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“THE RIVER’S FOR EVERYBODY”: THE RIVER CHRONOTOPE AND TRAUMA
HEALING IN MELVIN DIXON’S *TROUBLE THE WATER*

by

KEITH DEMOND FREEMAN JR.

Under the Direction of Scott Heath, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis broadly explores river imagery, which undergirds narrative, plot, and character trajectory in Melvin Dixon’s *Trouble the Water*. In the novel, the Pee Dee River, with its multi-directional flow, reflects the personal journey of the protagonist, Jordan Henry, and figures as a spatialized metaphor by which time and space are organized and articulated. Additionally, this thesis identifies correlations between river imagery and articulations of trauma and trauma recovery in the novel. Ultimately, this thesis argues that via Jordan’s simultaneous geographical and psychological, literal and symbolic journey, the novel offers an African-centered spiritual framework for moving through and healing from trauma.

INDEX WORDS: Trauma, Bakhtin, Chronotope, Space, Time, Healing, River, Africentric

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KEITH DEMOND FREEMAN JR.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Georgia State University

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HEALING IN MELVIN DIXON’S *TROUBLE THE WATER*

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Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

To my mother, who loves me for me.

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I am eternally grateful for all who've advised me during this process. I'd be remiss if I did not first extend a hearty thanks to my committee members, Drs. Heath, Caldwell, and Rajiva. Thank you all for your patience with me during this process. Also, I am grateful for my coworkers and supervisors in the Writing Studio, all of whom consistently kept me on my toes. You all continue to inspire me.

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INTRODUCTION

Using Melvin Dixon's *Trouble the Water* as my primary text, I explore river imagery, upon which narrative, plot, and character trajectory hinge in the novel. Additionally, I identify correlations between this river imagery and articulations of spirituality and traumatic recovery in the novel. Ultimately, I argue that, via the simultaneous geographical and psychological journey of Jordan Henry, the main protagonist, the novel offers an African-centered spiritual framework for moving through and healing from trauma.

Treatments of Dixon's various works of poetry and fiction through a trauma theorist's lens are virtually nonexistent. In fact, his works, both creative and critical, remain largely untouched by the scholarly community, save a few book reviews and a handful of more recent journal and book articles. The bulk of scholarship that has emerged since Dixon's death primarily centers either on his poetry collections or his most influential novel, *Vanishing Rooms*. As a writer, much of what Dixon concerns himself with, thematically speaking, are place, history, family, and identity. Therefore, much of the scholarship written on Dixon explores his examination of sites of memory in the African American experience, negotiation of racial and sexual identities, and interrogation of the relationship between landscapes and identity. Other critics read his works through a queer theoretical lens, exploring the interplay of black masculinity, sexuality, and desire. However, there is very little critical work on *Trouble the Water*. I've successfully tracked down only two book articles: "Without a Cosmology: The Psychospiritual Condition of African American Men in Brent Wade's *Company Man* and Melvin Dixon's *Trouble the Water*" by Melvin B. Rahming and "Transcending the Past to Cross the Jordan" by Yuri V. Stulov.

Written in 1989, *Trouble the Water* chronicles the geographical and psychological, individual and cultural journey embarked upon by Jordan Henry, who as a young child flees his childhood home in Pee Dee, North Carolina and heads North to Philadelphia, settling eventually in Massachusetts. His flight is catalyzed by a childhood wrought by family conflict. At the center of this conflict is his grandmother, Mother Harriet, who contrives to have Jordan kill his father, Jake, believing the latter to be the reason for the death of her daughter and Jordan's mother, Chloe. Prompted by a letter informing him that Mother Harriet is dead, Jordan returns home to not only unleash and confront the haunting memories of his traumatic childhood, but also to facilitate reconciliation and healing amongst his divided family.

Chapter 1 of this thesis focuses specifically on the river motif that flows pervasively throughout the novel. Undoubtedly, the novel's most salient metaphor is the river, manifested as the Pee Dee River. Like the Pee Dee, an actual river which originates in the Appalachian Mountains, runs through South Carolina—the novel's given location—and flows into the Atlantic Ocean, the river as an extended metaphor flows throughout the novel, feeding into and informing each character's development and trajectory. In historical and literary contexts, the river carries multiple symbolic connotations, many of which are often paradoxical. Specific—although certainly not exclusive—to African American religious, spiritual, historical, and literary traditions, the river most often symbolizes healing, freedom, fertility, and the possibility of travel. It, too, can symbolize destruction, division, death, and the promise of escape. The river also reflects many of the ontological, metaphysical and cosmological concerns of human beings, or in this case, literary characters that dwell near it. It is the element around which many civilizations have ordered their lives, and this is unmistakably true with regards to *Trouble the Water*. For example, in the novel, a personified Pee Dee River quite literally beckons Jordan

Henry towards its waters, a divine, spiritual calling that identifies Jordan as the reconciliatory figure in the novel.

Here, I argue that configurations of time and space in the novel take shape through the organizing metaphor of the river. To better understand this imagery, I employ Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the literary chronotope as a foundation for articulating a distinct river chronotope in *Trouble the Water*, and how it's used to articulate configurations of time and space in the novel. Borrowing from Kantian philosophy and Einsteinian science, both of which explore the inseparability of time and space, Bakhtin defines the literary chronotope as the interconnected relationship between time and space in a literary context. In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", Bakhtin writes:

spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This *intersection* [my emphasis] of axes and *fusion* [again, my emphasis] of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84).

Although Bakhtin argues for the inseparability of these two entities, he seems to privilege time when considering the chronotope's influence on "the image of man" in literature. As Sandra Lee Kleppe notes in "The Chronotope and the South, "Because literature is a narrative art and presents us with what Bakhtin terms an 'image of man', time would seem to be the primary category of the literary chronotope" (Kleppe 35). For the purposes of this thesis, I discuss both entities, but with greater respect to space since modes of time in the novel are ordered around and articulated by it.

Melvin Dixon was himself preoccupied with constructions of space in his novels, and how such images lend themselves to a more intimate understanding of the interplay of history and geography, the inherent tensions of the two, and how both inform the construction of black identity in the American South. This preoccupation he also carried over to his critical work. His book of critical essays *Ride Out the Wilderness* (1987) explores these very themes, as it “analyzes images of physical and spiritual landscapes that reveal over time a changing topography in black American quests for selfhood” and asserts that “[i]mages of land and the conquest of identity serve as both a cultural matrix among various texts and a distinguishing feature of Afro-American literary history” (Preface xi). We see Dixon’s preoccupation with these ideas, too, in *Trouble the Water* when we consider centrality of the Pee Dee River to each character’s life, Jordan in particular. The idea that geography and identity are closely linked fits neatly with discussion of Bakhtin’s notion of the “the image of man” and his assertion that the depictions of literary characters are chronotopic in nature. He writes: “[The] chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic” (Bakhtin 85). Character development and trajectory in a novel, then, are derivatives of the respective novel’s configurations of space and time.

That Bakhtin developed his theory of the literary chronotope, in part, to supplement analysis of ancient Greek novels of adventure and romance means that it presents limitations for interpretation of space-time in of the works of Dixon, a black, gay author, writing through a postmodern lens. Whereas the Greek novel is dominated by “adventure time”, whereby the hero undergoes virtually no development, and while the chivalric romance is dominated by a time-space organized around chance happenings, *Trouble the Water* is dominated by configurations of

time unmarried to linearity, and images of spaces upon which character development invariably hinges. Fortunately, the generality with which Bakhtin conceives the chronotope—not to mention the fact that configurations of time and space undergird any novel—has lent itself to consistent stretching and reshaping, as the theory has been applied to a multitude of genres since

For this reason, I turn to Paul Smethurst's *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction*. Smethurst observes that "The postmodern chronotope... registers a shift in sensibilities from predominantly temporal and historiographic imagination to one much more concerned with the spatial and the geographic, as categories in their own right rather than as spatialized histories" (Intro 15). With regards to modern literature, he asserts, "Time here is predominantly, although not exclusively, future-oriented, and space is predominantly abstract, homogenous and expansive (Smethurst, Intro 2). This presents a stark contrast to the works of Dixon, which figures spaces and places as varied, ever evolving, and maintaining an intimate link with characters. And in *Trouble the Water*, constructions of time are not necessarily future-oriented. Specifically, narrative time is not wholly linear. While narration charts events at a relatively steady chronological flow, its flow is frequently ruptured by abrupt temporal shifts, flashbacks, and narration hinged upon the unexpected flow of characters' memories. This bears relevance when considering Smethurst's citing of de-centering, de-differentiation, and non-linearity as features of space-time that characterize, again not exclusively, a generalized postmodern chronotope. This postmodern chronotope, too, focuses on the spatial and geographic, which are in stark contrast to Bakhtin, who emphasized the inseparability of time and space, but often privileged time as the entity most connected to the "image of man" in literature.

