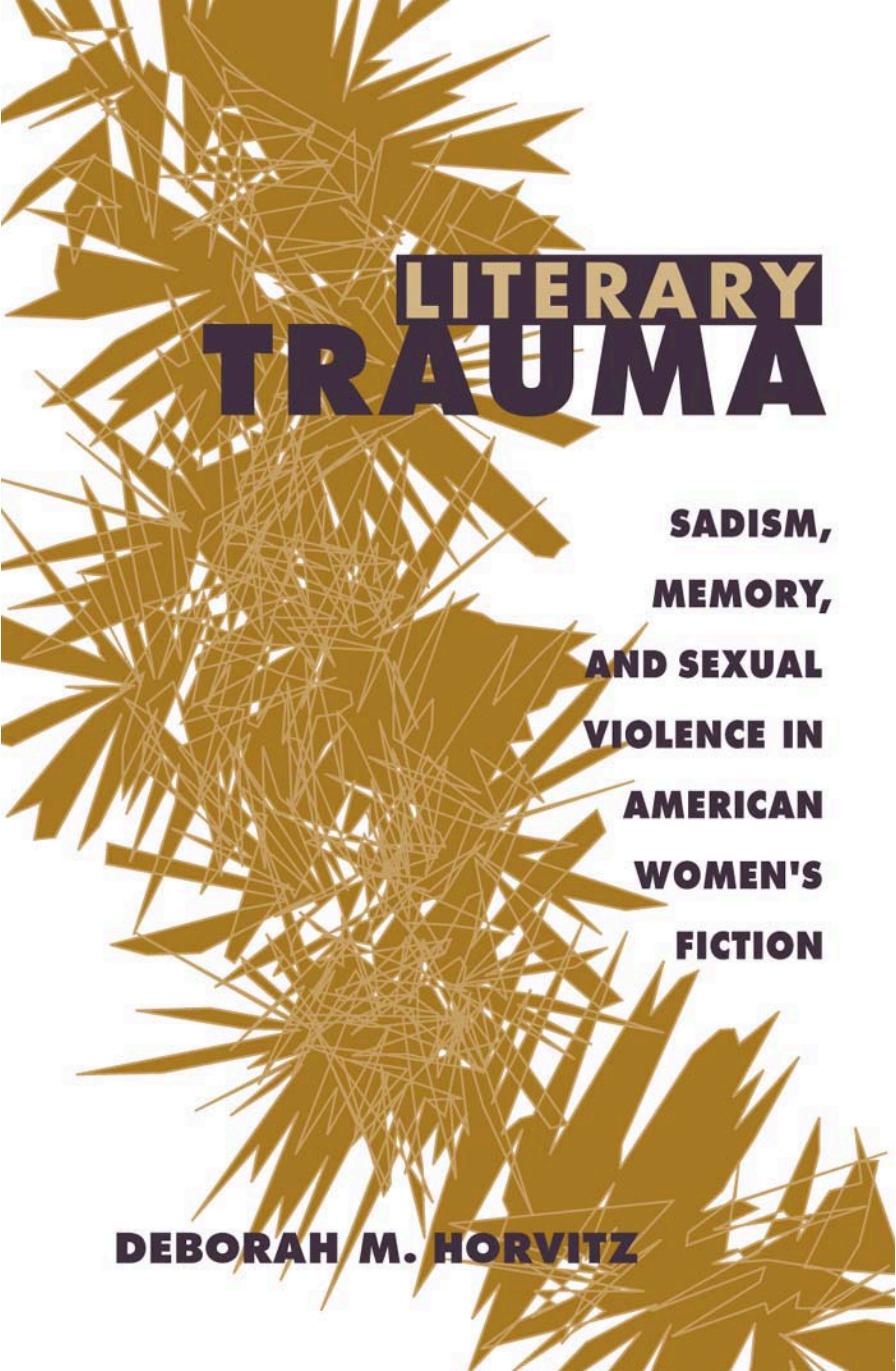
LITERARY
TRAUMA
SADISM, MEMORY, AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S FICTION
DEBORAH M. HORVITZ

