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Trauma Theory as Activist Pedagogy: Engaging Students as Reader-Witnesses of Colonial Trauma in *Once Were Warriors*

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A TRAUMA IS A WOUND—PSYCHIC, EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL, SPIRITUAL—AND THE STATE or condition brought about by that wound. Trauma produces excess. Overwhelmed by external stimuli, the traumatized mind cannot process *what* is happening *while* it is happening. Trauma's story, then, is not a cohesive narrative of events, but its aftermath of perpetual conflict between denial and telling. The traumatized can never say *what happened*, yet they never stop trying to say. As traumatologist Judith Herman, M.D.[1] explains, trauma "surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom" that at once signals "the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect[s] attention from it" (*Trauma and Recovery* 1). Trauma sets in motion a vicious cycle that never resolves: trauma erases the possibility of witnessing; yet validating the very occurrence of trauma *requires* witnessing. In interviewing Holocaust survivors, Dori Laub[2] found that "the very circumstance of being inside the event [. . .] made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist." No one, neither Nazis nor those they imprisoned, could observe the Holocaust from the outside. There *was* no outside of its "coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing framework." Indeed, Laub concludes, "one might say that there was, thus, historically no witness to the Holocaust" (Laub 66).

While Laub speaks to the impossibility of witnessing the Holocaust from the inside, his claim resonates with other historical traumas as well. For example, European colonial expansion across the globe—its settlements, missionaries, and policies of forced assimilation—also rendered witnessing from the inside "unthinkable" through its "totalitarian and dehumanizing framework" of genocide in the name of civilizing barbarian nations. If traumatic events effectively erase themselves, as Laub suggests, then witnesses exist only outside the events, such as post-event generations carrying the passed-down testimonies of those who survived. Witnessing the witness, that is, may be the only way to tell trauma. Reading traumatic literature is a form of witnessing the (outsider) witness. Even as outsider witnesses (i.e., writers of traumatic literature) and those witnessing them (i.e., readers of traumatic literature)

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can never get inside of *what happened*, literature *represents* trauma as it contends with "the vexed intersection of facts and meaning, events and narratives" (Roth 93).[3]

Colonial trauma and *Once Were Warriors*

Once Were Warriors, Alan Duff's controversial, bestselling novel about colonial trauma in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand[4] contends with the "vexed intersection" of facts (Aotearoa New Zealand's history of Māori subjection to European rule)[5] and meaning (what those events signify in a postcolonial nation). As the back cover states, Duff's novel provides "a harrowing vision of his country's indigenous people two hundred years after the English conquest." Set in the fictional Pine Block—a slum on the outskirts of Auckland, New Zealand's largest and most heavily populated metropolitan area—*Once Were Warriors* depicts the "harrowing vision" of one Māori community on the verge of extinction by poverty, abuse, and alcoholism. In portraying trauma's simultaneous past and present *presence*, the novel offers readers an opportunity to bear witness to post-event generations dwelling both outside *and* inside of colonial trauma.

A prolonged, chronic trauma like colonization involves "a history of subjection to totalitarian control" informed by and resulting in genocide (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 121). According to the United Nations, genocide is "any act committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, national, ethnic, racial or religious groups" and can include killing, physically harming, *and* "inflicting conditions of life calculated to *bring about* physical destruction of the group in whole or in part" (emphasis added, "Genocide"). Traumatic life conditions such as poverty imprison, "shatter[ing] the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community" (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 70). Moreover, the poverty devastating Pine Block is a common by-product of colonial trauma in many colonized nations, in addition to being a trauma in and of itself. Restoring relationships requires not only personal support systems, but also communal support: "public acknowledgment of the traumatic event [. . .] and some form of community action" (70). Witnessing trauma through reading traumatic literature in a classroom setting can become an act of collectively acknowledging and resisting injustice. As readers, we can sit with the discomfort of trauma—the pain of its still-open wounds—effectively engaging in the restorative process of reconciling horror with surviving that horror. As literary scholars, we can teach reading as decolonial activism by guiding our students to read as witnesses.

