Trauma, Community, and Narrative Form
Representing Connections between Individuals, Families, and Cultures

Nature and Scope of the Problem
One of the most compelling ways of thinking about surviving and beginning the healing process after trauma is LaCapra’s notion of “working through” trauma as an “articulatory practice,” which has become a widely-applied tenet of trauma theory (21-2). Noted psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk explains that psychiatry has “always attached crucial importance to the capacity to reproduce memories in words and to integrate them in the totality of experience” (167). However, it is not entirely clear how useful LaCapra’s insight is to a consideration of trauma narratives, which may or may not be the output of traumatized people themselves in need of healing but which certainly are the representations of artists concerned with the possibility (or lack of possibility) of healing from trauma in our contemporary culture. Because many contemporary artists figure healing or failure to heal as a dynamic and collective process, they often employ experimental forms in order to imagine and stage healing, I propose to explore how contemporary artists respond to specific cultural needs and anxieties about how and whether healing can be achieved by individuals, families, and groups through formal experimentation.

To a large extent, American history is the story of the clashes and collaborations between individuals, groups, and cultures. A large part of the American experiment, then, has been concerned with how to adjudicate fairly, not only between the needs of the individual and the community, but also between the competing and often opposed interests of different groups. In these texts, the issues of individual and communal trauma, from institutionalized racism to sexual and physical abuse within the nuclear family, all necessitate a consideration of justice. While critics like Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth have applied trauma theory as a means to properly hear the voice of the witness, recently their efforts have been called into question. Ruth Leyes, in Trauma: A Genealogy, objects to “the way in which [Caruth] tends to dilute and generalize the notion of trauma” (305). The “contagious” nature of trauma and the possibility of the transmission of trauma from victims to non-victims leads to intriguing questions: is it possible to speak of a traumatized community? or of the transmission of trauma from one who experienced it directly to one who has not? Because trauma theory is necessarily concerned with ethics and moral reasoning and, furthermore, because trauma theory is an interdisciplinary stance - combining as it does medical, historical, therapeutic, epistemological, sociological, and feminist strands of thinking - it is ideal for thinking through not only matters of justice, but also for examining complicated and far-ranging ideas like community, healing, and the split between public and private spheres, all of which are necessary for my project.

It is widely accepted that healing from trauma is necessarily a communal or social effort. Historian Dominick LaCapra promotes mourning as not just an “isolated grieving or endless bereavement but as a social process” that can offer a way of coming to terms with the past (40). Kai Erikson notes that trauma has a “social dimension” that allows for the rise of community based on shared traumatic conditions or events, or that trauma can have the opposite effect and instead damage the “texture of community” (185-7). While trauma can create connections between different individuals and groups, the representations I intend to work with each take the idea of community not as a given, but as a site of negotiation and, at times, infliction of additional trauma. These texts include both communities that are based along lines of identity categories (including race and ethnicity, sexual orientations, etc.) but also invented communities, such as political coalitions and multicultural communities that have formed by chance, design, or
necessity. Neither of these types of community are seen as necessarily beneficial or harmful, but instead offer the artists multiple and complex sites from which to explore questions of who and what define community, how community can act both as an inclusionary as well as exclusionary force, and what, if anything, brings and holds community together. Healing, too, is not an easy or uncomplicated matter; these texts figure the beginning of the healing process as contingent, partial, and always in danger of failing.

**Chapter Outline and Plan**

My chapters deal with four texts from different genres in order to examine how these artists exploit and expand generic and formal conventions in order to represent the possibilities for connection, community, and healing from trauma. My first chapter will deal with Diane Glancy’s 1996 novel *Pushing the Bear* which concerns the 1838 Cherokee Trail of Tears. Glancy’s novel blends communal and individual experiences of trauma through a narrative fragmented into numerous first-person perspectives. The individual aspect of the narrative is provided by the central narrator, Maritole, a young Cherokee woman who is censured by her husband and tribe for her connection with a white soldier. The result is both intimate and wide ranging as Glancy gives voices, not to just a few main characters, but also to the multiple voices of the tribe. Furthermore, Glancy’s characters experience the Trail of Tears differently depending on class, gender, age, etc. - the Cherokee are rich and poor, Christian and traditional, slave-holding and abolitionist. Maritole’s husband, Knowbowtee, feels his helplessness both at the hands of the soldiers and the more prosperous family he married into. He feels keenly his lack of status in the eyes of his wife’s family specifically, and in a culture where women have power over land generally. Glancy further extends the idea of community by representing historical figures, such as Chief John Ross, the chief of the Cherokee tribe during removal. Many characters, including Maritole’s mother, continue to have their thoughts represented even after death, and Glancy also includes segments of collective first-person voices speaking together as if composed of a single entity. Glancy insists on the multifaceted nature of the white soldiers supervising the march, representing the tensions between both groups. As Glancy herself notes, “I knew this wasn’t going to be a good Indian/bad white man story” (236). This novel provides an opportunity to examine the nature of both the white and native-American communities and the permeable boundary that exists between them and the anxieties this produces, and it is a chance to chance to explore how expectations of the novel genre contribute to Glancy’s representation of trauma and community.