Smethurst's privileging of spatial and geographic categories in literary theory can be attributed to W. J. T. Mitchell, who in "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward A General Theory" clarifies the role of spatial form in literary analysis. To start he demystifies the commonly held belief in space as a static entity. In part this idea, he argues, leads to the belief that attention in literary theory to spatial form is somehow "antitemporal", or "an antithesis or alternative to temporal form", pointing out that "spatial form is the perceptual basis of our notion of time, that we literally cannot 'tell time' without the mediation of space" (Mitchell 542). Perhaps his simplest yet most profound point is that the language we use, the metaphors we employ, to describe temporality are all "contaminated" with images of space. With both Smethurst and Mitchell in mind, my reading of the river chronotope in *Trouble the Water* will focus primarily on its spatial component. This will not be done irrespective of discussions of time, but in a manner which illustrates Mitchell's point, that space as a referent enables us to better mediate time and understand its passage. And, what better image than the river, constantly moving, multi-direction in its flow, to push against the idea that spatial form is absolute?

The Pee Dee River, ever-present in and ever flowing throughout the novel, assumes many symbolic connotations throughout the novel, some paradoxical and others that take new direction over the course of the novel. In *Narratologia; Handbook of Narratology*, Marie-Laure Ryan's chapter "Space" discusses the thematization of space. She writes: "An important aspect of the cognitive mapping of narrative texts in the attribution of symbolic meaning to the various regions and landmarks of the narrative world" (Ryan 428). As Ryan suggests, narrative is imbued with a symbolic geography in a plot-functional manner. Most obviously, the river represents an image of the journey, an apt metaphor when considering that *Trouble the Water* is itself a novel concerned with characters and their literal and figurative journeys. It comes as no surprise, then,

that the novel opens with a description of the river, one that not only establishes its centrality as a motif, but also establishes the significance of the theme of travel. More than just a theme of travel, however, the river most notably figures as a metaphor for the potential of transformation and healing.

Chapter 2 of my thesis extends discussion of the river motif in relationship to spirituality and individual and collective traumas. In part, I will refer here to Anissa Janine Wardi, who in her book *Water and African American Memory*, builds not only on the distinct relationship between water and trauma, but also its centrality in African diasporic spiritual and healing traditions. She explores the undercurrent of river imagery in religious rituals (e.g. baptism) and elements of the conjure tradition, highlighting all the while water's curative potential. Worth mentioning is the tendency of many African American expressive traditions to link geography with memory and articulate rivers as a reservoir for African history. As a repository for memory, the river figures as a site where past and present converge, a reservoir for individual and cultural memories. Thus, it proves the perfect image by which to explore and evoke individual and collective trauma.

It is in this way that I intend for my research to address concerns that the theoretical framework outlined by Cathy Caruth and other traditional literary trauma scholars does not sufficiently address collective and cultural traumas, which are embodied in the novel by Jordan and his family's shared trauma. Varied cultural models of traumatic healing are absent from the theoretical framework, because its current paradigm is largely Western and exclusive of non-Western cultures. This framework is problematic because it flattens cultural differences and excludes the social and historical factors that inform an individual or culture's trauma. This too complicates my research, for African diasporic notions of spirituality (e.g. rituals of the Akan of

West Africa; vodoun and Santeria) pervade *Trouble the Water*, and the current literary trauma framework fails to conceptualize of any relationship of healing to spirituality, ritual, and ceremony, although the processes of *testimonial* and *remembering* are depicted as spiritually involved. Various postcolonial scholars, therefore, will inform this aspect of my argument. For example, grounding her argument in Michael Rothberg's suggestion that critics rethink trauma as "collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal, and linguistic)", Irene Visser ("Decolonizing Trauma Theory") argues for the necessity of "openness to non-Western belief systems and ceremonies in the engagement with trauma". Merlinda Bobis continues this argument by pushing for inclusion of spirituality and orality, as well as social and political activism, in conversations about trauma recovery.

Via the text made privy to the particularities of Jordan's personal traumas. This chapter also examines Jordan's childhood trauma, his journey back home, and his and his family's efforts toward healing. The novel gives insight into Jordan's childhood and gives insight into the complex relationship between he and his grandmother, Mother Harriet. While on the one hand Mother Harriet is nurturing and affectionate, she is, on the other hand, conniving, manipulative, and emotionally abusive, which becomes clear her developing plan for Jordan to murder his father, Jake, and thus avenge her daughter's untimely death. A string of abrupt flashbacks reveal the complexity of Mother Harriet's deep vengeance and hatred toward Jake. She primes Jordan for this act at an early age, enlisting him to do chores that might build his strength, all the while attempting to plant in Jordan seeds of hate towards his father. Once made aware of Mother Harriet's plans, Jordan flees to the north, a significant act in that it signals a pursuit of freedom, and reflects the "fight or flight" that is typified as a response to trauma.

Chapter 2 also addresses Jordan's individual journey, during which he is forced to confront Philadelphia's racist past and present, and negotiate his identity as a black professor at a predominantly white institution. Jordan's decision to travel back home to Pee Dee shifts the story from one that chronicles a single, solitary journey to a collective journey that chronicles the Henry family's collective efforts towards healing.

Of interest to me, though, is Jordan's function as mediator in his family. Again, we find entry to discussion of trauma and the potential for recovery through both river imagery and Jordan Henry. It is no coincidence, then, that his character embodies the river, a curative element. It is no coincidence either that he is named for the Jordan River, a prominent motif of healing, transformation, and salvation in Christianity, yes, but also in many African diasporic religious and spiritual traditions. When considering constant reference to the river as a representation of the "flow of life" that runs through an individual, water, then, becomes a synecdoche of the human. Bodies of water, particularly their flow, have been likened to the blood circulating in our bodies. And after Mason tells young Jordan "about a river inside him", the latter "[imagines] himself brown and wide and muscular with age. A liquid coursing inside him, more nourishing than blood" (78). These correlations, however, between human bodies and bodies of water extend beyond metaphor when we consider the biological concerns that establish water as a vital component to human life and survival. These correlations underscore Jordan's role as healer.

To this point, of interest is "Transcending the Past to Cross the Jordan: Trouble the Water by Melvin Dixon", in which Yuri V Stulov explores the relationship between rivers and individual and cultural memory, as manifested through Jordan. I intend to use this source to further interrogate Jordan's sacred role as facilitator of peace and healing amongst his family.

Also, I am interested in Melvin B. Rahming's "Without a Cosmology: The Psychospiritual Condition of African American Men in Brent Wade's *Company Men* and Melvin Dixon's *Trouble the Water*", which explores the inner life of black male characters in the African American literary tradition, and posits that absence of a cosmology—particularly an African-centered one—prohibits them from reconciling concerns of identity formation. Of interest, though, is Rahming's illumination of Mother Harriet's deathbed scene as depicting a distinctly African-oriented ritual of psychic and emotional healing. That forgiveness is used to transform hate in this scene illustrates the power and necessity of Jordan, as Rahming puts it, "[locating] African spiritual history as his healing source".

Despite the limitations of literary trauma theory, sociology, psychology, and psychotherapeutics abound with material of this nature. Thus, in keeping with literary trauma theorists' tradition (e.g. Cathy Caruth grounds her literary trauma theories in the works of van Der Kolk, a trauma psychologist), I will employ an interdisciplinary approach, employing a few psychological and sociological sources to undergird my reading of *Trouble the Water*.

CHAPTER 1

Many Rivers, One Source: The Chronotope of the River

“Each was a separate river remembering its source; each created a significant flow of theme and political passion ever circling the ancestral landscape, moving outward for independence and transformation of traditional oral forms of expression, and returning for renewal, regeneration, reunion with the past made present through language.”

(Melvin Dixon, “Rivers Remembering Their Source” 31)

In his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”, Mikhail Bakhtin highlights the relationship between time and space in literary narrative, designating the term *chronotope* to signify this relationship. However, exploration of the relationship between the temporal and spatial is not new. In fact, Bakhtin grounds his literary theory of the chronotope in the philosophies of Immanuel Kant and the scientific conclusions of Albert Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. Immanuel Kant, who in *Critique of Pure Reason* devotes prominent attention to space and time, concludes that time and space are *a priori* entities; that is, their validity is not predicated on empirical evidence. They are, as Bakhtin puts it, not transcendental, but “forms of the most immediate reality” (85). Albeit a general and ambivalent definition, Bakhtin attributes “*chronotope* (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Specific to this literary chronotope, Bakhtin writes:

spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This *intersection* [my emphasis] of axes and *fusion* [again, my emphasis] of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84).

