Race and Trauma at the Rise of the Millennium:
Reading American Culture in the “Post-Racial” Era

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Abstract: In this paper I align history, trauma, and race studies to shape a conceptual basis for the race trauma inquiry in order to explore the effects of US racial history and of residual racisms on contemporary American culture. I argue that the social, political, and psychological mechanisms by which racism, racial exploitation and exclusion function have a traumatic effect on individuals and communities. This paper maps the extent to which race identification, racialized life experience, and racism can be traumatic in the “post-racial era,” and are sustained by misguided “political correct” discourses. By the trauma of race I refer to the psychological, somatic, and cultural effects that individuals and groups suffer as a consequence of their being ascribed to a race. In response to the insufficient collaboration between race and trauma studies I propose new hermeneutics of literary and cultural interpretation focused on particulars in the trauma of race variations synchronically and diachronically.

The election of the 44th President of the United States—the first African American to be elected to the nation’s highest office—inevitably brought to the forefront the country’s racial status quo and also reactivated old debates about its complicated racial history. More than before, the concerns and disagreements over the ideology of “post-racialism” in America flared. At a superficial assessment, President Barack Obama’s election would warrant “the end of (racist) history” in the same vein as Hegel envisioned the Battle of Jena (1806) as the triumph of the

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modern state and liberal reforms, as Karl Marx heralded the conception of the communist state, and, more recently, as Francis Fukuyama defined liberal democracy. When referring to racial equality and civil rights, the election of a non-white President seemed to have achieved the Hegelian desiteratum of equal and universal recognition. There is logic in such estimation: if an African American could sit down at the Resolute Desk in the most famous presidential office in the world, then who could deny that there is true, irretrievable, ubiquitous racial equality in America?

Nevertheless, both the presidential campaign and three years of Obama presidency are burdened with racist offenses which ran the gamut from relatively subtle to downright crude. In his own words, in the 2008 “A More Perfect Union” Speech, Candidate Obama observed he was found guilty, by blacks and whites alike, of being “either ‘too black’ or ‘not black enough.’” In fact, American racial imaginary has not reached an agreement about what exactly black is and what the parameters that define blackness at the rise of the millennium are. The attacks directed at the candidate’s racial identity come from all walks of life and from both sides of the color line. The offenders sadly include some of the most important political personalities of the country. Among the more infamous, the controversial Halperin’s and Heilemann’s Game Change quotes former President Clinton snide remark that “a few years ago, this guy would have been getting us coffee” (218). Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid notoriously described candidate Obama as a “light-skinned African American, with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one,” a gaffe for which he publicly apologized soon after (218). While the habit to caricaturize the highest

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1 Fukuyama analyzes in depth the concept of the “end of history,” first in The End of History and the Last Man, drawing on Hegel’s principle of the “desire for recognition,” which would be solved by liberal democracy, by replacing hierarchies of “lordship and bondage with universal and equal recognition” (ix-xxiii). Fukuyama, however, as Hegel and Marx before him, though praising the goal of a homogenous state and a “last man,” implicitly defined this “man” as white.
officials in the country, particularly the President, is long-standing in the American journalistic tradition and consistent with political media’s role of keeping pressure on authorities, when attacks focus on the President’s racial identity, the offense does not only afflict him and his office, but it ricochets on the entire black community, who rally around their most famous living representative. In effect, racist attacks on President Obama act as omnipresent reminders not only that racism in America is alive and well in the much-heralded “post-racial” era, but that these personal attacks are operative triggers of historical cultural trauma.