Literary Trauma

SUNY series in Psychoanalysis and Culture

Henry Sussman, editor

LITERARY TRAUMA

Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction

DEBORAH M. HORVITZ

State University of New York Press

Published by
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, ALBANY

Printed in the United States of America

For information, address State University of New York Press,
State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246

Production, Laurie Searl
Marketing, Fran Keneston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Horvitz, Deborah M., 1951-
Literary trauma : sadism, memory, and sexual violence in American women's fiction / Deborah M. Horvitz.
p. cm—(SUNY series in psychoanalysis and culture)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-7914-4711-1 (alk. paper)–ISBN 0-7914-4712-X (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. American fiction–Women authors–History and criticism. 2. Psychological fiction, American–History and criticism. 3. Psychoanalysis and literature–United States. 4. Women and literature–United States. 5. Psychic trauma in literature. 6. Sex crimes in literature. 7. Violence in literature. 8. Sadism in literature. 9. Memory in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PS374.W6 H68 2000
813.009'353—dc21 99-089796

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Elizabeth Ammons
and
In Memory of My Father

This page intentionally left blank.

Contents

This page intentionally left blank.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the help I received from James Peltz and Laurie Searl at SUNY Press, for the suggestions and support of my readers, and to Pam Makie for her cover design. I would also like to thank Linda Bamber and Joycelyn Moody, both of whom read an early version of this book. Their insights, conversations, and humanity will always be with me. And, thank you, Jeanne Smith, for help every step of the way.

Portions of chapter 2 appeared previously in *Studies in American Indian Literature*.

Portions of chapter 3 appeared previously in *Contemporary Literature*, volume 39, no. 2, Summer 1998.

Portions of chapter 4 appeared previously in *African American Review*, volume 33, no. 2, Summer 1999.

This page intentionally left blank.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Bearing Witness

> It is impossible to separate the text of a culture from the text of an individual.
>
> —Susan S. Lanser

> In 1996, a woman was raped every three minutes in this country; seventy eight per cent of them knew their attackers.
>
> —Bureau of Justice
> National Victim Center

> Take your mouth and make a gun.
>
> —Paule Marshall
> Advice from her mother

This book examines literary representations of psychic trauma provoked by sexual violence. Grouping fiction written by North American women either at the turn into or toward the close of the twentieth century, I focus on writers who assume responsibility for "witnessing" and testifying to traumatic events that are pervasively cultural and, at the same time, experienced and interpreted as personal: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood; Or the Hidden Self* (1902–1903), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Joyce Carol Oates's *What I Lived For* (1994), and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). Despite the differences and dissonances

among these fictions, they unite and, to some extent, engage with each other in their respective attempts to deconstruct the relationship between political power and sexual violence at both institutional and individual levels. Put another way, each text qualifies as trauma literature and performs, though not in every case by authorial intention, one of the early tenets of the second wave of the Women's Movement in the West: the fusion of the political and the personal.

My discussion relies on critical methodologies developed from the discourses of women's studies, feminist theory, African American and Native American literary studies, cultural studies, multiculturalism, and psychoanalytic literary theory—all but the last of which developed from the political activism of the civil rights, the women's, and the anti-war movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. In addition, my own expertise in psychoanalytic theory, particularly trauma theory, as a clinical psychiatric social worker and psychotherapist in Boston for many years, informs my readings of the included texts. Conceptually, Annette Kolodny's well-known concept of literary criticism as "playful pluralism" that is "responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none" (161) characterizes my critical approach, which blends intellectual exchange from several fields of study.

