

Reading Traumatized Bodies of Text: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* and Selah Saterstrom's *The Pink Institution*

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Introduction: "The obscenity of the very project of understanding"

Psychologists and literary theorists have used countless terms and phrases to attempt an articulation of the collapse of normal, linear understanding that ensues during and after traumatic events. Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth calls the narration of trauma an "impossible saying" (9). Literary theorist Shoshana Felman, in an exploration of Camus' *The Fall*, writes that traumatic events provoke a "disintegration of narrative" (171); and in her essay "Education and Crisis" she claims that traumatic events are those which happen "in excess of our frames of reference" (16). Theorist Maurice Blanchot states: "The disaster... is what escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes" (7). Claude Lanzmann, creator of the landmark Holocaust film *Shoah*, calls the task of representing trauma "the obscenity of the very project of understanding" (205). It has become clear that one of the hallmarks of psychological trauma is its inability to be contained within conventional linguistic and narrative structures. Trauma takes place precisely when our ordinary narrative abilities fail us—when an event not only goes beyond, but actually destroys, our schematic understandings of the world, disabling our ability to create and trust the stories, categories, and time-space delineations necessary for normal functioning. To experience trauma is to experience a world in which annihilation of the body and self is, potentially, always immanent; a world in which the body and self are always, potentially, unsafe; a world that is ultimately incomprehensible.

This essay will explore traumatic symptoms as a useful frame for interpreting certain texts. To begin, we will look at how the complex manifestations of psychological trauma effect the physiological body, in the form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). We will then explore how PTSD relates to language, narrative, and, ultimately, textual behavior, as demonstrated in two texts: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* and Selah Saterstrom's *The Pink Institution*. To conclude, we will discuss the relevance of literature as a space for witnessing trauma.

De-scribing the body: post-traumatic stress disorder

PTSD can be defined, broadly, as a collection of chronic physiological and psychological symptoms that occur in response to the firsthand experience, or direct secondary witnessing, of an unexpected event that threatens the integrity or existence of the body, and elicits extreme terror and helplessness (American Psychiatric Association 424). The characteristics of PTSD can be split into three major categories: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction.

Hyperarousal, the first category of symptoms, is marked by such traits as nightmares, insomnia, generalized anxiety, psychosomatic complaints, explosive anger, irritability, heightened startle reflex, and hypervigilance. Traumatic symptoms in this category can be understood as a chronic engagement of the nervous system. The body that displays these symptoms is, in a sense, constantly on the lookout for danger in both sleeping and waking states, with a near inability to turn off physiological and psychological reactions the normal body has in a state of emergency. As trauma scholar Judith Herman explains, “Traumatic events appear to recondition the human nervous system.” (36)

The second category of symptoms, *intrusion*, is distinguished by flashbacks, nightmares, repetition compulsion, and other modes of reliving the trauma. These intrusive modes are generally literal; traumatic nightmares, for instance, are not dominated by symbols and imaginative development like ordinary dreams. Instead, they replay the traumatic events exactly as they took place, accompanied by the overwhelming sense that the event is actually recurring. Such nightmares can even occur in stages of sleep that do not normally involve dreaming. Similarly, flashbacks can seem like waking dreams, overtaking the body and mind by replaying past events in the present as though they are actually happening (39). During repetition compulsion, traumatized individuals may actually reenact the trauma in attempts to master and control it, give it meaning, or expel it from the mind. Combat veterans may return home to become fire fighters or police officers; survivors of childhood abuse may marry abusers as adults; rape survivors may engage in unnecessarily risky behaviors—all in an attempt to gain assurance that they can survive, as well as master the extremities that, during the trauma, they had no control over. In regards to this phenomenon, Glenn Schiraldi writes: “Repeating the trauma gives an oddly comforting feeling of predictability, familiarity, and control” (30-31). In this vein, survivors might also develop everyday patterns of thought and behavior that are

obsessive and repetitive.

When an individual cannot fight or flee during a state of emergency, consciousness is altered instead; normal defenses “freeze” or shut down. The third category of traumatic symptoms, *constriction*, is marked by this paralysis. Perceptions, emotions, and physical sensations can become partially or completely numbed; various states of trance and hallucination might occur; the individual may experience both voluntary and involuntary suppression of thoughts and emotions. The mind and body may dissociate from one another, such that many survivors report watching themselves from afar during the event, or experiencing the trauma as a dream or something that is otherwise not really happening. They may additionally experience a sense of altered or frozen time (Herman 42-27). The most extreme states of dissociation can manifest as dissociative identity disorder, a mental orientation experienced generally by survivors of extreme, long-term, sadistic physical and/or sexual abuse that occurred in childhood, before the full formation of identity and personality. Those with dissociative identity disorder have at least two distinctly formed, alternating identities, each of which tends to express and contain different aspects of the trauma. Unable to logically, emotionally, or physically comprehend the magnitude of the events, the individual with dissociative identity disorder, in a sense, splits into different pieces, each acting as a container. These identities, once called multiple personalities, are now generally thought of as disintegrated aspects of a single personality. (22-23 Schiraldi)

