Cultural Trauma Fiction: Political Violence, Rampage Violence, and Structural Violence in Contemporary American Literature

Courtney Mullis

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CULTURAL TRAUMA FICTION: POLITICAL VIOLENCE, RAMPAGE VIOLENCE, AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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May 2022
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ABSTRACT

CULTURAL TRAUMA FICTION: POLITICAL VIOLENCE, RAMPAGE VIOLENCE, AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

Courtney Mullis

May 2022

Dissertation supervised by Greg Barnhisel

This dissertation identifies and proposes a new subgenre of American literature, Cultural Trauma Fiction, that has arisen since the late 20th century in response to numerous large-scale traumatic events and their representation in the media. Cultural trauma occurs when a shocking, shared event fractures collective identity and initiates a discursive process to understand what took place, why it happened, and how the affected culture can heal. Cultural traumas differ from individual trauma because cultural traumas affect a culture, rather than an individual, and because they are mediated; many members of the culture experience the trauma of these events secondhand through radio, television, print news, literature, and other forms of media. The dissemination of cultural trauma is rapid and widespread in the contemporary age of 24-hour news and the Internet. This dissertation argues that works of Cultural Trauma Fiction represent, construct, and process contemporary cultural traumas, using literary fiction’s power to cultivate
empathy. They engage with both local and cultural concerns, explicitly or implicitly question collective identity, engage with cultural meaning-making processes, represent multiple identities and perspectives, and offer counternarratives to dominant media or government narratives.

Diverging from the conventions of literary trauma theory, this dissertation uses narrative theory and the sociological concept of cultural trauma to analyze various novels published since the late 1990s that take as their subject culturally traumatic events including 9/11, mass shootings, Hurricane Katrina, and the structural violence generated by the prison industrial complex. This analysis demonstrates how mass media saturation shapes fictional responses to traumatic events. It also shows the relationships between different kinds of cultural traumas and argues that those traumas that most directly affect marginalized peoples should be recognized as culturally traumatic. Finally, this dissertation suggests that future work on trauma in literature should focus on texts that depict and respond to cultural traumas rather than those that center individual traumatic experiences.
This project would not have been possible without the support of my mentors, colleagues, friends, and loved ones.

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Introduction

In a recent article for the American Psychological Association, science writer Zara Abrams reports that frontline healthcare workers in the United States are experiencing trauma as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the “war-like circumstances” of hospitals, which include “prolonged suffering, more deaths than usual, and in many cases, a lack of adequate resources to respond.” As a result of these circumstances, healthcare workers are experiencing symptoms of psychological suffering including anxiety, depression, and burnout. Clinical psychologist Laura S. Brown notes, “This is what the body does when it’s continuously exposed to danger and crisis” (qtd. in Abrams). Or, in other words, healthcare workers’ symptoms are consistent with trauma exposure. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “‘trauma’ refers to experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions” (Trauma-Informed Care xix). Most people are familiar with the concept of individual trauma, which results from a traumatic event that directly affects only one person. Psychologists caution against treating healthcare workers as if they are suffering from individual trauma, however, and instead advocate for “a collective solution…which involves listening to the stories of health-care workers, acknowledging that the United States wasn’t prepared for the pandemic and taking steps to better manage COVID-19 moving forward” (Abrams). Healthcare workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic experience collective or group trauma, which “refers to traumatic experiences that affect a particular group of people,” who share a common identity or set of experiences (Trauma-Informed Care 38). SAMHSA identifies some causes of collective trauma common among first responders like front line healthcare workers, including “feeling responsible for the lives of others, witnessing catastrophic devastation, potential exposure to gruesome images, observing human and animal suffering and/or death, working beyond physical
exhaustion, and the external and internal pressure of working against the clock” (39). Healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic are experiencing a collective trauma due to their shared traumatic experiences.

The trauma of COVID-19 is not limited to front line healthcare workers and those who experience the individual traumas of severe illness or the sudden deaths of loved ones; the pandemic is also creating a cultural trauma for Americans. Cultural trauma occurs following a stunning, shared event in which “the taken-for-granted foundations of individual and collective identity are shattered, setting in motion a discursive process to understand what happened, assign blame, and find pathways to repair an interpreted situation” (Demertzis and Eyerman 429). Cultural sociologists generally identify and study cultural traumas in retrospect, but Demertzis and Eyerman argue that it is also possible to identify cultural traumas while they are still under construction (429). They posit that the COVID-19 pandemic is one such cultural trauma. The pandemic has many of the central features of cultural trauma, including “a fundamental disruption of the taken for granted in daily life, a potential loss of trust in leaders and social institutions, negative attribution in the media, a contentious meaning struggle to determine what happened and who is responsible” (431). In addition to personal experiences of fear, illness, and witnessing deaths, people experience the pandemic through mass media. Because of mass media’s tendency to dramatize and personalize events, media coverage is likely to affect the way viewers perceive the health crisis and the concomitant risks” (431). Conflicting media coverage may generate additional conflict regarding what has occurred and who ought to be held responsible (431).

While Demertzis and Eyerman argue that the pandemic is unlikely to produce cultural trauma for Sweden or Greece, the nations they examine in their study, I assert that the COVID-
19 pandemic is a cultural trauma in progress for the United States. Demertzis and Eyerman explain that in Sweden the public generally trusts national authorities and institutions, and these institutions framed the pandemic “as a public health emergency, not a political crisis” (447). Virtually “all political parties and mass media outlets accepted” the official definition of the situation and trusted authorities to act in the interest of the collective good (447). In Greece, the death toll has not been especially high and “there has been a basic consensus among elites regarding the handling of covid-19; therefore, the mainstream media were unable to amplify strategic differences and polarize public opinion” (448). The United States differs from both Sweden and Greece in that there exists in the United States a widespread distrust of institutions and elites, the pandemic was almost immediately politicized (indeed, science itself has been politicized), mass media outlets disagreed about the situation and stoked additional dispute and division, and the death toll has been high. In a time of mass trauma, it is especially important to understand what trauma is, how large-scale traumas can affect entire cultures, and how cultures construct and process these traumas.

**Trauma**

The term “trauma” comes from the Greek word for “wound” and was originally used to refer to a physical injury (“trauma, n.”). Today, psychologists understand that “trauma” in individuals is a deep and shocking injury to the psyche, often but not necessarily accompanying a physical trauma. The 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* defines trauma as “[e]xposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (American Psychiatric Association). Exposure may include direct experience of a traumatic event, witnessing the event, learning after the fact that someone close to you experienced the event, or “repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s)” (American
Psychiatric Association). The aftereffects of trauma—what came to be called “PTSD”—include repeated, intrusive memories of the event, dissociative episodes or flashbacks, “[i]ntense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s),” “[m]arked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s),” and “[n]egative alterations in cognitions or mood associated with the event” (American Psychiatric Association). Significantly, psychiatrists do not consider individuals experiencing symptoms following trauma to have PTSD unless those symptoms persist for at least a month (American Psychiatric Association). Thus, while many people who experience trauma suffer post-traumatic symptoms to some degree, not all trauma victims develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

The legitimation of PTSD as a mental-health condition following the Vietnam War led to greater awareness of psychological trauma as a phenomenon as well as the understanding that trauma does not necessarily result in the development of PTSD; trauma itself is a complex phenomenon with psychological consequences for victims. Judith Herman’s understanding of the aftereffects of trauma, that it produces a “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud,” has greatly influenced popular and scholarly understandings of trauma (Herman 1). Herman argues that both witnesses and victims are subject to the psychological consequences of trauma (2). According to Herman, for any traumatized individual to recover from trauma, they must establish safety, reconstruct the story of their trauma, and restore a connection with their community (3). Perhaps the most influential aspect of Herman’s work on trauma is her assertion that the survivor must tell “the story of the trauma” to one or more witnesses (175). Reconstructing the trauma through narrative, Herman argues, “transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated in the survivor’s life story” (175). Narrative
reconstructions of trauma help victims to “speak of the unspeakable” and create testimony (175, 181).

The notion of trauma as “unspeakable” and the need for narrative reconstruction of trauma influenced the field of literary trauma theory, which Cathy Caruth popularized in the mid-1990s. Literary trauma theory is a branch of literary theory that explores the effects of trauma in literature and conceives of traumatic experience as unrepresentable and inarticulable except “through repetitive flashbacks that literally re-enact the event” (Balaev 151). Literary trauma theory “privileges the act of speaking or narration as the primary avenue to recovery” (151). Literary trauma theorists study how texts “portray trauma’s effects through metaphoric and material means” (149). Some literary trauma theorists, including Caruth, conflate suffering from the aftereffects of trauma with the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. Caruth argues that PTSD is “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing…and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (4). Caruth asserts that “[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). She also argues that in the event of psychic trauma, “while the images of traumatic reenactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control” (Caruth 151). Through narrative and especially through imaginative literature, however, Caruth argues that trauma survivors can give voice to their otherwise inarticulable experiences (Pederson 334).

Caruth’s concept of trauma, as derived from Freud, Herman, and others, has dominated scholarly conversations regarding trauma in literature and other disciplines since the publication of her collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995). Since at least the beginning of the 21st
century, however, psychologists and other scholars have challenged her theory. Objections to Caruthian trauma theory often take one of two forms. Many scholars object to the underlying theory of psychic trauma on which Caruth’s concept rests. Joshua Pederson, for example, claims that recent “clinical studies of the psychology of trauma have challenged the theories on which Caruth relies” (334). These studies indicate that “traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may choose not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they cannot” (334).

Pederson and other scholars call for a revised concept of literary trauma theory in light of new discoveries in the scientific study of psychological trauma (334).

These theories apply only to how trauma impacts—and how the aftereffects of trauma manifest themselves—in individuals. These theories do not account for collective traumas, those psychic injuries that affect a group or even an entire culture and produce lingering aftereffects similar but not identical to individual trauma and PTSD. Indeed, the mechanisms of individual, psychic trauma do not necessarily apply to broader collective or “cultural” traumas. Caruthian trauma theory is too limited in its focus on individual trauma, which fails to question the political origins and cultural consequences of larger-scale traumatic events (Baelo-Allué 168). While individual, psychic trauma is certainly an important aspect of traumatic events, the sociological concept of cultural trauma may be better suited for describing and comprehending the consequences of events that affect a large number of people. Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander differentiates individual trauma from cultural trauma, explaining that cultural trauma “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Trauma 6). Much as psychic trauma changes individual survivors, cultural trauma transforms the identity of an entire cultural group.
For example, the “Troubles” of the 1970s through the 1990s inflicted cultural trauma on the people of Northern Ireland. More than 3,500 people were killed, and approximately 500,000 people within Northern Ireland—roughly 30 percent of the population—were directly impacted by acts of violence during the Troubles (Bolton 53). In addition to direct experiences with violence, “[r]ead[ing], hearing and viewing media reports on the violence was also commonplace, not least because people relied upon the media to keep themselves informed about possible threats and dangers” (54). In addition to specific experiences of violence “was an omnipresent sense of anxiety of varying intensity, made explicit and sometimes amplified by the focus given to particular events” in the media (54). In 1997, a year before the Good Friday Agreements created a truce between the factions, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland established a Commission to recognize the pain and suffering people felt as a result of the Troubles. The Commission’s Report acknowledges that “[e]ach fatality can be compared with a heavy stone dropped into a pool of water, with ripples extending far and wide. These ‘secondary effects’ of violent death are serious” (Bloomfield 2.10). On a broader scale, the report declares that “no-one living in Northern Ireland through this most unhappy period of its history will have escaped some degree of damage. Many who have happily escaped death or injury have nevertheless been exposed to threat and danger” (2.13). This cultural trauma is apparent in Northern Irish art and literature, much of which “has taken on the public role of highlighting the dangers of forgetting the past and of not dealing with the legacy of violence. What the works of visual artists and writers alike stress is that a wilful [sic] neglect of history may result in the return of the repressed and in psychic breakdown on both the communal and individual levels” (Alcobia-Murphy 88). The example of Northern Ireland demonstrates how recognizing and dealing with cultural traumas is a necessary step in cultural healing.
Northern Ireland is not the only example of a culture that underwent trauma and whose art and literature then served to articulate the experience of cultural trauma and act as a means for processing it. Over the last twenty-five years U.S. culture, in fact, has experienced and continues to experience cultural traumas both singular and ongoing, and a strain—or, as I will argue, an emerging genre—of American art and literature has arisen with precisely this purpose. **Why “Cultural” Trauma?**

Mass media propagation of dominant narratives contributes to the construction of cultural trauma. Cultural trauma differs from individual trauma in that, rather than affecting a single individual, cultural trauma affects a significant proportion of a cultural group and alters the collective understanding of cultural identity. I focus on cultural trauma, rather than collective or national trauma, because this term is more precise and consistent with the work of recent scholarship on trauma in the field of sociology. Cultural trauma is more precise than collective trauma, which can refer to small-scale collectives. For instance, a tornado that devastates a small town is a collective trauma, but it is unlikely to become a cultural trauma. However, some seemingly small-scale events become cultural traumas because of the way that contemporary media makes them ‘real’ and accessible to the masses and demonstrates that an individual event is part of a larger trauma.\(^1\) Similarly, cultural trauma is a more suitable term than national trauma because the concept of national trauma assumes that culture is inextricably connected to the state. Jeffrey Alexander objects to the term “national trauma” because the term “suggests that trauma is a kind of rational response to abrupt change,” and the “events that trigger trauma are

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\(^1\) For instance, the murder of George Floyd by a police officer, Derek Chauvin, in May 2020 would seem to primarily affect his loved ones and those who witnessed the murder directly. The event became a cultural trauma, however, after people across the country experienced mediated witnessing of the murder as captured on a smart phone camera and circulated on the internet and on television. The egregious murder sparked protests against police brutality across the United States and around the world and resulted, for some, in a reevaluation of what it means to be an American given the frequency with which police murder unarmed Black people. The complexities of institutional racism and cultural trauma are addressed in chapters 3 and 4.
perceived clearly by actors, their responses are lucid, and the effects of these responses are problem solving and progressive” (Trauma 8). In other words, the concept of national trauma implies that traumatization is the logical, necessary result of harm to the state, rather than the result of cultural and historical circumstances.

Cultural trauma is mediated in that all members of an expansive culture cannot bear direct witness to an event, but they experience the trauma of the event through radio, television, print news, literature, and other forms of media. The indirect witnessing and varying impacts of cultural trauma contribute to ignorance and denial of events themselves or of their significance. In a 2016 article, Alexander further explains, “[b]y constructing cultural traumas, social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations, not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering, but may also take on board moral responsibility for it” (“Culture Trauma” 4). Alexander also acknowledges, however, the “dark other side” of cultural trauma, in which “social groups often refuse to recognize the suffering of others; and, even when they do, they frequently place the causal responsibility for inflicting that suffering on events and actors outside themselves” (“Culture Trauma” 10). In other words, some members of a culture refuse to recognize certain events or practices as cultural traumas, especially when doing so would require they accept blame or moral responsibility for those traumas. These resisters opt out of the process of constructing cultural trauma, thereby preventing “the possibility of achieving a moral stance.” The refusal to engage in the cultural construction of trauma “restricts solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone. Laws are not changed and institutions are not repaired” (10). Because nothing changes following the trauma, “[s]trains that triggered earlier traumas are left in place, a situation that may allow the original traumatic events to happen again” (11). For those members of the culture who suffer most from the culturally traumatic event, the failure of
their fellow citizens to recognize their traumatization and refusal to take steps to prevent similar events from occurring again is itself traumatizing. Denial of the legacy of cultural trauma and denial of the trauma itself are part of what constitutes some cultural traumas.

The term cultural trauma also recognizes that there can be multiple cultures within a given state and that the traumatization of any given culture or cultures is the result of their contexts, power relations, and sociocultural constructions. Ron Eyerman describes cultural trauma as focusing on “discursive processes of meaning-making following shocking incidents and their materialization in memorial rituals and objects” (699). Following a large-scale, shocking incident, a “trauma drama” ensues in which multiple narrative interpretations of the event emerge and compete for dominance (681). These interpretations attempt to determine the meaning of painful incidents and to establish the borders of the affected group (681). Those affected by the potentially traumatic event are included as part of the group and those with stable membership in the group are presumed to be at least indirectly affected by the event. Eyerman’s conception of trauma as a discursive process is significant because it emphasizes that cultural trauma is a constructed, rather than a natural or necessary result of an event with traumatic potential and acknowledges that narrative is the means through which members of a culture construct cultural trauma. For any particular trauma narrative to gain traction and acceptance among members of a culture, Eyerman argues, the narrative “must be sufficiently charged with emotional energy as to facilitate identification between victim and audience while identifying the nature of the pain and demarcating victims and perpetrators. This identification is never simply cognitive, as it calls forth a powerful emotional response similar to that of those who directly and personally experience the incident” (681). Media narratives generally incite an emotional response in viewers through visual representation and by playing on the viewer’s emotions,
especially emotions like fear and outrage. By contrast, the kinds of narratives available in fiction can inspire empathy, or an increased understanding of the victim’s emotions. Eyerman also explains that the speed with which an event or series of events becomes a cultural trauma “is in large part a function of the dispersal and reception of the mass media framing. These first articulations can inflame or calm, arouse fear and anxiety, or empathy and solidarity. The same can be said of those experts and representative authorities whose performances are soon after filtered through the mass media” (Eyerman 700). Literature is thus especially significant in that it can respond to both the first articulations of trauma espoused by the media and the second articulations by authorities. In initial media narratives and the subsequent introduction of authorities’ perspectives, privileged “perspectives and voices are more likely to be heard and seen” (Eyerman 700). Through fiction, however, otherwise marginalized voices can gain authoritative status.

Defining Culture

To understand cultural trauma and its role in literature, it is necessary to define “culture” and consider how literature contributes to the formation and perpetuation of culture. Anthropologists of the early 20th century understand culture as a comprehensive way of life for a distinct group of people. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski argues that culture is “the integral whole consisting of implements and consumers' goods, of constitutional charters for the various social groupings, of human ideas and crafts, beliefs and customs… a vast apparatus, partly material and partly spiritual, by which man is able to cope with the concrete, specific problems that face him” (Malinowski 36). Similarly, Edward Tylor defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1). This dissertation
defines culture in line with Malinowski and Tylor as a complex whole that includes all of the various products, beliefs, customs, and arts of a people. Culture arises through human interaction and produces a shared understanding of collective identity. This understanding depends on literature, which may reflect and reinforce societal values or influence changes in those values. Literature can spread cultural materials—the dominant ideals of a culture—but can also challenge and recreate them.

Various scholars across time and the disciplines influence my definition of culture and my understanding of the relationship between literature and culture. The 19th-century poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold argues in his 1867 essay “Culture and Its Enemies,” that culture derives from “the love of perfection,” which is comprised of both a scientific passion for knowledge and “the moral and social passion for doing good” (207). He claims that culture seeks to understand and promote perfection (208). Human perfection is internal, yet it “is not possible while the individual remains isolated” (209). In other words, culture can only arise through human interaction. Culture, Arnold argues, “directs our attention to the natural current there is in human affairs…and will not let us rivet our faith upon any one man and his doings” (221). It seeks “to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere,” and “to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light” (223). In this view, culture is equalizing in that it aims to eliminate the various social classes that separate humans from one another (223). Arnold regards culture as a tool for individual improvement. Arnold’s view differs from my own focus on shared cultural products and experiences, but his understanding of culture as the product of human interaction informs my definition.

The modernist poet T.S. Eliot responds to Arnold’s definition of culture in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (1948). While Arnold focuses on the individual’s relationship
to culture, Eliot regards culture as the collective achievements and monuments of a group of people. Eliot defines culture as a society’s “peculiar way of thinking, feeling, and behaving” (57). For a culture to develop, a society must have an organic structure, “such as will foster the hereditary transmission of culture within a culture: and this requires the persistence of social classes,” must be “analysable [sic], geographically, into local cultures,” and must have a “balance of unity and diversity in religion—that is, universality of doctrine with particularity of cult and devotion” (Eliot 15). Eliot argues that it is difficult to develop, improve, or otherwise change culture because of its complexity (94). Furthermore, he maintains that the perfection of culture in an individual entails development in civility, learning, philosophy, and the arts; individuals are not generally accomplished in all four of these activities of culture, so “we shall look for culture, not in any individual or in any one group of individuals, but more and more widely; and we are driven in the end to find it in the pattern of the society as a whole (23).

Because no one can achieve perfection in all aspects of culture, Eliot claims, “it is only by an overlapping and sharing of interests, by participation and mutual appreciation, that the cohesion necessary for culture can obtain” (24). Eliot’s concept of culture compares to Arnold’s in that both value culture and recognize the importance of human interaction and exchange for its development, but Eliot’s conception differs in his concern with the collective development of culture rather than individual interactions with culture.

Furthermore, Eliot maintains that national culture will grow and flourish if it has a distinct language, especially “a literary language—not necessarily a scientific language but certainly a poetic one: otherwise the spread of education will extinguish it” (Eliot 57). While a culture might share a language with other cultures, it can still possess a unique literary language. Eliot also argues that there should be friction or tension within the culture; “both class and
region, by dividing the inhabitants of a country into two different kinds of groups, lead to a conflict favorable to creativeness and progress” (59). Indeed, he argues that “a national culture should be a constellation of cultures, the constituents of which, benefitting each other, benefit the whole” (58). Differences within culture and the clashes between different groups promote tolerance and peace of other cultures (60). Overall, Eliot believes that the ideal culture is unique to a particular group, develops organically, contains distinct social classes, and produces a unique literary language. Eliot’s conception of culture is not equalizing, like Arnold’s, but he argues that this model of culture will promote the interests of all its members and create the best collective, national culture. Eliot’s idea of culture is significant to my argument in that I also conceive of culture as cohesive and informed by a shared literary language.

Like Eliot, cultural theorist Raymond Williams regards culture as a way of life but argues that culture “depends…on the literary tradition” (233). Because the highest levels and forms of culture are not available to the average citizen, artists and writers are integral to the development, perpetuation, and refinement of culture (247). Authors of literary works facilitate training in culture on a broad scale, because literature serves as “a kind of training for general experience: a training, essentially, in that capacity for organization which is man’s only profitable response to his altered and dangerous condition” after the industrial revolution (249). Indeed, literature “is at once a formal record of experience, and also, in every work, a point of intersection with the common language” (255). Through the use of common language and representation of common experience, reading literature is a form of cultural training (263). Like Williams, I argue that literature is an important means for the development and proliferation of culture in society.

Milton Albrecht extends Williams’ claim that literature affects culture and describes the various ways in which literature may accomplish this task. Albrecht describes influential theories
regarding how literature contributes to society, including what he calls “reflection,” “control,” and “influence,” theories. The reflection theory asserts that “literature reflects predominantly the significant values and norms of a culture,” as well as “the attitudes and shared experiences in society.” (426). This theory, Albrecht argues, “seems to account for some of the content and certain broad aspects of literary and artistic styles, without coming to grips with the problem of what social conditions are responsible for the existence and popularity of specific literary and artistic forms” (431). The reflection theory is limited in its tendency to “minimize or deny the possible role of the arts in social change” (431). The control theory posits that “if literature reflects, then it also confirms and strengthens cultural norms, attitudes, and beliefs” (431). Because different groups evince different values through multiple literary and artistic forms, however, “social control through literature may either be limited to those norms and values common to all groups or applied to class or group control, each class or group responding to the art and literature that confirms its own set of values, customs, and beliefs” (432). The control theory differs from the influence theory, “which emphasizes literature as ‘shaping’ society” (433). According to this theory, literature may either corrupt or educate readers. The influence theory is also limited because it does not account for how art may contribute to social change, in addition to reflecting such changes (434). None of the three theories fully encapsulates the relationship between literature and culture, Albrecht argues, but each explains part of this relationship. I agree with Albrecht that literature may reflect cultural values and reify existing norms but may also disrupt these norms and influence social change.

Ultimately, this dissertation conceives of literature’s relationship to culture in line with literary historian Stephen Greenblatt, who argues that narratives contribute to culture by transmitting what he calls “cultural materials.” For Greenblatt, cultural materials are the
“culturally dominant ideas, experiences, and practices” transmitted through literature (qtd. in Herman and Vervaeck 121). Culture is a system of limitations and mobility, “the regulator and guarantor of movement” (227-228). Mobility leads to creativity and development within culture, but culture must have boundaries. Greenblatt also defines culture as “a particular network of negotiations for the exchange of material goods [and] ideas” (229). Literature enforces the boundaries of a given culture (226). Literary texts “are cultural by virtue of social values and contexts that they have themselves successfully absorbed,” and a thorough understanding of a text “will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced” (227). Literature, then, “is an important agent in the transmission of culture” (228). Novels in particular represent how people negotiate their relationships to cultural norms (229). Great writers are thus “specialists in cultural exchange” (230). In this vein, Herman and Vervaeck maintain that literature’s power “lies in the transmission of socially dominant ‘materials’ that are never presented as social but as purely literary” (122). As this dissertation will show, literature also has the potential to challenge these dominant cultural materials in favor of marginalized narratives.

**American Cultural Traumas**

Literature also helps shape a given culture’s understanding of traumatic events and how those events affect collective identity. For most Americans, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 are the “quintessential cultural trauma” (Smelser 264). In what is perhaps a unique feature of this particular cultural trauma, 9/11 was “appreciated almost immediately by the American population as perhaps the greatest trauma in the nation’s history” (265). More than 20 years after the attacks, even those who vehemently disagree about what took place on 9/11 and who bears responsibility still largely agree that 9/11 was a culturally traumatic event. 9/11 is also significant in its status as a contemporary cultural trauma whose transmission to the American public and
the world was facilitated by 24-hour news media and the Internet. The widespread, mediated witnessing of 9/11 differentiates this cultural trauma from earlier events, such as the attack on Pearl Harbor or the assassination of President John F. Kennedy Jr. Indeed, mass media saturation and the ubiquity of traumatic media coverage separates contemporary American culture from that of the past.

This dissertation begins with a discussion of the cultural trauma of 9/11 and its representation in fiction, and then goes on to argue that other recent events and patterns of events that are less spectacular than 9/11 have nonetheless constituted cultural traumas for Americans, not just because of the inherent qualities of the events or patterns themselves but also because of the changing nature of media coverage and the ways that Americans consume that media coverage. Specifically, I argue that three ‘events’ unlike 9/11—the epidemic of mass shootings, Hurricane Katrina and the structural violence that shaped the disaster, and the structural violence manifested in mass incarceration and anti-Black racism—are also cultural traumas. Mass shootings and structural violence differ from 9/11 in that they are patterns of events, rather than singular events. It is in their repetition that these events accumulate cultural relevance. Structural violence and Hurricane Katrina differ from 9/11 in that these traumas seemingly affect only a portion of the population—African Americans—rather than all Americans. Despite some differences, all of these traumas are similar in that Americans experience them through mass media, there is a struggle to understand and construct a narrative of each event, and they ultimately alter the collective understanding of American cultural identity.

Media Spectacle, Trauma, and Trauma Denial

Media coverage turns an event or series of events into a “cultural trauma.” Media attention helps determine which issues citizens consider social problems and which ones are
overlooked (Hoynes 477). Claimsmakers—those who “compete to have their claims about difficult social issues acknowledged”—utilize media to disseminate their interpretations of social problems (478). Mass media coverage tends to focus on sensational stories to attract audiences. Moreover, journalists often depend on “culturally resonant themes, invoking widely held beliefs, values, and preferences that are familiar to potential audiences” (481). These familiar themes often serve to reify dominant narratives.

Moreover, the nature of contemporary digital media creates cultural traumas as such. In a 2014 study published by the National Academy of Sciences, researchers concluded that “widespread media coverage extends the boundaries of local disasters, transmitting their impact far beyond the directly exposed population and turning them into collective traumas” (Holman et al. 93). Contemporary cultural traumas differ from earlier traumatic events because of the increasing ubiquity of mass media. In the past, exposure to a collective trauma ended when the event itself ended, but now “media exposure keeps the acute stressor active and alive in one's mind” (Holman et al. 93). The media keeps traumatic events “active and alive” through the creation of spectacle. According to media theorist Douglas Kellner:

…media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. They include media extravaganzas, sporting events, political happenings, and those attention-grabbing occurrences that we call news—a phenomenon that itself has been subjected to the logic of spectacle and tabloidization in the era of the media sensationalism, political scandal and contestation, seemingly unending cultural war, and the new phenomenon of Terror War. (2)
Media spectacles proliferate because in the contemporary era, “spectacle itself is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life,” and such spectacles “seize audiences and increase the media’s power and profit” (Kellner 1). As a result, both mundane and extraordinary experiences are “shaped and mediated by the spectacles of media culture and the consumer society” (2). The consumers of spectacle—viewers and listeners—become spectators, disengaged outsiders who merely observe news and world events like sporting events (3). Media spectacles create spectators or voyeurs, rather than witnesses. Media spectacle following traumatic events promotes this kind of shallow consumption of tragedy rather than an actual engagement with the victims of the immediate event or with the event’s broader cultural contexts and consequences.

By contrast, witnesses to traumatic testimony participate in the co-creation of knowledge about the traumatic event(s). Even when there exists historical evidence that the traumatic event took place, the event “has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of” until witnesses have heard or read the narratives of the event (Laub 221). Indeed, it is the listener—one who hears or reads the narrative of the trauma—who becomes witness to the event, not the spectator. The consumption of imagery related to the trauma does not constitute an engaged witnessing of the event(s). The witness “comes to partially experience trauma in himself,” to empathize with the trauma, by experiencing a narrative of that trauma (222). To experience this kind of narrative empathy, according to Laub, the listener/witness “has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony” (222). Certain types of narratives—above all literary narrative fiction, as opposed to genre fiction, as I argue in this dissertation—are most conducive to producing the kind of empathy that facilitates engaged witnessing, rather than spectatorship.
Why Fiction?: Narratives and Intersubjective Empathy

In addition to communicating cultural narratives, fiction, and especially the more prestigious category often called “literary” fiction, promotes empathetic witnessing through the use of narrative strategies such as defamiliarization, nonlinearity, and perspectives that offer insight into characters’ mental and emotional states. Philosophers, literary theorists, and laypeople alike have long recognized the function and value of literature. Aristotle argues that “poetry,” the term he used to mean all literature, is good because it arises as a result of people’s natural inclination to represent, everyone enjoys representations, and people can learn from these representations (90). He believes that poetry either represents reality, people’s perception of reality, or an improvement on reality. In response to those who doubt the value of literature, Sir Philip Sidney argues in line with Aristotle that poetry is an exercise in revealing the “highest knowledge” to the world (3). The poet, according to Sidney, improves upon the natural world through the art of imitation that teaches and entertains audiences (6). Sidney also argues that the best poetry engages in the “purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we call learning…the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls…can be capable of” (7). In other words, poetry improves the human mind. Many contemporary scholars understand the function of literature similarly, and science supports their claims.

Literary critic Paula Moya argues that close reading literature helps readers understand the lived experience of people who embody different subject positions from their own and “can thus serve as an excavation of, and a meditation on, the pervasive sociocultural ideas of the social worlds, as well as the worlds of sense, within which both authors and readers live.” Works of literary fiction “frequently plunge readers into unfamiliar situations, requiring them to pay
attention to types of people they might normally never encounter, or to interactions they might usually sail through without real engagement” (Moya). Fiction, therefore, enhances the reader’s “ability to accurately discern other people’s feelings and intentions in the real world outside literature” (Moya). Moya asserts that literature can improve readers’ understanding of the ways in which “race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality actually matter—both in the sense of being important and meaningful and in the sense of becoming materialized in individual lives.” In a similar vein, this dissertation argues that some works of fiction allow readers to perceive the ways in which certain traumatic events affect the culture at large. Moya also explains that on occasion “the work of literature ‘changes our lives,’ motivating readers to the kinds of concrete actions that bring profound changes in their life possibilities.” To be moved by literature to this extent is certainly rare, and authors cannot force this kind of change in the reader. They can, however, facilitate this type of growth through narrative strategies that promote readers’ identification with the suffering of the Other and inspire them to somehow mitigate this suffering. What is perhaps much less rare than this kind of change is for a work of fiction to make nearly imperceptible changes to a person’s way of thinking about and interacting with the world.

Moya’s claims are specific to close, engaged reading of a fictional text. Literary fiction in particular employs narrative strategies that promote close reading by disrupting passivity and subverting readers’ expectations. These texts, which Roland Barthes described as “writerly,” aim “to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes 4). By contrast, “readerly” texts are mere “products” that allow readers to act as passive consumers (4). Both genre fiction and mass-media narratives are “readerly” narratives that encourage passive consumption, rather than the active reading literary fiction facilitates. Psychological research
supports literary theorists’ claims that engaging with literary texts can affect the readers’ way of thinking. Psychologists David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano argue that reading fiction is a cultural practice that boosts affective Theory of Mind (ToM) by promoting “interpersonal sensitivity” (377). Affective ToM is one’s “ability to detect and understand others’ emotions,” or one’s capacity for empathy. The potential for literature to boost one’s affective ToM is significant because this “capacity to identify and understand others’ subjective states…allows successful navigation of complex social relationships and helps to support the empathetic responses that maintain them.” While it has long been established that reading conveys social values and increases readers’ understanding of others, Kidd and Castano propose that reading literary fiction in particular changes how people think because it forces the reader “to engage in mind-reading and character construction.” In line with Roland Barthes’ notion of “writerly” texts, Kidd and Castano argue that literary texts are those that “unsettle readers’ expectations and challenge their thinking” (377). The “writerly” nature of literary fiction “uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters' subjective experiences” (378). Literary fiction promotes the development of the reader’s affective ToM “by prompting readers to take an active writerly role to form representations of characters' subjective states” (380). In other words, the active reading necessary for engaging with writerly texts promotes reader empathy.

Recent work in neuroaesthetics supports the claim that fiction promotes empathy and demonstrates how literature can change readers’ ways of thinking about the world and others unlike themselves. The interdisciplinary field of neuroaesthetics considers both aesthetic theories and neuroscience to understand the heterogeneity of literature and literary criticism. In How Literature Plays with the Brain: The Neuroscience of Reading and Art, Brian Armstrong
employs neuroaesthetics how brain function correlates “with what readers have widely reported about literature and aesthetic experience” (2). Armstrong’s central argument is that mapping the particular relations between aesthetic experiences and neurological processes and regions may find that aesthetic theories “are linked in identifiable ways to different, particular neurological processes and the cortical regions that these interactions connect,” and may show how existing “views about aesthetic experience key in on particular brain functions” (18). The way the brain processes time allows for temporal variation in narrative and the distinctive aesthetic experiences these narrative innovations engender. As Armstrong explains, “interruptions in temporal continuity can have various effects on the reading experience” (103). Realist fiction, he argues, is actually “unrealistic” because it creates continuity greater than human beings’ usual neurobiological experience. This continuity may, however, “facilitate verisimilitude by assisting the reader’s ability to build consistent patterns, thereby encouraging immersion in a lifelike world that seems to have the stability we take for granted in our everyday dealings with people, places, and things. This continuity disguises the temporal processes of understanding it manipulates” (103). The realist text engages in some of the brain’s work by creating connections and a sense of continuity where disjunction actually exists. Narratives that do not portray time ‘realistically,’ by contrast, “may interfere with immersion in an illusion but can in turn promote reflection about the how of storytelling and the how of our temporal engagement with the world” (103). In other words, narratives of disjointed or nonlinear temporality—which Barthes would consider examples of “writerly” texts—may draw the reader’s attention to the formal aspects of narrative as well as to the always already disconnected experience of time in the real world. Temporal experiments in some novels “refuse the reader’s expectation of coherence in order to call attention to the disjunctions that make life a matter of living forward and understanding
backward. With temporally disjunctive texts, realistic narrative immersion is sacrificed for epistemological reflection” (103). Neuroscience provides additional evidence for narrative empathy and for the claim that certain narrative strategies, including nonlinearity, are particularly apt at inspiring empathetic responses.

Reading is also a function of memory with the potential for altering future neural processing and subsequent decision making, which indicates that reading can alter how a person thinks about complex social issues. The act of reading uses memory “in the very way we build consistent patterns and fill in indeterminacies based on past experiences with literature and life. The links between memory and processing in the brain facilitate these interactions” (Armstrong 116). Indeed, a reader’s past experiences affect the cerebral processes involved in reading and interpretation. People interpret texts differently because they have different “memories they have formed from their histories of reading,” and “the wiring of any two brains will differ” (116). These differences demonstrate the potential for reading experiences to change individual behavior. Neuroscience indicates that “it is certainly possible for literature to change a reader’s consciousness, as repeated experiences alter cortical wiring in a way that reflects our personal and cultural history” (119). When one reads, existing neural patterns respond to the phenomena of the text “and in the process the cell assemblies through which these phenomena are assimilated may establish new connections in the to-and-fro reciprocal exchange between cortical areas. This play can result in changes in brain structure” (119). Armstrong emphasizes that a single experience of reading is unlikely to affect neural patterns and brain structure, but “repeated exposure to patterns that form habitual responses” may affect the brain over time (119). Reading can act on the brain and over time can change the way individuals think about the world both within and beyond texts.
Moving beyond the neurobiological support for the impact of literature on individuals in general, literary and rhetorical theorists demonstrate how narratives foster empathy. Reader-response theorists also promote the power of narrative empathy. In “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” Suzanne Keen argues that certain narrative techniques, “such as the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states,” can support “character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening readers’ minds to others, changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism” in their daily lives (213). Similarly, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi argues that “narratives facilitate understanding by creating access to a world experienced by someone else by immersing readers in the texture of experiences and events that make up that world” (54). Ritivoi also demonstrates that both familiarity and difference promote narrative empathy (55). Readers can develop empathy for characters both like and unlike themselves because empathy arises “from a better understanding of experiences, rather than from relating to a familiar character, or a character in a familiar situation” (Ritivoi 55). Narrative empathy is the product of a situated understanding resulting from dialectics of general and particular as well as of difference and similarity (60). Some conceptions of narrative empathy may rely too much on similarity. These approaches are limited because “[a]pproaches based on the assumption of similarity do not allow us to avoid the first-person bias in understanding others. Reducing another to myself can conflate incommensurable experiences and produce inaccurate evaluations” (62). An understanding of another’s experiences based on the assumption of similarity is an understanding based only on one’s own point of view, so it “is limited to others’ experiences that we can make sense of because we can readily appropriate them imaginatively. We understand their need based on what that need means
to us” (63). Therefore, readers can only really understand narratives of others when they avoid assuming similarity (63).

In addition, readers must turn acceptance of difference into a vehicle for developing understanding and solidarity (Ritivoi 64). If another person’s experience is radically different from one’s own, “to understand it requires us first to enlarge our own repertoire of possible experiences” (65). Expanding one’s epistemic horizons to this extent may result in “an experience so new to us that our own identities must undergo a change for us to be able to comprehend it” (65). Developing true narrative empathy by reading about others unlike oneself allows a reader to “comprehend the human experience in a more nuanced and complex way” (66). Narrative facilitates the kind of open environment necessary for an “epistemologically rich and morally appropriate level of intersubjectivity” (66). They allow readers to experience life in new ways while temporarily foreclosing the possibility of other ways (67). Indeed, “narratives promote an understanding of experiences that are not our own, and sometimes not similar at all to our own. Narrative understanding keeps us focused on the experience of another and lets us see it from that individual’s perspective” (70). This understanding is significant because of its potential to translate to other situations beyond narrative. As Ritivoi explains:

Narratives encourage “feeling with another” by providing a system for interpreting another’s experience from a perspective that is limited to the situation in which that experience unfolded. As the result of a hermeneutical operation, narrative empathy creates an “enlarged mentality,” precisely because it offers access to thoughts and feelings that do not originate in us and are not a direct response to our own experience (70).
Empathy is, therefore, not an action in response to a single situation but rather “the mark of an expanded consciousness” (71). Narrative cultivates readers’ capacity for empathy in other contexts and, ideally, inspires change in the real world.

Some scholars have identified the negative possibilities of narrative empathy. For instance, Sujatha Fernandes argues in *Curated Stories: The Uses and Misuses of Storytelling* that there exists “an emergent culture of storytelling that presents carefully curated narratives with predetermined storylines as a tool of philanthropy, statecraft, and advocacy” (2). In these narratives, historical contexts, “ambiguities, and political struggles are erased in an effort to create warm and relatable portraits of others who are ‘just like us’ (Fernandes 2). Fernandes critiques this instrumentalization of personal narratives because such curated personal stories often distract from broad, structural issues in favor of a focus on individual agency (3). Fernandes advocates “for more deeply contextualized and complex storytelling” (4). She does not indiscriminately oppose instrumentalizing stories, but she does critique the “utilitarian approach to stories that seeks to reduce experiences and histories to easily digestible soundbites in service of limited goals” (4). In the contemporary era, storytelling has been reduced to “an essentialized, universal formula” for the “prototypical, conflict-driven story” (4-5). Fernandes argues that this conception of narrative is a construct that “serves to impose order on what is an incoherent, widely divergent set of narrative practices” (5). While her argument centers on the ways in which this practice ignores cultural difference and reduces or homogenizes storytelling practices, my argument focuses on how the notion of a simple narrative of any major sociopolitical issue is “a construct, which serves to impose order on” a nuanced set of interrelated structural issues (5). Like Fernandes, I argue that stories can both reproduce dominant relations of power and subvert them (3).
Some narratives may appear independent from sociopolitical discourses, but they are always intertwined with the power dynamics of the culture(s) from which they emerge. The use of recognizable “myths, narrative models, tropes, and so on in stories situates [narratives] within a web of power relations” (Fernandes 6). When personal stories reinforce existing, dominant cultural narratives, they make those discourses more resistant to revision. Stories can be subversive, however, when they “shift to include the community or structural-political modes,” or acknowledge relevant political contexts (7). The transgressive potential of storytelling arises when an individual’s “lived experiences, memories of collective struggle, deeply held feelings, and traumatic experiences…interject into their narrative in ways that disrupt the power of dominant discourses” (12). As this dissertation argues, the narratives instrumentalized by media tend to reinforce dominant discourses, while works of Cultural Trauma Fiction create subversive counternarratives that encourage the positive potentialities of narrative empathy.

Another objection to narrative empathy is that certain narratives may encourage detached spectatorship. According to narrative theorist Amy Shuman, “The appropriation of stories can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding. Appropriation can use one person’s tragedy to serve as another’s inspiration and preserve, rather than subvert, oppressive situations” (qtd in Mäkelä et al. 151). As previously implied, this kind of voyeuristic appropriation characterizes news media’s approach to representing trauma. Literature, by contrast, promotes witnessing and offers the potential for subverting the oppressive structures that facilitated the trauma. Compared to news and digital media, works of literature can depict divergent perspectives as well as “less visible disasters” and the “slow violence” of systemic inequalities in a way that humanizes victims and makes narratives compelling to readers (Gabbert 65).
In sum, fiction fosters empathy because it helps readers understand experiences unlike their own. The unfamiliar situations found in literary fiction force readers to pay attention and have the potential to inspire change. This is especially true when readers engage in close reading practices. Scientific studies demonstrate that writerly or literary texts promote close reading and improve readers’ affective Theory of Mind, which is closely linked with empathy. Indeed, reading literary texts can change how people think. Within literary texts, strategies that promote familiarity and defamiliarization both play a role in fostering reader empathy. Some key narrative strategies that have been shown to promote empathy include nonlinear or disjointed structures, first person narration, and narration that provides readers with access to characters’ thoughts and feelings. When these and other narrative strategies are present, readers must avoid assuming they are familiar with the experiences of the characters, accept the differences between themselves and the characters, and then translate that acceptance into understanding. Some scholars object to narrative empathy, arguing that it can be used to reify dominant power structures. While this use of narrative empathy is possible, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction use empathy to positive ends by constructing subversive counternarratives. Others object that narrative empathy can promote voyeurism, but I argue that this is not the case for works of Cultural Trauma Fiction, which, contrary to visual media, promote empathetic witnessing.

**Dominant Narratives, Counternarratives, and Rememory**

While empathetic witnessing offers an initial, individual step towards social change, Cultural Trauma Fiction also calls for broad, structural change. Literary narratives have the potential to disrupt the dominant narratives circulated by mass media through counternarrative. Dominant narratives, also called dominant stories or master narratives, are those narratives set within systems of hegemonic power that are told against a backdrop of shared cultural
assumptions to reinforce the interests and ideologies of the dominant sociopolitical group (Bamberg). Similar to the concept of dominant narratives is Audrey Yap’s concept of standard stories, which she describes as “narratives that have a limited number of characters with specific characteristics and resources, whose actions form a sort of closed system. Everything that takes place in a standard story is a direct result of something else within the story, meaning that all of the relevant causal factors for events and the actions of characters are included” (5-6). This concept also compares to the concept of a stock story, which “the institution collectively forms and tells about itself. This story picks and chooses from among the available facts to present a picture of what happened: an account that justifies the world as it is” (Delgado 2421). Standard and stock stories support the status quo and generally believe it to be neutral and fair. Because the causes of an event are often more complex than can be represented by the reductive standard- or stock-story format, standard stories generally fail to represent the event’s “underlying causal mechanisms” sufficiently (Yap 6). While dominant narratives may be more complex than the standard stories Yap describes, they similarly limit audience’s understanding of divergent perspectives and nuanced causes of events. The most effective means by which a collective can combat the testimonial injustice of reducing events to limited narratives “is to expand the range of paradigm cases by actively working for the inclusion of as many stories as possible” (17). In other words, people are less likely to receive dominant narratives without question if they are routinely made familiar with other narratives that contradict the interests and ideologies of hegemony. An expanded repertoire of narratives about events or kinds of events must include marginalized voices so that people can “gain greater understanding of possible lived experiences,” and, as a result, develop greater empathy for individuals unlike themselves and their experiences (Yap 19).
Narratives that challenge the dominant understanding of an event or the ideologies that undergird that understanding are known as counterstories or counternarratives. For critical race theorists, counterstories are “competing versions [of events] that can be used to challenge a stock story and prepare the way for a new one” (Delgado 2416). Critical race scholar Richard Delgado argues that just as “stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics. Counterstories, which challenge the received wisdom, do that as well…Counterstories can quicken and engage conscience. Their graphic quality can stir imagination in ways in which more conventional discourse cannot” (2414-2415). A good counterstory “invites the reader to alienate herself or himself from the events described, to enter into the mental set of the teller, whose view is different from the reader's own” (2434-2435).

Moreover, as Aja Y. Martinez explains, a counterstory “serves to expose, analyze, and challenge majoritarian stories of racialized privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival, resistance, and justice” (26). Counterstories or counternarratives², therefore, challenge dominant or standard stories by engaging readers’ imaginative and empathetic capacities. They depict events or circumstances from a different point of view than has been allowed by the dominant social group, allowing for an alternate perspective on matters that audiences may not have considered in depth. As subsequent chapters demonstrate, some works of fiction are particularly skilled in creating counternarratives that challenge dominant narratives of culturally traumatic events and patterns of events.

Indeed, some works of fiction engage in ‘rememory,’ or the “imaginative recovery of the historical past” (Michell 12). The term ‘rememory’ comes from Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel,

² Critical race theorists argue that to be ‘counterstory’ a marginalized narrative must critique a dominant ideology and “focus on social justice as an objective” (Martinez 17). The latter criterion distinguished counterstories from counternarratives as I use it in this dissertation; literary counternarratives do not necessarily aim to achieve social justice, though they may nonetheless promote social justice.
Beloved. In the novel, Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman, tells her daughter about her past, stating, “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory… But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world” (Morrison 43). For Sethe, things that once existed continue to exist both though individual memories and independent of them. Sethe also says that if her daughter, Denver, goes to the farm where Sethe was once enslaved and abused, “it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you” (44). The traumatic past continues existing in the present. Sethe’s story as depicted in Beloved is “not a unifying memory but the starts and stops of rememory, a reconstruction of a story that cannot be completely narrated, a story that instead makes visible the erasure, the forgetting, the disremembering” (Clough 124). Rememory, then, is a fragmented memory that reconstructs the history of an individual or group who shared an experience, especially a traumatic experience. Scholar Mark Tabone argues that rememory reveals “the ‘hidden transcripts’ of history in ways that directly challenge, resist, question, revise, correct, or transform the received ‘public transcript’ of ‘official’ history’s master narratives” (193). Tabone borrows the concept of the hidden transcript from social scientist James Scott, who explains that the hidden transcript includes those discourses which occur outside of the official record of history, “those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (4-5). Hidden transcripts are context-specific, include both verbal and non-verbal expressions, and, significantly, “the frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate—not a solid wall” (Scott 14). These hidden transcripts are most relevant to
literary counternarratives; while a subordinated individual “may develop a personal fantasy of revenge and confrontation…when the insult is but a variant of affronts suffered systematically by a whole race, class, or strata, then the fantasy can become a collective cultural product…this collective hidden transcript is essential to any dynamic view of power relations” (Scott 9). In this framing, the work of rememory is to illuminate the collective hidden transcript and disrupt dominant or master narratives of traumatic events.

**Cultural Trauma Fiction**

Drawing on these theorists’ ideas about the difference between individual trauma and cultural trauma, the role of media in forwarding dominant narratives about such cultural traumas, and the capacity of literary fiction to counter dominant narratives and foster empathy, I am proposing that a new genre of fiction has arisen since the late 20th century as a response to large-scale traumatic events and their far-reaching and often destructive representations in the media. “Cultural Trauma Fiction,” as I call it, represents, constructs, and processes contemporary cultural traumas, using literary fiction’s power to cultivate empathy. It engages with both local and cultural concerns, explicitly or implicitly questions collective identity, engages with cultural meaning-making processes, represents multiple identities and perspectives in response to recent culturally traumatic events, and offers a counternarrative to dominant media or government narratives. Although countless traumatic events occurred prior to the late 20th century, contemporary cultural traumas differ in their dissemination; given modern technology and the mass media, larger numbers of people experience traumatic events. Also, individuals who are geographically separated from traumatic events often watch them unfold in real time via traditional media sources or social media platforms, and people can access archival footage of these events repeatedly for years to come. This access alters and expands the collective
experience of trauma. Cultural Trauma Fiction necessarily differs from literary responses to earlier traumatic events because of the significant differences in how cultural traumas occur and circulate in the contemporary moment. Works of Cultural Trauma Fiction represent the cultural trauma already constructed in the aftermath of an event, participate in the continued construction of cultural trauma, and shape the subsequent redefinition of communal identity. This model I am proposing of Cultural Trauma Fiction offers a useful framework for understanding novels that respond to culturally traumatic events and illuminates the relationships between different kinds of cultural traumas in today’s media-saturated age. These connections are especially significant in the contemporary moment, as cultural traumas continually shape and reshape American culture and American literature. Ultimately, understanding the events addressed in Cultural Trauma Fiction, how this genre differs from fiction that focuses on individual trauma, and how this genre responds to mass-media narratives can show us more about the potentialities and power of narrative fiction even as the novel has faded as a central form of storytelling in American culture.

This dissertation also demonstrates that the study of cultural trauma offers a new direction for trauma studies and literary trauma theory. This new direction is timely, given recent challenges to the literary trauma theory in the tradition of Freud and Caruth. For instance, Joshua Pederson argues in his article, “Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory,” that the latest psychological research on trauma challenges the Caruthian theory that trauma is indescribable (Pederson 333). He asserts that a revised concept of psychological trauma indicates the need for a new literary trauma theory. First, Pederson argues that critics “should turn their focus from gaps in the text to the text itself,” acknowledging that traumatic memory can be accessible and traumatized individuals can provide reliable accounts of
their traumas (338). Second, since psychological research has shown that trauma can actually enhance memory, “trauma theorists should seek out evidence of augmented narrative detail” in literary texts depicting trauma (339). Third, those studying literary trauma “should focus on depictions of experiences that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted,” because “while victims may have heightened memory of trauma, these memories may be altered” (339). Pederson maintains that this framework will offer a better understanding of how literature represents trauma and how literary representations can help survivors reclaim and heal from trauma. My framework takes this revised understanding of literary trauma theory a step further; I argue that, while individual, psychological trauma is certainly significant in its own right, critical attention should shift to a focus on cultural trauma. This shift is needed both because of the aforementioned limitations of psychological trauma theory and because an increased understanding of literature’s participation in the discursive construction of trauma can foster a greater understanding of traumatic events and patterns of events, their cultural significance, and how similarly traumatic events can be prevented in the future. Fictional narratives of cultural trauma—like trauma narratives in general—may help “repair the torn social fabric and restore the foundations that grounded the community” prior to the inciting event or events (Eyerman 681). As cultures contest representations and interpretations of culturally traumatic events, Cultural Trauma Fiction facilitates counternarratives and empathetic representations of diverse viewpoints.

Chapter 1 surveys the vast body of 9/11 literature and related criticism to differentiate which of those texts fit within the Cultural Trauma Fiction subgenre, and thus to further refine my definition of the genre. This chapter engages in detailed analysis of three novels: Amy Waldman’s The Submission (2011), Don DeLillo’s Falling Man (2007), and Jess Walter’s The
These novels demonstrate that works of Cultural Trauma Fiction illuminate the collective hidden transcript of a traumatic event—9/11, in this instance—and engage in ‘rememory work’ by challenging, revising, and reconstructing cultural narratives about the trauma, thereby depicting the events’ effects on the culture, its meaning-making processes, and its marginalized populations. Each of these novels are part of the Cultural Trauma Fiction subgenre. Through my analysis of these novels, Chapter 1 highlights the conventions and boundaries of Cultural Trauma Fiction.

Chapter 2 centers on mass shooting narratives that demonstrate how a pattern of tragedies and their repetition in the media elicit cultural trauma. These novels speak back to media tropes about these events, provide context, and consider the multiple causes of mass shootings to help readers process these cultural traumas. Specifically, this chapter demonstrates that Tom McAllister’s *How to be Safe* (2018) and Wally Lamb’s *The Hour I First Believed* (2008) are works of Cultural Trauma Fiction that engage with broad questions about how these events affect the culture and present counternarratives to dominant narratives of school shootings. This chapter complicates the concept of cultural trauma as set forth in Chapter 1 because it demonstrates that Cultural Trauma Fiction about rampage violence does not necessarily represent specific, real-world events. Unlike 9/11 fiction, Cultural Trauma Fiction about rampage violence may respond either to specific events—like the shootings at Columbine High School in April 1999—or may respond more generally to the cultural trauma of rampage violence by representing a fictional event and subsequent cultural trauma. This chapter, therefore, will demonstrate that works of Cultural Trauma Fiction respond to cultural trauma, which is socially constructed after an event or a pattern of similarly traumatic events, and may or may not respond explicitly to the events themselves.
Chapter 3 considers works of Cultural Trauma Fiction about Hurricane Katrina. These texts, like works of 9/11 fiction, respond to an individual traumatic event. Both the event and the subsequent construction of cultural trauma, however, are complicated by the compound trauma of race-based structural violence. This chapter considers works of Cultural Trauma Fiction—Tom Piazza’s *City of Refuge* (2008) and Rosalyn Story’s *Wading Home* (2010)—alongside a work that falls outside of the subgenre—Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2013)—to call attention to how few literary texts thoroughly address Hurricane Katrina as cultural trauma and to further demonstrate the boundaries of the subgenre. This chapter uses critical disaster studies and cultural trauma theory to explore what constitutes a disaster, how to distinguish between “natural” and “man-made” disasters, and by what means some disasters become cultural traumas for Americans. The works of Cultural Trauma Fiction discussed in this chapter demonstrate how novels can depict multiple perspectives simultaneously and consider the effects of mainstream media on the sociocultural construction of trauma.

Chapter 4 similarly examines texts about race-based structural violence, but instead explores novels focused on broader examples of this kind of cultural trauma, rather than on the way singular incidents expose and magnify this trauma. The two texts analyzed in this chapter are Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* (2019). Like some of the texts discussed in chapter 2, multiple events and their subsequent traumatic constructions influenced Ward’s and Whitehead’s novels. Significantly, these novels differ from other works of Cultural Trauma Fiction because they focus on a pattern of routine harms that especially affect African Americans. Both Ward’s and Whitehead’s novels look to past traumas to process more recent traumas, rather than directly portraying recent events. In so doing, the novels connect the insidious violence of the present to the past’s more explicit racism.
to show they are all products of the same underlying racist structures. They also use ghosts, haunting, and unburied bodies to create counternarratives that engage with real-world injustices, demonstrate that past traumas affect the present through intergenerational transmission of trauma and through the continued existence of the structures that perpetuate such violence, and offer some measure of hope for a better future. This chapter demonstrates that events affecting a subset of the population are nonetheless cultural traumas because recognition of these events exposes a fundamental division within American cultural identity. Cultural Trauma Fiction about structural violence both represents the collective trauma experienced by some members of the culture and transmits the trauma to other members of the culture. These texts actively construct cultural trauma both by representing the harsh reality of structural violence and by informing uninitiated readers about the divide in American culture between those who experience this violence directly and those who have the privilege of denying its existence.

