
Trauma, History, and Terror in the Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa and Sinan Antoon

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Volume 24 Issue 2 (March 2022) Article 8**Hessa A. Alghadeer,****"Trauma, History, and Terror in the Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa and Sinan Antoon"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss2/8>>

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Abstract: In her comparative study "Trauma, History, and Terror in the Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa and Sinan Antoon," Hessa A. Alghadeer considers the work of the African American poet Yusef Komunyakaa (b. 1941) and the (Arab) Iraqi poet Sinan Antoon (b. 1967) through the lens of trauma theory of some notable theorists including; Freud, Cathy Caruth, Jean Laplanche, Roger Luckhurst, and Shoshana Felman—have negotiated in this field. The article explores the literary manifestations of trauma in two distinct historical periods and geographical settings to show the specificities of each prototype and how the historical-cultural significance and textual meanings of trauma have intertwined into a plural space. Drawing upon a cluster of selected poems, the article investigates through textual analysis how Komunyakaa and Antoon bring to light, articulate, and address their historic traumas, and how they elaborate similar discourses of trauma across their distinct cultures. The article thereby underlines the power of the poetic word and image to unveil several complex manifestations of trauma. It asserts that these two poets are situated within a global context that empowers the poetic voice and brings vitality to the predicaments of the traumatized subjects through a broad sense of connectivity and belonging regardless of their distinct histories, cultures, and homelands.

Hessa A. ALGHADEER

Trauma, History, and Terror in the Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa and Sinan Antoon

In his book *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst visualizes the traumatic event and its aftermath in order to penetrate the bleak avenues of trauma within the human psyche. In a poignant metaphor, Luckhurst observes that "trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication" (3). This comparison asserts the fact that trauma is a controversial and expanding issue which requires further investigation. The "piercing," which shows how far the anguish of victimization, torture, and terror dwells in trauma survivors, is defined in the words of trauma scholar Cathy Caruth (*Unclaimed* 11) as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events (57)." This traumatic experience is not "locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past," but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature ... returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). The non-linear temporality of trauma and its swift shifts between the past and present, along with its poignant impact on the future adds to the complexity of its nature.

A wide range of literary and critical scholars have explored the issue of trauma and examined its aftermath. In the anthology *Voices in Wartime*, for instance, editors Andrew Himes and Jan Butmann state: "If history and literature have taught us anything, it is that in the midst of trauma, violence and death, it is the poets who help us make sense of the senseless" (1). The present article attempts to shed light on how poets do "make sense of the senseless": how they identify, interpret, and represent trauma upon and against various sites and events. It explores this predicament within various poetic locales against a plural space of political, cultural, historical, and social landscapes. On that basis, the article then traces how the poetic text navigates the ambiguous workings of trauma while articulating provocative verbal and visual narratives of suffering, mourning, and sometimes healing. Through the lens of literary trauma theory, which is one of the essential concerns of this article, I examine the poetry of two distinct cultural voices, both of which reconfigure the traumatic event and image in a myriad of locales, experiences and memories of war. In this spirit, I revisit the poetics of trauma of two major contemporary voices, Yusef Komunyakaa and Sinan Antoon, to explore the peculiarities of trauma as these insightful artists capture them.

The concept of trauma has attracted the attention of a wide range of scholars, across fields, to the task of examining its nature and its effects on individual and collective experience. In *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, for instance, Gabriele Schwab examines the intersections between history and trauma and how history tends to foreshadow and determine the destiny of many traumatic subjects when she remarks "there is no history without trauma. Some lives will forever be overshadowed by violent histories, including colonial invasions, slavery, totalitarianism, dictatorship, wars, and genocide" (42). Thereby, many studies on trauma have been associated with the literature of the Holocaust in particular, a—perhaps singularly—shocking and catastrophic event in human history. In similar vein, Charles I. Armstrong in "Trauma and Poetry" addresses trauma as a historical event that wounds individuals and communities in "a material, psychic or metaphysical way" (208). Other trauma scholars such as Laura Di Prete and Kathryn Robson build their argument on what the Greek word τραῦμα signifies as a physical injury and argue that the "body" is usually the principal site of the traumatic wound and the images of trauma rely heavily on bodily drawings. Despite the fact that the literal meaning of trauma, Greek τραῦμα, is physical injury, it has come to be widely used to signify a psychic wound and hence a complex paradigm of distressing experiences with emotionally and indeed physically painful repercussions. The modern age, which has been characterized by tyranny, aggression, terrorism, and violence on an unprecedented scale, has become closely intertwined with the rise of trauma as a tragic element in human experience. Abi-Rached in his article "Post-war Mental Health, Wealth, and Justice" argues that mental health disorders of war-torn societies whether in armed conflict or post-war countries lead to a "nation's socio-political unrest that could perpetuate throughout generations." He therefore suggests that rebuilding these "shattered individuals is a key solution to gain sustainable recovery and growth" (55).