Use of the words *intersection* and *fusion* allude to Bakhtin's emphasis on the interconnectedness of space and time. Although there are points at which Bakhtin privileges a discussion of time in narrative, rather than positioning either as subordinate, or even equal, to the other, he merely insists on their inseparability.

Bakhtin conceptualizes genres as chronotopic, too, arguing that a novel's respective chronotope defines the genre to which that text belongs. He writes: "The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions" (84-85). The Greek novel, for example, is dominated by an "adventure time," by which the hero undergoes virtually no interior development; and a time-space matrix organized around chance happenings dominates the chivalric romance. Drawing specifically on Bakhtin's theory of the chronotopic motif, which maintains that constructions of time-space are often organized around a recurring image, such as the road in Western and travel literature or the castle in Gothic literature, my thesis will outline the distinct chronotope represented in Melvin Dixon's *Trouble the Water*.

Written in 1989, *Trouble the Water* charts the simultaneous physical (i.e. geographical) and psychological journey of the protagonist, Jordan Henry, who is forced to not only unleash and confront the trauma of his tumultuous childhood but also facilitate reconciliation and healing amongst his divided family. The most salient metaphor, or motif, running throughout this novel, is the river, manifested as the Pee Dee River. Like the Pee Dee, an actual river which originates in the Appalachian Mountains and runs through South Carolina—the novel's given location—feeding eventually into the Atlantic Ocean, the river as an extended metaphor flows throughout the novel, feeding into and informing each characters' development and trajectory. As Marie-Laure Ryan notes in a chapter on "space" in *Narratology; Handbook of Narratology*, narrative

is imbued with a symbolic geography, often in a plot functional manner. On this note she writes, “An important aspect of the cognitive mapping of narrative texts is the attribution of symbolic meaning to the various regions and landmarks of the narrative world” (Ryan 428). Here, I argue that the Pee Dee river functions as the symbolic geography of the novel, and representation of time and space in the novel “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible” through the organizing metaphor of this river. In Bakhtinian terms, then, *Trouble the Water* is dominated by a distinct river chronotope, through which all aspects of the narrative, from plot to language construction, to character development, are all intimately connected. Like a river, multi-directional in its flow, this chronotope is not fixed, but rather constitutes a tightly woven matrix, a multiplicity of time-space relations that often shift as the novel flows along its narrative tract. Primarily, though, the river figures as a spatial metaphor for Jordan’s continuous, multi-directional journey. Like “the river remembering its source,” Jordan’s journey, during which he both escapes upstream and makes a return downstream, is about locating and returning to his place of origin—his home in Pee Dee, South Carolina—and mediating his painful past with a future that bears the promise of healing and reconciliation, both of for his own identity and his family’s. Additionally, this river chronotope is dominated by constructions of time that aren’t married to linearity and, in fact, seem to insist on deviation from a traditional narrative flow.

That Bakhtin developed his theory of the literary chronotope to supplement analysis of ancient Greek novels of adventure and romance means that it presents limitations for interpretation of space-time in of the works of Dixon, a black, gay author, writing through a postmodern lens. Fortunately, the generality with which Bakhtin conceives the chronotope—not to mention the fact that configurations of time and space undergird any literary work—has lent itself to consistent stretching and reshaping, as the theory has been applied to a multitude of

genres since. To better understand the chronotope that governs my primary text, I turn to *The Postmodern Chronotope: Reading Space and Time in Contemporary Fiction*, in which Paul Smethurst and other theorists chart the multitude of temporal and spatial shifts in literary theory. Beginning by signaling the modern to postmodern shift in literature Smethurst highlights “that postmodernism has changed the way the past is re-presented, the contemporary apprehended and the future envisioned, and it has changed fundamentally perceptions of space and place” (Smethurst 1). While time in modernist thought is strictly linear, or “future-oriented” and space is fixed and absolute, Smethurst shows that “de-centering, de-differentiation, [and] non-linearity” characterize postmodernism.

Fittingly, constructions of time in *Trouble the Water* are not necessarily future-oriented or wholly linear. While events are charted at a relatively steady chronological flow, narrative flow is often ruptured by abrupt temporal shifts, flashbacks, and bits of narration hinged upon the unexpected flow of characters’ private thoughts and haunting memories. These flashbacks virtually dominate the story and serve to fill in narrative gaps and piece together the story of the Henry family. To come back to the river, its flow mirrors these temporal shifts that, facilitated by stream of conscious thoughts, connect the past with the present. “Water floats memories,” as Wayne Franklin says in the foreword to T.S. McMillin’s book *The Meaning of Rivers*. This quotation underscores the river’s function as a fitting metaphor for these temporal shifts and connections, as rivers and streams often connect with others, comprising a network called a watershed. Constructions of time in the novel is a topic I will return to later in this thesis.

Additionally, the postmodern chronotope concerns itself primarily with the spatial and geographic, which presents a stark contrast to Bakhtin, who emphasized the inseparability of time and space, but often privileged time as the entity most connected to the “image of man” in

literature. Smethurst's prioritizing of spatial and geographic categories in literary theory can be attributed in part to "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward A General Theory" in which W. J. T. Mitchell clarifies the role of spatial form in literary analysis. To start, he demystifies the commonly held belief in space as a static entity. In part this idea, he argues, leads to the belief that attention in literary theory to spatial form is somehow "antitemporal", or "an antithesis or alternative to temporal form", pointing out that "spatial form is the perceptual basis of our notion of time, that we literally cannot 'tell time' without the mediation of space" (Mitchell 542). Perhaps his most profound point is that the language we use, the metaphors we employ, to describe temporality are all "contaminated" with images of space. With both Smethurst and Mitchell in mind, my reading of the river chronotope in *Trouble the Water* focuses primarily on its spatial component. This is not done irrespective of discussions of time, but in a manner that illustrates Mitchell's point that space as a referent enables us to better mediate time and understand its passage.

Dixon was himself preoccupied with constructions of space in his novels and with how such constructions lend themselves to a more intimate understanding of the interplay of history and geography, the inherent tensions of the two, and how both inform the construction of black identity. He carried this preoccupation over to his critical work as well. His book of critical essays *Ride Out the Wilderness* (1987) explores these very themes, as it "analyzes images of physical and spiritual landscapes that reveal over time a changing topography in black American quests for selfhood" and asserts that "[i]mages of land and the conquest of identity serve as both a cultural matrix among various texts and a distinguishing feature of Afro-American literary history" (Preface xi). We see further Dixon's preoccupation with these ideas in *Trouble the Water* when we consider centrality of the Pee Dee River to each character's life. The idea that

geography and identity are closely linked fits neatly with Bakhtin's notion of the "the image of man", his assertion that depictions of literary characters are chronotopic in nature: "[The] chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic" (Bakhtin 85). With regards to *Trouble the Water*, it is the river that figures as the model for much of the characters' movements and transformations. Considering its long, continuous, and multi-directional flow, as well as the fact that it is vital to human's ability to travel, what better image than the river to represent the journey?

The Pee Dee River, ever-present in and ever-flowing throughout the novel, assumes many symbolic connotations throughout the novel, some paradoxical and others, which take new direction over the course of the novel. Both in an historical and literary context, rivers have received a plethora of symbolic connotations, many of which are often paradoxical and ambivalent. Specific—although certainly not exclusive—to African American religious, spiritual, historical, and literary traditions, the river most often symbolizes healing, freedom, fertility, and the possibility of travel. It, too, can symbolize destruction, division, death, and the promise of escape. The river also reflects many of the ontological, metaphysical and cosmological concerns of those who dwell near it. Most obviously, though, the Pee Dee River in represents an image of the journey, an apt metaphor when considering that the novel concerns itself with characters and their literal and figurative journeys. It comes as no surprise, then, that the novel opens with a description of the river, one that not only establishes its centrality as a motif, but also establishes the significance of the theme of travel. Dixon writes:

Wide and long the Pee Dee started way up in the Blue Ridge as the Yadkin River. It flowed south and east until it joined the Uharie in the Piedmont and gave its name and

granite color to the village near Lilesville, midway between Wadesboro and Rockingham. It would reach far down into South Carolina, gather red clay and yellow silt as the Little Pee Dee, ease into the Winyah Bay at Georgetown, then break water at the Atlantic.