Finally, the concluding chapter considers the significance of Cultural Trauma Fiction in the contemporary moment and offers some suggestions for future scholarship. Understanding the events to which Cultural Trauma Fiction responds, how works in this subgenre differ from fiction focused on individual trauma, and how they respond to mass-media narratives demonstrates the potentialities and power of narrative fiction even as the novel has faded as a central form of storytelling in American culture. Works of Cultural Trauma Fiction depict events such as 9/11, instances and patterns of rampage violence, so-called ‘natural’ disasters, and the repetitive violence of structural racism as “traumas” that affect a culture as a whole—much as traumatic events can affect an individual—and suggest that many of the same coping and healing tools that an individual can use to heal should also be employed by a culture. Drawing on fiction’s capacity to foster interpersonal empathy and counter dominant narratives, especially
those produced and disseminated by video and internet media, novels in the Cultural Trauma Fiction subgenre respond to mass-media-promulgated explanations of these traumatic events, using multiple perspectives and avoiding claims of any singular or unexamined interpretations of these events. Works of Cultural Trauma Fiction, through their capacity to foster empathy, can also demonstrate to a broad population that traumas experienced only by a sub-group of that population—such as the systemic violence of structural racism—have been traumatic. They also foster empathy and greater understanding of such traumas among those unaffected members of the population. Indeed, as this dissertation will show, the novels within the Cultural Trauma Fiction subgenre make an important contribution to our understanding of lesser-known or smaller-scale traumas because they demonstrate how these types of traumas are similar in kind to the major traumas that are already widely recognized.
Chapter 1: 9/11 Novels as Cultural Trauma Fiction

This chapter considers the vast body of literary responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and identifies a select few that fit within the Cultural Trauma Fiction subgenre. As I will demonstrate, Sonia Baelo-Allué’s concept of the ‘cultural trauma novel’ offers a useful starting point for understanding these works of literature, though the Cultural Trauma Fiction subgenre differs from that which she defines. This chapter proposes that works of 9/11 fiction centering on the attacks as a cultural trauma are part of a distinct subgenre that illuminates dissenting and marginalized perspectives, ultimately offering a more nuanced understanding of individual cultural traumas and of the process by which a given culture constructs a collective narrative of trauma and reconstructs cultural identity. First, I will make a case for why 9/11 is a cultural trauma for Americans. Next, I will explain how government and media narratives have dominated public discourses about this trauma. While popular culture—especially film and television—largely reify these dominant narratives, some works of 9/11 fiction challenge the mainstream interpretation of 9/11, its causes, and its consequences. The remainder of this chapter explores select works of 9/11 fiction that counter dominant government and media narratives about the attacks and their cultural significance. While many literary scholars have already thoroughly analyzed works of 9/11 literature, this analysis differs from previous scholarship in that I will demonstrate the utility of considering works of Cultural Trauma Fiction about 9/11 alongside texts about other cultural traumas. Indeed, recognizing these 9/11 novels alongside other works of Cultural Trauma Fiction avoids exceptionalizing 9/11 while simultaneously illuminating the traumatic impact of lesser-known or underrepresented events. The novels discussed in this chapter help establish the criteria for and characteristics of Cultural Trauma Fiction because 9/11 and its literary afterlives are widely recognized both by the general public
and in academic scholarship. The well-known traumatic event and some of the texts influenced by this event embody the features that, as subsequent chapters will show, characterize Cultural Trauma Fiction as a distinct literary subgenre.

9/11 as Cultural Trauma

Responses to the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11th, 2001 align with the central features of cultural trauma. Sociologist Neil Smelser identifies these features as “an initial reaction of shock, disbelief, and emotional numbing,” terror and psychological stress, “collective mourning,” a sense that the events should never and could never be forgotten, “a sense of national brooding over the events, akin to a repetition-compulsion,” recognition of the events as unique and culturally significant, “deliberate efforts to remember the events collectively, “Sustained public interest,” and, finally, “A culminating sense that American identity had been altered fundamentally” (267). Part of the reason 9/11 became a cultural trauma was because so many people—both in the United States and around the world—witnessed the events unfold either in real time or via recordings shortly after they occurred; “Approximately two billion people, almost one third of the world’s population, are estimated to have witnessed the events of 9/11 directly or via television, radio, and Internet broadcasts that day” (“Keywords”). Indeed, “coverage of the disaster and the emergency response replaced regular programming on almost all television channels” in the United States on 9/11, and news programs continued focusing on the attacks in the days and weeks that followed (“Keywords”). The pervasive coverage of the attacks captured and sustained public interest, spread the shock and stress of the event, and inspired collective recognition and mourning.

Indeed, 9/11 is the paradigmatic cultural trauma for Americans in the 21st century. As literary scholar Ira Nadel argues, 9/11 “altered America’s self-identity, sense of security, and
belief in its invincibility” (129). He asserts that the characteristically American “sense of privileged security evaporated on 9/11” (Nadel 129). Whether or not scholars explicitly use the term ‘cultural trauma,’ their descriptions of the traumatic effects of 9/11 remain consistent with Jeffrey Alexander, Neal Smelser, and other sociologists’ definitions of cultural trauma. Unlike other shocking happenings—such as the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 or the devastating explosion of the Challenger in 1986—9/11 fundamentally altered the collective understanding of American identity. 9/11 challenged the very definition of national “power, borders, security, and wealth,” according to political theorists Anna M. Agathangelou and L.H.M. Ling (518). Unlike other horrific events that traumatized Americans primarily through shock and grief, 9/11 also traumatized Americans through what sociologist Jean Baudrillard calls a “subtle mental terrorism” (Baudrillard 410). The initial experience of terrorism on 9/11 was, obviously, anything but subtle; Baudrillard argues that the fundamental difference between 9/11 and other acts of terrorism is that the terrorists committed suicide strategically as “an absolute weapon against a system that lives off the exclusion of death” (408). The terrorists wanted the system itself to “commit suicide in response to multiple challenges posed in terms of death and suicide, for neither the system nor its power can escape the symbolic obligation” (409). American Studies scholar Christine Muller explains Baudrillard’s concept of subtle mental terrorism as “the idea of potential terrorists living clandestine among us, as did the September 11 hijackers for months—[which] causes suspicion of all individuals, and all situations” (6). Baudrillard argues that their hiding in plain sight was “practically terrorist as the spectacular act of September 11, because it throws the cloak of suspicion on any individual…If they have passed unnoticed, then anyone (ourselves included) can be an unnoticed criminal (each airplane becomes suspect)” (Baudrillard 410). In particular, this pervasive suspicion led to distrust of and
discrimination against Muslim- or Arab-looking men. Post-9/11 subtle mental terrorism also “reflects a recognized aim of terrorist strategy: to produce sufficient fear in a nation’s population to erode social and political trust” (Muller 7). In addition to increased distrust of others, Americans also developed suspicions about the ostensible security of a nation that proved vulnerable to foreign terrorism. The 9/11 terrorist attacks disrupted or destroyed people’s belief in the ‘American Dream’ and altered the collective understanding of what the nation was, is, and ought to be (Muller 8).

9/11 also reinforced the American tendency “to identify crisis as a descent from innocence to experience” (Gray 2). American culture tends to believe that its own history is always positive and just and that points of crisis erode the integrity of an otherwise innocent nation. Many also represent America’s past as a time of peace and prosperity, regardless of the lack of factual substance in this portrayal. 9/11 signified, for many Americans, “the loss of their First Worldism,” or “the loss of the prerogative, only and always, to be the one who transgresses the sovereign boundaries of other states, but never to be in the position of having one’s own boundaries transgressed” (Butler 39). The events also “disrupted many Americans’ sense of home and their ‘psychological unity,’ leaving them feeling displaced, unsafe, and internally fragmented” (Greenberg 24). This disruption, as many critics have noted, compares to the kinds of disruptions that are common in other cultures because of First-World imperialism and global capitalism. At least to some extent, 9/11 exposed the myths of American exceptionalism and invulnerability.

9/11 also affected Americans’ sense of the future and confidence in American security. Jacques Derrida identifies 9/11 as “a trauma…whose temporality proceeds neither from the now that is present nor from the present that is past but from an im-presentable to come” (Borradori
97). In other words, Americans may have taken peace for granted in their projections about the future before 9/11 but could no longer do so in the wake of the attacks. After 9/11, America was “traumatized by the unrepresentable future, from the open threat of an aggression capable of striking—for you never know—the head of the sovereign nation-state par excellence” (Borradori 98). If the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—the “primary symbols of world dominance by the American economy and military”—can be destroyed or damaged unexpectedly in a single morning, then the United States as a whole is more vulnerable than citizens previously knew or were willing to admit (Neal 179). To the surprise of many Americans, the entire edifice of American security,” including the White House and the Federal Aviation Administration, failed to protect the American people from terrorism (Faludi 15). The trauma of 9/11 includes the physical devastation and psychological impact of the events as well as “the specific cultural encoding of the historical event,” namely the social, political, and ethical aspects of trauma in their cultural formulations (Cvek 9-10).

9/11’s impact on discourses and processes of meaning-making defines its collective psychological effect on the American people. Despite the physicality of 9/11, Kristiaan Versluys argues that it is “ultimately a semiotic event, involving the total breakdown of all meaning-making systems” (2). 9/11 demonstrates “the inevitability of discourse,” because it “would not exist and could not exist outside the interpretive schemas that are imposed upon it” (Versluys 3). The attack dramatically affected discourse because both the terrorists who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks and the Americans who processed the attacks in their aftermath recognized the emblematic nature of the Twin Towers. The Towers represented American freedom, power, and prosperity in the global, capitalist economy. Thus, according to philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the attack on the World Trade Center differed from previous acts of terrorism because of “the
symbolic force” of the towers themselves; “The attackers did not just physically cause the highest buildings in Manhattan to collapse; they also destroyed an icon in the household imagery of the American nation” (Borradori 28). Distinctively, the terrorists exploited the media’s powerful “real-time images and their instantaneous global diffusion” as part of the event itself (Baudrillard). The terrorists’ tactic was “to provoke an excess of reality and make the system collapse under the weight of that reality” (Baudrillard 409). Habermas argues that, because the collapse of the Twin Towers gave “the impression that they were responding to the suicides of the suicide jets with their own suicide,” it seemed that these symbols themselves were complicit in symbolically collapsing the “whole system” of American capitalist dominance (405). This apparent complicity mirrors what some critics and political scientists believe to be the United States’ complicity in the attacks, due to its having trained and provided aid to would-be terrorists and terrorist organizations prior to the events of 9/11. Additionally, as scholar Claire Kahane notes, 9/11 “was a trauma to our national identity” that “marked our fall, our entrance into the culture of a globalized political violence with no safe boundaries” (110). The fall of the World Trade Center in particular “shattered our symbolic certainties, forcing us to acknowledge the reality and disintegration and annihilation through the very materiality of the ash and debris raining down on lower Manhattan and, more uncannily, through the absence it left behind” (Kahane 110). 9/11 is thus distinctive not only as a terrorist attack, but as a major symbolic event and a cultural trauma.

Some scholars and critics, though, argue against categorizing 9/11 as a cultural trauma. For instance, Alan Gibbs argues that describing 9/11 as a cultural trauma facilitates decontextualization, which “refuse[s] understanding of what it sees as an abhorrent limit event” instead of considering 9/11 “in a historical and political narrative” (120). In other words, Gibbs
believes that calling 9/11 a cultural trauma divorces the event from the complex sociopolitical contexts that ought to inform one’s understanding the event. Some who resist categorizing 9/11 as a cultural trauma note that decontextualization “was an essential element in constructing a sense of collective trauma that was in turn crucial in garnering support for the Bush Administration’s forays into Afghanistan and Iraq,” and “enabled a sense of victimhood and false innocence to take root and deflect attention to America’s complicity” in the events (Gibbs 121). Gibbs and critics like him may reject trauma theory in order to resist reifying dominant, hegemonic narratives of 9/11 and its aftermath. These critics fail to take into account that narratives of cultural trauma can offer productive counternarratives that transgress dominant government and media narratives, rather than simply representing cultural traumas in a manner consistent with dominant or reductive discourses.

Some critics may also reject the use of trauma theory on the grounds that the Caruthian understanding of trauma does not offer a sufficiently comprehensive framework for interpreting 9/11 fiction. As previously noted in the introduction, the discourse of traditional literary trauma theory initiated by Cathy Caruth derives from a Freudian understanding of trauma, which centers on individual experiences of singular traumatic events and their repeated intrusions on survivors’ memories. Like Freud, Caruth conceives of trauma as too overwhelming to be fully understood by trauma victims. Caruth argues that literary stories have the unique ability to communicate the flashbacks and gaps characteristic of traumatic experience. For example, literary scholar Magali Michael argues that some notable 9/11 novels “overtly reject the very notion of the unrepresentable or the unspeakable” and therefore do not fit within a Caruthian perception of individual trauma (18). Similarly, in her comprehensive analysis of 9/11 literature, *Ground Zero Fiction*, Birgit Däwes argues that “the discourse of trauma…is ultimately too limited to do
justice to the fictional field” that takes 9/11 as its subject (19). Michael’s and Dawes’s arguments, however, apply specifically to “the traumatic impact of 9/11 on individual lives” (Däwes 22) and do not explore how the discourse of cultural trauma both considers the various impacts of trauma on individuals and simultaneously recognizes the broader effects of trauma on the culture.

I argue that cultural trauma theory is a useful lens for examining literary responses to 9/11 because the discourse of cultural trauma—unlike much of early, conventional trauma theory—recognizes the historical, social, and cultural aspects of trauma rather than limiting its scope to the experiences of traumatized individuals. 9/11 initiated widespread trauma through the spectacle of the planes colliding with the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. These events, of course, created individual trauma for survivors, firsthand witnesses, and those who witnessed the events secondhand through the media, both in real time and in the unrelenting playbacks that followed. But 9/11 became a cultural trauma both because its mediation facilitated widespread witnessing and because it produced the “subtle mental terrorism” described by Baudrillard. This subtle mental terrorism increased suspicion of and discrimination against Arabs and Arab-Americans, changed how Americans saw their nation and their relationships with other nations, amplified Americans’ sense of insecurity and vulnerability, and, ultimately, challenged the collective understanding of American cultural identity through its incredible symbolic force.

**Dominant Discourses of 9/11 in Government, Media, and Popular Culture**

Literature after 9/11 is both a product of cultural trauma and a means for exploring the profound effects of that trauma. In this way, it has often served as a counterargument to the dominant narrative about the facts and meaning of 9/11 that coalesced in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. This ‘dominant’ or ‘mainstream’ narrative of 9/11 quickly came to
overshadow other interpretations of the attacks and the causes of the attacks. This narrative, while likely familiar to most readers, warrants exploration to call attention to the nature of its construction and to the means by which this narrative dismisses other interpretations of 9/11. This section discusses the dominant narrative perpetuated by politicians and the news media following 9/11, as well as the continuation of this narrative across multiple television and film genres.

The dominant narrative, or “the interpretation of the 9/11 attacks by political and media elites as well as in popular culture,” portrayed 9/11 “as the work of an enemy that personifies evil” (Knight 179). This interpretation is a construction that arises out of and coalesces with a well-established ideological outlook. In effect, the Bush administration quickly capitalized on 9/11 to promote the idea of a "decisive intervention" as the most fitting response to the attacks (179). Peter Knight identifies a “mainstream discourse” that is “used to explain 9/11 and justify the need for a war on terror” (180). This discourse, he argues:

…is marked out by a tendency toward apocalypticism and heated exaggeration; a sense of urgent crisis and imminent threat to a specifically American way of life from an all-pervasive hidden enemy; the portrayal of America as an exceptional victim; the reassertion of traditional American values and a call to national unity in response; a Manichaean insistence on dividing the world into Them and Us; the demand that America lead an epic to-the-death fight against the plotters; the casting of all blame onto the enemy; and the portrayal of the enemy as completely alien, inhuman, all-powerful, and, above all, evil. (180)

Indeed, the “mainstream interpretation of 9/11 and the subsequent call for a war on terror are neither natural nor inevitable but are part of a deliberately constructed discourse and therefore
are amenable to revision” (Knight 192). Although government actors and media representatives may claim that they do not want to portray all Middle Easterners or Muslims as Others, the discourses they employ often do exactly that.

Like Knight, journalist Fareed Zakaria argues in a Newsweek article published in October 2001 that Americans need answers to why 9/11 took place in order to move forward. However, Zakaria’s piece fails to challenge the dominant discourses he claims to argue against. This article offers an example of the kinds of discourses that dominated the post-9/11 conversation about the causes of attacks. Zakaria writes three years prior to the publication of the Report, which perhaps provided some of the answers Americans craved. He claims to combat oversimplified explanations of 9/11, but his article ultimately reinforces the dominant, reductive narratives of the event and the perpetrators. The government narratives Zakaria claims to challenge include, “We stand for freedom and they hate it. We are rich and they envy us. We are strong and they resent this.” While Zakaria believes these answers are true, he also argues that they are incomplete because they fail to explain why the terrorists were willing not only to kill “but also to die.” In the absence of satisfactory answers, Zakaria creates his own. He claims that the terrorists “come out of a culture that reinforces their hostility, distrust and hatred of the West—and of America in particular. This culture does not condone terrorism but fuels the fanaticism that is at its heart.” The culture to which Zakaria refers is not Islam in general, he notes, but specifically Islam as practiced in the Middle East. Zakaria argues that this culture was born from a failure of modernization and increase in poverty in the Arab world. The revenue from oil sales to the United States has created more wealth for the upper class, rather than for the average Middle Eastern citizen. Moreover, Zakaria alleges, the Middle East resists modernization because it associates “economic advance…and political progress” with Westernization. These
circumstances allowed Islamic fundamentalism to flourish because the ideology provided a sense of purpose for people and members of the organization offered essential services and aid to those in need. Zakaria further explains that the “one great cause of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism…is the total failure of political institutions in the Arab world.” In other words, Zakaria blames the cultural and political conditions of the Middle East for Islamic fundamentalism without considering how the United States and other imperialist nations may have influenced or created those conditions. Although his argument complicates the narrative he believes the government has asserted, it nonetheless reinforces the same basic ideas of that narrative.

Zakaria also addresses the counterargument that it is not (just) the Arab world that has failed. Some Arabs, he notes, would argue that they take issue with specific American policies. He argues that Middle Eastern “disillusionment with America begins most importantly with the creation of Israel in 1948” and subsequent American support for Israel. Zakaria admits that the U.S. has been “careless” by failing “to press any regime there to open up its society,” but he does not accept any more responsibility on behalf of the U.S. Instead, he insists that grievances “directed at America have to be placed in the overall context of the sense of humiliation, decline and despair that sweeps the Arab world.” He claims that Arabs “feel they are under siege from the modern world and that the United States symbolizes this world.” Zakaria’s piece portrays the United States as the potential (white) savior of not only the Arab world but the entire world. This argument is but one example of the kind of discourse that was ubiquitous following the attacks. Indeed, Zakaria’s article exemplifies Knight’s characterization of the mainstream discourse through “the portrayal of America as an exceptional victim; the reassertion of traditional American values…[and] the casting of all blame onto the enemy” (Knight 180). Zakaria
repeatedly indicates that the cultural practices and attitudes of Middle Easterners are antiquated and dangerous and asserts that American values are necessary to save them. Zakaria’s claims about the Middle East and his refusal to fully acknowledge the faults of the United States further legitimated the dominant narrative of 9/11 because of his role as a media figure, a respected journalist, and a person of Muslim heritage.

This portrayal of the United States as “exceptional victim” is not anomalous (Knight 180). Zakaria’s article echoes President Bush’s now infamous question to a Congress, “Why do they hate us?” (Bush). Scholars Lynn Spigel and Jaap Kooijman both compare this question to Lauren Berlant’s concept of infantile citizenship (Spigel 123 and Kooijman 59). Spigel argues that infantile citizenship, much like the idea that the United States had descended from innocence to experience, “allows adult viewers to comfortably confront the horrors and guilt of war by donning the cloak of childhood innocence” (124). For the infantile citizen, “the crisis of her/his innocence/illiteracy emerges from an ambivalent encounter between America as a theoretical ideality and America as a site of practical politics” (Berlant 399). American citizens with an ‘infantile’ mode of citizenship faced this crisis on 9/11, when they began to recognize the disconnect between America as imagined by Americans and the United States as a nation-state involved in global politics. Kooijman argues that Bush’s use of the word ‘us’ “does not so much refer to the USA as an imperialist nation-state active in international politics, but to America as the Land of Freedom and Opportunity—thus not the nation-state USA but America as imagined community” (47). This rhetorical vein separates American culture from American politics and assumes that American values are obvious and universal, while ignoring evidence that the United States fails to champion freedom and democracy when it is inconvenient to do so. (47).
Another manifestation of infantile citizenship was the willfully inaccurate tendency of the media to compare 9/11 to World War II, rather than to more analogous acts of terrorism like the Oklahoma City bombing. Justin Lewis notes that in the month and a half following 9/11, “the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, and the Los Angeles Times published, between them, a total of 754 articles that referred to World War II or Nazi Germany in connection with the ‘war on terrorism’” (169). By contrast, only 257 articles referenced the Oklahoma City Bombing, even though this act of terrorism was clearly more comparable to 9/11 than was World War II (Lewis 169). Significantly, the media largely ignored the portions of history in which the United States and the West more broadly violated other peoples’ human rights, including U.S. support for an anti-democratic regime in Saudi Arabia (170). The U.S.’s connection to Saudi Arabia is especially relevant because “15 of the 19 hijackers on September 11 were, according to the FBI, Saudi born, and much of the recruiting, planning, and funding of the attacks took place in Saudi Arabia” (170). Very few articles following 9/11 acknowledged the connection between the U.S. and the Saudi Arabian theocracy. Media coverage implied that World War II—where the United States stood against oppressive forces—was more relevant than America’s connection to the Saudi Arabian regime, and this assumption was used to justify the bombing of Afghanistan (170).

Media outlets and government representatives also compared 9/11 to World War II, rather than to more recent events, because much of recent history and U.S foreign policy contradicts the myth that the West always seeks to advance democracy and human rights above all else (Lewis 171). Citing various studies of news media after 9/11, film studies scholar Guy Westwell argues that “the dominant ideological response to 9/11” was “founded on a sense of patriotic nationalism, innocence violated, righteous anger and the demand for retaliation and
war” (40). According to this dominant view, “the attacks were unprecedented and unfounded (coming literally ‘out of the blue’ on a cloudless autumn day) and therefore discouraged reflection on how past events might have offered some insight into why the attacks had happened, with a mythologised view of World War II the primary reference point” (40). Clearly, the government and the media framed many early narratives of 9/11 to serve the myth of American exceptionalism.

Narratives about Arab and Muslim people helped bolster arguments of American exceptionalism and innocence. According to scholar Tim Aistrope, an “Arab-Muslim paranoia narrative helped disqualify criticism of American power and limit interpretations of 9/11” (69). This narrative argues that Arab-Muslim resentment of America comes from humiliation and conspiratorial culture (97). The perpetuation of this and other narratives made it difficult for many Americans to see the real reasons why Middle Eastern peoples might resent the U.S. and nearly impossible to offer constructive criticism of American foreign policy without facing significant backlash (70). While some Americans reflected on how American foreign policy may have played a role in creating the conditions for increased terrorism, the loudest American voices focused on issues of identity politics. This explanation of Arab-Muslim resentment, argues Aistrope, “often entailed a broader concern about a monolithic terrorist threat poised for apocalyptic violence, buttressed by a standing reserve of easily radicalised Muslims already hostile towards America” (73). Aistrope also argues that both those who focused on identity and those who focused on American foreign policy maintained strict divisions between “us” and “them,” thereby portraying the United States as an innocent victim of unprovoked evil (72). This dichotomy was not entirely new, but it certainly became more prominent in the wake of 9/11.
The resurgence of the discourse of American exceptionalism affected visual media and entertainment. Spigel argues that, after 9/11, “traditional forms of entertainment had to reinvent their place in U.S. life and culture” (114). This reinvention was necessary, in part, because of the way in which near-constant coverage of 9/11 had disrupted the typical television routine (115). Most scholarship regarding 9/11 in the media focuses on the news media; Spigel, however, argues that this focus “underestimates” the role of entertainment television in communicating 9/11 to the American public (117). Entertainment television of various genres “channeled the nation back to normalcy—or at least to the normal flows of television and consumer culture” (117). Traditional forms of media like television, then, promoted a return to normal rather than a reevaluation of American entertainment culture in light of the attacks.

The week after 9/11, television media employed recognizable historical narratives to frame coverage of the attacks. These narratives attempted a “resuscitation of nationalism” as well as restoration of “the business routines and marketing practices of contemporary consumer culture” (Spigel 119). Much of the post-9/11 television programming reinforced the narrative of Americans as innocent victims who were attacked without reason (124). While “there were indeed counterhistories and antiwar messages to be found on the airwaves and [online], the news images of unfathomable destruction that aired on 9/11 resulted in industry attempts to match that spectacle with reparative images on a scale as great as the falling towers” (128). These images thrived in part because “after 9/11 many people found it important to ‘perform’ the role of citizen, which included the performance of belief in national myths of unity. And if you didn’t perform this role, then somehow you were a bad American” (133). Thus, the media’s emphasis on nationalism, capitalism, and American innocence overshadowed attempts to productively critique the United States’ response to 9/11.
Like the news media, other forms of visual media following 9/11 often failed to consider multiple, complex interpretations of the causes of the attacks. Kooijman notes that some popular American television shows, including *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The West Wing*, address 9/11 following the attacks (43). Kooijman argues that these shows “contribute to the American public debate” about the meaning of 9/11 “and present ‘America’ as an imagined community” (43). It was not just the nation state of the United States but the intangible, culturally constructed concept of ‘America’ that was under attack on 9/11 (45). American pop culture largely responded through either hypermasculine, patriotic rhetoric or the rhetoric of naivety and innocence (46-47). The angry, hypermasculine stance was “strongly present on the Fox News Network and arguably initiated by President George W. Bush when he described the American response to the terrorist attacks as if it were a Hollywood western” (46). Similar rhetoric appeared in popular country music following the attacks. Ultimately, the parallels between Bush’s own words and representations of these two strands of rhetoric in pop culture—including country music, awards shows, talk shows, and television dramas—indicate “that the rhetoric of America as imagined community reaches beyond the political realm into the globally mediated American pop culture” (48). Popular media representations of 9/11 and discussions of its significance influenced the way Americans understood their collective identity in the aftermath of terror.

Talk shows, dramas, and sitcoms also represented 9/11 through the lens of American innocence. In its many episodes dedicated to 9/11, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* emphasizes individual trauma and healing over larger political issues (Kooijman 48). This turn towards individual experience oversimplifies 9/11 and minimizes the socio-political context of the event and its aftermath (48). The show’s 9/11 episodes often promote American patriotism and
“[translate] 9/11 into a personal yet collective experience of the political…with little room for political dissent” (51). The Oprah Winfrey Show’s limited acknowledgment of American foreign policy is uncritical and justifies the U.S. government, while the episodes’ focus on individual experiences “tends to hide other social-economic and political interests” (67). In this way, the talk show largely mirrors the mainstream or dominant post-9/11 discourse.

Much like The Oprah Winfrey Show, the special 9/11 episode of The West Wing reaffirmed dominant narratives. The episode includes fictional white house staffer, Rakim Ali, who shares a name with a possible terrorist suspect. The White House chief of staff interrogates Ali, thereby representing the “political aftermath” of 9/11, including “the actual practice of racial profiling whereby Arab Americans (of assumed Muslim background) automatically become suspect of being potential terrorists” (Kooijman 57). Although the episode condemns this suspicion and anti-Muslim rhetoric in general, it does so by endorsing the rhetoric of American exceptionalism (58). 9/11 television episodes tend to obscure “the role of the nation-state USA in international politics in favor of celebrating the alleged universal yet– equally alleged – exceptionally American values of freedom and democracy” (68). By and large, Kooijman argues, these television episodes “take the acceptance of American idealism for granted” and ignore the realities of American politics and foreign policy (68). These television episodes about 9/11, like President Bush himself, embody Berlant’s infantile citizenship (59). However, as Spigel notes, television coverage regarding 9/11 in the years that followed more often allowed for dissenting voices and alternate interpretations of events and international politics than did these early episodes (141).

American films representing or alluding to 9/11 are comparable to these television episodes. Immediately after 9/11, “the film industry altered release schedules to bring to the fore
a cycle of patriotic war films,” while “films critical of US foreign policy such as Buffalo Soldiers and The Quiet American were delayed or sidelined” (Westwell 41). These latter films were frequently criticized for being “un-American, a term that was used regularly and with powerful censoring effect in the period immediately following the attacks” (41). The patriotic war films, however, largely fit with the dominant narrative of the government and news media. The film industry saw “a cycle of high-profile patriotic documentaries and a distinct post-9/11 revenge film cycle [that] sought to relate 9/11 to the banal nationalism prevalent in the wider culture and in doing so consolidate the move to war” (42). For instance, the film 9/11 focuses on the experiences of firefighters. This focus “fed the construction of 9/11 as an inclusive event – an attack not on symbols of US financial and military might but on ‘America’. The deaths of financial traders and white-collar workers were subsumed into those of the firefighters” (Westwell 46). The film eschews focus on jobs that symbolize cosmopolitanism and global capitalism in favor of those that symbolize courage and selflessness to further emphasize the narrative of American innocence.

Post-9/11 films also generally avoid representing the complex causes of the attacks. The films 9/11 and In Memoriam both focus on rescues and efforts to clean up lower Manhattan following the attacks, “and this tight focus implicitly discourages any attempt to think through the event in relation to history, capitalism or the role of the US in the Middle East or elsewhere” (Westwell 49). Similarly, the 2008 documentary 102 Minutes That Changed the World does little to contextualize the attacks. This limited framing of the attacks “may be regarded as an evasive strategy designed to discourage critical reflection and maintain a conservative view of the events” (49). Like the U.S. government, news media, and television media, early representations of 9/11 in film failed to challenge the convenient narrative of Americans as the victims of
unprovoked violence. Indeed, the majority of the media across platforms and genres upheld this dominant narrative rather than complicating or challenging it.

9/11 Literature, or ‘Ground Zero Fiction’

In the days and weeks following 9/11, Americans struggled to understand what took place, who caused it, who and what was lost, and what it all meant. This confusion and crisis endured for years in the hearts and minds of Americans and altered the collective understanding of what it means to be an American. Some of the earliest public responses to the attacks were made by writers, including Don DeLillo, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, and Susan Sontag. According to Morley, writers were called upon to respond because the “public seeks a narrative that will weave the multitudinous stories of 9/11, the stories of victims, survivors, witnesses and perpetrators, into some kind of coherence that speaks to a subjective sense and experience of the moment” (“Plotting” 296). In addition to the nonfiction essays composed in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, in subsequent years authors framed the multiple stories of 9/11 through fiction. Hundreds of writers feel compelled to respond to 9/11 because of its sheer force on American collective consciousness, as well as the power of fiction to construct trauma narratives that help people make sense of what took place. Some shocking events do not become cultural traumas—and are not widely depicted in literature—because they do not prompt a change in cultural identity. Indeed, there is no need for competing literatures when the meaning of an event is largely agreed upon. Cultural Trauma Fiction about 9/11, however, offers multiple perspectives and interpretations of the attacks, their causes, and their aftermath, and continues to

3 For example, the Boston Marathon Bombings—while certainly traumatic for many of those in attendance and for the city of Boston—did not become a cultural trauma because there were few casualties, fewer than 300 injuries, and, most importantly, because the events did not challenge collective identity. The bombings did not challenge collective identity both because 9/11 had already changed collective identity by making citizens aware of the potential for terrorism on American soil and because the perpetrators of the bombings were quickly identified and killed or arrested. Moreover, there has not been any sustained artistic or literary discourse questioning the accepted interpretation of the event.
shape the cultural memory of the events. Cultural Trauma Fiction plays a significant role in how a culture understands a traumatic event and therefore affects the culture’s response to the event; Cultural Trauma Fiction influences the cultural and global consequences of large-scale traumatic events. As subsequent chapters will show, Cultural Trauma Fiction that takes 9/11 as its subject and the wide body of theory and criticism regarding this literature lay the foundation for understanding works of Cultural Trauma Fiction about other traumatic events, including instances of rampage violence and race-based structural violence.

Because the news and popular entertainment media almost univocally spread the dominant narrative of American innocence and patriotism, literature was one of the few spheres of American culture to offer more nuanced and diverse depictions of 9/11, its causes, and its significance. These narratives may fulfill “the public’s hunger for literature as a means of shaping national identity” (Warren 534). Literary representations of 9/11 depict cultural trauma in the context of other historical events, rather than decontextualizing single events or focusing exclusively on individual traumatic experiences. Literary scholar Sonia Baelo-Allué agrees that novels about cultural trauma transcend the limitations of theories of individual trauma through considerations of the social and political consequences of trauma (167). Many works of 9/11 fiction do just this—offering counternarratives unavailable in texts that focus exclusively on individual traumatic experiences.

9/11 novels can also avoid reifying the ‘official’ narratives of 9/11 by including counternarratives. The United States government’s official narrative of 9/11 in the aftermath of the attacks was that “freedom itself [was] under attack” (Bush). Indeed, in front of a joint session of Congress, President George W. Bush argued that terrorists “hate us” because “They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and
disagree with each other.” His speech indicated that the United States was an innocent victim of jealousy and malice. Notably, he stated that “Great harm has been done to us,” without any acknowledgement of the harm the United States may have caused other nations and peoples. He also reinforced masculinist discourses of strength, insisting that, “As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror.” He also stated that “our courage” will inspire other nations to join the “war on terror.” The only way to ensure the safety of Americans, he implied, was to embody power and resilience. He appeals to a global audience by arguing that “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” This proclamation became more than a call to other nations, as both Americans and outsiders who disagreed with Bush’s foreign policy or who questioned the United States’ role in creating the conditions for 9/11 were often dismissed in public discourse as terrorist sympathizers.4 In this way, mainstream media outlets reinforced the government narrative of 9/11. Through fiction, however, writers have better examined complex arguments that challenge dominant narratives and represent marginalized voices in response to 9/11.

4 For instance, there was widespread backlash against notable author and scholar Susan Sontag, who wrote for The New Yorker’s September 24, 2001 issue, “Let’s by all means grieve together. But let’s not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen.” Writing for The Atlantic, Christopher Hitchens refers to “Sontag’s disdainful geopolitical analysis” and argues that, in acknowledging the shortcomings of the United States government and dismissing the dominant narrative of American strength and resilience, Sontag and other critics “awarded blame more or less evenhandedly between the members of al Qaeda and the directors of U.S. foreign policy” (Hitchens). This criticism and the scathing tone in which it was delivered offer but one example of the general public’s unwillingness to accept dissent, disagreement, and nuance in public, political discussions about 9/11.
American Studies scholar Birgit Däwes has constructed a comprehensive taxonomy of fiction that represents 9/11 or its aftermath, and her project offers a useful means for understanding the landscape of 9/11 fiction. According to Däwes, the hundreds of novels, distinct in both form and focus that directly and indirectly represent 9/11 constitute a literary subgenre that she calls ‘Ground Zero Fiction’ (Ground Zero 6). “The majority of 9/11 novels,” she explains, “use the literary representation of the terrorist attacks and their immediate impact as a counterpoint or symbolic parallel to other, much more complex strands of plot, projecting the iconography of terror onto an array of complementary or alternative screens” (9). Däwes argues that the 9/11 novel “demonstrates how fiction can generate and give shape to the diverse manifestations of the cultural imaginary” and “attests to the political and ethical capacities of literary texts at large” (13). Däwes defines six categories of novels within the subgenre of Ground Zero Fiction, including “metonymic, salvational, diagnostic, appropriative, symbolic, and writerly approaches” (Ground Zero 19-20). Metonymic novels “substitute the subject (the terrorist attacks and their aftermath) by characteristics of that subject or something closely associated with it” to engage indirectly with the events of September 11 (20). Salvational novels engage with the events of 9/11 more directly by re-enacting the events and “seek closure by fictionally tracing paths of rescue, recovery, and redemption” (20). Diagnostic novels, by contrast, explore the “political and social consequences” of 9/11 and contextualize the events “within larger historical and/or geographical frameworks” (20). Appropriative novels engage in similarly contextual and historicizing work by speaking for the Other. These novels construct the voices and perspectives of the perpetrator(s) of the attacks in an “attempt to close the gaps of comprehension and diversify the dichotomous order (“Why do they hate us?”) which dominated the public discussion after the attacks” (21). While speaking for the Other can be problematic,
these novels often consider multiple perspectives in an attempt to avoid reifying dominant Western narratives. By contrast, symbolic novels use 9/11 “as a symbolic setting and event, which provides a parallel or contrastive background to tales of personal crisis, loss, or decline,” while writerly novels “actively include the reader in the creation of meaning” and transform “the representational challenges into semantic, structural, or formal innovations, such as multiple perspectives, extensive allegories, non-linear forms of narration, visual elements, creative layouts, metafictional angles, and various other textual experiments” (21-22). Overall, “Ground Zero Fiction not only sounds out the attacks’ more obvious social and political consequences, it also traces their metaphysical, epistemological, ethic and aesthetic reverberations and sketches alternative patterns of perception and experience” (24). Däwes asserts that “these novels offer revisions of a national (and transnational) affiliations, and thus allow for more general conclusions about processes of identity construction in the twenty-first century” (24). The Ground Zero Fiction subgenre represents multiple, complex perspectives and affirms that American culture has traversed the liminal space between trauma and representation.

Unlike Däwes, who focuses on creating a taxonomy of the genre, other critics focus on what 9/11 Fiction does. In After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11, Richard Gray explains that 9/11 led writers “to question their trade and its tools” and “to wonder if words were any use at all—and, to ask, quite simply, if literature could or should survive the end of their world” (16). Gray alludes to debates about the ethics of representing atrocity that occurred following the Holocaust. Philosopher Theodor Adorno famously stated that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric” (qtd. in Marcuse 34). Although the scale of 9/11 certainly pales in comparison to the Holocaust, authors of 9/11 novels engage with similar ethical questions. These novels ultimately challenge Adorno’s idea that art cannot respond to the inhumanity of large-scale traumatic events.
and demonstrate that representing atrocity may help the affected culture to comprehend what took place, mourn what was lost, and reconstruct their collective identity in response to the traumatic event. Although these texts contest Adorno’s stance on literary representations of brutality, 9/11 novels accept his underlying premise that the memory of traumatic events pollutes the literature produced in their aftermath.

The conventions of 9/11 fiction help authors grapple with these ethical considerations. Gray argues that post-9/11 writing is often characterized by disorientation, a sense of loss and nostalgia, and recognition of the limitations of language itself (15). 9/11 Fiction may also feature both repetition and “a new focus on detail, detail almost Joycean in its minutiae,” which reflects how, “In a tragedy, everything slows down and time stretches out as experience distorts perception” (Nadel 132). Repetition in these novels mimics the repetition compulsion common to trauma survivors and witnesses to trauma. Sigmund Freud contends that the repetition compulsion “revives experiences of the past that contain no potentiality of pleasure, and which could at no time have been satisfactions” (Freud 20). Nadel posits that individuals repeatedly watch the horrors of 9/11—and that novelists represent this repetition compulsion through repetitive narrative strategies—“not to relive the trauma but because of a psychological need to share, perhaps, the guilt and address the trauma” (133-134). In addition to the use of certain narrative strategies, many authors who respond to 9/11 “represent the reality of their culture as multiple, complex and internally antagonistic” and participate in the processes of history (Gray 19). Similarly, Claire Kahan maintains that literature provides “narratives that can articulate the inchoate, that can give us metaphors to contain the unspeakable as it assaults us from within and without” (112). These descriptions and critiques of Ground Zero Fiction enrich Birgit Däwes’
account of the subgenre, while Däwes’ thorough taxonomy of the genre can help contextualize and enhance these and other critical responses.

9/11 fiction offers a framework for understanding the terrorist attacks and their cultural significance and engages with ethical and aesthetic questions about how authors ought to represent 9/11. According to Keniston and Quinn, 9/11 literature shows the spaces “between the real and the imagined, between image and trope, and between the private realm of memory and the public realm of history” and “consistently uses the literal to deconstruct the symbolic and the reverse” (2). The large and multifaceted body of literary responses to 9/11 reflects the difficulty of articulating what 9/11 means for Americans and American culture (2). Moreover, much of literature after 9/11 offers counternarratives to dominant political narratives about the event and reveals “the tension between private experience and the necessary social means for representing it” (3). Literary counternarratives challenge widely circulated photographs and televised images of traumatic events, thereby expanding the range of voices participating in the construction of cultural memory and cultural trauma (Torgovnick xvii). Literature after 9/11 questions what it means “to have witnessed and to recall an event that felt incommensurable, inaccessible, and incomprehensible” and ultimately “reveals the impossibility of knowing or conveying what actually occurred on that day” (Keniston and Quinn 5-6). Furthermore, 9/11 novels “suggest the power of narrative to restore temporal disruptions, to counter the suspension of history that visual representation sometimes invites, and to restore the links between private memory and public history” (9). While texts about trauma sometimes focus on imagery rather than narrative, post-9/11 literature focuses on how narrative can reintegrate the events of September 11th into the larger historical framework (10). Through complex, indirect representation, literature after
9/11 challenges problematic binaries, such as ‘us vs. them,’ and demonstrates the power of the novel to expose and (re)consider the social and ethical problems of the contemporary moment.

Other critics agree that 9/11 novels have unique powers of representation; the power of novels derives in part from their performance of cultural work. According to Magali Michael, 9/11 novels perform cultural work “by overtly manipulating and exploiting narrative strategies and aesthetic forms in a variety of creative ways,” while drawing “attention to their status as performative acts within and addressed to their specific cultural context” (20). In fact, many novels that deal with issues surrounding 9/11 constitute “overt political aesthetic acts that aim to disrupt and contest the dominance of media and government produced and disseminated narratives about the 9/11 attacks and their aftermaths” (20). For example, many novels about 9/11 represent the perpetrators of 9/11 in a way that challenges dominant narratives of the terrorist Other. By engaging in cultural work and taking an explicitly political stance, 9/11 novels solicit readers’ participation in the text and invite them to interpret the realities of the attacks for themselves. By countering dominant narratives and encouraging readers to question received information, 9/11 novels “alter not only how those events are conceived but also inevitably the events themselves, given that the past in essence survives only in narrative form” (Michael 22). In this way, Ground Zero Fiction influences both the literary and the cultural landscapes surrounding academic and popular interpretations of 9/11 and its aftermath.

Däwes’ work in particular offers a useful analysis of texts that take 9/11 as their subject, but it is limited in her exclusion of how these texts represent and process the cultural trauma of the attacks and their aftermath. Even the term “Ground Zero Fiction” reflects the subgenre’s concern with an immediate, physical event, rather than with the event’s causes, implications, and far-reaching consequences. However, two of Däwes’ categories—‘diagnostic’ and ‘writerly’—
may encompass novels that consider cultural trauma. Because diagnostic novels contextualize
the events of 9/11 and writerly novels allow for multiple interpretations, these types of 9/11
novels potentially illuminate broad cultural concerns surrounding 9/11 and offer
counternarratives contrary to government and media narratives.

The Cultural Trauma Novel

Although all novels about 9/11 and its aftermath fit within the categories of 9/11 Fiction
and Ground Zero Fiction, these subgenres are necessarily limited. The Cultural Trauma Fiction
subgenre provides a more comprehensive view of key 9/11 novels. This subgenre is significant
not only in the study of 9/11 fiction, but also with regard to literary depictions of other culturally
traumatic events. Texts about 9/11 should be considered in conversation with other
representations of cultural trauma to avoid reifying the dominant narrative that the trauma of
9/11 is fundamentally different from other large-scale traumatic events. I propose a subgenre that
emerges from the work of Sonia Baelo-Allué, who distinguishes between 9/11 novels and what
she calls “cultural trauma novels,” explaining that many 9/11 novels “have retreated to the world
of domesticity, depoliticizing discourse and assimilating the unfamiliar into familiar structures,
ignoring, in turn, the panoramic and public” (168). She argues that some of the most widely-read
9/11 novels—including Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and Don
DeLillo’s Falling Man—“focus not on the causes of the tragedy or even on its cultural
consequences for the nation, but rather on the way the attacks affected the lives of specific
individuals and families” (168). These novels and others like them, she claims, “narrow the
scope to the psychic, individual trauma that the attacks produced without questioning its political
and ideological origins” (168). Although there are hundreds of literary representations of 9/11,
texts that Baelo-Allué considers cultural trauma novels are exceedingly rare. Baelo-Allué
identifies one cultural trauma novel, Amy Waldman’s *The Submission*, “that manages to combine the global and the local, the numbness of psychological trauma with the polyphony of cultural trauma and that is rooted in both the domestic and the personal but does not ignore globalization and the way it affects all types of identities” (169). She argues that *The Submission* provides a new model for 9/11 fiction beyond the limiting range of individual trauma. *The Submission* differs from many 9/11 novels in that it represents a fraught memorial design competition, loosely based on true events, that, “rather than bringing closure and healing the nation, opens a new wound in the country’s social fabric” (170). In the novel, a group of artists and one 9/11 widow judge a memorial design competition. After a design, known as The Garden, narrowly wins the committee’s blind review, the committee learns that the designer is Mohammed “Mo” Khan. Once they hear his name and assume that Mo is Muslim-American, the committee struggles with whether or not to officially declare his design the winner. One committee member, who had previously been in favor of the design, states, “I’m not sure I want it with the name Mohammed attached to it” (Waldman 19). Before the committee can decide whether or not to accept the design, however, someone leaks the news that Mo’s design won. This leads to debates among artists, 9/11 families, Muslim-Americans, journalists, and Americans in general about what kind of memorial is appropriate, who should be allowed to design it, and, most significantly, who is really “American” enough to consider themselves victims of 9/11. Through this debate, Baelo-Allué argues, *The Submission* “shows how the nation’s sense of collective identity is shaped and how trauma and the memory of trauma is played out in society through a prolonged process of collective uncertainty, negotiation, and contestation over the proper form of commemoration and the proper way to articulate loss” (171). Though the novel represents the individual pain of multiple different characters, “the
novel does not simply retreat to the world of domesticity and ignore the consequences for the nation” (179). Instead, the novel demonstrates how individual trauma can be exacerbated by cultural trauma. Based on her reading of *The Submission*, Baelo-Allué’s criteria for what constitutes a cultural trauma novel include the following: attention to both local and global concerns, questioning of collective identity, explicit engagement with cultural meaning-making processes, and representation of multiple identities and perspectives. While I agree that *The Submission* is a cultural trauma novel, an examination of several other 9/11 novels shows that Baelo-Allué’s definition can and should be refined and expanded, not just to demonstrate how these other works should qualify as Cultural Trauma Fiction but to better explain how Cultural Trauma Fiction constitutes and operates as a genre.

Baelo-Allué argues that *The Submission* qualifies as a cultural trauma novel because it attends to both local and global concerns through representations of individual victims and of the collective struggle to understand, mourn, and memorialize 9/11. In the novel, “psychic trauma victims,” such as 9/11 widows Claire Burwell and Asma Anwar, “may all have been overwhelmed by their loss, which resists language and representation,” but Waldman does not focus solely on these individual experiences of trauma (Baelo-Allué 174). Instead, through its omniscient, third-person narration and shifting structure, the text “displays the frictions that competitive memory may cause in individual victims based on their race, ethnicity, gender, social class, age, political ideology and religious beliefs” (175). These conflicts demonstrate how individual traumas can have political and cultural consequences. Further, Waldman’s novel engages with these processes through representations of multiple identities and perspectives. The structure of the narrative aids in this representation, as different chapters center on characters of various racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. The shifts in narrative focus offer readers
multiple interpretations of events and subsequent debates about those events. Moreover, throughout the novel “most characters evolve and see other perspectives that make them question their initial beliefs” (Baelo-Allué 174).

_The Submission_ also represents the process by which cultures cope with trauma and demonstrates how this process differs from individual coping processes. Baelo-Allué states that a traumatized society must try “to assimilate an unexpected trauma that eludes sense-making” (176). Coping with cultural trauma necessitates “creating a formula or pattern” to domesticate and simplify traumatic memory. _The Submission_ also engages with cultural meaning-making processes by demonstrating the various debates over how to memorialize and mourn 9/11. This meaning-making process takes the form of mythologization, in which the society simplifies trauma and transforms it “into a set of symbols that codify the experience” (Baelo-Allué 176). In Waldman’s depiction, the people of New York want the 9/11 memorial to symbolize American identity and resilience. However, the Memorial itself “becomes a new site of cultural trauma that forces society to confront its own notions of freedom, tolerance, non-discrimination and equal opportunity policies” (Baelo-Allué 171). This new manifestation of cultural trauma plays out as individuals and groups assign different meanings to the proposed memorial. Through the characters’ debates about who has a right to design a memorial and about whose opinions count, “the meaning of traumatic experience becomes a battle between the victim, the community and the political power” (Baelo-Allué 177). Indeed, _The Submission_ directly engages with the processes by which traumatized cultures identify traumatic events, determine who can be considered victims, mourn, and redefine cultural identity.

**Cultural Trauma Fiction: Counterargument, Criteria, and Examples**
The Submission is clearly a cultural trauma novel by the criteria that Baelo-Allué sets forth. However, her claim that these texts must consider global concerns severely limits her category. Instead, I offer a notion of Cultural Trauma Fiction that better accounts for the myriad ways that fiction can represent and engage with cultural trauma. Works of Cultural Trauma Fiction need not engage with global concerns, so long as they depict and explore the effect of a large-scale traumatic event on a culture (as opposed to the effects of a lesser traumatic event on an individual or small group of individuals). Furthermore, while Baelo-Allué argues that only explicit, literal depictions of trauma can constitute cultural trauma novels, such a framework overlooks the complicated nature of trauma. Just as the individual processes trauma often through sublimation, displacement, and denial, a culture may process trauma similarly. Thus, art can also process trauma in complex, indirect ways. For these reasons, a more expansive notion of Cultural Trauma Fiction offers a more useful framework for interpreting these texts than does Baelo-Allué’s category.

Works of Cultural Trauma Fiction may consider global concerns, as Baelo-Allué notes, but I argue that texts need only consider local and cultural concerns to be works of Cultural Trauma Fiction. The Submission considers the global consequences of 9/11 and its aftermath, but the novel focuses on local and cultural concerns. The novel’s local concerns include the individual traumatic experiences of “9/11 families” who lost relatives in the World Trade Center. When Claire listens to the grievances of the other 9/11 families, “Half of what she heard had nothing to do with the memorial, as if two years of frustration and grief and anger had found their proper vent” (Waldman 97). Through these families, The Submission illustrates the ways in which the memorial and related debates aggravate the preexisting individual traumas of family members. For one 9/11 family member in particular, Sean Gallagher, communal debates about
memorialization rouse grief, insecurity, and prejudice. Sean’s brother, Patrick, was a firefighter who died in the World Trade Center. When he and the other 9/11 family members first hear that a Muslim won the memorial design competition, Sean thinks that “A Muslim gaining control of the memorial was the worst possible thing that could happen” (62). Sean, his parents, and many of the family members take offense to the idea of a Muslim designing the memorial for their loved ones because, as Sean’s father states, “They killed my son…I don’t want one of their names over his grave…It’s supposed to be his memorial, not theirs” (62). The Gallaghers act as gatekeepers of the trauma of 9/11, defining only themselves and others like them as victims. Indeed, the family represents members of the American mainstream who argued that 9/11 was an attack on America and its way of life; this framing unites the American mainstream and distances them from perceived Others, as “the self-definition as a victim clearly marks the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Irwin-Zarecka 60). As such, the Gallaghers believe their personal loss entitles them to ownership and “control” over the memorial and its design process, and they fail to account for the fact that Muslim Americans also died in the attacks. Their xenophobia replicates the “us vs. them” discourse popular after 9/11, which created a false dichotomy between uncritically supporting America and supporting terrorists. As counterterrorism researcher and former CIA operations officer Marc Sageman argues, identifying others “as enemies or potential enemies” can “trigger an emotive ‘in-group’ reaction among those people who perceive themselves as targeted” (Hussain). Because the Gallaghers and others like them feel that their loved ones and fellow citizens were targeted due to their American identities on 9/11, they feel threatened by those outside of their group. The local concerns of the text thus include the grieving individuals who reveal their ethnic biases.
Additionally, the ethnic biases of 9/11 family members, memorial judges, and the news media portrayed in *The Submission* are not merely individual concerns; these prejudices affect American culture. After the memorial judges select Mo’s design and the news leaks to the press, the chair of the memorial committee, Paul Rubin, meets with Mo “to probe what kind of Muslim he was” (Waldman 71). Paul tries to convince Mo to either run his design under his boss’ name or to withdraw his design, arguing that “I don’t know why anyone who loves America, wants it to heal, would subject it to the kind of battle the selection of a Muslim would cause” (72-73). He also suggests that Mo change his name, explaining that his own grandfather changed their Jewish surname. Mo replies that, “Not everyone is prepared to remake themselves to rise in America” (73). While Paul thinks that assimilation and erasure of difference are reasonable, if not necessary, concessions to make to succeed in America and avoid controversy, Mo believes that he should be judged on his own merits without having to change himself or erase his heritage. Both Paul’s own prejudices and the Islamophobia he recognizes throughout America lead him to pressure Mo to either change his identity or abandon his design aspirations. Moreover, when the committee officially declares Mo the winner, “The threats began…his countrymen promised to burn him as the terrorists had incinerated their victims, to stab him in the heart as he was stabbing America” (137). Mo’s own “countrymen” refuse to recognize him as a fellow citizen, instead associating him with the Other because he shares some aspects of their heritage. Individual instances of ethnic and religious discrimination in the novel serve as microcosms for the larger, cultural intolerance for Muslims after 9/11 and demonstrate that the novel deals with cultural concerns even when it does not directly explore global issues.

The novel also demonstrates that the cultural trauma of 9/11 inflamed preexisting prejudices and engendered negative consequences for Muslims, Muslim-Americans, and other
individuals perceived to have some connection to the Middle East. In addition to the uproar against Mo’s design, other Muslims in New York City and across the country become a target for harassment and violence. When Sean Gallagher happens upon a group of Muslim counter-protesters speaking out against religious and ethnic discrimination, “the most provocative act he could think of was to tug back her headscarf, and he reached out…and caught the edge of the scarf as she stepped back in fear” (Waldman 171). Sean wants to provoke the Muslim woman and the other counter-protestors because he feels intimidated by their challenge to his own perspective. The novel’s representation of violence against Muslims escalates when someone in a crowd stabs and kills Asma, the Muslim wife of a man who died while working in the World Trade Center (288-289). Asma’s murder demonstrates the horrific consequences of prejudice. The text also assigns blame for this violence when Asma’s friend and translator, Nasruddin, delivers an Islamophobic journalist to the police and insists that “She is responsible” for Asma’s death” (291). Nasruddin holds the media responsible because of their perpetuation of xenophobic narratives and inflammatory rhetoric. The novel’s illustration of this incident specifically comments on American Islamophobia and violence in the wake of cultural trauma. In this way, The Submission focuses more on the local and the cultural—individual experiences, the experiences of New Yorkers as a collective, and broader cultural attitudes and concerns—rather than focusing on the global, as Baelo-Allué implies.

The Submission also includes cultural narratives about how Americans ought to witness and respond to 9/11. Paul recalls his individual experience with trauma on September 11th and his experience with cultural trauma afterwards:

The trauma, for Paul, had come later, when he watched the replay, pledged allegiance to the devastation. You couldn’t call yourself an American if you hadn’t, in solidarity,
watched your fellow Americans being pulverized, yet what kind of American did watching create? A traumatized victim? A charged-up avenger? A queasy voyeur? Paul, and he suspected many Americans, harbored all of these protagonists. The memorial was meant to tame them. (Waldman 15)

Like Paul, most Americans who ‘experienced’ 9/11 did so largely through media representations. Paul felt—and believes many other people felt—it was his duty as an American to bear witness to the atrocity. Paul defines American identity in relation to this act of “solidarity” and implies that witnessing 9/11 is a necessary part of the American cultural experience (15). This passage also acknowledges the problem with this cultural mandate; if Americans must collectively face the cultural trauma of 9/11, then they also need an outlet for collective healing in order to move on. The committee intends for the memorial “to tame” the various “protagonists” within each individual trying to process the trauma (15). As the novel’s multiple protagonists illustrate, however, the multiple “protagonists”—or competing points of view—that experience trauma cannot easily reconcile their diverse experiences and needs. Paul’s individual experience with trauma serves as a microcosm for the cultural trauma of 9/11 and the subsequent struggle to memorialize and heal from the loss.

