

Facing Trauma in  
Contemporary  
American Literary  
Discourse



# Facing Trauma in Contemporary American Literary Discourse:

*Stories of Survival  
and Possibility*

By

Laura Virginia Castor

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Facing Trauma in Contemporary American Literary Discourse:  
Stories of Survival and Possibility

By Laura Virginia Castor

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2019 by Laura Virginia Castor

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3813-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3813-9

To Virginia and Roy Castor



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Permissions.....	ix
Acknowledgments .....	x
Introduction .....	1
Stories of Survival and Possibility in Uncertain Times	
Chapter 1 .....	26
“No Shadows Under Us”: Rewriting Trauma with Autobiographical Fiction in Louise Erdrich’s <i>Shadow Tag</i>	
Chapter 2 .....	40
Listening to the Language of Pain in Siri Hustvedt’s <i>The Shaking Woman</i> and Melanie Thernstrom’s <i>The Pain Chronicles</i>	
Chapter 3 .....	52
Reading 9/11 Prehistories in Nicole Krauss’s <i>Man Walks Into a Room</i>	
Chapter 4 .....	68
“Making Songs of the Marrow”: Joy Harjo’s Music, Poetry, and Mvskoke Ways of Knowing	
Chapter 5 .....	84
Remembering Wor(l)ds in Linda Hogan’s <i>Solar Storms</i>	
Chapter 6 .....	102
Unsettling Empathy in Jhumpa Lahiri’s <i>The Lowland</i>	
Chapter 7 .....	121
“Hurt on the inside but still strong and beautiful”: Gendering Resiliency in Toni Morrison’s <i>Home</i>	
Chapter 8 .....	132
Coming of Age in Louise Erdrich’s <i>The Round House</i>	

Afterword ..... 150

Notes..... 156

Works Cited..... 178

Index..... 204



## PERMISSIONS

Different versions of the following essays in this book were originally published elsewhere. They are reprinted with permission:

Chapter 1, originally entitled “‘No Shadows Under Us:’ Fictional Freedoms and real Violations in Louise Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag*,” was first published in *Writing the Self: Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction* (2015). Flemingsberg: Södertörn University Press: 239–255.

Chapter 2 in its original version was entitled “‘Pain is a present tense business’: Siri Hustvedt’s *The Shaking Woman* and Melanie Thernstrom’s *The Pain Chronicles*.” It was published in the Special issue on Life Writing for *Ravenshaw Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies* 8 (2018): 1–20.

Chapter 3 was first published in *JAST* (2015): 45–68 as “American Undercurrents in the Twenty-First Century: Trauma, Transformation, and the Reader as Witness in Nicole Krauss’s *Man Walks Into a Room*.”

Chapter 4 appeared in two previous versions, in *American Studies in Scandinavia* 44, no. 2 (2013): 51–73 as “Making Songs of the Marrow: Joy Harjo’s Music and Traditional Knowledge,” and as “Crossroads on the Path to Mental Decolonization: Research, Traditional Knowledge, and Joy Harjo’s Music” in *Mapping Indigenous Presence: Northern Scandinavian and North American Perspectives* (2015). Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press: 229–249.

Chapter 5 was first entitled “Claiming Place in Wor(1)ds: Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms” and originally published in *MELUS* 31, no. 2 (2006): 157–180.

Chapter 7 originally appeared as “‘This house is strange’: Digging for American Memory of Trauma, or Healing the ‘Social’ in Toni Morrison’s *Home*,” and was published by in *Living Language, Living Memory* (2014). Flemingsberg: Södertörn University Press: 139–150.

Chapter 8 was first entitled “Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House*: Restorative Justice in a Coming of Age Thriller,” published in *Nordlit* 40 (2018): 31–49.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment first to my students. You gave me a reason to write this book. You keep me interested and curious, make me sharper, and challenge me to keep learning with you. Thank you to Norway's Arctic University of Tromsø for generously providing financial support, resources, space, and time for writing and revising this book during the 2017–18 academic year. The University of Tromsø's Department of Language and Culture provided funding for editing and formatting, for which I am deeply indebted. Thanks a million to Jade Lascelles, Siobhan Denham, and Maya Berger for your brilliant editing help and efficient, thorough work to format the manuscript. Thank you to my colleagues in the English section for invaluable feedback on early drafts of the chapter in this book on Melanie Thernstrom and Siri Hustvedt, and for your examples of committed teaching and scholarship: Cassandra Falke, Ruben Moi, Minna Niemi, and Justin Parks. Damon Falke, thank you for your passion, discipline, and example of the creative life well lived. Ellen Marie Jensen, you are a model of integrity and tenacity in your research, writing, teaching, and community building. I am honored to know you. Thank you to the FemArc research group for constructively critical, insightful, and empathetic feedback on a first draft of the chapter on Jhumpa Lahiri. You gave me a boost at a time when I most needed it.

Many thanks to my P5 friends on the other side of the Pond for honest commentary on the Introduction and book blurb, and for reminding me why I care: Dottie Joslyn, Nancy Kerns, Robert Perrault, Dale Young, and Wendy Ware; Molly Welch, thank you for our many good talks and meditation together on Skype. You are a valued conversation partner through thick and thin. Thank you to Amanda Hinton for your sharp eye and helpful suggestions at an early stage in this project. Thank you to Vanja Olsen for your sharp eye and helpful feedback on the Introduction and Afterword. Sandra Kleppe's example and our meaningful conversations helped me trust that my ideas for this project were relevant; thank you also to Pirjo Ahokas for the encouragement to rework previously published articles and expand them into a book. Susan Piver and Lodro Rinzler's workshop on proposal writing got me started and provided invaluable practical tools for moving ahead. Thank you to Susan Piver, and Jenna Hollenstein for your example of genuineness, discipline, and heartfelt

connection. Thank you especially for helping me to integrate a regular meditation practice into everyday life. I am indebted especially to my friends in the MIG alumni group. Our weekly meetings remind me to live in the conversation and to keep listening to the stories.