(Dixon 7)

Among the first of many first descriptive passages of the river, this one takes stock of its multidirectional journey, of the towns and principalities it flows through, and of the transformations—which include changes in name, shape, and size of the river—it undergoes before rejoining its source.

As a metaphor of the journey, the river image bears some similarity to the road chronotope. Per Bakhtin, the road chronotope signals “both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement. Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road)” (Bakhtin 243-244). The road figures as a kind of threshold, one whereby the potential for unexpected encounters can occur, and the lives of individuals, who might not ordinarily cross paths, converge. Per narration in *Trouble the Water*, both the river and road run parallel to each other in the small town of Pee Dee, North Carolina; and Dixon often highlights these parallels in descriptions of the river as “rushing downstream in a noisy traffic of its own” (8). By way of these two spaces we witness characters presented with the possibility of movement. It seems no mere coincidence, then, that points of overlap abound between these two spaces of travel. However, parallels with the river aside, the road presents limits for defining and articulating this novel’s chronotope, limits which does not bind the river metaphor. What is more, in ways the road does not, the river carries with its flow a barrage of historical, spiritual, and even biological connotations that reinforce its intimate relationship with the characters.

Undoubtedly, no character maintains as central a relationship with the river than the protagonist, Jordan Henry. In many ways, Jordan embodies the river, as he is described as an extension of it in a metaphorical and spiritual sense. Other characters, too, maintain a relatively intimate relationship to water, considering constant reference to the river as a representation of the “flow of life” that runs through an individual. Water, then, becomes a synecdoche of the human. For example, there is Jake, Jordan’s father whose hand lines are described as “wide spider web of lines that marked him like the tributaries of a river reaching for the veins in his wrist” (56). Fittingly, bodies of water, particularly their flow, have been likened to the blood circulating in our bodies. And after Mason tells young Jordan “about a river inside him”, the latter “[imagines] himself brown and wide and muscular with age. A liquid coursing inside him, more nourishing than blood” (78). These correlations, however, between human bodies and bodies of water extend beyond metaphor when we consider the biological concerns that establish water as a vital component to human life and survival. Building on this idea of water integral to our biological makeup, Peter Swanson writes:

One could say that each of us—every man, woman and child—is a small river; ebbing...flowing...seeking replenishment. A 1-percent deficiency of water in our body makes us thirsty, 5 percent causes a slight fever; at 10-percent we become immobile. A 12-percent loss of water and we die. There is no option, no alternative, no substitute. From the elderly to the young, the rivers within each of us need a continuous supply of clean, fresh water. (Swanson 9)

This excerpt, although very exacting in its biological explanation, enables an even greater understanding of water’s importance and connection to characters in *Trouble the Water*.

Interestingly, Jordan and the river's relationship often registers as symbiotic, an idea emphasized when considering that many of Jordan's movements, geographically and directionally speaking, parallel those of the Pee Dee River. The river moves downstream, its natural course of direction, and filters into its main source, the Atlantic Ocean. By the same token, Jordan, having fled home as a child for safety and security in the north, eventually travels back to the south—downstream, to keep the metaphor going. Interestingly, our first introduction to Jordan in the novel—much like our introduction to the Pee Dee River—details he and his wife Phyllis's movement, as they travel up and later down a winding road in the mountains of Massachusetts. This scene, among others, in a micro sense, mimics Jordan's original migration, and underscores the idea that Jordan is in constant movement, much like “the Pee Dee River, as brown and restless as he [Jordan]” (73).

This restlessness, this ambivalence typifies the river motif in the novel, as the river's symbolic connotations so often shift, or maintain simultaneous, yet contradictory meanings. At once, the river represents the potential for geographical travel and migration, and a route of escape from danger and towards freedom: At once, the river represents Jordan's salvation and his potential undoing. For Jordan the Pee Dee river comes to represent the possibility of two choices: heed his grandmother, Mother Harriet, who desires for Jordan to avenge the death of his mother, Chloe, by killing his father, Jake; or protect Jake by fleeing town, a move which would allow Jordan to escape the haunting memories of the death of his best friend, Mason, and the “solid hate” of Mother Harriet. “He could go wherever the river led”, but “which river?” a question the narrator poses, a question most apropos considering the multi-directional flow of the river. What is more, this question shows that the river, at once, seems poised to either claim Jordan or free him, either outcome wholly contingent upon his personal choice. Water's dual

meaning, here, registers as a link between both life and death, freedom and bondage, and points still again to the inconstancy of its meaning throughout the novel.

Worth mentioning, too, is that the river figures as a literal and metaphorical site of resistance and escape in the novel. Unsurprisingly, then, much of Jordan's movements throughout the novel are indicative of his inclination towards resistance. The bulk of his childhood and adulthood is spent pushing against the tide, so to speak. As T.S. McMillin writes in *The Meaning of Rivers*, we typically only choose to go upriver out of a necessity, but that still "Going against the stream is a purposeful endeavor, often dependent upon an external power source...and almost always driven by a profound desire to obtain something reputed to reside somewhere up the river" (McMillin 61). The north represents to a young Jordan a promise of freedom from his shackled existence at home, and to adult Jordan the illusion of racial equity in Massachusetts. It figures as a sort of North Star, at once illuminating Jordan's route of escape, and becoming the very route of his escape. Fittingly, the sign for the Pee Dee River depicts a "star-like pattern of creeks and lakes fingering out of the mountain" from which the Pee Dee begins. The river's function as a guide is underscored when Mason "[tells] him [Jordan] about a river inside him he could follow away from [home]" (77). This is perhaps one of the river's most paradoxical connotations, for the north itself functions as a rather fragile symbol of freedom and refuge, considering it offered very little, if any, refuge for enslaved and freed black people from the oppression of slavery and Jim Crow. Still, in charting Jordan's escape, the novel harks to the historical resistance to slavery by enslaved Africans via various waterways. To refer again to its connotations with travel, to journey across rivers meant to move towards deliverance and freedom. Worth noting is that the Pee Dee River does not merely hark to resistance in a metaphorical, but also in a literal and historical sense.

The Pee Dee River, the given space by which Dixon constructs his novel, is also the literal site of the first European settlement, San Miguel de Guadalupe, as well as the first known rebellion amongst enslaved Africans and Native Americans—the Cofitachiqui. This settlement, established by Spaniard Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón in 1526, lay somewhere between the Winyah Bay near Georgetown, SC and the mouth of the Pee Dee River. The text only very subtly addresses this history: “Men who traveled, moved rivers, fought back like the Indians who stood on the banks of the Yadkin hundreds of years ago and yelled to the white settlers, ‘Come on over and fight.’” (82). It is unsurprising, then, that Jordan’s movements in the novel are ones of resistance when considering this historical revolt, as well as the fact that Jordan might be named for another river in South Carolina, the Santee, which runs parallel to the Pee Dee River and was renamed the Jordan River by Allyon and his band of Spaniards (Peck 185-188). Indeed, the text reveals that Mother Harriet and Addie Miller, her close friend, gave Jordan his name “for the river Chloe [Jordan’s mother] had crossed” (18).

The novel, then, implicitly articulates the inseparability of a space from its given historical time and context. As Bakhtin notes, “[a] literary work’s artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality is defined by its chronotope” (Bakhtin 243). And, as we can see there is an actual reality that correlates with, and often parallels, the time-space relationships in *Trouble the Water*. In *FTC and Art and Answerability*, Bakhtin terms the interconnectedness between the fictional and real worlds as a “given.” And, in her essay, “Chronotope and the South”, Sandra Kleppe expounds upon this idea, as well as Bakhtin’s assertion that “Man’s outer body is *given*; his outer boundaries and those of his world are *given* (*Art and Answerability* 95). Kleppe herself writes on the *givenness* of space: “...space is not only considered necessary to the creative act, but also one in which space originated outside of the artistic imagination. In other words, the

artist does not impose just any kind of space on a work of art, but receives and reworks what is already given” (Kleppe 37). This harks to Smethurst’s point that the postmodern chronotope is characterized by de-differentiation, which is to say a conflation of history and fiction. With postmodernism, this boundary between fictional and real worlds becomes destabilized—albeit never completely erased. This point is further underscored by the fact that Pee Dee, SC, the novel’s primary setting, is the birthplace of Melvin Dixon’s father, Handy Dixon. His mother, too, was born in the Carolinas, and both parents participated in the widespread migration of African Americans in the 1940s and 50s (Hoyrd 129). The symbolic terrain of this novel is imbued with a historicity that connects Dixon’s personal life and upbringing with the movement and quests for selfhood that characterize much of the African American experience.

