma, memory, symbolization and narrative." *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 56.5 (2011): 607-26. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 13 Dec. 2015. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-5922.2011.01936.x/abstract>.

Conway, Martin A. "Remembering, imagining, false memories & personal meanings." *Consciousness and Cognition* 33 (2015): 574-81. *ScienceDirect*. Web. 13 Dec. 2015. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1053810014002293>.

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Penguin Group, 2007. Print.

Mandel, Emily St. John. *Station Eleven*. New York: Random House, 2014. Print.

McCarthy, Tom. "Declaration on the Notion of “The Future”." *Believer* Nov.-Dec. 2010: n. pag. *The Believer*. Web. 10 Dec. 2015. <http://www.believermag.com/>.

- - -. *Remainder*. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.

Rivera, Catalina. "Paginas en Blanco: Transmissions of trauma in Junot Diaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao." MA thesis. U of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2012. *ProQuest*. Web. 13 Dec. 2015. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/923633892?pq-origsite=summon>.