

Trauma and the Ecological Crisis

"It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society."
Krishnamurti

*"A new type of thinking is essential if mankind
is to survive and move toward higher levels."*
Einstein

"The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House"
Audre Lorde

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MA, Engaged Ecology, Schumacher College, University of Plymouth

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Abstract

Research into the whole area of trauma — cultural and therapeutic, individual and collective — has grown significantly in the last few decades, approximately the same period of time in which the range and extent of the ecological crisis has become apparent.

In this dissertation, I review much of that trauma literature and then go on to explore its connections with the ecological crisis. I particularly look at the notion of *original trauma* as a source of the ecological crisis as found in the work of Chellis Glendinning, and I critique it in the light of Dominick LaCapra's distinction between historical and structural trauma. I then explore the notions of *future trauma*, *geotrauma*, and *climate trauma*.

I conclude by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of trauma as a metaphor for the ecological crisis before looking at three alternative metaphors for that crisis — *the soul wound*, *Wetiko*, and *initiation* — all derived from outside of the Western mindset that has produced both our current understanding of trauma and the ecological crisis itself.

Introduction

I have written this dissertation at Findhorn, on the Moray coast of Scotland, and have had the good fortune to intersperse my research and writing with walks along the beach and in the estuarine bay nearby. Curlew, oystercatchers and sandpipers abound, whilst gannets, scoter ducks and seals feed in the sea, and red squirrels inhabit the pine woods behind the dunes. My arrival here was accompanied by the sound of 50,000 pink-footed geese arriving from their summer breeding grounds in Iceland. Being amidst such natural beauty, it is sometimes hard to connect with the global ecological crisis that faces us, but nevertheless, the news does not improve. In August of 2021, the most recent IPCC report was published, and António Guterres, the UN General Secretary, described it as a 'Code Red for humanity' (Gutteres, 2021), issuing grave warnings that the 1.5C limit set at the Paris Climate Talks will not be held to at current levels of emissions. Not long after that, the Conference of Parties (COP) 26 was held in Glasgow, a meeting that very few considered a success (see BBC News 15/11/2021 for an overview of the outcomes from the meeting).

So, with this background of a deepening crisis and an inadequate response from the governments of the world, I have set about exploring the relation between the ecological crisis and the whole field of trauma studies to see what can be learnt from such a meeting.

The overarching question for the dissertation as a whole is *in what ways can an understanding of trauma help us to understand and respond to the ecological crisis?*

My approach to this question will be via a literature review and analysis of the current work in the field. There are no ethical considerations for the research as far as I am aware.

What is Trauma? An Historical Perspective

Trauma is a protean word and concept that has shifted and developed its meaning, particularly over the last 200 years or so. Indeed, its meaning is still developing and being applied in new areas, as we shall see. In order to clarify what those meanings are, I will first of all trace how they have developed historically. This process has been explored by a number of authors (see Luckhurst 2008, Leys 2000, and Micale and Lerner 2001) and my exegesis will follow that of the most recent survey of the term found in *Trauma: The New Critical Idiom* (Bond and Craps, 2019).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2000), the first recorded mention of ‘trauma’ (which comes from the Greek word for wound) in English occurred in 1693, when the second edition of Blanchard’s *Physical Dictionary* defined it as ‘a wound from an external cause’. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, trauma was understood as a physical injury. It was not until the late nineteenth century, when the enormous transformations of industrial modernity exposed people to new and hitherto unimagined dangers, that the notion of psychological trauma began to take root. (Bond and Craps, 2019, p.2)

This gives us the general trajectory that we will be following, particularly the connection between modernity and psychological trauma, but the first usage of trauma in English also coincides with a significant period in the development of the Newtonian atomism that Freya Matthews draws attention to in her monograph on *The Ecological Self*, a coincidence I shall

return to. To assist in understanding the phases in the development of trauma as a term, I will follow the four-fold structure of the chapters in Bond and Craps.

1. Historical research has shown that the beginnings of trauma understood as a psychological wound come from the investigation of railway accidents in the nineteenth century, with the railway considered a key symbol for the developing modernity. This was followed up in the work of Charcot, Janet and Freud who explored psychological issues around hysteria and developed the beginnings of a psychodynamic understanding of trauma. The forces of modern warfare as experienced during World War One and then the Vietnam War continued to affect the understanding and reception of mental illness, leading to the point of recognition of trauma formally within the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) entered in 1980.
2. Whilst the first phase of the development of psychological understandings of trauma was largely clinical, the second phase arose within literary and cultural studies as a response specifically to the Holocaust during World War Two. Theodor Adorno is a key figure in starting this debate with his famous dictum that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Combine this with his later 'literature must resist this verdict' (both quotes from Bond and Craps, 2019, p.7) and we have the imperative to represent the unrepresentable taken up in the work of George Steiner, author of *Language and Silence*, Maurice Blanchot, author of *The Writing of the Disaster*, and Francois Lyotard, in his work *The Postmodern Condition*. But it is in the work of a

group of Yale-based deconstructionists and literary theorists in the 1980's and 1990's that cultural trauma theory receives its canonical form. Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Geoffrey Hartman are the central figures for this work.

3. Following on from the seminal work of the Yale group, later trauma theorists have applied this understanding to both collective and cultural trauma. In this field, two distinct approaches have emerged, one which sees such trauma as a social construct and another that sees it as manifesting in much the same way that it does within individuals. Dominick LaCapra has also posited a key difference between what he calls structural trauma, where there is a foundational absence which cannot be healed, and historical trauma, which occurs at a point in time and does present the possibility of being worked through in a therapeutic context. How trauma is transmitted, both between human generations and to those who had no immediate contact with the traumatising event, has also been of concern to this later generation of trauma theorists who have explored both the media forms that represent trauma, as well as the nascent field of epigenetics, which studies the way phenotype changes can be inherited without modifying the DNA sequence.
4. Bringing trauma theory up to date, Bond and Craps suggest four areas that are now being explored. Firstly, that most existing trauma theory has a Western bias and does not account for the trauma associated with colonialism, slavery, apartheid and other such historical factors that affect non-Western populations. Secondly, a much wider range of texts, including visual media such as film, photography and video

games, is now being brought within the purview of trauma studies. Thirdly, there has been a shift toward exploring the experience not just of trauma victims but of perpetrators too. Finally, they arrive at the possible traumatic effects of climate change, the topic that I shall be exploring more fully through the course of this dissertation.

What is Trauma? A Medical and Therapeutic Perspective

Lucid as Bond and Craps's history of trauma theory is, it only deals with one half of what I will describe as a two-fold trauma literature. Alongside the literary and cultural theories of trauma that have developed in the last few decades, there is also a burgeoning therapeutic literature. This has arisen partly in response to some of the same events that prompted the theoretical approach, specifically the experience of veterans from the Vietnam War, but its aim is healing rather than a clearer conceptual framework for understanding trauma. So before proceeding to investigate the connections between trauma and the ecological crisis, I shall briefly review some of the main developments in this therapeutic approach. In order to do so, I will explore the work of some of the key figures in the field.

The move from PTSD to Complex PTSD

In her *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, originally published in 1992, Judith Herman applied her work as a feminist clinician to female victims of domestic abuse and childhood sufferers of sexual abuse. Seeing the work done with war veterans as primarily operating in terms of a masculine experience of trauma, she delved into the experience of women who suffered from violence within the household, and children who suffered prolonged abuse, to arrive at a new definition of trauma -

The syndrome that follows upon prolonged, repeated trauma needs its own name. I propose to call it "complex posttraumatic stress disorder." The responses to trauma are best understood as a spectrum of conditions rather than as a single disorder.

They range from a brief stress reaction that gets better by itself and never qualifies for a diagnosis, to classic or simple posttraumatic stress disorder, to the complex syndrome of prolonged, repeated trauma. (Herman, 2015, Chapter 6, Section on Need for a New Concept)

This is the first stage of the widening of the PTSD diagnosis that had been included in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980.

The Neurobiological Approach

In what was called the decade of the brain by President George Bush Senior (Bush, 1990), the 1990's saw significant breakthroughs in the capacity to scan and monitor areas of the brain as people were subjected to various stressors. Bessel Van der Kolk was one of those who saw the significance of these new developments and the implications for our understanding of trauma, and his decades of research reached a wide audience when he published *The Body Keeps the Score* in 2014. The book contains some now-famous reproductions of composite brain scans from a number of volunteers who had recorded descriptions of traumatic experiences they had endured, which they then had played back to them whilst their brains were being scanned. What it demonstrated to van der Kolk was that the limbic area of the brain that deals with intense emotions, and specifically the amygdala within the limbic brain, was triggered by the traumatic stressor; whilst Broca's area, a part of the left hemisphere of the brain that deals with language, and is often affected in stroke victims, effectively 'went offline' during the traumatic recall (2014,

Chapter Three). This neurobiological insight was key to van der Kolk's understanding of trauma as a physiological process. Subsequently, he went on to develop approaches to healing trauma that involved working with the body, for example, yoga, massage, or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), a sight-based desensitisation approach to dealing with trauma.