To explore the relationship between reading, teaching, and bearing witness in contemporary Māori literature—particularly in *Once Were Warriors*—this paper poses the following questions: What can trauma lead us to understand in *Once Were War-*

riors? What can *Once Were Warriors* lead us to understand about trauma? And finally, what pedagogical approaches do both *Once Were Warriors* and trauma theory call for that may differ from those used in other literature classrooms? While this paper seeks not to arrive at set answers but to articulate the importance of asking such questions in the first place, here are three preliminary answers to frame the discussion that follows. Firstly, trauma helps us engage literature from texts' perspectives, what *they* have to tell *us*, as well as from readers' responses. Secondly, *Once Were Warriors* leads us to understand the unique circumstances of colonial trauma in Aotearoa New Zealand, an allegedly bicultural nation (equal parts Māori *and* Pakeha), in contrast to colonization in other parts of the world. Thirdly, when taught in conjunction with one another, *Once Were Warriors* and trauma theory call for pedagogical approaches that disrupt conventional modes of reading texts: they subvert the colonial impulse to discover and conquer, to lay claims to particular readings and to construct arguments about what texts *mean*. In this way, *Once Were Warriors* destabilizes the categorization of texts as the novel fits into multiple genres: fiction, faction, nonfiction; action, drama, crime, even thriller; and sub-genres of philosophical, political, and urban texts. The novel illustrates how we can only identify and define past and present, violence and recovery, in relation to one another. Teaching *Once Were Warriors* and trauma theory alongside one another is far more complex than simply teaching context, becoming an endeavor to *not* know, to resist closure, and to experience that resistance as a form of social justice.

Teaching colonial trauma and *Once Were Warriors*

We can initiate this social justice project in teaching a range of literature courses, whether or not the courses focus specifically on Māori literature. To begin, we can design course structures that embody the paradox of trauma. For example, we might frame a course around what Judith Herman calls "the central dialectic of psychological trauma," or "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud," creating units around pairs of contrastive literary themes and traumatic symptoms: forgetting and remembrance; terror and safety; disconnection and commonality; captivity and reconnection (*Trauma and Recovery* 1). Next, we can teach modes of reading that encourage *investigation* rather than *mastery* of texts in which readers dwell on interstices between what gets narrated and what is left unsaid. Grounding our reading practices in investigation works to resist the closure that colonialism might have us believe: that colonization is over and that the poverty, violence, and addiction pervading many Māori communities indicate individual dysfunctions (e.g., violence and addiction are intrinsic to Māori and other indigenous peoples), not colonial oppression. To teach investigation, we might create assignments around *learn-*

ing milestones in which all participants, students and teachers, pause to articulate their learning through writing and class discussion. These *learning milestones* can take shape around particular questions that encourage investigative modes of reading, as follows.

Milestone 1: What is the relationship between inside and outside in Once Were Warriors?

This first milestone question can work to disrupt the colonial impulse to divide and conquer; to map territories, draw boundaries, and police borders. *Once Were Warriors* is rife with trauma and, while fictional, the novel has had widespread material effects among New Zealanders. As Kirsten Moana Thompson explains in her article about Lee Tamahori's film version of *Once Were Warriors*, through its "harsh unmitigated portrait" of violence in the Māori community of Pine Block, the film (and by extension, the novel) prompted open, public discussion about the impacts of colonization in Aotearoa New Zealand (234). After the film's release, a surge of abuse victims fled to shelters, and police noted a marked increase in reports of domestic violence (233). The violence of *Once Were Warriors* has also drawn international attention. At the annual Conference for the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN)—held in Auckland in 1998, just a few years after the film's 1995 release—conference participants and political leaders linked violence in *Once Were Warriors* with the realities of disproportionate unemployment, imprisonment, and violence among Māori in relation to the Pakeha majority inhabiting New Zealand. In a *New Zealand Herald* article covering the conference, Member of Parliament Nanaia Mahuta attributed such disproportions to "'the reality of the enduring *Once Were Warriors* lifestyle' and the 'code of silence' in Māori homes that allow[s] kids to grow up abused and thinking this [is] just part of life" (qtd. in Chateau). As *Once Were Warriors* affirms, violence and its "code of silence" get passed down from one Māori generation to the next. Moreover, colonialism portrays that violence as inevitably tied to Māori identity, rather than as symptomatic of colonial trauma.