In "Mourning and Melancholia," one of the earliest works on trauma, Sigmund Freud investigates the notion of trauma in terms of the sense of loss, fragmentation, and disassociation. He compares the state of traumatic loss to "an open wound" and reflects on how several disordered and painful mental states, including amnesia, hysteria, and nightmares, are associated with that condition (53). In a significant work on trauma theory, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth defines the term as a state "possessed by an image or event" (5), "as the response to a n unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (92).

Jean Laplanche, a remarkable French psychoanalyst and thinker, focuses on the temporal structure of trauma and how the experience of a shocking event develops into a psychic condition: "trauma consists of two moments . . . First, there is the implantation of something coming from outside. And this experience, or the memory of it, must be reinvested in a second moment, and then it becomes traumatic. It is not the first act which is traumatic, it is the internal reviviscence of this memory that becomes traumatic" (Laplanche and Caruth 1). On similar grounds, Caruth observes that the connection between literature and trauma is significant "because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing that the language of literature and psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (*Trauma* 4). In her article, "Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies," Irene Visser argues that in times of disruption, the collective trauma transcends the confines of the fractures of the individual self, to a more holistic space—the formation of cultural identity and social solidarity.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, examine the impact of trauma on literary text, asserting that the "disintegration of narrative" dominates the traumatic scene, and that its defining elements—events, speakers, and settings—reconfigure the perplexing realities of trauma (171). Regardless of the confusion that sometimes haunts the trauma narratives, Geoffrey Hartman asserts that literary expressions remain essential components for "making the wound perceivable and the silence audible" (259).

As these definitions and observations, among others, indicate, the state of in-betweenness, splitting life from death, the known from the unknown, the expected from the unexpected, does actually govern the traumatic space. This in turn underlines the problematic aspects of defining this notion and understanding its pervasive impact, which invites further investigations to rethink the paradox and uncertainties of trauma and their workings within the literary texts. Interestingly enough, Laurie Vickroy builds on Felman and Laub's argument and places more emphasis on the way these literary trauma texts serve as means of "witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically marginalized people" (221).

Against this backdrop, sites of trauma are highly variable, ranging from slavery, war, and colonization, through massacres and genocide, to forced migrations, terrorism, violence, natural disasters, torture, and physical and sexual assault and abuse, among others. In the last few decades, trauma as an issue and phenomenon has been engaged by many fictional works which examine the shards of the experience and how it intersects with cultural, social, and political realities and affect the formation of individual identity. Prominent writers in this vein have included Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, Nadine Gordimer, Derek Walcott, and Adrienne Rich, among many others, and also the two poets upon which this article focuses: Yusef Komunyakaa and Sinan Antoon.

The journeys of Komunyakaa and Antoon take place across three diverse geographies marked by the trauma of war—the American South, Vietnam, and Iraq—which draw attention to a new perspective on trauma beyond narrow definitions rooted in individual events and testimonies. Komunyakaa critiques the social terror that prevailed in the American South during the 1960s and revisits how the wave of the civil rights movement poignantly unveiled racial oppressions against African Americans, rooted in slavery and colonialism. He engages in a broader critique of another wave of national trauma, the one experienced by US-American troops in Vietnam and to some degree by Americans on the "home front." According to Komunyakaa, the analogy between these two historical experiences is quite inescapable, as they both emerge from the US-American tradition of racial and economic domination. Antoon, on the other hand, manipulates historic traumas when dealing with the brutality of political dictatorship in Iraq during the 1990s, along with the post-Cold War "new world order" and the encroachment of Western (neo)imperialism that drowned the old regime in 2003. His poetry concerns the posttraumatic phase, in particular, and how dynamics of power worked to dismantle the national culture and history of Iraq through ethnic cleansing, domestic and local wars, and Western invasions.