The physical space of this novel, then, becomes charged with the energy, or aura, of events that once occurred on its terrain. Bakhtin alluded to this aura when discussing the chronotope of the castle as a space where ‘the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it [the castle] in visible form’ (FTC, 246). We see textual evidence of this when Mitch and his brother Beauford, both younger cousins of Jordan, are playing along a trail lining Pee Dee’s shore: “the tongue of the trail had been pounded hard by many feet, as if boys their age had also visited the Pee Dee decades earlier and left their mark” (15). After the death of Jordan’s best friend, Mitch, on the road that runs parallel to the river, Jordan cannot bear to go near the Pee Dee River, as it can only remind him of the loss of his friend. Similarly, Maggie, Mitch’s sister, is opened and overtaken by her own traumas at mere mention of the Pee Dee River. From these examples we see, too, that these historical moments also persist in the memories of individuals.

In this way, the river becomes an embodied metaphor that links geography and memory; as a reservoir of individual and cultural memories, the river figures as a site where past and

present invariably converge. There is an inclination—and not at all an arbitrary one—in many African American expressive traditions to articulate rivers as sites of history and memory. Undoubtedly, Melvin Dixon was aware of these connections, as he often wrote about the way black writer’s use and construct memory. In his essay “The Black Writer’s Use of Memory”, Dixon notes that “memory is almost sacred, absolute, concretely rooted in ‘spaces, gestures, images, objects’” (55). Much like Dixon, Langston Hughes, in his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, employs the river as metaphor for the flow of life and the passage of time, establishing it as a repository of memory, and underscoring, yet again, the interconnectedness of human bodies with bodies of water: “I’ve known rivers:/ I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the/ flow of human blood in human veins.” This preoccupation with the river as metaphor has much to do with black writer’s concerns about reconnecting with a distinct cultural history, a concern that Dixon himself seeks to tease through not just in *Trouble the Water*, but also in most of his works.

Melvin Dixon applies this river metaphor when recounting the function of the works of prominent Harlem Renaissance and Negritude writers. He states:

Each [the works] was a separate river remembering its source; each created a significant flow of theme and political passion ever circling the ancestral landscape, moving outward for independence and transformation of traditional oral forms of expression, and returning for renewal, regeneration, reunion with the past made present through language” (Dixon 31).

Here, the metaphor is embodied even in the language Dixon uses to describe it, as he speaks of a “flow”, of “renewal”, “regeneration”, and “reunion”, all ideas that are associated with water imagery. The main point, though, is that the river is an element that facilitates this journey of

discovery, or re-discovery rather, of locating and reconnecting with a place of origin. Both Dixon and Hughes, along with countless other black writers, affirm then a shared consciousness that transcends individual experience, and is articulated by configurations of space imprinted with memory. To relate it back to the text, Jordan is a character unmoored and severed from his cultural past, a fact that is problematized by his desire to escape his painful childhood and his resistance to his divine calling. “You don’t even know who you are”, Mother Harriet says to a young Jordan, a line that prefigures his placelessness and the muddled identity he’ll have to reconcile as an adult. Ironically, Jordan runs from and manages to forget his painful past, moves to Connecticut where he becomes a history professor and is, for the first time, forced to confront America’s complicated relationship with race and its “potentially tragic consequences in his family’s reconciliation” (Dixon 69). Jordan must tap into his memory and, as Dixon writes, “transmit the pride of cultural revalidation”. The river, then, as a repository of individual and cultural memory, and as site of recovery, serves as his reconnection to the past.

The Pee Dee River, as a metaphor for memory and the flow of time, facilitates these reconnections. As noted before, time in *Trouble the Water* maintains a relatively steady chronological flow, one that is largely non-linear and hinges upon memory, “which is often expressed episodically and through visceral imagery independent of chronology, very much like a dream, reveals itself often as metaphor” (Dixon 63). Narrative is disrupted by the natural, often unrestrained flow of memory through various characters. If we consider time as constituting the past, present, and future, then, much like human minds, the river too contains these abstract temporal entities. To this note, Anissa Janine Wardi’s term “oceanic time” and writer John Edgard Wideman’s notion of Great Time bears relevance, as both offer extend the trope of water as a metaphor for time. Wideman writes:

Great Time is the ancestral time. It's non-linear. It is, if anything, like a river, like the sea—and we kind of swim through it. It's non-linear because it's always been here... It's like an ocean. So as you pass through it, you are not going in one direction, you are floating. You are immersed in it. It is the medium that holds everything and always has. So there is no beginning, no end. You are just as likely to bump into someone from fifty years ago as to bump into someone you saw the day before. Not only the living, but the dead—everything that has happened—is floating around in this medium of time.

(Wideman 267)

The phrase “passage of time” is itself paradoxical, considering this metaphor of time as being non-linear and directionless, bearing no clearly delineated beginning and end. Also, the metaphor proves even more salient when we consider the natural, often indiscriminate flow of water and how we are often swept up and carried by the currents of memory.

As we learn from writers like Melvin Dixon, African American literature frequently associates a recovery of the past with a symbolic, sometimes literal, charting of the river's flow, eventually leading to a return to the “originary waters of the Atlantic Ocean.” And, as Anissa Janine Wardi further writes, “while all water is interrelated [...], each body of water has its own composition and flow, and each has affected—and has been affected differently by—African American history” (Wardi 19). Interestingly, this preoccupation to reckon with and, ultimately, express varied social, racial, and cultural identities reflects much of what Smethurst highlights about postmodernism and its subsequent alterations of the literary chronotope. For example, he highlights that postmodernism is “haunted by the scepter of self-consciousness”—an idea that prevails in African American and diasporic literature—as well as the uncertainty of direction “and ambivalent approaches towards the past and the future” (2). *Trouble the Water* then

implicitly explores much of these concerns through its extended water metaphor. The river, characterized by its constant movement, its transformations, and its tendency to flow towards its source, all the while remaining the same entity, makes it an apt metaphor to register the consistent alterations of the boundaries of time and space in literature.

CHAPTER 2

The Role of Landscapes and Non-Western Rituals in Traumatic Healing

Wade in the water
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water,
God's gonna trouble the water.
 -Traditional

He had measured his steps from the porch to the crest of the red dirt driveway going down. Then he let himself go. He ran without taking a breath or looking back, trying to shake off Mother Harriet's anger, brush off the seeds and chicken feed she threw at him and bury them underfoot. He skipped over gullies and dips in the road until he reached the tongue of asphalt that circled the Pee Dee River, as brown and restless as he. (Dixon 74)

I begin the chapter with this extract from *Trouble the Water* for two reasons. First, this scene illustrates the first of several responses by protagonist Jordan Henry to his childhood trauma, that is, his escape from his home in Pee Dee, South Carolina. A series of flashbacks reveal that the death of Jordan's best friend, Mitch, and repeated attempts by his grandmother, Mother Harriet, to train and coerce Jordan to kill his own father, ruptures Jordan's perception of reality, safety, and self, causing him to flee his trauma-inflicted childhood home. Second, this scene is yet another that underscores Jordan's distinct attraction and connection to the Pee Dee River, "brown and restless as he". As Jordan reaches the "gurgling water" of the river, the narrator describes him as feeling "hollow," "eaten through and through with Harriet Henry's [Mother Harriet, his grandmother] hate" (74), a physical description that describes Jordan's emotional numbness or despair, which may very well be symptomatic of his trauma.

Chapter 1 of this thesis addresses how Jordan's identity is connected to and shaped by the landscape. As Bakhtin puts it, "the image of man [and woman]" is chronotopic, meaning it is influenced by configurations of time and space in the novel. In this chapter, I extend this conversation about spatial imagery in the novel to include how it functions as a metaphoric and

literal site of trauma and for trauma recovery. According to Michele Balaev, literature frequently makes use “of landscape imagery to convey the effects of trauma and remembering” (xi). In *Trouble the Water*, the landscape of home figures at once as the locus of trauma and memory in the novel, as a point of reference for Jordan to mediate his disrupted perception of self and reality, and as a space that bears the promise of healing and restoration for Jordan and his family. This chapter also addresses how the novel—through Jordan’s return to his birthplace—offers an African-based perspective on healing grounded in the Akan principle of *Sankofa*, which emphasizes the importance of “going back” to fetch what was lost in the past. That the land, and particularly the Pee Dee River, has the capacity to heal is suggested in the scene where, after splashing his face and body with the river’s waters, Jordan’s “sweat washed free and his body cooled. His heart stopped pounding” (74). This act grounds Jordan and allows him to “think of what he should do [next]” (74). It is only via Jordan’s return to his place of origin, his reconnection with the land and past—often mediated by the Pee Dee River—that he and his family can achieve healing.