Linda Wiechetek, thank you for all the yoga, for many matcha lattes and good talks, and for inspiring me with your chutzpah and kindness. Sylvia Stiglic, thank you for your no-nonsense instruction and for reminding me to breathe. To my fellow ashtangis, thanks for good company during many early morning yoga practices. You provided a container for daily sanity this past year and helped me keep body and soul intact.

I am especially grateful to Virginia and Roy Castor for giving me a home to return to and for believing in me; thank you Roy, Lisa, and Steve and your families for helping me see research, writing, and my “self” in a bigger and more fluid perspective. Mary Jones, Elisabeth Isaksson, Jack Koehler, and Celeste and Bård Schive, thank you for your friendship, and for many great talks and dinner invitations. Diane “Kirb” Buchanan, thank you for sharing websites and stories, and for your kind and supportive feedback on an earlier version of Chapter 2. Judith Sarah Rae, thank you for asking me to talk about my work in progress and for your insightful, honest, and heartfelt responses. Kirb and Judy, most of all thank you for sharing courage and decades of friendship. Doreen Kirban Frick, your stories work magic! Betsy Alspach, Darla Heivly, and Becky Riti, our week at the Maine cottage launched during my year “off the grid” and I could not have imagined a better start. Maybe we’ll see the moose next time. Betsy, thank you for your insightful comments on a draft of the Introduction and the great talk that followed. Thank you to Kerstin Shands for organizing inspiring conferences and for encouraging me to keep writing and publishing my work. I am most indebted to Lisa Birman for your invaluable feedback, intellectual integrity, and heart.

Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter,  
conducted with passion and discipline.

—Parker Palmer

The magic of all art is the ability to both capture our pain  
and deliver us from it.

—Brené Brown

## INTRODUCTION

### STORIES OF SURVIVAL AND POSSIBILITY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Trauma has always been part of the American experience, but collective awareness of its impact has never been so widespread as it is in the early 21st century. The interrelated essays that comprise *Facing Trauma in Contemporary American Literary Discourse: Literary Stories of Survival and Possibility* respond to this growing awareness through a series of literary critical analyses of texts by Louise Erdrich, Siri Hustvedt, Melanie Thernstrom, Nicole Krauss, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Toni Morrison. Considered separately, each chapter provides a lens onto a particular, historically situated trauma and the process of transforming it. Considered together, the chapters function as voices in an ongoing conversation about the need for responding to trauma with recognition of our planetary interdependence. The book's figurative conversation suggests ways of developing less reactivity to people the reader may consider "other" by virtue of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, degree of able-bodiedness, or political belief.

The need for a shift in perspective is underscored in a typical day's news headlines. As I write in July 2018, having recently returned home to Norway from a two-week visit with family in the United States, for example, 2,800 migrant children have been held in immigrant detention army tents in Texas at the border between Mexico and the U.S., separated from their parents who came seeking refuge from violence they were fleeing in their home countries (*CBS News* 2018); a mass shooting at a local newsroom in Annapolis, Maryland happens and reporters refer to it as part of "the new normal" (Swaine and Jacobs 2018); and yet another leader of one of the largest Buddhist organizations in North America and Europe has been accused of clergy sexual misconduct spanning over several decades (Winn 2018). Ongoing media reports such as the ones mentioned above seem to magnify the urgency that many readers sense. One imagines that if we cannot influence events, then at least we should know what to fear. Fear of what disaster might lurk around the next corner makes it difficult to take a

step back from the information overload that confronts us daily. One might, nonetheless, slow down the tendency to react according to what we think we already know. One might instead pause to consider the contexts and subtexts that inform our everyday consumption of stories that often include trauma.

In the following Introduction, I establish a working definition for trauma that opens possibilities for telling multiple stories, rather than merely consuming the popular narratives of villains and victims that keep the ordinary citizen fearful. I note key literary and historical contexts that inform the figurative conversations within and between chapters. I introduce the main conceptual threads and recurring questions that connect my discussions of selected texts. Finally, I summarize the main issues addressed in each of the chapters.

### **Defining trauma as story**

Trauma can be defined as what happens when a sudden event or many small events over time overwhelm the body's systems of care; one can no longer feel safe in one's own body, mind, and in the environment. The trauma theorist and physician Gabor Maté adds,

Trauma [...] does not reside in the external event that induces physical or emotional pain, nor even in the pain itself, but in our becoming stuck in our primitive responses to painful events. Trauma is caused when we are unable to release blocked energies, to fully move through the physical/emotional reactions to hurtful experience [...]. Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness. (Maté 2010, n.p.)

When a person is traumatized, events make no sense as time and space are compressed in a single capsule of heightened sensory awareness. The victim may have no memory of what actually happened. As a means of self-preservation, the body's "freeze" response is activated because it would be fruitless to either fight or flee. What remains "held inside" as "blocked energies" combines the body's efforts to immobilize the site of the pain and mentally dissociate from it. There may be a sensation of having an out-of-body experience as the events unfold. Psychologically, the person feels a sense of utter defeat (Levine 1997, 27-28).

These physiological and psychological mechanisms of the trauma response can also draw our attention to the embodied consciousness of the victim trying to manage that force; put another way, the body's self-preservation intelligence kicks into high gear in the immediate aftermath of

trauma. The very act of naming, even if it is to call ourselves “victims,” suggests the ability to tell stories about our experience. As thinking subjects, we can distinguish between attention and sensation, and pay attention to how a particular sensation begins to shift. Such an awareness creates a gap between the “I” who senses and the “I” who names that experience. We are already creating one of many possible stories.