Komunyakaa, who was born in Louisiana in 1941, grew up in the American South during the alarming civil rights movement and served for two years in the US military during the Vietnam War (1955–1975). These experiences informed his rich meditations on the two poignant landscapes of the African American experience and the (Asian) Vietnamese experience—indeed, what distinguishes Komunyakaa's poetry is the distinct inspirations these two experiences yield to his poetry. Revisiting African, American, and Asian lands, he negotiates the notion of trauma and its reflection in the testimonies of the traumatized amidst the glaring spaces of terror and agony, death and survival.

Komunyakaa's poetics relies heavily on the art of storytelling and the social realities of the South, jazz music, the rituals of harvest and feast, and the violence on Vietnamese soil along with the pathos of the Vietnam War. His aesthetic sensibility is interwoven with the fabric of myriad images of trauma,

with sensual imagery evoking fear, misery, torture, and shock. A number of his poems also place themselves in the equation of change, social justice, and freedom. The experience of the African American soldier on the Vietnamese battlefields remains a wild confrontation against the colonial powers of the world. The journey through Komunyakaa's titles in his remarkable collection, *Dien Caidau* presents a composite of two ravaged cultures, from "One More Loss to Count," to "Tunnels," "Prisoners," "Jungle Surrender," "To Have Danced with Death," and "The Edge," among others. The speakers of these poems are not only victimized survivors of racial segregation in the rural South but also defeated soldiers in a brutal war of occupation in Vietnam.

From the American South to the Middle East, trauma seems a prevailing motif, and it has played an integral position in the production of many writers in Iraq. Sinan Antoon (b. 1967) is an acclaimed Iraqi poet who has addressed the nation's agony over two decades of wars, revolutions, and ethnic persecution. His humane interest is always felt through his words and in particular the metaphors of his poems, which introduce him as a global Iraqi voice especially against the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. In his collection of poetry; *Baghdad Blues*, Antoon captures the trauma of the Iraqi people in different urban sites, alongside their history and culture, which are often seen straddling the border between war and peace. Among the significant themes in Antoon's writings is the traumatization of Iraq by its turbulent times. Antoon's revelation of the impact of trauma on soldiers, women, and children is worthwhile not only as an immediate reflection on the lingering experience of war but also a meditation on the barren landscape trauma leaves behind.

From the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), through the Gulf War (1990-1991), and the 2003 US invasion, other subsequent occupation, and the ongoing ethnic and religious civil wars and political tensions, Iraq is a vibrant milieu of trauma in which for Antoon to situate his anti-war poems. The act of making poetry, according to him, derives from and translates to a spirit of resistance against Western hegemony. His work has been recognized and valued for its sharp political satire, embedded in various lyrics. Like Komunyakaa, Antoon selects the lyric, in particular, to preserve the emotional intensity of the speaker's experience of trauma. In his poems, the speaker is not only anguished but disturbed by his trauma: "a tortured and traumatized prisoner cannot always think and remember in a linear fashion . . . So he is expressing himself spontaneously in nightmares and scattered memories" (Antoon, "I Think"). These fractured memories are woven into the fabric of the poetic text, which frequently laments the absurdities of the modern age and the insignificance of human dignity.

The uncanny dialogue of trauma is revealed through the testimonies of survivors after traumatic events, who have either "experienced, witnessed or [been] confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" (*DSM-IV* 253). In both Komunyakaa and Antoon, the historic trauma of war in particular becomes "the general matrix for all relations of power and techniques of domination" (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri 13). I focus on how they acknowledge, address, and delve into the agonies of specific catastrophic moments of trauma and how they make sense of the senseless wars as outstanding portfolios of contemporary trauma through the power of their poetics. Remapping multiple geographies, transcending multiple cultures and dislocated identities, signifies the intensity of the traumatic burden Komunyakaa is keen to resolve. His vision of poetry defines and resists the anguish of trauma, or the notion of wounding that he vividly expresses in the words, "like the word made flesh, the South has been woven through my bones. Coming of age there, I was fully aware of both the natural beauty and the social terror surrounding me. The challenge became to acknowledge and resist this terror" ("More" 163). In fact, as suggested above, this challenge is not confined to the setting of the American South, but extends to Vietnam. One of Komunyakaa's acclaimed collections, *Neon Vernacular*, evokes the traumatic crisis and negotiates "the challenge" of the Vietnam War, which he continues to address over fourteen years. "Monsoon Season" is a compelling poem that takes the reader into a typical Vietnamese rural setting. The poem is set in a jungle scene during the rainy season not as a romantic meditation on Asian "nature" and its innocence, but as a visual reflection of warfare and soldiers on the front line.