In addition to its attention to cultural concerns, The Submission includes a counternarrative that challenges dominant government and media narratives; I argue that counternarratives are an essential aspect of Cultural Trauma Fiction. The dominant media narrative includes widespread distrust of Muslims and of those affiliated with the Middle East. Shortly after 9/11, airport security agents pull Mo aside for questioning. The agents ask Mo if he loves America, what he thinks of jihad, and, “Do you believe you’d go to your heaven if you blew yourself up?” (Waldman 28). They also ask Mo if he has ever “Been to Afghanistan” (28).
Mo takes offense to this line of questioning, as he knows “His name was what got him pulled” from the security line (26). In addition to accusing Mo of having ties to terrorists, the agents “asked to photograph and fingerprint him” (31). The airport security agents represent the government’s increased security measures and subsequent institutional discrimination after 9/11. The clearly heightened suspicion of Muslims and Middle Easterners exhibited by governmental security agencies at the federal, state, and local levels affects public perceptions of Muslims, Arabs, and people with perceived ties to these groups. For instance, Paul tells Mo that “The public may wonder…what their memorial designer was doing in Afghanistan” (72). Mo’s reasonable explanation for visiting Afghanistan—trying to secure a contract for his architectural firm to design the American embassy—does little to assuage Paul’s suspicion. Because government agents treat those with Muslim-sounding names and perceived ties to the Middle East with mistrust, the general public often accepts this narrative and perpetuates similar biases.

*The Submission* further advances counternarratives by depicting media that simplify the message of American freedom and exceptionalism by perpetuating an “us vs. them” discourse and representing Muslims as a symbol for terrorism. This portrayal parallels the American media’s tendency to disseminate simplified versions of dominant narratives “through media campaigns and the use of symbols” (Baelo-Allué 176). In the novel, journalist Alyssa Spier writes an article with the headline, “MYSTERY MUSLIM MEMORIAL MESS” and suggests that choosing Mo’s design is “ADDING ISLAM TO INJURY” (Waldman 57-58). In an attempt to combat this Islamophobic discourse, the Muslim American Coordinating Council creates an ad with a picture of Mo that states, “An Architect, Not a Terrorist” (194). While the head of the ad campaign says the image and tagline are intended to “humanize” Mo, they make Mo feel objectified (194). Both the inflammatory article and the conciliatory ad attempt to construct
particular understandings of the cultural trauma of 9/11 as it relates to Muslim-Americans. *The Submission* thus replicates the process by which cultures construct collective trauma and critiques the way in which “The media provide the resources to silence certain interpretations and reinforce others” (177). Waldman’s novel thus creates a counternarrative and criticizes depoliticizing, homogenizing narratives of cultural trauma.

This analysis demonstrates that Baelo-Allué’s assessment of *The Submission* as a cultural trauma novel is useful, but also limited for four reasons. First, as I have shown, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction need only to attend to the local and the cultural—not necessarily the global—to thoroughly engage with cultural trauma. Second, novels’ engagement with cultural meaning-making processes need not be explicit; indirect engagement with these processes, like Paul’s thoughts regarding how Americans ought to witness and respond to 9/11, can similarly produce constructive discourses about how cultures produce meaning from trauma. Third, Baelo-Allué’s standard for how cultural trauma novels must represent multiple identities and perspectives differs from my own criteria for Cultural Trauma Fiction. Specifically, I argue that representation can be indirect. This difference will be explored further with regard to other fictional works depicting 9/11 and its aftermath. Finally, unlike Baelo-Allué’s definition of a cultural trauma novel, I argue that Cultural Trauma Fiction necessarily advances counternarratives that challenge dominant government or media narratives. Just as this section demonstrates Waldman’s use of counternarratives in *The Submission*, subsequent sections show that counternarratives are an essential feature of other works of Cultural Trauma Fiction.

**Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* as Cultural Trauma Fiction**

*NPR* book critic and literary scholar Maureen Corrigan suggests that *The Submission* is “*the* Sept. 11 novel—one that does justice, artistically and historically, to the aftershocks of that
day” (Corrigan). Before the publication of Waldman’s text, however, critics lauded Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, stating that the novel “provide[s] the counternarrative to terrorism [DeLillo] promised, the story that takes us beyond the hard, anonymous numbers of the dead” (Rich). Indeed, since its publication in 2007, Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* has become one of the best-known 9/11 novels. The novel arrived after *Harper’s* published DeLillo’s essay, “In the Ruins of the Future,” in which he considers the role of the writer in processing and responding to the catastrophe of 9/11. *Falling Man* was likely so highly anticipated because, according to Kris Doyle from Pan Macmillan, “Don DeLillo is one of America’s most important and influential writers. He is perhaps the quintessential American novelist. Why? He engages with the history of his country and predicts its future with a freakish accuracy; he catches the voices, fears and hopes of the full range of Americans; the capaciousness of his work only serves to highlight his omn nicompetence” (Doyle). Doyle’s description indicates DeLillo’s stature as a great writer who offers useful insights into the complexities of historical and cultural issues. In this way, his novel occupies a different position in the literary and cultural landscape than does Waldman’s; because of DeLillo’s longstanding reputation as a great American novelist, readers may have approached his text with the expectation that it would address some of the complex cultural issues surrounding 9/11 and its sociopolitical effects.

Although Baelo-Allué argues that *Falling Man* is not a cultural trauma novel because of its narrative focus on a handful of individuals, the novel’s depiction of individual trauma does not preclude explorations of the political, ideological, and cultural consequences of the attacks. Indeed, *Falling Man*’s structure and narrative strategies move beyond the scope of the novel’s plot and offer insight into the cultural response to 9/11, and the individual, traumatized characters in the novel represent the culture at large. *Falling Man* centers on the experiences of
Keith Neudecker—who survived 9/11—and his wife, Lianne. Both of these characters and their son, Justin, struggle with the trauma of the attack. While the novel certainly focuses on individual experience, it deliberately presents individual traumatic experience as a microcosm for understanding the trauma of the nation. The novel also represents multiple identities and perspectives through secondary characters, including Hammad, a fictionalized version of one of the hijackers who crashed into the North tower, and Florence, a Black woman survivor who develops a relationship with Keith. Moreover, Lianne works with an Alzheimer’s support group, whose diverse members offer additional perspectives and represent the widespread cultural impact of 9/11. Lianne’s own concern about developing Alzheimer’s disease reflects the collective cultural anxiety about memory in the wake of trauma. In addition to her fear of forgetting, Lianne develops an intolerance toward cultural expressions that she perceives as Islamic or Arabic in origin. Her intolerance signifies larger questions about American identity. Lianne also engages with cultural meaning-making processes as witness to the performance artist Falling Man, who forces his audience to consider the ethics of representing the most disturbing truths about 9/11. Lastly, *Falling Man* creates a counternarrative through the parallel narratives of Keith and Hammad, as well as through the different healing processes of Keith and Lianne. *Falling Man*’s representation of local and cultural concerns and multiple identities, concern with cultural consequences, attitudes, and meaning-making processes, and construction of a counternarrative demonstrate that the novel operates as Cultural Trauma Fiction.

In *Falling Man*, individual reactions to trauma are metonyms for cultural trauma. Throughout the novel, Keith and Lianne struggle to process their experiences on 9/11. Keith’s firsthand experience working in the World Trade Center and witnessing the deaths of friends and coworkers inspires him to contradictorily open up and shut down. He returns to his estranged
wife and attempts to resume their relationship, and yet he avoids discussing his experience, trauma, and grief with her. Meanwhile, Lianne struggles with heightened anxiety and distress despite Keith’s physical safety and return to their marriage. For example, Lianne’s trauma after 9/11 manifests as anxiety about memory. She already has some anxiety about memory because of her family history of Alzheimer’s disease, but this anxiety increases as a result of trauma. One way that Lianne tries to avoid forgetting is by reading as much as possible about 9/11. Lianne reads newspaper articles about victims “until she had to force herself to stop” (DeLillo 67). She believes that “Not to read them, every one, was an offense, a violation of responsibility and trust. But she also had to read them because she had to, out of some need she did not try to interpret” (106). This “need” reflects her anxieties about not knowing and not remembering the horror victims faced, and she believes that forgetting would be “a violation of responsibility and trust” (106). Lianne’s belief parallels the ubiquitous phrase, “Never Forget,” and evokes the cultural imperative to honor, remember, and memorialize the victims of 9/11. Lianne’s experience with trauma thus represents both local and cultural concerns after 9/11.

Like The Submission, Falling Man depicts, albeit on a smaller scale, the ethnic and religious intolerance and particularly the Islamophobia that exploded at this time. Lianne becomes angry when she repeatedly hears music coming from her neighbor’s apartment. Although she knows the neighbor, Elena, is Greek, Lianne believes that “the music wasn’t Greek. She was hearing another set of traditions, Middle Eastern…music located in Islamic tradition” (DeLillo 67). Lianne eventually decides to confront Elena, telling her that she takes personal offense to the music and that “Anybody would take it personally. Under these circumstances” (119). Elena insists that it is only music, but this attempt at de-escalation makes Lianne more irate. She pushes Elena, and Lianne “knew she was going crazy even as she turned
and walked out” (120). Afterwards, Lianne tells Keith that during the altercation, “My voice was like it was coming from someone else” (124). Lianne’s uncharacteristic intolerance results from a combination of anxiety, sleeplessness, and influence from public, Islamophobic discourse. The voice of “someone else” is the collective voice of xenophobic discourse after 9/11. Lianne’s anxiety and insomnia stem from her traumatization; she experiences and processes the trauma of 9/11 in relation to government and media narratives, which often perpetuate intolerance of anything perceived as un-American. Her personal prejudice serves as a metonym for the rise in Islamophobia in broader American society.

Unlike the tendency of the dominant discourse to homogenize the experience of 9/11, however, *Falling Man* represents multiple identities and perspectives. One example is the character of Hammad, one of the terrorists who hijack a plane and crash it into the World Trade Center. As Hammad sits in his apartment with other future jihadists, the narrator notes, “They were in this country to pursue technical educations but in these rooms they spoke about the struggle. Everything here was twisted, hypocrite, the West corrupt of mind and body, determined to shiver Islam down to bread crumbs for birds” (79). By showing the processes of Hammad’s radicalization, the novel insists that the terrorists were not all innately evil. The text also explains that Hammad likes the sense of belonging and order that come from being a part of the radical sect. The rules mean that “his life had structure. Things were clearly defined. He was becoming one of them, learning to look like them and think like them. This was inseparable from jihad” (83). While DeLillo does not paint a sympathetic portrait of the terrorists or offer justifications for their behavior, he nonetheless portrays Hammad as a human with complex thoughts and emotions. Even though scholar Birgit Däwes categorizes the novel as ‘appropriative’ because of the way the text speaks for the Other through Hammad, she argues that *Falling Man* performs “a
range of psychological, political, and cultural functions, which complement and diversify the cultural memory of 9/11” (Ground Zero 243). By humanizing the figure of the terrorist, DeLillo holds the terrorists accountable for their actions; the novel demonstrates that, even though there were influences outside of their control, the terrorists made deliberate decisions to commit horrible acts. In this way, Falling Man challenges the dominant, reductive narrative of 9/11. Like The Submission, Falling Man offers multiple perspectives to depict the heterogenous experiences of individuals experiencing the same cultural trauma. The multiplicity of perspectives and experiences depicted in these novels marks a significant difference between Cultural Trauma Fiction and writing about individual trauma.

Moreover, Falling Man represents an additional identity and perspective through Florence Givens. Florence is an African American woman and also a 9/11 survivor. Keith meets Florence after picking up her briefcase by chance as he escapes the North tower. Weeks later, he contacts Florence and takes her briefcase to her apartment. Florence opens up to Keith about her experience on 9/11, and Keith realizes that “She wanted to tell him everything…Maybe she’s forgotten he was there, in the tower, or maybe he was the one she needed to tell for precisely that reason. He knew she hadn’t talked about this, not so intensely, to anyone else” (55). Through sharing her experience, Florence creates a sense of intimacy with Keith and they quickly begin having an affair. The novel acknowledges that Keith and Florence are different from one another, especially with regard to race and gender, but “the text also indicates that these differences fade in the face of their remembering. Their parallel memories reveal the striking similarity of their experiences on the morning of 9/11” (Michael 164). Despite this similarity to Keith, Florence offers a unique perspective because she is the only survivor in the novel who speaks openly about her experiences on 9/11. Her openness demonstrates that there are various ways for
survivors with similar experiences to process trauma. Florence further showcases a different means of dealing with trauma in disclosing her efforts to find solace in religion. She tells Keith, “I went to St. Paul's yesterday. I wanted to be with people, down there in particular. I knew there would be people there” (89). On the one hand, she seeks out that particular church because of its physical proximity to Ground Zero and the likelihood that other people would be present for the same reason. On the other hand, Florence has complex feelings about turning to her faith because, she tells Keith, “Those men who did this thing. They're anti everything we stand for. But they believe in God” (90). She struggles to reconcile her longstanding religious faith with her understanding that the terrorists, too, were faithful. This perspective complicates the ‘us vs. them’ discourse popular after 9/11 because it recognizes that the perpetrators of the atrocity had something fundamental in common with some of their victims.

The novel also represents the diverse perspectives of the Alzheimer’s patients in Lianne’s writing group. Through these characters, the novel contributes to the construction of cultural memory as it represents “smaller, multiple stories, these individual moments and possessions, and [pitches] them against the massive spectacle of the attacks that seems to defy normal frames of response” (Morley, “Writing” 250). Lianne encourages the group members to write about whatever they like, and “They wrote about the planes. They wrote about where they were when it happened. They wrote about people they knew who were in the towers, or nearby, and they wrote about God” (60). While some members of the group express newfound faith, others think, “All that fire and pain. Never mind God. This is hell” (61). Their conflicting feelings represent the many Americans who may have found solace in faith or questioned faith after witnessing 9/11. Another member, Omar, writes that he “was afraid to go out on the street in the days after” because he thought people were suspicious of his Arab features (61). Omar’s fear mirrors that of many Americans whose ethnic or religious backgrounds made them a target for judgment,
harassment, and violence. Yet another group member muses that, “When you see something happening, it’s supposed to be real…You’re looking right at it. But it’s not really happening” (63). This sentiment reflects the collective experience of disbelief Americans experienced as they watched the planes strike and the towers fall, whether they witnessed the attacks in person or through the media. As critic Catherine Morley argues, through the stories of these secondary characters Falling Man offers a counternarrative to the dominant portrayals of 9/11. DeLillo’s notion of a counternarrative is “that which slipped past the governing, official narrative of history, the stories that go untold, obliterated by the dominant narrative of the attack” (Morley, “Writing” 250). To create a counternarrative, “the writer must seize on these smaller, multiple stories, these individual moments and possessions, and pitch them against the massive spectacle of the attacks that seems to defy normal frames of response” (250). Through the creation of counternarratives, the wide range of multiple, individual experiences DeLillo represents throughout Falling Man contribute to the novel’s broader depiction of cultural trauma and its aftermath.

In addition, Falling Man engages with cultural meaning-making processes through narrative representations of atrocities that the culture considers unethical to show visually, including depictions of those people who fell or jumped from the Twin Towers on 9/11. The images of falling persons are paradoxically taboo; though the American public wants representations of the attacks, they balk at representations that force them to consider difficult ethical questions, especially regarding death and suicide (Birdsall 40). Similarly, it is not until the end of the novel that the reader learns what Keith witnessed, including the falling body he sees as he exits the tower. Keith initially denies that he saw a falling person, and instead thinks of the plummeting body as a shirt floating away (DeLillo 4). The last lines of the novel clarify this
experience, stating, “Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky. He walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life” (246). Although these final lines preserve Keith’s initial misperception, the mention of “arms waving,” rather than sleeves flapping, indicates that Keith becomes aware that there is someone wearing the shirt, a person falling to his death. This delay in representing the falling person mirrors the cultural denial of people jumping and collective concerns about the ethics of representation.

This cultural meaning-making process also appears in the novel when Lianne witnesses the performance art of “Falling Man,” who reenacts the scene of 9/11 victims jumping to their deaths from the World Trade Center and Richard Drew’s famous photograph, The Falling Man. The performance artist forces the city to recognize the image they have taken pains to forget, reawakening trauma and making a political statement about the United States’ tendency to repress trauma and responsibility. Lianne happens upon Falling Man one day as she is walking to the train station. She sees that “A man was dangling there, above the street, upside down. He wore a business suit, one leg bent up, arms at his sides. A safety harness was barely visible, emerging from his trousers at the straightened leg” (DeLillo 33). Lianne immediately recognizes the aim of the performance. She remarks that Falling Man “brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump” (33). As other onlookers react angrily, Lianne remains calm and meditative. While she understands why people take offense to the performance, what she notices is “the awful openness of it, something we’d not seen, the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all” (33). Falling Man styles himself in the image of the man in Drew’s photograph, from his appearance and contortion to his affect. Like Drew’s photograph, the fictional performance artist Falling Man evokes what Susan Lurie calls the “trauma of spectatorship” (46). The viewer wants
to save the falling man, to identify him as an individual, while simultaneously distancing herself from the vulnerability of his circumstance. He evokes horror and reminds his unsuspecting and unwilling audience of realities they would prefer not to face. He mimics falling persons in a way that realistically and disturbingly simulates the trauma of spectatorship experienced both by firsthand witnesses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and by those people who were traumatized by Drew’s photograph. The trauma of spectatorship is an example of one manifestation of cultural trauma, as the proliferation of the horrifying images of 9/11 contributed to the construction of cultural trauma in the wake of the attacks.

The reader becomes witness to Lianne’s traumatic spectatorship multiple times within *Falling Man*. Lianne’s second encounter with the performance artist occurs when she walks home from work and passes by a train station. She finds herself almost directly below Falling Man, unable to move or react. She feels that “This was too near and deep, too personal...He was right above her but she wasn’t watching and wasn’t walking away” (DeLillo 163). Much like the spectators surrounding the World Trade Center on 9/11, Lianne feels paralyzed by fear and horrific awe. Lianne wonders why the man has chosen a relatively obscure location for his performance, but “Then she began to understand...he wasn’t here to perform for those at street level or in the high windows. He was situated where he was, remote from station personnel and railroad police, waiting for a train to come...this is what he wanted, an audience in motion” (164). The train passengers will see the man falling, and they will have no idea that he is a performance artist or that he has attached himself to a safety harness. Lianne imagines that the stupefied train passengers will immediately call other people to report what they see, and “She wondered if this was his intention, to spread the word this way, by cell phone, intimately, as in the towers and in the hijacked planes” (165). In doing so, Falling Man’s performance recreates
both an indirect and direct trauma of spectatorship. The witnesses on the train experience the trauma of spectatorship directly, much like the people who watched the devastation on 9/11. The people the train passengers call conjure the people witnesses and victims of 9/11 called; those who receive the phone calls indirectly experience the trauma of spectatorship. Falling Man’s performance replicates and extends the trauma of spectatorship, just as Drew’s photograph extends this trauma when people encounter and reencounter the image.

Lianne once again experiences the trauma of spectatorship in her third encounter with Falling Man. Roughly three years post-9/11, Lianne sees the obituary for a man named David Janaik—otherwise known as Falling Man. She learns that “All his falls were headfirst, none announced in advance. The performance pieces were not intended to be recorded by a photographer. Those pictures that exist were taken by people who happened to be at the site or by a professional alerted to the event by a passerby” (DeLillo 220). This information demonstrates yet another parallel between Falling Man and Drew’s photograph. The 9/11 attacks were unexpected. Although the terrorists knew there would be and wanted there to be photographs and videos taken of the attacks and their aftermath, these images could only be captured by those who happened to be near the site or who went to the site in pursuit of such images. Richard Drew’s photograph, *The Falling Man* is a product of coincidence just as much as photographs of Falling Man within the novel. These parallels gain further significance as Lianne realizes Falling Man models his performances on Drew’s photograph.

Through the performance artist and Lianne’s encounters with him, *Falling Man* both represents and replicates the trauma of spectatorship. Before dying of natural causes, Falling Man intended to stage a final performance. Multiple sources indicate that “Plans for a final jump at some unforeseen future time did not include a harness” (223). He intends to extend the trauma...
of spectatorship by not only replicating it, but by literally recreating the trauma of seeing another human being fall to their death. While spectators of his performances with a harness experience trauma, this trauma derives from the memory of 9/11. By planning to actually jump to his death in front of an audience, Falling Man intends to create a new, distinct traumatic event in the spirit of 9/11. Falling Man’s prior performances, like all performance art, reconstruct the man “as both the subject and object of art” (McMillan 3). Falling Man’s performance of objecthood circumvents prescribed limitations with regard to what can or should be seen by the public following a tragedy. Falling Man is not personally, individually suppressed in the public sphere, but he acts in service of the images and narratives that have been suppressed by the government and news media. His performances further transgress societal expectations because they “navigate slippages between subject and object and…reveal that the borders between subjectivity and objecthood are not nearly as distinct as we pretend they are” (McMillan 10). Just as the falling persons on 9/11 forced onlookers into an uncomfortable identification—*that could have been me*—Falling Man’s performance reminds spectators and readers of their own vulnerability and the reality of their bodies as objects.

Falling Man’s plan to jump to his death in a final performance makes the objectification of the performance artist even more literal, as he would literally become a falling object, debris not unlike that which fell on Lower Manhattan on 9/11. This knowledge confounds Lianne, who struggles to identify with Falling Man. Lianne recalls the kinship she felt with the other spectators on the day she witnessed Falling Man’s performance at the train station, but she cannot imagine knowing “the man who’d stood above her, detailed and looming” (224). Her failure to fathom the humanity of falling man parallels spectators’ inability or unwillingness to recognize falling persons on 9/11 as approximate to themselves. The performance artist
highlights that one of the ways that 9/11 inflicted a cultural trauma was through the collective experience of the trauma of spectatorship, which offered a seemingly personal connection to the traumatic event to countless, disparate members of the cultural group. Furthermore, as Magali Michael asserts, the novel itself parallels Falling Man’s performances and “offers itself as a performance that engages its audience into grappling with the ways in which Americans have been complicit with the vast, complex, and arguably unjust global economic systems that cannot be totally divorced from the horrific events of 9/11” (157-158). Indeed, *Falling Man* uses the metaphor of performance while simultaneously engaging in a kind of performance to demonstrate the role of the United States and the American people in creating the conditions that facilitated the trauma of the attacks.

The novel also considers cultural meaning-making processes and the ethics of representation through the fragmented and delayed representation of Keith’s experience in the North tower after the first plane hit. The novel opens with Keith in the street immediately after escaping the World Trade Center, disoriented and injured. This scene occurs first, skipping over Keith’s experience in the tower. Small parts of Keith’s memory intrude throughout the novel. First, Keith remembers seeing his friend in the tower. He thinks, “there was Rumsey in his chair by the window, which meant the memory was not suppressed…a dream, a waking image, whatever it was, Rumsey in the smoke, things coming down” (22). This passage demonstrates that Keith does not suffer from dissociative amnesia and he can remember the details of his traumatic experience. Instead of revealing Keith’s full memory at this point, DeLillo employs narrative fragmentation to mirror the difficulty the American public had in understanding what really happened. Americans experienced the initial trauma of watching the horrific events and learning that it was a terrorist attack, but only through investigation into the details of what took
place, what motivated the terrorists, how they carried out the attacks, and all that was lost did citizens develop an understanding of 9/11.

The novel’s very structure counters dominant government and media narratives about American innocence and uniqueness. Däwes argues that the parallel characters in *Falling Man*—namely Keith and Hammad—“blur the line…between Self and Other,” just as “American identity is deprived of the unique and affirmative sense of Self that the official rhetoric attempted to rescue” (“Close Neighbors” 512). The final chapter of the novel makes explicit the connection between Keith and Hammad. Hammad, one of the hijackers, is on the plane that crashes into the North tower. The texts represents the literal collision between Hammad and Keith in the narrative by obscuring the distinction between the two men:

A bottle fell off the counter and in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that...he watched it spin more quickly and the skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall. He found himself walking into a wall. He didn’t drop the telephone until he hit the wall. (DeLillo 239)

The narrative blurs the line between the two men through the use of the pronoun “he.” At the beginning of this passage, “he” refers to Hammad. At the moment of the crash, however, Hammad dies and the narrator’s “he” refers to Keith. This shift suggests that, perhaps, Hammad has become organic shrapnel lodged within Keith’s body. At the beginning of the novel, the medical worker who removes pieces of glass and debris from Keith’s face tells him about

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5 Multiple critics have discussed this narrative move, including Birgit Däwes and Magali Michael, who argues that by drawing parallels between Keith and Hammad, “Falling Man offers an image of the other as self and begins to unravel the static conception of the terrorist as inhuman, uncivilized, and unknowable” (176). Indeed, the novel’s grammatical slippage between self and Other argues for the humanity of the terrorists.
organic shrapnel, which occurs when a suicide bomber “is blown to bits…and fragments of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity that they get wedged, they get trapped in the body of anyone within striking range” (16). While Hammad was a kamikaze rather than a suicide bomber, his body was likely blown apart on impact. Regardless of whether or not he could plausibly have become organic shrapnel lodged within Keith, it is evident that Keith fears this possibility. The phrase “organic shrapnel” occurs to Keith sporadically at other points in the novel, indicating his fixation on the concept (66). This concept also compares to the fact that the remains of victims were released into the air and buried in the debris. The remains of victims and terrorists alike who died in the planes or the World Trade Center became organic matter than exists within the city. This concept of the intermingling of the organic matter of victims and perpetrator serves as a metaphor for the hazy distinction between self and Other, and therefore offers a counternarrative to the prominent “us vs. them” discourse.6

Keith and Lianne also help construct the novel’s counternarrative. Scholar Mary Parish argues that Falling Man concerns “the past’s implications for the future—the way in which America will choose to create a lasting counternarrative to terrorism” (195). She further explains that, through “the characters of Keith and Lianne, DeLillo represents two very distinctive possibilities for that future, which he emphasizes by the way in which he arranges the three final scenes in the narrative” (Parish 195). The first of these three scenes features Keith alone in his hotel room, engaging in the “empty ritual” of physical therapy on his wrist, which has already healed (Parish 196). Keith does not move forward after 9/11. In Lianne’s final scene, by contrast, she attends mass and explores “her conflicted and complex attitudes about her belief in God”

6 Similarly, Magali Michael argues that the novel “works to counter the reactionary bent of the dominant narratives created and disseminated by the media and the Bush administration following 9/11” and “targets those narratives that blatantly reassert and champion conventional American notions of heroic, militarized masculinity” (150).
“In direct contrast to the obvious impairment of Keith,” Parish argues, “Lianne realizes that she is healed in some important way” and that she can move on both from the trauma she experienced and from her relationship with Keith (196). Unlike the dominant narrative—which rightly asserts that Americans must “never forget” but incorrectly guides the public in empty rituals in the “war on terror”—Lianne’s healing process demonstrates that American culture can recognize the trauma of 9/11 without remaining stagnant indefinitely. Lianne finds that “She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm…the way they were before the planes appeared that day” (DeLillo 236). Although the dominant narrative asserts that “everything changed” on September 11th, Lianne finds that she can return to some peaceful normalcy in her everyday life despite the individual and cultural traumas she experienced. Lianne’s narrative arc therefore offers a counternarrative to the dominant cultural discourse regarding 9/11 and its aftermath.

The counternarratives constructed through the parallel characterizations of Lianne and Keith, as well as of Keith and Hammad, challenge the dominant discourse that treats terrorists as the unknowable Other and that forecloses the possibility of moving forward after cultural trauma. Indeed, *Falling Man* argues that moving forward after 9/11 requires counternarratives that replace dominant scripts with more accurate, nuanced narratives (Michael 193). Through counternarratives and through considering the ethics of representation, *Falling Man* engages with cultural meaning-making processes. The novel represents the process by which cultures construct trauma while simultaneously participating in the real-world construction of the cultural trauma of 9/11. The construction of cultural trauma necessarily includes multiple, diverse perspectives. DeLillo represents these perspectives through Keith, Lianne, Hammad, Florence, and the various members of the Alzheimer’s writing group. In addition, the representation of various points of view challenges the homogenizing, dominant discourse perpetuated by the government and
media after 9/11. Finally, *Falling Man* represents both local and cultural concerns by highlighting individual traumatic experiences, portraying collective anxieties about memory and memorialization, and representing the increase in Islamophobic prejudice that followed the attacks. DeLillo’s novel’s representation of local and cultural concerns, portrayal of multiple identities, concern with cultural meaning-making processes, and construction of counternarratives make clear that Baelo-Allué’s definition of cultural trauma novels is overly restrictive and needs to be expanded.

**Trauma, Satire, and Jess Walter’s *The Zero***

Jess Walter’s *The Zero* shares with both *Falling Man* and *The Submission* a concern with the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. *The Zero* similarly considers multiple identities and perspectives and explores cultural meaning making processes, but it is distinct from the other works of Cultural Trauma Fiction discussed in this chapter because Walter uses satire to present a counternarrative to the dominant discourse of American innocence and exceptionalism. *The Zero* also self-consciously considers what it means to respond to 9/11 while challenging conventional performances of grief. Walter’s novel highlights the role of the United States government in producing terrorism through the very processes that are ostensibly intended to prevent it. Overall, the novel counters dominant ideologies and demonstrates that works of Cultural Trauma Fiction may construct counternarratives indirectly through irony.

*The Zero* focuses on Brian Remy, a police officer who survived 9/11 only to suffer from suicidal ideation and lapses in memory. Remy struggles with his divorce, the strange behavior of his teenage son, and an increasingly confounding series of entanglements with the government. Remy finds himself working for multiple government institutions to gain intelligence regarding the 9/11 terrorists and their possible accomplices, but he does not know exactly what he is
supposed to be doing or how he became involved. The novel “combines a political and a domestic satire” through attention to Remy’s personal and familial concerns as well as to broader, cultural and political issues (Baelo-Allué 169). Through third-person limited narration, *The Zero* represents Remy’s experiences and the limits of his understanding. The reader—like Remy himself—does not know what takes place during his memory lapses, nor to what extent his more lucid perceptions are accurate. The novel thus represents local concerns through its focus on Remy, his individual circumstances, and his interactions with other New Yorkers.

Additionally, through Remy’s thoughts and other characters’ dialogue, the novel engages with cultural concerns and meaning making processes. For instance, Remy’s son, Edgar, discusses the cultural response to 9/11 when he explains his decision to “mourn” his father as if he had died in the attacks. Edgar argues that he can only grieve the attacks if he experiences personal grief, claiming:

> General grief is a lie. What are people in Wyoming really grieving? A loss of safety? Some shattered illusion that a lifetime of purchases and television programs had meaning?...Generalized grief is a fleeting emotion. Like lust. It’s a trend, just some weak shared moment in the culture, like the final episode of a TV show everybody watches. It’s weightless. You wake up the next day and wonder when the next disaster is scheduled. (Walter 34)

This passage demonstrates the dark humor littered throughout the text and simultaneously offers a cultural critique. The humor arises from the fact that Remy’s son convinces most of the adults in his life to play along with his performance of grief and pretend that his father died on 9/11, even as Remy stands in the room with them. It is ironic that Edgar fabricates individual grief because of the supposed inauthenticity of general grief. His argument, while absurd, nonetheless
identifies a valid distinction between individual grief experienced firsthand and the “general
grief” that many Americans felt after 9/11. The satirical passage, according to critics Duvall and
Marzec, “makes a serious point about the overly facile application of a notion of collective
trauma” in other 9/11 novels (386). Edgar’s decision to ‘mourn’ his extant father highlights that,
“Although people throughout the country felt a sense of immediacy in the collapse of the towers,
someone who experienced the moment through the mediation of television has not had the same
experience as someone who survived the destruction or lost a loved one in the attack” (Duvall
and Marzec 386). Through this humorous scene, Walter poses one of the central questions of the
novel: What specific losses do Americans grieve when mourning 9/11?

*The Zero* questions collective identity by challenging the notion of general grief and by
denouncing the supposedly indiscriminate nature of loss. As Remy examines a window covered
with images of those who went missing on 9/11—knowing “these weren’t missing people
anymore; they were dead people now”—he thinks about the hierarchy within the display (72).
He recognizes that the walls of photographs “were testaments to class” (73). Remy identifies
three strata based on differences in their photographs: white collar workers, firefighters and
police officers, and “the workers who had been mostly invisible before…black and Hispanic, or
foreign-borns…the grunts who staffed restaurants and cafeterias, the mailrooms and custodial
sheds” (74). A man tells Remy that he thinks that the shared tragedy of the people in the
photograph is ‘democratizing,’ but Remy thought the people probably spent their final moments
“crying alone, huddling alone, and burning alone” (75). Despite claims to unity, Remy
recognizes that class divisions socially alienated people from one another in life, and that
Americans will maintain these class divisions in mourning those lost. Remy’s girlfriend, April,
similarly believes that American collective identity did not change in response to 9/11. April
remarks that she hates the *New York Times*’ post-9/11 *Portraits in Grief* page memorializing those who died in the attacks. April, who lost both her sister and her estranged husband, says she “really thought that everything would change” after 9/11 (145). She is disappointed and troubled that the tragedy “just became another section in the paper. Like movie reviews” (145). American culture and the American way of life persist through tragedy. Both Remy and April lament that class division and individualism remain part of American collective identity after 9/11.

*The Zero*’s dark humor and satire offer cultural commentary and facilitate consideration of broader meaning-making. The reader gains insight into the perspectives of others through their conversations with Remy or with other characters while Remy is present. For example, the reader learns about April’s late husband when she asks Remy to join her in a meeting with her lawyer. The novel offers a cultural commentary about the commodification of human life when the lawyer tells April her base compensation as a widow is $250,000, “For pain and mental anguish. That’s what the guidelines have determined each life is worth, essentially, at a base level of grieving” (Walter 169). The lawyer also asks April if she and her late husband had planned to have children, as this could entitle her to more money. April begrudingly explains, “I can’t have children…I had a hysterectomy when I was nineteen” (172). Remy is as surprised as the lawyer and the reader, who simultaneously learn this detail about April. April’s character—a woman, a widow, a person incapable of having biological children—offers a perspective distinct from Remy’s.

*The Zero* also includes the perspectives of ethnically diverse characters. One such character, later codenamed Jaguar, is “a Middle Eastern man in his sixties” who appears sporadically throughout the novel to deliver obscure messages to Remy. Although he occasionally quotes the Koran, indicating his religious knowledge, the man does not reveal any
significant information about himself or his motives in his own words. Near the end of the novel, Jaguar calls Remy and quotes the Koran a final time, stating, “For on that day there will be shining faces, blithe with joy, and there will be faces blackened with dust—the faces of the faithless and the graceless” (320). As Remy tries to de-escalate the volatile situation, Jaguar remarks, “I used to tell my students that there are a hundred and ninety-two mentions of Allah’s compassion in the Koran. And only seventeen instances of his vengeance. And yet, it is always the vengeance that seduces” (320). Usually, Jaguar emphasizes that peace outweighs vengeance in the sacred text and practices Islam with love and tolerance for others. Now, however, he thinks, “I’ve been wrong all these years. Maybe power and vengeance…are exactly what we should build temples to” (320). Jaguar then detonates the bomb that kills April and severely wounds Remy, indicating that he has been radicalized by his interactions with the supposed anti-terror agents. Duvall and Marzec argue that Jaguar becomes a suicide bomber because of the way US government agencies betrayed him, and that “the novel forces the reader to consider that terrorism need not be exclusively the act of a religious fanatic but might be the desperate but rational choice of someone trying to cut through the glut of American media culture” (388). They also argue that, for this reason, Jaguar is “the most sympathetic” character in the novel; his radicalization diverges from earlier depictions of his character and suggests that he fell victim to forces beyond his control (388). The novel offers a clear indictment of the American government for its role in Jaguar’s radicalization, implying that the United States is similarly culpable for the radicalization of other terrorists. This characterization counters the dominant narrative of Middle Eastern men as radical Islamic terrorists and instead demonstrates the role of the United States in facilitating terrorism.
The Zero creates a counternarrative in that it “satirizes the political rhetoric immediately following 9/11 through the character of the Boss, the mayor of New York,” and through the asinine missteps of the agencies fighting the war on terror by colluding with the supposed “terrorists” (Duvall and Marzec 386). The Boss is a caricature of New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, but, as Duvall and Marzec note, the Boss also resembles President George W. Bush. Just as some critics of Bush argue that he prioritized economic recovery over emotional recovery, “the Boss experiences trauma as the effects of the attacks on the economy” (386). For instance, the Boss tells Remy, “in today’s world, there’s no separation between civilian and soldier, between business and government. The private sector is the ultimate covert ops. We won’t win this war without using our greatest weapon—our free market economy” (Walter 296). The Boss essentially argues that “if the economy tanks, the terrorists win, so keep spending” to serve his own interests and the interests of his political allies (Duvall and Marzec 387). Through this caricature, Walter “deploys irony to satirize the American response to the attacks and to comment critically on America’s post-9/11 state of exception” and to highlight the disingenuousness of the American government’s arguments for economic recovery as counterterrorism (Baelo-Allué 169). This framing highlights the flaws of the American governmental response to the attacks and those government and media narratives that promoted capitalism as an antidote to terror.

The Boss and agents Markham and Dave are also satirical in their ignorant missteps, which create the very problems they are ostensibly trying to solve. When Remy tells the Boss about his fear that he is causing terrorist attacks, the Boss argues, “Whatever is happening now was going to happen whether we were involved or not” and that “We owe it to the people who died in this city to find animals like this, animals capable of this kind of barbarism, and stop
them before they even think of it” (298). In his attempts to stop terrorists “before they even think” about committing acts of terror, the Boss unwittingly manufactures terrorism. Similarly, Dave and Markham each collude with supposed members of a terrorist cell and make them government informants. Markham tries to capture members of the terrorist cell before discovering multiple people working for agencies, and he angrily asks, “Is there anyone in this cell who happens not to be a government informant?” (294). As it turns out, everyone involved in the supposed terrorist cell is in some way affiliated with the US government; Remy realizes “They all work for us” (314). Even Jaguar, the only character in the novel to commit an act of terror, initially worked with Remy and other government officials. Ultimately, Jaguar only becomes a terrorist because of the influence of the American government. The novel’s great irony is that the United States government manufactures the terror it purports to try and prevent. *The Zero*, therefore, uses dark humor and satire to generate a cultural commentary that calls dominant narratives into question, including the narrative that irony itself died when the towers fell.\footnote{Journalist Roger Rosenblatt suggested that 9/11 “could spell the end of the age of irony” because the atrocity was too “real” to be denied.}

**Conclusion**

In sum, Sonia Baelo-Allué argues that *The Submission* is a cultural trauma novel because it includes both local and global concerns, questioning of collective identity, engagement with cultural meaning-making processes, and representation of multiple identities and perspectives. I propose that works of Cultural Trauma Fiction need not deal with global issues. Attention to the local and the cultural is sufficient for a cultural trauma novel, as cultural trauma necessarily describes the traumatization of a cohesive cultural group rather than a disparate international network. Also, Cultural Trauma Fiction does not necessarily question collective identity or
engage with cultural meaning-making in explicit terms; the texts may represent these issues indirectly through metaphor. Lastly, although I agree with Baelo-Allué that Cultural Trauma Fiction must include representation of multiple identities and perspectives, I disagree about what constitutes adequate representation. I do not think novels need to extend this representation so far as to become what Dāwes calls “appropriative” (Dāwes *Ground Zero* 21). Dāwes argues that appropriative novels speak for the Other and construct the voices and perspectives of the perpetrator(s) of the attacks in an “attempt to close the gaps of comprehension” (21).\(^8\) Novels written by members of mainstream American culture need not speak for Others in order to offer diverse perspectives. Lastly, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction offer counternarratives to dominant media or government narratives. Thus, the criteria for Cultural Trauma Fiction differs from Baelo-Allué’s criteria for the cultural trauma novel.

The distinction between works of Cultural Trauma Fiction and other works of 9/11 fiction is significant because, as discussed in the introduction, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction highlight the ‘hidden transcript’ of 9/11, or the “speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” that are usually ‘hidden’ from public view (Scott 4-5). The hidden transcript includes both individual experiences that contest or complicate dominant narratives and the amalgamation of those marginalized experiences and narratives, also known as the collective hidden transcript (9). Illuminating the collective hidden transcript constitutes what I call ‘rememory work.’ In the introduction, I defined ‘rememory’\(^9\) as constructed, fragmented memory that reconstructs the history of an individual or group who

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\(^8\) Some novels that represent the voice of the Other within the culture—individuals who are indeed Americans but who nonetheless feel excluded from mainstream American culture—avoid appropriation because they are authored by members of the marginalized groups they depict. One notable example is Laila Lalami’s 2019 novel *The Other Americans*. Lalami herself is Moroccan-American, so naturally her depiction of a Moroccan immigrant family in post-9/11 America avoids appropriation.

\(^9\) As noted in the introduction, this term is derived Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and my definition is based on my interpretation of rememory as it functions in that novel.
shared an experience, especially a traumatic experience. Rememory reveals the ‘hidden transcripts’ of history to challenge or revise the ‘public transcript’ of hegemonic narratives (Tabone 193). Works of Cultural Trauma Fiction that respond to 9/11, then, engage in rememory work by challenging, revising, and reconstructing cultural narratives about the attacks to better depict the events’ effects on the culture, its meaning-making processes, and its most vulnerable populations. Subsequent chapters will explore how the Cultural Trauma Fiction subgenre includes literary explorations of culturally traumatic events that are less often recognized as such by putting these texts in conversation with texts about the cultural trauma of 9/11.
Chapter 2: Media Frames and Fictional Depictions of Mass Shootings

At 9:30am on September 11th, 2001—just forty-five minutes after the first plane struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center—President Bush declared the attacks of that morning “a national tragedy” (Bush). The president’s remarks indicate that the event was immediately understood as a cultural trauma affecting all Americans. Other events that produce less spectacle may also produce cultural trauma. As this chapter will demonstrate, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction about mass shootings show that cultural trauma can also arise from a pattern or repetition of smaller events, not just a single spectacular event. While the news of some mass shootings—including those at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook Elementary School—may elicit an immediate, national response, other shootings garner less public attention because they are relatively small in scale (as determined by the number of people killed) or because audiences have grown somewhat accustomed to news of mass shootings over the past few decades. The very fact of mass shootings’ frequency contributes to their trauma. Mass media’s response to these events indicates that they have become an almost routine feature of American life. Cultural Trauma Fiction, however, speaks back to the commonplace media narratives and tropes that have become part of the pattern of mass shootings. While relatively few Americans are directly affected by mass shootings (just as relatively few were directly affected on 9/11), all experience the trauma of seeing it happen again and again and seeing its effects on the individuals, families, and communities that suffer directly.

This chapter argues that the repetition of mass shootings and their depiction in the media has created a cultural trauma not unlike 9/11, and that media narratives about mass shootings do not address the events in a way that helps Americans process this trauma. Mass shootings have come to dominate the news and make the general public more aware of their own vulnerability.
School shootings in particular are a defining aspect of what it means to be a member of Generation Z in America. The ubiquitous media coverage of mass shootings traumatizes viewers of all ages, making children feel unsafe in their schools and parents worry about how to prevent their children from becoming the next victims. I also discuss the master media narrative of shootings which has formed due to the frequency of these tragedies and which often serves dominant government narratives. This media narrative and the violence it describes have the potential to shape public discourses and engender cultural trauma. The excessive media coverage of mass shootings makes the public believe these events occur more often than they actually do. The mass media also focuses on widely disproven explanations for why these shootings happen—like the negative influence of popular culture—rather than considering the policy issues that enable such violence. Cultural Trauma Fiction about mass shootings, by contrast, provides more appropriate context and considers multiple perspectives in the construction of counternarratives that examine different possible causes and solutions than does mass media. I analyze how multiple such novels encourage readers to process information about mass shootings slowly, rather than rushing through the media scripts that acknowledge the event, offer empty thoughts and prayers, and hastily move on. This slow processing promotes reader empathy and creates narratives conducive to social change.

**Mass Shootings as Cultural Trauma**

9/11 was not the first major event to dominate the 24-hour news cycle and capture national attention. The arrival of CNN in 1980, the advent of the internet, and increasingly blurred lines between entertainment and news ushered in the 24-hour news cycle, in which news became available on network television at all times, rather than once per day in the daily newspaper (Logan 202-203). The 24-hour news cycle and the advent of the Internet coincided to
provide laypeople with rapid access to local, national, and international news. This cycle has changed how news is covered, the accuracy and reliability of the news, and the ways that audiences understand and respond to the news. There are some benefits to the 24-hour news cycle, including the potential for greater civic awareness and engagement. Moreover, the demand for constant news updates facilitated the development of additional news sources, rather than a handful of newspapers owned and operated by an elite few (Logan 201-202). Unfortunately, these benefits of the 24-hour news cycle do not override the negative consequences. In order to maintain interest in the news and generate revenue, networks created “a nonstop multimedia news-talk festival, in which the need for the content to fill hundreds of hours and thousands of pages per week triggers the reporting of allegations with neither the traditional concern for verification nor the time to sort out which stories are important enough to be reported” (Logan 206). In other words, the demand for constant and immediate news coverage sometimes leads networks to circulate underdeveloped reporting before learning all of the relevant facts. The 24-hour news cycle also allowed people across the country to experience mediated versions of events such as the Persian Gulf War, the contentious trial of O.J. Simpson, and the impeachment of President Clinton. These and other cable news events endure in American cultural memory. Americans also experienced mediated versions of earlier events such as the assassination of President Kennedy, but contemporary audiences have a different experience of major events because of the immediacy and ubiquity of the news. Audiences often witness major national and world events in real time. They also experience these same events again and again as the news media replays each incident and dedicates extensive time to coverage of the story for days, weeks, or even months depending on the perceived newsworthiness of the event. Audiences cannot easily escape the repeated coverage of such events without opting out of news entirely.
In this 24-hour news world, mass media coverage of school shootings and other acts of
rampage violence provides raw footage without proper context, leading to speculation,
misunderstanding, and misinformation. For instance, one of the first widely televised American
tragedies before 9/11 was the massacre at Columbine High School on April 20th, 1999. Although
there had been several school shootings prior, Columbine stands out both because of the high
number of casualties and because people all over the country witnessed a mass-mediated version
of the horrific spectacle. The media did not capture any of the murders in real time, but the
cameras showed fragments of the tragedy while it was still unclear what exactly was happening
and when many reporters and viewers believed the shooting was still underway. This kind of
coverage is characteristic of the contemporary 24-hour news cycle; it provided raw footage of the
event before understanding the context necessary to help audiences interpret the spectacle.
According to journalist and Columbine expert Dave Cullen, on April 20th Americans widely felt
“the panic and frustration of not knowing, the mounting terror of horror withheld, just out of
view” (Columbine 67). During and following the shootings, the media and the general public
speculated about what happened, who was responsible, and what their motivations were. This
struggle to understand Columbine reached an enormous audience through the media coverage
that continued for months after the event; researchers note that “Columbine was the largest news
story of the year, and the story was closely followed by 68% of the U.S. viewing public”
(Muschert and Larkin 7). The earliest news coverage of Columbine appeared on local television
twenty-eight minutes after the shooting started and network news quickly followed with
“confused reports” and speculation about what was taking place (Cullen 52). The news media
produced multiple myths and misunderstandings about Columbine that became enduring parts of
the collective understanding of the tragedy. As Cullen notes, “We remember Columbine as a pair
of outcast Goths from the Trench Coat Mafia snapping and tearing through their high school hunting down jocks to settle a long-running feud. Almost none of that happened” (149). Cullen’s language—“We remember”—reflects the ways in which media misinformation shapes the public perception of Columbine. He argues that while experts agree these and other Columbine myths are simply myths, most people believe them to be the facts of the event because they were the first, most pervasive, and most compelling explanations for what took place. The endurance of the myths created during and immediately after Columbine shows that the immediacy and repetitiveness of mass media coverage can lead to public misinformation.

Mass media coverage following school shootings is also problematic in that it has been shown to motivate other would-be mass shooters to carry out their crimes and increase the number of casualties. In an analysis of ABC World News Tonight from January 13, 2013 to June 23, 2016, researchers Jetter and Walker determine a positive correlation between media coverage of school shootings and the occurrence of additional shootings the following four to ten days (2). Like Jetter and Walker, journalism scholar Nicole Smith Dahmen observes that “intense and frequent news coverage given to mass shootings—and particularly to perpetrators—can have both contagious and incentivizing effects on would-be mass killers” (164). Research indicates that television news coverage of shootings influences a significant number of mass shootings in the United States. Jetter and Walker therefore “suggest that decreasing the amount of television coverage shooters receive could limit further tragedies” (2-3). Similarly, Adam Lankford found that “rampage shooters who clearly sought fame killed and wounded more than twice as many victims as other rampage shooters did” (126). If rampage shooters commit their crimes in an effort to achieve fame, then they will try to create a higher death toll because they know that the more people they kill, the more the media will cover the tragedy. Lankford thinks that mass
shootings are a growing threat in the United States and worldwide, but “a major reversal in the way the media covers these attackers” could help mitigate this disturbing trend (126). Another possible way of preventing the contagion effect of mass shootings would be to turn away from mass media as a means for processing these kinds of events, and instead turn to the less sensationalizing medium of fiction.

Mass media coverage is also a problematic means for processing the trauma of mass shootings because, in addition to perpetuating misinformation and encouraging additional shootings, mass media coverage of mass shootings traumatizes viewers. Columbine was obviously traumatic for the students, teachers, school staff, and families of the victims and “ranks as one of the great American traumas of the past Century” (Muschert and Larkin 20). Columbine became a cultural trauma in part because of the media coverage during and following the event, and because it exposed “the vulnerable underbelly of ordinary life and [told] us that malevolence can be brewing in places where we least expect it, that our fail-safe methods (parental involvement in children's lives, close-knit neighborhoods) do not identify nascent pathologies as well as we thought” (Newman 15). Indeed, Columbine traumatized American culture by dominating the news, infiltrating popular culture, and altering security measures in American schools. The event and mass shootings since have also shaped the collective cultural experience of a generation of Americans. Generation Z—comprised of those born between 1997 and 2012—has been called “the mass shooting generation” (Alter). Survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida in 2019 coined this term to describe “the kids that grew up post-Columbine, who huddled behind barricades during active-shooter drills and

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10 According to an article from the Pew Research center, “[n]o chronological endpoint has been set” for Generation Z (Dimock). However, in one graph they place the generational barrier at 2012. This endpoint reflects a similar generational span as other recent generations, such as Millennials and Generation X, which each span 15 years.
learned to tape construction paper over classroom windows” (Alter). In the first 20 years following the Columbine shootings, there were 68 school shootings in U.S. K-12 schools, as well as multiple shootings on college campuses (Melgar). There have been hundreds of other school shootings in the years since. For Generation Z and younger Millennials, school shootings and other acts of rampage violence have been a part of the American cultural experience for most of their lives. While only few individual school shootings (such as the ones at Marjory Stoneman Douglas and Sandy Hook in Connecticut) have been culturally traumatic in the way that Columbine was, since Columbine school shootings as a phenomenon have become culturally traumatizing, in part due to their frequency.

The trauma of school shootings is evidenced by changes in school security and government intervention regarding youth violence in the United States since the late 1990s. A report for the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress provides a comprehensive overview of these changes. They explain that after multiple school shootings in the United States in late 1997 and early 1998, Congress and the Clinton administration increased federal support for school safety policies and programs (Brock et al. 8). President Clinton held the inaugural House Conference on School Safety in October 1998, where he announced the COPS in Schools program, which funded school resource officers, and the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative. This initiative funded community-based violence prevention and behavioral health programs for children and adolescents (9). In response to the shootings at Columbine High School roughly six months later, the Department of Education worked with the Secret Service to create the Safe School Initiative, intended to “study the thinking, planning, and other pre-attack

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11 Katherine Newman defines rampage violence in opposition to “revenge killings,” where shooters seek out specific targets. Rampage shootings “involve attacks on multiple parties, selected almost at random” (15). Acts of rampage violence are “attacks on whole institutions,” such as the schools or communities in which they occur (15).
behaviors of school shooters” (10). Indeed, according to the U.S Department of Justice, since Columbine “school security measures have increased—nearly 100 percent of schools serving 12-to 18-year-olds use at least one safety or security measure. This includes locked doors, security cameras, hallway supervision, controlled building access, metal detectors, and locker checks” (10). The Bush administration continued these efforts during the early-to-mid 2000s (10). Then, in 2012, President Obama founded the Now is the Time Initiative, intended “to reduce gun violence and improve access to mental health services,” in response to the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School (11). These initiatives and policies demonstrate that the U.S. government has increased their attention to youth violence since the late 1990s as a direct response to high-profile school shootings. The changes to school and government policy in response to school shootings indicate the extent to which these events have become a fixture of American life.

Some also argue that violent media contributes to mass shootings and many studies have demonstrated that witnessing violence in the media negatively affects children and adolescents. In a study of youth exposure to mediated political violence, Gvirsman et al. found that both fictionalized and real-life media violence have a negative impact on children’s mental and emotional wellbeing (981). Similarly, scholar Joanne Cantor writes in the Journal of Adolescent Health about the well-documented negative effects of exposure to media violence on children and adolescents. In the article, published shortly after Columbine dominated the news, Cantor notes that the media often ignores or downplays the overwhelming evidence that media violence contributes to youth violence because the media does not want “to promote information that runs contrary to their economic self-interest” (30). In other words, media producers themselves ignore the consequences of violent media exposure because to acknowledge those consequences might
eliminate some of the profits generated by violent media production. Cantor also notes that “[t]here is growing evidence that media violence also engenders intense fear in children which often lasts days, weeks, months, and even years” (32). Children can experience these issues even after viewing only “brief, visually disturbing excerpts” from violent media, including “a teaser for an upcoming newscast” (32). This is to say that children exposed to even a small amount of violent news media—like the pervasive coverage following Columbine and other high-profile school shootings—may suffer from some degree of trauma as a result.

Although children and adolescents may suffer trauma as a result of viewing media regarding mass shootings, this coverage seems to have an even greater effect on adult viewers. A 2002 Gallup poll on school safety indicates that parents “worry twice as much as teens do about the physical safety of kids at school” (Lyons). Another Gallup poll, administered in 2006, found an increase in parents’ fears about children’s safety in school following significant media attention to a number of recent school shootings (Jones). One possible explanation for why parents worry more about school safety is that parents are likely “more aware of the high-profile school shootings reported in the news than are their children” (Jones). In addition, more recent studies indicate that students experience more fear at school after hearing about recent school shootings. In a survey conducted following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland, Florida in 2018, “a majority of American teens [said] they [were] very or somewhat worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school” (Graf). It seems, therefore, that students’ fears have increased over the last two decades as school shootings have become a more regular occurrence in the United States. While not all individual school shootings traumatize teenage students without personal connections to the events, it seems that mass shootings as a phenomenon traumatize Americans of all ages.
Furthermore, other studies indicate that media coverage of shootings on college campuses—such as the extensive coverage of the shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007—traumatizes students attending colleges where such violence has not occurred. Generally speaking, viewing violent media “has the potential to increase anxiety and fear of victimization and this is most pronounced for those whose media viewing is extensive and repetitive” (Shultz 13). More specifically, Fallahi and Lesik studied the effects of the Virginia Tech shootings on college students “who followed the case vicariously through news media” (220). As the researchers note, exposure to media violence “has been associated with the formation of aggressive scripts in memory, hostile attributional biases, and aggressive beliefs” (221). Researchers agree that the more violence an individual watches, the more they will experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress (221). Also, researchers have observed a correlation between watching television news coverage of traumatic events and increased fear (222). This study, therefore, indicates that college students suffer vicarious traumatization when exposed to media coverage regarding shootings on college campuses, even if the students are not personally connected to the tragedies depicted. These findings are consistent with other studies of vicarious or mediated trauma. Overall, studies indicate that exposure to mass-media coverage of rampage violence ends up traumatizing children and adolescents, who then fear that they could become victims to such violence. This media coverage traumatizes adults to an even greater degree. Adults exposed to mass-media coverage of rampage violence worry about it ways to prevent this violence from happening in their communities. In this sense, rampage violence becomes a cultural trauma, propagated by the 24-hour media coverage of the events as much as by the events themselves.
Mass shootings and their coverage in the media are culturally traumatic, much as 9/11 and its mediated representations traumatized Americans. Media representations of school shootings influence how the general public will understand these events, and many scholars have shown that a kind of “master-narrative” about school shootings has emerged, implicitly applied to each new one that emerges. “Cultivation theory,” or the idea that our understanding of events comes more from stories told about them (often by the media) than by experience of the events themselves, can help us understand how this works (Felix 398). According to professors Ryan and Hawdon, who were present on campus at Virginia Tech during the mass shooting, by the afternoon on the day of the shooting, “a master frame had apparently emerged and was being disseminated widely by the media and university spokespersons” (45). The key components of this master frame—or the dominant narrative about what occurred—are that the shooting “was an isolated incident carried out by a social deviant (i.e., a mentally ill individual)”; it could not have been predicted or prevented, so the university is not responsible; it was an attack “on our whole community” and, therefore, “we are all victims”; it will have lasting negative effects on the community; and “the whole country…was watching and supporting us in our grief” (45).