Even at a superficial assessment of the racial status quo in America, we can safely conclude that Obama’s era is not by far “post-racial,” the “end of the history” of racism, but a new stage in recent history, in which racial tensions have become more visible and inter-racial and intra-racial negotiations of civil rights, politics, and culture have gained more urgency. History is in the making with regard to the extent to which Obama’s presidency has altered racial discourses for the better. Despite the consistent efforts of the “post-racial” ideology, the Obama era makes inevitable new re-visitations of the US racial history and re-evaluations of the real state of US race relations. Among many contemporary scholars who warn against the pervasiveness and the consequences of colorblind ideology, sociologists Luigi Esposito and Laura L. Finley explain that colorblindness dismisses “racism in most public discussions” as “atypical and reprehensible acts perpetrated by irrational bigots,” and ignores “the need to challenge the foundational structures that continue to support racial inequalities in various areas of social life [which] is too often ignored or overshadowed by the post civil rights emphasis on remaining racially neutral” (166). In Esposito’s and Finley’s view, Obama’s election in fact “depended on de-racializing his campaign,” and to ensure his re-election the President took a “color-blind approach to governance” (167, 168). Robert Staples, in “The Post Racial Presidency,” corroborates this opinion when he notes that the “real reason for the paucity of
Black cabinet positions is that Obama and his handlers know that his race will remain a fundamental barrier to his re-election” and that “by making whites the face of his administration, he hopes to neutralize the race factor” (139). Consequently, Staples criticizes the President’s lack of “courage to address those problems anymore than all our white presidents,” a fact he decries as “our real tragedy” (144). Certainly, Staples’s complaint is not singular, nor is it unexpected, with other critics disappointed in Obama’s muted interest in the country’s racial conflicts.

Esposito and Finley equate colorblindness with “a new form of racism,” apathy. In fact, they perfunctorily reduce racism to apathy when they declare that “racism today is, to a large extent, about indifference to persisting racial inequalities” (171). But apathy is hardly new in US racial history—or the main form of racism today, for that matter—though indifference towards racial disparities is indeed a hurtful reality which non-whites confront on a daily basis. Such indifference, which I describe as the unsympathetic, sometimes hostile, witnessing to the Other’s trauma, contributes to and perpetuates what I will discuss as the trauma of race. In the context of this significant moment in American history, it is imperative, in society’s efforts towards antiracism, to discard this apathy by stimulating any acts of historical memory that would resurface silenced, unspoken, marginalized histories.

The historical and social contexts of the race relations in the US indicate that there is a predetermination of trauma within race. Through mechanisms of cultural traumatic memory we can assert that mere racial identification is fraught with a history of racial violence and it manifests itself in the trauma of race. By the trauma of race (or race trauma) I refer to the psychological, somatic, and cultural effects that individuals and groups suffer as a consequence of being racialized. Either as a result of an official racially oppressive system or as an outcome of residual racist discourses and practices, certain categories of people are still victimized solely on the basis of their association with a certain race. At the beginning of the twenty-first century,
American society is plagued with racism and racial violence. Certainly, racial oppression takes subtler forms now than fifty years ago. Shannon Sullivan vividly illustrates that “while big-booted forms of consciousness oppression still exist, in the early twenty-first century white domination tends to prefer silent tiptoeing to loud stomping” (5). In the context of the US racial regimes, being black often means being exposed to a range of traumatic experiences, ranging from episodes of blatant racial violence to daily racial microaggressions, whose cumulative effects could be just as poignant and consequential. However, racial identification is not always traumatic, neither is the trauma of race pathological by definition. Recent history shows that race identification and racialized experiences can be empowering and are instrumental in creating a sense of belonging and pride. Psychologically and clinically speaking, individuals respond differently to traumatic events and stimuli; various traumatisms provoke equally diverse traumas. Race trauma covers a number of definitions, such as the identity splitting that, according to some scholars (Du Bois, Fanon, Bergner) nonwhite race identity formation seems to produce in the white-dominated environment. Trauma itself takes multifarious forms, such as, most often, the compulsive repetition or/and reenactment of some traumatic event. For the purpose of my argument, when identifying the trauma of race, my focus rests on the racial anxieties fixed in the black-white paradigm, but this definition is relevant in regards to any interracial or intraracial clashes.

Racism, as a systemic form of oppression, calls for an expansion of trauma definitions, beyond clinical assessments. Race theories, particularly articulated within African American studies, and psychoanalytic theories, from which trauma studies emerged, have acted with few exceptions like repelling magnetic fields. Nevertheless, trauma scholars have articulated an increasing interest in expanding their inquest from the individual to the cultural, emphasizing trans-generational perpetuation of trauma. Race theorists have also adjusted their lens to equally
examine the subject, the group, the cultural, and the national through psychoanalytical inquiry in
the process of racial formation and identification. Moreover, there are new concerns that trauma
scholars “fail to live up to [the] promise of cross-cultural engagements” since they tend to
disregard traumatic histories of currently subordinate, marginalized groups both inside and
outside Western society, “and/or to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of
trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity” (Craps 33).