The pioneering efforts of feminist scholars who have challenged the criteria establishing the canon of "great" American literary works make it possible for me to group diverse texts, which span a century and cross boundaries of race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and narrative style.[1] To be sure, had I selected a homogeneous group of writers, say, post-World War II white women in the United States, it would be easier to generalize or draw conclusions about their texts. However, such a study would, in my view, merely reproduce existing hegemonic, usually racist discourse. One premise of this book is that the writers in it, whose races, ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, and sexual orientations simultaneously converge and diverge, reflect (though of course, not thoroughly) those who actually produce American fiction. Furthermore, I am influenced by innovative academicians and clinicians in the social sciences, medicine, and the humanities who have recognized the value of liberating psychoanalytic ideology from its patriarchal roots, and who are reworking and revising Freudian ideas to address women's concerns.[2] In addition, a number of African American literary scholars have recently started to draw upon psychoanalytic theory as a critical framework for textual analysis.[3] Significantly, the work of these scholars has paved the way for my study, which assumes as its starting point the possibility of race-cognizant, feminist, psychoanalytic literary criticism.

My chronology focuses exclusively on two *fin de siècle* periods. The first is the turn into the twentieth century and includes works published in 1892 and 1902–1903; the second is the closing decades of the twentieth century and, with the exception of Jones's 1975 novel, concentrates on the years between 1991 and 1996. The seven texts are thematically linked by intersecting con-

cerns, including political and personal trauma, gender and race politics, male violence against women, and curiosity about intrapsychic processes, particularly memory; and it is not accidental that a number of ideas explored in the fiction coincide with radical concepts occupying the forefront of an extended modern conversation on psychoanalysis. Promising to be emancipatory eras for women, the final decades of both centuries are periods in which investigations into psychic trauma, specifically violence against women, occur; the first inquiry focusing on the etiology of hysteria and the second, on widespread domestic violence. At the end of the 1800s, Freud announced the astoundingly high incidence of rape, incest, physical and emotional abuse against women and children, only to precipitate an effective patriarchal backlash which silenced that discussion and discredited its evidence. Likewise, the late twentieth-century revelation of an epidemic of domestic abuse is fighting a similar reactionary backlash, which attempts to mute the conversation and deny women's reality.

Indispensable to analysis of the sociopolitical conditions restricting women's lives and causing their traumas is a political climate permitting, even encouraging, resistance to entrenched patriarchal power. Known for her theoretical and clinical work with trauma and its survivors, contemporary psychiatrist, Judith Herman, believes that "in the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting" (9), which, of course, serves to thwart the battle against sexual abuse. Correspondently, literary critic, Elizabeth Ammons maintains that a reformist feminist "political climate ha[s] the effect of empowering women, including writers," thus enabling them to challenge their "historically assigned inferior status" (*CS* vii) at both cultural and personal levels. Ammons indicates that "women writers at the beginning of the twentieth century flourished in large part—as they do . . . in the 1980s—because of an intensified and pervasive feminist political climate" (*CS* vii). Still, turn-of-the-century fiction by women, like the inquiry into trauma, was followed by a censoring backlash. Similarly, at the turn into the twenty-first century, we find women-authored fiction prospering; yet, an unmistakable anti-feminist backlash trails close behind. Parallel social dynamics underlie both trauma and literary studies. The emergence of ingenious intellectual work, in either (or any) field, depends upon the existence of an introspective, broad-minded, cultural environment. On the subject of trauma research, Herman reminds us:

> To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family. For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered. (9)

In the same vein, Ammons observes that "it is no accident . . . that the second great wave of the women's movement in the United States and the second great burgeoning of women writers as a group occurred at the same time" (*CS* viii). In yoking together these two highly politicized turns of the century, including their backlash, I wish to raise the stakes on Silence. I emphasize the fact that silence is *not* a neutral act; rather, it is a politically regressive one that passively permits the continuation of violence against women and children.