Furthermore, cultivation theory indicates that media coverage of acute mass violence\(^\text{12}\) “not only shapes our perceptions of the world and risk, but does so disproportionately, in that expectations do not match up with the actual, low probability that any one of us will experience such tragedy” (398). Media coverage following the Virginia Tech shootings may have led viewers to believe

\(^{12}\) Felix et al. define acute mass violence, or AMV, as incidents of violence that tend to target unsuspecting people, typically unaffiliated with the perpetrator, often in a public place normally considered safe,” including but not limited to acts of terrorism and mass shootings (397). This category resembles the previously discussed category ‘rampage violence,’ but AMV encompasses a broader range of mass violence.
that similar events were likely to occur at other college campuses, despite the statistical improbability of such an event occurring again.

Displays of solidarity following tragic events help constitute the frames that form the basis of cultural traumatization. Ryan and Hawdon identify four factors that facilitate collective solidarity following a mass tragedy:

(a) the tragedy is defined by members as affecting the collective, (b) the tragedy is a “fateful event” that disrupts the routine of everyday life, (c) the collective is seen as an unwilling participant in the tragedy, and (d) the collective is seen as a “moral collective.”

We argue that if these conditions are met, individuals are likely to adopt a frame that defines the situation in a manner that resonates with the collective. (48)

In the case of Virginia Tech, the master frame conveyed that “we are all Hokies,” or that the massacre victimized the entire cultural community. This is similar, in fact, to the widespread, media-fueled slogan that “we are all New Yorkers” after 9/11. This collective solidarity indicates that the shootings at Virginia Tech were culturally traumatic, in addition to the obvious individual trauma faced by survivors, witnesses, members of the university community, and their loved ones, and that this cultural trauma arose at least in part because of the manner by which the media framed the event.

Displays of collective solidarity following the Virginia Tech shootings compare to responses to mass shootings in Finland. In the Jokela upper secondary school in Tuusula, Finland in November 2007, an 18-year-old shooter killed 8 students and staff members, then killed himself. The following year, a 22-year-old man killed 10 people in Kauhajoki, Finland before committing suicide. Vuori et al. explain that “school shootings received extensive media

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13 Examples include the editorials “We Are All New Yorkers Now” (Thomas) in Slate and “Nous sommes tous Américains” (Colombani) in Le Monde.
coverage that raised intense public debates” in Finland following these incidents (1).

Specifically, the shooters’ “violent videos and messages on the Internet posted prior to the murders raised national and international concerns about the contemporary social order” (Vuori et al. 1). Regardless of whether or not perpetrators post messages and videos online, large-scale acts of violence carried out by young people frequently elicit public outcry because people may perceive these events as a sign that the social or moral order is under attack (2). Media coverage of mass shootings “influences public perceptions of the causes and effects of the violent event itself” (Shultz et al. 13). Also, Felix et al. argue that the media’s tendency to replay distressing images for days or weeks at a time “can keep the images alive in one’s mind, which encourages the ruminative thinking that is linked with distress” (398). This distress reinforces the belief that acute mass violence is a threat to the culture as a whole. As sociologist Barry Glassner explains, the media contributes to a “culture of fear” in the United States. Glassner explains that, in general, American adults overestimate youth crime and ignore or misconstrue evidence to the contrary (xxii). These inaccurate perceptions may have initially arisen because the media sensationalized a few, isolated incidents of gun violence in schools in the late 1990s, thereby shaping the public misconception that school shootings were becoming commonplace (Glassner xxiii). As these scholars indicate, individual mass shootings and their framing in the media have the potential to shape public discourse and elicit cultural trauma, and this phenomenon can be observed across different cultures following comparable events.

In addition to shaping public discourses, media frames often serve dominant government narratives. For instance, in the years that followed the tragedy, media and government both described the Columbine shootings in terms that “fit into the expanding discourse of fear and terrorism in the United States” (Altheide 1). David Altheide defines this discourse as “the
pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central
totality of the physical and symbolic environment as people define and experience it in everyday
life” (1). While the media may have employed this frame primarily to maintain public interest
and generate profit, some political actors intentionally linked Columbine with terrorism “as part
of a control narrative that helped to anchor terrorism to schools in communities throughout the
United States and increased more fear, security measures, and surveillance” (Altheide 6, 1).
While his articl
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Altheide nonetheless demonstrates that “the extensive
coverage and framing of the Columbine shootings contributed to the broad discourse of fear as
well as a more specific context for worrying about and protecting children, legitimating the war
on terror, and expanding social control” (2). Indeed, as people learned more about the Columbine
shootings, “Columbine” became a metonym for all issues related to youth violence and school
security (5). Especially after 9/11, Altheide argues, “[t]errorism, gangs, and school shootings,
particularly Columbine, became linked through the discourse of fear, as writers reflected on the
chilling effects of uncertainty when our taken-for-granted world becomes challenged” (8). This
linkage demonstrates the social construction of cultural trauma, as journalists and media outlets
shape and perpetuate the narratives that transform an event from a tragedy to a cultural trauma.
Thus, while Columbine was initially disturbing to viewers who watched parts of the event unfold
on live television, the tragedy maintained its relevance because the media regularly “offered

14 Eric Harris wrote in his journal that his and Klebold’s attack on Columbine High School would “be like the LA
riots, the oklahoma bombing, WWII, Vietnam, duke and doom all mixed together” (Cullen, “Eric Harris’ Journal”).
Harris hoped that he and Klebold could top McVeigh’s death count in Oklahoma City, “start a little rebellion or
revolution to fuck things up as much as we can,” and “leave a lasting impression on the world” (Cullen, “Eric
Harris’ Journal”). In his journal, Harris also claims that if he and Klebold survived their initial attack on the school,
they would “hijack a hell of a lot of bombs and crash a plane into NYC” (Cullen, “Eric Harris’ Journal”). While
these aspects of their plan obviously did not come to fruition, Harris, at least, intended for Columbine to be a
domestic terror attack. Cullen and other scholars do not think Klebold aspired to commit an act of terror.
fresh frames, transforming it from local to national and even international relevance” by connecting it to the broader discourse of fear regarding terrorism (12). In conjunction with some political narratives about the shootings, the media constructed Columbine as a cultural trauma and school shootings as an imminent threat to children’s safety.

People turn to media narratives and conspiracy theories to understand, explain, and help them process and work through this trauma, but those types of narratives fail to resolve the problem and in fact are one of its causes. Individuals may seek out information online to better understand how these tragedies can be prevented. Semenza and Bernau hypothesize that “mass shootings of greater magnitude elicit increased collective threat response, which further contributes to public information-seeking in the wake of a mass shooting event” (2). They study Google search data related to mass shootings and related policy reforms following these events to determine the extent of increased public interest in solving the problem of mass shootings following a high-profile event. Further, they argue that “public interest in a solution to mass shootings is influenced by a collective understanding of mass shootings as a social problem, and that certain shootings influence this collective definition and resultant responses more so than others” (3). According to the theory of increased collective threat perception, Semenza and Bernau explain, “groups of people may perceive violent events that happen to others in the present as threatening to themselves in the future, resulting in feelings of powerlessness, mistrust, and fear that shape the cognitive worldview of the group” (4). As a result of their increased collective threat perception following a mass shooting, then, people “may seek to mitigate this threat through different means such as political organizing, purchasing weapons, or seeking information on potential solutions” (4). Semenza and Bernau also note that this threat perception increases more dramatically when children are the victims of a mass shooting.
According to their findings, search traffic for the phrase “gun control” increases following school shootings, and this increase is compounded by the total number of victims. In other words, the more casualties a school shooting produces, the more search traffic increases (11). They also determine that extensive media coverage increases the amount of online search traffic after school shootings (11). Notably, their research shows that media coverage influences the extent to which the general public seeks out additional information regarding potential solutions to the problem of mass shootings, and even to what degree people perceive mass shootings as a social problem. Semenza and Bernau’s work demonstrates that both the factual details of a particular mass shooting event and its depiction in the media influence the public’s response to the tragedy (14).

The media frames mass shootings differently depending on the details of the event and the characteristics of the perpetrator(s). These frames are significant because media coverage following a mass shooting “shape[s] public understanding of the phenomenon, including risk of victimization and the potential perpetrator threat, subsequently informing policy responses and discussions” (Silva and Capellan 1313). Silva and Capellan explain that mass shootings covered extensively by media produce a cultural trauma that “accentuates awareness of the phenomenon” (1316). They also note that “excessive mass public shooting coverage has increased fear, perceived risk of victimization, and the perception of an epidemic” (1316). They describe the media coverage of these events as “excessive” because their findings demonstrate that “the percentage of attacks covered and the average number of articles/words written about these incidents have been increasing” over the past 15 years, even though the number of shootings has actually decreased over this time period (1332). Thus, Silva and Capellan conclude that media coverage of school shootings distorts the public perception of the risk of school violence (1332).
Media coverage also disproportionately focuses on so-called lone wolf offenders of Middle Eastern descent, despite the fact that white, far-right individuals are statistically more likely to commit mass shootings (1333). These misperceptions are dangerous, they argue, because “skewed media perceptions of potential perpetrators may cause the public to overlook the warning signs of actual perpetrators who do not fit within this flawed criterion” (1332).

Similarly, Glassner argues that media coverage after Columbine included “misdirection away from real trends and dangers that confront children and adolescents, as well away from the most proximate and verifiable factor in the deaths at Columbine and elsewhere—namely, the ready availability of guns to people who shouldn’t have access to them” (214). Rather than focusing on the issues with access to guns, the media emphasized “scares about all sorts of peripheral things like the Internet, video games, movies, rap music, trench coats, and Marilyn Manson” (215). This media frame avoided complex policy discussions in favor of more sensational, cultural explanations for the tragedy. As this example illustrates, media framing of mass shootings effects how the public understands the events and, subsequently, how a collective politically responds to these tragedies. Because of the myriad limitations and flaws of media frames and other widely available narratives, many Americans look for other kinds of frames to better understand mass shootings, their underlying causes, and potential means of preventing similar tragedies from occurring in the future.

Some individuals may also seek out alternative explanations for mass shootings in the form of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are both an effect of cultural trauma and an element of its construction. According to research published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, conspiracy theories are common and, “given the advances in information technology and social media, as well as individuals’ tendencies to sort themselves into attitude-consistent
silos, even ideas with little basis in fact have the potential to quickly spread unchecked” (Miller, et al. 824). Psychologists who study conspiracy theories explain that these theories “allege that multiple actors are intentionally plotting to accomplish malevolent goals” (Swami, et al. 72).

Conspiracy theories are widespread, Swami et al. argue, because they “provide simplified, causal explanations for distressing events” and “help to regulate levels of acute stress…by reinstalling a sense of order, control, and predictability following a distressing external threat” (72). Increased psychological stress positively correlates with belief in conspiracy theories (74). Significant, traumatic events increase stress and “feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and existential threat” (74). Indeed, Douglas, et al. explain that the tendency to subscribe to conspiracy theories is “stronger when events are especially large-scale or significant and when small-scale, mundane explanations therefore seem unsatisfactory…especially when events lack a clear official explanation” (Douglas, et al. 7). Following large-scale traumatic events, then, “some individuals may engage in sense-making processes aimed at restoring individual agency and a belief that the world is orderly and predictable,” particularly through forming and perpetuating conspiracy theories (Swami, et al 74). Conspiracy theories may offer some comfort by offering “seemingly coherent explanations for distressing phenomena” in the wake of large-scale traumatic events (74). These theories, then, operate in a manner similar to mass media. Both conspiracy theories and some media outlets reinforce previously held beliefs or values, thereby placating audiences following a traumatic event and limiting challenges to the typical social order.

While conspiracy theories and mass media discourses offer ways of understanding the causes of mass shootings and propose strategies to prevent similar events from occurring in the future, Cultural Trauma Fiction can offer a greater understanding of these events and provide narratives more conducive to effecting societal change.
Why Literature?: School Shooting Narratives as Cultural Trauma Fiction

Works of Cultural Trauma Fiction that focus on school shootings and other mass shootings differ from those that depict 9/11 because these texts show that patterns of smaller-scale events can lead to the construction of cultural trauma, just as singular, spectacular events can. Like Cultural Trauma Fiction about 9/11, these novels challenge reductive media narratives and assert counternarratives that offer multiple perspectives on the trauma. Offering multiple, nuanced perspectives disrupts the media patterns that tend to blame popular culture and bad parenting for shootings, offer thoughts and prayers, and then swiftly move on. These novels, therefore, encourage readers to consider the cultural and political factors than enable these tragedies, which the texts argue may include things like inadequate gun control legislation and toxic masculinity. Because Cultural Trauma Fiction about mass shootings disrupts the typical media patterns following these tragedies and offers new ways of understanding and interpreting them, these novels also encourage slower processing and promote intersubjective empathy. Readers are more likely to take the time to consider and process narratives that differ from those repeated by mass media after every shooting. The novels also facilitate empathetic identification with not only those directly victimized and their parents, but also with various members of the affected communities who can offer unique perspectives on the causes and consequences of the

15 The America Psychological Association (APA) discusses this phenomenon—termed ‘toxic masculinity’ in some feminist scholarship and popular media—as “traditional masculinity ideology” (2). They argue that this ideology “is a set of descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive of cognitions about boys and men” which often include, “anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk, and violence” (2-3). As a part of this ideology, the APA notes, “Many boys and men have been socialized to use aggression and violence as a means to resolve interpersonal conflict” (15).
violence. Given their challenges to reductive narratives, introduction of multiple points of view, nuance, and ability to encourage empathy, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction about school shootings and other mass shootings offer a more accurate and comprehensive means of representing and processing these tragedies than does mass media.

The vast majority of American novels written about rampage violence focus on school shootings. Notable school shooting novels include *The Hour I First Believed* (2009) by Wally Lamb, *How To Be Safe* (2018) by Tom McAllister, *Only Child* (2019) by Rhiannon Navin, and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) by Lionel Shriver. Lamb’s and McAllister’s novels are works of Cultural Trauma Fiction, but Navin’s and Shriver’s novels exclusively depict individual and localized trauma in the wake of school shootings and do not engage with broader questions about how these events affect the culture or present counternarratives to dominant media or government narratives of school shootings. *How To Be Safe* and *The Hour I First Believed* distinguish themselves from Navin’s and Shriver’s novels, as well as other novels about school shootings, in that they help readers process the trauma resulting from mediated witnessing of high-profile mass shootings like Columbine and Sandy Hook or from repeated mediated witnessing of multiple mass shootings across a period of years or even decades. These works of Cultural Trauma Fiction respond to what the authors suggest is the flawed, harmful media coverage of mass shootings, which often includes shocking visuals without sufficient context and a failure to consider solutions to the problem of mass shootings that might disrupt the status quo. In response, these novels eschew simple explanations and instead provide insight regarding why mass shootings occur and how they affect individuals and communities. In so doing, works of

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16 For an exhaustive archive of school shooting fiction, including literary, popular, and young adult fiction, see the digital resource, “Pathologies of Mad Violence: The School Shooting Fiction Archive,” created by Dr. Haley C. Stefan.
Cultural Trauma Fiction provide more nuanced narratives of these tragic events with the potential to heal the trauma that shootings engender and, perhaps, even prevent additional shootings from occurring in the future.

Beginning with examinations of *The Hour I First Believed* and *How To Be Safe*, this chapter demonstrates that works of Cultural Trauma Fiction contextualize mass shootings though the use of multiple perspectives, challenges to dominant media narratives about school shootings, and counternarratives that suggest that the collective understanding of mass shooters is largely inaccurate. In so doing, they demonstrate that patterns of smaller-scale traumatic events can produce cultural trauma similar to that which is constructed after singular, larger-scale events like 9/11. These novels also replace mass media myths with more accurate, nuanced perspectives on the causes of rampage violence and possible solutions to the epidemic of mass shootings in the United States. The relatively slow pace by which Cultural Trauma Fiction processes mass shootings promotes greater reader empathy than the rapid, repetitive coverage available through the mass media. *The Hour I First Believed* specifically addresses misconceptions and media myths about Columbine and the perpetrators of the massacre in favor of narratives closely aligned with witness and survivor testimony and with the facts uncovered by the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department and other law enforcement. The novel also compares Columbine to other culturally traumatic events, thereby indicating that the shooting will continue to affect American culture long after the media has moved on to new stories. Similarly, *How To Be Safe* challenges the reductive narratives constructed following a school shooting. The novel depicts the aftermath of a fictional shooting, rather than a specific event, as a representation of all American school shootings. The text’s description of the fictional shooting recalls multiple other shootings in part through McAllister’s description of the media patterns following these events.
The novel also considers the role of various societal influences in motivating the shooter. These influences include the media itself, which often rewards killers with notoriety and reinforces cultural attitudes about masculinity. Like Lamb’s novel, *How To Be Safe* includes multiple perspectives to demonstrate the effects of a mass shooting on both a local community and the national culture. Significantly, McAllister’s novel acknowledges the role of conspiracy theorists and those who minimize the impact of large-scale traumatic events, thereby demonstrating that cultural trauma can be partially shaped or exacerbated by the refusal of some cultural group members to recognize or acknowledge the event’s devastation. Both of these novels, therefore, complicate the collective understanding of mass shootings by challenging the reductive, incomplete narratives hastily constructed by the media.

While *The Hour I First Believed* and *How to be Safe* offer multiple, complex depictions of school shootings, their causes, and their effects on the culture, *If We Had Known* (2019) by Elise Juska moves the focus beyond school shootings by considering rampage violence occurring in other public spaces. The novel’s depiction of the aftermath of a shooting at a local shopping mall invites readers to consider how the mass shooting epidemic extends beyond school grounds. However, the novel’s tragedy occurs in a small college town and the perpetrator is a student at the local university. The novel therefore engages in conversations about school-related mass shootings as well as those about rampage violence in general. Juska’s novel primarily concerns itself with questions about who is responsible for failing to prevent mass shootings and how these cultural traumas are constructed through the interaction between traditional forms of media and social media. *If We Had Known* challenges the collective fascination with the psychological profiles of mass shooters by instead focusing on the psychological wounds of the affected community. Moreover, the novel suggests that the media’s tendency to assign blame to people
close to the shooters—especially mothers and other maternal figures—ignores the reality that parents can only see what their children are willing to display or disclose, and information about children’s inner lives becomes less available to parents as children become young adults. This tendency demonstrates the inherent sexism of mass-media narratives, which reflect and reinforce the sexism of American culture. Juska’s characters question media’s vilification of mothers and other women and implicitly challenge the media’s failure or refusal to acknowledge the role of toxic masculinity in rampage violence. *If We Had Known* ultimately argues that the way Americans and American media react to and process the cultural trauma of mass shootings is not productive for preventing similar events from occurring in the future. Juska’s novel debunks the conservative commonplace that the solution to rampage violence is to detect mental illness and prevent mentally ill individuals from accessing weapons, rather than taking other, more comprehensive action against gun violence, including omitting gun show loopholes, limiting access to semi-automatic weapons, and reconsidering the cultural acceptance of male violence.

The works of Cultural Trauma Fiction discussed in this chapter suggest that novels are better suited than other forms of media to depict the cultural consequences of rampage violence because they disrupt the common media patterns that typically characterize responses to mass shootings and dispel myths about the factors that contribute to this violence. These novels also allow readers to process information regarding traumatic events slowly, rather than being inundated with the shocking imagery and quick explanations found in other forms of media. This slower processing and the novels’ depictions of multiple perspectives promote reader empathy. These novels participate in the (re)construction of narratives regarding mass shootings and suggest interventions that may actually help prevent future tragedies, rather than simply weaving narratives of even more mass shootings into the fabric of American cultural identity.
The Hour I First Believed

Wally Lamb’s 2009 novel, The Hour I First Believed, helps readers to process the Columbine shootings by acknowledging how the event and its representation in the media constitute a cultural trauma and by dispelling the inaccurate narratives perpetuated by mass media. The novel centers on a couple, Caelum and Maureen “Mo” Quirk, who work at Columbine High School in 1999. Although these characters and the other main characters in the novel are fictional, the text depicts the victims and perpetrators of Columbine realistically, using their real names and describing the events accurately. Caelum, an English teacher, is out of town visiting his dying aunt on April 20th. Mo, the school nurse, is present that day and hides in a cupboard in the library while the perpetrators shoot multiple students and themselves. Although Caelum is not present for the massacre and Mo is not physically injured, Columbine dramatically alters their lives. Caelum describes Mo as “one of the victims you’ve never read about in the Columbine coverage, or seen interviewed on the Today show or Good Morning America. One of the collaterally damaged” (Lamb 23). Mo develops severe PTSD because of the traumatic experience of hearing the shooters murder students and believing she would also be killed. Throughout the novel, Lamb explores the collateral damage of Columbine, both for individual characters and for American culture as a whole.

While this novel depicts characters’ individual traumas, importantly their experiences do not overshadow the cultural trauma of Columbine, in part because Caelum narrates the novel. He is not a victim of the individual trauma of the shootings, and his character serves as a microcosm

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17 Mo’s experience compares to that of Patti Nielson, an art teacher at Columbine High School in 1999 who placed the first call to 911 from the Library. Like Mo in the novel, Nielson hid in a cupboard while the perpetrators committed the majority of the murders and overheard as the shooters took their own lives. Although Mo’s experience compares to Nielson’s, one significant difference is that Nielson was shot at Columbine and sustained non-life-threatening injuries, while Mo is physically unscathed (Wallace).
for the millions of people who experienced the event as a mass-mediated tragedy. In a retrospective section of the novel, Caelum states “April 20, 1999. In the days, weeks, months, and years, now, since they opened fire, I have searched wherever I could for the whys, hows, and whether-or-nots of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s rampage” (300). Although certainly much closer to the tragedy than the average indirect witness, Caelum represents the journalists, sociologists, and laypeople alike who have desperately sought answers about what motivated the shooters. The novel explores different theories through Caelum, who admits that he initially “clung to the editorialists’ oversimplifications: the cause-and-effect of school bullying, violent video games” (302). He lists the places he’s searched for answers—church, psychology, exercise, alcohol, and the Internet. His description of searching the Internet parallels what an average person seeking information on Columbine might find. He states:

Google “Klebold Harris,” and you get 135,700 hits. From there, you can lose yourself in hundreds of pages of the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department’s report, or among the myriad criticisms of those official findings. You can listen to the 911 calls, print out the autopsy pictures, take a virtual tour of what the library looked like after the shootings. You can click on the killers’ school essays and journal entries…You can visit the site where bloggers conjecture about whether Dylan put the gun to his own head or Eric killed him…(Lamb 303)

The use of the second person ‘you’ throughout this passage acknowledges that any reader could engage in a similar search; surely many have searched for information in a futile attempt to make sense of this incomprehensible violence. Caelum’s mediated witnessing and subsequent search for answers thereby emphasizes the unprecedented accessibility of Columbine to the general public, both during and after the event. Lamb implies that this widespread, mediated access to
the shooting participates in the social construction of the shooting as an American cultural trauma.

The novel demonstrates that the trauma of Columbine reaches beyond the boundaries of the Littleton, Colorado community. In a support group two days after Columbine, participants are seated in three concentric circles. A group leader, Reverend Judy Clukey, explains, “The innermost circle was reserved for witnesses to the killings, and for those who themselves had been fired upon. The next, larger circle was for students and staff members who’d been at the school but had not personally witnessed the violence. The outer circle was for the rest of us” (Lamb 202). The first two circles host those most likely to have experienced the highest degrees of individual trauma. The leader describes the third circle as a place for “the rest of us” indicating that she as a community member is part of the traumatized group (202). She explains that the seating arrangement reflects that the shooting “was the emotional equivalent of a terrible earthquake…And its shaken us badly, this…upheaval. As individuals, as a community, as a nation. We’re frightened and confused. …The ground seems to have cracked open, and it feels as if we’re standing at the crumbling edge of some terrible abyss” (203). For the survivors and the community, the trauma of the shooting compares to a natural disaster or an apocalypse. The “ground,” or the foundation on which their beliefs about the world rest, has been “cracked open” to reveal the terrible reality of what has happened, of what was always possible. The Reverend also implies that there could be additional, metaphorical circles—perhaps a fourth and a fifth—for others who witnessed the events as they unfolded through mass media and for those who consumed media coverage of Columbine after the fact. Members of these potential circles and members of the third circle likely did not experience individual trauma associated with Columbine (unless their loved ones were involved in the attack), but they do experience the
cultural trauma of the event. For all those who are traumatized in this way, their sense of stability and safety is “crumbling” due to the shocking realization or painful reminder that suburban schools are not necessarily safe, and teenagers are capable of committing horrible atrocities without arousing the suspicions of their parents or teachers (203).

Through Caelum, Lamb argues that the killers traumatized individual survivors of the massacre, the Littleton community, and the entire culture. The novel portrays the day when the Jefferson County sheriff’s office screened portions of Harris and Klebold’s “basement tapes” for the media. Caelum manages to gain entry, despite not being a member of the press. The police officer guarding the door questions him, and when Caelum says his wife was a victim of the shooting the officer insists that she was not, stating, “Sir, there were thirteen victims: twelve students and a male teacher” (Lamb 307). This telling response demonstrates a disconnect between law enforcement’s understanding of the shooting, in which the only ‘victims’ are those who died, and the understanding of community members that there were countless “collateral victims” of the shooting, not to mention the dozens of survivors who were injured (307). This disconnect is a microcosm for Columbine’s impact on Americans in general, who suffer collateral damage from witnessing the tragedy in the media and from the subsequent realization that such violence is possible in unsuspecting and ostensibly safe communities like their own.

While watching the tapes, Caelum notes that Harris and Klebold “laugh, imagining themselves as ‘ghosts’ who will trigger flashbacks in the survivors’ brains. Make them go insane” (308). The revelation that the killers “[o]rchestrated” his wife’s psychological strain enrages and repulses Caelum, causing him to become physically ill (309). Moreover, Caelum says that in the tapes Harris and Klebold “address the cops, their parents, the classmates they hate, the rest of us” (308). Caelum’s belief that the shooters address “the rest of us” includes the Littleton community
as well as the entire nation. Harris states in the tapes that they “need to kick-start the revolution here,” indicating that their target audience is much larger than the local community. Caelum also notes that the killers “had planned for a much higher body count—higher, they hoped, than Oklahoma City. Their goal was two hundred and fifty casualties—the number they’d need to out-McVeigh McVeigh” (302). The novel presents this evidence, derived from the real-life ‘basement tapes’ and journals Harris and Klebold left behind, to demonstrate the killers’ intention to traumatize individual students and staff, their local community, and the nation. Their actions did just that, despite the killers’ failure to execute the majority of their plan.

*The Hour I First Believed* also makes multiple references to Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 to connect Columbine to other events that most Americans experienced through the media and that are more widely recognized as cultural traumas. Years after Columbine, Caelum befriends a couple, Janis and Moses, from New Orleans who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina. He sits with Moses watching news coverage of the city and thinks, “six years earlier, I had stared at that same TV, that same channel, watching Columbine unfold—watching the beginning of the end of *our* shared life as we knew it” (389). While the events themselves are not similar, Caelum recognizes that both Columbine and Katrina are devastating traumas that will fundamentally alter the lives of those affected and will have wider effects on the culture as a whole. Just as Columbine disrupted Americans’ confidence in the safety of their schools, Katrina eroded their faith in the government to protect them from disaster. The novel also makes comparisons between Columbine and 9/11. Caelum compares the two traumas, stating, “After Columbine, every damn school in the country developed a lockdown plan…Schools weren’t safe havens anymore…And 9/11: chaos had come rushing in that day, too” (596). This comparison indicates that different cultural traumas similarly introduce “chaos” and alter the way members of the
national culture live their lives. Lamb compares Columbine to two more recent cultural traumas in order to demonstrate that the effects of all three seemingly unrelated and unique events are analogous, indicating that events that are relatively small in scale can nonetheless produce cultural trauma, particularly when such events become regular occurrences.

*The Hour I First Believed* challenges media narratives of Columbine and its aftermath in favor of narratives more closely aligned with survivor and witness testimony. Caelum quickly rejects media myths because of his intimate knowledge of the Columbine student body and culture. For instance, when he watches news coverage of Columbine as the events unfold, Caelum immediately dismisses what would become one of the most pervasive rumors, that “the shootings may have been committed by students who belonged to a cult called the Trenchcoat Mafia” (161). He instantly shakes his head, thinking that the kids who called themselves the Trenchcoat Mafia “had graduated the year before. And anyway, they were ironists, not killers” (161). This brief representation of the news on April 20th indicates how the many pervasive myths of Columbine gained traction. As Cullen explains, the media’s “narrative of what had happened was set” shortly after the attacks (*Columbine* 213). Similarly, researcher Peter Langman notes that “[i]n the wake of a school shooting, a brief period of massive media coverage often follows. Much of the initial information that gets reported is not accurate, and by the time more accurate information has been obtained, the media has moved on to other stories” (Langman 5). Lamb’s novel, however, challenges the fixed media narrative by dismissing and replacing myths and misunderstandings with more accurate and nuanced representations of the shootings and their aftermath.

The novel challenges dominant narratives through the organizing metaphor of chaos-complexity theory. Caelum learns about the theory while flying to Connecticut to visit his Aunt
Lolly, just before the shooting. On the plane, he meets Mickey Schmidt, an adjunct instructor at Colorado State who talks at length about the theory. Mickey explains that chaos-complexity theory, also known as the butterfly effect, is “all about bifurcation,” which destabilizes “a dynamical system” (69). He also says, “there’s a self-organizing principle at the edge of chaos. Order breeds habit, okay? But chaos breeds life” (69). Caelum is not initially interested in the conversation or the concept, but later he recognizes the relevance of the theory to Columbine and to his life in general. After the shooting, Caelum becomes obsessed with finding some sort of explanation for why it happened. He searches online for “chaos theory” and one result states, “Explosive bifurcation is the sudden transition that wrenches the system out of one order, and into another” (304). Here, Caelum begins to recognize Columbine as a “bifurcation”—a dividing event that splits the time between ‘before’ and ‘after’—of the “system” of his life and his society. Indeed, Caelum begins to see that Columbine was both individually and culturally traumatic.

Throughout the novel, the symbol of a butterfly represents chaos theory. Part one of the novel, which spans from the days leading up to the massacre until the following summer, is entitled “butterfly.” The shooting is the initial agent of chaos—like the butterfly flapping its wings—that sets off a chain reaction of events in Caelum and Maureen’s lives. Butterflies also appear often in the novel. One butterfly enters the scene when Caelum stops at a gas station, and he wonders if “it was starting a domino effect—triggering a disaster in some other part of the world” (279). By chance, Caelum runs into a man at the gas station whom he recognizes from a grief counseling session. The man was a substitute teacher at Columbine High School on the day of the shooting. While the men talk, the butterfly lands on the man’s shoulder. Caelum asks the man who he was substituting for, and the man says “Some English teacher. He had a death in the
family. Name began with a Q, I think” (280). Although Caelum does not say anything, it is clear both to him and to the reader that the man was substituting for him on April 20th. In this way, the butterfly parallels Aunt Lolly’s stroke; her stroke lead Caelum to fly home to Connecticut, which meant that the man served as his substitute on the day of the massacre. The seemingly unrelated event of Lolly’s stroke indirectly influenced the trajectory of this other man’s life, since he would not have otherwise been at the school.

Columbine itself also becomes the “butterfly [that] flaps its wings” and instigates unexpected and far-reaching consequences (69). Because of her experience witnessing and surviving the massacre—as well as her preexisting childhood trauma—Mo develops severe PTSD. She attempts to cope with her symptoms by abusing Valium and, later, Ativan. Despite her attempts to stop abusing the drugs and regular participation in Narcotics Anonymous meetings, Mo relapses and hits and kills a teenage boy, Morgan Seaberry, with her car while under the influence. Mo’s attorney urges her to remember that she is also a victim, and the accident “would not have happened if those little psychopaths out there in Colorado hadn’t damaged you” (362). This assertion reflects the characters’ uncertainty about Mo’s moral responsibility and the novel’s broader question about to what extent victims in general are responsible for their actions after they experience trauma. Carole Alderman, Morgan’s mother, believes that Mo is morally culpable for his death. She tells Mo, “You snuffed out his life, Mrs. Quirk. Those two boys in Colorado used guns, and you used your car. But the result was the same” (366). Carole also tells Mo, “I don’t care…how much trauma you suffered because of those shootings out there. You murdered my son” (366). The trauma Mo suffered due to Columbine indirectly causes her to strike and kill Morgan, but Carole insists that Mo has committed murder through her negligence. Through Mo’s crime and the debates about her level
of moral and legal responsibility, the novel questions to what extent we can explain or trace the causes of life-altering events. This questions parallels the novel’s other questions about Harris and Klebold’s motives, agency, and responsibility for Columbine. Although Lamb justifiably offers a much more sympathetic picture of Mo, the traumatized woman who becomes an unstable addict and unintentionally kills someone, than of murderers Harris and Klebold, he nonetheless leaves the reader to question what factors or incidents may have initiated the chain reaction that resulted in the massacre. Were the killers the initiators of chaos—as Harris himself believed—or were they a ripple of previous chaotic instances? Thus, although The Hour I First Believed considers Caelum and Mo’s individual experiences, the novel ultimately connects all of the characters’ experiences back to the events at Columbine on April 20, 1999.

Lamb also explores structural issues in the United States beyond the availability of deadly weapons. Mo serves her sentence for vehicular manslaughter at Quirk Correctional Institution, a women’s prison that Caelum’s great grandmother founded with the intention of compassionately rehabilitating women felons (Lamb 78). In the present, however, the prison is a “new high-tech complex…surrounded by chain link and crowned with spools of razor wire” (125). A conservative governor “paramilitarized” all of the Connecticut state prisons and turned Quirk Correctional into a typical, dehumanizing facility that centered on retribution rather than rehabilitation (125). Through the depiction of Mo’s experiences in the prison and Caelum’s observations, the novel critiques the criminal justice system and asserts the need for prison reform. Quirk Correctional represents the prison system in general. When Caelum visits, he notices that the inmates are mostly Black women. He connects this to the devastation of Katrina depicted on TV, stating that “[a]ll Katrina did was shine a spotlight on what this country’s been

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18 According to Why Kids Kill, Harris wrote in his journal that he wanted to do “anything that will cause damage and chaos” (Langman 1).
tolerating since the days of the slave ships” (371). The novel thereby suggests that different forms of violence, trauma, and structural inequities are interconnected.

Lamb also demonstrates the relationship between the military industrial complex and gun violence, indicating that mass tragedies have causes and consequences far beyond reductive media explanations. Kareem, one of Caelum’s students and a veteran of the Iraq War, shoots a social worker, then shoots and kills his wife before taking his own life. Caelum stays up most of the night following the news of the shooting, wondering if there was anything he could have done to prevent it. He tells a friend that his student, “had been acting pretty unstable in class this morning…He could have just as easily pulled out his gun and started taking victims then and there […] could have found ourselves in the middle of another […] Columbine” (638-639). This incident occurs in 2007, eight years after Columbine, but Caelum notes the parallels between the two events. Caelum asks his friend, “Why is it that these damaged people who can’t take the pain anymore have to pick up firearms and […] destroy other people’s lives along with their own?” (639). Caelum’s reference to “these damaged people,” does not only refer to his former students; he recognizes that there is an epidemic of gun violence, and that young men who are ‘damaged’ often commit horrible acts of violence. Although the novel stops short of an expressly political critique of gun violence in the United States, The Hour I First Believed implies that, like Hurricane Katrina and the prison system, gun violence is in some ways an issue of structural violence.

The Hour I First Believed is also a counternarrative to the pervasive narratives of mass shootings and gun violence in general which blame individuals and communities, rather than recognizing the underlying structural violence that contributes to these outward expressions of violence. In this, Lamb echoes the conclusions of scholars and researchers such as the editors of
The Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery, who wrote in a 2016 editorial that the rates of firearm-related deaths in the United States “cannot be decoupled from the social and political circumstances in which they have arisen. Embedded in the country’s legislative genome is the right to engage in violence” (847). Multiple doctors asserted their agreement with these editors’ claims in a 2017 letter to the editor entitled “Gun Violence is Structural Violence: Our Role as Trauma Surgeons,” in which they recognize “gun violence as a component of structural violence” (Zakrison, et al. 224). Similarly, public health researchers explain that the United States is experiencing an “epidemic of gun violence,” influenced by “structural and socioeconomic determinants” (Santilli et al. 378). Other public health researchers define gun violence “as a biopsychosocial disease” and explain that “[i]nherent in the biopsychosocial model is the idea that there is no one cause of gun violence” (Kohlbeck and Nelson 3). Rather, multiple psychological, social, and structural factors contribute to gun violence. Kohlbeck and Nelson argue that “[m]edia attention focuses on the outward act of violence itself, as an isolated incident, rather than forming a more nuanced narrative around the subprocesses that trigger such incidents” including the underlying structural violence that creates the conditions for mass shootings and other instances of gun violence (4). Some of the specific elements of structural violence that Kohlbeck and Nelson argue contribute to gun violence include “violence in our systems of care that fails to adequately care for those suffering from mental health issues [and] violence in our firearm policies that favors profit over humanity” (4). This is to say that the failing system of mental health intervention and care and gun legislation (or lack thereof) are examples of structural violence.

How To Be Safe
Where Lamb’s novel serves as a counterargument to simplistic media narratives about the causes of school shootings, Tom McAllister’s *How To Be Safe* focuses on the **effect** of these events, asserting that the phenomenon of school shootings as a regular occurrence in American life is culturally traumatic not just because of the horror of each individual event but because of the cumulative effect of this epidemic. The novel argues that the frequency of school shootings and the repetitive, inadequate public response to these tragedies creates the cultural trauma and considers how those who are not directly connected to mass shootings nonetheless suffer this trauma. *How To Be Safe* focuses on the aftermath of school shootings, but also offers some insight into the psychological factors that affect perpetrators. McAllister avoids drawing a direct, causal link between the shooter’s mental state and his violent rampage, but instead offers a glimpse of the shooter’s thoughts, feelings, and circumstances to demonstrate the social and cultural factors that inform his psychology, namely toxic masculinity. The novel also demonstrates that cultural trauma arises in part through mediated witnessing and processing of events. The media’s attempts to understand a school shooting through close scrutiny of everyone connected to the crime can victimize further those close to the shooting. Indeed, *How To Be Safe* shows that both individuals and the media construct cultural trauma by trying to make sense of the individual event. The novel also criticizes the political narrative circulated in mass media that argues people ought not “politicize” school shootings by calling for policy change. This narrative, the novel argues, ignores that shootings are already political regardless of whether or not the public acknowledges this fact. McAllister’s text also shows that Americans are already more vulnerable to mass shootings than they want to believe, and no mass shooting is truly an isolated incident because they all arise due to similar underlying causes. Instead of focusing on possible causes, however, McAllister uses the unconventional genre of the inverted detective
story to direct readers’ attention toward aftermath, rather than trying to figure out how and why the shooting occurred. Ultimately, How To Be Safe demonstrates that media and government narratives, as well as the tendency to focus on why shootings occur, do nothing to stop more shootings and contribute to the cultural trauma of mass shootings as a phenomenon.

How To Be Safe concerns itself with the aftermath of a school shooting even before the shooting takes place, opening with a focus on the shooter, a young man who anticipates, “Later they will find his notebook and call it a manifesto. The media will try to analyze it and explain it, but they are dull and they cannot be trusted to understand” (McAllister 1). The future school shooter believes the media will misinterpret his motive and mischaracterize him, but this belief does not deter him. He takes pleasure in thinking that “the pundits will speculate. They will look for reasons. They will want to know why” (4). He knows from the media and public reactions to previous school shootings that “they will investigate his journal and his music and his web history, and they will try to paint a portrait that makes sense; they will shape a narrative around him that suggests the possibility of solutions” (7). In this passage, “they” refers both to the media and to the justice system. The police will literally “investigate” the shooter and the shooting, and then the court of public opinion will present their own investigation that “will shape a narrative around him that suggests the possibility of solutions” (7). The shooter understands both that the media and the general public desire solutions to the problem of mass shootings, but this phrasing implies that—at least in the shooter’s opinion—there is no solution. The shooter’s perception of how the public reacts to school shootings matches that of Patrick Osborne, scholar of American literature and cultural studies, who asserts that “media outlets attempt to explicate the causation of rampage violence by delineating the shooter’s actions as a product of competing external forces: e.g. bullying, America’s culture of violence, the availability of guns, and failures in
treating mental illness” (4). In the novel, the shooter revels both in the notoriety he will gain and in his belief that he will remain enigmatic despite the inevitable attempts to understand him.

Although *How to Be Safe* does not provide a single, clear explanation for why the shooter opens fire, the novel’s prologue gives readers some insight into who the shooter is and how multiple personal and societal factors may have shaped his decision. This complexity characterizes Cultural Trauma Fiction; the novel differs from news media coverage of mass shootings because it offers insight into the shooter’s background and state of mind without drawing conclusions about his motives. Fiction makes this sort of insight possible by exploring the psychology of characters and revealing the underlying influences that shape their behavior.

The shooter in *How to Be Safe* struggles with feelings of anger and helplessness (4). He eats pizza before going to school on the day of the shooting and thinks that he would like to “cut out” the part of himself that “craves garbage” food like pizza, “because then someone else could be the fat kid at school, the slob, the punch line” (4). The novel does not show the shooter being bullied at school because of his weight, but instead focuses on his feelings; he may feel like “the punch line” regardless of whether or not anyone actually makes fun of him. He cannot control his hunger, his weight, or the stereotype that overweight people are “slobs,” and he lacks an outlet for discussing his feelings. The shooter also suffers a difficult home life because of his father’s death and his mother’s alcoholism (5-6). Again, McAllister includes these details to develop the shooter as a character and to demonstrate the multiple factors that shape his psychology, but does not draw any sort of causal link between specific experiences and the shooter’s motive. In addition to feeling hopeless and angry, the shooter relishes the ignorance of ordinary people he encounters on the morning before the shooting. He thinks a woman he passes “will see him on the news later and not even know how close he’d been to her, how she could
have saved everyone if only she’d taken the time” (McAllister 2). The shooter thus contradicts his earlier implication by revealing that the media’s tendency to create narratives offering possible solutions is not wholly misguided, given that he admits a random stranger “could have saved everyone” by “taking the time” to reach out to him (2). In expressing his desire for this woman—or anyone, really—to help him, the shooter confirms Osborne’s claim that “Many rampage shooters, both real and fictional, display a sincere longing to be loved” (5). The fictional shooter exemplifies that “violence is often a product of an individual desiring love too much but not knowing the proper way to express such desires. This is because men are conditioned to deny feelings of love and that patriarchy only values anger as a truly masculine emotion” (Osborne 7). This understanding of mass shooters not as mentally ill lone wolves but instead as young men socially conditioned to process their emotions through violence challenges the reductive media refrain than it is mental health intervention, not a change to gun laws or the toxic masculinity rampant in American culture, that can prevent future mass shootings. Similarly, the novel’s shooter conforms to Katherine Newman’s description of school shooters. Newman argues that “shooters don’t go out quietly when they decide to address their social dilemmas. They arrive at these tragic solutions after a period of small trials and big errors. There is nothing spontaneous about a rampage school shooting” (21). The narrative demonstrates that underlying influences, such as social rejection and toxic masculinity, may have motivated the shooter. This portrayal differs from typical media depictions of perpetrators of mass violence and invites readers to empathize with the underlying feelings motivating violence, even if they cannot empathize with the young man’s violent impulse.

The prologue also indicates that the shooter’s primary interest lies in the aftermath of the shooting and the effect he will have on public discourse, rather than on violence as an end in
itself. Notably, the novel only gives the shooter a voice through third person, omniscient narration, and even this voice is confined to the prologue. The expression of the shooter’s voice allows the shooter some agency—and, therefore, culpability—for his actions, but also allows the reader partial insight into his perspective and the opportunity for an informed consideration of his thought processes and motives. Like real-life shootings, however, the public will never truly understand the perpetrator’s reasoning. The limited narrative perspective parallels reality in that the public cannot know exactly what caused a shooting or how to prevent similar violence in the future.

*How To Be Safe* also illustrates the mediated construction of cultural trauma. On the day of the shooting, former teacher Anna Crawford watches the news unfold on TV. The media first identifies and names the trauma: “On TV they called it a rampage, then they called it a massacre, then they called it a state of emergency, then they settled back on massacre” (McAllister 10-11). The media defines the event in whatever terms seem most likely to garner and sustain public interest. There is also a rush to understand and make meaning from traumatic events. The news media Anna watches conjectures, “Could it be terrorism? Maybe it was a student…A disgruntled former employee. A random act of violence…A different kind of terrorist” (11). The media quickly settles on a name, “The Seldom Falls Massacre,” knowing that the town’s name, ‘Seldom Falls,’ will become a metonym for the shooting, just as “Columbine” and “Sandy Hook” are metonyms for the massacres that occurred at those schools (15). The media’s rapid labeling and attempt at meaning-making arise in part because “It was easy to fill in the template: idyllic small town, never thought it would happen here, shocked residents” (15). The “template” refers to the typical understanding of the mass shootings now ubiquitous in American schools. McAllister’s template compares to the “familiar pattern” that journalist Charlotte Alter argues
has emerged since the Sandy Hook Massacre. Alter describes this pattern: “Every month or so, a killer shoots innocent people at random. There is a brief period of mourning. Democrats offer feeble pleas for new gun limits; Republicans offer ‘thoughts and prayers.’ No substantial laws are passed, and the nation moves on.” By referencing the all-too-familiar pattern of rampage violence in the United States, the novel’s local shooting illuminates larger, cultural concerns about school shootings and gun violence in general.

McAllister’s novel acknowledges the overwhelming evidence that school shooters intend to create cultural trauma by offering a brief glimpse into the mind of a perpetrator. Potential shooters “choose schools as the site for a rampage because they are the heart and soul of public life in small towns,” and because they know the media transmits trauma by publicizing school shootings and their aftermath (Newman 15). The unnamed shooter in How To Be Safe wants the community “to understand the randomness of fate, to understand that he himself is fate personified” (McAllister 6). He wants everyone in his community and in surrounding communities to live in fear of people like him, who may be hiding in plain sight waiting to commit the next atrocity. In his speculations about how the media will interpret his actions and motivations, the shooter recognizes that he will create “A collective trauma, which emerges when the damage affects everyone,” and that “shatters the very structure of the community” (Newman 227). The shooter also anticipates that the collective trauma will expand into a cultural trauma, motivating those beyond his small community to question their safety. The novel thus demonstrates how “For the country as a whole, school shootings opened up a searching self-examination as only a total shock can” and raises the question: “Are we no longer able to judge when a community is safe and when it just looks that way?” (Newman 14). The novel focuses on both local and cultural concerns and cultural meaning-making processes by limiting the shooter’s
perspective to a brief section of third-person narration and focusing the remainder of the narrative on an affected member of the community in the aftermath of the shooting.

*How To Be Safe* also argues that the media helps perpetrators to achieve their goal of traumatizing others and even victimizes those close to the shooting by being invasive. The shooter depicted in the novel leaves a note with the understanding that the media will find it (McAllister 1). While the shooter does not actively cultivate media attention—he does not contact media in the manner of some real-life shooters— he knows that he will create trauma through the inevitable media response to his crimes. The media also responds in ways the shooter cannot anticipate. In their frenzy to describe and understand the shooting, the media and law enforcement initially consider Anna Crawford a suspect. Anna states that once she is named as a suspect, “I had become public property” (13). Media representatives approach her home and film her through the windows. As the media speculates about her possible guilt and motives, Anna compares the experience to defilement, stating that she “felt the international media rustling through my pockets and ransacking my life, dumping out drawers, hoping to find evidence that I had committed a mass murder… I felt their hands all over me, violating me” (12). The text’s comparison between Anna’s experience and the experience of sexual assault critiques mass media’s tendency to seek out a story without regard for its human subjects. As a person connected to a mass shooting, Anna no longer owns herself; she is “public property,” sifted through to satisfy viewers’ curiosity. The media does not treat her as an affected community member deserving of empathy, but instead as a possible scapegoat to fulfil the need for a satisfying explanation. Even after the police and the public know the identity of the shooter,

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19 The man who murdered 32 people at Virginia Tech in 2007 sent a multimedia manifesto to NBC news. The manifesto included photographs of the killer with weapons and both written and audio descriptions of the massacre. Some of the descriptions indicate for how long the killer planned the attack, while others seem to have been recorded during or after the murders (Windrem).
“there was a frantic hunt for co-conspirators. On the internet, they pored over all the scraps of [Anna’s] life they could find…My biography had become so-called content, a disposable attraction to keep people occupied for a week” (13-14). Anna’s experience as a person of interest in the school shooting demonstrates the way that the media facilitates the court of public opinion, serving extralegal ‘justice’ to incite interest.

Anna’s experiences also demonstrate the onslaught of unsubstantiated speculation and misinformation following the shooting. Anna explains that her accusation and arrest continue affecting her life even after she is officially declared innocent, namely as, “Conspiracy theorists thought [she] had probably done it and was being protected by the government for some reason” (McAllister 20-21). Despite an absence of fact connecting Anna to the shooting, the initial media speculation and uproar about her possible involvement permanently shape the public narrative surrounding the event. Anna’s experience mirrors the proliferation of conspiracy theories in the aftermath of real-world traumatic events, such as the enduring misconceptions about goths and jocks following the Columbine massacre. The brief mention of conspiracy theories in How To Be Safe thus demonstrates the novel’s concern with cultural meaning-making processes by indicating how groups react to collective traumas, as well as how individuals and the media construct narratives of cultural trauma.

Large-scale traumas are also followed by attempts by ordinary citizens to explain the causes, motivations, and implications of the events. Once most people accept that Anna was not involved in the shooting, “there was a rush to assign blame” elsewhere (McAllister 24). Anna also notes that the news media “tried and judged” the victims of the shooting because, “[i]t was important for people to feel like the murders could somehow be justified” (27). In this way, attempts to downplay the severity of the tragedy are in fact part of the social construction of
cultural trauma. Similarly, Anna notes that “[e]veryone kept saying we needed to get back to normal, to not allow the shooter to change our lives” (31). This rhetoric downplays the tragedy by insisting that individuals can take power away from the shooter even after he has killed their friends and neighbors. Attempts by the general public to move past the shooting relate back to the dictates of some media outlets, who “told us it was not the right time to politicize the tragedy…There is no right time to talk about the causes, because the event has already occurred and if you spend time talking about the causes then you’re disrespecting the effects” (29). While not all media advances this same position, McAllister argues that the overwhelming media message elides complex conversations about policy change. Paradoxically, then, the media works to explain away the tragedy while simultaneously discouraging the general public from seeking explanations and possible means for preventing additional mass shootings in the future. In particular, the media discourages efforts to “politicize the tragedy,” because calls for policy change might hold those in power accountable for failing to protect citizens from violence (29).

The novel, therefore, critiques the ways in which media often reifies narratives espoused by government officials; McAllister also challenges these reductive narratives.

The media attempts to control public opinion regarding the shooter and those close to him, but McAllister demonstrates that the shooter himself retains a significant amount of control. The shooter’s mother is unnamed in the novel to reflect the media’s tendency to call her only “The Mother Of” the shooter. This disidentification reflects another effect of the shooting, as the shooter “robbed [his mother] of her right to define herself” (44). Moreover, Anna remarks that she and others affected by the shooting “were forced to account for him, to carve out a space in our brains where he would always live” (46). Anna’s personal feelings and experiences regarding the shooting and its aftermath serve as a microcosm of the collective experience. She states that,
“The shooter tore through the gauzy curtain of security that made me think I was in a safe place, that made me think there was some way I could live without fear” (52). The metaphor of the “gauzy curtain” indicates that the appearance of security was always an illusion, even before the shooting. Despite the fact that Anna, the citizens of Seldom Falls, and, by extension, Americans in general are already in danger and have been for a long time, the shooting and others like it disrupt the comforting illusion of security by which the town and the nation alike wish to define themselves.

Anna’s experience also raises questions about the ethics of cultural trauma and demonstrates how large-scale traumatic events alter collective identity. She asks herself, “Did I even have a right to mourn a mass killing that didn’t kill anyone I loved? I wasn’t there to witness it, but I still wake up and feel it, convinced it’s the only thing I’ve ever seen” (65). Indeed, Anna compares her experience to the experiences of those more closely associated with the shooting. Those who were present or whose loved ones died during the shooting differ from Anna and from many community members in that they faced individual trauma in addition to the cultural trauma incited when the shooting disrupts their collective identity and sense of safety.

The shooting altered the community’s collective identity because they previously defined themselves by their friendliness. As Anna explains, a major magazine named Seldom Falls “America’s friendliest city…three times in the ‘80s,” and even in the present, “[m]any of the shops on Main Street have faded signs in their windows saying WELCOME TO AMERICA’S FRIENDLiest CITY” (15). The faded signs indicate that the town is not the same as it once was, and whatever may have made it the friendliest city is also fading. The town’s name, Seldom Falls, implies that the town does “fall” at least some of the time; the town seems to decline as a result of the shooting, but perhaps the shooting is instead a product of a falling community. The
shooting is shocking for the community, despite indications that the town is no longer prosperous as well as the regular occurrence of school shootings across the country, because the residents of Seldom Falls “were raised to understand that being here was what kept us safe” (McAllister 17). Seldom Falls believed itself to be immune to rampage violence. The community in the novel signifies the thousands of comparable communities in the United States that are similarly vulnerable to this type of violence. In this way, *How to Be Safe* reflects the cultural trauma of school shootings because of the countless locales that have experienced or will experience this kind of shock and disruption to their daily lives and identities. The novel also asserts that seemingly safe towns are vulnerable to mass shootings, critiquing the media trope that claims no one could have imagined such a tragedy occurring.

The novel also challenges the narrative of a safe, idyllic community prior to the shooting by acknowledging the flaws that predated this event. Anna notes that the shooting has increased racial profiling in the community, despite the fact that the shooter was white. The increase in racial profiling both acknowledges that racial profiling was already an issue and that the residents of what is supposedly the “friendliest” city resort to racism following an unrelated threat. The presence of racial profiling before the shooting and the increase in such discrimination in its aftermath indicates that Seldom Falls may never have been a “safe” community for racialized minorities. Further, Anna states that “Arrests skyrocketed” in the aftermath of the shooting. These changes signal a “major crisis” for the town, which Anna compares to a natural disaster. She recalls that when she was sixteen, “the lake overflowed and flooded half the town” (72). This incredible flood “was the kind of disaster people would talk about for the rest of their lives,” just as they will now talk about the school shooting for the rest of their lives (74). Tellingly, this comparison between the shooting and a natural disaster
indicates that the shooting seemed inevitable and that Anna and other citizens felt powerless to stop it. This comparison also parallels media discourse regarding mass shootings because it overlooks the structural factors that facilitated the tragedy.