All three categories are marked by disturbances in the ordinary processing of memory and time. Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain that the “memory system [is] the central organizing apparatus of the mind, which categorizes and integrates all aspects of experience and automatically integrates them into ever-enlarging and flexible meaning schemes” (159). Normal memory also has a social function, as it acts to relay and receive information about the world. It serves to create shared meaning systems that are used to coordinate the mind, for the purposes of skillfully navigating life, society, and relationships. Normal memory uses the higher-level functions of language to create integrated, linear sequences. Without it, we would lack the ability to construct associations between emotions, thoughts, perceptions, time, space, and other aspects of experience that build the classifications and narratives necessary for everyday functioning. Traumatic memories, on the other hand, are isolated, disintegrated, inflexible, and addressed to no one (163). “Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of

overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemas, and be transformed into narrative language” (176). Normal mental constructs and schemas cannot contain or account for the enormity and incomprehensibility of traumatic experience; trauma explodes existing structures of meaning. The capacity for integration of emotions, sense perceptions, thoughts, and behavior is shattered, creating a unique class of traumatic memory marked by fragmentation, dissociation, intrusion, timelessness, and extraordinary sensory and emotional arousal. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub write:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of “normal” reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it to a quality of “otherness”, a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (69)

Traumatic memories remain stuck in the time and place of their occurrence, the body and mind having been overwhelmed, unable to integrate the events into the normal flow of narrative, linear, long-term memory. The traumatized body remains trapped in the traumatic moments as if time has stopped, henceforth performing the dialectic dance between constriction, intrusion, and hyperarousal. It does not live and function in the present, but in constant relivings of the past and terror for the future (Herman 37). Furthermore, such memories tend to exist in the parts of the brain that are pre-verbal and pre-cognitive, dominated by emotional, visual, and sensory information, disconnected from the higher-order functions of association, organization, and language. Consequently, the trauma cannot be integrated, the individual cannot move towards healing, without somehow bringing the trauma’s fragmented unspeakableness into that higher-order realm of language and cohesive narrative. “A sudden and passively endured trauma is relived repeatedly, until a person learns to remember simultaneously the affect and cognition associated with the trauma through access to language” (van der Kolk and Ducey 271).

Thus, we return to the literary project of how to navigate language when we are attempting to articulate not only the unsayable, but its very unsayableness—when we are inscribing, on the space and time of the page’s body, events which transcend and shatter normal

containers of space and time, events which are defined by their very “de-scribing” of the body. We confront the quandary of how to witness the unwitnessable through language, and where to begin this difficult yet crucial project. One place to begin, I propose, is to meet trauma where it is at, accepting and attending to it, in all of its chaotic stuck-ness.

There are many texts that can arguably be read for this kind of complex meeting and mirroring of trauma—texts which, when recognized for the *bodies* of language that they are, behave as though they are currently being, or have been, traumatized. Such texts are “speaking and listening from the site of the trauma” (Caruth 11), enacting a dynamic and contradictory narrative from the very places of narrative’s defeat. The forms that such texts embody reflect the manifestations of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, such that they could themselves be referred to as *traumatized texts* or *traumatized narratives*. Though these texts, like all cultural production, have information to offer in many realms of study and must be read in a myriad of ways, the framework of PTSD can serve as an entrance to the particular, complicated nature of traumatic representation. One can pose questions such as: What does a text look like when it displays the symptoms of a traumatized body, or the many disturbances of memory so prominent in traumatic stress? What does it look like when a body of text has a “chronically engaged nervous system” that vacillates between painful states of intrusion, repetition, fragmentation, dissociated identities, numbness, timelessness, disorientation, lack of reference, and explosions of meaning? We will now ask such questions of two novels: Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* and Selah Saterstrom’s *The Pink Institution*. In their various modes of linguistic and syntactic constriction, hyperarousal, and intrusion, these bodies of narrative go beyond a traditionally coherent telling of events, by using their physical existence as texts to mirror and enact the unspeakable experience of traumatized bodies in the world. In the words of groundbreaking trauma researcher Robert Lifton, “The insight begins with the shattering of prior forms. Because forms have to be shattered for there to be new insight. In that sense, it is a shattering of form but it is also a new dimension of experience” (134). In a necessary, yet necessarily incomplete, gesture, *Blood and Guts in High School* and *The Pink Institution* are unique and multi-dimensional textual bodies, constructed with the shattered skins, limbs, and juices of language, in a potential step towards a new understanding of experiences—in a potential step towards witnessing.