In effect, the poem attempts to define trauma along the lines of Caruth, who claims the traumatized are usually "possessed by an image or event" ("Introduction" 5). Komunyakaa reveals the events and what lies beneath them through the use of a series of disassociated images and figures revolving around the question: What kind of knowledge can this traumatized piece convey to the reader? The event related here is surely catastrophic loss involving dismal acts of killing, death, and burial scenes. The experiences of violent deaths and bloodshed and the torture of survivors are associated with many "troubled seasons" of the past, whose legacy stands as one of the dominant elements producing and reproducing trauma. Along with the past, the triple setting is enacted as a series of sites of aggression falling one after another into a subtle critique of the colonial history. One perhaps identifies oneself with the speaker who is an eyewitness to what the memories of the dead could possibly reveal. The traumatic

experience reaches its peak when the speaker alludes to the political and cultural divide the Vietnam War—known in Vietnam as the “Resistance War Against America,” and remaining an icon of resistance to hierarchies of colonial and military power. The several awakening moments that the poem delivers revive a mythical presence of human apparitions torn between reality and fantasy, consciousness and unconsciousness. The turbulent atmosphere to which the uncanny language translates into scenes of confusion and isolation, as though lost in a labyrinth, makes the poem more remarkable:

A river shines in the jungle’s
wet leaves. The rain’s finally
let up but whenever wind shakes
the foliage it starts to fall.
The monsoon uncovers troubled
seasons we tried to forget.
Dead men slip through bad weather,
stamping their muddy boots to wake us,
their curses coming easier. (1-9)

The impact of trauma on nature is personified through the impotence of grass and trees, the assault of wind and rain, which contribute to uncovering the psychological scars of trauma on the combat soldiers. The linguistic context accordingly evokes the pathos of the experience of the African American veterans particularly, who had been subjected to whipping, lynching, and massive executions in the American South, through words such as “shakes,” “troubled,” “bad,” “dead,” and “curses” (verses 3-9). Moreover, there are several flashbacks to torture scenes, interrupting the flow of the lines—“beating it naked. Soaked to the bone” (16)—where the speaker alludes to the individual and collective trauma of slavery, war, and discrimination:

There’s a bend in everything,
in elephant grass & flame trees,
raindrops pelting the sand-bagged
bunker like a muted gong.
White phosphorus washed from the air,
wind sways with violent myrtle,
beating it naked. Soaked to the bone,
jungle rot brings us down to earth. (10-17)

The speaker’s confession of dissociation from place, time, and his sense of being is placed in relation to the “bend in everything” in his world. The image of nakedness here evokes how his trauma has abundantly undisguised the physical, emotional, and psychological wounds inflicted by this war scene. The sense of helplessness, despair, emotional detachment from oneself, and severe anxiety is hidden. Apart from their physical injuries, the soldiers suffer from a pervasive sense of impotence:

We sit in our hooches
with too much time,
where grounded choppers
can’t fly out the wounded.
Somewhere nearby a frog
begs a snake.
I try counting droplets,
Stars that aren’t in the sky.
My poncho feels like a body bag.
I lose count. Red leaves
whirl by, the monsoon
unburying the dead. (18-29)

The images and metaphors deliver the traumatic content of the memory of the event into fragmentary relics, similar or identical to the mental wounds of amnesia, uncertainty, fear, and despair. The testimony of the speaker, then, is a resolute acknowledgment of those who remain in the “hooches” pondering over their fate while “the curses” of the dead haunt their souls. Reality and fantasy, hence, are overlapping, as the trauma of racial war mingles between mind and body, anger and empathy. This overwhelming emotional conflict shows how far and long human consciousness enacts and reacts against trauma.