The violence in *Once Were Warriors* calls attention to deep-seated afflictions between Māori and Pakeha. In *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific*, Susan Y. Najita articulates the pertinence, to reading Māori literature, of interrogating the emerging bicultural nationhood ideology that suggests shared governance and great potential for a decolonial future in New Zealand. Biculturalism implies coexistence between Māori and Pakeha, and that Māori culture is singular and monolithic, which negates the multiple tribal cultures within Māori populations. Biculturalism conceals an ongoing colonial trend of erasing difference in order to maintain colonial power. Najita argues that trauma plays an active role in shaping the politics and identities of colonized nations and, indeed, "intervenes in the problems of the nation" (19). The trauma of *Once Were War-*

riors "intervenes in the problems of" New Zealand by calling upon reader-witnesses to juxtapose ideology and reality, biculturalism and violence, among Māori communities.

As trauma theory can lead us to understand the misidentification of New Zealand as a bicultural nation—a smokescreen over white supremacy, the still-beating heart of colonization—it can also lead us to sit with the absence of closure in literature that represents that trauma—an absence constructed by the presence of wounding. Even as Māori and Pakeha negotiate the ownership of land, governance, and cultural autonomy in New Zealand—which might suggest equality—Māori continue to experience the cultural fragmentation and dispossession of colonization. As multiple contributors attest in *Rethinking Settler Colonialism,* a collection on history and memory in colonial nations, Māori and Pakeha "coexist uneasily" (Bell 114), their relationship steeped in "unsettled consciousness" (104)—at once "open and chronically controversial" (Thomas 152). For many Māori communities, urbanization in Aotearoa New Zealand—a byproduct of the colonial fantasy to bring civility to allegedly tribal cultures—has severed vital connections to their ancestors as the land and its people are deeply intertwined. Tapsell explains, "When we walk across our tribal lands we are walking beside our ancestors and using the precedents they have set over the past twenty generations to guide us into the future" (90). Urbanization, literally—its industries, highways, and mass migration of rural communities to cities—inserts itself between Māori: between individuals, tribes, and communities.

The Māori of Pine Block are not, as biculturalist ideology might suggest, nourished and sustained by their land, ancestors, and Pakeha cohabitants. Pine Block is a traumatized community; its geography dramatizes the instability of New Zealand's biculturalism, an invisible boundary separating the slum from wealthy Pakeha homes nearby. From the very start of the novel, protagonist Beth Heke voices the pervasive despondence in Pine Block—her home, like others in the community, a prison. Beth feels inevitably bound to "A mile-long picture of the same thing [. . .] just two-storey, side-by-side misery boxes" and "the going-nowhere nobodies who populate this state-owned, half of us state-fed slum" (Duff 1). The stark contrasts between Beth's poverty and European wealth and privilege consume her. Colonialism shapes Beth's relationship with her surrounds as one of antagonism, inequality, and resentment: "Bastard, she'd think, looking out her back window. Lucky white bastard, at that glimpse of two-storey house through its surround of big old trees and its oh so secure greater surround of rolling green pastureland" (1). Pine Block's location, skirting the spacious Pakeha homes—impossibly visible, yet just out of reach—is a testament to the fallacy of biculturalism.

Colonial privilege affords Pine Block's white neighbors physical space as well as mobility in and beyond that space. In contrast, Beth's Māori body, like her people's Aotearoa, is enslaved by violence while freedom, the fantasy of "a better life," taunts

along the periphery. Moreover, Beth's acquiescence to violence illustrates the masterful art of colonial perpetration: teaching the colonized to violate themselves by strategically replacing their sense of autonomous identity with fear (internalized oppression). Judith Herman defines captivity as prolonged trauma brought about by perpetrators (a) enslaving victims emotionally, mentally, and often physically as well, and (b) persuading victims that they deserve and desire abuse. Fear constructs, in a victim's mind, the perpetrator as "omnipotent" as "his ultimate goal appears to be the creation of a willing victim" (*Trauma and Recovery* 77, 75). Internalized oppression renders victims vulnerable to continued abuse and compromises their ability to escape. In other words, Beth's "just can't help myself" statement about loving "Jake the Muss"[6] indicates that prolonged trauma has taught her to imprison and colonize herself.

