Trauma, Posttraumatic Growth, and World Literature: Metamorphoses and a Literary Arts Praxis by Suzanne LaLonde (review)

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over seventy-five scholarly articles. He is coeditor of *The New Anthology of American Poetry*, volumes 1–3 (Rutgers 2003, 2005, 2012) as well of collections of essays on Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Lowell. His most recent coedited volumes are (with Grzegorz Kosc) *The Memoirs of Robert Lowell* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022) and (with Craig Svonkin) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary Poetry* (Bloomsbury, 2023). He is currently working on two scholarly books on American poetry and an edition of Lowell's essays.

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NOTES

1. For other recent essays on Merwin, see "Don Chiasson, The Ascetic Insight of W. S. Merwin," *The New Yorker*, 11 Sept. 2017; David Mason, "W. S. Merwin, American Proteus," *The Hudson Review,* vol. 66, no. 3, Autumn 2013, pp. 583–94; Cary Nelson, "American Poetry and War," *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, pp. 33–48; and Adrienne Raphael, "Reading a Dysfunctional World," 2017, www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/143711/.
2. Cheri Davis (Cheri Colby Langdell), *W. S. Merwin* (Twayne-Chapman & Hall, 1981); revised and reprinted: Cheri Colby Langdell, *W. S. Merwin* (Oxbridge Publishing, 2023).

Suzanne LaLonde. *Trauma, Posttraumatic Growth, and World Literature: Metamorphoses and a Literary Arts Praxis.*

Routledge, 2022. Pp. 248. Hardcover $180.

Reviewed by Deniz Gündoğan İbrişim

We live in a trauma culture, defined by the valorization of suffering and victimhood. Our culture today is "saturated with trauma" whether on an individual, collective, political, medical, or environmental level (Luckhurst). Traumatic experience often undergoes speechless terror and cannot be organized on a linguistic level and thus becomes not only inaccessible but also irrepresentable. However, at the same time, we have learned that negative experiences can spur positive change, including a recognition of personal strength, the exploration of new possibilities, improved relationships, a greater appreciation for life, and spiritual growth on a collective level. Suzanne LaLonde's much-anticipated *Trauma, Posttraumatic Growth, and World Literature: Metamorphoses*

and a Literary Arts Praxis (2022) is a rich and moving contribution to the field of cultural trauma studies from an interdisciplinary understanding of trauma and posttraumatic conditions, especially with regard to resistance, resilience, and posttraumatic growth. The book appeared in a year when the COVID-19 pandemic's physical and mental wounds were still wide open since millions had fallen ill, suffered, died, and undergone myriad of changes in their personal and professional lives. Written during the pandemic and folded into wider concerns regarding pandemics, global climate chaos, worldwide migration crises and their traumas, *Trauma, Posttraumatic Growth, and World Literature's* sense of novelty resides in how it utilizes humanities, social sciences, and literary lens. The book's main inspiration derives from French intimate literature, which LaLonde taught at the University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley (UT-RGV). In the opening section of the book, LaLonde tells the reader how she learned about the different traumatic experiences of her students.

The book is supported by scientific trauma theories from neurologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and psychologists, research from medical anthropologists, recent trauma scholarship from postcolonial critics, narratives from world literature, and the author's own experiences working in academia and classroom settings. *Trauma, Posttraumatic Growth, and World Literature*'s immediate attraction here resides in how it questions the issue of an intrinsic incompatibility between the literary arts and posttraumatic growth theories and the ways in which literary art can promote posttraumatic growth and resilience especially in times of crises and pandemics. In this context, LaLonde's specific focus on the topics of resistance, resilience, and growth rather than on the long-debated psychopathological effects of trauma constitutes the core of the book, allowing for a multidirectional space for challenging deconstructivist cultural trauma theories, mostly defined by gaps, silences, and dead ends (6). Here, LaLonde's study brings to the fore the important questions regarding "interpreting literature, keeping diaries, and storytelling" that can be understood as "therapeutic precursors or companions to psychotherapy" as well as vibrant artifacts of trauma (5). In this context, the author compellingly introduces the concept of "Literary Arts Praxis," which is built on clinical research and literature immersed in existential, phenomenological, and aesthetic themes, which all help trauma survivors to work through their traumas. In particular, "The Praxis" is poised to establish an educational training in the literary arts (telling and interpreting stories; reading and decoding literature rich in philosophical content from existentialism, phenomenology, and aesthetics; and creative writing, such as journaling) and clinical trauma theories on the importance of engaging in cognitive and imaginative exercises (7–8). "The Praxis" for LaLonde enables an open-ended inclusive and