The shattering of form: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*

In order to make such a language, a language game which resists ordinary language, through the lens of ordinary language or language whose tendency is to generate syntax or to make meanings proliferate, I must use an indirect route. (Acker, "Against Ordinary Language" 147)

The fragmentation, non-linearity, and narrative variation in Kathy Acker's novel, *Blood and Guts in High School*¹, are striking. The textual behavior dynamically parallels the experiences of the main character, Janey Smith—a young girl who is a victim of various sexual abuses, including life-long incest by her father, then being sold into a sex slavery ring until, ridden with venereal disease and cancer, she dies at age fourteen. As Carla Harryman argues, Acker's writing is "a material extension of the body analogous to language" (37). Gabrielle Dane, similarly, writes that *BGHS* is a "narrative enacting its content, an evocation of the splintered psyche of an abused little girl" (242). Dane goes on to state: "I suggest that Acker utilizes this schizophrenic array of styles and modes of discourse in order both to enact the permeable boundaries of a sexually abused child and to try to express that for which no ready words exist" (243). Instead of looking at Acker's language and array of styles as schizophrenic, we might view them as enactments of a *traumatic* mode of discourse. Acker's novel, in its form and language, is replete with manifestations of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction that define the traumatic experience. The following passage, for example, can be viewed as remarkably hyperaroused:

President Carter is the pillar of American society. He's almost fifty-three years old. WORN OUT by DECAyng practices, he looks like a SKELETON. He's HAIRY as a RAT, flat-backed, his ASS looks like TWO DIRTY RAGS FLAPPING OVER A PISS-STAINED WALL. Because he gets whipped so much the SKIN of his ASS is DEAD and you can KNEAD and SLICE it. He will never FEEL a thing. President Carter's centre is an enormous HOLE. This HOLE'S DIAMETER, COLOUR, and ODOUR resemble a NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY TOILET that hasn't been CLEANED for THREE weeks (119).

This passage, in fact, marks the beginning of a nine-page long section of hyperaroused narrative. This section is consumed by manic, agitated dialogue between a disembodied chorus of voices,

¹ For the remainder of this essay, *Blood and Guts in High School* will be referred to as *BGHS*.

which can neither stop speaking, nor stop interrupting one another. The use of capital letters is scattered throughout, sometimes completely dominating the dialogue. Though the content in these pages reflects intense anger, it is this use of capitalization which stamps the anger, so characteristic of traumatic hyperarousal, upon the physical body of the page. The capitals embody traumatic agitation—they literally enact the arousal of text. Similarly, though the segments of speech are delineated by some quotation marks and paragraph breaks, they display relatively few sentence breaks, and little traditional punctuation:

‘I was wandering around the streets with cancer.

‘I didn’t have any money or know anybody. Although I didn’t feel like a bum, I was hanging out at the Bowery with leftover humans.

‘One night I wandered into a rock-n-roll club named CBGB’s. The lights went boomp boomp boomp the drum went boomp boomp boomp the floor went boomp boomp boomp... then there was these worms of bodies, white, covered by second-hand stinking guttered-up rags and knife-torn leather bands, moving sideways HORIZONTAL wriggling like worms who never made it to the snake evolution stage, we only reproduce, we say, if you cut us apart with a knife, the slimy saxophone and the singer who’s too burned out to stick a banana in his cock flows away all was gooky amorphous ambiguous nauseous undefined spystory no reality existed so why bother to do anything? BOOM BOOM was reality, slimy slimy BOOM BOOM slimy slimy (120-121).

It is unclear who these voices belong to— they may represent dissociated parts of Janey, or a dialogue between Janey and her current lover, Jean Genet; at one point, the speech turns into a biting first-person critique of society, ostensibly issued by writer Erica Jong. All of these characteristics make for a text whose heart is beating quickly, whose frantic and outraged mind does not know where or how to focus—there is simply too much for it to attend to. This section of text, of which the above are just brief examples, is so overridden with sexuality, violence, and identity crises that it cannot be present for any kind of coherent, shared narrative with external reality. Though Janey is apparently in Tangier with Jean Genet at this time in her life, having been liberated from sex slavery and having discovered that she has cancer, we hear nothing of these objective facts of the story for nine pages.

In addition to hyperaroused text, *BGHS* also displays myriad characteristics of traumatic intrusion. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the array of disturbing illustrations and disruptions of narrative that happen throughout the first two sections of the novel. Crudely drawn visuals of penises and sexual acts abruptly interrupt the flow of the text, sometimes right in the middle of a sentence. A drawing of a vagina intrudes into the text with the caption, “My cunt red

ugh” (19). A drawing of disembodied male genitals being touched by disembodied female hands bears the caption, “YOU ARE THE BLACK ANNOUNCERS OF MY DEATH” (24); and later, a drawing of a rope-bound female body is labeled *ODE TO A GRECIAN URN* (63). Such images are sudden and unpredictable flashes, akin to the highly visual and literal, yet highly fragmented, flashbacks and nightmares experienced by survivors of trauma. They literally, as in trauma itself, cut through any semblance of cohesive, language-based narrative. These illustrations, in some sense, express the unspeakableness of Janey’s experience; they reach far beyond what words could relay (Dane 244). Intrusive images are also prominent in portraying Janey’s apparently turbulent dream life, as pages of dense, intricate dream maps interrupt her story.