The field of trauma studies has envisioned an inextricable link between trauma and
history. Famously, Cathy Caruth deems that history is “never one’s own, [but] is precisely the
way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Unclaimed Experience 24). Elsewhere, she
suggests that “[t]he traumatized… carry an impossible history within them, or they become
themselves a symptom of history that they cannot entirely process” (Trauma 5). Frantz Fanon
refers specifically to how racial history is traumatic when he conceptualizes Western culture as
the site of racial trauma. Fanon’s assertion urges the examination of culture, especially in its
racial prescription, as breeding trauma. His argument launches an investigation of the genealogy
of racial discourse formation, which has historically contributed to the identification and
hierarchization of racial typology and the trauma which they breed.

Throughout time, scholars observed the traumatic split within black racial identification.
W. E. B. Du Bois addressed the identity splitting of “the black folk” as “double-consciousness,
[which is] this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (279). Frantz
Fanon spoke of the “zebra striping of the mind” of black people. More recently, Gwen Bergner
drew on Fanon and Du Bois to develop a theory which details the complex process of racial
identity construction. Drawing from the established model of identity formation which describes
subject formation relying on sexual difference, Bergner argues that “the stock scenes of racial
discovery both parallel and complicate the psychoanalytic claim that subjectivity forms in
response to visual trauma,” thus indicating the formative impact of race on identity (xviii). The trauma of race which is identifiable in American culture was engendered by one (major) traumatic “event” or scene (conquest and colonization, Middle Passage, slavery) and perpetuated by recurring, omnipresent acts of racism which span the entire history of the US..

In order to understand the trauma of race we need to envision it in its historical avatars and in terms of inter- and intra-racial relations; in other words, we need to consider both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of race trauma. There is a demonstrable connection between individual and communal race trauma in transmitting the traumatizing elements of racism in American culture. The understanding of these transfers demands more in-depth inquiries into how these transfers operate intra- and inter-culturally. Since the structure of racism and the process of racialization inherently conflate individual and group identities, I distinguish individual trauma in relation to the non-homogenous community and analyze the slippery relations between individual and group identities. As such, assessing the trauma of race necessitates a reconsideration of what it means to be black in America, beyond the superseded belief in a native born, African-descended, and monolithic black community. Recognizing black diversity is crucial in mapping the severity, multiplicity, and accretion of race-related stressors which activate the trauma of race. The volatile and disjunctive black identity in the United States is constructed upon culturally diverse, yet consistently oppressive and traumatic historical conditions. The American race trauma is cumulative, in that it is both exclusive in its specific pre-American historical and geographical contexts, and also inclusive in the American context of a common pattern of racial oppression.