Similarly, Antoon, who admires the writers and artists whose work preserves a sense of political breadth without sacrificing aesthetic norms, explores the venues of trauma through a cluster of political poems, included in his collection *Baghdad Blues*: "When I Was Torn by War," "A Prisoner's Song," "A Prism: Wet with Wars," and "Wrinkles; on the Wind's Forehead," among many others. He conceives of himself as a global citizen who believes that "it is one's genealogy which is very complex and diverse, that predetermines the multiplicity of voices coming out through the poet's text" (Antoon, "Interview"). These poems, among others, embody the cultural history of Iraq as he asserts; "I think that I would have written about war and suffering even if I were from any other country" (Antoon, "Interview"). In his poem "Wrinkles: on the Wind's Forehead," a multiplicity of voices is heard from the outset: the wind, the moon, the stars, which are themselves agents enacting traumatic incidents in a fragmented country. The cemetery-like locale evokes a powerful sense of horror, as one imagines the scene, where "corpses" with no "shrouds" announce the trauma of the Baghdadis who failed to survive. The speaker meditates on the sense of disintegration that inflects the whole scene, and connects it to the elements of nature that personify the traumatized in order to heighten the tragic effect:

the wind is a blind mother
stumbling
over the corpses
no shrouds
save the clouds
but the dogs
are much faster

the moon is a graveyard
for light
the stars women
wailing (1-11)

The speaker employs "the wind" as a threatening force that resembles war and its desolation. In this sense, this opening image paves the way for the melancholic mood of the whole poem, evoking the sights and sounds, and the hostile realities, of war and filling the scene with traumatic manifestations: the battlefield, the trenches, the corpses, and so forth. The poetic text is replete with photographic images, torn between powerful elements of nature and vulnerable women, between the overwhelming agonies of survivors and the dead. The lines uncover a flow of memories of trauma which infuses the linearity of time, from the senseless past to the morbid present. The wind, which indirectly evokes the tyranny of the Western world, governs the poetic text and unfolds the map of Iraq and especially injured Baghdad. The swift shifts between the "wind," "moon," and "clouds" and thence to the "blind mother," "wailing women," and "graveyard" highlight the shaky physical condition and mortified status of the traumatized. The protagonist reflects too on the condition of the survivors of combat trauma and the brevity of their lives:

how narrow is this strait
which sleeps
between two wars
but I must cross it

heart is a stork
perched on a distant dome
in Baghdad
it's nest made of bones
its sky
of death. (31-40)

The text delves into this powerful sense of ambivalence, and the reaction of the narrative towards the specificity of the moment of shock. The text challenges the reader to comprehend the meaning which falls between fractures, "between two wars," and between the fragile parts of the body (33). Regardless of the multiple upheavals of trauma, the inner voice of resistance is faintly heard in the line, "but I must cross it" (34); however, this determined wish withers as the city of Baghdad approaches the scene while the speaker identifies his condition with that of a lone "stork" facing death (34). The linkage between the notion of trauma and the body thereby again evokes the ordeal of the traumatized in relation to the physical and emotional injury.

There are two conditions residing within the intricate space of relations among the traumatic event, the traumatized survivors, and the world. Sigmund Freud's argument on the relation between the experience of loss and trauma lies in the junction between two major conditions; mourning and melancholia. According to Freud, mourning is a normal response that overcomes loss—whether it is the death of a dear person, loss of country, loss of freedom, or whatever—and that resides in the conscious mind. In contrast, melancholia, a pathological disposition, resides in the unconscious mind, where the traumatized self is incapable of either comprehending or identifying its loss, resulting in pathological symptoms such as depression, dejection, and disturbance of self-regard. In other words, the fractures of the ego leads to a complex traumatic loss as exposed in this comparison; "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself" (Freud 246).

Through the eyes of diverse speakers, from Louisiana to Vietnam, Komunyakaa's poetics explores and seek to discover the unknowable, the unseen bond, the unspeakable pathos of trauma, in order to dwell on the psychic disintegration of the self in conjunction with traumatic loss. In his *Dien Caidau*, "You and I Are Disappearing" is a lyric overloaded by a spectator's narrative of a tormenting event in which the subject is a girl who "burns like a piece of paper":

The cry I bring down from the hills
belongs to a girl still burning
inside my head. At daybreak
she burns like a piece of paper.
She burns like foxfire
in a thigh-shaped valley.
A skirt of flames
dances around her
at dusk. (1-9)

The speaker here relives the traumatic memory, beginning with the title, where he identifies himself with the victimization and disappearance of a lone girl in Vietnam. This pathetic remembrance conjures up cycles of horrific flashbacks, as he went down from the hills. The notion of time is dismantled within the repeated flashbacks, disappears between the event and the shock, dissolves between truth and illusion, the world and ego.