The voices and narrative streams themselves repeatedly intrude upon one other, reflecting the unpredictable shifts of perception and cognition that mark PTSD. For instance, as Janey is locked in the slave trader’s room to learn how to be a whore, the narrative suddenly cuts to an in-depth book report that Janey has written about her hero, Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*. The book report is itself interrupted by a twenty-three page handwritten assemblage entitled *The Persian Poems*, in which Janey is teaching herself Arabic, after which the narrative returns again to the book report.

Various forms of repetition compulsion indicate yet another manifestation of traumatic intrusion in *BGHS*. From pages twenty-one through twenty-five, for instance, the story portrays an uncanny sequence of exchanges between Janey and her incestuous father, each exchange a slightly different version of the others, all of which begin with the same two sentences: “A few hours later they woke up together and decided they would spend the whole day together since it was their last day. Janey would meet Johnny at the hotel where he worked when he got off from work.” Throughout the section, these two sentences are repeated six times.

Through various modes of fragmentation, dissociation, and lack of reference, the marks of traumatic constriction also fuel the text. Indeed, one of Acker’s main methods of writing was the Burroughs-inspired cut-up technique, wherein text itself was cut and placed elsewhere in the body of writing, often arbitrarily. This technique brings the dance of destruction and creation right into the very DNA of Acker’s work (Robinson 3). The cut-up method, prominent throughout *BGHS*, reflects not only the dissociation and confusion of identity; it also highlights the disruption of linear time and narrative so prominent in the minds of trauma survivors.

The dissociation of Janey’s body, identity, and memory is widespread throughout the

story. The narration continually jumps between first, second, and third person point-of-view, as if Janey's body and self are floating in and out of various states of its own consciousness. Sometimes, Janey's identity and voice become sufficiently fused—or confused—with other characters like Hester Prynne or Erica Jong, as though she is filtering herself into dissociated identities. The narrative regularly cuts in and out of different tenses, implying the disruption and complication of normal, linear time and memory. It passes through descriptive sentences and paragraphs which entirely lack pronouns, creating the illusion of objectivity and the erasure of self so reminiscent of PTSD. This passage, for example, cuts in with its constricted language, just after a dialogue between Janey and her father that is replete with references to abuse:

Uxmal: Mayan ruins, huge temples, all the buildings are *huge*, scary, on high. Low land in centre. Everything very far apart. Makes forget personal characteristics. Wind blows long grass who! whoot! Jungle, not Amazonian swamp, but thick, thick green leafage so beautiful surrounds. Hear everything. (13)

Additionally, there are several passages of dialogue written in screenplay or script form, interspersed with third-person parenthetical commentary. This act of narrative distancing reflects the flat, dissociative experiences of a body that is forced to defend against overwhelming events by shutting down; a body whose only survival is to convince itself that it is removed from reality. In the very first pages, we are introduced, in this manner, to ten-year old Janey and her father:

Janey: I'm not crazy. (*Realizing he's madly in love with the other woman.*) I don't mean to act like this. (*Realizing more and more how madly in love he is. Blurts it out.*) For the last month you've been spending every moment with her. That's why you've stopped eating meals with me. That's why you haven't been helping me the way you usually do when I'm sick. You're madly in love with her, aren't you?

Father (*ignorant of this huge mess*): We just slept together for the first time tonight.

Janey: You told me you were just friends like me and Peter (*Janey's stuffed lamb*) and you weren't going to sleep together. It's not like my sleeping around with all these art studs: when you sleep with your best friend, it's really, really heavy. (7-9)

The content in this passage reflects the worst of physical and psychological abuses, yet the form allows for a frightening level of objectivity, such that it is possible to read the dialogue and forget—or at least, incompletely register—that Janey is a ten-year old victim of incest. There is distance created not only between the reader and the narrative, but between the narrative and itself, between Janey and herself. Janey's story becomes removed from space and time by way of the script, as if she is watching herself—or the reader is witnessing her—perform her life from

afar. Just before the final section of the novel, the story even more explicitly takes on the form of a script, complete with settings, scenes, and stage directions. While an abusive Jean Genet drags Janey across the sands of Egypt to her eventual death, this “play” represents, perhaps, her last traumatic constriction, her immanent confrontation with the annihilation of death:

Scene 5

Janey's still in gaol. She doesn't know whether it's day or night because she can't see anything.

She's blind.

She used to fantasize that when she went blind, a wonderful man would come along, take pity on her,

and rescue her. Now she knows that nothing like that is going to happen.

Janey (*thinking quietly to herself, not spoken aloud*): Everything that is this world stinks. Even if something good would come along now like love, or money which causes love, I would laugh in its face. No I wouldn't. I just absolutely know right now and for ever love's not going to come along, so I might as well die. I don't want to commit suicide anymore, like I used to; I want to go through death. How can I go through death?

(Aloud) Hey death!

(Death doesn't answer.)

Janey: Goddamn you answer me even if I'm a woman!