In convergence with the legacy of historical race trauma, the contemporary socio-political landscape of the United States often proves traumatic for the racial subject and group. In the era of “political correctness,” racial exclusion and white privilege are camouflaged under misguided
appeals to cosmopolitanism and colorblind humanism. I purposely put the phrase in quotation marks in order to call attention to the misuse and abuse of such discourses for the purpose of concealing, rather than fighting racism. The “political correctness” to which I refer is in fact the insidious double of an initially well-intended discourse which aimed to relegate racist slurs and practices to the level of socially unacceptable behavior. “Political correctness,” the controversial late twentieth-century mantra of socio-political decorum, has aimed for reconciliation, but often it has become a compromise that reinforces unuttered racist (and sexist, xenophobic, chauvinist, etc.) discourses. The term is inherently dichotomous, silently pointing to a political… incorrectness which seems to come more naturally through conscious and unconscious habits. Implicitly, “political correctness” suggests that it is a special kind of correctness, that semantically or otherwise, the signifier is “correct,” but that politically speaking, it may be faulty. The term puts in opposition the primacy of “we” (the white, male, heterosexual, citizen, etc.) to “them” (the racial other, woman, homosexual, immigrant, etc.), in effect reinforcing these binary oppositions. If at the political level “political correctness” aims to identify and resolve structural inequalities and the injustices associated with them, at the ideological level these inequalities are frequently reinforced and their effects trivialized. We witness today a culture of “political correctness,” which hinders rather than helps our ability to acknowledge and work through the tribulations that come with identity biases of any kind. In effect, rather than expunge prejudice, “political correctness” merely conceals it. This camouflage thwarts the process through which society acquires an educated perspective on race, race relations and the common racial history, which would actually trigger a more open, honest conversation on these matters. In other words, “post-racialism” and “political correctness” are in fact the same old discomfort of acknowledging and addressing the infamous pink elephant in the room.
Nevertheless, “political correctness” has become a necessity when it comes to the way Americans talk race. John L. Jackson undertakes an illuminating study of the phenomenon and explains why political correctness generates conflicting positions. The detractors dismiss it as a “silly and pointless form of social censorship that makes Americans, especially white Americans, overly precious with their language while simultaneously promoting thin-skinnedness among minorities, a mixture that many argue suppresses honest and open civic debate” (77). The supporters regard it as “necessary rules of common decency and mutual respect that actually facilitate productive conversations across entrenched lines of social difference” (77). But this debate does not emphasize that the culture of political correctness in fact generates racial distrust. And here is how “political correctness” functions as an unlikely vehicle for perpetuating racism. Due to Americans’ lack of transparency, PC policies lose the capacity to encourage honest dialogues. Instead, “blacks are stuck in the structural position (vis-à-vis white interlocutors) of their ancestors’ white masters: they see smiles on white faces and hear kind words spilling from white mouths without the least bit of certainty about whether those gestures are representative of the speakers’ hearts” (77-8). Accordingly, “political correctness” is tied to what Jackson calls “de cardio racism,” a concealed racism, “of euphemism and innuendo, not heel-dug-in pronouncements of innate black inferiority” (78). This reinvention of racism is “about what law can’t touch, what won’t be easily proved or disproved, what can’t be simply criminalized and deemed unconstitutional. It is racism that is most terrifying because it is hidden, secret, papered over with public niceties and politically correct jargon” (87). Such elusive racist discourses are obviously most difficult to fight against and constitute a permanent locus of traumatic encounters between whites and non-whites.

By and large, de jure racism ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Loving vs. Virginia ruling of 1967, but de facto racism has continued to exist, lately in the form of de cardio
racism. The racism “of the heart” manifests in disguised ways and sophisticated discourses which require, as Jackson warns, “new methods of analytical engagement, methods far from anything we’ve ever used to make sense of the racial ties that bind us together” (78-9). Jackson agrees that the “demonization of public racism… is a social and moral victory,” but he warns about the cost, since “political correctness has proven tragically effective at hiding racism, not just healing” (91). And here we deal with the Pharmakon dilemma; the cure proves poisonous since instead of alleviating race trauma, “political correctness” contributes to concealing the traumatizing discourses which perpetuate it. One of the big caveats of “political correctness” is the fact that it prevents people from sincerely addressing “their fears about others” in the public sphere, which in effect makes it more necessary for such fears to be vented backstage (207).

The most recent argument for overlooking race altogether, lest it destabilizes the racial status quo, and implicitly white privilege, comes from supporters of antiracialism. David Theo Goldberg warns against this trend which argues for an erasure of racial terms of reference and promotes colorblindness under the pretense of joining the antiracist movement. While antiracism, on the one hand, “requires historical memory, recalling the conditions of racial degradation and relating contemporary to historical and local to global conditions”; antiracialism, on the other hand, “suggests forgetting, getting over, moving on, wiping away the terms of reference, at best (or worst) a commercial memorialization rather than a recounting and redressing of the terms of humiliation and devaluation” (Threat of Race 21). Antiracialism is generative of what Goldberg calls “[b]orn again racism [which] is racism without race, racism gone private, racism without categories to name it as such.” (23). The conjunction of antiracialism and “political correctness” complicates the process by which genuine racial equality would be possible. By ignoring, minimizing, or rendering race altogether “invisible,” antiracialism and colorblind ideologies, sustained by “politically correct” discourses provide a
rationale for not addressing the needs and concerns of non-whites. Colorblindness, by concealing race itself and race relations, in fact allows racism to fester. As Toni Morrison cautions, there are instances in which claiming racelessness is itself a racial act (46).