One familiar story is about a victim so annihilated that he or she is relegated to repeating the same story of victimhood for life. There is also the story of a victim who determines not to remain a victim, but to survive through determination to take revenge on a perpetrator. From the vantage point of a reader or witness,<sup>1</sup> patterns of listening in Western cultures are often prescribed through juridical or moralistic discourses where the listener judges the moral position of a person identified as a “victim” or a “survivor” (Gilmore 2001). A particular kind of story is implied in the choice to refer to oneself as a “victim” or “survivor” of trauma, and debates around the connotations of these terms continue.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, similar patterns in stories of survival or victimization do not always reflect the infinite variations in the particular experience. For example, a survivor of long-term childhood abuse or neglect may appear outwardly self-assured and competent yet struggle with substance abuse and self-blame that may or may not relate to a historical trauma encoded in that person’s genes (Brave Heart 1998). The survivor of a historical trauma such as the Holocaust could occupy a position of white privilege yet tell him or herself a story about who they are in ways that resemble the self-talk of an African American whose ancestors were slaves. The African American, however, will likely experience daily institutional violence not familiar to the Holocaust survivor (or child of survivors) who enjoys white privilege in the dominant society. Another complication is that at one level, the Holocaust may be viewed as a singular historically located trauma, whereas the legacies of white conquest of Native lands and of slavery seem less specific to a historical moment (Kirmayer et al 2014, 299). Viewed in a longer timeframe, however, the “othering” practices of anti-Semitism and the centuries of historical violence that spawned the Holocaust are similar to the “othering” patterns that led to Indigenous conquest and African American slavery. We could consider Jewish trauma as extending from the time narrated in the Bible’s Old Testament, through the histories of Russian pogroms of the 19th century, to the present (Birmam 2018). Although the identities of the perpetrators and victims may be reversed, Jews in

contemporary Israel and Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza experience similar threats and fears.

As listeners, we could develop more nuanced ways of hearing stories of survivors in which we could suspend judgment, suspend the expectation of being able to relate to the survivor, and pause in the urge to judge him or her according to a familiar story we assume we are hearing. We could consider that intersecting and historically produced conditions could have led to the harm, and followed in its wake.

At the level of the survivor's story, we could also recognize a few distinctions between trauma, post-traumatic stress responses, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the Israel Psychodrama Center (METIV), the memory of trauma remains present for some time after the event, but it gradually subsides with the help of friends and family members who hear the survivor's story and believe it. Judith Herman notes that symptoms of post-traumatic stress vary by place and time, genetic makeup, psychological makeup, and environmental stresses. That said, she identifies three consistent categories:<sup>3</sup> "hyperarousal," where a survivor constantly scans the environment for threats; "intrusion," where memory of the traumatic moment can be triggered at any moment through flashbacks and nightmares, and where experience of the trauma is a constantly felt presence that interrupts normal functioning in everyday life; and "constriction," where a person either goes into a trance and becomes numb or uses narcotics, alcohol, or street drugs to dissociate from the pain.<sup>4</sup> Many people are able to allow these physiological effects to move through their bodies. Soon they recover the ability to function in daily life. For many others, however, the effects persist beyond several weeks. For a diagnosis of PTSD, the symptoms continue for at least a month, and often for years. The point is that although, as Mark Epstein notes, "Trauma is an indivisible part of human existence. It takes many forms but spares no one," (2013, 2) not everyone who experiences trauma develops post-traumatic stress and PTSD.

### **Trauma in the 21st century: What is at stake?**

Whether we are trauma survivors, clinicians, theorists, imaginative writers or other kinds of artists, or general readers, and no matter who we think we are in terms of nationality, politics, religion, ethnicity, age, and gender, much is at stake, for our personal and collective well-being, and for



the well-being of the planet. I don't need to belabor the point that in our time, intensified expressions of violence and fear spread like wildfire across the globe; for many Americans the increasing presence of trauma raises the question of whether or not the ideas on which the United States was founded are still viable, or if they ever were.<sup>5</sup>

Paradoxically, for many nations, including the United States, trauma serves as a foundation for collective identity, when those who hold institutional power succeed in renaming the memory of an atrocity as a sacrificial event to be celebrated (Alexander 2013). Consider the Fourth of July festivities with fireworks, parades, and hot dogs, where military formations and battlefield explosions are reinterpreted as celebrations of light, color, and family fun; veterans of America's Civil War, where the technology of photography first brought the battlefield agony of the dead and dying home to the average civilian, are among those most honored each Memorial Day holiday. Trauma, named as collective crisis, becomes a rallying cry for group identification of "us" and "them" that habitually leads to a declaration of war. Likewise, an event equally overwhelming to a whole population can relegate innocent people to slavery or genocide, as in the cases of Armenians in Turkey, Cambodians under Pol Pot, Africans brought to the Americas as slaves, and Indigenous peoples in North America and other parts of the globe.

At the level of the individual in a community, trauma's effects include shame and marginalization; they can leave a survivor demonized and disregarded, isolated and punished, as many victims of incest and rape discover. As recent research in epigenetics suggests, trauma can be coded biologically in the cells and passed to children and grandchildren. Some populations are more vulnerable than others and virtually all of their members experience daily institutional trauma. Nevertheless, in a broad sense, trauma crosses the boundaries of age and historical time, educational level, profession, race, class, culture, and religion.<sup>6</sup> The impact of early childhood traumas might not be obvious at first, but they later show up as addictions or phobias that cluster around a situation the individual associates with the trauma (Epstein 2013; Maté 2012a; Maté 2012b).