The depiction of the flashbacks creates a sharp critique of US-American abuses and war crimes in the Vietnam War. It stands as well as a parallel to the savage practices taken against African Americans in the South. The mourning tone of the lines is staged against the suffering of a young Vietnamese girl, to respond and probably expose the wound. However, as the poem proceeds, the mourning condition diminishes as the speaker asserts it "belongs to a girl still burning / inside my head" (verses 2-3). In this manner, the condition of mourning fails to conquer, or even to re-cover, the traumatic situation because the speaker is unable to account for what exactly he has lost in the incident.

The poem then begins to pour down other flashbacks of the catastrophe, in myriad images of violence. The object and source of trauma here is presented as an anonymous girl, reinforcing the global dimensions of war trauma on women. The speaker delves into the phase of melancholia, where the mind abandons its conscious perception of the overwhelmingly violent assault. His mental attempts constantly fail to acknowledge or grasp the shocking event, due to the absurdity of the horrific experience. Moreover, the stage of identification with the lost object and its nature which takes place here is complicated to the extent that the speaker is capable of recognizing the loss but incapable of recognizing "what he has lost in him" (Freud 245). He begins to trace what precisely he has lost through confronting several pathological symptoms, like the acute sense of disturbance of self-regard evoked by "a piece of paper," "foxfire," and "skirt of flames." Hence, the poem engages on a journey of melancholic inhibition, a rediscovery of the unknown, where the speaker is not yet aware of what he has specifically lost (verses 4-7). Other symptoms of melancholia the traumatized text tries to unmask are vividly depicted:

We stand with our hands
hanging at our sides,
while she burns
like a sack of dry ice.
She burns like oil on water.
She burns like a cattail torch
dipped in gasoline.
She glows like the fat tip
of a banker's cigar,
silent as quicksilver.

A tiger under a rainbow
at nightfall. (10-21)

The narrative arrives at its climax: the peak of a mental disorder, in which the speaker and other troops are disturbed and confused: "We stand with our hands / hanging at our sides" (verses 10-11). The confession is immediate and, ironically, clear, unlike the ambiguous condition of suffering with its helplessness, numbness, and dejection. The grotesque portrayal of mental illness continues to dismantle itself, as the grief surrounding the girl in fire dominates the situation. The collective trauma inhabits successive dissolving snapshots, recalled by exhausted memories of dry ice, oil on water, smoke, cigars, dragons, and burning bushes. The voice of the speaker succeeds in revealing the intensity of the trauma, regardless of the uncanny nature of the narrative. The voice depicts the labyrinth of melancholia which builds the structure of non-vertical lines and stanzas.

Antoon, on the other hand, demonstrates in an elegiac tone how the poetic text can examine the intrusion of trauma amidst violence and chaos, and dive into the subconscious mind of the speaker to bring alive the effects of melancholia and its pathological outcomes:

I took a brush
Immersed in death
And drew a window
On war's wall
I opened it
Searching
For something
But
I saw another war
And a mother
Weaving a shroud
For the dead man
Still in her womb. ("When I Was Torn by War" 1-13)

This cinematic scene illustrates precisely the deterioration of the self in the vortex of war. The confrontation between the speaker and the war is suggested by one of the provocative metaphors in the poem, which reflects the density of the melancholic condition that lies in the lines; "I saw another war / And a mother / Weaving a shroud / For the dead man / Still in her womb" (verses 9-13). The depressing tone of the lines is overwhelmingly redolent of the powerlessness of the speaker, who neither comprehends nor is capable of overcoming the constant losses of war. This melancholia at the loss of an object projects a deep-seated sense of ambivalence which neither delimits nor diminishes the complexity of loss. The "window" is an effective visual expression which uncovers the speaker's traumatized desire to escape from his melancholic disposition. Antoon extends the metaphor of the "mother," which usually suggests meanings such as peace, land, or belonging, to a means of resistance against occupation, aggression, and violence.