Post-racialism, which relies on the pretense of colorblindness and the veneer of “political correct” discourses of race, makes race trauma less apparent. “Political correctness” has become the ubiquitous façade for veiling racial conflicts, and it effectively serves the cause of antiracialism. It often serves the agenda of colorblindness and antiracialism, rather than being employed as a way to “purge” various official and vernacular discourses of their offensive attributes in relation to race. While that “purging” is necessary and beneficial for political correctness to result in better inter-racial relations, this “cleansing” is not yet doubled by an educated understanding of the nation’s common racial history. As with everything regulated by society and law, “political correctness” implies some degree of hypocrisy. The phenomenon of employing “political correctness” merely to censor offensive public speech in turn necessitates a closer look at the rhetoric of silence, omission, and avoidance in which it results. Such rhetoric can prove to be provocative and effective in triggering cultural and individual distress.

One recent instance comes to mind in addressing the controversial ways in which “political correctness” dismisses the uncomfortable truths associated with historical authenticity for the sake of a misguided notion of “protecting” the innocence (ignorance?) of young audiences and implicitly taps into cultural trauma. In 2010, Twain scholar Alan Gribben and NewSouth Books took the initiative of releasing a joint volume version of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* that launders the original text of the offensive “n” word and “in” word, “Injun,” by replacing them with the word “slave.” Gribbean, quoted by Marc Schultz for *Publishers Weekly*, defends his edition: “this is not an effort to render Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn colorblind… Race matters in these books. It’s a matter of how you express that
in the 21st century” (6). Gribbean declares that his edition comes to rescue the classic from its being further banned from school curricula lest it offend young minds, referring to a long-standing controversy. This misuse of political correctness calls to mind George Orwell’s “Newspeak” and “thoughtpolice” and the realization that “correcting” Twain’s nineteenth-century language to protect the sensibilities of the twenty-first century audiences serves only in artificially “fixing” inter-racial exchange and confusing (young) readers in regards to the realities of the era Twain portrays. In his extensively researched book, The N Word, Jabari Asim acknowledges the uneasiness of many African Americans regarding the extensive use (215!) of the word which makes the book “difficult to stomach and absolutely unacceptable as assigned reading in school” (110). But, aware of the controversy regarding the removal of the offensive language, Asim warns that “replacing ‘nigger’ with ‘slave’ or ‘Negro,’ as some critics have suggested, would not only undermine Twain’s attempted fidelity to the customs and attitudes of mid-nineteenth-century Missouri but also dilute the impact its scathing sendup of white hypocrisy,” concluding that “teaching methods that fail to illuminate the ironic intent of the novel or place it in its proper historical context reflect badly on the state of modern pedagogy, not on Twain and his creation” (111). By extension, the modern pedagogy to which Asim refers merely reflects the colorblind ideology’s discomfort with and inability of honestly confronting a past which is often painful and controversial. It is likely that those who such an endeavor protects are not as much the blacks’ sensitivities as the whites’. But sugarcoating history through altering historical record and literary representation is a frustrating and damaging act of misrecognition and covering-up. One of literature’s most important roles is to help keep the past

2 As early as 1995, Howard Hurwitz decried the decision of school authorities in Connecticut, Virginia, Texas, and Washington D.C. to ban Huckleberry Finn from the school curricula because of Twain’s use of the racial slur. Hurwitz remarked the hypocrisy of the “PC crowd” who effectively promoted ignorance of the US racial history and the linguistic contexts in which the novel is located.
alive and by doing so, to unveil and speak effectively about the unresolved conflicts of our times. The challenge of historical representation is that the past be continually and truthfully represented in order to open it to speculation in the present. Since the significance of the past branches in a multitude of directions, literary representations and interpretations of history are inherently replete with contradictions, and may run the risk of being traumatizing in themselves.