Death: What do you want, you lousy brat? (134)

Following this, the last section of the book brings the reader right to the site of traumatic annihilation—and also, potentially, to the site of healing or liberation. In this last section, entitled “The World”, Janey’s body disappears from the textual body; her voice is apparently gone; there is no more reference to the carnival of names, places, and themes the reader has come to know. Yet the text continues for twenty-five pages, overtaken by an unnamed, omnipresent voice. The voice narrates a creation-like myth that is otherwise dominated by illustrations. For the first time in the novel, the pages are marked by considerable amounts of white, empty space—it is easy to get the impression that the text is breathing for the first time. The illustrations do not read as traumatic intrusions of violence and sex, such as those at the beginning; instead, they are simple, archetypal scenes of animals, plants, shapes, maps, rivers, and people, interspersed with sparse, poetic language. It is unclear who or what this voice represents—perhaps a god-like power, or Janey’s consciousness just before or after death—but Janey, as we know her, is no longer present, having been replaced by something much more vast and universal. She has literally, in the body of the text, been erased or transcended. As Karen Brennan writes, “Within this pictorial, highly pastiched space, this voice, which has been figuratively silenced, speaks eloquently”

(266). Suddenly, the narrative is lucid and simple, relaying myth-like stories of creation and destruction.

The novel has succeeded in representing the total de-scription of Janey's body, while simultaneously enacting the inscription—the witnessing— of Janey's body upon a solid object, a book. The ending “instructs us to change our paradigms, to imagine the world differently” (Brennan 268), as the last line of the novel jumps from this creation-myth and unexpectedly invokes Janey one more time: “Soon many other Janeys were born and these Janeys covered the earth” (165). It is as though we are being assured that Janey Smith—and what she represents as a fictional character— will continue to haunt us until we witness and heal her legacy.

Erasure and presence: Selah Saterstrom's *The Pink Institution*

After atrocities, forms emerge, often called avant-garde forms. Looking at avant-garde as a literal translation, these forms may be “forward looking” but they feel more to me like present moment witness. How does one speak after a violence that literally reconfigures the cellular structure of things, that, in its erasure, records the shadow of what is no longer present? Out of necessity forms arise to speak a language that must also speak these losses and transfigurations. (Saterstrom, *Tarpaulin* 22)

Selah Saterstrom's *The Pink Institution*², set in the southern United States, relays a multi-generational portrait of one family as they struggle through poverty, addiction, suicide, and abuse. It is another traumatized body of text, a narrative embodiment of the complicated dance between intrusion, constriction, and hyperarousal. But while Acker's *BGHS* reads as a dense, harried labyrinth of language and signs that move in all directions, invoking a veritable narrative explosion, Saterstrom's novel is filled with white space, non-text; the imprints of traumatic erasure mark the pages like a ghost, silent and unknowable, yet inescapably present. White space defines the textual body, the book, of *TPI* just as much as its tangible language and images do. If Acker's novel is a traumatic explosion of narrative, Saterstrom's is an implosion, a traumatic sinking and rising of narrative that is spilling and leaking, treading water at the threshold of being known.

TPI's white space can be read as an enactment of constriction that is threaded throughout the whole text, rendering the words and images themselves an intrusive force—pieces of

² For the remainder of this essay, *The Pink Institution* will be referred to as *TPI*.

narrative that are trying to gel at the surface. The first chapter of *TPI* contains the most prominent white spaces, with sentences and paragraphs repeatedly lodged with gaps. The following passage, containing the only words on page twelve, is representative of the form in chapter one:

Micajah was the law she lived in
 the town he lived in
 the country. Children lived between versions
 suggest the couple adored one another
 others that they detested.

As the chapter proceeds, the gaps, though still prominent, tend to lessen; periodically, there are paragraphs or lines without gaps; and, at one point, the text drops into quick, vertical poem-like lines. These passages and gaps work together to create what feels like a series of fragmented, truncated memories. They mirror the familial and historical amnesia, the vacillation of constrictive and intrusive disturbances of memory, experienced by the family at the center of the story. The silence—whether willed silence, or involuntary, subconscious silence—surrounding this family’s trauma is embedded on the page. The literal slowing-down of narrative time that results from the gaps, enact the disturbances in time and space that mark traumatic occurrences.

The second chapter, entitled “I can never recover my object”, is comprised of lists of “objects”, each described in short blocks of prose. The descriptions, however, do not necessarily pertain to objects, but to *events* which have been objectified— events turned into static symbols, or cut off into alienated memories. In the first list, “Childhood Objects”, we read a description of the object called “There”:

Azalea sent Aza to Toomsata to see if Willie was there. Aza walked into the house. She asked Dunbar if her father was there. Dunbar said, “He’s in the bed, you jealous little bitch.” On several occasions the children watched Dunbar masturbate their drunk father while their mother, also drunk, slobbered on herself sitting in the corner. (52)

Though the prominent gaps, in the first chapter, between words and lines have subsided, the narrative continues to behave like a series of dissociated memories. Though noteworthy or traumatic in content, they remain objective and descriptive, lacking emotional and metaphorical language. In this way, the blocks of prose function as literal, highly visual representations,

reminiscent of the intrusive drawings in Acker's novel; reminiscent, also, of the flashbacks, dreams, and nightmares experienced by survivors.