First, it is important to locate and understand Jordan’s trauma, as well as his emotional responses to trauma. Doing so necessitates an overview of traditional and current trends in literary trauma theory. The word trauma itself means, “wound” and has been used to refer to a wound inflicted upon both the body and mind. In psychology, trauma quite broadly refers to a person’s emotional response to an event or situation that at once overwhelms and disrupts mental faculties that govern perceptions of self and reality. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth, the pioneer of trauma studies in literature, describes trauma as an experience so abrupt and intense that it causes a rupture or division in consciousness, prohibiting the mind from later retrieving and properly integrating the memory.

The idea of trauma as a rupture comes from Freud, whose ideas on trauma undergird Caruth's argument that a traumatic experience can never be fully integrated by memory in the moment, and that, as a "belated experience", the memory of a traumatic event can be triggered and relived, but not consciously or voluntarily accessed. Undergirding Caruth's model is the idea that trauma is both irretrievable by memory—only through repetitive flashbacks can it be engaged—and unrepresentable by language, as it "stands outside representation altogether." An individual then can only make attempts to integrate the traumatic experience into the regular memory, which is conceptualized as separate and distinct from traumatic memory.

Caruth's traditional model holds that fragmentation and dissociation, an important aspect of the model that informs the work of most literary trauma scholars, characterize emotional responses to trauma. Employing the work of psychologists Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk as foundation, Caruth suggests that fragmentation and dissociation are causally linked to trauma, and that all emotional responses to trauma invariably cause dissociation. Her characterization of the traumatized individual's consciousness as fragmented supports her argument that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). In other words, because of the fragmentation of consciousness that results from trauma, the brain is unable to fully process the traumatic event even belatedly. Caruth argues then that trauma is almost virtually unknowable and unrepresentable by mind and language.

How then can an individual adequately work through symptoms of trauma if the original event is inaccessible? With regards to the potential for recovery from trauma, Caruth relies upon Judith Herman's ideas on remembering, which hold that healing and recovery are made possible

through the act of testimony, or talking to another trusted individual. Herman purports that all memories are fixed and stored in the brain exactly as they occurred in real time. Enshrining fragments of the initial event in a narrative aids in unlocking previously inaccessible memories. Paradoxically, he also maintains that traumatic memories are created and stored differently from “normal” memories.

It is important to note that this argument problematizes van der Kolk’s idea that trauma is “prelinguistic” and “unspeakable”. On this he writes, “When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience a ‘speechless terror.’ The experience cannot be organized on a linguistic level” (172). Herman, van der Kolk, and Caruth’s views of trauma as pathological, dissociative, and unrepresentable create a universal standard by which we understand the causes, symptoms, and potential healing of trauma. However, these views are narrow and reductive, failing to account for responses to trauma that belie these characterizations.

Literary theorist, Michelle Balaev, on the other hand, argues that manifestations and outcomes of trauma are far more varied than the traditional model represents. Balaev warns against the prevailing rhetoric of dissociation and points to a variety of psychological sources that suggest the multiplicity of responses to trauma. In *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, Balaev encourages a pluralistic model of trauma that takes into account a multitude of psychological studies, refuses marriage to the idea that trauma primarily produces dissociation, and “addresses the spectrum of traumatic imagery in literature” (xiii). Balaev does acknowledge the legitimacy of pathological responses like dissociation, but not irrespective of other equally legitimate responses. It is worth noting that Jordan does dissociate from the present. For example, while driving with his wife, Phyllis, Jordan involuntarily slips into an out-of-the-blue

flashback. As he “inched his way around the hairpin curves and through much of the increasing fog”, Jordan becomes consumed with the memory of his best friend Mitch’s death. Dixon writes:

Jordan followed another car closely, using the red taillights as a guide. But what if a skinny black boy crossed the road with his fishing pole and a string of flapping, curve-tailed fish? Would he find the brakes fast enough? What about the blood and stinking scales on his hands? Jordan concentrated so hard on the thickening fog that he found himself remembering his own child voice and Mother Harriet’s advice. (73)

This flash back scene typifies the dissociative response to trauma that severs an individual from the present moment. Here, Dixon uses free-indirect discourse to slip into Jordan’s consciousness and embody the dissociative symptoms of his trauma. Literary critics usually latch onto evidence in texts of narrative dissociation and silence to substantiate claims of these symptoms’ causal relationship to trauma. Once again, though, Balaev warns against such conflation and instead highlights that these “narrative omissions must also be viewed as rhetorical techniques that convey the assorted meanings of trauma”, and “attempts to embody the psychological ‘action’ of traumatic memory or dissociation” (22).

Again, while Jordan’s speechlessness resounds throughout the novel, it is not his only emotional response to his trauma. More importantly, as Balaev notes, the multiplicity of potential responses an individual might have to trauma are invariably influenced by social and cultural factors, “such as individual personality traits, family history, culture, geographical location, place, and historical period that shape the meaning of an experience” (xiv). Most often, Jordan, who is emotionally disconnected from his past and the circumstances of his trauma, exhibits silence in his interactions with Phyllis, which stifles intimacy in the relationship and, ultimately,

strains their marriage. Jordan is in many respects emotionally unavailable, as is evidenced by his speechlessness. However, this is hardly due to a pathological inability to speak, as the traditional literary trauma model suggests. “In terms of responses to trauma, the difficulty of speaking about a traumatic experience is not necessarily due to the intrinsic quality of trauma to defy all representation, but due to variable factors, including individual, social, and cultural factors that influence the remembrance and narration of the experience” (Balaev 10).

A closer reading of the text reveals that cultural expectations of manhood and narratives of shame around exercising vulnerability stifle Jordan’s speech. At just ten-years-old Jordan has to navigate the emotional terrain of dealing with the tragic death of his best friend Mason. In a fit of despair, he says, “Gran’Mama, it’s like my stomach and my insides got no bottom” (80). He then begs for Mother Harriet’s comfort as he works through his grief:

“Hold me, Gran’Mama. Hold me”

“Naw, boy. You ten years old now.”

“Gran’Mama. I’m cold. I’m scared. Please hold me.”

“Naw, boy. You just stand there and feel it. Feel it good, Jordan.” (80)

Based on this extract, it seems that the possibility of Jordan’s “inability” to voice his trauma can be attributed to his being raised in an environment and by a guardian both unfriendly to healthy emotional expression. This extract hints at how the traditional trauma model often conflates a pathological inability to speak with an unwillingness to speak, unwillingness informed by cultural factors.

Balaev also argues that the pluralistic model conceptualizes the process of remembering differently than the traditional mode. She writes: “Importantly, a pluralistic model describes the multifaceted functions and effects of a traumatic experience in terms that extend past essentialist

notions of identity, experience, and remembering found within the traditional model because it conceptualizes memory differently” (Balaev xiii-xiv). The pluralistic model presented by Balaev figures memory not as fixed and absolute, as it is articulated in the traditional model, but as fluid, malleable, and informed by a variety of social and environmental factors. In contrast, the traditional model does not take into account the influence of these factors on the process of remembering. The traditional model also presents limitations for our understanding of what even constitutes a traumatic event.

Pegging down the exact moment that incites Jordan’s trauma proves difficult. It seems that there appears no single traumatic moment; rather his childhood is comprised of several factors that overwhelm and disrupt Jordan’s sense of reality and self. The more obvious moment of trauma for Jordan is, of course, the night he witnesses the death of Mason. More than any scene, that of Mason’s death exemplifies the difficulty of properly processing and integrating a traumatic event into consciousness. On the night of Mason’s death, Jordan did not come home, but instead stood on the highway where Mason was struck, struggling to remember all of what happened. His memory of the moment is fragmented. Dixon writes: “He remembered the swish of the navy blue Ford and a flash of a red painted lady and white man inside” and then the car “whizzing past” and “a broken fishing pole and a flapping streak of red on the asphalt” (155). After searching for Mason, who he doesn’t realize was struck by the Ford, Jordan discovers his body near a gathering of bushes off the highway road and “saw the bloody head with one eye hanging open and loose and glaring at him. Hot and cold raced through him and he screamed but he could not move. He stood trapped by the blank swollen eye of the head that said nothing, but burned” (155).