In an article in *The Professional Counselor*, Laura K. Jones and Jenny L. Cureton (2014) note that trauma survivors account for nearly 80 percent of all clients at mental health clinics. However imperfect, statistics provide an accessible starting point for drawing attention to a problem. At the same time, the statistic reminds us that quantifying a phenomenon so vast and

varied may more accurately signal the effort to domesticate and manage it, rather than serve as a helpful springboard for knowing how to treat it. In my book, I do not mean to suggest that the practice of reading is an effective therapeutic treatment for trauma. Reading can nonetheless be part of a larger therapeutic process for some people, or, as Epstein states, it can motivate a person to seek treatment.

A second paradox is that when PTSD was first included in the DSM in 1980, “it was described as outside the range of usual human experience” (Herman 1992, 33). Judith Herman reflects that this assessment was sadly inaccurate: “Rape, battery, and other forms of domestic and sexual violence are so common that they can hardly be considered outside the normal range of women’s experience.” Military trauma, too, must be considered a usual part of human experience, considering how many people have been killed in war over the past century (Herman 1992, 33). Although post-traumatic stress has only recently been identified as a condition worthy of medical diagnosis, it has always been a basic part of human existence: Levine writes that for the ancient Greeks, in times of war the gods Zeus and Pan were called upon to strike “pan-ic” and a sense of terror in the enemy. The Indigenous peoples of South America and Mesoamerica borrowed the term *susto* from their Spanish and Portuguese colonizers to describe “fright paralysis” and “soul loss.” During the American Civil War, soldiers who broke down as they witnessed their fellow soldiers being blown to bits and the rotting of corpses on the battlefield developed *soldier’s heart*; in World War I, the term was, as Levine notes, the “raw and descriptive” *shell shock*; and during World War II, it became *battle fatigue* or *war neurosis* (Levine 2010, 32). After the Korean War, the term used—which, as Levine notes, removed any vestige of poignancy—was *operational exhaustion*, reinvented during the Iraq war as *combat operational exhaustion*. The current term, PTSD, developed out of the Vietnam War. For Levine, the medical designation of post-traumatic stress as a bona fide “disorder” renders it “fully sanitized” (2010, 33). In light of this legacy, Herman’s insight cuts to the point: “Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman 1992, 33).

## Theories and contexts

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the increased collective awareness of trauma as everyday experience has included the development of trauma studies in a variety of fields from psychology to physiology to medicine to history to literary theory and culture studies. As Dominick LaCapra notes

in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, and as Roger Luckhurst demonstrates in *The Trauma Question*, no single field or discipline can claim to understand how best to represent or treat trauma (LaCapra 2001, 96, qtd in Luckhurst 2013, 4). Trauma studies are similar to other interdisciplinary fields such as American studies, Indigenous studies, women's studies, and medicine in that the field has developed because of societal power imbalances that have perpetuated injustice. The scholarship that often best serves those needs arises out of the particularity of the trauma experienced, and it draws on theories and methods most appropriate to addressing that particularity. The relationship between research and social reality often means that integrative approaches work better than any top-down application of a single theory or method.<sup>7</sup>

Recent approaches in cultural and literary studies have challenged the Western-based psychoanalytic and deconstructive emphasis of cultural trauma theory as it has developed since 1995 with the influential work of Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Dominick LaCapra, and their colleagues at the Yale School.<sup>8</sup> The Yale School approaches favor anti-narrative experiments in form over realist plot lines with narrative closure. Novels such as W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and Jess Walter's *The Zero* (2006) reflect the call to new forms that could adequately convey the horror of living since World War II, often represented through Theodor Adorno's provocative claim in *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (2005) that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."<sup>9</sup>

To many scholars—in particular, postcolonial theorists and critics—the approach described above is too narrow given the many histories implicated in the global injustices of our time. The writing of postcolonial scholars such as Michael Rothberg, Sam Durrant, Robert Eaglestone, Gert Buelens, Stef Craps, Julia Emberley, and Irene Visser, and imaginative writers, including Derek Walcott, Michael Ondaatje, Chimamanda Adichie, Edwidge Danticat, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, and many others, argue for and express the ways in which non-Western experiences in collectivist societies can be accounted for in theories of trauma. They believe that Western trauma theory over-emphasizes the psychological work of individuals at the expense of acknowledging the variety of reparative practices collectivist societies use. Reparative practices in their many expressions acknowledge the moral vulnerability of the survivor, along with the need for group practices such as rituals and ceremonies to support healing (Emberley 2014; Walker, 2014, 110). In non-Western traditions, restoring well-being, although it includes the psychological healing of individuals, most often requires more support of a community than is assumed to be important in

the West.<sup>10</sup> Postcolonial trauma scholars have also criticized the Western approach to trauma studies associated with the Yale School as favoring a limiting range of forms and styles in their analyses of texts. They argue that analyses of modernist and postmodernist, as well as realist and other styles accessible to wider audiences, are needed to express the range of trauma experienced globally. They believe that in some cases, more accessible forms and styles may be needed to help wide audiences relate to the urgent need for more restorative justice in the world outside the text.

At another level, however, some of these critics could be assuming a false opposition.<sup>11</sup> Roger Luckhurst suggests that the apparent conflict between cultural studies scholars who emphasize the loss of the ability to narrate caused by trauma, on the one hand, and those who see the narrative possibilities that trauma can open up, on the other, is motivated by an ethical desire for working through trauma's suffering. Working through suffering, I would add, includes individual psychological work as well as the cultural and political work of collectives. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* expresses the attitude that, "As literary creatures and political animals we ought to concern ourselves with the understanding of human action and the social world as a moment when *something is beyond control, but it is not beyond accommodation* [Italics Bhabha's] ... For the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present" (Bhabha 2012, 12).