McAllister makes explicit connections between the fictional shooting and the nationwide epidemic of school shootings to show that there really are no individual mass shootings, but instead a continuum of interrelated events that arise because of the same underlying cultural and political causes. Anna explains that “[i]n America we send children to school to get shot,” so, “[t]he children learn how to hide beneath their desks. They spend every morning learning what to do in case of an active shooter” (75-76). These preparations are, of course, largely futile, both because hiding under desks would not provide much protection from bullets and because school shootings continue happening despite these preparations. Anna thinks about yet “another safe town across the country, [where] another boy with a gun and a grudge shot a classroom full of children…The safe town is dark now. It is cold and will never feel safe again” (75). The repetition of the words “another” and “safe” remind the reader that school shootings continue to occur and that every town facing this type of tragedy previously believed itself to be safe. The novel emphasizes that, while the details of each shooting may differ, the trauma left behind in each instance is the same. Through this emphasis, McAllister argues that school and government policies enacted in response to mass shootings do little to prevent them. He also indicates that the media’s conventional reactions to these tragedies ring hollow. The novel asserts a counternarrative to these dominant narratives about how to respond socially and politically to mass shootings by demonstrating how typical media reactions ignore the systems and policies that enable these events. Moreover, the novel’s counternarrative differs from that of The Hour I
First Believed, because McAllister highlights the familiar, repeated traumas of mass shootings instead of focusing on a singular instance of this violence.

The novel also challenges dominant narratives through representations of diverse perspectives as well as through the use of elements from an unconventional genre. Other than the prologue—in which a third person omniscient narrator shares the shooter’s perspective—Anna narrates the entire novel. How to Be Safe opens with the perpetrator’s perspective and the details leading up to his crime in a manner similar to the inverted detective story. In this genre, “the reader is informed fully about the crime at the beginning through scenes identifying the killer and showing him at work” (Herbert 238). McAllister uses the genre here to indicate that the role of the reader is not to figure out “whodunnit,” but instead to focus on the aftermath of the violence. Unlike media narratives that often seek to unravel the mystery of why or how the killer enacted violence, the novel dispels mystery from the outset. McAllister argues that we already know what has happened because we have seen it happen dozens of times. The novel also eschews the conventions of media narratives by offering multiple perspectives on the shooting and its aftermath. The text represents multiple identities and perspectives secondhand through Anna’s detailed descriptions of events, debates, and both public and media discourses in Seldom Falls. These various perspectives indicate that there can be no singular narrative of trauma and assert that an understanding of complex points of view is necessary to effect substantive societal change. For instance, Anna explains the different perspectives of the shooting victims’ families. Some family members argue that the school should never reopen, “but should instead stand as a memorial to those who had died,” while others thought the school should be torn down completely (91). These arguments parallel those arising after various real-life mass shootings, in which even those in similar positions with regard to the tragedies often hold conflicting points of
The novel also depicts multiple identities through the chapters “Victims, Part 1,”
“Victims, Part II, and “Victims, Part III.” Anna describes in these chapters her direct and indirect relationships to the shooting victims, as well as the things she learned about the victims from the community and the media. These descriptions of the victims are informed by official reporting of the event, but simultaneously counter official narratives by revealing personal information about victims and critiquing media portrayals of them. One description of a deceased teacher notes that his obituary “focused on his public service” but omitted “the strange pleasure he took in shooting squirrels with a BB gun, or the brief period when we all suspected he was living in his car in the parking lot” (41). Here, McAllister subtly critiques the conventions of public mourning and the tendency to portray the dead in an unrealistically positive light, especially when they died tragically. The novel also critiques the media’s portrayal of “pretty and young and white” victims (179). Anna argues that the media portrayed one victim, a white cheerleader, as a “Small-Town Barbie” because “people got sadder about pretty dead white girls than any other type of dead person” (179). This particular criticism hints at the novel’s broader concerns with the racialized nature of violence, trauma, and public recognition of both victimhood and the culpability of those who perpetrate violence. Although these descriptions are related entirely from Anna’s point of view, they offer a perspective different from that usually offered by the media and critique these more familiar forms of public mourning.

The government narrative portrayed in the novel is that of a so-called “war on violence,” which mirrors the real-life calls by some government officials to increase the number of firearms

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20 Debates raged after Columbine regarding what to do with the library, where the majority of the murders occurred. Some families of those killed called for the library to be permanently closed, but ultimately official decided to renovate the space (Olinger). Even decades later, school officials and survivors disagreed about whether the building should still stand; while some survivors of Columbine argue that “part of their healing process involves revisiting the site…some longtime faculty, including the former principal, are leading the charge for the school's destruction” (Allyn).
in schools to prevent shooting deaths (159). Readers immediately recognize the irony of a war on violence, and this irony invites criticism of government responses to mass shootings in general. Anna compares one state senator, who “had built himself into a national figure” in the wake of the shooting, with other state officials who “remained silent” because they had “learned a long time ago that the best way to stay in power is to remind people you have power only when it’s absolutely necessary” (158). Anna’s comparison implies that both types of government action are inadequate because they are individualistic and unconcerned with actually improving the lived realities of their constituents. The state senator who spoke out about guns influenced the state legislature to enact a new policy requiring all teachers and school administrators to keep guns at their desks (159). They also mandated that “in each grade, ten students would be designated as class guardians, armed and trained in tactical shooting” (159). While the idea of arming students has not been seriously considered by representatives of the United States government, many high-ranking government officials—including former President Donald Trump and former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos—have argued that teachers and school administrators should be armed to protect innocent students in the event of a mass shooting. According to Education Week, the idea of arming teachers gains traction following large-scale school shootings, such as those that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High school in 2018. In fact, some teachers and school officials in Texas and a few other states already carry guns on school grounds (“Should Teachers Carry Guns?”). This policy is unpopular among teachers and school officials, but, like the fictional state senator in How to Be Safe, some officials believe that dangerous individuals “will always have guns” and, therefore, law-abiding citizens must “outnumber them with our own guns” (159). In response to the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, which occurred the same year
that McAllister published his novel, “Florida law was changed to allow school districts to train and arm employees…including administrators, librarians and custodians” (Spencer). While this law only allows for teachers to carry firearms on campus if they are current or former police officers or military servicemembers, as of November 2018 “teachers in 28 states can carry firearms” (Spencer). The novel addresses the significant controversy in the United States following school shootings by depicting the narrative espoused by some members of the government, right-wing media outlets, and gun rights organizations and by offering a critique of this narrative. Like Lamb’s novel, How To Be Safe implies that dominant narratives disguise the extent to which structural violence contributes to gun violence.

Though much of the novel subtly and indirectly critiques media narratives of school shootings, in fleeting moments the novel offers an explicit counternarrative to the accepted interpretation of this event and other events like it by exploring different possible causes. While reflecting on other acts of violence worldwide, Anna remarks that “Most bombs are just the result of people trying to remind the world of their existence” (90). She argues that “Men do not have a language for loneliness, so they turn to violence and sports, in that order. They cannot cry, so they blow things up instead” (90). Much like the shooter’s own introspection in the prologue, Anna’s claims indicate that the socialization of men in American society and even worldwide contributes to the prevalence of violence.

McAllister represents additional perspectives through indirect comparisons between mass shootings in the United States and large-scale acts of violence and terrorism in other countries. While watching television, Anna notes, “[i]n a country that I couldn’t locate on the map, a school was raided and all the children were kidnapped by a terrorist group” (128). She further describes the scene, stating that the “terrorists are all boys, armed with God and guns and hate and
desperation” (129). The incident Anna describes compares to the Seldom Falls massacre in that the raid occurs at a school and that the perpetrators are boys. Her choice to describe them as “boys,” rather than as men, emphasizes both that the perpetrators are young and that they are not unlike the perpetrators of most school shootings in the United States. After describing another terrorist attack in another country, Anna reflects on media representations of violent criminals. She notes that when perpetrators of violent crimes are Muslim or Black, other members of their ethnic or racial group are implicated in the media. By contrast, “When a white man did the killing, they called him a lone wolf” (131). Through Anna’s description, the novel shows that media responses to violence deny individuality to members of racialized groups. The media depicts white men as individual actors, but assumes that perpetrators of color must be motivated by some group ideology. In this way, the media humanizes white male shooters in a manner denied to Black and brown perpetrators. This section of the novel allows for multiple interpretations by representing these discrepancies in media representation and the collective understanding of violence, but it does not overtly argue for a particular point of view. Instead, Anna’s narration describes these issues and leaves readers to construct meaning for themselves, beyond the bounds of typical media patterns.

*How to Be Safe* depicts the lasting effects of cultural trauma, rather than the immediate effects of a traumatic event, by chronicling the entire year following the massacre. As the first anniversary approaches, Anna explains that the media “would call this the final chapter of our story, because our attention span for atrocities is fleeting” (217). She implies that the media narrative attempts to close the book on traumatic events after a certain period of time, but that the trauma remains for those affected. For example, the father of one of the shooting victims commits suicide just before the anniversary and “streamed it live online, because he said he
wanted people to see exactly the damage a gun does when its pressed against someone’s skull” (219). Anna explains that the man “wanted to become a martyr. But his son was already a martyr, and the sad thing about martyrs is they don’t matter. They’re just dead bodies” (219). Clearly, the man suffered greatly from the individual trauma of his son’s murder as well as the cultural trauma he shared with other members of his community and the nation as a whole. Although the shooting and its aftermath were widely reported in the national news for the year that followed, conspiracy theorists denied that the shooting took place and harassed victims’ families and activists online, including the man who ultimately took his own life. The conspiracy theorists “claimed he’s never even had a son, that he was an actor hired by the government as part of anti-gun conspiracy. They told him his son was not dead” (220). Anna implies that this online vitriol may have contributed to the man’s suicide. This description of online conspiracy parallels myriad claims from fringe media groups, online conspiracy theorists, and right-wing extremists that the massacre at Sandy Hook and other mass shootings like it were staged by “crisis actors” to promote gun control.21 Both the rush to move on from the shooting and the denial of the tragedy depicted in the novel and their real-world analogs reflect the complex nature of cultural trauma, in which some members of the culture fail to recognize the trauma as such. Ultimately, How To Be Safe depicts the media and government narratives, as well as the political actions and inactions, that attempt to deny school shootings as culturally traumatic and thereby engender even more trauma for survivors, witnesses, community members, and those who remain vulnerable to mass shootings.

21 In early 2021, Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene came under fire for her Facebook posts, in which she claimed that the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 and at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018 were “staged” (Salcedo). Greene also expressed agreement with a Facebook user who wrote that “none of the school shootings were real or done by the ones who were supposedly arrested for them” (Hananoki). She has since been compelled to publicly apologize and disavow these statements, as well as for her claims that 9/11 was perpetrated by the United States government.
Off-Campus Rampage Violence in Cultural Trauma Fiction

*If We Had Known* (2018) by Elise Juska counters the media’s disproportionate focus on school shootings by depicting a mass shooting that occurs in another public space. In the novel, a young, male shooter kills three shoppers and one security guard at a local mall before turning the gun on himself. The novel’s protagonist, Maggie, taught the perpetrator in her Freshman Composition class at Central Main State University four years prior. This connection invites the reader to think about the shooting in light of both school shootings and mass shootings more generally. Indeed, the novel references school shootings multiple times, including Maggie’s daughter’s realization that the shooter “could just have easily snapped in [Maggie’s] class” (Juska 37). Maggie also directly references school shootings when she thinks about a meeting she and the rest of the Freshman Composition faculty had with the counseling center regarding “concerning” student writing (53). In this meeting, counselors “coached the writing instructors on what subtleties to look for” in students’ essays to identify those who could be in crisis (53). Maggie recalls that the meeting took place “shortly after the Virginia Tech shooting” (53). Therefore, even though *If We Had Known* centers on a mass shooting that did not occur on a school campus, the novel recognizes that school shootings and off-campus shootings affect communities similarly. The novel contributes to our understanding of Cultural Trauma Fiction by demonstrating that the phenomenon of mass shootings in general, not just school shootings, is culturally traumatic, challenging the commonplace media narrative that people close to the shooter should have recognized signs of mental illness and prevented the shooting, and

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22 As previously discussed, “not all mass public shootings receive the same amount of attention” (Silva and Capellan 1313). Research indicates that “school shooters and lone-wolf terrorists make up approximately 32% of all mass public shootings; yet, they receive 75% to 80% of the total news coverage” (1326).
demonstrating the flawed mechanisms by which social and mass media construct narratives of violence.

The novel probes the similarities between school shootings and mass shootings in general when Maggie compares her individual experience to the experiences of former professors of previous mass shooters; these comparisons reveal how the normalization of masculine violence enables shootings. Maggie recalls her mediated witnessing of the Virginia Tech shooting, when, “[I]ike everyone, she had followed the unfolding story in wordless horror” (53). During the news coverage following the tragedy, Maggie “watched one of the shooter’s English professors interviewed on CNN…as she described the disturbing material she’d seen in his work” (53). The professor also tells the interviewer that she “alerted the school, and the police, who couldn’t act unless the threats were more explicit” (54). Maggie acknowledges that her former student may have submitted writing that was abnormal, but she does not believe it was ever concerning enough to warrant reporting him to the school or police. His writing may not have caused serious concern because of America’s “cultural acceptance of the boys’ obsession with violence” (Klein and Chancer 84). Indeed, research indicates that many members of communities affected by gun violence ignored the warning signs because they “adopted a ‘boys will be boys’ attitude that led them to mistakenly believe aggressive statements had no deeper meaning…it may have been the very ‘normalcy’ of such remarks ‘in everyday life’ that explains why myriad parties—including but not limited to parents—did little to prevent words from turning into actions” (84). Because toxic masculinity has normalized boys’ violence, Maggie wonders if reporting her former student’s writing would have solicited any action from law enforcement, especially given what she knows about the Virginia Tech shooter.
The novel demonstrates the difficulty of anticipating and preventing violence by depicting Maggie as she revisits Nathan’s writing from years prior. Maggie did not recognize any reason for concern in Nathan’s writing when he was her student, but in hindsight she wonders if there was something she could have done to prevent him from committing an act of violence. Maggie retrieves Nathan’s final paper and carefully rereads it to look for any signs of violent tendencies that she may have missed four years earlier, when he was still her student. She believes Nathan’s final paper is about a trip he took with his father. She learns when she revisits the paper that this is technically accurate, but that the paper is specifically about a hunting trip. Maggie initially thinks that the paper is innocuous because so many of her students “were kids from the country, kids who grew up hunting—certainly this was not the only hunting essay she’d received” (58). However, as she reads the paper, she begins to notice “other things, smaller things. Bits of language—always, it was in the language” (58). The language of Nathan’s paper includes extensive, detailed descriptions of guns and ammunition. Maggie notes that these descriptions are not relevant to the paper; the essay lacks a plot and does not share any information about the relationship between Nathan and his father. When she was Nathan’s teacher, Maggie thought of the essay “as the work of a lonely kid who lacked imagination, who was prone to digressions” (59). Now, she believes that Nathan wrote so much about the guns because “he simply liked thinking about them. He couldn’t help thinking about them, like a student with an eating disorder who lapses into lush digressions about food” (59). Maggie likely uses the example of a student with an eating disorder because of her familiarity with eating disorders (her daughter struggles with anorexia), but this comparison is also telling; in hindsight, Maggie recognizes Nathan’s excessive description of weapons as a manifestation of obsession. Also, like many eating disorders, Nathan’s obsession with guns went largely unnoticed until he
had already caused serious damage. American culture normalizes disordered eating in girls and violence in boys until the consequences become too severe to ignore.

Just as Maggie feels guilty for not recognizing her daughter’s eating disorder and other concerning behaviors sooner, she begins doubting her past judgment regarding Nathan and his writing. Bill Wall, the department chair, questions Maggie about her memory of Nathan. Maggie explains that Nathan was “uninvolved” in her composition course and that he “lacked sensitivity” (70). Bill reframes Maggie’s descriptions of her former student, asking if he was “isolated,” “hostile,” or if he “lacked empathy” (70). Maggie feels judged because of this reframing and because Bill asks her if Nathan’s behavior and demeanor “didn’t concern you at the time?” (71). Although Maggie insists that she did not think Nathan was dangerous, she also doubts herself as she remembers that she was more concerned for how Nathan might affect other students in the class than for Nathan himself. Maggie feels “alarmed” by the realization that “to even imagine the scenario where her concern was expressed to Nathan, for Nathan, that simple pivot in perspective—to have taken him aside, seen him as the student in need of help—was nearly impossible to do” (71). Because she realizes that she did not fully empathize with Nathan when he was her student, Maggie now wonders if she is somehow responsible for the horrible actions he took four years later. Through Maggie’s uncertainty and self-examination, the novel highlights the questions anyone who knew a perpetrator of violence might ask themselves.

Bill’s concern about Maggie’s perception of Nathan, as well as Maggie’s own fears about what she could have done differently, reflect one of the novel’s central questions: to what extent are teachers responsible for the actions of their students? This question reflects the relationship between this novel and texts about school shootings. In the case of school shootings, the media often criticizes teachers and school administrators for failing to recognize potential shooters. In If
We Had Known, college faculty and administrators are also expected to notice signs that their students may become violent. While Maggie argues that a college cannot guarantee the safety of its students—especially off-campus—Bill argues that colleges “have a responsibility to try” to keep students safe (72). Bill argues that the shooting “didn’t happen out of nowhere. Whatever measures we can take, whatever red flags we can be more vigilant about…No doubt there were signs, and they were missed” (72). Maggie maintains that educators cannot be wholly responsible for the actions of their students—particularly their adult students—but Bill believes that they should take on greater responsibility in the hopes of preventing future tragedies. Bill goes on to say that if someone had noticed a ‘red flag’ in one of Nathan’s papers, “there’s a chance tragedy might have been avoided. It might have been caught” (74). Bill’s position reflects the dominant narrative of mass shootings, while Maggie’s position serves as a counterargument.

Juska uses Bill’s concerns about student’s mental health to demonstrate the problematic narrative that mental health intervention alone can prevent mass shootings. Bill worries about professors’ perceptions of ‘red flags’ because he has internalized the narrative that mental illness causes people to act violently, and that intervention to treat mental illness can prevent violence. Bill tells Maggie, “last year, one in every two of our students was medicated for anxiety,” and he speculates that Nathan suffered from “what were obviously very severe problems” (72). Bill implies that Nathan committed a mass shooting due to an unrecognized mental illness. Maggie feels an increasing sense of guilt and responsibility, but she nonetheless argues that teachers are “not trained psychologists…It’s not our job to know if they might be shooting people in a mall in four years” (74). Maggie defends herself as the shooter’s former teacher, who could not have known that Nathan would go on to commit a mass shooting, and simultaneously defends other educators who are criticized for failing to intervene before students commit school shootings.
Bill’s claims about mental health parallel the collective struggle to cope with mass shootings both in schools and in other public venues, in which individuals and the media look for reasons why the tragedy occurred and for people to blame. Indeed, as scholar Cassandra Bird notes, “for the American news media there exists a strong link between mental illness and mass shooting acts. After events like these, media and political discussion focuses on the sanity of the shooter and often becomes the dominant narrative” (4). Because of this tendency, Bill knows that the media will question both the perpetrator’s mental health and the school’s culpability for not intervening to provide psychiatric treatment.

In addition to reflecting media discourses regarding mass shootings, *If We Had Known* considers the effects of these tragedies on adolescents and young adults. Maggie’s teenage daughter, Anna, struggles to cope with the shooting even though she was not present at the mall when it occurred. For Anna, that the shooting occurred on an otherwise normal day represents “the collision of the ordinary and the end of the world,” and emphasizes “the not-impossibility of terrifying things” (Juska 31). In other words, the shooting makes her more aware that tragedy can strike anywhere at any time, and living in a small, rural town cannot insulate her from danger. Anna also believes that the “most terrifying part” of the shooting is that Nathan Dugan, the shooter, “had been plotting, roaming around the periphery of their lives—the mall, the campus—just waiting for the moment to explode, and nobody had seen it coming. That these killers walked the world, invisible and unstoppable, and your only hope was that you didn’t cross their paths” (37). Anna’s belief that the shooting was “invisible and unstoppable,” parallels the commonplace claim that certain instances of mass violence are inevitable and taking legal and political measures, such as gun control, cannot prevent tragedy (Metzl and MacLeish).

According to public health researchers, not even psychiatric evaluation can predict—or make
‘visible’—who will commit a mass shooting, since studies indicate that “psychiatrists using clinical judgment are not much better than laypersons at predicting which individual patients will commit violent crimes and which will not” (Metzl and MacLeish). This seeming invisibility of potential mass shooters persists because “[p]sychiatric diagnosis is in and of itself not predictive of violence, and even the overwhelming majority of psychiatric patients who fit the profile of recent US mass shooters—gun-owning, angry, paranoid White men—do not commit crimes” (Metzl and MacLeish). Indeed, research indicates that potential mass shooters are “roaming around the periphery” of public life, undetected by psychiatry and—at least in the opinion of some proponents of gun rights—“unstoppable” (Juska 37).

*If We Had Known* centers on the aftermath of the shooting by depicting both individual experiences like Anna’s and the collective repercussions of the tragedy. The day after the shooting, Maggie listens to a radio interview with the fiancé of a young woman who was murdered. As she listens to the interview, “Maggie could feel the weight of the tragedy subtly shifting: the shooting no longer a slow unknown unfolding before them but a terrible memory taking shape behind them, facts disclosed and assembled, hardening into the past” (64). The shooting becomes memory after only one day. It is no longer “unfolding,” both because it is not actively occurring—as it was when the media began reporting—and because the public now has a greater understanding of what took place. Notably, Maggie states that the facts are “assembled.” The media, government and community leaders, and the public give “shape” to the events and fit them into a narrative of “the past.” The media in particular quickly declares the shooting a thing of the past so that it can move on to other stories.

*If We Had Known* showcases the distinct nature of contemporary cultural traumas, which are shaped by the interactions of mass media and the public. In the novel, the public and the
media collaboratively construct the narrative of the shooting through social media. Another former student of Maggie’s, Luke Finch, writes a Facebook post about Nathan, his odd behavior in the composition class, and the shooting. In the comments section of Luke’s Facebook post, hundreds of people share their opinions and theories about the tragedy and why it occurred. In this way, too, the novel parallels the aftermath of real-life mass shootings in the United States. The narrator notes that in addition to those offering sympathy or political critique in the comments section of Luke’s post, “[t]here were the sick conspiracy theorists who thought the shooting hadn’t happened and was part of a government hoax perpetrated by anti-gun groups” (111). While Juska does not devote much attention to these conspiracy theorists, her reference to them contributes to the novel’s realistic depiction of contemporary American mass shooting discourse. The novel’s brief mention of these ideas demonstrates that unfounded conspiracy theories are not the dominant narrative of school shootings, but acknowledges that these kinds of narratives frequently emerge following mass shootings and that social media facilitates these narratives’ circulation among the general public.

Juska also criticizes the reliability of mass media narratives given their frequent collaboration with the uninformed public. Social media also influences more traditional media outlets, and individuals sharing personal opinions online can unwittingly contribute to media narratives. The reciprocal nature of mass media and social media influence—in which mass media influences social media and social media informs mass media—leads to the dominance of certain narratives over others. Shortly after the shooting, a reporter for the school newspaper contacts Luke about his Facebook post. The reporter, Julie Brody, tells Luke that the responses to his post inspired her to write an article about the aftermath of the shooting. Julie explains how the varied online responses demonstrate that “[t]here are so many compelling angles” to the story.
(116). Luke initially does not understand what Julie means by ‘angles,’ so she explains that the angles include Luke’s “memories of Nathan Dugan, of course. And what it’s like to be sitting in class with a person like this, and then all the attention online” (116). Clearly, Julie’s article will help construct narratives of the shooting and its aftermath. During their brief conversation, Luke and Julie discuss his impressions of Nathan when they were in class together. Julie asks Luke why he thinks Nathan “made such a lasting impression” on him, and Luke defensively explains that “it wasn’t just me who noticed him” (118). Luke resists the notion that he may have been abnormally aware of or interested in Nathan because he feels guilty for having once rejected Nathan’s offer to go hunting together. Luke tells Julie that “there were a lot of us who felt that…[Nathan] was kind of disturbing” to indicate that his relationship to Nathan was no different than that of his classmates (118-119). In so doing, Luke unwittingly fuels the ‘angle’ that there were warning signs of Nathan’s potential for violence. Luke only admits to himself that, “in truth, he barely remembered Nathan Dugan, and what he thought he remembered he was now starting to second-guess” (119). Luke questions his own memory because he now realizes that he has become a source for a story, rather than merely a former classmate who remembers anecdotes about the future killer. Despite his hesitancy, Luke continues responding to Julie’s questions. Her questions begin leading Luke towards the narrative she wishes to portray; Julie states, “it sounds like lots of students were aware there was a problem” (120). Luke replies, “Yeah…It definitely wasn’t just me” (120). While the reader sees that the fear of seeming abnormal or of somehow appearing responsible for the shooting motivates Luke’s response, Julie takes the response as confirmation of her theory that Maggie should have intervened regarding Nathan’s behavior. Moreover, Julie asks Luke for his opinion on whether or not Maggie ought to have talked to Nathan about his paper. Luke agrees that she should have, not because he has
given the question any real thought, but because the phone interview has made him late for work and he wants to end the conversation as quickly as possible. Because of his initial social media post, Luke becomes a ‘source’ on Nathan Dugan and on Maggie’s class, despite his foggy memories and his ignorance of the narrative he helps construct. This interview and the resulting story in the school newspaper, which implicates Maggie, demonstrate the role of media in creating narratives in the aftermath of traumatic events. The media attempts to answer unanswerable questions or to simplify incredibly nuanced accounts in service of a streamlined narrative that satisfies mass audiences and reifies the status quo.

The novel also demonstrates how media tends towards uncomplicated analysis and hastily assigns blame. Maggie’s students read Julie’s article in the student newspaper and ask Maggie about her experience teaching Nathan Dugan. Students ask what the shooter had been like in class and what his writing was like. When Maggie evades the questions, a student remarks, “The article said he was deeply troubled” (152). The student also explains that the article describes a paper Nathan wrote for her class as “haunting,” and states, “that he was messed up, and the other students all knew it” (153). Here, the reader sees how Julie has decontextualized Luke’s interview responses and shaped them to fit her angle. Moreover, the article fabricates elements of the interview. The article states, “Asked if he thought his professor had been negligent, Luke admitted, “Probably, yes” (156). Readers know that Julie did not ask Luke if he thought Maggie had been negligent, and his similar answer—“Yeah, probably”—had been offered in response to an entirely different question. The questions Julie actually asked Luke were about whether or not Maggie had talked to Nathan about his paper. Luke stated that he did not know if she had, but acknowledged that she “probably” should have (120). Julie’s depiction of the interview reflects her own interpretations of Luke’s responses, rather than a
factual account of what she asked Luke and how he responded. She concludes the article, “Clearly, in hindsight, that intervention was necessary—not only that, it might have prevented a tragedy” (156). Julie draws her conclusion from evidence that she constructed. Moreover, Luke’s actual responses to her interview questions were constructions based on his fallible memory and his unwillingness to admit that he had been unkind to Nathan when they were classmates.

Despite the fact that the flawed article only appeared in the school newspaper, it nonetheless participates in the communal process of meaning-making in the aftermath of the shooting.

In addition, Luke’s Facebook post and Julie’s article contribute to the broader construction of the event as an American cultural trauma and demonstrate public and media fascination with understanding mass shooters. Both the post and the article gain traction online and spread to people across the country. When Anna begins dating James, a fellow student at her college, she discloses her personal connection to the recent shooting. Anna tells him about her mother’s relationship to Nathan Dugan because she wants to keep James’ interest. She even confesses that Maggie found an old paper of Nathan’s and did not allow Anna to read it. James realizes that he has heard about Nathan’s writing before, remarking that the paper Maggie found could be “the paper that guy wrote about online. On Facebook” (178). James correctly assumes that the Facebook post Luke wrote refers to the same paper Maggie found. He insists that Nathan’s paper warrants scrutiny, because “[i]t might shed light on this guy’s motives or his mental state” (179). James and others hope that the four-year-old paper will provide valuable insight because, although Nathan himself posted a video online shortly before the shooting in which he described his plan, he did not leave any explicit explanation of his motives (15). This interest in Nathan’s writing parallels the collective fascination with the writings of other mass shooters, including the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre.
Like the mass shooter in *If We Had Known*, Klebold and Harris left behind video explanations of their plans. Klebold and Harris’ “basement tapes” differ from Dugan’s video in that they detailed their motives across hours of footage, but the media and the public were nonetheless interested in uncovering their past writings to determine the underlying psychological factors that motivated the killers. Cullen notes that the media studied Harris’ personal journal, and “they focused on his hatred—hatred that supposedly led him to revenge” ("The Depressive"). The FBI also analyzed the journal, but instead concluded that Harris felt contempt for others even more than he hated them. This observation and their belief in his “perpetual deceitfulness”—as evidenced by Harris’ journal entry that states “I lie a lot…Almost constantly, and to everybody”—lead the FBI to conclude that Harris was a psychopath (Cullen, “The Depressive”). By contrast, the FBI determined from Klebold’s journal that he was likely depressed and suicidal, not a psychopath. Their analysis of the journal indicates that Klebold “would never have pulled off Columbine without Harris. He might have gotten caught for some petty crime, gotten help in the process, and conceivably could have gone on to live a normal life” (Cullen, “The Depressive”). Cullen argues that the FBI’s view of Harris “is more reassuring” than their estimation of Klebold, because “Harris was not a wayward boy who could have been rescued. Harris, they believe, was irretrievable.” The FBI profiles of two of the most infamous mass shooters shape the collective understanding of what psychological factors drive young men to kill.

In Juska’s novel, then, the media and public fascination with what Nathan might have written reflects their desire to know if Nathan was like Harris, an irredeemable psychopath, or like Klebold, a profoundly unhappy young man in need of help. James’ desire to understand Nathan’s motives leads him to search online for more information. He soon discovers Julie’s
article. Based on the article, James concludes that Nathan “was clearly fucked up and [Maggie] ignored him” (Juska 191). This information inspires him to revisit Luke’s Facebook post and the hundreds of comments posted in response. James texts Anna, “They blame dugan’s [sic] mother just because she’s an easy target…When plenty of people didn’t do shit” (194). James resists what he perceives to be the typical, convenient narrative of mass shooters—that their parents are to blame for not knowing what their children were capable of. He argues that Marielle Dugan should not be blamed because “there were plenty of other people who were fully aware this guy needed help. Because that’s how the system works. It protects some people and ignores others” (180). Though James is a problematic character in the novel, his criticism of the media highlights one problem ubiquitous in media responses to rampage violence: the tendency to blame parents, especially mothers, for failing to prevent their sons’ violent acts. In a study on school shootings, researchers found that “most journalistic accounts focused only on three factors: the need for gun control in American society, violence in the media itself, and the behavior of parents” (Klein and Chancer 82). Like James, the researchers note that even if parents miss some warning signs, clearly so too did other members of the community including teachers, neighbors, and peers (84). Because James recognizes this flaw in the media narrative, he resolves to (re)construct the narrative of the shooting to reflect that Nathan’s mother is not the only person deserving of blame.

Similarly, Suzanne—whose husband, Tom, is having an affair with Maggie—influences the narrative of the shooting by sending a copy of Nathan’s essay to Arlen Mackey. Arlen’s fiancée, Doreen Howard, was killed in the shooting. Doreen previously cut Suzanne’s hair and the women discussed Doreen’s engagement and excitement for the future. Suzanne sends Arlen the essay both because of her sadness about Doreen’s murder and her anger about Tom’s affair.
Arlen then shares Nathan’s essay with the local newspaper, which reports that “the outing of this four-year-old essay is proof that Nathan’s violent tendencies had deep roots” (201). The newspaper prints Nathan’s entire essay. The article also furthers the narrative that Maggie should have known Nathan was dangerous, citing a psychologist who claims that there are “almost always signs,” that individuals are violent, and sometimes the signs “are quite obvious” (201).

As a result of the article, Bill arranges another meeting with Maggie to inform her “a set of new policies” for faculty. The new policy states, “if a student writes about any inflammatory subject, faculty must report it” (208). Bill explains that inflammatory subjects include any writing “that alludes, directly or indirectly, to feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, violence, [or] hopelessness” (208). Maggie objects on the grounds that virtually all students’ personal essays include these topics, and “if student know we’re reporting every paper that hints at any kind of trouble, anything painful or personal, they’ll stop opening up” (209). For Maggie, who has often been a resource for struggling students, trust is essential. In addition to the new policy, Bill suggests that Maggie take a leave of absence. Maggie refuses to do so and takes offense at the suggestion.

Nonetheless, the new narrative that the media and the public are constructing has personal and professional consequences for Maggie, which parallel the consequences faced by former contacts of real-life mass murderers.

*If We Had Known* also showcases the multiple motives of people who actively participate in constructing narratives of tragedy. After Nathan’s essay reaches the public, James engages more directly in shaping the narrative of the shooting. James creates a video in which he interviews Marielle Dugan, Nathan’s mother, about the essay. Marielle eagerly consents to an interview that may reshape the public’s understanding of her son, because she feels that Nathan “was no longer hers. He belonged to the world” (228). She resents that countless strangers
theorize about Nathan’s motives despite having never met him. Marielle finds particularly troubling the theory that “he was trying to impress his father, resented his mother, had spent his life being ignored,” because “Marielle hadn’t ignored him. She had devoted her life to him” (227). She therefore seeks to set the record straight in her interview with James and to shift some of the blame elsewhere. First, Marielle tells James that the essay was completely made-up; “He hasn’t seen his father in twenty years…And they act like I’m the one who’s a bad parent” (235-236). Here, “they” refers to both organized media outlets and the general public on social media. Marielle, therefore, explicitly endeavors to reshape the narratives of both her son and herself. James also asks Marielle about her impression of Maggie. Marielle reveals that Maggie visited the house and states, “She came here telling me she was sorry for messing up with Nathan. She said she could have done something for him. She could have saved him—she has a kid too, she said” (236). Marielle’s recollection does not depict the interaction accurately, but instead reflects her desire to clear her name. She then remarks, “I told you this wasn’t all my fault” (236). Both James’ questions and Marielle’s responses place at least some of the blame on Maggie, who they agree did not “see how important it was to help Nathan…who clearly needed her help” (236). Notably, both James and Marielle imply that Maggie’s role as a mother influences her responsibility for Nathan. Because Maggie is “another mother” and “she has a kid too,” they expect her to have taken a maternal role in helping Nathan with his burgeoning psychological instability (236). This sentiment contradicts Marielle’s argument that she is not responsible, even though she is actually Nathan’s mother. Despite the inconsistency of Marielle’s narrative and the biases of James’ interview questions, Maggie feels implicated and agrees to take a leave of absence from teaching at Central Maine State, effective immediately.
Ultimately, however, If We Had Known demonstrates the limits of parents’ knowledge about their children’s inner lives. Shortly after the shooting, Maggie thinks, “For a mother to not recognize something was so deeply wrong with her child—it was a sickening thought” (122). She initially thinks that Marielle should have realized that Nathan was severely disturbed. However, Maggie also admits that she “had known that guilt herself” when she did not realize Anna was struggling with severe anxiety and anorexia (122). The novel reiterates the connection between Maggie and Marielle as mothers who did not know everything about their children towards the end of the narrative, when Anna’s close friend, Kim, tells Maggie that she is concerned about Anna. Maggie quickly makes the long drive to Anna’s dorm and questions why others failed to notice Anna’s deteriorating mental health sooner. She thinks that Anna’s father, Tom, should have noticed Anna was behaving oddly and losing weight when he went to check on her. Maggie asks herself, “How had he not seen it? How hadn’t Alexis? Because she was spoiled and self-centered…What about that teacher, then, the grad student Anna loved so much?” (267). Maggie’s desire to assign blame for Anna’s psychological decline parallels the collective rush to determine who was responsible for the shooting. Maggie arrives at the dorm and discusses with Anna what has been going on in her life recently. When Anna reveals her recent experiences to her mother, Maggie “was struck by all she didn’t know about her daughter; she had a life that was all her own” (269). Maggie’s realization mirrors Marielle’s thought that, “There had been times, lately, when she felt like she didn’t know [Nathan]. Since starting college, he’d changed” (229). In acknowledging what Maggie did not know and could not have known about her daughter, the novel implicitly absolves Marielle of some responsibility for not recognizing that Nathan was planning violence. Furthermore, the novel indicates that if Maggie could not prevent her daughter—whom she knew previously suffered from anxiety and an eating
disorder—from experiencing another instance of psychological decline, then she also could not have known that her former student would commit a mass shooting. While it is perhaps natural, in hindsight, for people to speculate about what they could have done to prevent terrible things from happening “if they had known,” Juska ultimately demonstrates the futility of looking back and assigning blame to those who did not recognize dormant psychological issues before they erupted.

Indeed, If We Had Known offers multiple perspectives from a diverse cast of characters who demonstrate how the media and the public construct narratives of cultural trauma. The novel simultaneously disrupts dominant narratives about mass shootings in general, including the idea that parents, teachers, and other figures in a potential mass shooter’s life ought to be able to prevent them from committing acts of violence. Juska demonstrates through Maggie and Anna’s relationship that all parental knowledge of one’s children is limited to what those children are willing to display or disclose, and this knowledge becomes increasingly scarce as children become adults. Through its depiction of the process of cultural meaning-making in the aftermath of trauma and its challenge to dominant narratives, If We Had Known argues that the typical American response to mass shootings is flawed. American media and policy makers often assume that the best way to prevent mass shootings, if not the only way to prevent them, is to better detect mental illness and then to prevent ‘dangerous’ mentally ill individuals from accessing weapons. This assumption fuels speculation about the motives and psychological conditions of mass shooters and overlooks the cultural factors, such as toxic masculinity, that may have influenced both the shooter’s desire to commit violence and the community’s inability to recognize the warning signs. Instead of relying on media speculation about mental illness and
parental neglect, Juska’s novel calls for a closer look at the underlying flaws in American culture that motivate violence.

**Conclusion**

Cultural Trauma Fiction depicting mass shootings and their aftermath responds to the abundance of rampage shootings that have occurred in schools and other public spaces since the late 1990s and their sensational coverage in the media. Although rampage violence shootings certainly occurred prior to the 1990s, so many mass shootings have occurred in the last three decades that some have defined Generation Z in relation to these now ubiquitous tragedies (Alter). Some individual mass shootings, including Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland, have been culturally traumatizing in and of themselves. Moreover, these shootings are part of the wider phenomenon of mass shootings in the United States, which collectively constitute a cultural trauma. While news media misinforms audiences, encourages additional acts of violence, and follows a familiar template of shock, mourning, and healing to process the trauma of rampage violence, fictional depictions of these events participate in the ongoing construction of cultural trauma and the subsequent reformation of cultural identity. Fictional depictions of mass shootings also offer a path forward following these events, rather than sensationalizing and reproducing the very conditions that facilitated them.

Rampage violence novels that are Cultural Trauma Fiction challenge media myths and reductive narratives, illuminate the similarities between the trauma of mass shootings and other culturally traumatic events, acknowledge the multiple and complex factors that motivate perpetrators of violence, demonstrate that structural violence is a component of the nationwide epidemic of gun violence, and show that denial or dismissal of trauma by some members of the cultural group actually constitutes part of the trauma of these events. As these examples show,
works of Cultural Trauma Fiction differ from other media depictions of atrocity because they move more slowly, allowing for a more nuanced explanation of the multiple, nebulous factors that contribute to this violence. Additionally, the form of the novel facilitates readers’ understanding of multiple perspectives. While news coverage of an event often centers on a few perspectives that advance a single narrative, Cultural Trauma Fiction explores multiple perspectives that may even contradict one another. Taken together, these various points of view foreclose the possibility of simple explanations and ask readers to consider the myriad causes and effects of cultural trauma.
Chapter 3: Disaster and Structural Violence

As the preceding chapters demonstrate, either singular large-scale events or repeated smaller events can result in cultural trauma. Some major events that potentially engender cultural trauma include acts of terrorism, mass violence, and natural disasters. These kinds of events become culturally traumatic because of the ways in which organizations and individuals define, describe, interpret, and respond to them. The collective reaction to such events is not homogenous; people may disagree about how to classify and define traumatic events. Disasters in particular elude clear classification. Through critical disaster studies and cultural trauma theory, this chapter explores what constitutes a disaster, how Americans differentiate between “natural” and “man-made” disasters, and by what means some disasters become cultural traumas. In particular, I demonstrate that natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina are culturally traumatic and that some literary responses to the event act as Cultural Trauma Fiction, just as do some novels depicting 9/11 and mass shootings. These works of Cultural Trauma Fiction represent multiple points of view that disrupt prevailing government and media narratives about the storm, especially those that blame Katrina’s victims for their own suffering, fail to acknowledge the systemic inequities that shaped victims’ experiences, and regard the storm as a primarily ‘natural’ disaster. Indeed, these texts demonstrate how Hurricane Katrina was not primarily a natural disaster but was in fact largely the result of structural violence, which occurs when violence is built into societal systems or structures and manifests “as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung 171). This chapter explores leading narratives and myths about Hurricane Katrina as well as fictional representations of the storm that are not part of the Cultural Trauma Fiction subgenre before analyzing two novels, Tom Piazza’s City of Refuge and Rosalyn Story’s Wading Home, that are examples of subgenre. Ultimately, both
novels demonstrate mainstream media’s tendency to proliferate reductive narratives of traumatic events and their victims. These works of Cultural Trauma Fiction depict the flaws of these dominant narratives and reject them in favor of multivocal narratives that inspire greater intersubjective empathy. *City of Refuge* and *Wading Home* showcase Cultural Trauma Fiction’s aptitude for telling and retelling stories of cultural trauma, elucidating complex layers and dimensions, and allowing readers to inhabit and understand multiple lived experiences to gain a greater understanding of the often-invisible realities of structural violence.

**Defining Disaster**

People often think of disasters as single, shocking events that cause significant harm, but the field of critical disaster studies challenges this limited definition by arguing that disasters are socially constructed, political, and take place over time (Horowitz and Remes 5). Disasters, they argue, “are fundamentally shaped by the cultural and material contexts within which they erupt” (Hagen 34). Multiple aspects of disaster are socially constructed, including risk assessment, the presence of hazards, the causes of disaster, determinations of who count as victims, ways of mitigating disaster, and means for providing disaster assistance (Tierney 83-88). Scholars of critical disaster studies also note the importance of recognizing the sociopolitical construction of disaster because assertions that certain events are “natural” or “acts of God” can mask human responsibility for shaping the conditions that enabled the disaster and impede social changes that might prevent future disasters (Horowitz and Remes 5). While certain environmental events may trigger disaster, ultimately, they are “rooted in and emerge from the ongoing, moment-to-moment work of reenacting the social world” (35). This is to say that the social contexts in which an event occurs shape whether and to what extent that event produces disastrous effects. For example, a tornado that disables internet and phone connections is only a disaster in a society
that has come to rely on these technologies for its survival. To understand any given disaster, one must understand the social, political, and environmental factors that facilitated it.

**Hurricane Katrina: Disaster, Structural Violence, and Cultural Trauma**

On August 29th, 2005, one of the worst storms in the history of the United States made landfall off the coast of Louisiana. Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast as a Category 3 storm, killing roughly 1,200 people, causing over $100 billion in property damage, and permanently displacing an estimated 400,000 people (Gibbens). In addition to the damage the hurricane itself inflicted, the devastation that followed the storm due to structural and organizational neglect are part of the disaster now known as “Katrina.” One of the most severe collateral effects of the storm was the flooding of New Orleans that occurred when strong winds damaged many of the city’s poorly maintained levees; more than 50 levees failed (Gibbens). The flooding in New Orleans inhibited relief efforts, leaving residents stranded and without necessary public services. In the city and along the Gulf Coast, there was neither a widespread evacuation plan to help people escape before the storm nor a comprehensive system for providing relief (Eyerman 3).

Scholars agree that Katrina was not primarily a natural disaster. In his seminal text, *Is This America?: Katrina as Cultural Trauma*, sociologist Ron Eyerman explains that the government failed its people by failing to adequately protect them from the storm or provide appropriate rescue and relief efforts in its aftermath (1). By failing to maintain the levees in New Orleans and enabling the destruction of the wetlands along the Gulf Coast (which would have served as natural buffers against heavy winds and storm surges), government officials “helped turn a natural force into a social disaster” (2). Similarly, as sociologist Kai Erikson explains:
‘Katrina’ is the name we have given to a series of events and happenings that are largely of human invention. The settlements in Katrina’s path were of human construction. The openings Katrina took advantage of to reach New Orleans and other vulnerable parts of the coast were of human construction. The susceptibilities of the persons victimized by Katrina were of human construction. And virtually everything that followed was a product of human hands or human imaginations. (3)

Indeed, Katrina resulted both from the ‘natural’ force of the hurricane—shaped in part by man-made climate change—and from socially constructed vulnerabilities (Erikson 3). Especially in New Orleans, the death and destruction that Katrina wrought can be “attributed not to the hurricane itself but to levee failures brought about by institutional mismanagement” (Tierney 86). In other words, much of the disaster known as Katrina was man-made.

Scholars also challenge the notion of the Katrina disaster as a singular, time-bound event. Writing five years after the storm, Erikson explains that “what we mean by ‘Katrina’ began long before the storm of that name began to take shape, and it will be an ongoing event for a long time to come. The storm is not over” (1). This view is consistent with critical disaster studies’ rejection of the concept of disasters as isolated events because such a view divorces disasters like Katrina from their sociopolitical contexts (Erikson 5). Political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry likewise argues that devastating weather events are not disasters in themselves. Instead, these events are “shocks” that “focus our attention and allow us to see the real disasters, disasters that exist long before a storm gathers on the horizon” (“Are Disasters Natural?” 1:51-2:10). The real disasters, then, are “the deeply rooted social and structural problems that lead to unequal distribution of risk, vulnerability, and resources” (2:14-2:24). In this sense, the 2005 hurricane exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities and catalyzed the Katrina disaster.
The man-made risks and sociopolitical failures that caused Katrina are manifestations of structural violence. Structural violence, a term coined in 1969 by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, occurs when “violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung 171). Structural violence, also known as systemic or institutional violence, is difficult to combat because it is insidious and complex. This difficulty increases in the case of slow violence. Slow violence, according to scholar Rachel King, describes catastrophes caused by “environmental disasters” and “human intervention or mismanagement” with consequences that occur across space and time (34). Like other forms of structural violence, slow violence occurs because institutions enable injustice and inequality (King 34). Similarly, Carlton Waterhouse describes the failures that caused Katrina as manifestations of environmental injustice, which occurs when “decision makers in both the public and private sectors discount the well-being of racial or ethnic minority groups who otherwise lack the power to control the environmental protection they receive” (156). Environmental injustice often results from neglect, rather than explicit intent to harm disadvantaged peoples (Waterhouse 165). Katrina exposed the environmental injustice plaguing New Orleans. Those responsible for developing and maintaining the New Orleans levee system neglected their duty to protect minoritized and economically disadvantaged citizens “in order to support what seemed to be more promising financial priorities” (178). Journalist and historian Michael Ignatieff argues that this governmental neglect in fact violates the contract of American citizenship, the implicit guarantee that the government will help “citizens to protect their families and possessions from forces beyond their control” (Ignatieff 15). Even though many people in New Orleans experienced structural violence on a regular basis in the form of limited educational opportunities, insufficient or absent resources, and other systemic inequities, they “still believed
that, as Americans, they were entitled to levees that would hold, an evacuation plan that would actually evacuate them and a resettlement plan that would get them back on their feet…because they are Americans and because these simple things, while costly, are well within the means of the richest society on earth” (16). In other words, the city, state, and federal governments’ failure to protect citizens was an act of structural violence because that protection would have been possible but for institutional neglect and mismanagement. The storm’s devastating effects also illustrate the slow violence of environmental injustice.

I argue that this abnegation of the fundamental contract of citizenship, on top of the physical destruction and hardship the storm brought, exacerbated the cultural trauma of Katrina and demonstrated that the United States government would rescind the social contract if the citizens affected were primarily African American. After Katrina, “it was no longer possible to believe in the contract that binds Americans together” (Ignatieff 16). The United States government’s violation of the social contract is widely recognized. For instance, Malik Rahim, founder of the non-profit network Common Ground, explained his organization’s efforts to “fill the void created by federal, state, and city governments’ unprecedented and catastrophic failure” by providing the services “normally assigned to our government by way of the social contract” (qtd. in Luft 510). This criticism is not limited to academics and community organizers. Indeed, multiple government committees concluded that failure across multiple levels of government worsened the effects of the storm. The United States Congress’ Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs argues in a special report that the government exacerbated Katrina’s damage because “warnings went unheeded and government officials neglected their duties to prepare for a forewarned catastrophe” and then they continued to make poor choices in the storm’s aftermath (S. Rept. 2). Similarly, the United States Congress’ Select Bipartisan
Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina concludes that the government’s “inefficiency,” “ineffectiveness” and “passivity” both before and after the storm “cost lives, prolonged suffering, and left all Americans justifiably concerned our government is no better prepared to protect its people than it was before 9/11” (H. Rept. 359). This failure of their government, in turn, challenged Americans’ sense of collective identity (Eyerman 6). According to Eyerman:

this failure and all the deep-seated cleavages it exposed that catalyzed a great public debate in which the foundations of collective identity were brought up for reflection. It was a debate that raised the question, “Is this America?” (7)

An important aspect of the public debate was the question of to what extent the race and socioeconomic class of the majority of vulnerable citizens influenced the institutional response to Katrina, as “the overwhelming majority of those left behind to suffer the direct force of the storm were poor and black” (12). Sociological studies show that “race was a significant factor in who died and in conditioning how the authorities responded” to the hurricane and subsequent flooding (13). Katrina became a cultural trauma for Americans because it exposed the structural violence that preceded the storm and demonstrated the ongoing manifestations of race-based structural violence in its aftermath.

Katrina also became culturally traumatic because of the overwhelming public, political, and media response to the storm and the inequities it exposed. News reporting shaped authorities’ understanding of and response to the storm and the resulting floods. The national news media became “a central actor in defining the situation, in determining how serious it was and what could and should be done” (Eyerman 21). The news media saw Katrina as more than just a storm; “it was becoming a symbol or symptom of something much deeper, with many
levels of meaning and interpretation” (31). Indeed, the media served as one of the dominant carrier groups for the cultural trauma of Katrina—it “was the first hurricane to hit the United States to the accompaniment of continuous (24/7) television coverage” (Dynes and Rodriguez 26). As a result, the general public took substantial interest in Hurricane Katrina. Media images following the storm shocked viewers. Some of the most salient images included “families pulling their belongings on makeshift rafts through flooded city streets, crowds of people stranded in blistering heat on rooftops and highway overpasses, [and] thousands lined up waiting for entry to an ill-equipped Superdome” (Eyerman 124). These images were particularly surprising to those viewers who previously believed such devastation could not occur in the United States (125). Indeed, “the public recoiled and then seethed with anger and startled disbelief” as they witnessed the devastation wrought and governmental sins committed following Katrina (Gordon 227). Political scientist Ruth Gordon argues that “Americans of almost all political stripes still expected presence and proficiency from the federal government during natural disasters. The public felt collective outrage, embarrassment, and perhaps shame” when they observed the government’s failures (227). As a result, news commentators referred to Katrina’s displaced victims as “refugees” and to “New Orleans as a Third World country,” implying that such horrible conditions were unamerican (227). The conditions were, however, the result of American governmental failures, so Katrina damaged the widely held belief in American exceptionalism (Eyerman 130). Because this myth shaped many Americans’ understandings of their collective identity, its refutation altered their sense of what it means to be American. Hurricane Katrina became culturally traumatic because it triggered an increased awareness of entrenched inequities among Americans and a subsequent reassessment of collective identity.
Although African Americans disproportionately suffered from individual and collective trauma due to Hurricane Katrina, all Americans experience the event as a cultural trauma. As the psychologist Nancy Boyd-Franklin asserts, Katrina produced psychological trauma “both for the victims of the storm and for a broader African American community” because the government’s response to the storm and subsequent media coverage conveyed the message “that black Americans were not full citizens of America” (78). Similarly, White et al. demonstrate that Black Americans “were much more likely than Whites to be angered or depressed by the events surrounding the storm,” especially when they understood the role of racism in creating the catastrophe (534). Katrina and its aftermath contributed to anger and depression among Black Americans across the country, regardless of their geographic proximity to the victims or socioeconomic status (534). Indeed, the research indicates “that Blacks as a group felt abandoned by their government during one of the most devastating natural disasters this country has experienced” (534). Boyd-Franklin and White et al. demonstrate that African Americans were particularly susceptible to the individual and collective trauma of Katrina. However, Katrina also produced cultural trauma for Americans regardless of race because it affected people across multiple racial and ethnic groups and initiated a reevaluation of American identity. Though African Americans made up the majority of the victims, other marginalized groups suffered, including white residents and members of New Orleans’ significant Vietnamese American population (Nguyen 275). Americans of all races also witnessed the storm’s destruction and the government’s mismanagement on television and other digital media. As White et al. themselves argue, the “images of suffering and despair will likely be etched in the minds of an entire generation of Americans who observed one of the greatest natural disasters in this nation's history” (524). Americans experienced the cultural trauma of Katrina regardless of race.
Therefore, I argue that while the experience of the cultural trauma was different for African Americans than for non-Black Americans—because the event was another example of racism for Blacks and thus contributed to the larger trauma arising from structural racism that I will detail further in the following chapter—it was also a shocking illustration of race-based structural violence for non-Blacks who were previously uninformed or underinformed. Indeed, Americans of all races described the crisis and the shock Katrina wrought. For instance, photojournalist Ron Haviv explains the collective “realization that those struggling to survive had been abandoned by the government” and argues that “[t]he days following Katrina should haunt us all about how we lost our way” (qtd in Laurent and Taylor). Another photojournalist who documented the devastation of Katrina, Stanley Greene, argues that the catastrophe showed Americans that “the safety net guaranteed to all Americans in need, at anytime, had holes” (qtd in Laurent and Taylor). As these examples illustrate, Katrina—both the storm itself and the governmental failures surrounding it—“was a traumatic occurrence, a shocking incident that threatened established routines of understanding and action” (Eyerman 6). Because it was witnessed by millions through mass media, “Katrina became an event of great significance not only for those who directly suffered its wrath, but, at least for a time, for the rest of the nation as well” (6). Those directly affected by the storm and African Americans across the country suffered individual and collective trauma in addition to the cultural trauma that affected all Americans.

**Dominant Narratives of Katrina**

Interactions between news media, political figures, and audiences constructed the cultural trauma of Katrina. Following the storm, politicians and early media reports described chaos and crime in New Orleans and constructed a narrative that blamed the victims for their own suffering. These narratives relied on and contributed to common myths about post-disaster human behavior that have been widely refuted by researchers (Stock 708). While later news
reports evinced criticisms of the government officials and institutions who failed to protect and provide timely aid to citizens, the narrative of institutional mismanagement did not fully replace earlier narratives of individual responsibility and widespread criminality. Moreover, many revised narratives still overlooked or underemphasized the role of race-based structural violence in shaping Katrina.

One major theme of news reports in the days following the hurricane was “the breakdown of law and order,” particularly within the city of New Orleans (Eyerman 26). Many news outlets depicted this collapse through exaggerated accounts of looting, which were generally attributed to young, Black males (28). For instance, an NBC Nightly News report on August 29th—the evening after the storm made landfall in Louisiana and shortly before flooding became a serious issue in New Orleans—included footage depicting police patrolling New Orleans “to prevent looting” (94). This example demonstrates that the narrative of looting in New Orleans was already being constructed before any looting could have actually occurred. During the following evening’s news broadcast, NBC reporters highlighted scenes of looting, “reflecting what was deemed a breakdown of social order” (94). Images of chaos and looting in the television news almost exclusively featured Black residents as alleged perpetrators (95).