At the end of the second chapter, the first person narrator is, literally, born: "Faryn begot Abella, Ginger begot Mary, Trulie begot Alea, and Aza begot me" (78). After all of the amnesia, distortion of time, and objective, dissociated scenes in the first two chapters, there is now an "I" who is struggling to become a subject through the fragmented, incomplete telling of family and social history. This "I" was, perhaps, always there; perhaps it was not—in any case, it remained silent and unseen until now. The text enacts and bows to this birth of subjectivity through the brief third chapter, called "Birth Interim", whereafter the narrative consciously flows through the new subject via a first-person point of view. This point-of-view shift—the dawn of the conscious awareness of the subject—is significant in terms of the traumatized body, which is so often debilitated by its confusions of identity and its sense of existential annihilation. The text, as a body, from here on out, has at least the beginnings of a sense of its own solid existence and identity.

However, by the fourth chapter, though we now have a first-person subject and her voice, she remains general, lacking a name and face. Though we have the start of a more linear narrative, the blocks of descriptive text getting longer and more dotted with personal impressions, the text still performs abrupt moments of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. As in Acker's novel, the point-of-view at times flips back to third person; sometimes the identity of the narrator and the identities of those she writes about become confused. For example, in two consecutive sections of chapter four—both suggestively entitled "Repetition"—the narrator is first relaying a memory of her grandfather:

When he repeated himself I thought it was because he was trying to reinforce the stories because he would say over and over the most important thing was to know one's history. Sometimes I thought he had a bad memory. He told every story, no matter how many times I had heard it, like I was hearing it for the first time. (92)

The second "Repetition" jumps to a third person account of a girl riding in a car with her drunken mother, who almost drives them into a ditch: "Her mother's car is a Beetle-bug color of insect wings. In the back of the Beetle bug is a rounded space carpeted with beige fuzz... If she wants, she can kneel back there but she likes it in the front" (95). Coming on the heels of a first-person narration with the same title, this section, just as so many sections in *BGHS* and so many

flashbacks and out-of-body dissociations experienced by survivors of trauma, reads as if the first narrator is suddenly outside of herself, watching the events of her life from an anesthetized distance. The two voices seem to represent the same individual, yet they act as separate and fluid identities.

There are notable moments of breakdown in the fourth chapter wherein sentences once again become constricted and incomplete, or hyperaroused: “‘don’t touch it’; backyard apple tree groundshades the thrown and wasted doll; we walk on wood floors; the parental bedspread is patterned paisley mold purring” (110). Here, the text seems to enact an anxious purging of dissociated flashes and timeless memories; it is a flow of highly sensory images without periods or capitalization to denote any beginnings or endings. It comes out of white space, then goes back into white space. Alternating sequences of past and present tense also play a role in the fourth chapter, again marking a distorted, non-linear “stuckness” in the narrative’s sense of time, such as on pages 114-116, when the narrator weaves in and out of past-tense memories of food-related events, and present-tense events of eating.

A noteworthy event that continues to occur throughout the first section of *TPI* is the insertion of several “tableaux”. The tableaux all bear the caption “The Confederate Ball Program Guide, 1938”, and include text that is literally broken by the phrase “text smears”: “The following tableaux tell the true story of a young man [text smear] The reverence with which the [text smear]...” (5). The text smears, and their surrounding text, not only refer to the vast traumas of the civil war—often by referring to their omission—but serve to literally inscribe silence, blurriness, and incomprehension on the physical page. Furthermore, the tableaux, which function more like pieces of visual art as opposed to literature, are another player in the incomplete composite of events that this novel is attempting to witness and narrate. Similarly, an insertion—perhaps an intrusion—of dreamlike, foggy pictures occurs throughout the whole novel. There is a headless man holding a goat’s horns; a blurry child and woman in front of a house; the faded figure of someone dressed as a devil; and, on the very last page, an antique-looking portrait of an anonymous little girl. These photographs, fuzzy and lacking context, again enact the dance between the seeable and unseeable, the known and unknown.

The ending of chapter four tells of the suicide attempt and miraculous recovery of the narrator’s mother. It is followed by chapter five, the conclusion: a brief set of utterances that bear striking similarities to the ending of *BGHS*. It starts with an entirely blank white page. This page

may represent a constrictive numbing or amnesia, but it reads more like a breath—a calm expanse that does not portray the same quality of the rapid, staccato gaps and breaks in the first chapter. The following page is mostly blank, as well, save for one paragraph describing some kind of malleable “It”. This “It” points to something vast and universal that cannot be pinned down, an entity that bears the quality of the omnipresent narrator at the end of *BGHS*: “It was bodies, what made bodies, and what bodies made. It was illegal separation. It was back-flipping in a five-star padded room. It was the Confederate Memorial Bandstand. It was the sound of birds pecking glass. You could see it if you held it open. You could drink it. It was pink.” (133)

The narrative then turns to a brief fragment entitled “Scene” and a set of sentences that read like a poem. The page is speckled with sparse language and white spaces; the violence of the rest of the novel is behind us, and the voice is suddenly contemplative and lucid as in the ending of *BGHS*. “Scene”, as well, is reminiscent of the dissociated scripts in Acker’s novel, and the section, much like the one in Acker’s ending, potentially liberates through its vastness. The final lines of *TPI* answer their own question: “Do you think she was losing her breath or catching it? I think she was catching it” (134). The reader is left with the feeling of an open-ended narrative that, while still incomplete and traumatized, is finally above water.