diverse space for trauma survivors to insinuate themselves into their traumas, as they engage in imaginative escapades—forging alliances with characters; completing interpretative exercises, including reacting to varied hidden emotions through phenomenological experiences; and, in particular, completing creative writing endeavors that transform testimony into imaginative stories.

As a result, the corpus examined by LaLonde devotes a particular emphasis on literary art and metaphor of a metamorphosis to convey its main arguments about trauma, posttraumatic conditions, and world literature. The metaphor, as LaLonde argues, refers to not only to a possible metamorphosis of the mind but also changes to the historical narrative about trauma studies and to the field of trauma studies itself (7). In many ways, then, part of what is at stake here is a decision to steer away from the hegemonic trauma discourse that focus too much on trauma, as opposed to modes of posttraumatic growth that might often happen naturally, without psychotherapy or other formal intervention. The book instead aims to interrogate and complicate the hegemonic trauma discourses from the Western-oriented approaches and modes of therapy in terms of what LaLonde sees as their (potentially problematic) aporetic and unspeakable features. LaLonde's original take on the issue is to go beyond the logic that looks at images from the perspective of their aporetic power in favor of one that turns toward the perspective of their therapeutic possibilities.

The book includes an introduction and conclusion, and it is divided into four parts and nine chapters, most of which explore the creative capacity of world literature and art to manipulate themselves into new expressions, thus expanding and challenging our understanding of the relationship between the literary arts and posttraumatic growth theories and treatments.

The book makes its argument through accumulating examples of a larger pattern as opposed to offering longer readings of just a few texts. Part I, "An Evolution of Key Concepts and Terms"; chapter 1, "Embryonic Concepts of Trauma and Traumatism from the Humanities," and chapter 2, "The Birth of the Terms Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," explore both society's understanding of human suffering and the eventual development of the concept of psychological trauma in the mid-nineteenth century and the discourse of the posttraumatic stress disorder. Part I also expands the historical narrative of trauma studies by highlighting research from Briquet, Charcot, Janet, Kardiner, Chodoff, and Fanon that provide a contextual and culturally specific understanding of trauma and recovery mechanisms. This perspective aims to foster a more integrated and expansive metamorphosis of the historical narrative of trauma studies, while responding to several physicians' concerns about biologically focused research on human emotions and affect. Examining here a wide range of texts from Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century BCE),

the Roman poet Lucretius (first century BCE), Ovid (first century CE), the Roman philosopher Apuleius (second century CE), the Spanish missionary and writer Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), and the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), LaLonde pays close attention to illustrations of what today we would call PTSD, resistance, resilience, and growth in these writers. Although these writers do not employ the terms "trauma" and "PTSD," LaLonde makes the case for how these writers illuminated in their work kindred concepts through moving prose and vivid metaphors. Concurrently, in chapter 2, LaLonde engages with eighteenth-century philosophers including Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Denis Diderot and the ways their work "provoked a psycho-philosophical revolution that would lead to an adjustment of the term 'trauma' in the nineteenth century" precisely because "they prepared the terrain for the term to be nuanced by planting new notions of extreme suffering; offering visceral descriptions of the suffering of others; and spurring readers' emotions" (14). Taking as her premise the conceptual deficit that has been created by the psychological trauma and PTSD, LaLonde sets out to revise the exhaustive imaginary of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and thereby understand their correspondences to enlarge our understanding of the development of quasi-medical terms that significantly pre-date the birth of trauma concepts.