The Evolutionary Nervous System

Another influential figure who emphasises the biological roots of trauma is Peter Levine. His work is primarily derived from understandings of the nervous system as it has developed along an evolutionary trajectory from reptiles to mammals and then to us human beings.

The involuntary and instinctual portions of the human brain and nervous system are virtually identical to those of other mammals and even reptiles. Our brain, often called the triune brain, consists of three integral systems. The three parts are commonly known as the reptilian brain (instinctual), the mammalian or limbic brain (emotional), and the human brain or neo-cortex (rational). (Levine, 1997, p.29)

The triune brain theory has since come in for criticism (e.g., Barrett, 2018), but Levine combined it with observation of animals as they deal with life-threatening situations, when they adopt fight, flight or freeze responses to predators, to develop his somatic approach to dealing with trauma. In his more recent work, citing Walter Cannon's pioneering account of the sympathetic-adrenal nervous system from the 1920's, he suggests

Taking into account the more than seventy-five years of etiological and physiological research since Cannon's discovery, fight-or-flight could be updated with the acronym "the A, and four Fs": *Arrest (increased vigilance, scanning), Flight (try first to escape), Fight (if the animal or person is prevented from escaping), Freeze (fright—scared stiff) and Fold (collapse into helplessness)*. In two sentences: *Trauma occurs when we are intensely frightened and are either physically restrained or perceive that we are trapped. We freeze in paralysis and/or collapse in overwhelming helplessness.* (Levine, 2012, p.48)

So, for Levine, the key to healing trauma lies very definitely in our physiology, and he has gone on to develop his own approach to releasing trauma from the body known as Somatic Experiencing.

Polyvagal Theory

Taking the biological approach one step further, Stephen Porges has developed an understanding of the human nervous system that is triune rather than the simple binary of sympathetic and parasympathetic that has been dominant prior to his work. Here, the parasympathetic nervous system has two parts, the ventral vagal and the dorsal vagal and we end up with a three-part hierarchy, in ascending order, as follows –

1. The dorsal vagal system, oldest in evolutionary terms, is responsible for immobilisation, conservation of energy, and avoidance of pain. In those who have traumatic symptoms, it manifests as dissociation.

2. The sympathetic nervous system comes next in evolutionary terms. It is responsible for system arousal and fight or flight mechanisms that also have the effect of isolating us from social contact. In those manifesting traumatic symptoms, this comes across as hyperarousal and a constant alertness to danger.

3. The ventral vagal system is the fullest evolutionary development of the nervous system and is responsible for social engagement and communication. This is active when we feel safe and in relation with others and is responsible for what is known as co-regulation. When in this state, we seek connection and our system as a whole has the basis for health, growth and restoration. (Dana, 2018, Chapter One)

Whilst clearly the ventral vagal system is the desirable state to be in and, through its association with safety, not effectively a traumatic state, a healthy functioning of the nervous system will see us moving between all three stages as conditions require. So, health is the ability to move fluidly between the stages of the system and traumatic symptoms occur when we get stuck in the dorsal or sympathetic systems.

Trauma and Relationship

Amongst a burgeoning field of trauma therapies, Bonnie Badenoch brings to them the approach of interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB)

IPNB offers particular help here because it is the scientifically grounded, interdisciplinary study of how we influence each other's neural landscape from moment to moment (Siegel, 2015b). It focuses particularly on our essentially social nature, placing the individual brain in the context of relationships (Cozolino, 2014; Siegel, 2015b), something that is essential for understanding the development and healing of trauma. (Badenoch, 2018, pp.19/20)

For Badenoch, safety is key to any healing work with trauma and safety is created through the presence of others in whom we can trust. Indeed, she goes so far as to say

the essence of trauma isn't events, but aloneness within them. Who we perceive as being with us before, during, and after an event is central to our ability to integrate the trauma throughout our embodied and relational brains. (Badenoch, 2018, p.25)

So, if we have experienced a secure attachment style from our early life, if we are with people we are bonded with during the traumatic event, and if we are able to feel safe with others after the event, trauma is much less likely to become embedded within our neurological and nervous systems. To illustrate her point, she quotes from some research done by Kohrt who looked at trauma in child soldiers in Nepal. Whilst results varied from individual to individual, there was a general trend that showed those children who were rejected or ignored upon their return developed long term problems with trauma whilst those who were held well during their period of reintegration were able to thrive with very few signs of what they had been through (Badenoch, 2018, p.24).

She also draws on the work of Ian McGilchrist and his bihemispheric approach to human nature and culture outlined in his *The Master and his Emissary* (McGilchrist, 2018). The left brain, with its emphases on analysis; on the task; on correct behaviour; on judgment and control; values autonomy more than relationship and sees the 'I' as more important than the 'we'. Instead of acting as emissary to the relationally attuned and present moment orientated right hemisphere — the master of McGilchrist's book — the left hemisphere of our brains has become dominant, particularly since the Industrial Revolution, and this, according to Badenoch, leaves us with an increasing sense of disconnection. Given her view of our essentially social and relational nature coming from IPNB, this may be, she suggests, a cause of ongoing trauma (Badenoch, 2018, p.26). All this leads her to define trauma as

Any experience of fear and/or pain that doesn't have the support it needs to be digested and integrated into the flow of our developing brains. (Badenoch, 2018, p. 22)

Trauma as a Crisis of Meaning

Having looked at a number of scientific and medically informed approaches to trauma, it is time to look into another approach that, at times, criticises the over-reliance on neuroscience. Fred Alford specifically criticises van der Kolk, quoting Joseph LeDoux, author of *The Emotional Brain*, in relation to van der Kolk's book -

He has a lot of interesting and important ideas, but the relatively weak connection to the brain detracts from his message. This happens in a lot of fields now. Everybody

wants to use the brain to justify certain things. But sometimes what the brain does is more important than how it does it. (Fred Alford, 2016, p.96)

Fred Alford substantiates his critique with a detailed exploration of fMRI imaging techniques, suggesting that they are not as reliable as often made out, and the number of participants used in van der Kolk's work are not enough for reliable generalisation (Fred Alford, 2016, Chapter 5). He also suggests that the reductionist explanations of neuroscience in the West appeal to some because they counter cultural relativism and provide a simple message of universal brotherhood — we all have the same neural make up, and empathy and ethics flow naturally from this as a result (Fred Alford, 2016, pp.92/3). For Fred Alford though,

while it is not much of a scientific diagnosis, PTSD is a pretty good political diagnosis. PTSD reveals something about the emptiness of modern life, at least in Western industrial societies. PTSD is a diagnosis that fits someone who is cut off from traditional sources of support that people have relied on for millennia, including religion and close-knit communities. In some ways, our culture prepares people to suffer from PTSD. (Fred Alford, 2016 p.1)

Trauma, whilst it has somatic effects, should not be reduced exclusively to the activity of neurons. For Fred Alford, trauma is more fundamentally about how we deal with suffering and its meaning, and "(t)he somatic society is a society without imagination, one that has lost access to myths or narratives that help populate rich inner worlds" (Fred Alford, 2016,

p.93). We are in danger of losing a world that explains human action in terms of art, literature and drama, Fred Alford argues, and we will be the poorer for it.

Another recontextualising of trauma takes place in the work of Robert Stolorow, who turns to the philosophy of Heidegger to seek a fuller understanding of trauma. For Stolorow, Freudian theory, from which so much of our understanding of trauma comes, is rooted in the Cartesian idea of the isolated mind with its fundamental subject-object, body-mind split. Indeed, he goes so far as to say, "Nowhere is the Cartesian doctrine of the isolated mind more deleterious than in the conceptualization of trauma", and he identifies a common theme in much of the trauma literature of alienation and aloneness (Stolorow, 2007, p.11/14). Heidegger, for Stolorow, mounts the most important philosophical challenge to Descartes with his understanding that human life is always embedded and engaged in the world and hence not separate from it (Stolorow, 2007, pp.1/2). It is this emotional embeddedness in life that means that "the possibility of emotional trauma is constitutive of our existence and of our being-with one another in our common finitude" (Stolorow, 2007, p.50). That is, because we are in this relational world with close connections to others, we are subject to emotional trauma which inevitably arises in those relationships. However, those relationships are also our means of overcoming that trauma. Relationship, then, is fraught with possibility, both painful and creative.