Milestone 2: What is the relationship between beginning and ending in Once Were Warriors*?*

This second milestone question can work to disrupt the colonial ideals of civilization and progress. *Once Were Warriors* resists closure at every turn. The external and interior realms of Pine Block are in a constant state of deprivation and mutually constitute one another's hopelessness. In particular, the children of Pine Block embody symptoms of a chronically traumatized community, their playground of abandoned, wrecked cars—"rusty jagged metal edges that add to their infected, half the time pus-oozing wounds"—wounding and preventing healing (Duff 6). As colonialism stunts the children's growth, it also stunts that of adults. Abandonment permeates the homes of Pine Block. Absence narrates physical space: there are no bookcases in the Heke home, and "dwelling after dwelling [Beth's] been to, relations' homes, her own childhood home, friends" are equally "bookless" (4). Beth attributes this absence of books in Māori homes to her people's history prior to colonization, but also to colonialism. She notes that the Māori "didn't have a written language before the white man arrived," which might signify resistance—that Beth and her community have refused linguistic assimilation (4). However, Beth also attributes the epidemic of booklessness to genocide, explaining that without print literacy, the Māori don't "stand a show in this modern world" (4). Colonization instigated the move from oral to written communication, and then withheld access to the very resources for Māori to participate equally in a bicultural nation (e.g., nourishing, safe learning environments for children, books and literacy for adults).

Yet it is within the traumatized spaces of Pine Block and the Hekes' home that Beth tries to make sense of her personal trauma as colonial trauma. The first few pages of the novel—Beth's despairing descriptions of Pine Block—take place within

the Hekes' home. In these moments, Beth connects Māori history prior to colonization and the subsequent loss of Māori culture to conquest, poverty, and alcoholism. Within this same home space, however, loss continues. Beth and Jake throw drinking parties for their Pine Block friends while their children sleep (or, more accurately, wet their beds and shiver with fear). During these parties, Jake often rages—one night, so severely that the following morning, their daughter Grace finds "a pool of [Beth's] blood on the floor at the table where she must've sat after he'd finished with her" (22). The home itself is traumatized, a space both of revelation and death, "The whole scene bathed in sunlight pouring in through the black cloth blinds on permanent B for broken [. . .] the floorboards sticky with partly dried beer, and cigarette butts everywhere" (23). The home, like Beth's body, is in a state of traumatic excess—desperately needing care, yet caving in on itself.

When Beth catches a glimpse of her battered face in the mirror—"if you could call it a face [. . .] beaten to a barely recognisable pulp [. . .] the right eye puffed shut, nose broken—again—lower lip swollen with a deep cut [. . .] bruises all over"—she begins to identify how her lot as a battered woman perpetuates her own isolation as well as isolation among her people and family (32). On this very morning, Beth is supposed to appear in court with her son, Mark, charged with shoplifting. Yet she knows her beaten face will betray her—that the judge will see she is an abused woman; that their home is unfit for children; that she is an unfit mother. Beth is caught in the dialectic of trauma, between denial (not going to court, masking the truth of her situation) and telling (going to court, exposing the abuse). Either way, Beth risks losing Mark. And she is right: when Beth fails to show in court, the magistrate says, "I have no choice but to declare [Mark] a ward of the state [. . .] Asking for the next case. Just like that" (29). The fact that Beth parties the night before Mark's court hearing, and that she continues to stay with Jake after multiple beatings, could lead readers to conclude that Beth is "damaged goods" and that she personally created and chose her life circumstances and, therefore, must change them herself.

However, turning to trauma might complicate the extent of Beth's agency here. Turning Mark over to the system is part and parcel of the genocidal mechanism of colonization that has severed many Māori ties to one another—especially those of children to their families—to the land, and to resources that might allow Māori youth to unlearn the vicious cycle of poverty, addiction, and violence. In the aftermath of this most-recent beating from Jake, Beth begins to reflect on the enduring rifts between Māori and Pakeha that continue to subordinate Māori to colonial power. As Beth faces her beaten face, she also confronts stereotypes of Māori as inherently inferior and in need of taming through the colonizer's religion, education, and political control—stereotypes that associate alcoholism and violence with the "passion" of Māori, not with the genocidal regime of colonization (Duff 37). She

figures it "must be something in the Māori make-up makes us wilder, more inclined to breaking the law [. . .] we have this [. . .] passion. We got passion, us Māoris" (37). While Beth appears to succumb to the logic of stereotypes here, she then goes on to link Māori stereotypes to the fallacy of biculturalism in New Zealand. Europeans are "strangers to most Māori [Beth] know[s]. May as well be from another country, the contact the two races have" (37).