Bhabha's "act of writing the world" as text includes the act of "reading" the world. His attempt to "fully realize" unrepresented pasts needs to be contextualized as well. All critics, as hard as we try to "fully realize" unspoken pasts, can at best attempt to write truthfully, all the while recognizing that all ideas about truth change and are therefore only ever partial perspectives. All perspectives are shaped in interpretive communities that are biased in some way. As reader-response theorists Stanley Fish (in his later work) and David Bleich<sup>12</sup> suggest, readers do not develop interpretations of the world in isolation, apart from the beliefs and knowledge inherited and learned through custom and education; it is more accurate to say that interpretations only have meaning when relationship is involved—they must be embraced by *someone*. They are not set in stone apart from temporal and geographical contexts. Feminist theorists such as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, and Gayatri Spivak, have discussed the ways in which interpretations originate in particular eyes and bodies whose differences and development in relation to shifting conditions of material cultures need to be acknowledged. It is presumptuous and inaccurate to imagine an objective God's-eye "view from nowhere" that sees everywhere.

In this book, I draw on insights from cultural studies, theories of gendered power, postcolonial trauma criticism, and Indigenous epistemology to examine the multiple ways in which selected texts open possibilities for reading practices that can be integral to working through trauma. My analysis emphasizes close readings of selected texts that have been read by wide audiences and acclaimed for their literary merit. I include both discussion of style and attention to historical contexts and ideological and cultural subtexts.<sup>13</sup> As a white Western woman who balks at being identified by the categories of race, gender, and national origin, I also see that my choice, organization, and discussion of texts have developed in the context of how I tell my own story. In other words, my choice of what and how to represent trauma's variety of expressions is influenced by my intersecting inherited and lived conditions, including the ethical relationships I develop with the larger social worlds represented in the texts. Broadly speaking, I imagine my intended "reader" in terms of insights provided by reader-response criticism. As the following autobiographical context suggests, I also recognize that my texts and critical approach to analysis do not represent the full range of trauma narratives that have been, or could be, told. My own story below does suggest some of the experiences that have shaped my choice of texts. My story, too, is part of the larger ongoing conversation that extends well beyond this book.

### **Autobiographical beginnings**

My process of writing the book has helped me to see, more than I have already known at an intellectual level, just how my personality structure is shaped in gender, class, and race, and by the contradictory rhetoric of American "liberty and justice for all." In first grade, we began each school day by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag with our right palms over our hearts. We sang "America the Beautiful" without any thought to what it could mean to "crown thy good with brotherhood" at a time when some days we would have air raid drills where we would all move into the corridors, crouching, holding our knees to our torsos, bending our elbows to cross our arms around the backs of our heads. One morning in November during my first year in school, when I was getting to know Bill, Susan, and their dog in the "Blue" reading group with my classmates, the American flag outside the classroom windows hung at half-mast because JFK had been assassinated. I sensed the unease of my teacher and parents, who kept the black and white TV in the living room on from the time I came home from school. I didn't know who "Oswald" was but heard that someone named Jack Ruby shot and killed him, too. In 1964, there were race riots in

Philadelphia less than twenty miles from where we lived, and in 1968, the Democratic presidential candidate Robert Kennedy, and nonviolent Civil Rights leader for liberty and justice for all races, Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated as well. There was an escalating war in Vietnam, where the older brother of one of my best friends was sent in 1967.

At the time of my writing, more than fifty years have passed since those events, and I have lived as an immigrant in Norway for more than twenty years. The reason that I decided to leave the U.S. was not because of my distress over the contradictions between American dreams and realities. It was not because I fell in love with a Norwegian, and not because I have Norwegian relatives or ancestors (the narratives many people tell me they expect to hear when they ask, “What brought you to Norway?”) but because I was offered a job at a university in the north of Norway. Although I speak Norwegian, I have not yet succeeded in feeling as consistently at ease in the language and culture as I wish I did. Nevertheless, a double perspective as a bicultural person helps appreciation for what I see as the strengths and weaknesses of both cultures to grow—this topic could be the subject of another book. There is also reassurance in knowing that I share what Homi Bhabha in “The World and the Home” calls “unhomeliness” with millions of other immigrants, exiles, and ex-patriates across the globe. I also recognize that my exile is self-chosen compared with what most other exiles experience. Despite “Trump’s America” and the exclusions, violence, and fear it has engendered for so many people around the world, I have so far been able to return to the U.S. whenever I could afford the price of a plane ticket.

I continue to make the journey “home” figuratively as well: as a teacher and scholar of American studies, and as a book lover who too seldom finds the time to read a whole novel just for pleasure—and who has seen how the novel can speak truths that empirical research and historical events later confirm. I speak as a long-term practitioner of yoga, flexible but often lacking in terms of balance and strength, yet more willing to welcome the imperfections than I once was. I have memories of a happy childhood in suburban middle-class Philadelphia neighborhoods where I remember being listened to, reassured, and encouraged to explore the world rather than pushed to achieve unfulfilled dreams of my parents, or prevented from doing so because of their daily stresses.

I first remember being at home in the Cape Cod-style two-story house where I lived with my parents and little brother until I was six. I remember afternoon sunshine, the hum of a window fan, a doll with real hair and eyes that blinked open and closed, and cutting my brother’s hair and dousing him with a white powder meant for treating athlete’s foot, proud that I could

dress him up as a clown (and my mother taking our picture because, as she says, she thought it was cute and funny, rather than locking me in the basement). I remember a backyard swing and believed one day I might be able to brush my feet on the upswing against the leaves of a big oak tree on the other side of a fence. There was a big brown dog in the neighborhood that I was afraid could bite, but I don't remember being bitten.