Following that, part II, "A Gallery of Trauma Studies," begins with reflections of van Gogh's notions of landscapes, figures, and self-portraits and expands its inquiry into a broader investigation of cultural trauma studies from the 1980s and 1990s or during what LaLonde calls the field's "First Wave." This investigation foregrounds the field's foundational theories of psychoanalysis, structuralism, and deconstruction. In addition, it portrays a wide landscape of contemporary scientific contributions, focusing on the topics of trauma and PTSD found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and new definitions, such as C-PTSD and Developmental Trauma; recent clinical and survey findings on war trauma; and neuroscience and neuroimages of traumatized brains. This collage compellingly brings to the fore several shortcomings with regard to clinical and recent scientific discoveries and critically attends to what LaLonde calls a "myopic vision of what constitutes a traumatic experience." This part acknowledges the importance of discoveries of PTSD biological markers, treatment methods, and its widespread acceptance as a clinical diagnosis. However, it urges the reader to take into account cultural experiences and individual psychologies that of course change geographically, culturally, and linguistically. Part III, "Treatments and Educations for Trauma Survivors," starts with the poignant statement by the neurologist Oliver Sacks: "The exploration of deeply altered selves and

worlds is not one that can be fully made in a consulting room or office" (103). LaLonde takes her cue from this statement to offer an analysis of the deeply altered world and psyche of trauma survivors in this part. In what follows in chapter 5, she examines "Clinical Treatments for Trauma Survivors" and introduces several treatments under the umbrella of pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy. In addition to PTSD, LaLonde traces treatments from Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, and Herman and specifically focuses on two current clinical trends: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and somatic-centered therapies. These treatments, LaLonde argues, are rich in theories and methods inherited from psychoanalysis, behavioral psychology, neuropsychiatry, and especially non-Western cultural sources, which pave the way for both innovative trends in psychoanalysis and holistic perception of the mind and body beyond dualistic and biologically oriented formulations. More importantly, the author provides here lucid definitions of clinical methods designed to cultivate posttraumatic growth, resilience, resistance, and recovery, which enable us to see her intervention "A Literary Arts Praxis," advanced in the next chapter and illustrated in part IV.

Eventually, in part IV, LaLonde makes the case for world literature's agency "that seems well-positioned [to] morph our understanding of traumatic and posttraumatic experiences" (155), which consider local and cultural mesh of languages, literature, and philosophy. In so doing, she explores the concept of world literature by drawing from and building on David Damrosch's implied definition of world literature as a combination of the familiar and the foreign. Provocatively, following the first line of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and considering how it became a fruitful narrative device for García Márquez to envision his own metamorphosis into a novelist, LaLonde traces how the metaphor of an insect carries universal images and feelings, and at the same time transmits psycho-philosophical messages to get at trauma. LaLonde writes: "The insect introduces an alternative reality while Gregor Samsa's family reflects a recognizable one. These images were foreign and yet familiar enough to stick to García Márquez's wall of imagination. But doesn't this apply to literature in general? Isn't literature precisely a tango dance of foreign and familiar tones and rhythms of fiction and reality?" (156). With that statement, LaLonde stretches her examination and argues that the idea of world literature as a combination of the familiar and the foreign needs to be explored from the other end of the angle and asks: "Can the foreign not be familiar and the familiar foreign?" (156). Here, she conceives of world literature as a meaningful field to explore existential, phenomenological, and aesthetic issues, traumatic and posttraumatic experiences with their both foreign and familiar features. Thus, the next three chapters in part IV investigate world

literature that explores different forms of traumatic experiences: Miguel de Cervantes's vivid portrayal of the trauma of aging; Albert Camus's depiction of traumatic suffering during an epidemic; and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's visceral sense of childhood trauma. The protagonists in these authors' work—Don Quixote, Rieux, and Lalla—demonstrate examples of creative mechanisms to work through and more importantly transcend trauma. For LaLonde, familiar stories from these authors may very well seem foreign, while the foreign may seem familiar. In addition, the novels are not so much "trauma fiction" but rather "resistance, resilience, and posttraumatic growth fiction" precisely because characters vividly engage in a literary-arts praxis. Particularly, in "The Trauma of Aging and Reading Adventures with Miguel de Cervantes" LaLonde focuses on Quijano's traumatic experience associated with aging and deciphers his reading practices while drawing on literary theorists' and affective scientists' research. Her analysis enables us to see how the traumatic experience of aging that might have triggered Quijano's "madness." It was exactly this madness and his obsessive reading that allowed Quijano for assuming the role of Don Quixote, establishing the most creative thoughts, and weaving outstanding emotional responses, all supported by therapeutic alliances with fictional characters. This type of reading literature and collective experiences with imagined characters can be seen as a solid attempt to move beyond the aporia of the psyche and psychic suffering. At the same time, as LaLonde argues, Don Quixote works through his trauma of aging via his own body, as he passionately chases down ewes or charges at windmills. The body here is put into a vulnerable and dangerous position, while it is poised to involve all traumatic registers and vibrations from the environment, serving as a material-affective archive.