Antoon's poetics therefore takes us to the core of trauma, in which many innocent civilians suffer from the void and nothingness and are entrapped in the web of death; as psychologist Jonathan Shay has observed: "danger of death and mutilation is the pervading medium of combat. It is a viscous liquid in which everything looks strangely refracted and moves about in odd ways" (10). In this light, melancholia is probably that "viscous fluid" which pervades the ego of the speaker, whose testimony reflects a disturbed perception of reality. The brevity of the lines signifies this crucial dissociation, which moreover alters the text from a confrontation with the unknown and unpredictable to a canny synopsis of the dismal content of trauma; death, impotence, and disposition. In this spirit, the poetry of Komunyakaa and of Antoon replaces mourning with melancholia for the sake of continuous exploration of the traumatic fragments, their implementation and interconnections, in order to control the traumatic condition and master its symptoms. Their two voices bear witness to conscious and unconscious awareness of the loss, the absence of meaning, and the presence of fluid identities.

In the poetry of trauma, the poetic text often represents the body as an instrument in order to confront its physical erosion and to further speak its pain, grief, and sorrow through diction and imagery. In fact, there are two major questions to (re)think when we explore the relationship connecting trauma with the body and when we trace the reflection of this relationship to the poetic text itself: How far does the poetic text reveal the senseless workings of trauma in relation to the body? And how does it manifest and delve into the particular symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder upon the body? In fact, in the middle of this chaos, the narrators' beliefs and thoughts of the world dissolve, their self-worth withers,

and the sense of guilt, anxiety, and mistrust comes to control their relationships with others. Etherington's argument bears some answers to these complex questions: "When we have no language, no frame of reference, we cannot understand our experience. When we don't understand what we are experiencing we are helpless to communicate it to others except perhaps through the body" (188).

In this context, the gap between trauma and its impact, between understanding the unpredictable and implementing it verbally, is crucial. This gap works as a discovery zone for the fear of loss, the loss itself, and the disintegration of the self. In writing about trauma, the poetic text communicates what Carolyn Zaikowski, also underlines: "painful states of intrusion, repetition, fragmentation, dissociated identities, numbness, timelessness, disorientation, lack of reference and explosions of meaning" (203). The severity of the psychic experience generates what is known as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some significant characteristics of PTSD during and after the time of chaos fall triple episodes—hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction—which lead to prominent changes effected upon the body of the traumatized, "symptoms" such as fear, vulnerability, and resistance, and other psychic upheavals (199). In so doing, since they are major agents in composing the narrative of trauma, the cohesion of the body and the text come under crucial question.

One particularly sharp political critique of trauma in relation to the Vietnam War and race relations in the American South is introduced in a remarkable poem in Komunyakaa's *Dien Caidau*. "Facing It" opens to a scene of a veteran standing at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. The title of the poem prepares the reader for immediate confrontation, as a means to recognize the facets of trauma in relation to the body. The veteran's testimony speaks of the traumatized body, in particular, and how the trauma metaphorically intersects with a rapid chain of sensual images of the body and the loss of sense of agency over it:

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning, I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I'm inside the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference. (1-12)

The peculiarity of the experience here lies in how these images and emotions kindle the intrusion of trauma on the body and the text. At the memorial, the veteran is imprisoned within the confines of an agitated memory of trauma, instead of the trenches of warfare as in others of Komunyakaa's works. In this vein, while the speaker is hovering between the war and its traumatic memory, he unveils a distorted perception of himself, others, and the world. The poem uses the body as a point of departure to relive the inner experience of trauma in relation to ethnicity, as the veteran compulsively brings up blackness; "black face" and darkness; "black granite" under light (verses 1-2). The syntax thus loses the anatomy of meaning and structure which is precisely aligned with the fluid identity of the speaker. He is neither "stone" nor "flesh," but rather a "clouded reflection," "a bird of prey," and a "profile of night" (verses 5-7). Nature is therefore playing here a vital role in exposing the atomization of the traumatic content; "I turn / this way—the stone lets me go / I turn that way—I'm inside" (verses 8-10). The whole space is visualized as a prison, or rather a colony wracked by racial conflicts. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a monument to a fifteen-year war of trauma, a linkage between moral and social waste.