I remember another Cape Cod house in suburban Boston where I lived more than forty years later. In that house, I learned from a now-ex-husband how the effects of a traumatic childhood could lead to insults and threats that could erupt at any time, broken dishes, yelling that could go on for hours, and more. His implicit memories triggered mine. I yelled back sometimes, or tried to escape, or just stood there and shook. He helped me lay down what are most likely a few of my own short-term traumatic memories. However, during that painful time I also had what Gabor Maté calls “empathetic witnesses” through phone calls to family members and one weekend trip with college friends to an island on the actual Cape Cod. I managed to walk out the door of the house outside Boston one blustery, chilly morning in October and eventually to find my way “home” to Norway—and I have not developed PTSD.

A sense of “being-at-home” continues to represent a longing for safety in the precarity of the lived experience of human and nonhuman beings in the 21st century. Humans (and nonhumans) share a need for communion as well as companionship—expressed vividly by Raymond Carver in his short story “Cathedral.” These include the capacity to develop enough curiosity and courage to be vulnerable to unmasking the illusion of any ideal of home—at the level of the person escaping to a world of a novel; an imperfect family trying to talk across a political divide at a Thanksgiving dinner; a virtual internet community of meditators, fan-fiction writers, or vegans realizing that the internet connects instantly but never quite satisfies; all the way to the recognition that our planet is in fact subject to harmful effects of human intervention.

What I have learned through the journey of researching and writing *Facing Trauma* is how “home,” as a repository for memories and as a place of longing toward, is a continued felt presence and even a shadow twin of trauma. Home, like trauma, is a space that has no fixed boundaries: Is it in the body or expressed (or triggered) with friends or acquaintances, in a crowded international airport, or at a yoga ashram in South India? Both a sense of home and the trigger for trauma could show up on the wire between emails with a childhood friend or parents on Skype. Both the disorientation of trauma and the comfort of home can appear suddenly at a family gathering, or with colleagues at an academic conference who empathize

with or dissociate from the links between academic pressure and panic attacks.<sup>14</sup>

In seeking familiarity with the traumas I have known directly and vicariously through reading and listening, I find Merleau-Ponty's definition helpful. He speaks of "being-at-home" as the "lived body" in a condition of being, and in a process of development. As philosopher Kirsten Jacobson in her commentary on Merleau-Ponty's work notes, "the fundamental intertwining of activity and passivity in our experience of home (and therefore in our experience as such) will allow us to recognize that the permanent character of our freedom is an ambivalent openness and closedness to what is outside, an ambivalence that requires vigilant self-criticism" (Jacobson 2009, 356).

But ambivalence in the face of trauma requires an even stronger felt sense of "being [more] at home" than Jacobson's article addresses. The need to feel safe in one's body includes both an external environment where one feels free from physical danger and also an affective sense that the inner environment of one's mind (that is also part of the body) is free from harm.

### Unsettling empathy

In a broad sense, we negotiate external and internal environments through the stories we construct. "Narrative" originates from the Sanskrit root *gna* (to know) that developed through the Latin words *gnarus* (knowing) and *nano* (telling) and includes both knowledge and the acts of hearing and expressing it<sup>15</sup> (Abbott 2008, qtd in Muskievicz 2012, 42). It carries knowledge that is dynamic and encourages thinking and problem solving. Muskievicz adds that all meaning-making depends on the ability to narrate (2012, 42), and that likewise, a person's capacity to narrate reflects her or his ability to know, to be understood, and to develop an identity (Luckhurst 2013, 84).<sup>16</sup> At the core of this knowledge is a need to organize events as they relate to a sequence, time, and causality (Luckhurst 2013, 43).

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes the function of narrative literature in a sense that allows for a range of effects rather than as an instrument useful for a predetermined outcome: "to represent the specific circumstances and problems of people of many different sorts (Muskievicz 2012, 43). In *The Fragility of Goodness* she complicates the sense of empathetic connection that reading can open. In an interconnected, global world of instant communication and information overload, the presence of empathy also introduces a layer of ethical choices that can make it difficult, if not impossible, for a person to remain true to their ethical principles.



“Empathy” is a term that has only been around for a century, and its meanings have changed over time. Susan Lanzoni says that for some people, empathy helps build understanding for those different from us, in that it allows us to think more broadly. For others it interrupts rational thinking and closes us down. She notes that it was first used by a German psychologist and termed *Einfühlung*, to “feel in” and referred to “enlivening of an object.” Empathy’s meanings have changed and multiplied to the point that Lanzoni identifies eight definitions used today. These range from an ability to sense another’s physical pain, to a projection of one’s own pain onto what one thinks the other is experiencing, to the ability to feel without getting wrapped up and lost in the pain of the other. These differences suggest how basic our inability to understand each other can be even when we use terms we agree on. That said, Lanzoni notes, “[...] we *do* experience a strange admixture of self and world when we contemplate a *weeping* willow, describe an *imposing* tower, or hum along to a *happy* melody. We can empathize with form, and feel ourselves in the world around us” (Lanzoni 2015). Narrative literature can help readers identify our shared affective responsiveness to basic emotions such as joy, sensory awareness, fear, and grief. From a place of commonality, we can begin to see and to negotiate the effects of our various socially, historically, and culturally conditioned assumptions about who we see as worthy of our empathy and who we have difficulty empathizing with.

