

“This narrative is no fiction” : Mapping Cultural Expressions of Post-Traumatic Slave Disorder

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on African American cultural products, such as literary texts, films, and artworks, as artifacts of their condition. They do not merely attest to the historical fact of slavery; they represent forms of response, writing back to white supremacy, working through trauma, and forging grounds for a sense of identity by legitimating personal experience within the context of widespread, systemic violence filtered through the lens of the creative process. The focus of this dissertation is therefore an examination of both historical documents and contemporary creative works to identify the extent to which PTSD can be mapped in African American writing or creative arts. My particular examples will be slave narratives, chiefly that of Harriet Jacobs, but also other forms of contemporary autobiographical writing, and the work of Toni Morrison, although the reach of the project requires that many other texts and textual processes are addressed in terms of a residual trace of the impact of slavery on cultural practices. PTSD is, in essence, a “retronym” in that the issue has always existed despite not being named as such. My assertion is that, by focusing on narrative and artistic expression, the *origins* of this disorder can be assembled within the context of American culture, and some of the modes of transmission from one generation to another can be mapped in substantial detail as a result. What follows from this, I believe, is the recognition that white supremacist ideology, in all of its manifestations, and African American experience and collective identity have been shaped by a mutually contingent relation to one another, and African American history is accordingly the product in part of the moral violations inherent in white supremacist social practice. The history of that collective experience, then, must be moral as well as intellectual, culturally centered as well as factually accurate. A further issue at hand regards not only contextualizing slave narratives, and therefore contemporary African American literature, but in determining the residual effects of a history of bondage and racism in any efforts to teach American history.

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