One other writer who has found the medical model of trauma limiting is Patrick Bracken. Trained in philosophy as well as psychiatry and having experience of working in Uganda as well as the UK, he sees the western understanding of PTSD as being very one-sided and individualistic and looks to address this by attending to social context (Bracken, 2002,

p.204). He also sees in postmodernism a loss of spiritual ways of understanding ourselves and a decline in other meta-narratives that leave us particularly vulnerable to issues relating to meaning, value and purpose in our lives (Bracken, 2002, p.8). This issue of meaning he analyses in three ways.

1. The mainstream approach of psychiatry to the issue of meaning is that it is derived from within individual minds and their interaction with sensory experience. This kind of cognitivism allows for quantification and hence empirical study but, for Bracken, it still operates within the limits of a Cartesian understanding of the mind and human reality.
2. Hence Bracken turns, like Stolorow, towards Heidegger and his attempt to reorient phenomenology away from Husserl's focus on pure internal consciousness towards being and being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, the meaningfulness of the world is primary and not reducible to the explanatory and empirical models of cognitivism. Being, for him, cannot be understood or grasped through such a causal framework.
3. In postmodern societies, which are based upon an intense form of consumer capitalism that tutors us to define ourselves by what we buy, the narratives and meta-narratives of our lives constantly need to be rewritten because of economic pressures to do so. Whilst this creates a certain freedom, there is also a loss involved, a loss of previous spiritual, cultural and political narratives that gave meaning and purpose to our lives. This condition of postmodernity leaves us

vulnerable to the experience of trauma, distress and alienation (Bracken, 2002, pp. 9-14).

Bracken also draws on the work of the medical anthropologist Allan Young in his *The harmony of illusions: Inventing posttraumatic stress disorder*. Tracing the emergence of PTSD as a diagnostic category, Young sees it as a condition that has been constructed over time rather than, as Judith Hermann thinks, waiting to be discovered, and it has arisen now as “part of an effort to secure a scientific basis for psychiatric classification” (Bracken, 2001, pp.735/6). This construction of PTSD becomes clearer when looked at from the perspective of cross-cultural psychiatry generally. Quoting Littlewood, Bracken suggests that

It seems likely that the more individualized and Cartesian a particular society's notion of the self (whether as a consequence of industrialization, Westernization, or whatever), the more some notion of 'stress' or 'pressure' has then to be introduced to link the individual back to society and to articulate constraints on autonomy. (Bracken, 2002, p.215)

According to cross-cultural psychiatry though, the usual Western assumptions about the universality of diagnoses come into question. A couple of examples that Bracken quotes to highlight this are –

1. NGOs working in Rwanda after the genocide, trying to engage the Rwandans in a process of ‘psychoeducation’ by explaining the symptoms of PTSD, had difficulty

because there is no word in the native language — Kinyarwanda — for the concept of stress. (Bracken, 2002, p.217)

2. In Taiwan, people invest “intimate relationships with more affective significance than one's own thoughts, fantasies, desires and emotions. Family and other close interpersonal relations become a person's paramount interest; coping with them becomes a sign of adult competence, and problems with them are more important to him than other personal problems.” (Kleinman, quoted in Bracken, 2002, p.212)

One of Bracken's major concerns is to avoid the insensitive and inappropriate export of Western models of trauma and other psychiatric illness to other parts of the world. A very good example of this process is given in Chapter Two of Ethan Watters book *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*, where he explores what happened in Sri Lanka in the wake of the tsunami of 2004. Many Western trauma specialists descended on the country trying to help with what they thought would be a massive outbreak of PTSD. However, as Watters shows, such efforts, whilst laudable in intention, didn't always sit easily with Sri Lankan ideas about what was important. Talking therapies often didn't make sense because Sri Lankans have a different set of values and don't see personal expression of difficulties as the primary concern. Watters gives a striking example of this by quoting an interview with a young boy whose father had been killed during the Sri Lankan civil war –

‘This boy told me that he feels better when his mother promises him that if they are attacked and killed that they would all die together,’ Fernando recalls. The answer struck her so deeply that for several moments she couldn't translate the response

for the other researcher. The mother offered no promise of protection or even survival, only togetherness in the face of violence and death. The boy, for his part, appeared deeply reassured by his mother's promise. (Watters, 2010, pp.76/7)

Cultural Trauma and Collective Trauma

The concept of trauma developed originally in relation to the experience of individuals but even Freud, who did much to shape that concept, acknowledged a link to group or mass psychology –

I hold that the concordance between the individual and the mass is in this point almost complete. The masses, too, retain an impression of the past in unconscious memory traces. (Freud, 1939, p.151)

This comes in his late work *Moses and Monotheism*, in which he explores the possibility that there were two people named Moses, the first of whom was Egyptian rather than Jewish, and was murdered by the Jews, creating an experience of collective guilt that was passed down through the generations. Whether or not we agree with his analysis, the suggestion that there can be such a thing as group or collective trauma that can be inherited has been developed since Freud into another large area of discourse, covering ideas of both cultural trauma and collective, inherited trauma.

One of the key proponents of cultural trauma is Jeffrey Alexander and, in his *Trauma, A Social Theory*, he suggests that cultural trauma occurs –

when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

(Alexander, 2012, p.6)

Smelser, in an essay on *Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma*, proposes a formal definition of cultural trauma as follows –

a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions. (Smelser, 2004, p. 44)

There has also been exploration of what happens when a community is affected by trauma, and Kai Erikson was one of the first to explore this. He defines it thus –

By *collective trauma*, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the

quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.” But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. . . . “I” continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. “You” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson, 1995, p.187)

We will return to this widening of the application of trauma to groups and collectives when we look at the idea of ecological trauma.

Racialized Trauma

All of the writers and approaches mentioned so far have come from within the modern, white, Western mindset. Now I want to look at a number of writers who are exploring trauma from different perspectives, albeit also drawing on some of the ideas of psychoanalysis and the research from medical science. Resmaa Menakem is an American trained in, amongst other things, body centred psychotherapy. His distinctive emphasis is to explore racial trauma and he sees two bloodlines of trauma, one originating in European bodies during the Middle Ages and then imported into the New World during the process of colonisation, and a second one instilled into the bodies of many Africans who were imported to the New World as property. He also acknowledges another path that trauma has followed, that passed on to the bodies of the Native people of America by the European colonists. (Menakem, 2021 p.xix). This trauma then is passed on between people and also between generations —

This intergenerational transmission—which, more aptly and less clinically, I call a soul wound—occurs in multiple ways:

- Through families in which one family member abuses or mistreats another.
- Through unsafe or abusive systems, structures, institutions, and/or cultural norms.
- Through our genes. Recent work in human genetics suggests that trauma is passed on in our DNA expression, through the biochemistry of the human egg, sperm, and womb. (Menakem, 2021, pp. 9-10)

So, he is exploring how the violent processes of colonisation and slavery have been imprinted on the bodies both of white people and people of colour and he draws on much of the research done on the brain and the nervous system, particularly that of Stephen Porges with his polyvagal theory. For Menakem, the vagus nerve becomes the soul nerve (as intergenerational transmission of trauma has become the soul wound), mediating between the activating responses of the sympathetic nervous system and the resting responses of the dorsal vagal nerve (Menakem, 2021, p.5). Trauma, for him, is neither an emotional response nor an event; rather it always happens in the body and is the body's protective response to an event perceived as being dangerous. Hence healing has to take place through the body. (Menakem, 2021, p.6)

The key points in Menakem's exploration are, aside from his emphasis on the importance of the body in dealing with trauma, the notion of intergenerational transmission of trauma and

the impact of social and political systems of power in creating trauma. This is an important move beyond the individualistic emphasis of the other approaches to trauma that we have already explored.

Racialized trauma has also been explored in the work of Joy DeGruy who coined the term *post traumatic slave syndrome* which she defines as -

a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to this condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of the society in which they live are not accessible to them.

(DeGruy, 2005, p.143)

For her, trauma is passed down primarily through family and community conditioning and leads to three primary destructive behaviours – vacant esteem, ever-present anger, and racist socialisation. (DeGruy, 2005, Chapter 4)

Trauma as the Soul Wound

Eduardo Duran, also known as Tiospaye Ta Woapiye Wicasa, in his book *Healing the Soul Wound*, comes at trauma not from the Afro-American perspective that Menakem does but as a Native American, a term he uses interchangeably with Original People, Indigenous and Aboriginal. Although he is familiar with, and uses, Western psychological and medical approaches, Duran sees it as essential that Indigenous people are not subject to those

approaches without a detailed and subtle awareness of their own traditions. Indeed, he sees the privileging of Western practices, based on the empirical method and using behavioural methods of treatment, as another manifestation of the neo-colonialism and historical trauma inflicted upon his people.