Despite news media’s early representations of Katrina, empirical studies show that looting was not a significant problem in New Orleans following the storm. Indeed, “long-standing assertions in sociological literature on disasters portray widespread looting as a myth” (Barsky et al. 1). Research also demonstrates “that looting is highly unusual in U.S. disasters” (Tierney et al. 65). The post-disaster looting myth arises in part because there is no clear way—either legally or in the media—to distinguish between opportunistic property theft and what Barsky et al. call “appropriating behavior” (Barsky et al. 2). Appropriating behavior “involves a
person taking property owned by another to use it for emergency purposes” (2). According to Tierney and colleagues, media images during and after Hurricane Katrina erroneously “characterized disaster victims as opportunistic looters and violent criminals,” rather than victims engaging in appropriating behavior to supplement lacking or absent government aid, particularly when the victims in question were Black (Tierney et al. 60). Tierney et al. describe a set of media photographs depicting African American and white victims of the storm engaging in the exact same behavior; while the white people are “labeled as ‘finding’ supplies,” the black people are “described as ‘looting’ goods” (62). As this example indicates, the difference between looting and appropriating behavior “depends primarily on an individual's perception of the situation” (Barsky et al. 2). Media reports of looting in New Orleans also overlook the fact that theft was an issue in New Orleans before Katrina. In fact, some studies indicate that theft may have decreased in New Orleans following the storm (3). The media sensationalized a relatively small number of reported cases of actual looting. Rather than reporting on other elements of Katrina’s aftermath, such as communal rescue efforts, “social breakdown behaviors and institutional efforts to control these behaviors are emphasized” in the media to maintain viewers’ interest (4). Early news reports on Katrina hinged on discredited myths about human behavior in the event of disaster, and these reports reinforced those myths as well as harmful, racist stereotypes about African Americans. Subsequently, officials used claims of looting to justify “systems of control” (Barsky et al. 4).

News coverage following Katrina also negatively affected victims by frequently comparing New Orleans to a “war zone” (Eyerman 34, Tierney et al. 61). The media constructed narratives comparing New Orleans to a war zone “to draw parallels between the conditions in that city and urban insurgency in Iraq. These media frames helped guide and justify actions
undertaken by military and law enforcement entities that were assigned responsibility for the postdisaster emergency response” (Tierney et al. 61). These frames were especially salient in the post-9/11 context, in which people were already poised to believe that military intervention was necessary to prevent and respond to disaster (64). The false narratives of disorder and crime in New Orleans following the hurricane contributed to the devastation of the storm and floods because “those in charge of the response placed law and order above the lives of hurricane survivors” (Tierney et al. 75). As this example demonstrates, media narratives about disaster shape public and institutional responses and can produce severe consequences for victims.

Popular culture responses to Hurricane Katrina and its devastating aftermath emphasize the rich culture of New Orleans, criticize governmental failures, and humanize victims. Most early responses to Katrina focus on New Orleans, as many regard the city as “an irreplaceable national treasure” (Eyerman 52). Many musicians responded to Katrina, producing albums and holding benefits to raise money for relief efforts and environmental protection (56-64). Some high-profile musicians, including Bruce Springsteen and hip-hop artists Mos Def and Lil Wayne, responded to Katrina through their music. Lil Wayne, a New Orleans native, includes lyrics in his song “Georgia Bush” that implicate then-President George W. Bush for the inadequate rescue and recovery efforts in the city following the storm (66). Similarly, Mos Def’s song “Dollar Day” suggests “that the government response to Hurricane Katrina was part of a wider policy with regard to poor blacks” (67). Visual artists including photographers, painters, and multimedia artists also responded to Katrina by producing artistic representations and political commentary. Likewise, popular arts like film and television depicted the storm and its aftermath. One of the most notable depictions is Spike Lee’s documentary, *When the Levees Broke* (2006), which includes the news media’s response to the storm, images of the devastation, and
interviews with victims (87-88). The film informs viewers of what took place and humanizes the victims. Another HBO production, the series *Treme*, centers on “a diverse set of characters returning to New Orleans in the weeks after the storm and attempting to get on with their lives” (90). The show represents New Orleans’ culture, but largely eschews politics and avoids assigning blame (90). Taken together, these popular culture reactions to Katrina raise some awareness of the human costs of the storm’s devastation.

While popular culture responses to Katrina significantly contribute to the collective understanding of the storm and its implications, the story of Katrina, according to Eyerman, “requires continuous telling and retelling, with more sides and dimensions, new layers added and older ones modified” (91). Fiction is uniquely suited for this “telling and retelling” because novels encourage slow processing of information, feelings, and events. Scholar Susan Scott Parrish explains this function of the novel, arguing that these texts are an important means for bridging the gap between official and experiential knowledge of disaster because they have the “capacity to dwell over time in complex disasters,” by “registering their complex causes and how they variously affect human perception and feeling” (141-142). Readers can also inhabit multiple “sides and dimensions” of the story of Katrina within a single novel (Eyerman 91). Indeed, novels often ask their readers to identify with multiple characters and recognize the multifaceted contexts that shape characters’ choices and outcomes (Parrish 134). Works of what Parrish calls “contemporary disaster fiction” can help readers to feel the aspects of disaster that are not usually perceptible to those without direct experience (137). Contemporary disaster fiction accomplishes this task in part by promoting reader empathy; these novels “ask readers to think as if they are other people…[and] make readers inhabit multiple characters’ perspectives and produce a complex kind of knowledge out of this cognitive flexibility” (134). These novels can
promote people’s understanding of events like Hurricane Katrina because they “can help readers imagine, and inhabit over time, others’ material and psychological experience of risk and disaster” (137). Overall, novels depicting disaster and its victims can promote readers’ understanding of multiple lived experiences and of the complex factors shaping people’s decisions.

While I agree with Parrish that contemporary disaster fiction in general promotes slow processing and generates empathy by providing insight into the lived experiences of disaster victims, those novels that qualify as Cultural Trauma Fiction facilitate an even more nuanced understanding of culturally traumatic disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. Cultural Trauma Fiction considers the cultural concerns related to disaster, while some contemporary disaster novels may only explore the concerns of a few victims and may not represent multiple identities and perspectives. Novels that depict disaster do not necessarily explore these broader aspects of disaster and disaster recovery. Perhaps most significantly, contemporary disaster fiction does not necessarily challenge dominant narratives. In fact, these novels may implicitly or explicitly reify the narratives espoused by the news media or by politicians. Cultural Trauma Fiction, by contrast, resists dominant government and media narratives regarding disaster in favor of narratives that promote empathy through storytelling. These narratives recognize the complexity of disaster and the “layers” of human experience during and after a traumatic disaster event (Eyerman 91). These novels also elucidate the otherwise incomprehensible “hyperobject” of structural violence. Rachel King argues that structural violence functions as a kind of “hyperobject,” or something “that is, spatially and temporally, so huge that we are not equipped to comprehend it in its entirety” (33).\textsuperscript{23} As science fiction writer Jeff VanderMeer explains,

\textsuperscript{23} King cites philosopher Timothy Morton’s Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World (2013) in which he coins the term “hyperobject.”
fiction helps readers comprehend hyperobjects because it can “make visible what is often invisible to us” (qtd. in King 33). Structural violence can be so damaging that “the intellectual and practical tools used to describe or cope” with it cannot be articulated in nonfiction media, particularly if the structural violence in question produces cultural trauma (King 33). The role of Cultural Trauma Fiction about Hurricane Katrina, then, is to make visible and comprehensible the overwhelming trauma of Katrina and the structural violence that shaped the disaster.

**Hurricane Katrina in Fiction**

Perhaps the best-known disaster novel about Hurricane Katrina, Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* (2011), is not a work of Cultural Trauma Fiction. The novel depicts a poor, Black family in Mississippi as they anticipate and experience the hurricane. In the novel, fifteen-year-old Esch Batiste struggles with an unplanned pregnancy and her late mother’s absence as Katrina looms. Esch’s father and three brothers, Randall, Skeetah, and Junior, try to protect themselves and their home from the hurricane, but they cannot evacuate or seek more appropriate shelter because they lack the necessary financial resources to do so. Parrish classifies *Salvage the Bones* as a contemporary disaster fiction and argues that, because of Ward’s “hypnotizing” writing style, readers “must navigate the tension between the relentless approach of the storm, coming daily closer, and the deeply paused sensory world her language suspends one in” (143). Indeed, the novel’s “diurnal structure” forces the reader to slow down and recognize the struggles inherent in the daily lives of Esch and her family (Parrish 144). Ward’s novel does not, however, engage with broader cultural concerns, in part because of the novel’s limited perspective. While generally speaking novels with a single narrative voice have the potential to consider social and structural issues, Ward’s narrator, Esch, “has no access to any overall perspective on anything outside her very limited experience” because of her family’s isolation and poverty (Jellenik 191).
Esch is also too focused on her immediate circumstances to explore larger issues; she is fifteen, pregnant by a boy who does not love or even particularly like her, grieving her deceased mother, and staring down the eye of a hurricane, in addition to facing the more mundane challenges of being a teenage girl. Each of Esch’s struggles connects with larger, systemic issues. Her mother’s death in childbirth connects to the larger issue of Black maternal mortality, her pregnancy can be partially attributed to lack of proper sex education and access to birth control, the hurricane produces severe effects due to climate change, and she and her family cannot evacuate because of their poverty. The novel does not, however, engage with these issues because it instead centers on Esch’s internal struggles and narrow, individual experiences. As Glenn Jellenik explains, although “the novel represents the family’s poverty and suggests a racial component to their endemic lack, the immediate world constructed by and consuming the novel is too limited to push such concerns to the forefront. The engrossing urgency, richness, and stark beauty of Ward’s microcosm prevent the possibility of larger social overviews” (191). While Jellenik argues that *Salvage* is artistically superior to novels that provide “larger social overviews” and engage overtly in the political causes and consequences of Katrina, I maintain that good literature can be both politically engaged and aesthetic.

*Salvage the Bones* humanizes Katrina’s victims and encourages readers to recognize the complexity of their circumstances. However, it is not a work of Cultural Trauma Fiction in that it does not explore broader cultural concerns or represent multiple identities and perspectives, though it does implicitly challenge dominant narratives of the storm by depicting a family whose experiences defy reductive narratives. As Jellenik argues, in *Salvage* “Katrina is the catalyst for universal stories—stories of the ways that people remember and fight for their way of life, stories of the ways that cultures live and die, stories of life and death itself. In short, it’s not about a
While universal stories are undoubtedly important for promoting empathy and the collective understanding of the human condition, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction are about specific traumatic events or patterns of events. In this specificity, Cultural Trauma Fiction demonstrates the broad significance of traumatic events and participates in reshaping dominant narratives that oversimplify cultural trauma.

**City of Refuge: A Novel**

Tom Piazza’s *City of Refuge* (2008) follows two families—one white, one Black—as they navigate the ravages of Hurricane Katrina and their subsequent displacement from New Orleans. SJ Williams, his sister, Lucy, and her young adult son, Wesley, live in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, a historically Black neighborhood. For SJ, the neighborhood symbolizes his hard work to build a life for himself, his family, and his community (Piazza 12). By contrast, Craig and Alice Donaldson live in an upper middle class New Orleans neighborhood with their two young children, Annie and Malcolm. The Donaldsons are white, educated transplants who moved to the city after completing graduate school in the Midwest (19). While the two families similarly face the physical reality of the impending hurricane, their socioeconomic circumstances shape their experiences during and after the storm. The novel depicts the ways in which race influences these socioeconomic circumstances and, therefore, colors the families’ experiences. The novel’s central contribution to Cultural Trauma Fiction comes from its engagement with media narratives. Throughout the novel, various characters and the narrator encounter and contradict such narratives. Even when characters are limited by social conventions and cannot or will not voice their objections to what they hear from media, the narrator explicitly states a counterargument that disrupts media narratives. While the narrator’s blunt disruptions of dominant narratives may sometimes be heavy-handed and indicate the novel’s aesthetic
limitations, they nonetheless demonstrate the novel’s intentional assertion of a
counternarrative. Both the novel’s implicit comparison between white and Black victims and its
more explicit challenges to the media demonstrate that dominant narratives of Katrina are
incomplete and inaccurate because they do not explore the role of structural violence in shaping
the disaster.

Craig and Alice Donaldson experience the storm differently from the Williams family
because of their racial identities and socioeconomic statuses, and from one another because of
their opposing feelings about the city. Craig loves the city and hopes to raise his children there,
but Alice feels out of place in New Orleans and takes issue with the collapsing infrastructure,
high crime rate, and subpar public education system (20). When Alice and Craig discuss their
plans to evacuate in advance of the hurricane, Alice argues that New Orleans “is a scary,
backward, inconvenient place to live, and…we are putting our children at risk by living here”
(55). Craig acknowledges that New Orleans is not perfect. Nonetheless, the close, third-person
narrator explains that Craig’s “self [is] invested in the city, in its rituals…it was a refuge he’d
found…a safe harbor to get away from something in himself for which he lacked a name” (80).
The narrator reveals that Craig fears rebuilding his life if he lost New Orleans to the hurricane,
while Alice sees the storm both as validation of her distaste for the city and an opportunity to
relocate. Through Craig and Alice Donaldson’s opposing perspectives and the implicit
comparison between the white family’s perspective and that of the Williams family, City of
Refuge depicts multiple understandings of New Orleans before the storm and indicates the
heterogeneity of the city’s residents. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates the limitations of
mainstream media coverage, which often omits information that implicates those in power and
censors particularly disturbing images. The novel, by contrast, openly assigns blame and creates
imagery that conveys the full extent of the horrors suffered and witnessed during Katrina. Piazza employs narrative strategies such as non-linearity, absurdity, and depictions of the abject to exceed the structural and substantive limitations of traditional media and more fully portray the psychological and emotional experience of Katrina. *City of Refuge* self-reflexively explores the selective and constructive processes inherent to all narratives, demonstrating the limitations of media narratives that fail to admit their constructed nature and avoid using the more explicitly constructed strategies characteristic of literary fiction. These strategies may disrupt the reader’s sense of “reality,” but paradoxically create narratives that are more “real” than mainstream media narratives in their very acknowledgement of their constructed nature and their capacity to convey the emotional and psychological aspects of trauma that exceed straightforward, factual descriptions.

The novel’s narrator expresses the thoughts and feelings of each character and shapes the counternarrative of the storm, challenging the popular narrative that people were merely too stubborn or ignorant to evacuate when they learned Hurricane Katrina was imminent. *City of Refuge*’s narrator plays a crucial role in stimulating reader empathy by allowing intimate access to multiple experiences and points of view. The narrator acknowledges that some residents of New Orleans are “defiant” because most warnings and calls to evacuate the city in the past had “turned out to be a false alarm,” but also explains that there are material impediments to evacuation (28). The narrator also notes the financial burden of evacuation, including lost wages from missing work and the cost of gas and a hotel room, as well as logistical concerns like acquiring a vehicle, finding a place to stay, and sitting in traffic for hours on end to get there (28-29).24 Moreover, the novel acknowledges the historical and generational factors that influence

24 According to the narrator, “[e]veryone knew that the traffic during evacuations could get apocalyptic as a storm approached” (Piazza 77).
how residents respond to a storm. While people understand, “in principle, what is possible with a hurricane,” they also believe that they can survive Katrina because they and their families have lived through other major storms (28). Indeed, the narrator notes that SJ’s choice to remain in the city is informed by the fact that no one in SJ’s family “had ever evacuated for a hurricane” (32). The narrator’s access to SJ’s thoughts, feelings, and family history indicates the utility of fiction for providing insight unavailable in other media. Some news media following Katrina failed to account for the practical constraints and cultural narratives informing residents’ choice to remain in New Orleans during the storm. For instance, a *Los Angeles Times* article entitled “Hundreds Refuse to Evacuate” argues that residents “ignored pleas to evacuate “and claims that “the refusal of hundreds of residents to leave” complicated rescue efforts (Gold et al.). The language used in this article—“ignored,” “refusal”—exemplifies the media’s tendency to ignore the practical constraints and cultural narratives that influenced residents’ decisions. Because *City of Refuge*’s narrator can access SJ’s thoughts, feelings, and family history, the novel avoids these kinds of reductive explanations in favor of an empathetic explanation of the multiple, complex factors informing his choice to stay in his home. The novel incites empathy for victims of the storm by providing insight regarding their decisions and implying that the very same factors influencing and constraining SJ’s options likely affected other victims.

Piazza constructs a narrative of Katrina that considers the social, emotional, and cultural constraints informing New Orleanian’s decisions before the hurricane. On top of his family history, SJ receives conflicting messages in the present regarding whether or not he should leave the city. Delois, an acquaintance of SJ’s, claims that the government only calls for an evacuation because they are “covering they ass for the white folks and the insurance” (84). She argues that if those in power thought the storm would be devastating, they would “make it mandatory and have
buses lined up…You don’t hear nobody talking about evacuation plan, meet here, do this” (84). Interestingly, Delois’ beliefs expose her inconsistent degree of trust in institutions. Although she believes that the government would lie to protect themselves from lawsuits, Delois also has faith that government actors would know if the storm was going to be dangerous and would take proper precautions to evacuate and protect its citizens. Through Delois, the novel offers another perspective and demonstrates the multiple factors that residents of New Orleans had to consider in their decision of whether or not to evacuate. For readers, an increased awareness of how difficult the decision was can promote empathy for the people forced to decide.

The novel also critiques mainstream media’s construction of Katrina, stating that the shocking coverage “would go on all night as the country watched one of the largest storms in recorded history head straight for New Orleans” (Piazza 112). The media begins covering the storm before it even occurs, paralleling the hours of pregame coverage before a football game. The narrator’s claim that “the country watched,” acknowledges that millions of Americans experienced Katrina through television and computer screens. Notably, according to the narrator, none of the news coverage mentioned “the dozens of places along the levee system that had been designed improperly, built improperly, and around which water had been seeping for years” (112). The narrator establishes the failures of government both before and after the storm, clearly arguing that the citizens of New Orleans suffered in large part due to structural violence. For years prior to Katrina, residents raised concerns about the structural integrity of the levees. Residents’ concern resulted in an investigation, which, the narrator explains, “concluded that there were structural problems with the levees and the flood walls” that required “extensive and expensive repair,” but repairs never took place (97). However, the media does not report the aspects of the story that implicate authorities in New Orleans and the United States Army Corps
of Engineers. The narrator notes that a study by Louisiana State University predicted the hurricane, the levees breaking, and the flooding that would ensue, but still no one took action (141-142). Indeed, the narrator asserts that “the federal funding to implement the study’s recommendations was cut off by President George W. Bush, who needed the money for other things” (142). Despite his full knowledge of the risks associated with inaction in New Orleans, “the president told the news media later that week that nobody could have predicted the levee breaks” (142). Even days after the storm hit and subsequent flooding began, President Bush remained on vacation in Texas (155). As the narrator suggests, Katrina occurred as such due to various institutional failures both before and after the storm. The novel uses this argument to influence readers’ opinion regarding who was to blame for the devastation.

The novel also emphasizes that those who remained in New Orleans during and after the levees broke experienced hopelessness and witnessed the images too horrific for television, indicating that the lived experience of victims was even more difficult than news media portrayed. After spending a day using a small dinghy to rescue other residents, SJ lies in bed “throbbing in a darkness he had not known for thirty-five years, since patrols in the jungle” (163). This allusion to SJ’s experience serving in Vietnam emphasizes the extent of his suffering and demonstrates the similarities between Katrina and the Vietnam War, an event that was also traumatic for many. On one hand, there is a literal darkness as the result of widespread power failure. On the other hand, the “darkness” SJ experiences is the despair, loneliness, and trauma resulting from his rescue efforts. He feels compelled to maintain strength and serve others under

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25 President Bush stated on “Good Morning America” on September 1, 2005, “I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees” (qtd. in Martinez). However, federal agencies “had compiled damage forecasts for the White House at least 48 hours before the storm's landfall that predicted levee overtopping and breaches” (Martinez). It was probably not possible to reinforce the levees at that point, but greater evacuation efforts in light of knowledge that the levees would likely fail could have saved lives.
extreme conditions, and he witnesses Katrina not as “something to get through” like Hurricane
Betsy before it, but instead as “the end of something. For many people he passed, it had already
meant the end of everything” (162). The storm marks the end of “everything” for those who have
lost their homes and who lack the resources to rebuild their lives, as well as for those who died in
the storm and subsequent flooding (163). Much like the “patrols in the jungle” SJ experienced
during his army service, he witnesses terrible devastation and death during Katrina. Piazza
compares the experience to the experience of military combat to further inspire reader empathy,
as the traumatic toll of war is perhaps more widely understood than that of environmental
disaster. When SJ looks down from his window at the flood waters below, he sees “two of them
floating facedown” (164). Though the narrator does not explicitly state what “them” refers to, it
becomes clear that SJ sees the corpses of babies floating in the water below. The narrator further
describes, “One was naked, its bottom presented to the sky for care that would not be
forthcoming, and the other with a diaper unfastened at one hip…bumping up against the gutter
lazily, like any other garbage in the water, two brown babies out there just like any other
garbage” (164). The narrator initially refers to the two corpses as “them” and “it,” indicating that
SJ does not initially recognize them as human. The repeated comparison between the babies and
“any other garbage” conveys the narrator’s outrage—and perhaps SJ’s, as well—that those who
allowed this to happen did so because they did not value the lives of brown babies or New
Orleans’ other most vulnerable inhabitants (164). Significantly, City of Refuge represents an
image that would not be shown in the media because of government censorship. During rescue
and clean-up efforts, FEMA officials “requested that the media not take photographs of dead
bodies. The agency has also started to reject reporters' requests to travel with rescue boats, now
that the waters are receding and the dead bodies become more and more prevalent” (Welsh). City
of Refuge exemplifies how Cultural Trauma Fiction can share those images which have been censored in the media in service of the government’s stated efforts not to “offend viewers’ or victims’ sensibilities,” and possible efforts to reduce the public’s understanding of the catastrophe’s magnitude (Welsh).

In addition to avoiding the limitations of government censorship, the novel uses narrative strategies that exceed media’s ability to portray the psychological and emotional experiences of Katrina’s victims. The trauma SJ and other New Orleanians experienced during the storm and the ongoing trauma they experience in its aftermath disrupt their sense of time. The novel represents the confusions citizens face through an asynchronous, nearly incoherent description of the “narrative” of the Superdome. First, the narrator states that, for the thousands of people struggling to survive inside and around the Superdome, “[e]verything was on overload…time itself was perverted…every narrative was twisted and mocked, torn out of any context” (167). Next, the narrator states that it is impossible to construct a sequential narrative because “the parts don’t fit together; characters are in the wrong place,” before describing the suffering of a disparate cast of famous characters:

Prince Hamlet plays the sitar on a cooler full of body parts, Santa Claus has lice, Rosa Parks is having a heart attack on the curb and Mister Rogers blows Paul Robeson for a cigarette and the Andrews Sisters and the Supremes lift their skirts in a darkened corner and hope for the best. Oh yes, they have lice, too. What are they trying to tell us? Why have they all been placed together in this narrative? What do they all have in common? If the Depression didn’t reveal it, or the Holocaust, or the photographs of Emmett Till, or Goya’s Caprichos, why should these mismatched socks, this salvage, mean anything now? Why should it make any sense? Don’t you know garbage when you see it? (167).
Here, the narration moves from its typical, realistic engagement with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the characters to an absurd departure. This deviation from the narrator’s usual style indicates that the scene at the Superdome is so vile and depraved that it can only be represented through the outrageous, abject, hallucinatory, and fragmented. Even if the reader has been desensitized to the conditions on site following Katrina, they can still experience comparable chaos and decontextualization through the metaphor of beloved characters and heroes facing desperation. The text invokes numerous familiar “characters,” both real and fictional, and places them within the disorder of the Superdome because forcing characters into uncomfortable, compromising, and repulsive situations can humanize them for those divorced from the devastation. However, the narrator also shifts from stating the conditions to asking the reader how these narratives—or the narrative of the atrocities following Katrina as a whole—could “mean anything” to people who have witnessed countless other narratives of terrible human suffering through media and who are, perhaps, no longer sensitive to the suffering of unfamiliar others.

Following this confusing and unsettling description, the narrator turns back to the experiences of the real-life victims of Katrina. Regarding the horrors they face, the narrator states that “[t]he mind cannot process all the disjunction…The mind goes on overload and only scraps adhere” (168). These passages, then, draw attention to the conditions in the Superdome and provide insight into the psychological and material realities of experiencing those conditions. The text juxtaposes these narratives with an image of Air Force One flying over New Orleans. In the plane above:

the president of the United States is up there looking out the window at the pretty designs made by the water—That’s the Mississippi River? That sorta squiggle there?—
wondering what he is supposed to do and if he will have time for a nap and an hour with the video games before having to face the cameras again and say something to make it sound as if there is still a narrative in place. (168)

The image of the president flying above the suffering of citizens indicates his chosen distance from the problem; he is far enough above New Orleans that the Mississippi River is a “squiggle” beneath him (168). The narrator portrays the president as distracted and disinterested. Similarly, the text indicates that it is often considered the president’s job to “make it sound as if there is still a narrative in place” (168). In other words, he is supposed to reframe the disaster as something which he can and will control, despite obvious evidence to the contrary. The narrator thus engages with one of the central concerns of Cultural Trauma Fiction: unpacking and complicating the dominant narratives constructed by government and media. While government officials are tasked with exhibiting control and maintaining at least the appearance of order, the truth is that there was no such order in Katrina’s aftermath. The government institutions and representatives tasked first with preventing and then with responding to the structural failures of Katrina abdicated their responsibilities. Piazza’s narrator acknowledges this reality and displaces the false narrative of control with the more honest narrative of institutional failure. This narrative offers greater credibility than mainstream media narratives because the novel introduces greater nuance and considers multiple perspectives. The narrator preemptively contradicts the narrative President Bush will espouse regarding order and control in the city, stating that “the Dome and the entire city and maybe the entire nation [is] a ship without a pilot, battered and headed for disaster” (169). In this view, the president’s incompetence leaves the nation without a leader and without a framework for processing what has occurred. As City of Refuge demonstrates, Cultural Trauma Fiction offers such a framework.
City of Refuge also depicts the ongoing suffering of those evacuated from the Superdome and the Convention Center in the days and weeks following the storm and demonstrates how false narratives about Katrina’s victims—particularly victims of color—affect their access to aid. A bus takes Lucy and one hundred and thirty other Black New Orleanians to a camp in Missouri (193-194). The Red Cross set up the camp, ordinarily used only a few weeks per year for summer camps, with only ten hours’ notice after two other facilities turned the displaced citizens away (194). The white Red Cross representatives in charge of the camp initially take a paternalistic attitude towards the displaced people in their care and resist calls to keep the kitchen open for breakfast beyond their scheduled time. The person in charge opposes extending their breakfast hours on the very first day, claiming that bending the rule “immediately sends the wrong signals” (199). While the Red Cross is ostensibly there volunteering to help displaced people, some of their workers believe the camp’s new residents need to be controlled. An EMS worker, Steve, challenges the workers’ lack of empathy, reminding them that the people now inhabiting the camp “had just spent three days on buses with no change of clothes, after being flooded out of their houses” and insisting that they “can cut them some slack” (199). Steve represents the kind of compassionate care that displaced New Orleanians deserve, but do not always receive. The attitude of the Red Cross workers symbolizes one of the false narratives that circulated following Katrina, which characterized displaced people as criminal and unruly. By contrast, Steve evinces an alternate narrative of the victims that challenges the problematic, inaccurate, and often racist characterizations popularized in the media.

As evidenced by Lucy’s experience, the storm and its aftermath displaced citizens across the country and separated them from both the places and the people they knew. Wesley, Lucy’s young adult son, flies to Albany, New York to stay with a temporary host family despite rarely
having left his own New Orleans neighborhood prior to the storm (209). His experiences prior to the storm were limited to the Lower Ninth Ward, where “if you made a misstep it could cost you your life, or part of your life in jail at least, and he assumed that the same was true everywhere” (209-210). As a result, he feels out of place in the Albany airport; “Wesley felt exposed and anxious, as if he were being processed for prison” (210). Like Lucy, Wesley unwittingly enters an unfamiliar environment in order to find shelter following his displacement. Wesley initially finds his host family’s home uncomfortable because it is so different from everything he knows. He feels anxious, in part, because “[i]t was harder being here, in this place, with all the evidence of life continuity, in all its foreignness, than it was being in the shelter. In a time of total disruption, disruption was what felt natural. This sense of continuity was what was hard to assimilate” (214). Indeed, for the duration of his stay in Albany, Wesley’s “mind was a battlefield of incompatible emotions” (218). On the one hand, he feels sick with worry over his mother and uncle, as well as grief over everything he has lost. On the other hand, his host family’s kindness provides some measure of comfort. Wesley finds the home uncomfortable because it offers him physical comfort and stability; the peace of Art and Ell Myers’ Albany home serves as a painful reminder of the chaos and loss Katrina engendered. Wesley’s experience in Albany serves as a microcosm for the work of Cultural Trauma Fiction in general, which disrupts an imposed “sense of continuity” to show that, contrary to what dominant narratives say, not everyone experiences trauma and its aftermath in the same way (214).

The novel also juxtaposes the suffering of the majority of New Orleanians with the willful ignorance of the privileged few. As Craig and Alice watch television coverage of the conditions in New Orleans, they encounter “an hallucinatory moment that took them by surprise amid the nightmare scenes” (178). The news pivots from covering the disaster to a crowded bar,
where “a sardonically smiling” man states that at his bar, “you could almost think that nothing has changed in New Orleans” (178). Craig even asks himself how bad Katrina’s devastation could really be if there were still people drinking at a local bar, despite the “deluge of misery” he witnesses in the majority of the television coverage of the storm (179). This brief scene indicates that media coverage skewed the public perception of Katrina. If people like Craig who are from New Orleans and who understand the devastation that occurred can be even momentarily persuaded that the circumstances are not that bad, then the general public beyond the city is also likely to fall for simplistic, misleading depictions of the city.

Such misleading media depictions shaped most Americans’ understanding of the storm and its aftermath, the nature of the destruction, and who was responsible for the chaos and devastation. Alice’s Aunt Jean and Uncle Gus, who host the family temporarily after their displacement, watch the news coverage and have opposite reactions. While Jean expresses sadness and pity for the people suffering in New Orleans, Gus, influenced by the sensationalistic media coverage of looting, asks “Where the hell is the National Guard? They need to start laying down the law in there” (181). He believes that citizens are responsible for the disfunction in New Orleans, rather than recognizing the structural causes of the myriad issues in the city. The news repeatedly shows “the same three or four clips” of black men allegedly looting. In response, Gus asks, “isn’t that just…animalistic? Don’t those people have any sense of right and wrong at all?” (181). Gus’s response clearly indicates his racial bias—“those people”—as well as his lack of empathy for the desperate situation they find themselves in. While Craig points out that people accused of “looting” may very well be “taking things they need,” Gus refuses to see the possibility that taking things in a dire situation could be anything but “wrong” (181). Most notably, his claim that the victims’ behavior is “animalistic” further indicates his racist attitudes.
and unwillingness to recognize that the individuals depicted are, in fact, victims. Gus’s attitudes and statements reflect those fostered by news programs that sensationalized or exaggerated reports of crime, rather than demonstrating the injustices victims faced at the hands of the government systems intended to serve them. Indeed, the novel depicts the ways that news media participated in shifting blame from those responsible—the government actors who created the conditions for the disaster and responded inadequately—onto the victims themselves.

The novel further depicts mediated witnessing through Craig, who encounters media and government narratives of the event on television and online during his displacement. Craig receives over three hundred emails in the week following the storm from relatives, friends, and acquaintances who want to know what Katrina was like. It seems to Craig that “[a]ll of America…was overwhelmed with awe at the scale of what had happened, and the suffering they were witnessing on television” (184). The text rightly recognizes the hundreds of email inquiries as a microcosm for the collective desire of Americans to better understand what they were witnessing. Even when Craig is not watching television coverage of Katrina, he thinks about what he has witnessed “and that his children had to see it and live through it, and anger began to coil around his heart like a snake, irrational anger at everyone around him who was going on as if life hadn’t been interrupted, as if the greatest single forced migration in American history since the Dust Bowl hadn’t just happened” (186). For Craig, part of the trauma of Katrina comes from the fact that some deny or minimize its significance despite the innumerable testaments to the disaster and its consequences depicted on television.

Like many people, Craig feels powerless in the face of the devastation (185). He wants to respond to incendiary claims like that made by the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Dennis Hastert, who “had said that large parts of New Orleans should be
bulldozed, and that it didn’t make sense to save it” (185). For Speaker Hastert, “it didn’t make sense” to save the areas most devastated by the storm because these were the low-income areas populated predominately by people of color. Although the majority of government figures may not have made such dismissive, insensitive calls to destroy portions of what remained of the city, claims like Hastert’s contributed to an unfortunate narrative about the storm, the city, and its residents. Just as Craig seeks “to do something to answer” Hastert’s remarks, the novel itself counters narratives that minimize the significance of New Orleans’ displaced and devastated populations and blame Black residents for their own vulnerability rather than recognizing it as an effect of structural racism.

Piazza also demonstrates how conservative ideologies proliferate under the guise of Christian values and, ultimately, perpetuate a false narrative about individual accountability in the face of massive institutional failure. On a Christian talk radio show, both the host and a caller repeat conservative talking points blaming Katrina’s victims for their own suffering. One caller states that “these people are trying to turn the federal government into the place of God almighty…instead of praying to the Lord to provide, and them helping themselves some…they want the government to do everything for them” (229-230). The caller then implies that it is because of “what’s been going on in these places,” including “fornication, gambling” and various crimes, that God sent the hurricane to New Orleans (230). The caller’s remarks parallel those evangelist Frank Graham made on Fox News the week following the storm as well as similar comments written by evangelist Hal Lindsay. The caller and the host demonstrate an

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26 When asked about the situation in New Orleans on Fox New’s Hannity & Colmes, Graham stated that, “This happens in our country when we have taken God out of our schools and God out of society. We don’t have a moral standard” (Kaylor). Similarly, Lindsay claimed that “[s]ince America has forsaken the Christian principles on which our country was founded and on which all our founding documents were based, God’s gracious protection that is so evident in American history is being withdrawn” (Kaylor).
extreme lack of empathy in their characterization of the victims as responsible for their own fates. The host extends his callousness when a caller from New Orleans explains that many residents were unable to evacuate, and none were individually responsible for the failure of the levees (231). This caller asks the host how a Christian could witness New Orleanians’ suffering and not demonstrate compassion, but the host responds by implying that the victims were stupid for living below sea level in the first place (231-232). Through these exchanges, the radio host highlights a segment of the popular discourse following Hurricane Katrina which blamed victims and regurgitated the rhetoric of personal responsibility. The novel counters this discourse by depicting a caller who challenges the host’s hateful rhetoric, but nonetheless demonstrates that this discourse is pervasive when the host hangs up on the dissenting caller (232).

*City of Refuge* further counters false narratives about Katrina and its aftermath through Craig’s interviews with evacuees, who paint a more nuanced, human picture of the storm. As Craig explains to one displaced New Orleanian, “people’s stories have to be told. That’s the only way New Orleans is going to get the help it needs. What happened in our city should never have happened” (236). Despite hearing dismissive and unsympathetic condemnation of Katrina’s victims on the radio, Craig believes that some people will feel empathy for the victims if they hear their stories. In one interview, Mrs. Gray, a septuagenarian, Black woman from New Orleans, describes Katrina as “a tragedy for the country” (237). Mrs. Gray projects confidence and wisdom, so both Craig and the reader feel compelled to listen when she explains that Katrina “is not just a tragedy for our people, black or white, people from New Orleans. This is a tragedy for everyone in this country. This is the greatest country on earth, and if this is the best they can do then it is a shame on all of us. It is an embarrassment in front of the world” (237). She further explains, “[a]s long as we are thinking about an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ we are thinking the wrong way
in our society” (239). This claim engenders empathy because it demonstrates Mrs. Gray’s belief in national unity, a widely held cultural value in the United States. Taken together, Mrs. Gray’s statements demonstrate the broad significance of Katrina for all Americans as well as the problem with the kind of discourse Craig heard on the radio. The radio host’s refusal to accept Katrina as a reflection of American governmental and societal failures as well as his dismissal of the victims as ‘them,’ rather than part of the collective, American ‘us,’ may serve to perpetuate the very inequities that made Katrina possible. Mrs. Gray, by contrast, insists that “it is not really about what we each have lost individually. It is about what we have lost collectively” (240). What Americans have lost is a sense of confidence in government to protect the most vulnerable citizens or provide timely, compassionate, comprehensive aid following disaster. A few days after speaking with Mrs. Gray, Craig asks himself, “how could they ever again act as if there were such a thing as normal?” (241). Indeed, the novel as a whole challenges the impulse to return to “normal” following Katrina; the novel advocates for a reassessment of the status quo and the insidious ways in which normalcy facilitates disaster.

Similarly, SJ distinguishes between natural and man-made disasters. When Dot (his cousin Aaron’s wife) claims that the flood “was God’s will,” SJ angrily replies, “That flood was not God’s will…That flood was somebody’s mistake. The hurricane was God’s will, if you want to see it like that, but that flood was man’s mistake” (271). SJ feels anger not towards Dot, but towards God. SJ finds that the stress of everything he has endured, witnessed, and heard about since the storm “sometimes triggered other memories and feelings and responses that felt almost physical to him, things he had known for a long time, from after his time in the army” (272). The trauma of the storm and of being displaced triggers for SJ other traumatic memories. Aaron offers SJ some help in coping with his feelings, since he “had also been in Vietnam” and
therefore “knew a fair amount about the traumatic syndrome SJ was struggling with” (273). The novel again compares SJ’s experiences during the storm to combat and the trauma that remains to postwar PTSD when he returns to the city. The narrator describes how SJ drives through the city when suddenly, “like an ambush, he drove through an invisible cloud with...an intolerable smell that spoke of a body not yet discovered, a smell that SJ remembered from the army, one you did not forget, ever” (350). The description of the odor’s sudden intrusions as “like an ambush” recalls military vernacular. Also, these intrusions mirror the experience of PTSD, in which unwelcome traumatic memories return unexpectedly and overwhelm the survivor. For SJ, the trauma of Katrina compares to the trauma of combat. Piazza includes this comparison between the trauma of Katrina and the trauma of combat veterans because readers are likely aware of the prevalence and severity of PTSD among veterans. By connecting the newer trauma of Katrina to the more familiar trauma of military combat, Piazza evokes reader empathy for the storm’s victims. Moreover, this connection reinforces the novel’s claim that, like war, Katrina is a man-made disaster.

Katrina also recalls earlier collective traumas specific to African American residents of New Orleans. Leeshawn asks SJ “if he thought they had dynamited the levees, as some black residents of the Lower Nine were claiming” (277). This suspicion recalls the intentional bombing of the levees in 1927 to prevent flooding in prosperous white neighborhoods. SJ does not think that the government blew up the levees this time because “[t]hey didn’t need to…All they had to do was make weak levees and that was it” (278). As SJ intuitively understands, and as the novel itself stresses, structural violence need not be overt. No individual actors took explicit action to harm the mostly Black residents of the neighborhoods most affected by the flooding, but the

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27 The Vietnam Experience Study of 1988 reported that “14.7% of Vietnam veterans experienced combat-related PTSD at some time during or after military service” (Richardson et al.).
system of unequal and insufficient government resources nonetheless enacted violence. Indeed, this sort of structural violence often goes undetected, and even when it is identified there is no single person to blame (“Structural Violence”). Through SJ, the novel argues that those in power need not engage in overt discrimination or violence because the inequalities embedded in the structure of society do that work for them.

The narrator further describes the different circumstances faced by New Orleanians with and without economic resources after the storm, explaining that citizens “with resources were able to rent apartments in upscale areas of New Orleans at the inflated rates that landlords suddenly realized they could charge, or they bought one of the houses that suddenly hit the market in the twenty percent of the city that did not flood,” even though such houses were exorbitantly priced (287). Those without wealth, however, largely remained displaced. Many people who wanted to return to the city could not, as they “had just been hanging on in life as it was before the storm” because they “had to take three buses to work across the city and back from work every day and support aging parents and nieces and nephews of siblings or cousins in jail” (287). In other words, those facing economic hardships prior to Katrina lack the resources necessary to return to New Orleans; as before and during the storm, they are just trying to keep their heads above water. For similarly disadvantaged citizens who remained in the city, basic utilities are often unavailable. The resources promised by the federal government to combat the lack of adequate power and shelter arrive slowly and fail to serve those most in need because, as the narrator notes, “[t]here was no coordination among the various agencies set up to provide aid” (287). This negligence is itself another manifestation of structural violence, as it violates the contract between citizens and government.
In addition to the psychological consequences of Katrina, survivors of the storm suffer negative physical consequences. A couple of months after surviving the storm, Lucy suffers a heart attack and dies. The doctor who performs Lucy’s autopsy states that the heart attack was “quite possibly precipitated by the intense stress of the past weeks” (346). Moreover, the doctor explains that they “see this all the time…So many from New Orleans. Stress is a killer” (346). The doctor acknowledges that preexisting conditions and failure to take proper medications played a role in Lucy’s heart attack, but also emphasizes the correlation between the stress endured by Katrina’s victims and negative health outcomes. This correlation illustrates another form of structural violence, as those without resources were more likely to struggle with medical conditions prior to the storm, and those conditions worsened due to the physical and psychological toll of Katrina. As with other issues, Katrina laid bare the systemic barriers to proper health care and resources for the management of health conditions for poor, Black residents of New Orleans.

The narrator also notes that, like SJ and Lucy, other New Orleanians suffered trauma from the storm and the flood. The narrator describes survivors “in shock and grief, with no counseling to help them manage the intrusive imagery they had of their mother, who refused to leave, drowned in the living room where they had grown up and had graduation parties, everything they knew transfigured as if in a nightmare…and others couldn’t understand why they didn’t just pull up their socks and do something to help themselves” (290). This passage emphasizes that some people—like Alice’s Uncle Gus, for example—hold victims personally responsible for mitigating their own suffering. Part of the trauma victims face comes from this kind of failure or refusal to recognize their suffering. The narrator explains:
There was a gulf between those who had had their community smashed and their future thrown completely into question, and those for whom life still moved in an intelligible stream. It was not unlike the line that separated those who had come back from the war and those whose lives had been going on continuously while they had been away. There was an understanding among those who had been there, and a gap between them and those who had not (292).

Here, the novel distinguishes between direct victims of the storm—those facing individual trauma—and those who only experienced Katrina secondhand. Moreover, the narrator distinguishes between different kinds of victimization; SJ, Lucy, and Wesley suffered traumas greater than those suffered by Craig and Alice. Though the Donaldsons were also displaced, they managed to evacuate prior to the flooding and hostile conditions that followed. Craig even feels guilty when he sees that other New Orleanians suffered more from the storm and the flood than did he and his family (265). These differences between the individual traumatic experiences of those with relative privilege and the experiences of poor, Black New Orleanians contribute to the cultural trauma of Katrina in that these differences illuminate the systemic inequalities that exacerbated individual traumas for some on the basis of their race and socioeconomic class.

The novel also depicts the potential for media to contribute positively to the construction of Katrina as a cultural trauma. Craig thinks of his gig writing columns about New Orleans in the aftermath of the storm as “a godsend” because the act of writing provides “a way to process and manage all this potentially overwhelming material” (258). This “material” is the abundance of information he receives from friends and fellow New Orleanians about the devastation they have witnessed and experienced. As the narrator notes, the devastation of the storm “was more than the mind could take in. Every house on that block and the next and every other block for miles in
each direction contained some version of this scene, marinating in the murderous heat” (265). Because the disaster of Katrina and subsequent flooding is so overwhelming, people seek out different ways to process the experience. The media offers one means of processing the devastation, as its rapid coverage tries to take everything in as quickly as possible. The novel indicates, however, that the mind cannot actually process information in the way that media represents it. Instead, human stories like Craig’s columns slow things down and offer a different means of understanding the trauma. However, Craig’s columns about New Orleans unintentionally reinforce some of the oversimplified narratives he ostensibly intends to challenge. While writing these columns, Craig struggles with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, he feels “a debilitating anxiety that the city could never come back” (305). On the other hand, he believes that maintaining some measure of hope is necessary to help people heal. He ignores his doubts and writes “columns about all the signs of hope, and bravery, and occasional pathos” (306). Craig thinks of the city as “an optical illusion” because “from one angle the city was a ruined shell of itself, where people hung onto the wreckage for dear life; from another angle it was already coming back, insisting on not dying, full of examples of the human spirit defiantly asserting itself in the face of the worst that life could dish out” (306). He wishes that he were not so overwhelmed with conflicting emotions so that he could “write his column about how the city was both, at the same time” (306). Through Craig, the novel argues that the physical damage to the city does not detract from citizens’ resilience and strength. At the same time, it insists that narratives about individual resilience ought not overshadow the reality that most people cannot overcome the disaster through attitude alone. Piazza indicates that any narrative of New Orleans should consider both the incredible strength of individual citizens and the nearly incapacitating devastation facilitated by systemic inequities.
Part of Craig’s motivation for giving voice to both of these aspects of the Katrina story comes from his outrage at those who dismiss the poor, Black citizens most affected by the storm. Craig discusses returning to work for the weekly paper, *Gumbo*, with his boss, Borofsky. Craig tells Borofsky about a disturbing letter he recently received, in which the writer asks, “whether the city wasn’t better off without its poorer black citizens” (320). He notes that the letter is “part of a theme that was coming out of the closet more and more,” indicating that many people seem to share the writer’s belief. To Craig’s chagrin, Borofsky “tacitly defended the letter-writer’s point-of-view,” stating that “some of these neighborhoods do not express, have never expressed, something essential about the city” (320). When Craig pushes back against his boss’s claims, Borofsky insists:

> The most motivated, most talented citizens, black and white, whatever neighborhood they lived in before the storm, will come back. And they will be the ones most likely to make a contribution to the city’s growth and rebuilding and eventual well-being. And the ones who want to sit on their ample posteriors and cash a monthly check to buy potato chips and watch their High-Definition TVs that they bought with their FEMA money will be just as happy in Atlanta or Houston. (322)

Borofsky’s claim that only those who are “most motivated, most talented” can or should return implies that those who struggle to return are of no use to the city. Like the letter-writer Craig describes, Borofsky also clearly harbors racist prejudices. His statement about displaced citizens “who want to sit on their ample posteriors and cash a monthly check,” evokes racist stereotypes that stem from former President Ronald Reagan’s false claims about Black Americans abusing
the public welfare system. Moreover, his assertion that displaced residents have excess “FEMA money” for purchasing luxuries is patently false; FEMA was slow to provide aid, and the aid provided was largely inadequate for covering even the cost of living. Though Craig does not respond aloud to Borofsky’s racist rhetoric, the novel reveals his internal monologue, in which he questions, “What about the hardworking people who were just hanging on…If they couldn’t muster the resources to move back, in this climate of no insurance, no electricity, no jobs, no schools, no services, then the hell with them?” (322). Thus, while Borofsky represents the problematic, popular narrative that New Orleans’ most vulnerable residents are lazy and entitled, Craig evinces a counternarrative that recognizes the structural barriers citizens face both before and after Katrina. Borofsky also represents the institutional barriers that may prevent counternarratives from circulating through journalism. Gumbo’s readership does not gain access to Craig’s counternarratives unless they happen to find his column in the Chicago publication. The novel, by contrast, portrays the scene in Borofsky’s office to show the problematic nature of the dominant narrative while simultaneously expressing a more sympathetic counternarrative.

City of Refuge also counters the narrative of crime and chaos in New Orleans by showing how community members help one another. The devastation overwhelms SJ when he finally returns to New Orleans. Before even arriving home, “it was already too much to absorb” (349). The city feels unfamiliar, like it “could have been on the moon, or in some battle zone” (349). The novel also describes the city as “defiled,” “ruined,” “violated,” and “brutalized,” indicating

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28 Reagan famously exaggerated a story about a Black woman in Chicago who abused the welfare system to become rich. The story and the subsequent proliferation of the term “welfare queen” were—and still are—used as a racist dog whistle to falsely claim that Black women in particular were lazy and entitled (Borrelli).

29 Federal law mandates that disaster victims receive aid from FEMA. Although Congress approved over $62 billion in federal aid following Katrina, FEMA did not properly administer that aid (Pierre and Stephenson 445). Four months after Katrina, “thousands of disaster victims still had not received desperately needed assistance from FEMA and, as a result, continued to suffer harm” (445). Even those who received some aid in the form of checks to cover the costs of temporary housing did not receive instructions on how the aid was to be used, so they spent the money on other necessities like food and medications (446).
both the desecration caused by the storm and the culpability of human actors for the destruction (349, 354). Despite his anger and grief, SJ believes that those who survive must preserve the narratives of those who have passed. While gathered with his remaining family members to celebrate Thanksgiving, he feels the presence of his late loved ones, including both of his parents, his sister, and his wife. He thinks to himself that his own survival is not enough because “the ones who have gone have to survive, too” (366). In other words, he can ensure the survival of those who have left the material world by sharing their stories. SJ takes a step towards immortalizing those lost in rebuilding his house “from the pieces of the wreckage,” and “on every piece of wood, he would write the name of someone from the Nine until he ran out of names” (403). SJ literally rebuilds his home from the wreckage of the storm, and he metaphorically asserts that his community will rebuild from what remains. His home will have the name of both victims and survivors from his neighborhood built in, indicating that it is the people in his community who make his house a home. SJ’s story of individual resilience does not overlook the role of his community in providing support.

SJ’s decision to live a life that focuses on the future while honoring the stories of the past mirrors the city’s decision to host Mardi Gras just a few months after Katrina. The narrator acknowledges the mixed response to the city’s decision to hold the celebration; some feel that “the sound of celebration assaults a grieving heart,” while others believe that celebrating “was an obligation on those who were still alive to restate the resilience of the human spirit with wit and style, to be present, to answer when called, even with tears running down your face” (374). These positions share a concern with properly acknowledging the incomprehensible losses of the city and its residents. Those in favor of holding Mardi Gras and those who ultimately decided to attend participated in the city’s longstanding custom of dancing at funerals, which expresses
“insistence upon the life that is left, the reminder of how finite it all is, how bitter and precious” (375). Notably, the novel includes Mardi Gras in order to demonstrate the two aspects of Katrina that Craig recognizes; New Orleans is a place with strong people and an irrepressible culture that was nonetheless devastated by factors beyond any individual citizen’s control. Mardi Gras endures, indicating that the culture of the city as a whole will endure, but simultaneously serves as a reminder of what has been lost.

Those displaced by the storm mourn the loss of community and the losses borne by others in their community. On Thanksgiving Day, Craig sits at dinner with his family and thinks of the thousands of displaced New Orleanians in hotel rooms across the country; “They were the echo in the room, amid all that warmth, for Craig” (358). He struggles with a sort of survivor’s guilt, in which he questions “what right did he have to be grateful, when so many people had lost everything?” (360). Surprisingly, Gus—who rarely says the right thing at the right time—gives a brief speech about thankfulness that addresses Craig’s guilt. Gus describes serving in the Korean War in 1952, and how “so many of your friends die when you are in a situation like that, or get injured, disappear, and you can wonder why you are still alive and they aren’t” (360). He explains that, rather than wondering why one survived when others did not, it is more useful to ask oneself “how—how do you use your time you have left…Because that is the only thing you have any control over” (360-361). Craig takes Gus’s message to heart and resolves not to wallow in his grief. Similarly, the novel itself is a response to the question of “how.” Though the text details the devastation and loss engendered by Katrina and subsequent government failures, ultimately Piazza offers a path forward for privileged survivors of and witnesses to Katrina. No one can erase the suffering that has already taken place, but one can honor that suffering through
open acknowledgement and by challenging harmful or reductive narratives that dismiss lived experiences.

Upon his return to the city during Mardi Gras, Craig condemns the “bastards” responsible for Katrina, “who built the levees wrong, who didn’t inspect them, who wouldn’t listen to the reports of the problems all over the city, who didn’t care enough…Who wouldn’t fund the restoration because it could cost almost as much as a month in Iraq” (401-402). He recognizes that Katrina was so disastrous because of government incompetence, indifference, and misplaced priorities. The novel shows Craig’s resolve to promote justice as the narrator states, “They were not going to sweep this under the rug. He would tell everyone he knew” (402). “They” refers to the government and mainstream media outlets, including the one where Craig used to work. He believes—based on the discourses he has already heard on the radio, from his former boss, and from those who wrote to him—that some people will perpetuate narratives that blame the victims of Katrina rather than those truly responsible and minimize the storm’s devastation. To combat these false narratives, Craig takes “dozens of photos” and “planned to do presentations and slideshows about this” (402). Though he has felt some guilt about leaving New Orleans, “he was at least not going to abandon it. This was not going to drop off the radar” (402). Craig will use his power as a member of the media, now based in Chicago, to share the true stories of New Orleans. Contrary to his earlier stories which focused on the resilience of the human spirit in the city, he will now circulate a more nuanced narrative about both the strength of New Orleanians and the often-insurmountable institutional barriers to their prosperity. Indeed, Craig’s writing and presentations will acknowledge the structural violence that created the conditions for Katrina and exacerbated the city’s devastation following the storm. Similarly, City of Refuge as a whole presents a complex picture of New Orleans after Katrina that simultaneously acknowledges
individual mettle and institutional failure. The novel ultimately conveys the cultural trauma of Katrina and challenges the two dominant narratives of Katrina—that New Orleanians were responsible for their own victimization and that the city could easily overcome the devastation. The novel’s counternarrative acknowledges the complexity of recovery, highlighting the multiple structural factors that contributed to the initial devastation and impeded citizens’ well-being in the aftermath of the storm.

*City of Refuge* is a work of Cultural Trauma Fiction because of the narrator’s intentional, explicit assertion of a counternarrative and Piazza’s use of narrative strategies such as temporal disruptions, depictions of the abject, and intentional absurdity. The narrator’s access to the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and family history provides insight unavailable in other media. As this discussion has demonstrated, media following Katrina did not account for constraints and cultural narratives affecting residents’ choice not to evacuate. Media described victims as “refusing” to leave or “ignoring” warnings, rather than acknowledging the complexity and difficulty of their decisions. This characterization serves to reinforce dominant narratives of criminality and chaos following the storm. *City of Refuge* eschews these narratives through sympathetic depictions of the victims and their circumstances. The novel also pushes back against media censorship—which the government defended as a fear of offending viewers, but which was more likely indicative of their fear of how people would react if they understood the enormity of the government’s failure to protect citizens—by using disturbing imagery to incite emotional responses in readers. Piazza also counters dominant narratives by depicting characters’ reactions to news media. The novel includes misleading and unsympathetic media narratives as well as people influenced by those narratives to have contempt for Katrina’s victims. Craig tries to counter the media narrative through better journalism, but his efforts are limited by
institutional barriers, including those in power in the media who hold the racist or problematic views Craig wants to combat. Craig fails to change the media narratives from the inside, but the novel’s depiction of his efforts succeeds in doing so. Overall, *City of Refuge* exemplifies Cultural Trauma Fiction’s intention to stir readers’ emotions and avoids the institutional barriers and boundaries of journalism as a genre that inhibits the proliferation of sympathetic narratives.

**Wading Home: A Novel of New Orleans**

Rosalyn Story’s *Wading Home: A Novel of New Orleans* (2010) depicts the experiences of the Fortier family and their New Orleans community during and in the months following Hurricane Katrina, and, like *City of Refuge*, demonstrates that widespread government and media narratives of the storm do not fully capture the reality of the disaster. *Wading Home* differs from Piazza’s novel in that it more explicitly links Katrina to other iterations of systemic racism. Specifically, *Wading Home* demonstrates that the structural violence that shaped Katrina and resulted in loss of property is no different from the ongoing legalized theft of Black-owned property by miserly, white land developers. In this way, *Wading Home* links the more visible structural violence of Katrina to other, more insidious manifestations of structural violence that also produce trauma. The novel thus sets the stage for the works of Cultural Trauma Fiction, to be explored in Chapter 4, that examine how longstanding patterns of structural violence produce cultural trauma, much like singular, shocking instances of such violence.

*Wading Home* centers on Simon Fortier, a Black, 76-year-old former chef, who refuses to evacuate his home in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward, despite his son Julian’s desperate attempts to convince him otherwise. The elder Fortier escapes his flooded house and attempts a journey to his ancestral home in a rural area north of the city, but he suffers heat exhaustion. He lies unconscious and unidentified in a nearby hospital for weeks after the storm. Meanwhile,
Julian, a successful musician living in New York City, returns to New Orleans to search for his father. The novel demonstrates multiple facets of Katrina and its aftermath, including cultural narratives about the storm, the myriad factors contributing to residents’ decisions not to evacuate, the disparate experiences of those with economic privilege from those without resources, New Orleanians’ strength and resilience, the systemic factors affecting recovery outcomes, news media’s representations of the disaster, and the similarities between Katrina and other instances of race-based injustice. Like City of Refuge, the novel illustrates how news media shapes the experiences and perceptions of survivors themselves, making them secondhand witnesses in addition to being firsthand witnesses to the trauma. Additionally, Wading Home exemplifies how Cultural Trauma Fiction promotes empathy and insight regarding the lived experiences of individual victims in order to motivate action towards social justice reform. Story’s novel differs from Piazza’s primarily in its attention to examples of structural violence that are more insidious and less spectacular than Katrina. This novel demonstrates how longstanding patterns of violence can constitute cultural trauma comparable to that of Katrina and explores why it is necessary to cultivate empathetic witnesses in order to motivate substantive action towards social change.