In these ways, *TPI* typifies, as well as allows the reader to enter, the process of “present moment witnessing.” This constant play between erasure and presence defines *TPI*, creates the conditions for a narrative body that is never final, always struggling to be born. Sometimes it succeeds in its own birth; at other times, it falls back into impenetrability. Once alienated from comprehensible and shared narrative, through witnessing, the trauma gains its first step towards integration, towards embodiment. This is the necessary nature of the relationship between trauma and witnessing.

Addressable Others: How literature can engender witnessing

All bodies are verbs; they do not just contain, but *are*, living, active, dynamic inscriptions and de-scriptions of narrative. In this sense, all bodies are texts and all texts are bodies. They exist only in relation to context, condition, association, and relationship. When these contexts, conditions, associations, and relationships come face-to-face with death and annihilation; when they are completely shattered and overwhelmed; when they are pushed past the limits of language and understanding; when they become completely alienated from the sign systems that

furnish life's spiritual and psychological tolerability, then bodies cease to exist on a very real level. They are no longer able to be inscribed into the shared reality which keeps us functioning and integrated.

As psychologists and theorists have articulated the difficulties inherent in representing trauma, they have also articulated the fact that witnessing is at the core of healing from trauma. To witness—whether it is to witness oneself or another—is to willingly and compassionately orient our consciousness towards the very thing that cannot be understood. Witnessing is an act of exchanging the alienation of trauma with the connection of relationship. Witnessing means being willing to be present with the unknowable and assist it, whenever possible, to be born as fact; and, when it cannot be born, one must acknowledge and accept its unknowable qualities. In this manner, traumatized bodies, through witnessing, have the potential to heal. So long as an other body is willing to be a witness, then even in its incomprehensibility, trauma can leave marks of evidence upon time-space. In *TPI* and *BGHS*, the initial body of the witness takes the form of a book. These book-bodies then point to, and help birth the existences of, characters and events. Finally, even though *TPI* and *BGHS* are works of fiction, they incontrovertibly resemble and reflect—whether or not their authors were acting in a conscious political manner—the politics, cultures, oppressions, and experiences of individual bodies in the real world. Literary production cannot happen in a social or cultural bubble. Another way to say this, is that a book of fiction can act as a witness, and in doing so, it can allow its readers to become witnesses—both to the fictional characters, and to the realities those characters represent in the world beyond the book. This is how witnessing begets witnessing, how traumatized bodies can help one another re-integrate, re-embody, and re-inscribe their narratives.

The process of healing, and creating trauma narratives, cannot exist without a reader/witness. This kind of narration is a co-creative process, dependent upon both the telling and the receiving. The witness assists in discovering the narrative by acting as a reflective surface, an *other* body, upon which the incomprehensible events of the trauma re-establish their place in space-time; upon which the alienated, dissociated trauma comes to re-create itself as a validated and “real” presence (Laub 57). If the reader is willing to be present with traumatized texts—to meet them where they are at and to accept their internal, often mysterious, logic—he or she can become a witness. There is a special kind of “listening” required of the reader/witness of such texts—a willingness to sit with, and accept as legitimate, the ambiguity, disconnectedness,

and incomprehensibility of the traumatic symptoms these texts hold and enact; a willingness to let go of, for the duration of the text, the myth of completeness and comprehensible time-space that is borne out in more traditional narratives. As Laub writes, the refusal of this witnessing, the insistence that the trauma remain unseen and unknown, is the final blow to trauma survivors: “The absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (68). The lack of a witness—a reader or listener—undoes the very potential for healing at every level.

Conclusion: “The tremors of a deep cultural shift”³

I would identify that “narrative” as a collection of images that have intersected and conjoined through time in such a way that it feels right—inexhaustible, non-negotiable...Where there are things and conditions, there is narrative. (Saterstrom, *Tarpaulin* 20)

TEACH ME A NEW LANGAUGE, DIMWIT. A LANGUAGE THAT MEANS SOMETHING TO ME. (Acker, *BGHS* 96)

Critical and literary theory are replete with proponents of psychological frameworks, namely hysteria and schizophrenia, as a frame for giving voice to trauma, the unspeakable, and the general complications of understanding and reference that are central to our (post)modern psyche. However, as Elaine Showalter argues in her essay “On Hysterical Narrative”, the use of the hysteria model might be inherently problematic, with its roots in misogyny and psychoanalysis, and its potential to re-pathologize and romanticize victims of violence. The use of the schizophrenic model, most prominently explored by Deleuze and Guattari, is intriguing as a metaphor, but too often undefined and misunderstood by those who theorize about its applications to language and narrative. It risks glorifying a set of symptoms that many experience as torturous, debilitating, life-threatening conditions; and it is generally, like hysteria, considered a pathology.