Some of the key points that Duran makes in a richly argued text are as follows -

1. He uses what he calls root metaphors — related to Jung’s notion of a collective unconscious — that have more of a universal appeal than the modern pathological diagnoses associated with Western understandings of trauma. His use of the term soul wound is one example of this, but he sees the largest metaphorical gap as that between Western psychologising and Native spiritualising. (Duran, 2019, Kindle Edition, Introduction, section on A Bridge Between Western and Traditional Perspectives and Chapter One)
2. The English language carries its meaning in the nouns, and these objectify the world, effectively separating those who use it from the world. Indigenous languages, according to Duran, carry the meaning in the verbs, and hence understand reality as dynamic and in motion. (Duran, 2019, Kindle Edition, Introduction, section on The Importance of Cultural Competence)
3. Native categories of sickness, corresponding with the work of anthropologist Frank Clements, include object intrusion, loss of soul, spirit intrusion, breach of taboo and

sorcery. These are further examples of the use of root metaphors and allow for a much more comprehensive understanding of illness than Western empirical and pathological categories. (Duran, 2019, Kindle Edition, Introduction, section on A Bridge Between Western and Traditional Perspectives)

4. Although terms like intergenerational trauma, historical trauma and racial trauma are relevant to the Native experience, a more traditional Native metaphor for trauma is 'injury where blood does not flow' and trauma is seen as occurring in the soul or spirit, hence the use of the term soul wound. (Duran, 2019, Kindle Edition, Introduction, section on Historical Context)

5. Quoting Sinha, he notes that Western research "is basically micro-social, concentrating itself almost entirely on personal characteristics of the individual actors in social processes rather than on socio-historical factors" that Native approaches tend to emphasise. (Duran, 2019, Kindle Edition, Introduction, section on Historical Context)

6. To call the scientific method objective is, for Duran, a misrepresentation, and the roots of this so-called objectivity lie within the racist ideology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that labelled people of colour as genetically inferior. (Duran, 2019, Kindle Edition, Introduction, section on Historical Context)

7. Duran also acknowledges the research work done by Israelis into the whole area of intergenerational post-traumatic stress. When trauma is not dealt with, it is passed on to subsequent generations in a cumulative rather than just simple way. (Duran, 2019, Kindle Edition, Chapter One, section on Intergenerational Trauma)

8. Finally, “It is critical that we engage in epistemological hybridism (literal translation: being able to think or see the truth in more than one way). Epistemological hybridism takes the actual life-world of the person or group as the core truth that needs to be seen as valid just because it is. There should never be a need to validate this core epistemology or way of knowing by Western empiricism or any other validating tool.” (Duran, 2019, Kindle Edition, Chapter One, section on Intergenerational Trauma)

So, in order to understand the experience of trauma of Native and Indigenous people, a whole series of epistemological shifts are needed, and it is not appropriate to just apply those metaphors and understandings gleaned from dominant Western modes of knowledge. To do that is often to perpetuate many of the causes of the trauma experienced within those communities in the first place. Trauma within the Native American communities then is understood both as a soul wound and as the result of historical events arising from their mistreatment by the European colonists. As such, what is needed, to use a root metaphor, is a discourse and process of liberation, both internally and externally.

Historical Trauma

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart is a Lakota (Teton Sioux) who has worked closely with Eduardo Duran. In the 1990s, she engaged in detailed research into the traumatic experience of the Lakota and developed an approach to healing historical trauma and unresolved grief that she calls “the return to the sacred path”. Her research led her to a definition of historical trauma as follows

Historical trauma is defined as cumulative trauma — collective and compounding emotional and psychic wounding (Niederland, 1989) — both over the life span and across generations. (Brave Heart, 1998, p.288)

She also saw that grief acted as a strong component of trauma and that the Lakota experienced traumatic grief as a result of four things in their history — the assassination of Tatanka Iyotake (Sitting Bull); the Wounded Knee massacre; the forced removal of their children to boarding schools where they were routinely and seriously mistreated; and the tuberculosis outbreak amidst these schools that led to the deaths of more than one third of the Lakota population (Brave Heart, 1998, p.289). The method she developed to address this traumatic grief included presentations on Lakota trauma; reviewing the dynamics of unresolved grief and trauma; small group exercises and sharing facilitated by other Lakota; and the traditional Lakota purification ceremony and wiping of tears known as *oinikage/inipi*. As she describes it

Another aim was to facilitate integration and consolidation of Lakota identity through the incorporation of traditional Lakota culture, language, ritual, and memorialization which also offered vehicles for abreaction. For example, the *oinikage* (a) permits cathartic self-disclosure of previously repressed material as part of an ego-enhancing experience in which individuals are connected to others in a group context, (b) replaces depression and identity diffusion with experiences that encourage reformation of the self, (c) enhances collectivity and bonding, (d) transmits expectations of healing, and (e) encourages strength through peer role modelling of self-disclosure through prayer. (Brave Heart, 1998, p.294)

This mixture of Western and traditional approaches is a good example of the kind of hybrid approach that Duran recommends.

Trauma and the Ecological Crisis

Having made a survey of the current state of trauma studies, it is time to turn to our principal topic, the relation between trauma and the ecological crisis. Many writers who have explored the current ecological situation facing humankind have made attempts to understand why it has come about and what needs to be done about it. Arne Naess, a pioneer in this field, saw a limited understanding in Western societies of our basic connection to the world, and responded by coining the term *the ecological self*, suggesting that we need to extend our range of self-identification to include others and the world we find ourselves in (Naess, 1985).

Freya Matthews identifies the problem as the substance pluralism that underlies Newtonian atomism that separates us from the world (Matthews, 1991, Chapter One), a coincidence in chronology with the first use of the term trauma in the English language that I noted earlier. In her monograph on *The Ecological Self*, she seeks to develop what she calls a good cosmology based on substance monism, and in her later work, she elaborates what she calls *living cosmos panpsychism*, a version of the view that mind inheres in matter and is not a product of it; and *ontopoetics*, a creative dialogue with the living world we find ourselves in. (Matthews, 2021, Introduction)

Val Plumwood sees dualism as the key culprit, a dualism she traces back to Plato as well as to Descartes (Plumwood, 1993). It has five dominant features -

1. *Backgrounding or denial of dependency* where the other is used and benefited from, but that relationship of dependence is excluded from the dominant identity.
2. *Radical exclusion or hyperseparation* where any similarity between the two is denied and a difference of kind is insisted upon and enforced.
3. *Incorporation or relational definition* where the inferior side of the dualism is defined in terms of a lack of the qualities of the superior side. This means the inferior side has no independent qualities of its own and is defined only negatively in relation to the superior side.
4. *Instrumentalism or objectification* where the other is portrayed as having no ends of its own and hence exists purely to fulfil the ends and needs of the dominant side.
5. *Homogenisation or stereotyping* where any differences in the other are denied or minimised and hence, they do not have to be related to as individuals. (Plumwood, 1993, Chapter 2)

The consequences of this within the context of the human/nature split is that, in Western societies, we deny our dependence upon nature, and we also deny selfhood to nature (Plumwood, 1993, p.191), allowing us to create the current unhealthy and unsustainable relationship to the ecosystem within which we live.

Whilst this notion of a split or loss of identification with the natural world is common, in different forms, to a wide range of ecological thinkers, it falls to Timothy Morton, in *Humankind*, to connect this split explicitly with trauma. He attributes the split to the move from a hunter gatherer society to one based on agriculture (Morton, 2017), and describes the consequences in the following way

Let's think up a dramatic Game of Thrones–sounding name for it. Let's call it “the Severing.” Why such a dramatic name? What the Severing names is a trauma that some humans persist in reenacting on and among ourselves ... The Severing is a foundational, traumatic fissure between, to put it in stark Lacanian terms, reality (the human-correlated world) and the real (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere). Since nonhumans compose our very bodies, it's likely that the Severing has produced physical as well as psychic effects, scars of the rip between reality and the real. (Morton, 2017, Kindle Edition, Location 260)

So here we have the use of the word trauma to describe a fundamental split in the human relationship with nature, or, as Morton borrows from Lacan, the real. He also characterises this split using a violent term — *the Severing* — that supports his idea of this being a traumatic event. Charles Eisenstein, in *Climate — A New Story*, also refers to a split that has had untold consequences, what he calls “the Story of Separation—that has dominated the last several centuries (and to an extent the last several millennia)” (Eisenstein, 2018, p.8). He suggests that this disconnection creates “the trauma of our deprivation” (Eisenstein, 2018, p.7) which fuels our numerous addictions. The connection between trauma and addiction has also been made by Gabor Mate in his work *In the Realm of the Hungry Ghosts*

Not all addictions are rooted in abuse or trauma, but I do believe they can all be traced to painful experience. A hurt is at the center of all addictive behaviors. It is present in the gambler, the Internet addict, the compulsive shopper, and the workaholic. The wound may not be as deep and the ache not as excruciating, and it may even be entirely hidden—but it's there. As we'll see, the effects of early stress or adverse experiences directly shape both the psychology and the neurobiology of addiction in the brain. (Mate, 2018, Location 763)

Original Trauma

However, it is to an earlier writer that I want to turn to draw out the implications of this split in traumatic terms. Chellis Glendinning, writing in the early 1990's, is the first person that I am aware of to give a detailed exploration of what she calls the original trauma of Western civilisation. In her 1994 book *My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization*, she draws, as the title suggests, on 12-step addiction theory, as well as her work as a psychologist. Another influential strand on her thinking is that of the so-called American primitivist tradition, particularly in the work of Paul Shepard and Kirkpatrick Sale.