The trauma of race has the potential of illuminating relevance in literary and cultural studies. When it appears as a consequence of racial discrimination, all relational and performative aspects of racial identification are important in understanding how the trauma of race is experienced and what its possibilities of representation are, given that race and (traumatic) memory are so fraught with political and cultural significance. Racism, institutionalized and vernacular, is ever adapting to a system which morally, politically and legally condemns it. By exposing racism’s pervasiveness and primacy in the US socio-political schema we can develop new hermeneutics of cultural interpretation which emphasizes racism’s traumatic effects. Racialized discourses, which reveal the isolation, hyperarchization, harassment, exclusion, even violence against categories of people on the basis of their race, provide a model for approaches to trauma that resist pathologizing diagnoses.

Racism and trauma are in causal relation; the former generates and maintains the latter. Equally important, their respective narratives/discourses display important similarities stemming from common patterns of ideological formation. Once a group or individual is “hailed,” in the Althusserian sense, as belonging to a certain race, that group and that individual is also ascribed a certain position in the locus of historical trauma: as either a victim or as a perpetrator. Yet the distinction is not absolute. Whites are not automatically perpetrators, nor are non-whites always victims in terms of hierarchies of racial power. Whites and non-whites have had different exposure to race-related discrimination and demonstrably, a different racial understanding
altogether. Traditionally, while non-whites had been historically victimized by racial oppression and violence with long-reaching cultural consequences, whites more often display cultural guilt and more recently, albeit infrequently, whites too have been exposed to racist exclusion and violence. Racial in-betweenness and mixedness further complicate race trauma. There are instances when the mixed-race individual could inhabit both positions. The racial anxieties fixed in the black-white paradigm which manifest themselves within the mixed race individual are demonstrably traumatic since it is depositary of both races’ atavistic trauma.

The maladjustment of non-whites in the socio-political structure, the incompatibility of their goals with those of the white structure comes with psychological and social consequences. This is not to belittle the importance and reality of either race or trauma discourse, but rather to recall that both are equally ideological, cultural constructs as much as they are physical and psychical realities. In his homonymous study, Charles Mills dismantles the “racial contract” by which the humanity is structured, which favors whites’ privilege, regardless of the beneficiaries’ assent. The reality of race, on the background of a society which describes itself as colorblind, is especially poignant to non-whites. They “find that race is, paradoxically, both everywhere and nowhere, structuring their lives but not formally recognized in political/moral theory” (Mills 78). On the other hand, Mills observes, “the only people who can find it psychologically possible to deny the centrality of race are those who are racially privileged for whom race is invisible precisely because the world is structured around them, whiteness as the ground against which the figures of other races… appear” (76).

The etiology of race trauma indicates both proximal causes, such as everyday acts of racism, and distal causes, such as slavery. Traditionally, however, trauma is linked to a major shock, to a traumatism that shatters the psyche’s protective shield. Recent research indicates that the proximal causes refer to a wide array of traumatisms. Some traumatisms are inflicted
unintentionally, such as “aversive racism, implicit racism, and modern racism” which reside in well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that their attitudes, beliefs, actions, often discriminate against blacks, or “racial microaggressions,” those “brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities directed towards Black Americans, often automatically and unintentionally” (Nelson 4) (Sue, Capodilupo, Holder 329). In the taxonomy of “racial microaggressions” researchers identify two forms which are relevant for the subtle ways in which racisms take shape. Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder name “microinsults” and “microinvalidations” as forms of “microaggression,” which “tend to be expressed unconsciously by the perpetrator, yet communicate a hidden demeaning message to the person of color” (329). The effects of such “microaggressions” add up; they can induce tremendous stress and anger, generating feelings of invisibility and marginalization (Franklin 768) (Pierce 216). One event may not constitute a significant stressor, but studies found that the cumulative impact of many events is traumatic (Holmes and Rahe 214).