Even after discovering Mason’s body, Jordan is unable to fully process all of what

happened, and for some time afterwards he believes his friend is still alive and merely hiding. While his and Mason's family react to the news of the death, Jordan sits "at the kitchen table, alone singing", only to look up at the "knot of faces tightening above him" and then ask, "Can I spend the night with Mason?" (157). In the aftermath of Mason's death, Jordan belatedly begins to process his loss and the resulting grief: "Gran'Mama, it's like my stomach and all my insides got no bottom. Things just move through me. They don't settle no more" (80). Interestingly, Jordan's testaments of feeling empty resemble earlier characterizations of him as "hollow" and "eaten through with Harriet Henry's hate" (74).

There are other, more elusive factors, however, that exacerbate Jordan's trauma, such as his fraught relationship with Mother Harriet. *Gradual* perhaps best describes this aspect of Jordan's trauma, as it is informed by the changing parameters of their relationship, which shifts from a loving grandmother-grandson relationship to an emotionally abusive one. As noted by Kai Erikson, a trauma theorist, "Trauma can issue from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single searing assault" (Erikson #). The emotional abuse Mother Harriet subjects Jordan to correlates with her own unresolved feelings of grief and despair. Mother Harriet carries a load of grief over the death of her daughter, Chloe, who died while giving birth to Jordan. Mother Harriet resents Jake, Jordan's father, who she blames for her daughter's ruin and, ultimately, her death. There appears in the text no real evidence to suggest that Jake had anything to do with her death, as Chloe died from a stressful childbirth. Still, Mother Harriet attempts to exorcise her grief via an unquenchable rage and hatred towards Jake. Her hatred overwhelms young Jordan, who, as the proxy for the expression of her hatred, Mother Harriet wants to kill Jake. "Chloe cut him, now you gonna finish it", she says to Jordan (33). Mother Harriet begins to covertly train Jordan to build his strength via physically demanding chores and fieldwork:

weeding and shucking corn, repairing the outhouse, smoking the meat for winter, sharpening scythes and axes, fixing the yard pump, drawing gallons of water at a time, spreading lye in the outhouse pit, clearing brush, feeding fires in the stove and under the backyard washpot with a steady supply of split logs and kindling. Then they stopped him. Jordan was thirteen. (33)

At thirteen years old, Jordan becomes aware of the life's purpose that Mother Harriet attempts to impose on him when she and Jeremiah, Jordan's cousin, hand Jordan the shotgun that belonged to his grandfather, Pa Henry. "You handle a axe good", says Mother Harriet to her grandson. And then, Jake: "Take the gun, Jordan... You almost a man" (33). Jordan's next reaction exemplifies a common one to an intensely stressful, traumatic environment: flight. The morning following this incident, Jordan was gone, having covertly fled his home to head north to stay with family in Philadelphia.

Jordan's move north correlates to his desire to escape and forget a past of which he is ashamed. Moving north presents him an opportunity to at once escape Mother Harriet's sinister plan and "interpret the self [on his own terms] and even change [his] destiny" (47). In the years following his escape, Jordan, before meeting and marrying Phyllis, would attend graduate school and become a professor of American colonial history at a college in Massachusetts. It is ironic that Jordan specializes in history yet is a protagonist severed from his own past. As a history professor, Jordan trades in his personal history for "a past he could pass on to others, not one that made him ashamed and afraid to cross deep rivers into camp ground or freeze in the path of a speeding car, *honk, honk*" (84). For Jordan it is an issue of security and "positioning the self within a narrative of belonging to a place or places" that pose no threat to his being (47). However, Jordan's illusion of safety and comfort is shattered when faced with the reality that he

does not belong in the north even, for his blackness is not welcomed in Massachusetts. Dixon writes:

But if he ever stopped teaching for just a day and walked down the one main street in Ephramville and saw how deeply grained and historical were the bemused gazes of the townspeople, he'd know that even they had only recently come to tolerate his presence. When school was not in session, Jordan simply did not belong there. (84)

Jordan's sense that he is unwelcome and unsafe in the north is confirmed when he and Phyllis awake in the middle of the night to find on the campus green "a burning cross, the size of a man with outstretched arms dressed in flaming rags". Then, Jordan knew "[he] was no longer safe" in Ephramville (92).

As the cross burning scene illustrates, though, Jordan's efforts to evade danger in the north are to no avail. The move might've kept him "from the hills of Harriet Henry's solid hate, from the turbulent waters of the Pee Dee Jordan did not understand" (82), but there was something more sinister lurking in the north. A series of racial microaggressions and transgressions—Eurocentric curricula, complaints by white students about black students "self-segregating", racial slurs sprayed in graffiti across campus buildings, the benching of a black football player during home games, the cross burning—reveal to Jordan the often covert but always violent racism that pervades even the north (93). These instances disrupt the guise of safety under which Jordan and Phyllis live in Massachusetts and expose their naiveté about racial tension in the north. Stunned by the cross burning, Phyllis says to Jordan: "But this is the North." Jordan responds: "This can't happen here" (92). However, this novel—and history, frankly—demonstrates that the American landscape represents a nation steeped in a history of terror and

oppression, most often predicated upon race. Jordan is forced to grapple with American's racist past in a way that demands that he also confront the violence of his personal past. In doing so, Jordan finds that he cannot escape his traumatic experiences back home as he once thought.

Jordan's escape to the north, then, and the racism he experiences while living there, harks to the historical, decades long migration of African Americans from the rural south to the industrious north, commonly known as the Great Migration. While the motivation for these migrations is usually chalked up to greater economic and social opportunity, black American's decision to uproot and head north was about far more than jobs. The reality is that black people were in large part attempting to escape the racial terror that was part-and-parcel of the south, a "threatening place replete with memories of the slave past", a past "perceived as something to get away from, if not forget," as Ron Eyerman notes in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (158). Migration for Jordan then represents not so much the potential for social mobility as it does an ontological mobility, as Jordan has an opportunity to self-define and reconstruct his life in the north far away from his terror-ridden childhood. But again, Jordan cannot escape his traumatic past any more than black Americans, by moving to another region, could escape the harsh reality of racism in America.

Through these incidents in Ephramville, the novel connects Jordan's individual trauma with a cultural trauma linked to his racial identity. In other words, Jordan's blackness "facilitates an unconscious link to this traumatic past" of slavery in the New World (37). Unlike physical or psychological trauma, cultural trauma "refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" (Eyerman 2). Jordan's geographical movements alone allude to an enduring history of uproot and displacement that has stifled black American's efforts to self-identify since being transported

across the Atlantic to the Americans during the Middle Passage. In this way, Dixon uses his traumatized protagonist to reference the historical atrocity of slavery and its enduring, disruptive effects on the African American psyche.

In linking Jordan's trauma to cultural trauma of slavery, I do not intend to adopt a reductive view that flattens individual differences and responses to trauma. Jordan's trauma cannot represent the various forms of violence and abuse suffered by black people, nor can it account for the varied responses to traumatic events. But, the parallels between Jordan's migration and personal suffering and that of black people historically underscore the idea that culture and history provide a framework in which individuals experience and assign value and meaning to trauma. As Balaev puts it the protagonist "brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural ideologies" (Balaev 17). The bridging of Jordan's individual trauma and a collective, cultural trauma also highlights the intersections of memory and identity formation. According to Ron Eyerman, the resulting trauma of slavery is cemented as collective memory and informs the identity formation of black people. He contends:

There is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process. As cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory." (Eyerman 1)

The key to recovery, to "repairing the tear in the social fabric", as Eyerman puts it, is to access and reinterpret and recover the past.

In literature, recovery of the past often correlates to a return—whether literal or symbolic—to an individual's place of origin. As Michelle Balaev puts it, "the land is the location

where the protagonist comes to terms with memories of a traumatic experience (xvi). It is the place where the boundaries between past and present begin to blur, enabling an individual to engage time and space and their influence on the self. Perhaps ironically, Jordan's best chance of addressing and healing from his past trauma is connected to the land of his childhood, and is predicated upon his return to the south. Jordan's relationship to his home is fraught and complicated, though, much like the relationship between African Americans and the south. Historically, southern landscapes have always represented the violent and traumatic history of slavery and its aftermath. Thus, any return to the south necessitates a confrontation with a painful past and its lasting, intergenerational consequences. If left to his own volition, Jordan would never return home; however, "the memory of Mason and his own decision three years later to leave the land where he was born pressed into him". Jordan becomes increasingly unsettled living in Massachusetts, and, as fate would have it, is summoned home by a letter from his cousin Jeremiah, informing him of Mother Harriet's death and stressing the urgency of settling possession of her belongings and of family land. The text later reveals that Mother Harriet is not in fact dead, and that summoning Jordan is a part of her and Jeremiah's unyielding plot to have him kill his father. Again, Jordan cannot escape the fact that wrestling with and reconciling his past is a task wrapped up in his connection to the land.