For Glendinning, the split occurs away from something which she describes in the following way –

People have a natural state of being. It is variously known as “being integrated,” “human potential,” and “merging mind, body, and spirit.” Taoist philosophy refers to

this state as the “balance of yin and yang.” To Lakota (Sioux) Indians, it is known as “walking in a sacred manner;” to the Dine’ (Navajo), “standing in the centre of the world.” I call this state of being our *primal matrix*: the state of a healthy, wholly functioning psyche in full-bodied participation with a healthy, wholly functioning Earth. (Glendinning, 1994, p.5)

It is from this primal matrix that we are severed and, following Shepard, she traces this to the process of domestication that came with agriculture.

The small-scale, nomadic life that had endured through more than a million years and thirty-five thousand generations was irreparably altered. The human relationship to the natural world was gradually changed from one of respect for and participation in its elliptical wholeness to one of detachment, management, control, and finally domination. The social, cultural, and ecological foundations that had previously served the development of a healthy primal matrix were undermined, and the human psyche came to develop and maintain itself in a state of chronic traumatic stress. (Glendinning, 1994, p.70/1)

The idea of a fundamental shift in human consciousness arising from the move to an agricultural society and the civilisation associated with it continues to be explored since Glendinning wrote her book. Rutger Bregman, in his *Humanity: A Hopeful History*, devotes a whole chapter — *The Curse of Civilisation* — to this very theme, particularly referencing the work of James C Scott in his *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (see Bregman, 2020 and Scott, 2017). Even more recently, David Graeber and David Wengrow, in

The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity, go to some lengths to show that the myth of the primitive savage no longer bears scrutiny, and that pre-agricultural humankind is a much richer and more intelligent figure than usually portrayed. Indeed, Graeber and Wengrow suggest a more nuanced, non-linear approach to human history, one that isn't either a fall from grace or an endlessly rising story of progress. (See Graeber and Wengrow, 2021)

To return to Glendinning though, we find her describing the symptoms of trauma associated with this major shift, in both the individual and the collective, as follows (Glendinning, 1994, Chapters 6 and 7)

1. *Hyperreactivity*, manifesting as chronic anxiety, jumpiness, tendency to knee-jerk reactions, paranoia. Institutionally, this manifests in military build-ups and retaliatory strikes.
2. *Recurrent intrusive recollections of trauma, flashbacks and nightmares*. Collectively, this manifests as repeated and continuous images of violence, war and conflict on television and in films.
3. *Psychic numbing, constriction of feeling, warding off of such intrusions*. This manifests as a dead-to-the-world attitude and in the callous calculations of military planners about to destroy thousands of lives, or business executives calculating their profit that leads to destruction of eco-systems.

4. *A sense of powerlessness over one's destiny, a sense of futurelessness, and surrender patterns.* This is the triumph of victimisation in the survivor's psyche, believing that nothing can be done about the predicament facing us. Collectively, it is the loss of participation in social issues and supposedly democratic politics and passivity in relation to the corporate destruction of the Earth.

5. *Arrested genetic and/or psychosocial development.* Such arrested development is witnessed in the prevalence of psychotherapy but has its roots, according to Glendinning, in the loss of millennia-old ways of child rearing when the move to domestication and agriculture happened.

6. *Narcissism,* which arises when the needs of the individual for security and communion are frustrated, and hence we all have to look out for Number One. "The individualism our society touts as the pinnacle of evolutionary achievement is a bold-faced expression of narcissism. Never in the history of humanity has so much emphasis, attention, and responsibility fallen upon the individual; never before has there been so much isolation of the individual." (Glendinning, 1994, p.94)

7. *Thinking disorders.* The traumatized mentality includes rigid, overly rationalistic, either/or logic and grandiose strategizing. Collectively, this manifests as a tendency to want to fix things and find solutions rather than listen and relate to what is actually happening.

8. *Addiction*. When trauma remains unhealed, addiction often arises as a means to avoid confronting the pain of that trauma. It has three hallmarks — an out-of-control compulsion to fill the lost sense of belonging and communion with an alternative substance such as food, drugs, alcohol, sex; a denial that anything is actually wrong; and an attraction to repeated trauma, the so-called completion compulsion to resolve the original trauma through acting out. Glendinning particularly draws attention to what she calls our techno-addiction.

9. *Dissociation*, the primary effect of traumatic stress, the purpose of which is to avoid total breakdown in the face of overwhelming experience. Referencing Paul Shepard, she describes domestication as a kind of fencing of the collective psyche, a fundamental restructuring to handle the unprecedented influx of loss and pain that occurs through separation from the natural world i.e., we strengthen our defences to avoid dealing with the loss but that only further separates us.

All of this leads Glendinning to conclude –

Our society is made up of vast numbers of traumatized individuals, and our culture has come into being through a universally traumatizing process. The outcome — today's technological civilization with its massive psychopathologies and unending ecological disasters — is a collective reflection of the traumatized personality.

(Glendinning, 1994, p.126)

Such assertions are difficult to prove by empirical means but Glendinning is not the only one to liken the traumatised individual to the society in which they live. Freud, in another of his late works, makes the following suggestion -

If the development of civilization so much resembles that of the individual and operates with the same means, is one not entitled to proffer the diagnosis that some civilizations or cultural epochs – possibly the whole of humanity – have become ‘neurotic’ under the influence of cultural strivings? (Freud, 2004, Kindle Edition, Location 1102)

Krishnamurti also makes a similar point in a quote attributed to him - “It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”¹ So Glendinning, Freud and Krishnamurti all put forward the idea that a whole society can be profoundly traumatised, neurotic, or sick.

Historical and Structural Trauma – Loss and Absence

It is worth turning at this point to the writings of Dominick LaCapra who, as was noted in the summary of Bond and Craps’s survey of trauma theory, developed the idea of structural and historical trauma. In his *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra actually makes a series of distinctions. Historical trauma, as it suggests, occurs at a particular point in time, implying that there is a before and an after, and hence there is a sense of loss. Structural trauma

¹ Like some other famous quotes, including the Einstein quote also used at the beginning of this dissertation, it is difficult to track down the exact provenance of these words. However, I am not appealing to him as an authority, but rather to the idea that the quote expresses.

implies not loss but absence, a fundamental experience that does not occur in historical time. LaCapra goes on to explore two key Freudian ways of responding to historical trauma — acting out, and working through — and then connects them with melancholia and mourning.

Freud, in comparing melancholia with mourning, saw melancholia as characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object. Mourning brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again. (LaCapra, 2014, pp. 65/6)

Distinguishing these two kinds of trauma allows LaCapra to observe what happens when they become confused.

When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into ... absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted. (LaCapra, 2014, p.46)

Turning absence into loss, for LaCapra, gives us stories such as the Biblical Fall from the Garden of Eden and the Oedipal story in Freudian thought (LaCapra, 2014, pp.50/1). But

“Paradise absent is different from paradise lost” (LaCapra, 2014, p.57) and they require quite different responses. Acknowledging absence as absence means we have to accept that there might not be ultimate solutions and that the anxiety that comes with the sense of separation cannot be extinguished or projected onto others (LaCapra, 2014, p.58). Dealing with historical losses, on the other hand, allows

that mourning be seen not simply as individual or quasi-transcendental grieving but as a homeopathic socialization or ritualization of the repetition compulsion ... by repetition in ways that allow for a measure of critical distance, change, resumption of social life, ethical responsibility, and renewal. (LaCapra, 2014, p.66)

What LaCapra is saying here is that historical trauma or loss can, indeed should, be a spur to collective change, and that ritual mourning of that loss is one important aspect of that process of change. If, however, structural trauma is confused with historical trauma, we can end up stuck in a process of melancholy, longing for what we can never be united with, that can never be fixed or worked through.