But the framework of post-traumatic stress disorder is unique in its understanding of psychological symptoms, the dynamics of trauma, and the mechanisms of witnessing. The main

³ Wollen, 2

causes of PTSD are acknowledged as external to the survivor. The symptoms and behaviors experienced by survivors are not thought of as de-contextualized, inherent personality traits or incurable biological flaws. An acknowledgement of PTSD encourages the survivor to see that she or he is precisely *not* crazy, but having a normal internal reaction to an extraordinary set of external circumstances. PTSD requires an analysis that recognizes, at least, interpersonal power dynamics, and at best, the violence ingrained in our socio-cultural paradigms. Not only does trauma take place in a social context, but healing from trauma does, too. Speaking to this, Judith Herman writes:

To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family. For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered. (9)

PTSD is one of the only accepted psychiatric models that recognizes the personal and political implications of power and violence, in addition to connecting violence with language and narrative. Therefore, literary applications of PTSD have immense potential to engender personal empowerment and healing, as well as cultural and social movement.

Yet the project of writing about trauma turns out to be difficult and riddled with paradoxes; many legitimate questions have been raised in regards to it. Perhaps the most prominent of those questions is: If trauma is precisely that which explodes our schemas of understanding, that which is inherently unspeakable, then is the act of writing about trauma inherently a degradation and betrayal of the trauma? As theorist Theodore Adorno famously stated, "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric."⁴ But perhaps another question, just as relevant, is: What do we risk by *not* writing about trauma? I argue that we risk a great deal. The

⁴ I include Adorno's controversial statement here because it has been the center of much discussion around literature and trauma. However, an extended discussion about it is beyond the means of this paper, and it is important to note that he is often misquoted and misunderstood. The original quote, which read, "The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today", was published in 1955 in an essay called "An Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society", in *Prisms* (Marcuse and van Gelder). Later on in his career, in *Negative Dialectics*, he retracted the original quote and gave a more nuanced, in-depth explanation which included the statement, "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems". (362)

task of writing trauma is politically and culturally indispensable, even in its incompleteness. It is that very incompleteness which must be written and witnessed, in order for healing to begin. To write the collapse of understanding, to attempt to write from the very place of annihilation while accepting the inevitable gaps and shortages, is both an act of witnessing in itself, as well as an entrance—an invitation—for readers to become witnesses. In a sense, we must first understand that we will never “understand” trauma, at least not in the manner the mind usually understands things; and then we must be determined to write about it anyways. Felman states in “Education and Crisis”: “By its very innovative definition, poetry will henceforth speak *beyond its means*, to testify—precociously—to the ill-understood effects and to the impact of an accident whose origin cannot precisely be located but whose repercussions, in their very uncontrollable and unanticipated nature, still continue to evolve even in the very process of testimony” (30). Invoking the Holocaust survivor and poet Paul Celan, she goes on to state that, in order to heal from trauma, language must first “pass through its own answerlessness” (53).

We live in a social body filled with individual bodies, which together manifest an endless matrix of narratives. In this body, there is rape, incest, abuse, addiction, mental illness, and poverty. There is sex trafficking, imperialism, racism, sexism, constant large-scale war and threat of war, factory farms, genocide, ecocide, and the destructive forces of global capitalism. In it, the damage and annihilation of bodies takes place at a larger and more unfathomable level than it ever has. In other words, this is a chronically traumatized—and traumatizing—society, and the magnitude of its trauma is a relatively new development in history. We need narrative forms that can accommodate this reality. We need to represent the unrepresentable in a thorough and complicated manner that does as much justice to it as possible. Furthermore, we need styles of interpreting and reading that can accommodate this reality. Traumatic sites are not linear sites, are not simple sites, are perhaps not even comprehensible sites. But in order to explore them, to enter them, to even get a foot into them, we must act as reader-witnesses. Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* and Selah Saterstrom’s *The Pink Institution* are just two examples of many books that, if examined through an informed lens of PTSD, might offer us invaluable information about language, society, and healing. Though more traditional literary forms serve a crucial purpose in the witnessing and integration of trauma⁵, we also need language and syntax

⁵ Paul Celan, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Charles Reznikoff, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Albert Camus are just a few of the countless novelists and poets from the last century whose

which, like *BGHS* and *TPI*, take that first step of meeting traumatic shattering where it is at—and readers who can do the same. We need both the text and the reader-witness to attend to the traumatized space; to hold it with a tolerance for ambiguity and confusion; to maintain the heartbeat of patient, compassionate witnessing that will make real the possibility of healing, integration, and ultimately, a new world. This is a politically and culturally indispensable concern of literature.

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works, now generally recognized for their bravery of content as opposed to their innovation of form, has played an invaluable role in the cultural witnessing and integration of trauma.

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