In the following chapters, I argue that each novel in this study examines a repressive sociopolitical ideology of empowerment and disempowerment and, in so doing, confronts the intensely destructive dynamic of sadomasochism. Sadism, as I define it, is a psychological mechanism in which the sadist enacts and gratifies unconscious erotic fantasies by inflicting pain and violence. Masochism, sometimes mistakenly understood to mean the enjoyment of pain, is, in fact, a complex psychodynamic in which powerlessness becomes eroticized, then entrenched within the victim's self-identity. For the sake of clarity, I discuss sadomasochism as it specifically appears in each text, such as organized genocide in Silko's novel or child abuse and incestuous rape in Allison's, as though it were *either* political/cultural *or* personal/psychological. But I am constructing an artificially sharp "difference" for analytical specificity and discursive purposes only, bearing in mind that in *trauma*, the borders separating "political" from "psychological" become blurred, penetrable, and eventually disappear. Indeed, in these novels, the convergence of political and psychological sadomasochism marks the occurrence of trauma. For example: Mutt, in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, is provoked to beat his wife both by his jealousy toward men who he believes leer at her *and* his rage at slavery. By probing how legally sanctioned and institutionally promulgated atrocities subjugate not only individuals, but also entire cultures, the writers I discuss recognize that frequently, if not always, the phenomenon of trauma conflates political and psychological processes.

Just as these authors share an interest in representing political ideologies of power in realist fiction, they also document how these ideologies, when enacted, permeate their protagonists' conscious and unconscious intrapsychic lives. That a fictional character may remain unaware of either the political or psychological dimension of her or his trauma does not impede a literary critic from recognizing such meaning. For example: While a victim of domestic abuse may fail to recognize that a component of her abuser's behavior is motivated by institutionalized misogyny, the reader's capacity to perceive such meaning remains. Each writer, in command of her creative production, asserts that the impact of major traumatic events is never identical on any two people, and that trauma manifests where political and psychological forces fuse. On this point, literary theorist, Cathy Caruth, who has written extensively on psychoanalytic and trauma theories, states: "If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic

experience, it is 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 intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (*UE* 3). At this site of fusion, in other words, story originates.

To comprehend the magnitude of trauma, it is necessary to focus on the individualized nuances and textures of each victim's narrative. Although certain events outside ordinary experience—such as forced relocation and incarceration in a concentration camp or reservation, a Japanese internment camp, or a slave ship—are universally and indisputably considered horrific, they are not unidimensional phenomena that are experienced identically by each victim. Toni Morrison emphasizes the importance of humanizing victims whose experiences are frequently represented as indistinguishable. Therefore, she develops each of *Beloved*'s characters uniquely to differentiate among the "great lump of slaves" (Darling 7) and avoid what Hortense J. Spillers calls "totalizing narratives" (140). Similarly, in the work of the writers I discuss, trauma and the sadomasochism which foments it are carefully contextualized within identifiable, political, historical, and cultural constructions; for instance, Aubrey's incestuous rape of Dianthe in Hopkins's *Of One Blood* has distinctly different meanings from Glen's of Ruth Anne in Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*.

My concern in this book is to examine how individuals internalize the material conditions of their lives, by which I mean their social and economic realities, through symbols, fantasies, and metaphors in order to build a unique and personalized interpretation of the world. Indeed, this is Claudia Tate's focus when, in her recent book, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (1998), she thinks about how individuals create internal representations of "the material and the psychical . . . so as to construct personal meaning" (15). Conversely, my book also explores how personal meaning is either consciously or unconsciously projected onto materialist culture by intrapsychic representations. For the protagonists in this study whose lives have been irreversibly disrupted by both an internalization of violent sadomasochistic events and an externalized projection of these events, the borders between their "inner" and "outer" worlds dissolve, leaving them feeling lost and fragmented.

Psychologist Elizabeth Waites explains trauma as "an injury to mind or body that requires *structural repair*." According to Waites, "a main effect of trauma is disorganization, a physical and/or mental disorganization that may be circumscribed or widespread," and this disorganization causes "*fragmentation of self, shattering of social relationships, erosion of social supports*" (22, 92; emphasis added). Similarly, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Kalí Tal defines trauma as "a life-threatening event that displaces [one's] preconceived notions about the world" (15). Tal stresses that the event must be experienced