If we apply LaCapra’s distinction between historical and structural trauma to the divide between human and nature that Glendinning describes, what we appear to have is an historical trauma occurring at a particular point (or period) of time that has been turned into a foundational, or structural trauma i.e., the absence of symbiotic connection with the natural world that arises in agricultural and industrial societies. If that is true, what exactly are the implications of such an interpretation? Are we going to end up, as LaCapra suggests, in a state of perpetual melancholia, longing for some unattainable state of prelapsarian

wholeness, unable to work through the difficulties that face us? LaCapra's distinction is a helpful one that points out some of the difficulties of thinking in terms of original trauma. Whilst Glendinning's attempt to throw light on why we act in the ways that we do has some explanatory appeal, it is open to LaCapra's criticism. Original trauma can create a religious frame for the ecological crisis, presenting it as a need to return to an idealised, Edenic state that we cannot be sure existed in the way Glendinning suggests and that we are very unlikely to be able to return to. Whilst we can mourn the loss of connection with the natural world, and that may be an important part of responding to the ecological crisis, can we really recreate our society in the form of a hunter/gatherer society? If we can re-integrate ourselves within the primal matrix as Glendinning wishes, surely that has to be a different version of it than an idealised past?

A Buddhist View of Original Trauma

Joanna Macy and her 'work that reconnects', has many similarities with the work of Glendinning, but also one key difference. In *Coming Back to Life*, co-written with Molly Brown, Macy explores what deadens the heart and mind, inhibiting our feeling of pain for the world and hence leading us to inaction and lack of response. Her list includes (Macy and Brown, 2014, Chapter Two)

1. Fear of pain. Our culture generally teaches us to avoid pain and see it as dysfunctional so to feel for the world we live in can be seen as being dysfunctional.

2. Fear of despair. That we might not be able to deal with the full scale of the losses facing us and that we might lose hope leads to avoidance of facing the facts.
3. Other spiritual traps i.e., spiritual views that see feelings for the world as attachments to be overcome, or a version of subjective idealism that views consciousness as more real than the phenomenal world.
4. Distrust of our own intelligence whereby we overlook our own intuition and judgment because of so-called experts.
5. Fear of guilt i.e., a gnawing sense that we are somehow responsible for the mess we are in which we don't wish to acknowledge.
6. Hijacked attention, largely through electronic devices, but also through the mass media that promotes entertainment as distraction.
7. Fear of powerlessness and of not being able to do anything about the crises we face.
8. The view of a separate self – “It is hard to believe we feel pain for the world if we assume we're separate from it. The individualistic bias of Western culture supports that assumption. Feelings of fear, anger or despair about the world tend to be interpreted in terms of personal pathology. Our distress over the state of the world is seen as stemming from some neurosis, rooted perhaps in early trauma or unresolved issues with a parental figure that we're projecting on society at large.

Thus we are tempted to discredit feelings that arise from solidarity with our fellow-beings. Conditioned to take seriously only those feelings that pertain to our individual needs and wants, we find it hard to believe that we can suffer on behalf of society itself, or on behalf of other life-forms, and that such suffering is real and valid and healthy.” (Macy and Brown, 2014, p.58)

The cost of all this blocking of our pain for the world is high and leads to (Macy and Brown, 2014, Chapter Two)

1. Impeded cognitive functioning. Repression dulls our perception of the world and we cut ourselves off from sources of information that threaten us, impeding our judgment.
2. Impeded access to the unconscious. As we filter out what is difficult for us, we lose contact with the forces of the unconscious that can provide intuition and creativity. And what we banish to the unconscious does not disappear, returning in our body as illness or being projected out onto the stage of history.
3. Impeded instinct for self-preservation. If we avoid looking at the threats to our life, we cannot tap the basic biological energies associated with preservation of our life.
4. Impeded eros. By denying our basic life energies, our sense of connection and aesthetic enjoyment of life are diminished, and we turn instead to pornography and hedonism.

5. Without eros, our ability to empathise with other life is also weakened.
6. Impeded imagination. If we withdraw from pain and what is going on around us, it is more difficult to allow our imagination to roam freely, and without imagination, it is difficult to see alternatives to the destructive mainstream narratives that surround us.
7. Impeded feedback. As an open system operating amongst other open systems, we regulate our life through monitoring feedback, so if we ignore the feedback, we close off from information that is essential to ongoing life.

I see, in Macy and Brown's attempt to understand the forces that hold us back from creatively responding to the ecological crisis, similarities with Glendinning's description of the effects of trauma on the individual and society already listed. However, whilst Macy and Brown do acknowledge the effects of trauma, both those to come and ancestral traumas (Macy and Brown, 2014, Chapters One and Twelve), they do not cast the ecological crisis in terms of a fundamental or original trauma. Instead, they see, underpinning the whole industrial growth society, the three poisons of Buddhist teaching, poisons that lie at the root of all human suffering — greed, aggression and delusion.

Consumerism can be seen as institutionalized greed, the military-industrial complex as institutionalized aggression and state-and corporate-controlled media as institutionalized delusion. It follows that we are confronting in the Industrial Growth Society universal errors to which all humans are prone, rather than evil or satanic

forces. It also follows that once these errors become institutionalized as political, economic and legal agents in their own right, they attain a degree of autonomy extending beyond the control and the conscious choices of any individuals involved.

(Macy and Brown, 2014, Chapter One, Introductory Section)

This acknowledgment that we are all prone to these poisons, both those of us causing the problems and those experiencing the effects of the ecological crisis, can help to avoid polarisation between us and them. The Buddhist teaching that Macy is drawing on suggests no origin in time for the three poisons i.e., there is no fall. Hence it avoids the problems — a desire for a lost past that can never be reclaimed; and the shaping of the solution in the likeness of what has been lost but cannot be restored — of Glendinning's original trauma, which, as we have seen, can easily be confused as a structural trauma in the guise of a historical trauma.

Future Trauma

What we have looked at so far in terms of trauma and the ecological crisis has followed the normal direction of time associated with trauma — a traumatic event followed by a period of latency before the manifestation of symptoms. In this schema, trauma, or more correctly, the traumatic event, always occurs in the past. But one of the developing trajectories in trauma studies is towards the notion of pre-traumatic stress and future trauma.

The first mention of pre-traumatic stress disorder actually occurred on a satirical news website called *The Onion* in 2006, which suggested armed combatants could suffer from

flash-forwards rather than flashbacks, and went on to suggest a wide range of people who might suffer from the condition, including anyone who watches more than three hours of television a day! (Craps, 2020, pp.277/8). Empirical evidence of such pre-traumatic stress did, however, follow the satire, and has been gathered by Berntsen and Rubin in their work with Danish soldiers before, during, and after their deployment to Afghanistan, from which they have developed a Pretraumatic Stress Reactions Checklist to quantify this (Berntsen and Rubin, 2015). E. Ann Kaplan has then taken this research to confirm her own intuition that future catastrophic events could also be traumatic, leading her to use the term Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome (PreTSS), comprising ‘disturbing future-oriented cognitions and imaginations’ that are correlated with the past-oriented cognitions of classic PTSD. She goes on to explore how these ideas play out in what she calls “pretrauma cinema” of which she sees two types — pretrauma political dystopias where totalitarian regimes have taken over; and pretraumatic disaster films where the world has become inhabitable for humans (Kaplan, 2015, pp 1-4). Michael Richardson, in turn, develops Kaplan’s approach to distinguish what he calls traumatic affects from actual trauma — traumatic affects are “jarring, rupturing, disjunctive experiences of future crisis in the now” (Richardson, 2018, p.1). According to Stef Craps, Paul Saint-Amour has even gone so far as to suggest “it is time for trauma studies to take seriously the suggestion that the dread of a potentially oncoming disaster can traumatize as much as an actually realized one” and he calls for trauma studies to reorientate itself from the past to the future. (Craps, 2020, p. 278/9)

However, what we are really dealing with here is, just like traditional trauma theory, trauma in the present — only the cause is perceived as being in the future. A more accurate description of future trauma in relation to the ecological crisis might be the trauma that will

be experienced by people in the future as the crisis deepens e.g., in response to extreme weather events or to conflict over diminishing resources etc. In this area, another burgeoning field within trauma studies and therapy is developing — that of resilience. Whilst this is not the primary focus of this study, a quote from one of the people exploring this area defines the term and places it in context.