Like City of Refuge, Wading Home engages with cultural narratives about the storm, but it begins with one of the best-known cultural narratives in the Western world: that a vengeful God will send an apocalypse to destroy the world. Story’s novel challenges even this most ubiquitous narrative by demonstrating that New Orleans’ apocalypse was a manmade failure, rather than an inevitable curse from God. The narrator introduces the cultural narrative of apocalypse, stating, “Years before the night the storm made history, it had already earned its name. Those who’d witnessed the worst of them argues that when The Big One finally appeared,
it would signal the end of everything in its path” (1). Unlike the Biblical flood, the apocalypse in New Orleans was constructed by mankind, both through institutional negligence and human contributions to rapid climate change.

The novel’s close, third person narrator provides access to Simon and Julian’s thoughts and feelings, as well as background information that contextualizes the characters’ experiences of the storm. By illuminating Simon’s motives for staying home during Katrina, the narrator plays a key role in demonstrating the economic and cultural factors that contributed to some New Orleanians’ decision to not to evacuate. The narrator notes just prior to the storm that “most have left town for higher ground, and only the cash-strapped or fearless have hunkered down to brave out the night” (5). This statement acknowledges both the material and cultural constraints influencing residents’ decision to remain; some could not leave, and others were influenced by cultural narratives about hurricanes in the city and previous ‘false alarms,’ when storms that promised destruction passed them by. The narrator emphasizes the pervasiveness of media narratives in people’s lives, and how that pervasiveness has led to mistrust in those narratives—many residents dismissed warnings of a catastrophic storm because they felt that media and government officials “had a way of exaggerating these things” (7). Moreover, New Orleanians like Simon rely on their individual and collective memories of past storms as well as media narratives of disaster to guide their decision. Simon thinks, “he hadn’t left for Betsy and he wasn’t leaving now. The vandals and the looters would have to move on to another house for their business. Besides, he was a Fortier, and a Fortier did not leave his home to the whims of storms and thieves” (7). Clearly, both his familial and cultural understanding of hurricanes and widespread media myths about looting and other criminal activity following disaster events influence Simon’s decision to remain at home during Katrina.
Wading Home also compares the experiences of the privileged few with the majority of New Orleanians who suffered extensive losses due to Katrina and the floods that followed. In contrast to the devastation wrought in historically Black neighborhoods, the houses in wealthy, predominately white neighborhoods “still shone in the metallic wash of the sun…as if nothing had happened” (39). The privileged neighborhoods only suffered a few inches of flooding and avoided the “weeks of waiting for head-high water to drain and muddied rooms to dry” common in the Lower Ninth Ward and other low-income portions of the city (40). Wading Home also depicts the mediated witnessing of New Orleanians with immense privilege, as their socioeconomic security shields them from the most traumatizing aspects of Katrina. Matthew Parmenter, Simon’s former business partner, tells Julian, “I’ve been listening to the radio. It’s so sad, what’s happened in this city. So much heartbreak…” (51). Parmenter only knows about the devastation in his own city through media because his privilege separates him from the average New Orleanian. Parmenter’s experience during the night of the hurricane included little more than hearing “the sounds of deafening thunder and rain, the crashing of tree limbs” (55). He describes the experience as “a little frightening” (55). Parmenter’s experience hardly bears mentioning compared to the thousands of accounts of immense suffering, trauma, and loss. By contrast, Simon’s experience of the hurricane includes waking up “to the sound of water crashing through his door, and quickly gathering around his bed” (20). 76-year-old Simon has no choice but to break through the roof of his home with a pickaxe, climb outside, and wait for rescue. A rescue helicopter takes him to the Convention Center and wishes him luck among thousands of people, “standing around in the brutal sun, looking hopeless” (262). He realizes that no one will help him any further, so he hitchhikes his way towards his ancestral home at Silver Creek (262). Simon eventually passes out from heat exhaustion on the side of the highway after
walking 7 miles towards his destination, surviving only because a couple of strangers take him to the hospital in time (263). Clearly, Simon’s ordeal is more than “a little frightening” (55). The novel describes these disparate experiences of Katrina to illustrate the racial and socioeconomic divisions in the city and how those divisions produce radically different outcomes for citizens in each group.

The novel showcases the realities of working-class life in New Orleans as well as the resilience of its citizens through Grady Casey, Julian’s friend and formal rival from high school band. A few weeks after Katrina, Julian sees in Grady’s eyes “the same look he’d seen in the eyes of everyone as they’d returned to the battered neighborhoods…a look of utter disorientation, as if the world you once knew had suddenly and sharply tilted, and you were holding on to whatever you could to walk upright” (36). Katrina and its aftermath disrupt Grady’s life and his sense of stability, but he nonetheless continues working because, as he explains, “[l]ife don’t stop just because of no storm” (37). Grady must continue working regardless of his psychological state because he cannot afford to miss a paycheck. Moreover, Grady symbolizes the unity of New Orleanians in the face of their collective trauma. Despite their lifetime of rivalry, Grady demonstrates kindness and empathy for Julian’s grief over his missing father. Grady’s compassion emphasizes for Julian that “[t]hey were all in this madness together” (38). Through his resilience, diligence, and kindness, Grady signifies they myriad ways in which the people of New Orleans maintained strength of character under terrible circumstances after Katrina.

Despite the resilience of New Orleans’ people and culture, systemic factors exacerbate their suffering and prevent a speedy recovery. When Julian gazes at the Mississippi River a month after Katrina, he thinks, “any other time when the government levees had not failed and
the flooding waters had not filled up the giant bowl of the sinking city and laid waste to thousands of acres and hundreds of lives; any other night when all that had not happened, there would have been lights on the river” (69). Julian could have attributed the loss of tourism and nightlife to the hurricane, but he recognizes that the real devastation arose due to the failure of “the government levees,” the failures of government and its institutions to protect their citizens (69). Through Julian’s realization, the novel counters descriptions of Katrina as a “natural” disaster.

In addition to depicting the lasting effects of the storm on the city’s landscape and economy, the novel describes the enduring effects of Katrina on residents’ physical health. Indeed, Hurricane Katrina and the flooding it produced contributed to significant health effects in the weeks and months after the storm was ostensibly over. *Wading Home*’s narrator describes how six weeks after the hurricane, victims still succumb to the effects of the ordeal. The death toll from Katrina increases because “infirm or elderly citizens ferried to outposts of safety in distant towns survived the storm and flood, only to die in Houston, or Atlanta, or Dallas or dozens of other places, from lack of critical medicine or some long standing illness worsened by heartbreak” (217). Moreover, “even some who were healthy when they left perished as their bodies buckled under the shock of tragedy and the load of loss” (217). Story includes these descriptions of the long-lasting health outcomes of the storm to show the limits of personal resilience for overcoming trauma and structural violence and to promote reader empathy.

*Wading Home* nonetheless emphasizes the resilience of New Orleanians and their culture, as well as the city’s counter-hegemonic cultural practices. Like *City of Refuge, Wading Home* notes that New Orleans will hold Mardi Gras in February, only six months after Katrina. Julian learns that Mardi Gras will go on from Mr. Deslodge, a friend of his father who serves as Chief
of the Red Feather Night Warriors, a krewe honoring the Native Americans who sheltered Blacks escaping from enslavement (Story 65). Despite his initial surprise that Mardi Gras was to take place, Julian concludes, “that was the way the city was, has always been—the biggest flood of the century was no match for the rolling tides of tradition” (65). Moreover, Julian thinks that if New Orleans “was going to go down, it would go down fighting, with people like Deslonde on the front line of the battle” (65). Deslonde and those like him are well-suited for the “front line” because they have long championed the cultural history of the city. The Red Feather Night Warriors in particular pay homage to a multicultural history while acknowledging the darker elements of the region’s past. In so doing, they engage in a counter-hegemonic process “that challenges the status quo and the normative arrangement of political and economic relations, aiming ultimately at human liberation” (Zembylas 2). Indeed, the group’s participation in Mardi Gras following Katrina symbolizes the recognition of the losses and injustices of the past and, simultaneously, symbolizes moving forward and celebrating their rich, multifaceted culture. The counter-hegemonic practices of New Orleanians within the novel parallel the novel’s own construction of a counternarrative.

In addition to depicting the endurance of New Orleans’ culture and the firsthand experience of the storm through Simon, *Wading Home* demonstrates the mediated witnessing common among those who experienced the storm through television news media. Julian first learns about the flooding in New Orleans while he is performing with his band in Tokyo. Julian and his bandmates watch CNN “as footage of the flood flashed across the screen and captions told the story of the drowning city. Helicopters like giant steel dragonflies hovered over what looked more like rivers than streets, and boats and makeshift rafts cruised through neighborhoods he recognized as well as his own reflection” (24). The scenes on the news promote both
recognition and defamiliarization, as Julian knows the neighborhoods displayed but cannot come to terms with their current state. When the camera shows the flooded site of the elementary school he once attended, Julian’s “mind could barely grasp what was happening…It was like seeing the face of someone you loved twisted strangely by a sudden and horrible stroke” (25). This metaphor captures the simultaneous familiarity and foreignness of the footage for Julian and for any potential viewers who know the city. Julian feels ill when he sees on the news “a group of weary, sweating people trudging through water up to their waists. Others hung on for their lives where the water had chased them—the top balconies of apartment houses and rooftops” (27). Like most Americans, Julian’s first encounter with the devastation in New Orleans comes from the news media.  

Julian’s experiences of secondhand witnessing through the news media exemplify the common phenomenon of “news fatigue,” showcasing the widespread effects of the storm and its aftermath (Dvorkin). When Julian listens to the radio a few weeks after Katrina, “bad news had blared mercilessly. All about the hurricane, the levees…The government failures…The missing people and the ones who were not—the ones who floated face up in the flood waters, bloated, found at last” (Story 85). The news media acknowledges some of the systemic causes of the hurricane as well as its human costs. Additionally, Julian hears “a few good stories—the reconnection of loved ones once lost and returned to each other, the rescues of old women or young children on rooftops, who told their tales of hopelessness, heat, [and] exhaustion” (85). Over time, Julian experiences news fatigue as a result of the incessant television and radio coverage of Katrina and the suffering it produced. He later watches television news and thinks that he “didn’t want to hear another word about life gone wrong, about things he couldn’t

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30 Also called “compassion fatigue,” this occurs “whenever there is a long-running news story that shows no signs of resolution. Listeners can become bored by even the most compelling story, if it seems never to change” (Dvorkin).
control” (194). Julian’s feelings illustrate a common sentiment among consumers of news media in the weeks and months following Katrina; the abundance of human suffering overwhelms audiences who are powerless to provide relief. Through Julian’s mediated witnessing, the novel shows that fiction can represent cultural trauma in a way that news media does not. Significantly, news and other forms of media that rely on near-instantaneous representation of events do not consider the effects of media representation and their own role in the construction of cultural trauma.

Furthermore, media influences Julian’s behavior in the weeks following the storm. When he has some free time, he considers visiting the Lower Ninth Ward to see how his old friends have fared. However, he decides against it because of television coverage comparing the neighborhood to “a war zone” (58). The influence of the news media on Julian—a Black native of New Orleans—indicates that the continued reports of disorder in the city could potentially influence anyone’s perception of the city and its most vulnerable residents. In this way, the novel explores the effects of news media on the public perception of hurricane Katrina and its victims, further indicating that fiction can explore the effects of news media in a way that news media itself does not.

Notably, those with direct experiences of Katrina also indirectly experience the disaster through other survivor’s stories and through the media. Julian’s former bandmates recount their own stories of being trapped on balconies and rooftops for days at a time and swimming through the putrid flood waters to rescue family members and neighbors (223). In the weeks that followed the storm “all had watched the tragedy play out on the TV screens of spare bedrooms, shelters, and church basements around the country” (223). Hearing the stories of their acquaintances and those of other fellow New Orleanians on the news angers the men, as they feel
“the winds of betrayal had blown powerfully from every direction” (223). Learning more about the scale of Katrina’s devastation leads the men to blame government at all levels, FEMA, and the Army Corps of Engineers for the failures and negligence that produced the disaster as such. This section of the novel demonstrates how news media shapes the experiences and perceptions of survivors themselves who become secondhand witnesses to some aspects of the trauma.

*Wading Home* also juxtaposes the man-made with the natural, implicitly challenging those narratives that describe Katrina as a natural disaster. The text explores the relationship between man and nature through the Fortier’s land at Silver Creek. The novel flashes back to Jacob Fortier, Simon’s father and Julian’s grandfather, who claims:

*Nothing is as enduring as land, because it’s land, not water, that covers the whole earth.*

*Beneath every pool of water...you go deep enough, you’ll find land. Water, always in motion, shifts and moves...But land will always be...Land needs water, true, but without land, water knows no bounds. With land, you can make a life for yourself* (Story 169).

For the Fortiers, then, land is the only guarantee of life. Land is essential, permanent, and resilient. This claim implies that the Fortier family can endure as long as they retain and care for their ancestral land. Furthermore, Jacob’s claims about the impermanence of water and the resilience of land also imply that New Orleans will survive after the flood waters recede. The novel’s depiction of the Fortier family’s longstanding perceptions of land and land ownership further demonstrates the cultural factors influencing Simon’s actions and the cultural significance of land for African Americans in general.

The novel’s comparisons between New Orleans and Silver Creek show the similarities between Katrina and other iterations of race-based structural violence. Julian meets a young, white law student named Kevin Larouchette who informs him that the Fortier family land at
Silver Creek has been sold (101). As Kevin explains, land speculators have been abusing heirship property laws to buy valuable land in the area from Black families at unfair prices (104). The speculator responsible for the unjust sale of the Fortier’s land was Kevin’s own grandfather, Nathan Larouchette. Kevin recognizes that his grandfather’s theft of African Americans’ land is unethical, and he makes it his mission to fight back. Kevin and Nathan Larouchette demonstrate the lasting consequences of structural violence; those whose forebears enacted such violence possess some responsibility for restructuring society to promote justice and equity. In a similar vein, those with a generational legacy of inequity and environmental abuses in the city of New Orleans must accept responsibility for ameliorating the damage of the past.

The novel further compares Nathan Larouchette to those responsible for the devastation in New Orleans, demonstrating that people in power prioritize profits over people and consequently enact violence. Kevin explains that men like his grandfather “cut themselves a slick path in the world while expecting others, without the hubris, gall, and money to match them, to just step aside and let them pass” (208). Story’s text implies that those with power in New Orleans have done the same. The wealthy neighborhoods in the city lie on higher ground or have well-maintained infrastructure to protect them from the worst of any flooding. Some property owners in these areas raise rent prices to take advantage of people’s desperation. As Grady notes, rents in these parts of the city “were sky-high, in some cases double what they’d cost before the flood” (197). In New Orleans as well as in Silver Creek, those with resources exploit their power to accumulate more wealth at the expense of those with the least to spare. Nathan Larouchette believes that his acquisition of the Fortier land is simply business and that his offer to let the family keep a small portion of the property is “generous,” just as those who neglected the levees in New Orleans’ most vulnerable neighborhoods likely had no intention of damaging poor, Black
residents. Despite the supposed lack of malicious intent, however, both Larouchette and officials in New Orleans enact violence against the victims of their greed.

In addition to the loss of life and material costs of the storm, the novel shows how Katrina depleted Black generational wealth. Julian’s former bandmate, Dereek, tells Julian about how the home that his family had owned for four generations “was swallowed in minutes by the flood” (225). The loss devastates Dereek because he feels that the land “is all I got…It’s like family. It’s mine. They got no right to it” (225). Here, he refers to “rumors about the future of the Lower Ninth Ward,” including some claims that impoverished neighborhoods including the Lower Ninth Ward are not worth rebuilding and the city would be better served by redevelopment (225). If enacted, this plan would displace Black residents from their ancestral homes and effectively rob them of the generational wealth accumulated by their families. Dereek believes that those seeking to reshape the historically Black neighborhoods “didn’t seem to know much about how their ancestors—freed slaves, many of them—had all sweated blood over their own patch of land for the future of their children and children’s children, and they didn’t much care” (225-226). As the novel implies, Black New Orleanians had to overcome historical inequities and traumas to accrue even modest plots of land to provide some measure of security to their families. Inherited land in African American communities holds cultural significance because of this history. Dereek’s sentiment compares to Simon’s commitment to the land at Silver Creek. Simon tells Julian that “land meant history, and history meant you knew who you were…land meant you had a place in the world” (226). For displaced New Orleanians and for the Fortiers, then, the concern that they might permanently lose their family land engenders additional trauma.
*Wading Home* argues that the only way to prevent such a loss and subsequent trauma is for those with the power to fight injustice to develop empathy through witnessing. Julian’s cousin, Genevieve, explains that while his efforts to save the family land are admirable, they are unlikely to be successful because Julian lacks a personal, emotional connection to the land. He initially fights for the land because he knows how important it is to his father, but Genevieve insists that “it’s harder, fighting for something you don’t love, something that don’t move your heart. So before you go trying to get the land back, it needs to mean something to you” (159). She asks Julian to stay a while and listen to the story of “where [his] people came from, where it all started” (159). Genevieve implores Julian to “think about your daddy, his daddy, and his daddy before. What the place meant to them. You got to know exactly what it is you fighting for” (171). This message is as much for the reader as for Julian; through Genevieve’s powerful act of storytelling, the novel indicates that secondhand witnesses who hear or read testimony can develop empathy that will “move [their] heart” and inspire action. The novel does not depict Genevieve’s story, but it does describe Julian’s reaction to it. When Genevieve concludes the story “Julian leaned his elbows on his knees and rested his head between his palms, as if Genevieve’s story weighed so heavily in his mind it took both hands to hold it” (171). Significantly, Julian recognizes that his father has told him the family’s story before. The story affects him differently this time because “now he was willing to listen, not just hear” (172). In the past, Julian had only “listened with half an ear and an iterant mind” (172). This realization indicates that audiences can hear narratives of trauma from various sources, but they will not develop empathy unless they actually listen to those stories. Genevieve participates in the oral storytelling tradition to share this narrative and encourage engaged witnessing. The novel uses
the written form to facilitate a similar kind of engaged witnessing in the reader and argues that the empathy that comes from such witnessing is necessary for social justice advocacy.

Indeed, *Wading Home* creates a multivocal narrative of collective suffering to highlight the cultural and economic factors constraining New Orleanians’ decisions before and after Hurricane Katrina, how economic privilege or lack thereof shaped their experiences, and how individual resilience cannot easily overcome structural violence and related institutional barriers to recovery. The novel also challenges the news media’s representations of the disaster, indicating that fiction offers a more nuanced, empathetic means for processing traumatic events because of novels’ potential for exploring other media’s role in the construction and interpretation of the trauma, highlighting otherwise marginalized voices and narratives, and inviting readers to participate in the active co-creation of knowledge. While the news media creates spectators who passively consume sensationalized and inflammatory coverage, Cultural Trauma Fiction inspires empathetic witnessing and a reconsideration of accepted narratives. Moreover, the novel displays the similarities between Hurricane Katrina and other forms of racial injustice. *Wading Home* is a work of Cultural Trauma Fiction because of its challenges to reductive narratives of the trauma, its representation of multiple identities and perspectives, and its attention to the larger cultural concern of race-based structural violence. The novel demonstrates the importance of Cultural Trauma Fiction as a tool for cultivating reader empathy and, potentially, inspiring work towards social justice.

**Conclusion**

*City of Refuge* and *Wading Home* are works of Cultural Trauma Fiction that explore broad, cultural concerns about Hurricane Katrina through multiple perspectives, engage with questions of collective identity, and challenge reductive narratives of the disaster in favor of
complex, nuanced, layered narratives. *City of Refuge* engages explicitly with media narratives about Katrina and its aftermath and intentionally counters those narratives. *Wading Home* also considers the role of media in the construction of cultural trauma but focuses more on structural violence and demonstrates the similarities between Hurricane Katrina and other manifestations of structural violence. Both of these novels highlight how fiction’s slow processing of events can promote empathy and insight regarding the lived experiences of individual victims as well as a greater understanding of the sociocultural construction of the disaster and its effects. Indeed, these works of Cultural Trauma Fiction challenge common government and media myths about the breakdown of law and order and increased criminal activity following the hurricane and push back against subsequent justifications for government and military control of areas and peoples impacted by disaster. Unlike the news media available on television, radio, and in print, these novels demonstrate that Hurricane Katrina was socially constructed rather than ‘natural’ and that it was not a singular, time-bound event. More importantly, both *City of Refuge* and *Wading Home* eschew dominant narratives—to which audiences are likely desensitized given their proliferation in the news—and instead portray the suffering of specific others in order to “move your heart,” or incite reader empathy (Story 159). Both novels facilitate reader empathy by demystifying the “hyperobject” that is structural violence; Cultural Trauma Fiction helps readers to comprehend structural violence by illuminating the myriad, complex causes and effects that are otherwise invisible.
Chapter 4: Structural Racism in Cultural Trauma Fiction

Cultural traumas are often conceived as singular, large-scale traumatic events, like 9/11, Columbine, or Hurricane Katrina, that result in “shocks to the routines that communities have come to take for granted” (Onwuachi-Willig 336). But longstanding patterns of smaller-scale traumatic events can also become cultural traumas; mass shootings, for example, are still traumatizing even though—in part, because—they have become a routine part of American collective life. Indeed, sociologist Angela Onwuachi-Willig argues that cultural trauma can arise from routine, harmful events, “when regularly expected occurrences…occur and in fact get reaffirmed in a public or official manner” (336). Specifically, Onwuachi-Willig cites the acquittal of the two white men charged with murdering Emmett Till in 1955 as an example of a routine occurrence that became culturally traumatic. She also cites the FBI’s report of the case as well as various individual testimonies to demonstrate that “the African American community experienced collective and cultural trauma in response to the not guilty verdict, even though this denial of African Americans’ humanity and civil rights was foreseeable and anticipated and in fact had been regularly experienced by African Americans” (337). The verdict was not a “shock to the routine” of African American collective life, as justice was rarely served when white people harmed or killed Black people. However, the verdict was culturally traumatizing because it constituted an official, legal confirmation that African Americans were still excluded from “full citizenship and legal protection” ninety years after the abolition of slavery (337). So, while the murder of Emmett Till and the murderers’ acquittals were not surprising or out of the ordinary—at least for African Americans—these events still incited cultural trauma among that population.
Only some of the routine harms that affect groups of people also distress the culture and become culturally traumatic. According to Onwuachi-Willig,

First, there must be a longstanding history of the routine harm, a history that essentially leads the subordinated group to expect nothing other than the routine yet cultural trauma-inducing injury. Second, underlying facts related to the routine injury must have garnered the type of widespread media attention that makes a large audience, both within and outside the group, take notice of the routine occurrence. [...] finally, there must be public discourse about the meaning of the routine harm, a harm that usually occurs in the form of governmental or legal affirmation of the subordinated group’s marginal status. (336)

In other words, a routine harm becomes culturally traumatic when it reminds the oppressed group that they are second-class citizens and intensifies their preexisting suffering (337). Some people within the larger culture but outside of the directly impacted group must also recognize the harm; for them, the event may not seem routine. Only some members of the larger culture will acknowledge the harm as such because “social groups can, and often do, refuse to recognize the existence of others’ trauma” (Alexander, “Toward a Theory” 1). This trauma affects different members of the larger culture differently based on their membership in or relationship to different cultural subgroups, such as those related to race or ethnicity. Nonetheless, when a large segment of the culture both within and outside of the affected subgroup recognizes the harm caused by the routine injury, the event has the potential to become a cultural trauma for the entire national culture in addition to being a collective, cultural trauma for the directly affected cultural subgroup.

Highly visible or especially flagrant instances of the routine harm that the American criminal legal system deploys against black people are one of the myriad ways that American
institutions harm and oppress people of color. Onwuachi-Willig moves beyond the well-known example of the Emmett Till murder and verdict, explaining that “institutionally oppressive structures” in general, “as well as conscious and nonconscious individual behaviors, work to demean and subjugate less powerful social groups in ways that can leave such subordinated groups with a sense of exclusion, powerlessness, or hopelessness” (340). Marginalized groups’ experience of routine harm “creates a constant simmering of individual and collective distress, tension, and psychological trauma underneath the surface for the subordinated group’s members,” and each instance exacerbates the group’s suffering (Onwuachi-Willig 341). When a particular instance of routine harm garners public and media attention, the group’s underlying trauma may boil over, and “eventually advances to broad-based discourses among individuals, groups, and subgroups about the meaning of the routine harm for the group and all others in a society, which then creates a space for a cultural trauma narrative to form” (341). Moreover, each publicized instance of the routine harm that the criminal justice system commits reminds African Americans “that they were not part of the country’s or state’s core identity and that the laws of the nation did not exist to protect them” (347). Routine violence increases the weight of the historical trauma African Americans bear, and the presence of historical trauma reinforces the significance of present-day racist violence.

**Structural Violence Past and Present**

Systemic or structural violence has always been a part of the lived experience of African Americans. As Michelle Alexander explains in her seminal text, *The New Jim Crow*, during the era of Jim Crow, African Americans were frequently arrested arbitrarily and then subjected to exorbitant court costs and fines “which had to be worked off in order to secure their release” (31). As convicts, these men did not have legal rights and “were understood, quite literally, to be
slaves of the state” (Michelle Alexander 31). This form of legal slavery was able to occur because the 13th Amendment abolished slavery except “as punishment for a crime” (31). White Southerners effectively continued enslaving African Americans through unjust law enforcement and incarceration practices. Later, when Jim Crow laws and segregation became illegal and African Americans saw some gains during the Civil Rights Movement, “[a] new race-neutral language was developed for appealing to old racist sentiments, a language accompanied by a political movement that succeeded in putting the vast majority of blacks back in their place…without violating the law or the new limits of acceptable political discourse, by demanding ‘law and order’” (40). Alexander argues that conservatives constructed this new racial caste system by connecting their objections to Civil Rights with demands for law and order and depicting Civil Rights protests as criminal, rather than political (41). Also, as Alexander further explains, the media sensationalized crime reports and presented a relatively small number of instances as evidence that the Civil Rights Movement had reduced collective morality, legality, and stability (41). Government conservatives and media outlets crafted and perpetuated narratives that demonized Civil Rights and reframed preexisting racist ideas and policies for a new generation, and subsequently installed a new system of racialized control and legal discrimination. Alexander’s interpretation of this history informs my analysis of the novels discussed in this chapter because it explains how some existing systems of racist discrimination came to be and demonstrates that cultural trauma is not necessarily a stunning, isolated incident; cultural trauma may arise due to an ongoing series of smaller injuries and collective traumas.

The ideology of racism persisted in the United States beyond the Civil Rights Movement; its contemporary analog can be found in the prison industrial complex, which arose in the early 1970s. According to Critical Resistance, the term ‘prison industrial complex’ describes “the
overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems” (“What is the PIC?”). Indeed, as Angela Davis and Cassandra Shaylor explain, the U.S.’s high incarceration rate “is more clearly linked to larger economic and political structures and ideologies than to individual criminal conduct and efforts to curb ‘crime’” (2). Private industry has a vested interest in incarceration because numerous companies “rely on prisons as an important source of profit” (Davis and Shaylor 2). Furthermore, because the majority of incarcerated people in the United States are members of racial minority groups, the prison industrial complex benefits from the nation’s racist past and reinforces racism in the present (2). Even when prisoners are not racial or ethnic minorities, imprisonment itself functions as “a medium of racialized statecraft” because inmates “are considered in law and in social practice an inferior race in and of themselves” (Gordon 652). In addition to this societal othering of prisoners, prisons lack incentives to actually rehabilitate offenders, as the prison industrial complex prioritizes profits “at the expense of human education and transformation” (Davis and Shaylor 3). Interested individuals and smaller organizations, such as police and corrections officers’ labor unions, also bolster the prison industrial complex. For instance, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA) has historically been “one of the most powerful political players” in California state politics, supporting measures like mandatory sentencing that disproportionately affect people of color (“California Guard”). Furthermore, prisoners are seen as second-class citizens and are effectively stripped of their citizenship. If convicts are members of racialized minority groups, their incarceration exacerbates existing inequalities. Also, legal measures ostensibly intended to prevent crime, including “draconian strategies” such as lengthy sentences for minor offenses, “tend to reproduce and, indeed, exacerbate the very problems they purport to solve” (3). The
entire system of mass incarceration—in which roughly 2.3 million people are in jail and prison in the United States—buttresses the prison industrial complex and proliferates race-based structural violence (“Mass Incarceration”).

Mass incarceration negatively affects incarcerated individuals, their families, and their communities. Scholar of criminal justice Todd R. Clear asserts that incarceration’s effects “ripple outward,” as incarceration has the unintended consequence of being “an intervention into the lives of people who may never go there themselves” (98-99). Incarceration harms the children and families of imprisoned people, their community infrastructure, and the safety of their communities (Clear 99). Incarceration negatively effects the safety of communities, as studies indicate “that concentrated incarceration has become criminogenic in its effects on involved communities” (102). In other words, high incarceration rates in a given community actually increase crime and decrease public safety in that community. Social scientists theorize “that people who live in neighborhoods with high prison rates tend to feel a strong distrust of formal sanctions, less obligation to obey the law, and less confidence in the capacity of informal social control in their communities” (Roberts 1287). Decreases in reverence for the rule of law and in public safety perpetuate cycles of crime and incarceration, which harm vulnerable African American communities for generations.

Moreover, mass incarceration is particularly devastating for African American children. It is well-established in empirical research that “African Americans experience a uniquely astronomical rate of imprisonment, and the social effects of imprisonment are concentrated in their communities” (Roberts 1273). Indeed, studies show that although African Americans make up only about 13% of the U.S. adult population, “approximately 37% of men in prison and 21% of women in prison are African American” (Engstrom et al. 24). Incarceration becomes
concentrated in particular communities due to the “extreme racial and socioeconomic segregation of housing in the United States,” which endures due to a longstanding history of redlining and other forms of housing discrimination (Clear 103). Legal scholar Dorothy E. Roberts argues that the mass incarceration of African Americans engenders communal harm because those most affected by this injustice “tend to live in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods” (1275-1276). Indeed, in some poor, predominately Black, urban neighborhoods, “almost one out of every five males aged 18–44 was behind bars on any given day” (Clear 103). In some impoverished, Black neighborhoods, one third of the youth residents aged 16–24 are sent to prison each year (103). Studies suggest that the geographic concentration of incarceration produces more incarceration (Roberts 1276). In those African American communities most affected by mass incarceration, “incarceration has become a systemic aspect of family affairs, economic prospects, political engagement, social norms, and childhood expectations for the future” (1277). Indeed, mass incarceration “damages social networks, distorts social norms, and destroys social citizenship” within and beyond African American communities (1281). Roberts notes that imprisonment robs children of necessary parental support. She further explains that the incarceration of a parent increases a child’s risk of “depression, anxiety, feelings of rejection, shame, anger, and guilt, and problems in school” (1284). Numerous studies substantiate Roberts’ claim that membership in a community where incarceration appears to be a normal or inevitable part of life has damaging effects on children (1289).

High incarceration rates among Black fathers also negatively affect mothers’ mental health. For one, research indicates “that having an incarcerated father adversely affects children's mental health, which might redouble back to mothers” (Wildeman et al. 219). In a recent study,
Wildeman et al. find “a statistically significant negative association between recent paternal incarceration and maternal mental health,” particularly as a result of increased social and economic instability (234). While many studies highlight the economic consequences of incarceration, Wildeman et al. show that “incarceration would still undermine the well-being of incarcerated men's families” even if finances were not an issue because of its effects on children’s and partners’ mental health (234). As this study demonstrates, mass incarceration causes collateral damage to mental health across families and communities.

In addition to these effects of incarceration on children and mothers, Kristin Turney argues that “mass incarceration has altered the American kinship system” more broadly through its effects on relationships across multiple generations (300). Specifically, “paternal incarceration alters children’s co-residence and contact with grandparents” (Turney 301). For some families, the stigma of incarceration may lead either the children’s mother or grandparents to withdraw from the relationship (303). Paternal grandparents may also withdraw from their grandchildren’s lives because of strained relationships with their adult sons as a result of their incarceration or the stress of repeated incarceration (303, 321). By contrast, in some families grandparents may play a greater role in their grandchildren’s lives after paternal incarceration because of the family’s increased need for financial and emotional support (303). Turney notes that the effects of paternal incarceration differ depending on the intergenerational relationships in place prior to that incarceration. The effects on a grandchild’s relationship with their paternal grandparents “are likely strongest when children are living with fathers prior to paternal incarceration, as it is among this group that incarceration most substantially leads to a reorganization of family roles” (305). Moreover, the intergenerational effects of paternal incarceration are greater when a father is incarcerated for 3 months or longer or when he is incarcerated for a violent crime (320).
Turney indicates that paternal incarceration primarily affects children’s relationships with their paternal grandparents because incarcerated fathers can no longer effectively “broker” relationships between their children and parents (321). Notably, while children with incarcerated fathers often have less contact with their paternal grandparents, they generally “do not have compensatory increased contact with maternal grandparents” (323). Turney argues that changes to intergenerational relationships as a result of paternal incarceration “are likely consequential for all three generations” (323). As these studies show, the mass incarceration of African American men produces far-reaching, devastating effects for their families and communities.

The system of mass incarceration also exacerbates existing societal issues. Engstrom et al. argue that “mass incarceration builds upon and exacerbates profound social inequality” (24). Mass incarceration increases inequalities, in part, because it “dramatically constrains the participation of African American communities in the mainstream political economy,” due to the societal stigmas associated with a criminal record and the routine disenfranchisement of those with felony convictions (Roberts 1291). Also, individuals with felony convictions often face “ineligibility for public housing, student loans, food stamps, and numerous professional licenses” and limited employment opportunities (Engstrom et al. 26). The mass incarceration of African Americans is an iteration of structural racism in that it “systematically maintains racial hierarchies established in prior eras by embedding white privilege and nonwhite disadvantage” (1299-1300). Moreover, Smith and Hattery argue that the prison industrial complex31 “exploits African American men by extracting their labor for less than fair market wages,” and, by extension, “extracts the capital of African American families and communities through the practice of mass incarceration and mass removal of African American men” (388). This

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31 Schlosser defines the prison industrial complex (PIC) as “a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need” (qtd in Smith and Hattery 389).
exploitation and extraction of capital has detrimental effects on Black communities. Various studies in criminology demonstrate that the current system of incarceration in the United States reproduces existing structural inequities (De Giorgio 10). As criminologist Alessandro De Giorgi explains, one means by which incarceration reproduces inequality is “by rendering invisible a large fraction of the racialized poor” by housing these populations in prisons (10). In so doing, these populations are effectively absent “from the public sphere as well as from official statistics on a variety of social issues, thus generating severe distortions in official indicators of social inequality” (De Giorgi 10). This is to say that incarceration exacerbates inequalities by rendering invisible those inequalities to those who might otherwise seek to ameliorate them. In addition to obscuring structural inequalities, then, mass incarceration also reproduces them (11). Mass incarceration produces “a large army of disenfranchised poor people, rendered powerless to resist their exploitation in the labor market, and desperate enough that they will accept any condition of work” (12). Given that the inequalities produced and worsened by mass incarceration disproportionately affect African Americans, civil rights lawyer Michelle Alexander argues that mass incarceration is “a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow” (4). The criminal justice system still proliferates comparable race-based structural violence through police brutality and mass incarceration, and research demonstrates the ways in which this violence traumatizes individuals and communities. Indeed, the prison industrial complex and the related system of mass incarceration are manifestations of race-based structural violence that produce cultural trauma not only for African Americans, but for all Americans. For African Americans, mass incarceration is a routine harm that impacts one’s daily life and psyche. For non-Black Americans who are less often personally subjected to this type of structural violence,
certain egregious miscarriages of justice and shocking statistics about incarceration in the United States bring awareness to the issue and initiate questions about what “America” really is, since it clearly is not the land of the free. Some non-Black Americans may not realize that race-based structural violence endures in the present day. As more and more Americans understand the inherently racist nature of the prison industrial complex, however, many ask themselves what it means to be an American in light of ongoing institutional racism.

Indeed, the structural violence of the criminal legal system engenders cultural trauma for a significant number of Americans. For an event or pattern of events to be culturally traumatic, it must be remembered and “the memory must be made culturally relevant, that is, represented as obliterating, damaging, or rendering problematic something sacred—usually a value or outlook felt to be essential for the integrity of the affected society” (Smelser 7). For Americans, the prison industrial complex and its corollaries—namely mass incarceration and police brutality—have become culturally relevant because of the broad recognition that the United States is not a free country given such a substantial portion of the population is incarcerated and fears the extralegal violence that regularly occurs in the enforcement of the criminal legal system.

Roughly 0.7% of the population of the United States is incarcerated, or 698 per 100,000 people (Wagner and Bertram). Even more strikingly, “1 out of 5 prisoners in the world is incarcerated in the U.S.” (Wagner and Bertram). The United States incarcerates a larger proportion of its citizens than any other country in the world, but still collectively identifies as the land of the free. Writing for the Institute for Policy Studies, Robert P. Alvarez explains the disconnect between American myth and reality, stating, “When I was a child, I learned to believe that Americans valued freedom and equality more than any other place on the planet. I learned that, in our criminal justice system, we were innocent until proven guilty…It’s hard to still believe that now”
(Alvarez). He goes on to explain his disillusionment, stating that America is particularly “unfree” for people of color; “Police are choking us to death on camera like George Floyd, and shooting us to death in our sleep like Breonna Taylor. And when we’re not being killed by police, we’re locked in cages guarded by correctional officers.” Alvarez’s sentiments are not uncommon among Americans today. For many Americans, the cultural trauma of structural violence arises not only because of particular, high-profile instances of violence, but because these instances facilitate collective disillusionment. The more Americans learn about or experience the violence of the criminal legal system, the more will understand that the values “essential for the integrity” of American identity—such as freedom and the right to be considered innocent until proven guilty—are not universally available to American citizens.

**Race-Based Structural Violence and Cultural Trauma Fiction**

Several contemporary novels engage with the present and historical effects of police brutality, incarceration, and the prison industrial complex, each of which are manifestations of race-based structural violence that produce cultural trauma. These novels participate in the transmission of that trauma to unfamiliar readers, counteract the proliferation of reductive media portrayals, and promote the kind of intersubjective empathy necessary for motivating change. Two such novels, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward and *The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead, acknowledge the traumas faced by Black men who were imprisoned unjustly and treated inhumanely in the Jim Crow South, and explore how the established history of African American trauma exacerbated their suffering. These novels differ from the myriad other novels that consider issues of historical racism and present-day structural violence in that they explore the broad, cultural implications of this violence, rather than focusing exclusively on the experiences of individual victims. Furthermore, these novels do not dwell in the traumatic past;
they invoke the past to process the traumas of the present and to generate a different future. Both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Nickel Boys* illuminate overlooked or suppressed histories to indicate that racist legacies and systems live on under new names. Both Ward’s and Whitehead’s novels engage in Cultural Trauma Fiction’s general practice of challenging dominant narratives of trauma but differ from other novels in the subgenre in that they center on specific instances within a pattern of traumas and those traumas are especially poignant for African Americans. These novels compare to texts about mass shootings in that they respond both to particular, brazen instances of a trauma that have become routine for at least a significant subset of the culture. These texts also share with novels about Hurricane Katrina their focus on traumas that disproportionately affect African Americans. The novels discussed in this chapter differ from those examined in the previous chapters in that they explore traumas that occur partially in the distant past, rather than focusing solely on recent traumas. These novels explore the traumas of the past alongside contemporary traumas to show how the past still effects people in the present through the intergenerational transmission of trauma as well as through new manifestations of the same racist systems that caused earlier traumas. As *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Nickel Boys* demonstrate, the unfortunately commonplace abuses of African American boys and men throughout Americans’ collective history not only resonate in the present, but are replicated in the present by the enduring production of systemic violence.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing*’s multivocal narrative depicts the lives of Jojo, a biracial teen learning about race and injustice, River, his grandfather, and Leonie, who is Jojo’s mother and River’s daughter. Leonie struggles with the grief of losing her brother, Given, fifteen years prior, with drug addiction, and with her partner Michael’s incarceration. The novel uses a non-linear chronological structure to explicitly connect the histories of River and Richie—-who were both
imprisoned at Mississippi’s infamous Parchman Farm in their youth during the Jim Crow era—with present-day instances of structural violence, including Given’s murder and the failure of the justice system to hold his killer accountable, Michael’s present-day imprisonment at Parchman (now called the Mississippi State Penitentiary), and Jojo’s distressing encounter with the police. Through representations of these injustices and their lasting consequences, as well as of the ghosts of past traumas, the novel illuminates the unbroken chain linking the highly visible systemic violence of the past to the somewhat more insidious systemic violence of the present. These novels differ from other works of Cultural Trauma Fiction in their portrayal of an enduring pattern of systemic violence, rather than a recent development or event; 9/11 was a single event that occurred at the dawn of the 21st century and mass shootings are a relatively new phenomenon.32 While the novels that respond to Hurricane Katrina acknowledge that the systemic inequalities in New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf coast are the result of longstanding discrimination and institutional violence, Katrina itself was very much an event of the contemporary era because of the ways in which climate change exacerbated the devastation. The Nickel Boys and Sing, Unburied, Sing do not directly portray contemporary traumas, but instead look to the traumas of the 20th century to indirectly process the analogous traumas enacted in the more recent past.

The Nickel Boys and Sing, Unburied, Sing depict the traumatic past and its reverberations in the present. The Nickel Boys’ two central characters are Elwood Curtis and Jack Turner, Black teenage boys sent to a juvenile reform school in Florida in the 1960s. Much like River’s arrest in Sing, Elwood’s arrest and conviction are for a crime he did not commit. Elwood was a model of respectability prior to his arrest and aspired to enact change peacefully, like his idol Martin

32 Or, at least, the fact of mass shootings as a regular occurrence is relatively new.
Luther King Jr. Elwood repeatedly listens to his album of King’s speeches at Zion Hill and reads King’s writing as inspiration for his fundamental values and attitude (Whitehead 9). In the spirit of King, Elwood tries to maintain his optimism even after his unjust sentence. However, he quickly realizes that Nickel Academy is an abusive, racist institution that seeks to demoralize and exploit its young charges. He befriends a boy named Turner, who from the outset recognizes that being optimistic and following the rules of Nickel will not shelter him from abuse. The novel also depicts an adult Turner, who in 2014 learns that the unmarked graves of murdered Nickel boys are being exhumed and some of the perpetrators may face legal repercussions. Though he has never spoken about his true identity or detailed the abuses he suffered and witnessed at Nickel, Turner resolves to return to Florida to confront his past and seek justice for himself and all of the other boys who experienced similar injustices. The Nickel Boys, therefore, meditates on the lasting psychological and social consequences of race-based structural violence, emphasizing that both survivors’ and victims’ legacies continually shape the present.

Both Sing and The Nickel Boys are works of Cultural Trauma Fiction that depict the cultural traumas of race-based structural violence within the context of the criminal legal system in order to create a counternarrative that connects the violence of the present to the more overtly racist violence of the past, indicating that present instances of this violence are part of the same, ongoing issue. Subsequent realizations may contribute to cultural trauma if affected readers previously believed that the institutional racism of the past was no longer an issue in the present. These texts accomplish this objective by amalgamating traumatic inheritances with the lived experience of trauma; the ghosts of traumas past exacerbate the traumas of the present. Ward’s and Whitehead’s novels each include ghosts or other spectral figures from the past that haunt the central characters. These figures reanimate the traumatic pasts of the Black men in the texts who
suffered from unjust convictions and brutal incarcerations. Therefore, both novels are examples of what Joanne Lipson Freed calls “haunted fiction.” Freed explains that “works of haunted fiction make visible what history has made invisible or unimaginable: suppressed pasts, experiences of trauma, and the subjectivities of those denied full personhood” (22). State control over narratives suppresses the past. As James R. Martel argues, states try to control subjects’ lives so much that they even try to control death. In order for a state to hold power over citizens, “the state must maintain its power to kill…Thus the state periodically requires a more public display of that killing power to remind us that it continues to be both necessary and terrifying” (Martel 11-12). Racist societies exact the power of violence and murder over Black and brown citizens. Although state violence intends to strip marginalized peoples of their agency, the dead body “disrupts and subverts the projections of political authority that it is meant to convey” (Martel 6). In other words, after death the body is no longer subject to state control, and unburied bodies assert this freedom. As these novels exemplify, works of haunted fiction can be Cultural Trauma Fiction because the haunted narratives, or the dead body’s assertion of freedom through its spectral presence, are counternarratives against state violence and the narratives used by the state to justify such violence.

By extension, unburied bodies also expose the potential for liberation from ‘social death,’ or the denial of one’s existence by society. In these novels, unburied bodies demonstrate to the living but socially ‘dead’ how to subvert oppressive forces that attempt to deny them agency. As Martell argues, “The dead can teach the living…not to listen to the voices that tend to be read as inevitable, authoritative, and the only path to redemption…by countering the authority of the state and other biopolitical agent with their own authority, the dead can untell the living, allowing other voices to be heard” (144-145). Indeed, these works of haunted fiction are also
“texts of prophetic remembrance” because they engage in what Erica Still has called “artful mourning” (127). Artful mourning is “the aesthetic articulation of grief that is both endless and generative” (Still 131). Texts of prophetic remembrance “offer accounts of discrete, specific injustices endured by black peoples” (132). Significantly, these accounts make (white) audiences more aware of these injustices and makes the injustices more ‘real’ by portraying Black suffering and evoking empathy. Through empathy, injustice becomes concrete and personal, rather than abstract. Still clarifies that not all novels depicting the grief African Americans experience engage in artful mourning. Indeed, artful mourning “requires recognition of a story waiting to be told, understanding of the appropriate preparation, and a commitment to as much truth as possible” (140). Authors of texts of prophetic remembrance must incorporate the facts behind instances of Black suffering while acknowledging that facts alone are insufficient for conveying the depths of Black sorrow. Because Black sorrow is “excessive, uncontainable, and forever eluding definitive or final enunciation,” it cannot find full expression in language. Through artful mourning, however, texts of prophetic remembrance are “generative, leading to life rather than death” (Still 152). Works of haunted fiction that engage in artful mourning depict unburied bodies to honor the dead and give voice to their sorrow to create a future liberated from such injustice and suffering. Indeed, it is through artful mourning’s engagement with real-world injustices and generative counternarratives that a given work of haunted fiction can also be considered Cultural Trauma Fiction.

Ward’s and Whitehead’s novels are works of haunted fiction and of prophetic remembrance. Using ghosts or spectral figures, their narratives portray the realities of Black subjugation and grief, indicate a path forward for inheritors of this traumatic legacy, and challenge official stories about the traumatic past in favor of more complete, nuanced narratives.
that privilege the experiences and testimonies of victims and survivors. Both are works of Cultural Trauma Fiction because the spectral figures’ narratives constitute counternarratives and the novels as a whole engage with the cultural meaning-making process following atrocity as well as the growing understanding of past atrocity. In these novels, unburied Black bodies defy the power of racist state institutions by reclaiming agency, motivating justice, and offering some measure of peace to survivors of structural violence and to future generations of marginalized individuals. The novels demonstrate that the traumas of the past affect the present in two ways. First, they showcase how the intergenerational transmission of the traumas of enslavement, Jim Crow, and other legalized discrimination affects African Americans in the present. Second, they indicate the myriad ways in which the systems that produced trauma in the past continue to exist and enact additional traumas for African Americans in the present. Both novels are based on real places: Parchman is another name for the Mississippi State Penitentiary, and Nickel Academy is based on the Dozier School, a reform school in Florida whose abuses were uncovered in 2014. Within the novels, the dead return to the present as a ghost and a haunting memory, respectively. Through the novels, the real-life boys and men who suffered the described injustices are given a voice. Both novels ultimately reveal the power of unburied Black bodies and uncovered Black stories to affect change in the living world and promote racial justice for future generations. Moreover, the texts themselves fulfil the role of the unburied body and “dispel and displace the stories and meanings that the state wants to force upon each and every one of its subjects” (Martel 5), and especially subjects of color. In so doing, both Sing, Unburied, Sing and The Nickel Boys eschew official narratives in favor of nuanced counternarratives, demonstrate the legacies and contemporary iterations of systemic violence, and engage with the processes by which Americans—and African Americans in particular—derive meaning from these
circumstances. Furthermore, both novels serve as arguments to readers unaffected by structural racism, namely white readers, that structural racism exists and is traumatic. Since Ward’s novel won the National Book Award in 2017 and Whitehead’s won the Pulitzer Prize in 2020, clearly both novels engage with a wide audience that includes white readers who do not directly experience structural racism and who may even deny its existence. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Nickel Boys* depict systemic violence and its aftereffects to increase awareness of this violence and inspire empathy for African American victims among white readers. By facilitating readers’ engaged witnessing and vicarious experience of structural racism, including specific instances of violence as well as the feelings that victims experience in the aftermath of this violence, Ward and Whitehead create narratives intended to haunt the reader, just as the ghosts of this violence haunt the novels.

**Enduring Trauma and Structural Violence in *Sing, Unburied, Sing***

*Sing, Unburied, Sing*’s multivocal narrative depicts the traumatic experiences and inheritances of three generations, demonstrating the unrelenting consequences of structural violence and contradicting false narratives about America as a post-racist culture. The novel centers a Black family living in rural Mississippi in the 2010s. One of the main characters, Jojo, is 13 years old, biracial, and struggling with coming of age as a young man of color. He has a 3-year-old sister, Michaela, whom he calls ‘Kayla.’ Their mother, Leonie, is an addict and in an unstable relationship with Michael, the children’s incarcerated, white father. Leonie and her parents, Philomene or “Mam” and River or “Pap,” grieve the death of her older brother, Given, who was killed 15 years prior to the opening of the novel. Simultaneously, River struggles with the memory of his experiences as an inmate at Parchman Farm, where he was incarcerated in the 1940s from ages fifteen to twenty. The ghost of Given haunts Leonie and Philomene, while the
ghost of Richie, a boy from Parchman, haunts River. These two spectral figures are, according to Catherine Calloway, “personifications of intergenerational trauma” (67). *Sing* illuminates the myriad ways in which intergenerational trauma affects African Americans in the present while emphasizing that their traumas are ongoing. In depicting contemporary racial traumas, the novel challenges popular notions of American collective identity that tend to assume the society is post-racial and based on the values of freedom, justice, and equality. The ongoing cultural traumas of race-based structural violence, including police brutality and mass incarceration, demonstrate that dominant narratives about the United States often overlook the more complex, unsavory aspects of American culture and identity. By replacing these reductive narratives with complex counternarratives, Ward’s novel recovers marginalized voices of the past and privileges them with regard to present iterations of systemic violence and cultural trauma. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* allows those readers from directly affected populations to see their own stories foregrounded, in stark contrast to the other media representations that dismiss them. The novel also forces readers outside of directly affected groups to witness and vicariously experience the traumas of others. This experience differs substantially from the experience of news media spectatorship in that it allows the reader to feel with the traumatized and, for non-Black readers, develop greater empathy for those unlike themselves. Like other works of Cultural Trauma Fiction, Ward’s novel privileges the counternarratives of trauma victims and survivors to promote intersubjective empathy rather than passive spectatorship.

In the novel, Richie’s ghost represents River’s individual trauma, the collective trauma of all Black men and boys incarcerated at Parchman, and the cultural trauma of African Americans in the Jim Crow South who lived with the knowledge that they could be arrested for petty crimes—or no crime at all—at any time and be effectively enslaved as punishment. Jojo first learns about
Richie when River tells him about his time as an inmate at Parchman in the 1950s. River tells his story in fragments because his experience “haunts him for years, leaving him trapped in a liminal space between his incarceration and post-prison life” (Calloway 66). River tells his grandson that he was sent to Parchman despite not committing any crime. His older brother, Stag, got into a fight with a white man, and when men came to arrest Stag, they arrested 15-year-old River, too, claiming he harbored a fugitive. River knows that many of the inmates were sent to Parchman to do hard labor not because they committed any serious offense, but because “even though White people couldn’t get you to work for free, they did everything they could to avoid hiring you and paying you for it” (Ward 21). River implies that the prison was a way to extract free labor from Black boys and men without technically violating the law. In this way, the prison became a post-Thirteenth Amendment form of enslavement for Black men and boys. River also tells Jojo about Richie, the youngest inmate he encountered during his time at Parchman. Richie was a boy of twelve who was convicted of stealing food to support his nine malnourished, younger siblings. Richie attaches himself to River immediately upon his arrival at Parchman, and River takes pity on the boy and accepts his company. River does not initially tell Jojo why Richie is significant, leaving Jojo with unanswered questions when, on Jojo’s thirteenth birthday, Richie’s ghost begins haunting him.

Richie’s ghost offers an additional perspective by narrating some sections of the novel and serves as a voice of intergenerational trauma. Jojo sees Richie’s ghost after he goes with Leonie to pick Michael up from Parchman—now called the Mississippi State Penitentiary—where he was recently incarcerated. The ghost says that as soon as he saw Jojo, he knew “He is River’s child” (Ward 133). Richie does not realize that Jojo is actually River’s grandson because he does not understand how much time has passed since his death. His misunderstanding also indicates
the closeness of River and Jojo’s relationship. River is a father figure for Jojo, especially during Michael’s incarceration, and Jojo helps fill the absence left by Given’s death. Richie wants to tell Jojo the story of his time at Parchman prison because he says, “The story of me and Parchman, as River told it, is a moth-eaten shirt, nibbled to threads: the shape is right, but the details have been erased” (137). Indeed, whenever River tells Jojo about his incarceration, he omits the more troubling aspects. In particular, he avoids the topic of Richie’s death. Richie, however, wants to tell Jojo “how his pop tried to save me again and again, but he couldn’t” (140). In other words, Richie thinks it is important for future generations to understand the full extent of the boys’ experiences at Parchman, rather than merely hearing a simplified or sanitized version of their traumatization.

Moreover, the novel implies that Richie’s ghost cannot rest in part because he does not remember the circumstances of his own death at Parchman. River eventually agrees to tell Jojo the whole story, unaware that Richie’s ghost is present and listening in. River explains that Richie resolves to escape Parchman after suffering a violent whipping. He encounters an opportunity to escape when he witnesses another inmate, Blue, attacking a woman. Blue threatens to beat Richie, too, if he does not run away with him immediately. The two inmates escape before anyone realizes, but as a fellow inmate bound by the commands of the corrections staff, River has no choice but to track Blue with the prison’s hunting dogs. Although Richie was innocent and played no part in harming the woman, River knew that the boy would be considered guilty by association and would be killed along with Blue when they were inevitably found. This unfortunate reality parallels River’s personal history, in which he was arrested and convicted of a crime because he was in the same household as the ostensibly guilty party. River’s fears about Richie’s fate are confirmed when a mob of white men catch Blue and brutally murder
him. In the novel’s present, River relates the horrific scene to Jojo, stating that “they was cutting pieces of him off. Fingers. Toes. Ears. Nose. And then they started skinning him” (254). Because he knows Richie will suffer the same horrible fate when the men inevitably catch him, River mercy kills the boy. River tells his grandson that he “took the shank I kept in my boot and punched it one time in [Richie’s] neck. In the big vein on his right side. Held him till the blood stopped spurting. Him looking at me. A child” (255). This description recalls the novel’s opening scene, in which Jojo watches River slaughter a goat. The brutal depiction of the slaughter—in which Jojo sees the goat’s “still wet eye” looking “like I was the one who cut its neck, like I was the one bleeding it out”—foreshadows River’s confession that he once killed a boy in a similar manner (3). The novel represents both the slaughter and the mercy killing as necessary evils; River must kill the goat to feed his family, and he must kill Richie to save the child from unimaginable torture. Despite his belief that he did what needed to be done for Richie, River lives with extreme guilt. He tells Jojo, “I washed my hands every day…But that damn blood ain’t never come out” (256). River has never told the entire story before because of the guilt that has haunted him throughout his life, much as Richie’s ghost now haunts Jojo. This guilt is one aspect of the trauma Black boys and men faced in the Jim Crow South, as they were put in impossible situations that stripped them of the power to protect their loved ones. Notably, the traumas River suffered as a teenager—his own arrest as well as the things he witnessed and felt compelled to do while incarcerated—still affect his life in the present. These traumas inform his relationships with his children and grandchildren and perpetuate the inheritance of generational trauma.