Patrick Colm Hogan acknowledges how cultural conditioning can lead to varying expressions of empathy and even prevent some people from developing empathy for those they perceive as different. He uses the term “categorical empathy” to describe situations where we identify with people we think are similar to us; for example, in terms of age or religion, culture, or country of origin. “Situational empathy,” in contrast, is a literary effect reached through focalization, imagery, character development, or other elements of a text that allow the reader to get to know a character’s situation and to feel their pain, regardless of how different or similar their experiences are to ours (Patrick Colm Hogan 2003). In Chapter 7, I consider how situational empathy does not require that the reader relate to or condone the actions of the character of Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*. Even though situational empathy does not necessarily create more compassionate or morally responsible readers in the world outside the text, it can broaden the range of ethical and emotional responses available to a reader (Keen 2007).

In Siri Hustvedt’s *The Shaking Woman*, the distance she creates between her lived experience and the character of the “shaking woman” in her memoir has the effect of moving Hustvedt from a lack of categorical

empathy for her “other” alien self to a measure of situational empathy for the shaking woman as one part of herself. When Hustvedt’s doctors are not able to diagnose her shaking episodes, she begins her own research in psychoanalysis, neurology, psychology, and histories of women’s relationship to medicine. The narratives she weaves together for herself and her readers do not lead her to the cure that she seeks at the beginning, even though her shaking episodes can be controlled through beta-blockers. What has changed is the story she tells about herself and her relation to the figurative “alien” character that seems to invade her familiar rational, autonomous self at unexpected moments. She comes to accept the ambiguity of her identity and, in a larger sense, the ambiguity of what we call the “truth” of memory.

I do not necessarily assume that all trauma survivors are reliable narrators, nor that the reader or listener should try to “relate” to them; allowing them to speak for themselves is crucial, however, and they deserve the reader’s serious attention. LaCapra distinguishes between identification that slides into uncritical acceptance of the survivor’s story and what he calls “empathetic unsettlement.” Identification-based empathy can ironically get in the way of serious dialog developing. Identification too easily glosses over the complicated conditions that shape a survivor’s choices and actions. It can be motivated by unconscious guilt and the need to appease, and it is susceptible to manipulation. Conversely, the need to identify can too easily keep readers from hearing and respecting the stories of those who have been harmed because they are dismissed as being “unrelatable to me” (LaCapra 2001, 40). Many of my student readers, for example, find the character of Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* difficult to identify with and therefore dismiss her as immoral and uninteresting.

## **Trauma as a literary and critical lens for examining power structures: Overview of patterns and through-lines**

Trauma exists on a continuum between overwhelm, such as panic attacks; crises, such as the death of a child or parent, child abuse, domestic violence, and rape; and extraordinarily disruptive collective experiences, such as wars, acts of terror, and legacies of genocide and slavery. I regard the process of naming and working through trauma as an experiential lens through which to examine a range of hierarchical power structures. These structures saturate Western common-sense notions of how the world works as well as epistemological assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge (Gibbs 2014). Put another way, my approach to trauma in narrative literature takes the experiences of trauma survivors seriously without trying to contain their experiences and insights in a Eurocentric

trauma paradigm; in a broad sense, this relationship has parallels in critical race studies and gender studies that take seriously the voices of marginalized people in their interdependent identifications and histories.

My texts include novels, narrative poems crossing into other genres, and two autobiographical texts. All of them are by women—a choice I did not begin with, but one that emerged as I worked to limit the scope of my study. All were written between 1995 and 2012. As acclaimed literary artists, teachers, and performers, the writers represented here have achieved conventional success in American culture, but at the same time they all understand trauma experientially and have particular ways of expressing it through their narrators and characters. My selected writers live or have lived for extended periods of time in the United States. They come from backgrounds that give them each a particular double perspective on American history and culture—as Jewish, Native, African American, white, and Indian American, and as people with chronic illnesses. As women, as members of at least one other non-dominant group, as authors, and through their narrators, they have particular intersectional knowledge of being an outsider. They experience some version of what W. E. B. DuBois identified as “double consciousness.” For DuBois, double consciousness entailed feeling simultaneously black and American in a culture that made Blacks invisible even as it presupposed the ability of any individual to thrive (DuBois 2017, 922). The writers represented in the following chapters also convey a sense of feeling invisible and, paradoxically, also present, alive, embodied, and empowered in intersecting social and cultural worlds.

In reading and thinking about these books together, I have identified several recurring patterns. *First*, I draw attention to the many ways in which images and motifs of house (as physical location and setting) and home (as affective site for renegotiating trauma) show up. These recurring images suggest various ways of imagining one’s proximity to, or distance from, traumatic experience. Either directly or indirectly, an idea of home functions in these texts as trauma’s imagined reverse. It can be thought of at the level of metanarrative as a practice arena where the reader and writer can imagine domestic interrelationships as coming from an urge for dialog more than domination. The idea of home sets the terms for dialog between the reader and the writer, the characters, and the narrators, and between the reader and her or his world outside the text.

*Second*, I identify the presence of a singular trauma experienced by a character that functions as one of the central, but not necessarily the most apparent, catalysts for transforming characters and narrators. Whether or not trauma is recognized in a moment of epiphany by the character and narrator during the time of the narration, or whether the reader enters *in medias res*

at a point when the process of working through the trauma is already underway, the reader has the chance to develop a measure of empathetic unsettlement for the narrator and characters.

*Third*, my discussions emphasize the decision on the part of the narrator or character not to be a victim but, rather, a survivor. This is an important distinction, both for how a person interprets their own experience in terms of power relationships and in terms of how readers listen. In reading my selected texts, I have found the term “survivor” to represent the journeys of the narrators and characters more accurately than would “victim”: “Survivor” allows for more complexity than “victim,” including a degree of ethical ambiguity. Both victims and perpetrators are survivors, and many survivors are both victims and perpetrators. In addition, the term “survivor” places emphasis on storied narrative movement toward resilience. Resilient survival as it emerges here is not “toughing it out” by gritting one’s teeth in an ongoing battle to assert one’s individual dignity. Rather, resilience is relational. It connotes the ability of the survivor to find meaning through shared strengths, mistakes, and fragilities in larger social and planetary worlds.<sup>17</sup> For the reader, these connections include the ability to see how the power of reading and writing narrative literature affirms the power of art to communicate, and to transform. As art in action, reading and writing practices can strengthen critiques of unjust power hierarchies. Equally important, they teach the reader to recognize and honor beauty as part of what makes life worth living. As Brené Brown writes, “Art has the power to render sorrow beautiful, and make loneliness a shared experience, and transform despair into hope” (Brown 2017, 56).