One of the most self-destructive and controversial forms of racism is internalized racism. Beth Kaufka describes internalized racism as a mechanism of oppression that forces victims to “carry out [their] own abjection though believing the destructive images of [their] groups, constructions of dominant culture” (138). Suzanne Lispky also maintains that “most of the actual damage done by any oppression results from the operation of the internalized form;” she defines internalized oppression as chronic distress patterns “created by oppression and racism from the outside” (3). Another scholar, Penny Rosenwasser warns about the devastating effects of internalized oppression: “we learn to loathe ourselves, rather than understanding that these destructive beliefs are instilled in us by a socioeconomic political system that constructs us to blame ourselves and our people” (54). As Kaufka observes, non-whites become agents of their
own oppression (138). Consequently, the trauma of race may be generated from the outside, but it is often perpetuated through internalized racism.

The more elusive, though as distressing, causes of trauma are distal. By extrapolating the generational memory transfer—such as Marianne Hirsch’s seminal concept of “postmemory” or Toni Morrison’s “rememory”—to cultural memory, the term is appropriate in explicating how traumatic cultural memory works. Such memory is located not in the actual experience but in a physically disconnected cultural transfer. Irving M. Allen explores the ethno-cultural transmission of trauma. Allen identifies “the legacy of slavery” and perpetuated racism as main traumatic stressors for African Americans. Allen argues that racism, in all its subtle and not so subtle forms, constitutes the “ideological foundation of excessive stress in the lives of African Americans, which remains deeply ingrained in the American psyche, and has been relatively untouched by the legal changes to date” (221).

A major pitfall in both trauma studies and race theories regards the reception and interpretation of cultural productions, particularly literary texts. While trauma scholars struggle with the difficulties of articulating discourses that could translate physical and psychical, individual and communal trauma into coherent narratives, race theorists toil with the simultaneously abstract and physical nature of race. Trauma scholars face the challenges of a concept with a complicated genealogy, which branches in multifarious directions, and they continuously search for a new epistemology of narrative interpretation.

The field of trauma studies is founded on theories of subjectivity, but expanding its spectrum to groups and cultures has deep relevance in acknowledged and publicly condemning the histories of abuse which produced and sustained cultural trauma. Judith Herman’s assessment of individual and collective trauma explicates the importance of political action in the effort to surface, acknowledge, and assuage the sufferings generated by trauma; she argues that “the
systematic study of psychological trauma... depends on the support of a political movement” (9). At a communal level, the acknowledgement of trauma faces the challenge of the competing narratives of victims and perpetrators. Once again, power positions may tolerate or stifle the production of truth; in effect, the access to race trauma narratives generally has to pass through the Caudine Forks of the white censor. Jeffrey Alexander, quoting Elizabeth Jelin’s and Suzana Kaufman’s “Memory and Narrativity,” exposes this problematic aspect of narrating trauma:

[The investigators] contrast the victims’ insistence on recognizing the reality of traumatizing events and experiences with the denials of the perpetrators and their conservative supporters, denials that insist on looking to the future and forgetting the past: ‘The confrontation is between the voices of those who call for commemoration, for remembrance of the disappearances and the torment, for denunciation of the repressors, and those who make it their business to act as if nothing has happened here.’ (7-8)

As contending narratives of trauma break the surface according to hierarchies of political power, the next question should be, what happens when this denial—this intentional overlooking—is in fact state politics? As Alexander asserts, the creation of cultural trauma becomes a “new master narrative” (12).

Besides maintaining a sharp focus on the specifics of race trauma, assessing it comes with important caveats. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw warn about the commodification of a “culture of trauma,” one that “describes the experience of both victims—those who have suffered directly—and those who suffer with them, or through them, or for them, if only by reading about trauma” (2). Having been warned about the trivialization of trauma, I establish why my understanding of trauma is more inclusive than what is generally defined by clinical studies, while I am aware of the risk of pathologizing entire communities or cultures. Richard McNally
explains the refinement with which we should look at both what we define as trauma and also what we accept as an individual response to any number of traumatisms. McNally notes that trauma “might be defined by the objective attributes of the stressors, by the subjective response of the victim, or by both” (79). Allan Young also challenges the generally accepted picture of psychological trauma as a single, uniform, transhistorical, and universal phenomenon which is relevant and applicable to understanding the trauma of race. Allan warns that trauma “is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources” (5). The theoretical foundations for the race trauma inquiry are new, but the method of investigation also requires a departure from Euro-centric, monolithic definitions of both trauma and race, a nuanced approach according to race, cultural, ethnic, and other identitarian parameters.