Through Jojo and Leonie, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* represents the traumas of the violence inflicted on Black boys and men in the United States as well as the traumas their loved ones face
in witnessing this violence. Jojo inherits trauma from his family and directly experiences the trauma of race-based structural violence. The clearest manifestation of this trauma occurs when he is riding home from Parchman with Michael, Leonie, Leonie’s friend Misty, and Kayla. In the novel, the road is “a contested space in where black bodies are policed,” as well as “a space of violent memories that find expressive form in ghosts” (Dib 135). A police officer pulls them over and Leonie quickly swallows a bag of meth to avoid being caught with it. Then, because Leonie makes the mistake of telling the officer that they are leaving Parchman, he instructs everyone to get out of the car so he can search it. He handcuffs Michael, Leonie, and Jojo. Jojo reaches into his pocket to retrieve the ‘gris-gris’ bag River had given him for good luck and protection, but the officer assumes the boy is reaching for a weapon. The officer pulls out his gun and points it at Jojo. This frightening moment arouses Leonie’s maternal instinct, and she sees him not as a nearly grown teenager but as “a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler” (Ward 163). Ward juxtaposes the officer’s perception of Jojo as a threat with Leonie’s perception of him as an innocent child to demonstrate how the officer’s biases inhibit his judgment. In this moment, Leonie thinks, “I should scream, but I can’t ... I blink and I see the bullet cleaving the soft butter of him. I shake. When I open my eyes again, Jojo’s still whole. Now on his knees, the gun pointing at his head” (163-164). Leonie fears that the officer will murder her son but knows that reacting would likely motivate the officer to shoot her, too. Luckily the officer does not discharge his weapon, but the incident makes both Leonie and Jojo realize that Jojo’s life is in perpetual danger because of how others react to the color of his skin.

The novel depicts the emotional turmoil that mothers of Black sons experience during encounters with police and invites non-Black readers to engage in empathetic witnessing by portraying Leonie’s thoughts and feelings at the moment her son’s life is under threat.
Additionally, the text evokes empathy for Jojo by providing insight into his psychological and emotional state following the incident. His feelings are likely familiar to Black readers, who may have also experienced threats from police, and illuminating for white readers, who might not yet understand how this experience feels. This incident subverts the typical road trip narrative by depicting “the immobilization that threatens automobility for black subjects,” and indicates “the living effects of present racial violence” (Dib 135). Indeed, the novel shows the emotional toil of “driving while Black,” or the reality that Black drivers and passengers are more likely than white people to experience “danger, harassment, and even violence” while travelling by car (Sorin xviii). Thus, the novel’s road trip “becomes a vehicle for confronting massive injustices tied to the US penal system” (136). Jojo’s encounter with police brutality also serves as his coming-of-age moment, in which he recognizes what it means to be a Black man in America. Although Jojo walks away physically unharmed, Nicole Dib argues that “the feeling in [Jojo’s] body of the violating and nearly lethal encounter lingers and becomes part of his physical memory. Ward further stokes reader empathy and our indignation by affirming how this situation nearly resulted in Jojo becoming what Richie is and by demonstrating the lasting effects of policing on Jojo’s mental landscape” (147). Therefore, this scene reflects the traumas experienced by Black boys and men who have violent encounters with the police, as well as the traumas of Black women who know their loved ones’ lives are under siege, but who are powerless to protect them from state-sanctioned violence. Ward depicts these traumas not only to honor the experiences of victims, but also to demonstrate to white audiences what takes place all too often for African Americans and how these experiences feel. This scene parallels the countless instances of police violence that have injured or killed Black males—including George Floyd, Tamir Rice, and Philando Castile, to name but a few—demonstrating that race-based structural violence is an
ongoing threat rather than a thing of the past. Compared to media coverage of these instances of systemic violence, the novel discourages passive spectatorship in favor of immersion in the conscious experiences of victims and direct witnesses. While viewers of media who are members of targeted groups—African Americans, in this case—can place themselves in the position of the victims and their loved ones with unfortunate ease, viewers outside of directly affected groups often engage with visual news media only as spectators. In reading Ward’s novel, however, the very same audiences must actively share in the traumatic experience. As a work of Cultural Trauma Fiction, Sing, Unburied, Sing offers Black readers a fuller representation of their own community’s traumas and provides non-Black readers with an active means for engaging empathetically with the experiences of others.

Indeed, Jojo’s encounter with a racist police officer, the structural racism of Parchman and of the criminal justice system as a whole, and Michael’s family’s racism demonstrate the similarities between Jojo’s life and the circumstances River and Richie faced in their youth (Calloway 64). Michael’s parents, Big Joseph and Maggie Ladner, accept and perpetuate the lie that Given’s death was accidental, threaten and demean Leonie for being Black, and refuse to accept Jojo and Kayla into their family even though they are their biological grandchildren. Leonie plans to leave the Ladners a letter explaining that she will pick Michael up from prison. She resolves to leave a letter in their mailbox, rather than simply calling, because she is afraid Big Joseph will answer the phone (Ward 52). Unfortunately, Big Joseph is outside mowing the lawn when Leonie drops off the letter. He sees her just as she tries to leave the property, and he redirects the lawnmower towards her while pointing to a “No Trespassing” sign nailed to a tree (56). Leonie speeds off as quickly as she can, terrified. She questions what exactly it is that she is afraid of, reasoning that “something about how fast he’s gunning that lawn mower, the way he
points to that tree, the way that tree, a Spanish oak, reaches up and out and over the road, a multitude of dark green leaves and almost black branches, the way he’s coming at me, makes me see violence” (56). Ward’s choice of the word “gunning” implies the violent intent behind Big Joseph’s approach. Moreover, Leonie’s feelings about the tree in particular indicate the connection between Big Joseph’s racism and the long, horrific history of lynching in the United States; she feels that “the way he points to that tree” is a pointed threat against her life, not a simple indication to read the sign (56). Big Joseph proves that Leonie’s fears are warranted when he grabs his rifle, which she thinks “he keeps for wild pigs that root in the forest, but not for them now. For me” (56). This implied comparison between Big Joseph’s attitude about wild pigs and his attitude about Leonie indicates the extent of his racism and hatred. Both racist microaggressions and more blatantly racist actions like Big Joseph’s gain further significance in the context of the trauma Leonie experienced following Given’s death and the family’s longer traumatic legacy.

The novel repeatedly revisits Given’s death because it was traumatic for his family and because it illustrates the larger failures of the legal system to enact justice for African Americans. Given was killed during his senior year of high school on a hunting trip with friends. Given bet his would-be killer, Michael’s cousin, “that he could kill a buck with a bow before the boy could take one down with a rifle” (48). Given wins the bet, and the boy shoots him. He and the other boys leave Given’s body in the woods while they seek help—not help for Given but help to keep the murderer out of trouble. Michael learns about the incident when “his uncle came to Big Joseph in the middle of the day…saying: He shot the nigger. This fucking hothead shot the nigger for beating him. And then, because Big Joseph had been sheriff for years: What we going

33 The killer is unnamed in the novel, indicating Given’s family’s refusal to acknowledge the boy’s humanity. The novel defines the boy only by his crime and by his relationship to Michael.
“to do?” (49). The words of Michael’s uncle demonstrate his profound racism, as well as his understanding that the power and privilege of his family can save his son from fully facing the consequences of committing murder. It is Big Joseph who concocts the narrative of the “hunting accident,” and the killer repeats this lie in court (50). As a result, the District Attorney “agreed to a plea deal that sentences the cousin the three years in Parchman and two years’ probation” (50). The murderer’s paltry sentence exacerbates the injustice of Given’s death. Following the unjust sentence, Big Joseph, Maggie, and the other members of the killer’s family openly express their racist attitudes and reaffirm the family’s belief that Given was murdered. Additionally, in deeming Given’s death an accident, the court “works together with the murderer’s kin to cover up Given’s murder and to speak a new truth into existence” (Dib 142-143). Through the localized instances of racism perpetuated by Michael’s relatives and the structural factors that inhibit justice, Sing considers broader cultural concerns with enduring racist beliefs and practices among white Americans long after de jure segregation. These clear-cut examples of structural violence and individual racism mirror real-life incidents and further emphasize that contemporary American culture has retained some of the flaws of the Jim Crow era.

As a result of the trauma of Given’s death and the court’s failure to hold his murderer accountable—and perhaps because of the other acts of racism she experiences on a regular basis—Leonie becomes addicted to drugs. She believes she can see her late brother when she’s high. Early in the novel, Leonie recounts being high the night prior, stating “he smiled at me, this Given-not-Given, this Given that’s been dead fifteen years now, this Given that came to me every time I snorted a line, every time I popped a pill” (Ward 34). Although Leonie sees her brother when under the influence of drugs, she believes that the underlying reason she can see and hear him is because of a psychic gift, inherited from her mother. Rather than a mere
hallucination, then, the novel portrays Given as a ghostly figure who actually appears to his sister at various intervals, much as Richie appears to Jojo. Both ghosts connect the traumas of the past with ongoing traumas resulting from racism and subsequent structural violence. Richie and Given remind River and Leonie of the life-altering instances of structural violence they have experienced and witnessed. In addition, the ghosts inform the new generation of African Americans of their history and of the persistent manifestations of institutional and individual racism.

The ghosts also challenge both the other characters’ and the reader’s assumptions about the nature of time by demonstrating the proximity between the past and the present. As Kirsten Dillender argues, in *Sing* “[t]he past, present, and future collapse into a single moment in the novel, showing readers how neither the land nor its people can escape the denuded futures fostered by racism” (134). The moment of temporal collapse occurs when Jojo and Kayla confront Richie’s ghost and the other Black ghosts suspended in their midst. Richie’s ghost appears to Jojo and explains that he cannot cross over fully into the afterlife and find peace. Richie states that there are “so many…So many of us” who cannot leave the physical world after death (Ward 282). Richie’s ghost ascends a tree and Jojo sees that “the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls…None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes. They perch like birds, but look as people” (282). Although these figures do not speak, they communicate their suffering to Jojo through their eyes. He understands the ghosts’ testimonies by looking at them. Jojo ‘hears’ multiple testimonies, including: “I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night
and they hung me they found out I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me still” (282). Just as Jojo can understand the stories of the ghosts, he now possesses a general understanding of what it means to be Black in America; Jojo now knows the precarity of his own life because of the way others feel about the color of his skin. Ward’s novel asks readers to engage in this same praxis; much as the ghosts call for Jojo’s understanding of past injustices and their reverberations in the present, the novel itself asks the reader to develop a similar level of intersubjective empathy. The novel moves beyond making an argument about the persistence of systemic racism by facilitating the readers’ greater understanding of how the experience of systemic violence actually feels. The reader, like Jojo, can hear multiple voices and perspectives simultaneously and must reckon with this new knowledge. When Jojo turns his back to the ghosts, Kayla first tells them, “Go home,” and then sings to them (284). As the toddler sings, “the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease” (284). The ghosts do not leave “because the only home they can have now is within people like Jojo and Kayla,” those who can ‘see’ them and share their stories (Dillender 144). Indeed, “Ward’s ghosts linger in this landscape because the cruelty that extinguished their lives is inscribed on the land, seemingly as indelible and unavoidable as natural weather cycles. Such racism continues to affect black subjects regardless of perceived markers of time or progress” (136). The novel does not offer a simple resolution—like the ghosts leaving after Kayla’s command or song—because the racist violence that took their lives is ongoing in the present. Moreover, the ghosts are not the only figures bound to the land; “Ward insists that her living characters remain trapped within this unrelenting time-space between land and antiblackness, reinforcing a temporal conflation that overlays the then and the now” (Dillender 135). In other words, the novel demonstrates that not
much has changed between Richie’s lifetime and Jojo’s. Jojo and his family are not free from the racist violence that ensnares the dead. Richie, Given, and the countless other ghosts perched in the tree symbolize Jojo and Kayla’s intergenerational trauma, as well as the inherited traumas of African Americans in general. Neither these traumas nor their symbolic manifestations can be dismissed.

_Sing, Unburied, Sing_ questions how Americans can (re)define themselves given an increased understanding of both inherited and present traumas. A complete understanding of American identity must necessarily consider the experiences of marginalized people, and, Ward’s novel argues, younger generations face and reckon with the culture’s racist histories and with the injustices of the present. Like Jojo, Americans collectively increase their knowledge about and empathetic understanding of race and racism by experiencing others’ stories, challenging received ideas, and trying to find an understanding of shared history that moves forward while still honoring the past. Just as Jojo comes to see and feel the pain and trauma of others, the reader learns both the facts and the feelings—the intellectual and emotional aspects—of race-based structural violence, regardless of their own personal experiences with it outside of the text. The novel’s examples of intergenerational racial trauma—including River’s incarceration, Richie’s death, and River’s fifth great-grandmother’s experience of the Middle Passage (Ward 69)—as well as its examples of recent and present racial trauma—such as Given’s murder, the failure of the justice system to hold his killer accountable, and Jojo’s near-fatal encounter with police—combine to counter the dominant narrative of America as a post-racist culture. The term “post-racist” became ubiquitous during the 2008 presidential election, as some mistakenly assumed that the election of a Black man signaled the end of racism (Gines 379). For instance, the editorial board of _The Wall Street Journal_ claimed that Obama’s victory meant “we can put to
rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country” (“President-Elect Obama”). Similarly, conservative pundit Lou Dobbs claimed that 21st-century America is a “post-partisan, post-racial society” (qtd in Dawson and Bobo 247). The post-racial narrative insists that since some Black people achieve success in America, racism and racist violence are in the past and African Americans need to ‘move on’ from these traumas, rather than recognizing the ongoing systemic inequities that continue to harm African Americans.\textsuperscript{34}

This narrative also assumes that the criminal legal system enacts justice for all. The novel counters this narrative by showing that police brutality occurs for any Black man or boy, not just for ‘violent criminals’ who threaten officers’ lives, courts do not necessarily serve justice for Black people, prisons are not institutes of ‘correction’ or rehabilitation, and prisons have been used and continue to be used as means of legalized enslavement. \textit{Sing} advances these counternarratives through diverse perspectives, including voices of those from different generations, multiple subject positions, and a variety of individual experiences. Through this diversity, the novel engages authentically with cultural meaning-making processes related to the collective understanding of how people of color experience American identity and demonstrates how counternarratives revise dominant narratives about race, racism, and culture. Significantly, \textit{Sing, Unburied, Sing} illustrates that a pattern of routine structural violence may constitute a cultural trauma if the events emphasize for the oppressed group that they are not valued as members of the culture and exacerbate their preexisting or inherited traumas.

\textbf{Systemic Injustice, Hope, and Reform in \textit{The Nickel Boys}}

\textsuperscript{34} Colson Whitehead satirizes the post-racial narrative in “The Year of Living Postracially,” a 2009 op-ed for \textit{The New York Times}, in which he nominates himself for the position of “secretary of postracial affairs” and refers to racism as a “branding problem.”
Like Ward’s novel, Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* addresses racism past and present, but *The Nickel Boys* differs in that it considers the ghosts of the past metaphorically; Whitehead’s ghosts live on through the memories, actions, and testimonies of their loved ones rather than existing literally as spectral figures. This difference is significant because it demonstrates that the “ghosts” of the past need not exist in the form of supernatural figures to “haunt” the present. Like trauma itself, the ghosts of *The Nickel Boys* exist in the minds of the living as the result of real, material harms. The novel depicts the harms that engender trauma in the 1960s as well as how the legacy of that trauma haunts both individual characters and society collectively in the 21st century. The central character of the portions of the novel set in the 1960s, Elwood Curtis, lives with his grandmother in Tallahassee, Florida prior to his arrest. He is a promising young man who has already enrolled in college courses during his senior year of high school with the support of a Black teacher and mentor. Elwood’s unjust conviction arises after he accepts a ride to the college in what turns out to be a stolen vehicle. A judge sends Elwood to Nickel Academy as punishment and, ostensibly, for reform. The ‘reform school’ segregates students by race, provides unequal resources to Black students, and carries out horrific abuses against them. Elwood’s optimism and belief that, in Dr. King’s words, he is “as good as anyone” do little to protect him from injustice and abuse (Whitehead 10). The novel engages in artful mourning through a fictionalized account of the suffering endured at the Dozier School. Whitehead’s characters reanimate victims, allowing them to challenge false narratives that whitewash or erase their experiences.

Indeed, *The Nickel Boys* does more than present the facts of the abuses enacted at the Dozier School; Whitehead seeks to evoke empathy and prompt political change. As Adelaide Strickland argues, the fiction genre allows Whitehead “to haunt his readers with the history of
racial injustice and the horrors experienced by reform school survivors” (77). While nonfiction accounts of this atrocity are necessary, fictional representations of the same “[allow] readers to make connections, to empathize, and to have hope” in a way that nonfiction media cannot (Strickland 77). *The Nickel Boys* differs from other works of Cultural Trauma Fiction in that it offers a fictionalized account of a historical trauma that has only recently come to light for the majority of Americans. While the abuses of the Dozier School were always individually traumatic for the young inmates, the realization of that abuse, the structural factors that enabled it, and the institutional cover-up that shielded perpetrators from responsibility become culturally traumatic in part because of the novel’s role in conveying that trauma to the public. *The Nickel Boys*, then, offers a framework for understanding comparable cultural traumas under construction, such as the ongoing efforts of Canadians to recognize the structural violence enacted at the Residential Schools for Indigenous children. Whitehead also structures the novel in such a way as to promote connections between the past and present. By facilitating these connections for readers, Whitehead established the novel’s “political purpose beyond what non-fiction materials, whether the products of journalism or the archive, are apt to produce” (Strickland 74). Overall, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction like *The Nickel Boys* that depict specific iterations of systemic violence—like the abuses of the Dozier School—bring these events into conversation with broader sociopolitical issues (77). In so doing, these texts can connect individual incidents with their systemic causes, motivating changes in perspective among readers and, perhaps, social and political action to change the very structures depicted in the text.

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35 Residential schools ostensibly existed to educate Indigenous children, but have since been found guilty of inflicting physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse (Hanson et al.). These abuses have received increased public attention in recent years due to the discovery of more than 1300 unmarked graves as Canadian residential schools (Hopper).
In *The Nickel Boys*, Elwood’s understanding of the school’s many injustices emerges when he is brutally beaten after protecting a boy from bullies. When Elwood enters a restroom in his dormitory, he sees two boys, Lonnie and Black Mike, pushing a smaller boy, Corey, up against the wall. Elwood intervenes and, almost immediately, “Black Mike spun around, slugged him in the jaw and knocked him back against the sink” (Whitehead 63). When Phil, a white houseman, happens upon the scene, he reports all four of the boys involved to the school superintendent, because “[i]nterpreting the scene was not part of his job. Who was at fault, who started it, why. His job was to keep these colored boys in check” (63). Because the boys involved are Black, Phil does not care to find out which of them are actually responsible and deserving of punishment. He declares Elwood guilty by association, much like the judge who sentenced him to Nickel in the first place. Superintendent Spencer and Earl, a houseman, come to the dormitory at one a.m. to take the four ‘guilty’ boys to The White House, a converted shed where they beat the students with a leather strap (64-65). Elwood counts the number of times that the men strike each of the boys and notices that Corey received the most severe whipping even though Big Mike and Lonnie were the aggressors. Elwood thinks, “It didn’t make sense…Maybe there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why” (66). He cannot prepare himself for the punishment he faces because he realizes that there is no reason for its severity. He begins understanding the extent of his powerlessness; Elwood sees the impossibility of his resolution to “make the best of” being at Nickel when he realizes he will be abused without reason or justification (62). Spencer beats Elwood so severely that he passes out from the pain, and they admit him to the school hospital (67). Elwood nonetheless maintains his belief that right will triumph over wrong, and he tells Turner “I have a lawyer…He can do something” (78). Turner dismisses Elwood’s naivety, explaining that he “already got off
lucky” because Spencer spared his life (78). Once Turner explains that sometimes the staff kill unruly students and that there is no one who can help, Elwood decides not to tell his grandmother about what happened. The inhumane beating and Turner’s stories make Elwood question his faith in justice, but they do not fully divest him of his optimism.

It is clear that Elwood has accepted and internalized the myth that the American justice system treats everyone equally because he maintains his belief that justice will ultimately prevail despite experiencing abuse, discovering the arbitrary nature of reward and punishment at Nickel Academy, and witnessing school administrators’ repeated, flagrant violations of the law. Because of his enduring optimism, Elwood decides he will become a model student in the hopes of graduating from Nickel Academy early. He struggles to understand how to earn merits and avoid demerits because, just like the system of corporal punishment, the merit system is cruel and arbitrary. No one can tell Elwood “how fast could he climb from the lowest level of Grub to the highest level of Ace,” at which point he could ‘graduate’ from Nickel (84). Elwood nonetheless resolves to graduate by June, four months before his scheduled release. He also achieves some respite from the grueling daily labor of the school when the school’s community service coordinator, Harper, selects Elwood for special assignments. Turner already works for Harper, and he recommends Elwood on the grounds that he is not “another one of these dummies” and he “can keep [his] mouth shut” (85). The “service” is primarily selling the food and other supplies intended for the black students to businesses in the community, which clarifies for Elwood “why the boys had no toothpaste” or other essentials despite receiving government funding (89). In addition, Harper takes the boys to nearby homes to complete household chores for wealthy, white members of the school board (90). Turner and Elwood accept these tasks, reasoning that they would “take being out here over any job back at school” (90). The fresh air and illusion of
freedom afforded by completing deliveries and other services make Community Service detail far less oppressive and objectionable for Elwood. Despite his seeming contentment, Elwood recognizes that his labor is being exploited, and many of the powerful, white people in the community are implicated. Indeed, he realizes that the work expected of him “is convict-leasing by another name” (Strickland 73). He writes down everything he does, the date, and the name of the person or business he serves so that he can later report the injustices because he maintains his belief that if he works hard and maintains respectability, justice will be served.

Elwood’s enduring belief that respectability will help him to overcome racial oppression parallels the early behaviors of the narrator in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, who thinks of himself “as a potential Booker T. Washington” (18). Like Washington, both Elwood in *The Nickel Boys* and the young, Black narrator of *Invisible Man* believe in racial uplift through education, self-improvement, and the performance of respectability. Washington argued that Black men would “be tested in our patience, in our forbearance, our power to endure wrong, to withstand temptation, to succeed, to acquire and use skill, our ability to compete, to succeed in commerce; to disregard the superficial for the real, the appearance for the substance; to be great and yet the servant of all,” and that meeting these challenges “is the passport to all that is best in the life of our republic, and the Negro must possess it” (Washington). For Washington, then, respect could be earned through good behavior, education, hard work, and economic success. The notion of respectability requires that the oppressed individual meet the standards of behavior set by the oppressors despite the structural barriers standing in their way and the problematic nature of the dominant group’s expectations. By modeling some aspects of Elwood’s characterization on the narrator of *Invisible Man* and his performance of respectability, Whitehead “Signifies” on both Ellison’s novels and Washington’s intellectual oeuvre, which
includes his writing and speeches. *The Nickel Boys* engages in Signifyin(g), a term coined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. to describe how African American literature often includes “repetition and revision” of earlier stories and texts (Gates Jr. 19). The novel subverts the expectations of readers familiar with *Invisible Man* in that Whitehead’s protagonist is not entirely disabused of his optimistic adherence to Washington’s ideology as a result of experiencing and witnessing racist injustice and violence.

Whitehead further signifies on *Invisible Man* through Nickel Academy’s annual boxing tournament, which demonstrates the continuum between the school’s history of racism and its racist present and compares to the battle royal portrayed in Ellison’s novel. At the beginning of Ellison’s novel, the narrator gives a speech at graduation in which he argues that humility is essential for Black progress (Ellison 17). He does not actually believe his own message, but he consistently performs the kind of behavior that he believes will win him favor with white people. Due to the success of his speech at graduation, the school superintendent invites him to repeat it “at a gathering of the town’s leading white citizens” in a local hotel ballroom” (17). When he arrives, ostensibly with the honor of an invited speaker, he is told that “since [he] was to be there anyway [he] might as well take part in the battle royal to be fought by some of [his] schoolmates as part of the entertainment” (17). In attendance are all of the town’s important white men, including “bakers, lawyers, judges, doctors” and even a pastor (18). The narrator and nine other Black boys are paraded in front of the crowd in shorts and boxing gloves, and forced to watch a young, white woman dance nude and suffer harassment from the crowd. The boys are them blindfolded and forced to fight while the white men hurl insults and threats. As the narrator blindly suffers blows, he thinks, “I had no dignity” (22). Despite the physical and psychological pain of being forced to fight, the narrator continues to think about giving his speech. When he is
forced into a one-on-one fight with the largest of the boys, he “fought back with hopeless
desperation” because he “wanted to deliver [his] speech more than anything else in the world,
because [he] felt that only these men could truly judge my ability” (25). The narrator believes so
strongly in the power of respectability that he cannot accept that he was not brought there to
deliver a speech to an interested audience. Neither his intellect nor his performance of
respectability separates him from the other Black boys and the white men’s belief that they are
subhuman.

By signifyin(g) on the battle royal in Invisible Man, another widely read work of African
American fiction about structural racism, Whitehead’s novel foreshadows the outcome of the
Nickel Academy boxing match and emphasizes the flawed nature of Elwood’s belief in the
power of respectability and compliance with white authority. Prior to the tournament,
Superintendent Spencer tells the top Black boxer, Griff, “that his black ass had to take a dive in
the third round or else they’d take him out back” (101). Spencer fixes the fight because the
Nickel staff and prominent white men “in three counties with a taste for wagering” bet on the
boxing match (104). Because the Black boys have won for the last fifteen years, Spencer stands
to make a lot of money by betting on the white boxer. The Black students, however, desperately
want Griff to win, because winning a fair fight “would be their sole acquaintance with justice at
Nickel” (97). Despite Spencer’s threat, Griff does not throw the fight. Afterwards, Griff
approaches Spencer and desperately screams, “I thought it was the second! I thought it was the
second!” (112). Turner theorizes that the hits Griff suffers in the first two rounds of the match
make him “addle-minded and confused,” leading him to unintentionally win the fight (112). The
likelihood that Griff’s win was a mistake does not save him from Spencer’s wrath. The narrator
states that Griff “was all of them in one black body that night in the ring,” serving as the
manifestation of their collective desire to overpower the white boys. Unfortunately, Griff is also “all of them when the white men took him out back” where he is beaten to death for disobeying Spender’s order and costing him money (112). For the boys, Griff symbolizes their potential to overcome the oppression that dictates their lives. This symbol is merely an illusion; in reality, Griff serves as a reminder that any attempt to succeed or any failure to follow a white man’s orders can cost the boys their lives. The school claims Griff escaped, but the truth becomes clear “fifty years later” when Griff’s body is exhumed from the land and examiners see his fractured wrists—broken from being restrained by iron rings secured to two trees—and other broken bones (112). The narrator reflects, “Most of those who know the story of the rings in the trees are dead by now. The iron is still there. Rusty, Deep in the heartwood, Testifying to anyone who cares to listen” (112). This sentiment indicates that the physical site of Nickel Academy figuratively remembers the traumas suffered there; like in Sing, Unburied, Sing, the land bears the scars of past injustices and remains haunted by what occurred. The iron rings, the bodies of murdered boys, and other artefacts remain in the land and live on in the minds and bodies of those who survived. Furthermore, this moment marks a turn to the present in an otherwise retrospective section of the novel. The narrator’s temporal shift following Griff’s murder portends more violence and injustice in subsequent chapters.

Neither Elwood’s own experiences of unfair incarceration and cruel abuse nor his knowledge of Griff’s murder fully erode his belief in justice; he has fully internalized the myth that respectability can trounce institutional violence. Elwood develops his unshakable faith in justice from listening to King’s speeches, in which King “promised” that one day “all those places closed to his race [would be] opened” (10). Elwood takes to heart King’s insistence that he must maintain respectability regardless of how white people might react and fight back
against injustice “because to do nothing was to undermine his own dignity” (25). Unfortunately, as the novel’s narrator explains, the ideas King’s speeches “put in [Elwood’s] head were his undoing” (9). When government authorities visit Nickel Academy, Elwood plans to give them a letter detailing the illegal practices of the school in the hopes that someone will help him and the other students. Turner tries to dissuade Elwood from giving anyone the letter, but when Harper sends Elwood to complete a task that will make it impossible for him to give the letter to the state inspectors, Turner volunteers to deliver it on his friend’s behalf. Turner’s willingness to actively participate in delivering the letter, despite his belief that it will not inspire justice, indicates his loyalty to Elwood. Unfortunately, Spencer and other members of the Nickel staff soon learn about the letter, abduct Elwood from his room, take him to The White House, beat him, and lock him in a cell. The narrator recognizes Elwood’s fate as a continuation of the legacy of slavery, stating that the white men’s “daddies taught them how to keep a slave in line, passed down this brutal heirloom. Take him away from his family, whip him until all he remembers is the whip…A term in an iron sweatbox, cooking his brains in the sun, had a way of bringing a buck around, and so did a dark cell, a room aloft in darkness, outside time” (189). Indeed, this description highlights the similarities between how slaveholders treated the enslaved and how the White men running Nickel Academy treat Elwood. Further, the description of the enslaved as “outside time” emphasizes that similar, racist abuse continues long after the abolition of slavery.

Elwood’s imprisonment in the “jail within a jail” finally disillusioned him and breaks his optimism. He accepts that “[n]o one was coming” to save him (193). His thoughts return to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous Letter from Birmingham Jail, but Elwood no longer finds inspiration in it. He spends hours in his cell considering Dr. King’s assertion that African Americans can win their freedom by loving their oppressors. Elwood decides that “he could not
make that leap to love. He understood neither the impulse of the proposition nor the will to execute it” (194). His has fallen so deeply into despair and hopelessness that he can neither maintain King’s values nor fight for justice. Instead, Elwood now believes “[t]he world had whispered its rules to him for his whole life and he refused to listen, hearing instead a higher order. The world continued to instruct: Do not love for they will disappear, do not trust for you will be betrayed, do not stand up for you will be swatted down” (193). This belief is a marked shift from his previously resolute faith in respectability and hard work, demonstrating that the oppressors have finally broken down Elwood’s will. The violence inherent in the system of white supremacy ultimately disrupts the power of that system because this violence shatters the foundational myth of upward mobility through respectability.

The similarities between Nickel’s brutal carceral system and the system of chattel slavery continue in the school’s efforts to prevent Turner and Elwood’s escape. As Elwood suffers in his cell, Turner visits and confirms Elwood’s fears that he will be killed for speaking out against the injustices of the academy after three weeks of confinement. The boys sneak out of Nickel in the cover of darkness in a desperate attempt to save Elwood’s life. As they ride north on stolen bicycles, the boys spot a Nickel van approaching. They abandon their bikes and begin running as quickly as possible. The two Nickel staff members, Harper and Hennepin, get out of the van and “each carried a shotgun” (199). The narrator notes that Harper “held the shotgun like his daddy showed him when he was a boy. His daddy wasn’t around much but had taught him this thing” (199). The “thing” Harper’s father taught him was not shooting in a general sense, but the “brutal heirloom” of violently oppressing Black boys (189). Again, this description reinforces the idea that the criminal justice system extends the abuses of slavery. Much as white men banded together to capture escaped slaves, Harper and Hennepin are tasked with killing the boys to
prevent them from revealing the atrocities committed at Nickel. Harper shoots and kills Elwood, but Turner escapes with his life and heads north. Turner’s escape parallels the familiar narrative of fugitive slaves both in his destination (New York City) and in his decision to abandon all aspects of his past life for fear of being caught and reimprisoned or killed. Furthermore, Elwood’s death reminds the reader of the countless murders of young Black men running away from authorities.

The implicit comparisons between the murders of fugitive slaves, escaped convicts, and retreating suspects demonstrate the continuum linking the structural violence of the past to more recent and ongoing cultural traumas. Specifically, Elwood’s death recalls both searches for escaped slaves in the 19th century and the much more recent killings of unarmed Black men at the hands of police. For instance, in 2015, a South Carolina police officer, Michael Slanger, shot a Black man named Walter Scott who fled a traffic stop (“S.C. Police Officer”). A cellphone video of the incident “appears to show the officer shooting towards Scott's back at least eight times as Scott ran away” (“S.C. Police Officer”). Unlike most white police officers accused of killing unarmed Black men, Slanger was convicted of a federal civil rights charge and sentenced to 20 years in prison (Vann and Ortiz). In another incident even more comparable to Elwood’s killing in the novel, 17-year-old Antwon Rose was shot and killed by a police officer in East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as he ran away from a traffic stop in 2018 (Coen). As Rose fled the scene, “Officer Michael Rosfeld fired his service weapon three times, striking Rose in the back, face, and elbow” (Coen). Officer Rosfeld was acquitted of criminal homicide in 2019. These shootings are but two instances of a larger pattern of police killings of unarmed Black people in
the United States.  

The novel’s prologue and epilogue include a frame narrative that also connects the structural violence of the mid-20th century with its ongoing consequences in 2014, demonstrating for readers that the empathetic experiences they have when reading the novel can be carried forward into their lives in the present day. Elwood’s death comes as a surprise to the reader, who learns from the novel’s prologue that Elwood Curtis lives in New York City in the present day and has recently resolved to return to Nickel (6). In the epilogue, the narrator reveals that Turner adopted Elwood’s name and identity two weeks after his escape from Nickel. Turner adopted the name “to honor his friend” and to “live for him” after his unjust death (200). Turner continues to live as Elwood Curtis when he finally makes his way to New York City, even going so far as to acquire Elwood’s birth certificate and social security card. He marries a woman using his false identity and does not tell her his real name, Jack Turner, until he learns about the bodies being exhumed at Nickel and resolves to go back and share his testimony. Though he has never spoken about his experiences at Nickel or about Elwood:

In some ways Turner had been telling Elwood’s story ever since his friend died, through years and years of revisions, of getting it right, as he stopped being the desperate alley cat of his youth and turned into a man he thought Elwood would have been proud of. It was not enough to survive, you had to live—he heard Elwood’s voice as he walked down Broadway in the sunlight or at the end of a long night hunched over the books. Turner walked into Nickel with strategies and hard-won dodges and a knack for keeping out of scrapes. He jumped over the fence on the other side of the pasture and into the woods and

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36 An NPR study found that police officers shot and killed at least 135 unarmed Black people in the United States between January 2016 and January 2021 (Thompson).
then both boys were gone. In Elwood’s name, he tried to find another way. (Whitehead 202-203)

Turner’s decision to live for Elwood and even to live as Elwood comprises a living testimony. Turner entered Nickel with the skills he needed to physically survive the ordeal, but through Elwood he learned that there was no reason to survive if he did not really live. Elwood’s death teaches Turner that avoiding conflict, keeping one’s head down, and simply moving through life cannot cultivate a life worth living. He becomes the hard-working man that Elwood would have been, but for the structural inequalities and violence that ended his life. For Turner, “both boys were gone” when he escaped and Elwood died, because Turner would forever be a different person from the boy who entered Nickel (203). Elwood’s death could have merely confirmed Turner’s belief that justice is unattainable for African Americans, but instead Elwood’s life demonstrates that Turner can only find justice by living his life well. In this way, the novel draws a parallel between Elwood’s death and Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, indicating that both figures effected positive societal change despite their premature deaths. Given this frame narrative, the novel offers multiple possibilities for readers. The first possibility, what I call the optimistic outlook, compares to Elwood’s own perspective when he was first sent to Nickel. While he knew that the sentence was unjust and he struggled with the loss of both his past life and the future he had imagined for himself, he maintains hope that he will still achieve that future, albeit via an indirect trajectory. A reader with an optimistic outlook will hold out hope that the novel will have a happy ending despite evidence to the contrary available in the prologue. The second possibility is the pessimistic outlook, which mirrors Turner’s perspective at Nickel. Like Turner, the reader may see the writing on the wall and assume from the outset that something awful has happened to Elwood. While Whitehead hides “clues throughout” the
novel to indicate that Elwood is dead, “the fact that it is not clearly stated allows readers the opportunity to hold onto hope and avoid believing that Elwood dies until it is stated explicitly at the end” (Strickland 75). The novel thus differs from nonfiction depictions of similar narratives, as these texts are “far less likely to offer readers the chance for hope in the face of discouraging subject matter” (75). Strickland calls this the novel’s “structure of purposeful deception” (75). This structure leads readers to emulate Elwood’s optimistic outlook and continue reading the novel; readers might not fully engage with the narrative if they already know how it will end and that the ending is an unhappy one (75). A third possibility is that Turner, like the unnamed protagonist of *Invisible Man*, cannot fully inhabit his own identity because of the trauma he has faced due to structural racism. The frame narrative further signifies on Ellison’s novel and indicates the similarities between Turner and the unnamed narrator as well as their central difference; unlike the invisible man, Turner eventually reveals his true identity and gives his testimony publicly. By signifyin(g) on *Invisible Man* through the frame narrative, Whitehead demonstrates the emotional consequences of the systemic devaluation of Black humanity and evokes reader empathy. *The Nickel Boys* diverges from its predecessor, however, by demonstrating the possibility of a more just future through testimony and witnessing.

Turner actively seeks justice for his friend and for himself—the other boy who was “gone” after Nickel—by returning to Florida in 2014 to attend a press conference regarding the recently uncovered atrocities that took place at Nickel. Whitehead calls attention to the limitations of media narratives through this media event and Turner’s conviction that his testimony is necessary. Turner’s journey back to Nickel parallels the novel’s own excursions between past and present. Turner knows that “some of the White House boys will be there to testify” and call for “a memorial and an apology from the state. They wanted to be heard” (206).
He has spent his life convincing himself that he has moved on from Nickel, but he realizes that his silence has actually resulted from fear. Turner also notices that all of the Nickel boys sharing their testimony are white. He asks himself, “Who spoke for the black boys? It was time someone did” (207). In addition to providing testimony on behalf of Black victims and survivors, Turner decides he will “find Elwood’s grave and tell his friend of his life after he was cut down in that pasture. How that moment grew in Turner and changed his life’s course. Tell the sheriff who he was, share Elwood’s story and what they did to him when they tried to put a stop to their crimes” (207). Nickel Academy did not fulfil its stated mission of reform, but Elwood’s influence effectively reformed Turner. Turner’s decision to share their story will offer him some measure of personal closure and will solidify Elwood’s legacy. In providing testimony, Turner ensures that Elwood will ultimately succeed in advocating for racial justice and holding the perpetrators of abuse accountable in some measure. Furthermore, the novel itself testifies to the real-life structural racism that harmed and killed Black boys at the Dozier School.

Additionally, the novel provides hope through its structure, which revisits earlier scenes from a new perspective. Turner realizes one of Elwood’s goals when he returns to Florida and stays in a hotel at the site of the former Richmond Hotel; Turner rents a room and eats his dinner in the hotel restaurant that Elwood dreamt about seeing Black patrons in when he was a child. Thus, although Elwood was murdered as a result of structural violence, Turner lives out his friend’s dreams, both witnessing and initiating progress toward racial equality and societal reform, as Elwood would have done. Though much of the novel’s chronological structure depicts the negative effects of the past’s intrusions on the present, this scene demonstrates that actors in the present can reanimate and realize the aspirations of the past. In this way, Elwood metaphorically acts as Turner’s ancestor; though they were once contemporaries, the Turner of
the present was reborn from his friend. The connection between Elwood and Turner acts as a microcosm for the relationship between African Americans and their ancestors. The novel conveys that the ancestors’ suffering may continue to inform the present, but their values and aspirations can similarly inspire subsequent generations to make progress.

Through its reflections on both the history of race-based structural violence and on the traumatic legacies of that history, *The Nickel Boys* engages with the processes by which American culture (re)conceives of its relationship with this violence. In the novel, Turner’s wife, Millie, thinks it is “hard to remember sometimes how bad it used to be” to be Black in America (204). She remembers the everyday injustices of her youth when “standing on a corner trying to hail a cab, a routine humiliation,” or when she learns of “another [Black] boy shot dead by a cop” (204). Indeed, both racist microaggressions and larger instances of race-based violence reinforce Millie’s understanding that “[t]hey treat us like subhumans in our own country. Always have. Maybe always will” (204). Here, “they” refers to white people in power in the United States who uphold racist structures—including the criminal legal system—as well as those who commit smaller acts of routine discrimination against African Americans. Millie demonstrates the significance of racism in all forms, as microaggressions and seemingly small-scale instances of discrimination reanimate larger injustices of the past and present. In addition, her reaction to learning about her husband’s experiences at Nickel Academy parallels the reactions some Americans had when first hearing about the real-life Dozier School, which informed the content of Whitehead’s novel. An article originally published in the Tampa Bay Times asks “How could this happen? How was this allowed to continue? Why didn't someone speak up sooner?” (Montgomery and Moore). The article notes, however, that there were many investigations into the Dozier School prior to its closure in 2011. In 1903, an investigation into the school
determined that it was more like “a prison for children” than a reform school. Later, “investigators discovered that school administrators hired out boys to work with state convicts. They also learned that students were brutally beaten with a leather strap attached to a wooden handle.” Despite institutional knowledge of the school’s crimes, “outsiders had no idea” what took place at Dozier (Montgomery and Moore). The article indicates that powerful actors in south Florida knew for over 100 years that Dozier was committing horrific abuse, but officials ignored or enabled this injustice, all while shielding the public from information about what took place. In this way, too, the fictional Nickel Academy mirrors the Dozier school. The novel itself answers the article’s central question: “How could this happen?” The novel argues that the media refuses to engage in sincere, critical questioning of racist institutions and structures because those with power in media institutions benefit from these structures. Whitehead’s realistic portrait of the unjust legal system, youth incarceration, abuse, and systemic violence illuminates the traumas affecting survivors of such crimes. Moreover, the novel highlights the cultural trauma generated from African Americans’ collective knowledge that these crimes can and do occur and from the denial of their experiences by society at large. Elwood’s experiences demonstrate that the refusal to see another’s suffering perpetuates and extends that suffering, as much of his trauma comes from the realization that justice is not guaranteed to him as an American because he is Black. Indeed, the novel demonstrates that the very refusal of people to acknowledge traumatic experiences exacerbates existing traumas and participates in the construction of cultural trauma.

**Race-based Structural Violence in Cultural Trauma Fiction**

Ward’s and Whitehead’s novels imply that the dead cannot rest because American society has not collectively acknowledged or mourned their unjust ends. Public
acknowledgement of traumatic injustice matters because “the failure to take into account the
larger story of the event marks a continuation of social injury. Official or social silence
surrounding historical traumas…is a wounding silence” (McIvor 9). Certainly, the surviving
characters in Sing, Unburied, Sing and The Nickel Boys continue suffering due to the traumas of
the past and the collective failure to acknowledge those traumas. As David W. McIvor argues,
“[t]he dominant discourses and practices of justice” cannot adequately recognize and respond to
traumas, “in part because traumatic events are never discrete phenomena isolated in time and
place” (9). To properly recognize trauma is to admit that it occurred, assign blame, and pursue
justice for victims, survivors, and future generations. In Sing, Unburied, Sing and The Nickel
Boys, those who survive the trauma of structural violence and their descendants recognize the
traumas of the past and challenge dominant discourses by asserting the continued significance of
these traumas in the present.

Sing, Unburied, Sing and The Nickel Boys depict the local concerns of families and
communities affected by racial trauma, as well as cultural concerns regarding how to properly
mourn victims, how survivors can share their testimonies and heal, and how to combat ongoing
issues with race-based structural violence, especially those related to the criminal justice system.
The novels each question the collective understanding of American identity, both for those with
privilege who fail to account for the culture’s inherent racism and for those who lack the
privileges ostensibly guaranteed to Americans. The novels also grapple with identity in their
depictions of cultural meaning-making processes. Both question how individuals can make
meaning from their own traumas and the traumas of their forebearers, and ultimately demonstrate
that artful mourning provides some measure of narrative justice to those oppressed, abused, and
killed by systemic violence. Through their diverse perspectives, these texts advance
counternarratives that challenge dominant narratives about race, racism, and justice in the United States. Whitehead’s novel challenges dominant narratives through a frame narrative that signifies on an earlier work of African American fiction, while Ward’s novel uses multivocal narration to depict various perspectives and create nuance. Through these different strategies, Ward and Whitehead both refuse simple, comforting narratives of linear progress that claim racism is a thing of the past. Instead, their texts favor complex, difficult narratives that show multiple ways of grappling with and mourning the past.

Sing, Unburied, Sing and The Nickel Boys also highlight that routine injustices may constitute cultural traumas and argue that no amount of denial can prevent unburied narratives from bringing the truth of traumatic experience to light. Sing, Unburied, Sing explicitly counters the narrative of a post-racial America by depicting how structural racism endures in the present. By contrast, The Nickel Boys focuses on how specific institutions, including mass media, enable the proliferation of racist systems. Despite these differences, both novels use ghosts as a metaphor for the traumatic past, indicating that the past is not gone despite no longer existing in the same way it once did. Ghosts are an apt metaphor for trauma because both are manifestations of that which that should be gone and over, but that nonetheless continues to “haunt” the present. Moreover, the novels’ ghosts demonstrate how the everyday lived and psychological experiences of some can be haunted by something that others fail to recognize or explicitly deny and show that both the haunting itself and the denial of its reality are forms of trauma. As the novels’ ghost metaphors indicate, the fact that some members of a culture deny the trauma of structural violence is in itself a facet of the trauma.
Conclusion

In a recent piece for *The New Yorker*, literary critic Parul Sehgal argues that what she calls “the trauma plot” has overtaken literature, film, and television. She argues that the trauma plot—or, perhaps more accurately, the *bad* trauma plot—directs readers’ focus away from both the present and the future and towards the traumatic past. In these kinds of narratives, Sehgal argues, trauma is “totalizing” and “trumps all other identities, evacuates personality, remakes it in its own image.” Despite her evisceration of most iterations of the trauma plot, however, Sehgal also acknowledges that “in deft hands the trauma plot is taken only as a beginning—with a middle and an end to be sought elsewhere. With a wider aperture, we move out of the therapeutic register and into a generational, social, and political one. It becomes a portal into history and into a common language.” I argue that this move out of the therapeutic, individual realm and into the social and political realm is precisely the work of Cultural Trauma Fiction. Even when these texts look back to the traumas of the distant past or sit with the traumas of the present, they do not treat the individual traumatic experience or even the isolated experience of cultural trauma as an end in itself. While Sehgal argues that the bad trauma plot “flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority,” and essentially determines that the reader must interpret characters in a prescribed way because of their trauma, I argue that this criticism of the trauma plot does not apply to Cultural Trauma Fiction. Indeed, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction challenge obvious interpretations of trauma and the traumatized. Novels in this subgenre lead readers away from conventional narratives but resist introducing new hegemonic narratives in their place. Rather, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction override dominant narratives and demonstrate the generative
potential of recognizing multiple perspectives regarding large-scale traumas or patterns of smaller-scale traumas.

While this dissertation focuses on American cultural traumas in particular, this work can well be extended to other cultures and national literatures. However, the Cultural Trauma Fiction framework is unique to regions in which mediated witnessing of potentially traumatic events is ubiquitous, so this subgenre may only occur as such in parts of the world with an advanced mass-media infrastructure and in which there is a free press. Despite this limitation, the genre of Cultural Trauma Fiction is likely quite broad and observable beyond the West. Future studies of Cultural Trauma Fiction may focus on other cultures, especially those in the East or Global South that may face more complex cultural traumas resulting from First-World imperialism. Such work might consider how Postcolonial Cultural Trauma Fiction differs from the kinds of cultural traumas and literary responses available in imperialist cultures. For example, there are similar works in South African literature that respond to the cultural trauma of apartheid, including *Imaginings of Sand* (1996) by Andre Brink, *The Persistence of Memory* (2004) by Tony Eprile, and *Red Dust* (2000) by Gillian Slovo, to name but a few.

In addition to the potential for studying Cultural Trauma Fiction beyond the bounds of American literature, another significant contribution of this subgenre comes from the potential for teaching these texts under the unifying framework of Cultural Trauma Fiction. For instance, today’s traditional-aged, American college students likely have some familiarity with 9/11 from televised anniversary commemorations, history classes, and older relatives’ personal recollections of the trauma. While there are still some who dispute the events of the day and disagree about who bears responsibility, 9/11 is widely recognized as a devastating event that altered America’s collective consciousness. Studying Cultural Trauma Fiction about 9/11 in
undergraduate literature classrooms can help students understand not only the events’ impact on individuals, but also the cultural trauma that ensued and altered American culture itself. The same students will almost certainly be aware of the ongoing epidemic of mass shootings in the United States. By reading works of Cultural Trauma Fiction about mass shootings in conjunction with texts about 9/11, students will recognize how patterns of relatively small-scale traumas can contribute to the formation of cultural trauma. This understanding is significant for students’ comprehension of cultural trauma and of culture in general. Similarly, once students understand the kinds of cultural traumas that effect American culture broadly, they will be better equipped for engaging with texts about cultural traumas that affect smaller cultural groups. Indeed, an understanding of broad, recognizable cultural traumas facilitates one’s ability to recognize more complex and possibly contested instances of cultural trauma. This dissertation has established that works of Cultural Trauma Fiction encourage intersubjective empathy. This potential is even greater for readers of fiction about people unlike themselves and cultural traumas with which they lack personal experience. Teaching Cultural Trauma Fiction about race-based structural violence can increase non-Black students’ empathy for the experiences of African Americans while simultaneously affording African American students the opportunity to see voices and experiences like their own privileged within the text and in the classroom.

Through their articulation of counternarratives, works of Cultural Trauma Fiction may challenge hegemonic understandings of major events or patterns of events, facilitate the creation of a more nuanced collective understanding, and privilege the voices of marginalized peoples in the real world. Fiction may play an even greater role in creating and perpetuating counternarratives in the era of widespread disinformation and public distrust of news media. Overall, Cultural Trauma Fiction’s promotion of intersubjective empathy can affect change in
the real world, as empathy can inspire action and such action may foster political and social change. Such changes would certainly be significant for individuals, but also for American culture as a whole. In fact, changes to the conditions that enabled the occurrence of traumatogenic events and the construction of cultural trauma in their aftermath may prevent additional traumas from occurring in the future. This is especially true for those traumas produced in whole or in part through structural violence.

Cultural traumas endure as a fixture of American life. Recent, notable instances of structural racism, including the state-sanctioned murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, motivate the ongoing construction of cultural trauma. Cultural trauma fiction identifies, describes, and analyzes the cultural trauma that arises from the enduring pattern of such violence. As discussed in Chapter 4, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Nickel Boys* engage with the trauma of structural racism. The trauma of structural racism that Ward and Whitehead examine in these novels is even more relevant after recent instances of police violence against African Americans and especially in the wake of the massive nationwide unrest resulting from these incidents, so we can expect more works of Cultural Trauma Fictions to explore this trauma in the near future. For example, *The Sentence*, a 2021 novel by the Indigenous author Louise Erdrich, takes on a similar project by exploring specific instances of police brutality, namely the murder of George Floyd in summer 2020. The novel centers on a Native American woman, Tookie, who works in a Minneapolis bookstore that is haunted by the ghost of a recently deceased customer, Flora. While the beginning of *The Sentence* is set in late 2019 and focuses narrowly on Tookie and her personal experiences of being haunted—by her own criminal past, the memory of her mother, and the ghost of Flora—as the novel progresses through 2020 its focus expands to consider the cultural trauma of the murder of George Floyd, the widespread reaction to the viral video of the
murder, and connections to other instances of police violence against Black and Indigenous Americans.

Like *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *The Nickel Boys, The Sentence* explores how distant histories of racist oppression and violence haunt American culture, but focuses on specific, recent instances of police brutality to indicate that this haunting will continue. A chapter set in May 2020 opens with the definition of a “signal event,” which is a man-made disaster that provokes public outcry and motivates legal challenges to the policies that enabled the disaster (235). Erdrich argues that murder of George Floyd is a signal event. In the novel, Tookie witnesses Floyd’s murder through the media when her daughter, Hetta, shows her the infamous video of Derek Chauvin’s knee on the Black man’s neck. Hetta argues that as Native Americans, they have a responsibility “to stand with Black people because we know. The [Minneapolis Police Department] has fucking done this to Indians since the beginning of this city. No, before that. They practiced on us in the Dakota War and ever since” (238). Hetta connects the murder of George Floyd to the longstanding history of police abusing Native Americans in the region and across the country. Similarly, Tookie connects Floyd’s murder to the police violence against other Black men like Philando Castile and Native American men and boys like Zachary Bearheels and Jason Pero (291). She notes that “You rarely hear about police killings of Indigenous people, though the numbers are right up there with Black people, because so often it happens on remote reservations, and the police don’t wear cameras. So I was thankful, however shattering the truth, for the witnesses with the cameras” (292). This statement takes the second person to directly address the reader and the likely limitations of their knowledge about how police violence affects Indigenous people. Through Tookie’s thoughts about these various instances of police brutality, the novel argues that police violence is widespread and
underreported, and that Black, brown, and Indigenous people are disproportionately abused and killed by police.

Erdrich’s novel also explores the cultural trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, responds to the mainstream media narrative that some COVID deaths are acceptable, and compares those deaths to the deaths of Black and Indigenous people at the hands of police. Like many of the works of Cultural Trauma Fiction discussed in this dissertation, *The Sentence* depicts and responds to media representations of traumatic events. For instance, Tookie notes, “The reports kept saying that those who died had underlying health issues. That was probably supposed to reassure some people—the super-healthy, the vibrant, the young. A pandemic is supposed to blow through distinctions and level all before it. This one did the opposite. Some of us instantly became more mortal” (183-184). The mainstream media tells Americans that only those with “underlying health issues” will die, implying that the old and the sick are expendable (183). The media-crafted division between healthy and unhealthy, allegedly safe and unsafe, separates the most vulnerable from the rest of the nation and asserts that those who are at a higher risk are on their own in protecting their health. When Tookie’s husband, Pollux, is hospitalized with a severe case of COVID-19 in the fall, Tookie stares at the hospital façade and thinks, “The world was filling with ghosts. We were a haunted country in a haunted world” (364). Her thought acknowledges that the entire world is “haunted” by those who have died as a result of COVID-19, but she specifies that the United States is “a haunted country” because of the number of deaths, the media and government response to the pandemic, and because of the other horrific histories that haunt the nation (364). Depictions of possible futures in which pandemics plague the world have long been a feature of speculative fiction—including novels like *The Stand* (1978) by Stephen King, *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel, and *Severance* (2018)
by Ling Ma—but readers will now experience these novels through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, authors like Erdrich are writing realist fiction of the pandemic, rather than speculative texts in which a pandemic serves as allegory for an uncertain or dystopian future.

The Sentence exemplifies the likely direction of Cultural Trauma Fiction in the 2020s. Fiction will continue exploring how certain signal events, including high-profile instances of police brutality and the COVID-19 pandemic, connect to larger systems of violence and have ripple effects across the culture. Novels like The Sentence are already participating in the construction of COVID-19 as a cultural trauma; the cultural trauma comes not just from the virus itself (an entity comparable to a ‘natural’ disaster) but from the institutional responses and failures to respond to the virus and the increasing disunity of American culture resulting from the politicization of the virus, the vaccine, and other mitigation measures like face masks. The proliferation of misinformation and the increasing polarization of Americans demonstrate the need for works of literature that challenge not only the dominant narratives constructed by the government and mainstream media, but also those false narratives that arise from counterculture and gain widespread popularity, such as claims that the government is exaggerating the number of COVID-19 deaths or that COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips and alter human DNA (Hamel et al.). Furthermore, the polarization and violence arising from the pandemic and related policies demonstrate the need for the kind of intersubjective empathy that can be cultivated through reading Cultural Trauma Fiction.

37 According to the KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor, “8% of adults say they have heard at least one of eight different false statements about COVID-19 and that they believe it to be true or are unsure if it is true or false” (Hamel et al.).
38 A PEW Research poll indicates that three-quarters of Americans “say the country is more divided than before the coronavirus outbreak” (Mordecai and Connaughton).
39 There has been a dramatic increase in anti-Asian violence since the outset of the pandemic (Cabral).
Given the United States’ media saturation and entrenched systemic inequities as well as the global threats of pandemics and climate disaster, Americans will continue experiencing cultural traumas. Cultural Trauma Fiction can offer readers nuanced understanding of these traumas and the systems that produce them in an effort to inspire the personal, structural, and cultural changes necessary to prevent the accumulation of even more trauma. Though criticisms of backward-looking, individually focused trauma plots may be justified, Cultural Trauma Fiction offers a path forward in a contemporary world beset with viral media, viral infection, and violence.
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