*Fourth*, I consider the process of renegotiating trauma that includes the intention to connect as truthfully as possible with a historical past. Truthfulness may be expressed most obviously through references to events, people, and periods. It also develops through representations of psychological processes, choices, and actions taken by characters constrained by and given freedoms in their circumstances. By extension, readers then can engage with these processes cognitively. Connecting with the historical past also includes the imaginative process that Toni Morrison calls “re-membering.” It takes fragmented images of the past, gives them narrative shape, and can move memories of victimization toward resources for survival rather than triggers for repetitive acting out.

*Fifth*, each chapter discusses an expression of what Leigh Gilmore calls “agency without mastery” (Gilmore 2012). This practice refers to the ability to take conscious action that influences the environment without the need to control other people’s responses or to realize a projected future. It also creates openings for familiar storied patterns to change; for example, the

final chapter of Toni Morrison's *Home* is a poem that places the image of a tree at its center: "Hurt right down the middle/But alive and well" (Morrison 2012, 147). Morrison's image encapsulates the sense of resiliency each of the main characters, Cee and Frank, have developed from the beginning of the novel. In burying the victim of a murder they witnessed as children, they give their traumatic memory a sense of closure.

The acceptance of one's agency, without necessarily having the power to control one's experience, leads to an increasing willingness to admit mistakes and weaknesses. It also opens space for breathing with, rather than fighting against, imposed limitations from the outside. One who claims agency without mastery can see the illusion of the American idea of self-reliance without giving up the need to develop autonomy. One can recognize the paradoxical strengths in physical or emotional vulnerability and the reality that the exercise of autonomy is also relational, and seldom comfortable. The discomforts one inevitably senses in not being able to control or predict the outcome of one's striving, in fact, can be seen as beneficial. For example, such discomfort helps cut through the reader's possible illusions about the scope and time needed to see even small movements toward societal justice.

If there is one message that all of these texts convey, it is that the refrain I remember from the backyards of the neighborhood of my childhood is more complicated than it looks: "Sticks and stones can hurt my bones, but words can never hurt me." If we look at the saying as a claim to fact, we either believe it or we reject it as true. But if we listen to these words as part of a story, we can see how that larger story could have some truth to it, and it could lead to multiple endings. Words can hurt and words can heal, and they can do a lot in between.

### **Working through trauma: How can reading narrative literature matter?**

Narrative literature that includes trauma as a trope encourages readers to slow down and pause from the usual onslaught of media that bombards us daily in the 21st century. Readers of narrative literature engage our capacities of thinking, feeling, and imagining without the need to be on guard against danger or reconcile our full range of affective and intellectual responses with the more limited responses we imagine others expect. As urgent as it can be to engage socially and politically with interventions that interrupt cycles of violence and trauma, long-term change demands an equally strong ability to recognize the ways in which we, too, are implicated in these cycles historically, culturally, and through lived experience.

Imaginative power is a less predictable but more flexible resource than is the appeal to empirical evidence, though it is presumptuous to assume that it is “unlimited” in a time and place. As insights from studies based in intersectionality theory have suggested, we could question the assumption that any one experiential lens, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or class, is more or less important in shaping one’s views of the world than any other category (Crenshaw 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006). Any one analytical category cannot be placed on a hierarchy of value that is valid for everyone; rather, the multiple and intersecting patterns of institutional power need to be acknowledged in particular contexts of place and time.<sup>18</sup> The reader can at least make the effort to better understand the inherited intersecting narratives that have led to the other’s words or actions. Likewise, one needs to allow for the cultural blind spots and lack of experience that may not make it possible for them to hear the other.<sup>19</sup> Psychologist Jonathan Haidt’s research suggests that people listen selectively with what has been called “confirmation bias” for narratives that reaffirm what they already believe (2012).

Reading creates possibilities for telling and receiving stories that move beyond blame and victimization. It also opens up the chance to see the range of temporal and spatial relationships that shape the writer, narrator, and character. The Pulitzer Prize-winning history author of *Polio* (2005) David Oshinsky explains his approach to writing history as an engaging story that includes both temporal and spatial relationships when he states, “In writing about history, there has to be a trip and a river.” Oshinsky knows that fiction appeals to the reader through the five senses, and in his fiction he wants to immerse the reader directly and as truthfully as possible in a character’s sensory experience (NYU Center for the Humanities 2016, 40:30). Similarly, Paul Harding, in a conversation about the research and writing of his novel *Tinkers* that won a Pulitzer Prize in 2010, approaches the truth of illness histories from an imaginative starting point rather than from empirical medical research. His idea for *Tinkers* came from his relationship with his own epileptic grandfather, whose experience of a grand mal seizure he tried to imagine. The strategy seems to have worked since, after public readings, hundreds of readers have thanked Harding for describing with such clarity and precision what it feels like to have a seizure.

From a reader’s perspective, the medium of the book provides a buffer between the self, who is engaging in a solitary imaginative act of interpretation through seeing, touching, and feeling the texture of the book’s binding and pages (or the pleasurable act of holding an electronic tablet and effortlessly swiping from page to page), and the pain of empathizing with the suffering of characters when described with the kind of precision that