first-hand, and not vicariously perceived or mediated through any textual conduit, such as a book or a movie. Likewise, Judith Herman conceptualizes trauma as a "threat to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (33), a view that is especially relevant to my discussion on "The Yellow Wallpaper" in chapter 6. Chaim Shatan, a psychiatrist who works with Vietnam combat veterans, describes trauma as a psychic state in which "reality is torn asunder leaving no boundaries and no guideposts" (qtd. in Tal 15). Thus, the question for both the writer and the literary critic becomes: How can such a lost, indefinable state of existence be narratively represented? Can narrative, itself, by compelling victim-survivors to remember and to repeat stories suffused with terror, panic, and pain, serve a palliative role in the healing process? Certainly, psychoanalysis believes that crucial to recovering from an experience of trauma is the capacity and willingness to incorporate that traumatic event *inside* one's self as an indispensable piece of personal history and identity. Since, in the fiction in this study, narrative is inextricably entwined with memory and the process of remembering, the greater one's ability to "make story" out of trauma, which is defined differently for each protagonist, the more likely s/he is to regain control of her or his life after that trauma.

While the process of psychoanalysis provides useful paradigms for thinking about these questions and decoding the language(s) of rupture, fragmentation, and even psychosis, for a political analysis of trauma literature by women writers, I am informed by feminism's challenge to patriarchal power, especially to the artificial rupture between the political and the personal. As an example of that challenge, Jane P. Tompkins' well-known, early essay "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History" (1978), confronts "the male-dominated scholarly tradition that controls both the canon of American literature . . . and the critical perspective that interprets the canon for society" (82). Likewise, Nina Baym, in her important early book, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870*, also published in 1978, analyzes the work of women writers whose novels, though widely read at the time of publication, have subsequently been neglected. Explaining that these forgotten texts are disparaged for, among other reasons, their sentimentality, a term linking gender and genre, Baym wishes "to correct such a bias" (14) by taking seriously narratives that "interpreted experience within models of personal relations, rather than classes, castes, or other institutional structures" (18). Similarly, focusing on texts by white men, including Henry James's *The Bostonians* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Judith Fetterley, in another early study, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature* (1978), points out that because "classical" American literature assumes the universal American experience is male, the reader of these works must either identify as male or endure a sense of alienation from the text. To expose this

issue, Fetterley sets out to "examine American fictions in light of how attitudes toward women shape their form and content . . . and thus . . . change our understanding of these fictions, our relations to them, and their effect on us" (xi). However, formative as such early feminist literary scholarship was, it focused solely on white writers and white women readers, a deficiency in much feminist literary criticism that continues to require repair.[4]

Barbara Smith's 1977 landmark essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," was rightfully "filled with rage" (169) at white feminist critics who were (re)defining feminist literary theory without even a cursory glance toward the work of black women writers. Responding to white scholars who seemed to be advocating the creation of a new canon, yet promised one as elitist and racist as the existing patriarchal one, Smith wrote: "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity" (170). Along with Smith, critics such as Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Trudier Harris, Deborah McDowell, Hortense J. Spillers, Claudia Tate, and Cheryl Wall, working individually or collaborating on anthologies, contributed to the development of a diverse, race-attentive body of feminist theory; and literary scholarship written by and focused on women writers of color flourished in the 1980s. In a 1990 essay, Smith notes the positive changes and cites this impressive critical undertaking by and about women of color.[5] Yet, she cautions that although "the personal isolation [Black feminist critics] face and the ignorance and hostility with which [their] work is met have diminished in some quarters, [that ignorance and hostility] have by no means disappeared" (784). I am reviewing this familiar territory in literary history because my study brings together theories and concepts that have not been united under one roof before. Thus, a brief clarification of how trauma studies, psychoanalysis, and feminist theory converge with African American, Native American, and European American literary theories and multiculturalism may be useful.

Like Barbara Smith, David Theo Goldberg articulates the necessity for political analyses of the relationships among power, race, and the literary canon. He advocates multiculturalism describing it as an investigation of "the body of political relations" (9). Central to Goldberg's view is the concept of "incorporation" which, unlike ideas of assimilation and integration,

> does not involve extension of established values and protections over the formerly excluded group. . . . [Instead,] the body politic becomes a medium for transformative incorporation, a political arena of contestation, rather than a base from which exclusions can be more or less silently extended, managed, and manipulated. . . . Incorporation . . . empowers those once marginalized in relation to the dominant and forceful of the body politic. (9)[6]