Human beings are resilient and have the capacity for healing after traumatic life experiences. We define resilience as the ability to identify and use individual and collective strengths to live fully in the present moment and to thrive while managing the tasks of daily living. We have seen that resilient people not only get back on their feet after a fall, they can create meaning from their struggles that transforms their lives and their communities. According to George Bonnano (2009), resilience is the most common reaction of those who experience trauma. We have travelled the world after man-made and natural disasters and have witnessed this capacity for resiliency. (Miller-Karas, 2015, Kindle Edition, Location 408)

Geotrauma

In the story of Tancred and Clorinda from Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* — a text that both Freud and Cathy Caruth have dwelt upon — Tancred, having mistaken her identity, has killed Clorinda and wanders, grief struck, in a wild wood -

At last he draws his sword, and with great force
hacks the high plant. Oh wonder! At each bound,

great gouts of blood out of the cut bark course
and stain the earth vermilion all around.
He is filled with horror, yet without remorse
redoubles strokes, and waits, and stands his ground,
and hears the gashed wood, like a tomb, exhale
a dolorous and a muffled groan or wail. (Tasso, 2009, p.247)

Stef Craps points out that both Freud and Caruth interpret the harm of the tree in terms of the pain of Tancred and Clorinda, revealing their anthropocentric viewpoint, a viewpoint that underpins most of trauma theory (Craps, 2020, p. 280/1). A few writers are now beginning to take the next step and see trauma as a term that applies to the world around us and not just to human beings. Geotrauma is the term most often used to describe this development and Rachel Pain, a geographer, explores not just the temporalities of trauma but also its locations in space. In a recent article, she identifies “seven overlapping placings of trauma by geographers and others: memorial places, retraumatizing places, layered places, hardwired places, mobile places, places of repossession and healing places” (Pain, 2021, pp. 984/5) and concludes that

Geotrauma describes the relational clasp of place with the experience and impacts of trauma. It not only shapes places but becomes part of place, hardwired but still with plasticity. Its clasping is ongoing and dynamic, continually being reformed. Trauma disperses and fixes elsewhere, it bounces back, it is amplified or dampened. (Pain, 2021, p. 985)

Reza Negarestani, building on Nick Land's post-psychoanalytic notion of geotrauma, goes a step further and wants to arrive at "a generalized conception of trauma".

Since there is no single or isolated psychic trauma (all traumas are nested), there is no psychic trauma without an organic trauma and no organic trauma without a terrestrial trauma that in turn is deepened into open cosmic vistas. (Quoted in Craps, 2020, p. 282)

This notion of cosmic trauma comes close to returning us to Glendinning's original trauma, although without the necessary fall from a pre-traumatic state. Whether or not it genuinely holds meaning to talk of cosmic trauma is debatable — perhaps it extends the metaphor too far, and I shall return to this in the conclusion. Nevertheless, this reaching out to find new terms to describe the causes and effects of the ecological crisis continues. A good example is Glenn Albrecht's coining of the term solastalgia to describe "the chronic distress and melancholia of the lived experience of negative environmental change". His neologism draws upon the etymology of nostalgia, solace and desolation to evoke and describe a new and complex emotional state in response to the impact of ecological change and loss (Albrecht, 2015, p.299). If the ecological crisis is of the scale that impacts the whole of our global civilisation, potentially affecting its very existence, it is perhaps not surprising that new terms are needed, and the old ones don't apply any longer.

Climate Trauma

In an article called *Climate Trauma: Toward a New Taxonomy of Trauma*, Zhiya Woodbury chooses to use the words *climate trauma* to describe a new, superordinate form of trauma. She lists the three predominant ways in which trauma is usually experienced as 1) generational (epigenetic) trauma, 2) personal trauma, and 3) cultural trauma (Woodbury, 2019, p.3) and then raises the question if we are seeing things the wrong way round. Rather than trauma being a symptom of climate change, perhaps the climate crisis is a new form of trauma that pervades the circumstances of our life and is, in fact, a cause of that crisis (Woodbury, 2019, p.1). This also is akin to Glendinning's move to identify an original trauma as the cause of the crisis. However, for Woodbury

with Climate Trauma, there is no past tense. This is a crucial distinction, which imparts to Climate Trauma its superordinate character. (Woodbury, 2019, p.4)

One of the key characteristics of this new kind of trauma is that we are both perpetrator and victim at the same time, something not usually acknowledged within conventional trauma theory. Her conclusion is -

Our existing clinical paradigm for addressing trauma does not really fit this new, over-arching category of Climate Trauma. A much more ecopsychological, Earth-oriented paradigm is called for, one developed outside the limited and limiting box of Western psychology and the (Cartesian) scientific-materialist worldview from which modern psychology sprang forth. (Woodbury, 2019, p.5)

I shall return to her point about appealing to sources outside of the Western worldview in the next section.

Trauma as Metaphor

Having drawn attention to Glendinning's notion of original trauma and then surveyed some of the most recent thinking on trauma and the ecological crisis, I want to turn to the very notion of trauma as a metaphor for the ecological crisis and explore its strengths and weaknesses in such usage.

Put simply, to use the term trauma to in any way describe what is happening with the current ecological crisis is to talk of it in terms of wounding, whether that wounding be physical, psychic, cultural, collective, historical, or to do with the very environment itself. Some of the strengths that I see in using such a term include the sense that it is not just some abstract problem but one that very definitely impinges upon us and creates suffering. Likewise, it suggests that technical solutions to reducing CO2 emissions will not, whilst being necessary, fully address the problem and the nature of the suffering caused. It is also clear that the term trauma has captured the collective imagination, constantly developing and mutating in its meanings to address new problems. To use a contemporary term, it has become generative of discourse and thinking in relation to all sorts of issues. However, there are problems too and I want to explore those before concluding.

A Wound or Victim Culture?

The term *wound culture* was coined by Mark Seltzer in an article in 1997 to explore the fascination and voyeurism that people have around the suffering of others (Seltzer, 1997). According to Craps and Bond, in Seltzer's developed thinking around this, published in his book *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*,

Witnessing the suffering of others is not conducive to any kind of progressive social or political change, in Seltzer's view—quite the contrary even: the cultural fixation on spectacles of suffering and trauma, such as car crashes or serial killings, is all about individuals indulging in erotic pleasure, enjoying a sadistic identification with violence and a masochistic identification with exposed pain. In Seltzer's account, the popularity of trauma theory is but an enactment of this morally dubious fascination with trauma as spectacle that is pervasive in the culture at large. (Bond and Craps, 2019, p.140)

Whether using trauma as metaphor for the ecological crisis buys into this notion of a voyeuristic and ethically dubious wound culture needs further exploration but perhaps a more immediate concern is that trauma can be associated with a victim culture. Whilst this term is politically loaded and has become associated with the so-called culture wars, by using it here I am simply meaning to draw attention to the connotations of weakness and passivity that are implied within the term. If we see the ecological crisis primarily in terms of its wounding effects, does that disempower us from making suitable responses?

We have already seen, in the quote from Miller-Karas above, that some are using the language of resilience to counter this tendency to victimhood. Another term that is used in this regard is posttraumatic growth (PTG), coined and defined by Tedeschi and Calhoun as “positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with traumatic or highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi et al, 2018, p.3). Drawing on both constructivist and existentialist thinking (and preceding positive psychology, with which it is

often likened), Tedeschi and Calhoun have developed a whole body of thought and research to back up their claims that, for some people, trauma leads to growth. They define trauma not necessarily as a life-threatening experience but as a life changing one.

The event needs to be significant enough to challenge “the basic assumptions about one’s future and how to move toward that future, and therefore produce massive anxiety and psychic pain that is difficult to manage. Inherent in these traumatic experiences are losses such as the loss of loved ones, of cherished roles or capabilities, or of fundamental, accepted ways of understanding life.” (Tedeschi et al, 2018, p.4)

Posttraumatic growth then is concerned with longer term changes in cognitive and emotional life that have behavioural implications. These are distinguished from general life changes that arise as a result of ageing because they occur as a result of a struggle which initially may have been an attempt merely to survive or cope with the traumatic event (Tedeschi et al, 2018, p.5).