Just a few pages later, Beth reconceptualizes Māori "passion" as a colonial distortion of Māori warrior identity used to render the battle-ready Māori defenseless against colonization. Brendan Hokowhitu explicates this manipulation of warrior as a colonial move used to justify taming Māori men, as colonizers tamed and conquered land, for European benefits like manual labor and sports' spectacle. As Beth explains, the identity marker "warrior" went from signifying tribal pride to signifying savage under colonial rule. "Warrior," that is, became a tool for teaching Māori to colonize themselves—to internalize and enact ruthless violence on oneself and one's family.

> And we used to war all the time, us Māoris. Against each other. True. It's true, honest to God, audience. Hated each other. Tribe against tribe. Savages. We were savages. But warriors, eh. It's very important to remember that. Warriors. Because, you see, it was what we lost when you, the white audience out there, defeated us. Conquered us. Took our land, our mana, left us with nothing. But the warriors thing got handed down, see. Well, sort of handed down; in a mixed-up sense it did [. . .] We—or our men, anyway—are clinging onto this toughness thing, like it's all we got, while the rest of the world's leaving us behind. (Duff 41–2)

In linking Jake's domestic battery with colonial manipulations of "warrior," Beth connects her personal trauma of enduring domestic violence with the collective trauma of colonization—trauma perpetuated through the very welfare system that removes Mark from Beth and that has removed, and continues to remove, many Māori from their homeplaces.

Despite Beth's increasing clarity about her lot in Pine Block, the space between what *is* and what *might be* remains vast. The life Beth believes she wants closely resembles the one she resentfully describes at the beginning of the novel: a white life—one that can rescue her from poverty, addiction, and violence. Beth begins to express hope as she feels her life becoming increasingly "normal." Yet Beth defines this normalcy through the very (white) privilege she criticizes and defines herself against at the beginning of the novel: "a nice car, my husband at my side for once acting like one, my kids in the back, or four out of six, and the fifth coming up, with a boot fulla [sic] picnic food and even a purse with a few bob for extras" (89). While violence and alcoholism continue to boil beneath the surface, Beth's desire for "the

good life"—a life built upon colonial ideals of material security and the stability of nuclear, bonded families—could free them from dysfunction.

Along their way to see Mark, Beth uncovers another layer of her history: her Māori ancestry. As the Hekes pass by Wainui pa, Beth's hometown, Beth begins to identify connections between her own behaviors and those of her parents. Drinking, smoking, and neglect killed her mother and could, if she continues on her current trajectory, kill Beth and her family. Beth recalls that her "Mum died of [. . .] Lung cancer. From smoking these things, Beth looking frowningly at her cigarette before her body had her sucking at it for what it offered. And love" (94–5). The closeness of the words "what it offered" (the temporary comforts of smoking) and "love" suggest that she associates this fleeting pleasure with love. Beth's love for "the fist-happy" Jake mirrors her addiction to cigarettes. Both represent love *and* toxicity to Beth, yet this kind of love is the only one she has learned to recognize, given her mother's example and Māori's history as a colonized people. Beth also ponders how her father never expressed love for her mother "because he was of that school of being gruff, tough, manly – manly – and happier when he was around his mates, drinking"—a theme that reverberates throughout Beth's upbringing, marriage, and her people's history (95). This story of injury and neglect is not just Beth's or her parents' story, but the story of many Māori communities. Moreover, the abusive masculinity embodied in Jake and, by implication, in Beth's father as well, is not simply evidence of affliction in the novel's male characters, but in Māori men collectively.