The clash Komunyakaa attempts to highlight is perhaps what Antoon, on another frontier of trauma, seeks to capture in his poignant poem "A Prism: Wet with Wars." His speaker transposes the clash between light and darkness found in Komunyakaa to an oasis "wet with wars." The title of the poem situates trauma within a remarkable allegory filtering waves of horror instead of light:

this is the chapter of
devastation
this is our oasis
an angle where wars intersect
tyrants accumulate around our eyes
in the shackle's verandah

there is enough space for applause
let us applaud. (1-8)

The body here is a stage which displays the confusion of the traumatized, whose reaction to the several invasions on their country is senseless. The gap between the external and internal tyrants, obsessed with war, is ridiculed when the speaker decides; "Let us applaud" stands as "a prism" (8). This bodily expression is shocking to the reader who expects another sort of reaction. The devastation which the poet here brings to the traumatic scene is an immediate path leading to question the remapping of Iraq, its people according to ethnicity:

another evening climbs
the city's candles
technological hoofs crush the night
people are being slaughtered across short waves
but the radio vomits raw statements
and urges us to
applaud
with a skeleton of a burning umbrella
we receive this rain. (9-17)

The text here reflects the narrative void of the condition of the city, whose inhabitants live in a darkness that evokes the darkness of their destiny. The speaker is using a "prism" to refract dismal images of trauma over this desolate urban scene. The line "people are being slaughtered across short waves" (12) revives the power of the body to revolt against oppression.

Then, the speaker concludes the stanza by repeating the word "applaud," to ridicule again the internal sense of impotence. The images of the body used here are powerful and daring, as they refer to familial images of infants and mothers:

we will baptize our infants with smoke
plough their tongues
with flagrant war songs
or UN resolutions
teach them the bray of slogans
and leave them beside burning nipples
in an imminent wreckage
and applaud. (23-30)

The "we" governs the text with the plurality, sharing the agony of their victimization. The voice conjures up a traumatized nation, and the images of body are intrusive, torn as they are between mind and body. The presence of the moment of trauma and its visual and aural after-effects—"smoke," "songs," and "slogans" (verses 23-27) of war—is evident. The images of the body are routes for traumatic memories, under which the speaker struggles to integrate his or her various dissociated parts within the heart of chaos. "Infants" signifies that this trauma is distilled into the survivors' testimony, which is not a singular plea, a desperate cry, but rather a kind of barbed wire connecting tragic cycles of human history, especially, of course, in Iraq (23). It reminds one of how one of Antoon's characters in his novel *The Corpse Washer* perceived Iraq's historic trauma: "history is what people call fate. And history is random and violent, storming and uprooting everything and everyone without ever turning back" (184). In this light, the poetic texts fall apart into meaningless splinters mirroring the inexplicable, "uprooting" experience of trauma and reflecting the senseless practice of war. In so doing, Antoon intentionally aligns the ongoing trauma of Iraq's experience of war with Holocaust imagery, implicitly addressing and negotiating the significance of this association through the fragments of the poetic text itself. These textual raptures again trigger memories of invasion in many Arab countries and work to form a global voice in trauma discourse, condemning historic imperial and racial tensions.

The poetic oeuvres of both Komunyakaa and Antoon thus contain many poems that dare to tread the complex sites of trauma, gripped by the terror of war. Their poetry locates itself within the double terrain of horrific wars in Vietnam and Iraq and of the African American experience in the South, and navigates trauma and its representations in diverse spheres of culture, war, ethnicity, and history. Their poems voice the collective trauma of the dead, the wounded, and the survivors who have witnessed times of terror and torture. Many of their poems constitute powerful political and historical endeavors to empower a dialogue, facing, opposing, and overcoming the trauma of war. Their poetics inhabits the intricate intersection of trauma and poetry and discloses its ambiguities by staging a variety of cross-

cultural experiences and encounters within the confines of hegemonic discourse, critiquing and underscore the nexus between horrific modern wars and trauma. They exploit the fragility of the tragic narrative, the absurdity of the unpredictable, the disconsolateness of witnesses to events, and their distressful testimony as means to interpret the senseless reality of contemporary trauma. In this spirit, Komunyakaa and Antoon's poetics is not only a poetry of witness but, more, a poetry of resistance to differing practices of trauma. It is a poetry that goes beyond mourning the dead and celebrating the survivors to illuminating the unspeakable burden and torment of trauma.

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