Framing traumatic events in these ways — either as opportunities to draw on hitherto unrecognised strengths through resilience; or as events that can spark positive long-term growth within the individual — can definitely help to counter the tendency in trauma-as-metaphor to emphasise victimhood and passivity. But there is a wider or more fundamental criticism that can be made of trauma therapy as a whole, whether it be under the guise of resilience, posttraumatic growth, or the various therapeutic approaches developed by van

der Kolk, Porges, Levine or Badenoch. We have already noted Zhiya Woodbury's critique of a restricting Western psychology and Steffi Bednarek makes a similar point –

Many psychological theories reflect the capitalist values of individualism, materialism, anthropocentrism, competition and progress, and the concept of mental health itself can be regarded as the capacity to function symptom free within a capitalist system. (Bednarek, 2021, p.7)

What she is alluding to here is a species of thinking akin to the quotes that preface this dissertation by Krishnamurti, Einstein and Lorde. To paraphrase Krishnamurti, is trauma therapy just a means of adjusting us to a profoundly sick society? Or, following Einstein and Lorde, can we really solve the problem of the ecological crisis with thinking that has emerged from within the mindset that has created that problem? As I have shown, trauma itself is a concept that is intimately tied up with the whole development of a modern industrialised society. The therapeutic responses to trauma have also emerged from within that framework and whilst they appeal, as Fred Alford points out, to hard science that supposedly provides a universal truth about our nervous systems and brains, perhaps the very mindset that tends to revere such scientific truth is blinkered to other solutions or approaches. Whilst I have no wish to deny any empirical evidence or approaches that help people to face and deal with the very real experience of trauma — indeed, such approaches are to be lauded — I do want to suggest three possible metaphors to conceive of the ecological crisis that do not use the language of trauma, at least explicitly.

Ecological Crisis as Soul Wound

The first metaphor we have already come across, that of the soul wound used by Eduardo Duran, or Tiospaye Ta Woapiye Wicasa in his native language. This metaphor is still close to trauma, using, as it does, the notion of a wound, and so potentially having some of the same limitations that I have just explored. However, transposing the wound to the level of soul helps avoid the kind of reductionism associated with Western knowledge and medicine that Fred Alford picked up, placing it in a different context and drawing on different associations. As I mentioned when exploring Duran's work, he sees that the largest metaphorical gap that needs bridging is that between Western psychologising and Native spiritualising and to use the term soul wound allows for that bridging. Obviously, the word soul has many different meanings and it too, like trauma, has become something of a buzz word, in danger of being appropriated by Western psychology without the significant shift in values that is required. But in the context of Duran's work as a whole, and especially his epistemological hybridism, to see the ecological crisis as a soul wound allows us to take one step beyond original trauma or climate trauma and a step away from the predominantly Western ways of thinking about the crisis that they embody.

Wetiko – The Mind Virus

A further step can be taken by using the metaphor of wetiko — an Algonquin word for a cannibalistic spirit that is driven by greed, excess, and selfish consumption (in Ojibwa it is *windigo*, *wintiko* in Powhatan – see Ladha and Kirk, 2016). The metaphor of Wetiko, whilst it obviously draws on longstanding traditional usage, first came to wider attention in 1992 through the work of Jack Forbes who is from a Powhatan-Renape, Delaware-Renape, and

non-native background. His *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wetiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*, is, as the title suggests, a damning critique of the Western mindset that has created so many of the problems we face –

Many people have examined the subjects of aggression, violence, imperialism, rape, and so on. I propose to do something a little different: first, I propose to examine these things from a Native American perspective; and, second, from a perspective as free as possible from assumptions created by the very disease being studied. Finally, I will look at these evils, not simply as “bad” choices that men make, but as a genuine, very real epidemic sickness. *Imperialists, rapists and exploiters are not just people who have strayed down a wrong path. They are insane (unclean) in the true sense of that word. They are mentally ill and, tragically, the form of soul-sickness that they carry is catching.* (Forbes, 2008, Kindle Locations 121-126)

This is plain speaking indeed and articulates a Native perspective on the Western mindset and culture that can be hard to hear. But if we take David Stannard’s descriptions of the European conquest of the Americas seriously in his well-documented *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, it is hard not to agree that there is a kind of destructive madness involved in Western colonialism and economic exploitation of the natural world.

Forbes did not directly make the connection between the wetiko virus and the ecological crisis, but his work has since been taken up by Paul Levy, a non-Native American, practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, and student of Jung, who has developed Forbes’s

approach and extended the range of the metaphor. He gives a fuller description of the source of wetiko

In Native American tradition, the wetiko monster is regarded as a legendary, mythic being of supernatural powers, a creature of the Algonquian imagination, while at the same time, when read symbolically, it can represent a living psychic reality having relevance for all of us. Native American mythologies portray the mythical figure of wetiko as a cannibalistic spirit who embodies greed and excess and can possess human beings. The wetiko was once a human being, but because of its gluttony and selfishness it was transformed into a predatory monster. In indigenous mythology, indulgent, self-destructive habits are thought to be inspired by the wetiko virus. (Levy, 2013, Kindle Location 926)

He also clarifies the meaning of the original term

The Ojibwa word for wetiko, *windigo* (or *weendigo*), seems to have been derived from *ween dagoh*, which means “solely for self,” or from *weenin n’d’igooh*, which means “excess.” (Levy, 2013, Kindle Location 945-946)

And further elaborates the imagery -

In describing wetiko, the Cree describe giants that grow with each human meal, so they are simultaneously huge and emaciated—never able to fill their inner void—searching desperately for their next victim, driven by excess. (Levy, 2021, pp.26/7)

This imagery is remarkably similar to that of the hungry ghosts in the Buddhist Wheel of Life — fat-bellied wraiths with needle-thin mouths through which any food that they consume turns to sharp, painful needles — an image that Gabor Mate explores more fully in his work on addiction and trauma (Mate, 2018).

Levy also draws extensively on the work of Carl Jung who he thinks referred to this wetiko virus by a number of other names — “psychic epidemics, collective psychosis, the germ/infection of evil, totalitarian psychosis, imperialistic madness, counterfeiting spirits, powers of darkness, the demon of sickness, etc.” (Levy, 2021, p.24).

Coming, as it does, from a non-Western source, this image/metaphor of wetiko, focusing on an insatiable greed that hardens the human heart to the sufferings of others, puts in perspective the rampant and destructive form of life that the West has made global in the last fifty years. If, as some forecasts suggest (e.g., Xu and Ramanathan, 2017), we may be headed for catastrophic collapse, is it not appropriate to use such strong language and call this a kind of civilisational madness?

Initiation

The last metaphor for the ecological crisis that I wish to draw attention to is that of initiation. In his *The Age of Catastrophes*, part of a wider project called *Letters to the Earth*, Nigerian-born British writer Ben Okri begins with the words “Dear Earth, give us the suffering we deserve” and goes on to suggest that humankind only learns through suffering. “We have become too spoilt, too stupid and too self-regarding” and “it is time for us to

undergo the greatest initiation that we have undergone as a species”, an “initiation of fire that brings us humility and illumination”. “We will not transform ourselves and be worthy of this fabled earth if we aren’t raised up in some way. The only way is to temper us with fire and with iron and with love.” (Okri, 2021²). To see the ecological crisis as such an initiation also takes us out of the Western mindset that has created it, drawing on traditional and Native ideas of a rite of passage. It invokes a trial from which we are not guaranteed to emerge unscathed or even alive; a trial that, if we do emerge from it, will only be as a result of us having changed and matured in some fundamental way. This, to me, places the ecological crisis in its true context and raises it beyond the metaphor of trauma.

² The published version in the book *Letters to the Earth* is slightly different from the version he reads aloud at the launching of the book. I am using the spoken version on YouTube here.

Conclusion

To return to my starting question — in what ways can an understanding of trauma help us to understand and respond to the ecological crisis? — it is time to draw conclusions.

I have shown how, as the process of modernity has advanced, the very idea of trauma has developed from a physical wound to a psychic one, suggesting a connection between the two processes. This has led to an ever-widening application of the term trauma and I have briefly outlined some of the key developments in that process.

Turning specifically to trauma and the ecological crisis, I explored the notion of original trauma as found particularly in the work of Glendinning. Whilst it has a certain explanatory appeal, the idea of an original trauma that happened with the move from a hunter/gatherer society to an agricultural one is, I have suggested, subject to a critique from LaCapra's distinction between an historical trauma and a structural one.

Although specific trauma therapies that help people to deal with the effects of trauma are to be lauded and may well be of use in relation to the trauma that will inevitably come as the ecological crisis deepens, I have suggested that the overarching use of trauma as a kind of meta-narrative for the ecological crisis as a whole has definite limits. Those limits are due to the fact that trauma itself is a concept derived from Western modernity which has itself produced the ecological crisis. Referencing both Einstein and Audre Lorde, I conclude by suggesting three different metaphors for the crisis that do not originate from within modern Western theory – the soul wound, Wetiko, and initiation.

To take this research further, a fuller exploration of these metaphors and their relevance to the ecological crisis needs to be undertaken. This would benefit particularly from first-hand interviews and contact with people immersed in those metaphors and hence able to elucidate their relevance for the ecological crisis.

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