In contrast to Glancy’s historical novel, *Magnolia*, a 2000 film by Paul Thomas Anderson, depicts several intertwining stories over the course of a single night. The movie traces the complicated path of damage inflicted on and by damaged children, spouses, coworkers, friends, etc. One story concerns dying game show host Jimmy Gator and his wife, Rose, and their daughter, Claudia. Jimmy attempts to contact his estranged daughter, only to be rejected by her. Later, Rose asks why Claudia refuses to speak to him and Jimmy finally confesses “I think that she thinks I may have molested her” (173). Although Rose immediately leaves Jimmy, it is not clear what she may have known before his confession and why it took her so long to ask. In this film, community is a matter of individuals taking risks and reaching out to others despite the chance for rejection; the cinematography and editing constantly emphasize connections between characters. Bits of other storylines can be glimpsed out of windows, in the background, or on various television sets. In addition, there are numerous whip pans, in which the camera pans so rapidly that all background is blurred, that highlights the connection between

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scenes. When meticulous police office Jim Kurring forgives another character and helps him return what he has stolen rather than arresting him, we see Kurring expanding his repertoire of human emotion. This chapter allows me to examine the medium of film and how it can represent trauma, an area that has been, to this point, rather unexplored. Lacking both the larger historical trauma and the well-defined community based along racial lines of Pushing the Bear, Magnolia offers an opportunity to explore trauma in the nuclear family and the idea of community in a less defined, more individualistic sense. The line between trauma and damage is not always clear, and investigating this film allows an examination of the differences between these terms.

Tony Kushner's play Angels in America is set in the 1980s in New York as the AIDS crisis is beginning to take shape. The lack of immediate response, both by the legal and medical communities, added to the damage already wreaked by the disease itself. Within this milieu of fear, confusion, and death, several characters deal with diagnoses of AIDS, and with the issues associated with homosexuality in the cultural and political landscape of the Reagan era. Kushner stages moments of impossible connection, such as when Harper, the wife of a Mormon man who is also gay, meets up with Prior while she is in a drug-induced stupor. Such moments are the hope for community that Kushner believes is the only antidote to the environment of fear and distrust fostered by the disease. Kushner's characters, beset by discrimination from outside and fear and alienation from the inside, are examples of traumatized individuals, families, and communities in need of, but sometimes failing to achieve, connection. Like Glancy, Kushner radically expands the notion of community by including angels and ghosts to figure both history and transcendence into a contemporary urban setting. The juxtaposition of fantasy and death creates a space to explore and expand the ideas of identity and community.

Finally, Audre Lorde's work Zami: A New Spelling of My Name is a new genre, biomythography, which combines autobiography, mythology, and history. Zami details Lorde's experiences of racism and poverty, her growing lesbian desires, her various jobs and apartments, and her affairs with women. Lorde creates a hybrid world populated by characters that are part personal mythology and part biographical reality, which, like Kushner's play, creates a space in which identity and community can be examined. Lorde's struggle to create a community is complicated by white lovers who, though often well-meaning, do not recognize their own racism, and black lovers who are also scarred by lives within a racist society. Lorde widens the definition of lesbianism by reclaiming a word from her mother's language, Zami, that she defines as "women living and working together as friends and lovers" (255). Lorde's work presents her self-conscious search for a community that allows her to define herself in opposition to traditional Western values and binaries. Again, this text raises the possibility of traumatized communities and the trauma they in turn can inflict on those who do not conform.

My methodology provides close readings that explicate each text and their complex renderings of community and trauma. By examining the interactions between trauma theory, genre, and form, my readings will explore how the texts figure connection and healing through formal and generic experimentations. Furthermore, I would like to complicate discussions of healing from trauma by examining how these artists represent the possibilities and impossibilities for traumatized individuals and communities to connect. I plan to have the first chapter on Pushing the Bear done by April 2005, the next chapter, on Magnolia, finished by July 2005, the third chapter, on Angels in America, done by October of 2005, and the final chapter, dealing with Zami, completed by January of 2006. The introduction and conclusion will be completed by April 2006 and the dissertation defended by May 2006.
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Publications:

- Resume section of the Purdue Online Writing Lab
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Conferences
- “Sedgwick’s Hope Leslie in the Undergraduate Classroom: Blurring the Lines between History, Historical Fiction, and/or Historiography.” Society for Early Americanists. April 2005. (Pending).
- “Teaching Writing through Ethnography.” Invited Talk -- Rhetoric and Composition Instructor Training. Purdue University. May 2003.
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- ENGL 250 Great American Books: American Exceptionalism Examined, Fall 2004
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• ENGL 286 The Movies, Spring 2003, Fall 2003
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Service:
Chair. Concurrent Film Panel. Purdue Women’s Studies Conference. March 2005
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ENGL 672: Gender Ambiguity. Dr. Geraldine Friedman. Fall 2001.

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ENGL 596: Teaching College Literature. Dr. Nancy Peterson. Summer 2000.  
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