Toward the end of the novel, this traumatized masculinity turns fatal. Jake rapes his own daughter, Grace, prompting her to commit suicide. Grace's funeral brings to the fore the colonial undertones of her suicide and of Jake's abuse. When the *Te Tupaea*[7] recites the *whakapapa*,[8] Beth's aunt translates: "His ancestry—your ancestry, therefore, Beth, and mine—he recalls all those *tupuna*[9] long gone yet still alive in the heart of every true Māori. He is saying, Beth, that we are what we are only because of our past [. . .] and that we should never forget our past or our future is lost" (118). In hearing these words, Beth begins to compile the many moments of recognition she has throughout the novel. She identifies *lack* as the core of "what ail[s] her people: their lack of knowledge of the past. A history" (118). Beth can sense the presence of an absent history within herself, which will ultimately compel her to leave Jake, reform her own alcoholic life, and transition from victim/survivor to protector. She exclaims, "Who needs anything else when you got the strength of history supporting ya? I mean to say [. . .] A resurgence of fierce pride, a come-again of a people who Once Were Warriors" (121).

After Grace's funeral, Beth reclaims the Heke home *as* a home: a safe haven. Instead of attending the funeral, Jake invites his boozing buddies over, losing

himself amidst drinking and smoking. However, Beth refuses the cycle she has repeated so many times with Jake, exclaiming, "The lot of you—out. Jake jumping up and tellin em, Don't listen to her, she's, you know—Beth, c'mon, dear. These're guests. Only reason he was being reasonable because of Grace. Not my guests. Now go. The lot of you" (140). She then orders Jake to leave, shaming him: "So where was my daughter's father when she was buried? [. . .] Get out, Jake [. . .] Get out! [. . .] And don't you come back, mista [. . .] Ever" (141). As he leaves, "Beth spat full in his face [. . .] standing there, feeling [. . .] feeling almost exultant. Go to hell, mista" (140).

By the end of the novel, Beth returns to the beginning—to the "unkempt, ill-directed, neglected" (1) children described on the first page that now inspire her to create a new home that surpasses the superficial, materialistic fantasy she describes on their family outing to visit Mark. In the home Beth returns to at the end of the novel, the Māori people of Pine Block are still very much on the brink of genocide. Poverty still plagues the community, most everyone living from government check to government check. Yet Beth no longer feels bound to Pine Block's misery. In fact, by staying—more fully inhabiting her home space—Beth finds peace, not to be confused with recovery or closure. Reading Beth's decision to stay in Pine Block *through* trauma theory can challenge assumptions that escaping poverty through upward mobility, a narrative of subscribing to colonial "progress," is ideal. Beth does not flee the site of trauma; rather, she stands within it with greater presence of mind: "Every day; evenings, afternoons when the kids were coming home from school, at nights when they were out on the streets, Beth Heke out there with them. With a message: I'm here to help you. Any of you. You only have to feel you got a problem and I'll listen [. . .] I'll go out onto the streets where all this misery's at and do what I can" (159). In making herself available to the children, Beth claims she will "do [her] best to give you kids your rightful warrior inheritance. Pride in yourself, your poor selves. Not attacking, violent pride but heart pride. Gonna go to my people, my leaders, ask them the way" (161). Beth makes good on her promise, bringing tribal elders to Pine Block to speak to the children about Māori history—"The Treaty of Waitangi [. . .] IT WAS A CONTRACT [. . .] Which – they – broke" (173). Beth's actions are not a cure or erasure of colonial trauma. Rather, Beth provides an opportunity for the Pine Block community to embrace rage—rage directed not at one another but at the trauma of colonization that steals Māori land, breaks treaties, and forces assimilation. Beth cannot provide this opportunity for her own children, several of them already gone to social welfare (son Mark), gangs (son Nig), and death (daughter Grace). She can, however, advocate for the children of others—of parents lost to alcohol and violence themselves.

Milestone 3: What are our responsibilities and rights, as global citizens and university members, in studying colonial trauma in literature?

This third milestone question envisions the classroom and community as inextricably bound spaces. The course might culminate in a community outreach project in which students create public texts that memorialize colonial trauma and that relate ongoing colonial trauma in Aotearoa New Zealand with colonial traumas in students' local, native communities. This project, thus, calls for critical thinking around what constitutes a public memorial, the conventions of various public memorial genres and how they might lend themselves to addressing colonial trauma, and how New Zealand's colonial trauma and participants' communities intersect, wherever they might exist in the world.