The American imaginary has produced a culturally and racially diverse body of literature which reflects the conflicting US racial history. Such works of literature are a commentary on the multifarious effects American racial history has on individuals and cultures. These texts are enunciations of trauma and also manifestations of the trauma of race. Be it as a direct response to racial violence or as cultural indentation in the racial subject’s psyche, the trauma of race takes various forms and degrees of intensity. Literature demonstrates time and again how it can recover racial history and represent racial consciousness. I deem it illustrative for the choices and ethics of representation with regard to race trauma that the American imaginary depicts race trauma through literary realism as well as through works which conspicuously challenge hagiographic, mythologizing depictions of American history, often with great risks in spurring not only critical controversies but also social upheaval.
Literary and cultural criticism which engages the concept of the trauma of race reveals this literature as a condemnation of racist regimes in the US and also as modes of negotiating racial awareness and reconciliation. The race of trauma as the interpretative category of culture and history is inevitable given the impact race has in a culture of trauma. It brings together different intellectual and epistemological traditions and fields of scholarship which are often at odds with each other. Geoffrey Hartman professes that “trauma studies provides a more natural transition to the ‘real’ world often falsely split off from that of the university, as if the one were activist and engaged and the other self-absorbed and detached” (543-4). Regarding works of literature through the prism of trauma studies inevitably has at least two consequences. The first is the interpretative outcome, since there is a lot to understand about the mechanisms of trauma though the literary imagination. The second effect is consistent with the field’s end purpose of finding therapeutic strategies for coping, if not overcoming trauma, by changing social, political, economical conditions with traumatic risk.

Reading American literature in the “post-racial” era necessarily urges hermeneutics of cultural and literary interpretation that focus on what colorblindness aims to veil, i.e. the traumatic effects of racialized discourses on individuals and groups. Even when operating within the mainstream literary norms of genre and publications, under scrutiny and censorship, the black author fashions narrative techniques as both acts of literary rebellion and also of socio-political resistance. Minority literatures have traditionally encoded resistance, contestation, and reform to challenge the white grand narrative of history and society. For instance, African American literary representations of the trauma of race often resort to metaphysical narratives, a choice which has a triple impact in novels such as Toni Morrison’s Beloved, J. E. Wideman’s The Cattle Killing, Charles Johnson’s Oxherding Tale, Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada, Octavia Butler’s Kindred. First, the deviation from conventional white realism bamboozles (a
nodd to Spike Lee) white audiences with little initiation and superficial interest in black history and culture. Second, these innovative narrative techniques are more relevant and representative of these authors’ cultural and historical background since they continue the age-long practice of escapism and camouflaging. Resorting literary tropes casts an indirect gaze on race trauma which unveils not as much its narrative, but its deep implications. Like the famous optical illusion, we can see the vase, but, more distinctly, we have the satisfaction of distinguishing the face. Third, the disregard for any chronological sequence of events and the penchant for mocking the grand narrative of American history cleverly points towards sobering reality of the link between the violent past and troubling present of racial relations in the US, thus warning about the future.

The literature of trauma and any cultural production which expresses the trauma of race create the premises for an imagined community (in Benedict Anderson’s sense) which contributes not only to surfaceding and heralding important and representative narratives, but also to comforting those who bear witness to trauma. Moreover, as literary and cultural texts often do, these narratives contest mainstream views on racial relations’ status quo, challenge culturally dominant theories of identity, and they are effective cris de coeur against civil rights injustices. As such, we ought to read American literature—and by extension, American culture—be it created by whites or blacks, through the lens of the painful, complicated racial history of this country, regardless of how unnerving this endeavor may prove. In 1952, James Baldwin, while acknowledging the whites’ and blacks’ comparable aversion to looking back to their common, yet dividing, past famously emphasizes its crucial importance: “I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly” (6). For this reason, it is crucial to raise awareness of the multifarious ways in which insidious racist discourses continue to hurt cultures and individuals
and the ways literature and art illuminate the darkest corners of human suffering generated and perpetuated by racism.
Works Cited:


