

Review of *Facing Trauma in Contemporary American Literary Discourse: Stories of Survival and Possibility* by Laura Virginia Castor¹

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In her 2019 monograph, *Facing Trauma in Contemporary American Literary Discourse: Stories of Survival and Possibility*, Laura Virginia Castor surveys the usage of trauma in the fiction, nonfiction, and poetry by several ethnic American women writers in the 1995-2013 period. She tries to take “the experiences of trauma survivors seriously without trying to contain their experiences and insights in a Eurocentric trauma paradigm” (14-15). She aims to analyze five themes in the books under review—the role of house and/or home, the presence of a singular trauma experienced by the protagonist that acts as a catalyst for the story, the ambition of the narrator/protagonist to be a survivor rather than victim of trauma, the attempt to relate individual trauma to a historical past, and, finally, the ability of the protagonist to take action that influences the environment without controlling others (15-17).

In the first chapter, Castor discusses *Shadow Tag*, an autobiographical 2010 novel by Louise Erdrich. She draws on theories of autobiographical writing by Philippe Lejeune and Leigh Gilmore, claiming that the novel “as a fictionalized personal narrative raises questions about the boundaries between private life and public disclosure” (28). Castor focuses on Riel, the young daughter and fledgling writer who is forced to find “a way to narrate the memory of her father’s suicide and her mother’s sacrifice of her own life on his behalf, and thereby to reclaim a sense of her own agency” (36). The novel is praised for “displacing the violating discursive structures that assume that autobiography as a genre is free and available to all” (39). Arguably, Erdrich’s novel wins empathy from readers by transcending the ethical and narrative limits of autobiographical fiction in which the abuse of power within the family should be scrutinized, understood and forgiven.

In the second chapter, two 2010 nonfiction books about chronic pain are examined—*The Shaking Woman, or a History of My Nerves* by Siri Hustvedt, and *The Pain Chronicles: Cures, Myths, Mysteries, Prayers, Diaries, Brain Scans, Healing, and the Science of Suffering* by Melanie Thernstrom. Castor argues that analyzing “the language of [chronic] pain” (40) contributes to the understanding of trauma and autobiographical writing, as the narrators in both books “effectively connect their compelling personal stories with larger, historically situated subjectivities” (43). While Thernstrom’s treatment assumes the format of a readable general history of pain against the backdrop of the author’s experience, Hustvedt’s book is a long essay which explores “the large ambiguity of the interdependent relationships between mind and body, illness and health, and personal and generational memory” (49).

In the third chapter, Castor looks at *Man Walks into a Room* (2002), the first novel by Nicole Krauss. This novel has not been widely discussed, perhaps because the author avoids the stereotypical Jewish themes of coming to terms with the Holocaust, survival, and negotiating the

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diaspora. Instead, Krauss focuses on Samson, the protagonist, and on his attempt to reconstruct his life after an operation that saves his life but robs him of his adulthood memories. Although the novel is set in the American West, California, and New York, it is the desert location where the protagonist enters “a conscious process of transformation” (60) that includes the disastrous implant of a memory of 1950s nuclear testing from another patient. Castor argues that in the quest of Samson Greene, “the boundaries between personal and historical memories are often fluid...infused with emotional charge” (66). Trauma, for Samson, is as much a personal problem of memory loss as the collective sense of many Americans who have lost their drive, innocence, and hope. *Man Walks into a Room* is a richly-textured probe into the individual’s struggle “to reinvent notions of the self not as self-reliant but, rather, as interdependent and able to assume more collective responsibility for America’s [historic] traumas” (67).

The fourth chapter surveys the poetics of Mvskoke writer Joy Harjo and her historical poem “Equinox.” Although the inclusion of a short poem on the history of persecution of Native Americans feels incongruous, Castor argues for the relevance of discussing it since Harjo’s “art addresses larger collective needs for continued healing of historical trauma through mental decolonization” (71). Refusing to provide a realistic portrait of the 1814 Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Harjo “opens spaces for thinking critically about the psychological and ethical consequences of the frontier narrative of America” (77). Castor argues that such poems not only manage to transform traumatic memories into art, they also testify to the power of Native American poetry to “shift from trauma to resilience” (79), while the initial angry impulse of the poet to refrain “from breaking into the story by force” is followed by Harjo’s reconciliation with the history of traumatic dispossession that is shared experience for most Native Americans. The use of music to forward Harjo’s poem of reconciliation, furelps “activate psychological healing [...] through reflection on the historically contextualized, living presence of her words” (83).

In the fifth chapter, Castor discusses the novel *Solar Storms* (1995) by Linda Hogan. The book showcases Hogan’s “ability to create openings among characters, between the narrator and the landscape, and between the narrator and the reader” (86). Castor focuses on two women, the abusive and mentally unstable Hannah and her daughter Angel. While the former is portrayed as “the vampire-like figure of the Wiindigoo” (95), the latter is presented as a survivor, a Wolverine trickster who “can easily move across boundaries of place and time” (97). It is through Angel’s struggle to write her way out of her traumatic past that Hogan criticizes “the power of real and imagined boundaries to exclude some people from the sources of control over their lives” (97). Castor summarizes Hogan’s achievement in *Solar Storms* as “the process of empathetic ‘re-membering’ of the past” which is a painful but necessary process that has to be experienced in order to name “larger truths about personal, cultural, and ecological survival” (100-1).

The sixth chapter features an analysis of *The Lowland*, a 2013 novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. The novelist “connects houses and exterior environments to her characters’ often understated or unexpressed inner struggles” (103), an approach also used by Hogan in *Solar Storms*. The plot revolves around the traumatic experience of Gauri and her relationship with two brothers, Udayan the radical who commits murder, and Subhash the Americanized scientist who marries Gauri out of compassion and to save her reputation and raise her child (fathered by Udayan). Castor’s analysis focuses on Gauri, a survivor woman who is first smitten with Udayan, embraces his political

radicalism and even helps him with a politically-motivated murder, then grudgingly accepts the reputation-saving marriage offer from his brother Subhash after Udayan is killed. Gauri proves an unfeeling mother and wife who accepts Subhash only to leave him and her daughter behind to pursue her academic career in the States. Castor emphasizes the pattern of doubling, a juxtaposition of the two brothers and their different fates and personalities, representing the “loosening oppositions between guilt and innocence” (112-13). The focus on Gauri as the sole traumatized survivor and dislocated Indian woman in America seems a missed opportunity, as Gauri’s husband Subhash, a responsible Americanized Indian survivor who plays the role of stepfather and keeper of family appearances, might have also been analyzed from this perspective.

The seventh chapter surveys a late novel by Toni Morrison, *Home* (2012). The story of Frank Money and his sister Cee is framed within the narrative of home-seeking, as houses represent the places that reflect the protagonists’ struggles “to find healing from the personal and societal violence they have experienced and internalized” (Castor 121). Set in the 1950s, the story involves the quintessentially American middle-class quest for home-ownership, made problematic by the racism of the era in which African Americans were often prevented from partaking in such a dream. While both Frank and Cee are haunted by traumatic experiences from their past which they cannot cope with on their own, they do find “home together and separately” (130) as Cee’s healing from the abusive medical experiment that almost killed her is achieved with the help of several caring women, while Frank’s demons are exorcised when he and his sister join forces to rebury a man whose death in an illegal prize fight has haunted Frank since childhood. Castor concludes that Morrison’s usage of home is “both about being healed and continuing to heal the social, as men and women” (131).

The eighth chapter analyses *The Round House*, a 2012 novel by Louise Erdrich. Castor reads the complex story of traumatic abuse, rape, and vengeance as “a web of double meanings, related to place, characterization, and historical context.” (133) She highlights the symbolism of two houses, the tribal round house and the house where the Joe, the protagonist, and his family live. Both houses are portrayed as sinister locations, as Joe’s mother is raped in the round house while the family house subsequently ceases to be the haven it once had been. Castor also emphasizes Erdrich’s symbolic use of the “attacking trees,” as tree saplings are endangering the foundation of Joe’s family house and the rapist’s name is revealed to be Linden, which happens to also mean a tree genus. The quest of Joe to find and punish the person who raped his mother is portrayed as a complex coming-of-age story. Joe aspires to be a good tribal judge like his father, who has learned to negotiate with Native American wisdom the differences between American and tribal law. Castor praises the novel for creating “a figurative environment where readers can reflect critically on the issues she [Erdrich] raises for her characters” (149).

Facing Trauma in Contemporary American Literary Discourse is a valuable contribution to international scholarship on trauma and its portrayal in literature. Castor makes useful interpretations and cross-references between several notable recent American books. However, her study has its share of deficiencies. It neither outlines a usable theory of trauma in American literature to be used in the respective chapters nor does it use existing trauma theories in a sustained manner. Instead, Castor applies relevant criticism about American history, culture, and psychology in a combination of close reading and cultural studies interpretation. Beyond a few generic references to the work

of Cathy Caruth and Dominic LaCapra and a few references to the psychological approaches to trauma (such as those by Peter A. Levine and Gábor Maté) and to the work of other trauma scholars (such as Stef Craps), Castor makes no use of recent authoritative surveys of trauma in American literature.² This is perhaps due to the fact that the chapters were first published as individual articles and the trauma studies angle was added to the collection later. Nevertheless, the choice of books for critical analysis is logical and sound with the exception of chapter 2 (on trauma in two nonfiction books) and chapter 4 (focusing on an overrated poem by Harjo that does not really fit in the overall book scheme). Another problem of *Facing Trauma* is the author's refusal to recognize the possibility that even male characters in some of the novels she discusses face real issues of trauma and survival (for example, there is no discussion of the compassionate and traumatized male characters in the chapters on Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Morrison's *The Home*). Strangely, this bias is overcome by the author in the third chapter on Krauss's *Man Walks Into a Room*, a novel which, although written by a woman, focuses exclusively on the trauma of a male protagonist. In her conclusion to *Facing Trauma*, Castor argues that the works she analyzes suggest "the need to critique power hierarchies, to work toward greater justice and well-being for all people, and to broaden the range of people considered worthy of attention and empathy" (151). By denying fair treatment to several characters in her analyses, however, Castor sometimes perpetuates the stereotypes of "gendered, racialized stories of inequality behind the American promise of liberty for all" (152) that she sought to reinterpret.

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2 See Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo, eds., *Trauma in Contemporary Literature: Narrative and Representation* (Routledge: New York, 2014), and Tamás Bényei and Alexandra Stara, eds., *The Edges of Trauma: Explorations in Visual Art and Literature* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014).