Where Colonial Trauma and *Once Were Warriors* Lead Us

A critique of biculturalism, as informed by reading *Once Were Warriors* alongside theoretical work in trauma, serves several important pedagogical functions: (a) it challenges victim-blaming, the colonial glorification of individualism and personal responsibility in domestic violence situations (e.g., trauma intervenes in the common question of, Why she doesn't just leave?); (b) trauma intervenes in the possible secondary wounding that can occur when students encounter the brutal dysfunction in a novel like *Once Were Warriors*; and (c) it encourages students to recognize dysfunction not as a self-generated problem, but as a symptom of colonial trauma.

Victims of violence like Beth, like the Māori, incite bystanders—those of us studying contemporary Māori literature—"to share the burden of pain [. . .] demand[ing] action, engagement, and remembering" (Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 7–8). As teachers, we can teach students to allow trauma to move us, to insist that we witness at the very moment we desire escape, silence, and ignorance; at the very moment we desperately try to just be left alone to go about our own lives. Communal witnessing is vital for recovery from trauma as survivors require community if they are "to rebuild [a] sense of order and justice" in the world (70). Thus, any refusal to perceive trauma in others—and even in ourselves for that matter—not only revictimizes survivors, but also prevents healing from even becoming possible.

Teaching trauma theory in conjunction with *Once Were Warriors* invites students to engage reading as an act of bearing witness. To read as conscious witnesses, however, we must first learn to identify symptoms of trauma, as we are reading the text, and how such symptoms are indicative of colonial trauma. As writing is an act of telling, of bearing witness, reading is an act of listening. Listening through reading necessitates becoming a stranger to what one hears: to subvert the colonial impulse

to master, analyze, and interpret; to become estranged from one's prior knowledges, opinions, beliefs, and values; and to dwell in uncertainty.

Notes

[1] Judith Herman, M.D., helped pioneer the study of PTSD among sexual abuse victims and authored the landmark text, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence–from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* ("The Case of Trauma and Recovery"). She is Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts and Director of Training at the Victims of Violence Program at Cambridge Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[2] Dori Laub, M.D. is a psychoanalyst who has worked extensively with Holocaust survivors and their children. His cited work in this paper appears in "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." While Laub discusses witnessing in the specific context of the Holocaust, his ideas about witnessing also resonate in other prolonged historical traumas such as colonization. Laub is co-author, with Shoshana Felman, of *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Laub).

[3] In *Memory, Trauma, and History*, historian and trauma theorist, Michael S. Roth, gathers essays he has written over the past twenty years "that orbit around the question of how people make sense of the past" and how this sense-making work is taken up in literary scholarship and scholarship about other forms of representing trauma, like film (xiii).

[4] *Aotearoa*, commonly translated as "land of the long white cloud," is the Māori and original word for the land now known as New Zealand (named by Dutch explorer, Abel Tasman, and English explorer, Captain James Cook). Many New Zealanders now refer to New Zealand as Aotearoa New Zealand, in recognition of the country's alleged *bicultural* (Māori and European) identity. In April 2013, the New Zealand Geographic Board sought public opinion on officially changing the country's name from New Zealand to Aotearoa New Zealand ("Aotearoa"). This paper uses Aotearoa, New Zealand, and Aotearoa New Zealand interchangeably.

[5] New Zealand's colonial history can be marked in the historical time period from 1642, when the first European discovered Aotearoa (Dutch explorer Abel Tasman), to 1840, when Māori chiefs signed the Treaty of Waitangi, turning sovereignty (governance) of New Zealand over to the British Crown (Manatū).

[6] Jake's nickname, "The Muss," is short for muscles and signifies his intimidating character—his physical strength, volatility, and tendency toward violent rages against Beth and others in his family and Pine Block community.

[7] *Te Tupaea* is the Māori word for the chief of a Māori tribe.

[8] *Whakapapa* is the Māori word for a traditional reading of Māori genealogy at a formal, communal occasion such as a funeral.

[9] *Tupuna* is a Māori word referring to male ancestry.

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