LaLonde concludes the book's argument by stating that the book itself was a chain of islands, an archipelago encompassing "a series of distinct, albeit related, histories and concepts of trauma and traumatism from the perspectives of the sciences, clinical medicine, and the humanities to cultivate metamorphoses" (208). In addition, she turns back to her students' stories of trauma and traumatism, which provided the book's main intervention, "A Literary Arts Praxis," an educational training in the literary arts. The concluding remarks extend the intervention into further related research questions and projects in the future which can potentially join the ranks of "Bibliotherapy" and "Narrative Medicine." The former is a treatment model including traumatized subjects reading literature, whereas the latter engages with practices that can provide clinicians with solid methods to understand stories and traumatic experiences better (212). Similar to those of "Bibliotherapy" and "Narrative Medicined," "A Literary Art Praxis" surfaces from evidence-based

medicine, and yet differs from the aforementioned modalities in its distinctive push for interdisciplinary dialogues and collaborative research projects as well as cross-cultural approaches.

Trauma, Posttraumatic Growth, and World Literature offers crisp discussions, and, cumulatively, builds an argument that convinces by the overwhelming body of clinical, scientific, cultural, and literary evidence it presents. In its compelling appraisals of world texts, rich incorporation of the theoretical and methodological perspectives and limitations of trauma studies and the lucidity of its prose, LaLonde's book more than fulfills the goal the author sets out for contemporary trauma studies and posttraumatic growth research as a whole. Her book will become essential reading for scholars, an invaluable resource for those seeking new ways to teach trauma research and literature to students whose lives are taking shape in the inescapable context of vulnerability and precarity in the present day. And yet, a question arises after reading the book. In the face of traumatism and posttraumatic growth that map onto world literature, we need a stronger notion of the world (hence world literature) that would allow us to diversify its semantic and practical content to facilitate a just modality of agency, recognition, and distribution. Defining world literature as that which goes beyond the Eurocentric and (neo-)colonial paradigm of capitalist globalization remains highly important here. In *Forget English!* Aamir R. Mufti laments the asymmetries that underlie the very concept of the world and emphasizes the unequally distributed abilities to engage in configurations of the world. Thus, he argues that "[t]he ability to think 'the world' itself, whether in a literary-critical thinking or other discourses and practices, is hardly distributed equally across the world" (Mufti10). By following Mufti here, LaLonde's position seems to me to remain selective and leaves less room for considering world literature through transnational and transcultural polycentric networks and relations among texts, their vibrant world-making capacities, and their contemplation of the singular as well as the universal, the local and the global that comes with them.

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Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry.*

Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Pp. 535. $144.

Reviewed by Meg Schoerke

Along with the close-up cover photo of a thickly layered abstract painting by Laura Eve Borenstein, the most immediately striking aspect of the print version of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry* is its size: weighing in at 2.5 pounds, with 535 broad, 8 ×10–inch pages, and thirty-eight chapters (each an individual essay or interview), the book is enormous. The sheer scale is, of course, intentional; as editors Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod propose in their "Introduction": "We wanted this *Handbook* to be a whale of a book, and moreover to be what Melville called a 'Loose-Fish'—not one with clear labels but one that reflects the slippery nature of poetry, reading, and reality itself" (1). Rather than aim for a master narrative of contemporary American poetry, Svonkin and Axelrod present a polyphony, "slippery" in that no one voice—or type of poetry examined—predominates, yet each intertwines—though does not necessarily blend—with others. But even metaphors are slippery for Svonkin and Axelrod, who generate multiple analogies in the introduction to explain their approach, including discord and the benefit of looking through partial perspectives:

> In a culturally and intellectually diverse society like the United States, influenced so deeply by the past and by other regions and world systems, we are doubtful that any single narrative of what has happened and is happening makes sense. This book, therefore, offers a series of partial views that don't