Psychological trauma has become a staple of literary theory over the past twenty years, making meaningful insights into works of literature and the time periods in which they were produced. This surge in interest in trauma, however, has led to difficult definitional questions about what constitutes trauma and who can claim to be traumatized. This difficulty is particularly evident in discussions of cultural trauma that still relies predominately on psychological definitions. Dominick LaCapra drew our attention to this in Writing History, Writing Trauma when he warned scholars of conflating primary and secondary witnesses.

In this essay, I articulate a new theory of cultural trauma that invokes contemporary research on cultural evolution – specifically the work of Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd – to describe the effects of traumatogenic events on a community. This involves changing the metaphor used in our analyses from one in which culture is depicted as a person (with a collective memory, for instance) to a more fitting assessment of culture as transmissible information. Doing so prompts researches to consider a new alignment of traumatic inheritances and satisfies La-
Capra’s concern of doing violence to primary witnesses by stretching the definition of psychological trauma too broadly.

I take as a case study the American fear generated in response to the atomic bomb, as it affords the opportunity to analyze a community with no primary witnesses to the tragedies at Hiroshima and Nagasaki but with an overabundance of ‘traumatized’ individuals. However, rather than argue that Cold War Americans exhibited symptoms now diagnosable as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), I contend the atomic detonations prompted massive changes to the information transmitted between individuals. As these changes become codified in institutional policies, common parlance, and artistic productions like literature, they create a lasting condition within the United States. It is this persistent, mal-adaptive condition that I now term ‘cultural trauma’.

The essay ultimately turns to Leslie Marmon Silko’s canonical novel Ceremony to show how one author articulates the process by which communities can be said to be traumatized, how cultural information is passed on, and how this can have a serious impact on the health and stability of a community. It is fitting that Silko’s novel culminates in a final climactic scene outside the Jackpile Uranium Mine, one of the largest open pit uranium mines in the world, that she regards as the ‘point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid’. Reading Silko’s novel as a commentary for all ‘non-Destroyer’ communities – set against the atomic-armed Destroyer mentality of characters like Emo – I show how the atomic bomb has left a lasting impact on American culture. And above all, through this analysis, I differentiate cultural trauma from its psychological counterpart, and explore the implications for literary studies more broadly.
References


Balaev, Michelle, Trends in Literary Trauma Theory, Mosaic 41:2 (2008), 149–166.


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