As an integral part of the novel's landscape, the river should not be excluded in discussions of a return to and recovery of the past. The Pee Dee River, like other bodies of water, is as Anissa Janine Wardi writes, "*lieux de memoire*, embodied sites where memory and history converge" (Wardi 6). In referencing this term popularized by French historian Pierre Nora, who wrote on the interplay of history, geography, and memory, Wardi underscores the connection between water and memory that extends far beyond metaphor. Various waterways were integral

in the forced enslavement of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade and, interestingly, figure as sites of resistance and potential freedom in African diasporic expressive traditions. Thus, Wardi calls the Middle Passage the “*lieux de memoire* par excellence” as it “calls us to remember the millions who endured the enforced physical crossing over the moving waters of the Atlantic” (Wardi 6).

Throughout the novel, the Pee Dee River demands that Jordan remember, too, and foreshadows his inevitable return home. Just shortly after a young Jordan flees home, the Pee Dee River, which is personified as a “man tossing in sleep”, foretells his return: “The river rose only slightly now...the stones were urging it to speak...The river opened its rippling lips and said, “Yes, boy. You coming back” (19). That the river foreshadows Jordan’s return is fitting considering that it symbolizes the potential for travel, and more specifically a return to an originary source. It is fitting then that Jordan is intimately connected to the river and that his movements are often likened to or described in relationship to the flow of water—his escape north can be thought of as him moving upstream, against the current. Mother Harriet assures Jordan that, “You part of the earth, too”. Similarly, Jordan is the Pee Dee River, as its waters are a “liquid coursing inside him, more nourishing than blood”. Mason tells Jordan after one of their many visits to the river, “you know you got the river inside...a river inside him he could follow away from here”. This river is poised to carry Jordan away from his troubles, but more importantly, to facilitate his return home, a journey he was always fated to carry out. “All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was”, writes Toni Morrison in her essay “The Site of Memory” (99). Much like various waterways flowing toward their source, Jordan too must return home.

Jordan fully intends for his trip to be a short one, as he only plans to survey and sell

Mother Harriet's land, of which he is the rightful owner, before heading back to Massachusetts. However, he cannot resist the pull of the Pee Dee River and the message Jordan suspects it has for him. "I feel like I'm close to discovering something...something about me, about who I am", he says to Phyllis who struggles to understand her husband's aversion to home and opening up about his family and upbringing. In part Jordan wishes to confront the painful trauma of Mason's death. After visiting the Pee Dee, which happens to flow adjacent to the road on which Mason was killed, Jordan believes his confrontation with the past is then settled:

He had been to the water. It was finished. He could leave and forget it all. he wanted to return to New England right then, but eh had seen something new in the running river, something new even in the red earth road leading back to Mother Harriet's. Both were holding him for unfinished business. (159)

While Jordan believes that his return functions merely to help him confront his past and move toward a more hopeful future, he is being tasked with something far greater: the healing and reconciliation of his fractured family. Jordan's awakening in this sense further clarifies the necessity of his return home and shifts the story from that of a singular journey and effort towards healing to a collective, familial journey.

In this way, the novel articulates a method of addressing and working through trauma that is communally rather than individually based. What is more, this emphasis on community deviates from the traditional literary trauma model, which has a Eurocentric thrust that focuses on the individual and frames the process of working through trauma as a solitary endeavor. Irene Visser, argues for the necessity of "openness to non-Western belief systems and ceremonies in the engagement with trauma". She grounds her ideas in Michael Rothberg's suggestion that critics rethink trauma as "collective, spatial, and material, instead of individual, temporal, and

linguistic” (“Decolonizing Trauma Theory”). That Visser and Rothberg de-emphasize the individual in the process of trauma recovery fits neatly with Michelle Balaev’s argument for attention to the “manifold imagery of trauma in literature” and the “contextual factors at work in both the experience and remembrance of trauma” (xviii). I would like to add that Balaev’s argument lends itself to better understanding the varied ways an individual’s potential for healing is also informed by these “contextual factors”.

Jordan must facilitate healing through a focus on his relationship to land, family, and ancestral lineage. This again is mediated through his symbolic and literal return to and reconnection with the land. In this way, the the novel offers an Africentric paradigm for which trauma recovery is made possible. More specifically, the novel emphasizes the necessity of addressing the historical, social, and spiritual influences on trauma through the principle of *Sankofa*, a symbol commonly associated with Ghanaian Adinkra symbols. *Sankofa* means to “return and take”, or to “go back and fetch” M.L. Blakey who writes about the carving of these symbols on coffins and their significance in African burial rituals, says of *Sankofa*, “It has to do with the idea that you need to go back and search in the past, to let the past be a guide. It has to do with connection with past and present. That you have to look backwards in order to look forwards” (Blakey). The principle’s emphasis on a return to collect ancestral wisdom and knowledge needed to understand the present and better navigate the future suggests an engagement with the past, present, and future, and with trauma that is communal, intergenerational, and inclusive of historical, social, and spiritual factors.

In “going back”, Jordan must contextualize the violence of his trauma within the historical, social, and cultural realities he and his family face. In other words, Jordan’s working through of his trauma, requires that he understand it in relationship to his family member’s lived

experiences and individual traumas. In confronting his childhood trauma and his estrangement from Mother Harriet, it is important for Jordan to first understand the source of Mother Harriet's grief and exercise compassion and forgiveness. He must understand her despair as symptomatic of a lack of forgiveness for Jake and desire for revenge. "You want revenge...But I won't let you have it" Jordan says to Mother Harriet who is, by the novel's end, on her deathbed. "Don't you want to forgive me? Don't you want to forgive *him*, Gran'Mama?" Jordan implores of Mother Harriet, as he finally understands that her desire to die with a clean heart and see her family made whole again is only possible if she forgives Jake. She begs him to touch her one last time, so "I'll know I'll be remembered", but Jordan refuses to oblige unless she forgives: No. Not until you forgive Jake and me... You have to save yourself, Gran'Mama. You still have a chance" (224-25). This scene emphasizes that Jordan as healer and mediator must address deep wounds that span generations.

Mother Harriet begs her family surrounding her to touch her as a means of easing her transition: "You all mine. Touch me." And after she acquiesces to Jordan's insistence that she forgive, "they held onto Mother Harriet tight. Phyllis's hands circled the woman's leathery stomach. Jordan held her hands, and Jake touched her wrinkled feet" (225). As her family touches her one last time, Mother Harriet croons "Yes, yes" and then "'yesyesyesyesyes' until the word was a musical note between them" a note and melody that "carried itself out the window and up through the air and on through the tops of the pines rustling now with the wide presence of her voice. The vessel of body which had locked those words for years found relief and rest" (226). Here, I reference "Without a Cosmology: The Psychospiritual Condition of African American Men in Brent Wade's *Company Men* and Melvin Dixon's *Trouble the Water*", in which Melvin B. Rahming's illuminates Mother Harriet's deathbed scene as depicting a

distinctly African-oriented ritual of psychic and emotional healing. In this scene, Jordan and his family enact a community ritual, a “laying of hands” that is designed to facilitate forgiveness and ultimately clear away the residue of violence and trauma that has spiritually haunted the family. That forgiveness is used to transform hate in this scene illustrates the power and necessity of Jordan, as Rahming puts it, “[locating] African spiritual history as his healing source”. And, while this ritual scene does not necessarily mean that the healing work is complete, it does constitute the Henry family’s effort to collectively locate its wound and begin the process of healing it. Mother Harriet at least finds the rest and peace she always yearned for and thought only possible via Jake’s death.

I end this chapter by considering a couple of questions that Michelle Balaev poses in *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*: “Can we imagine a traumatic experience or response beyond that of disease or the unrepresentable?” Is the pathological paradigm’s etiology a process of othering what is not understood nor permitted within hegemonic frameworks?” (118). An inability or unwillingness to consider these questions within a larger cultural framework poses the threat of flattening cultural differences and excluding the social and historical factors that an individual uses to ascribe meaning to a traumatic experience. Richard McNally, a Harvard psychologist who studies traumatic memory, attests to new developments in psychological trauma studies that refute these claims. Such developments in the realm of psychology force a shift in how we understand trauma’s representation in literature, as the psychological model informs the literary trauma model. *Trouble the Water’s* culminating deathbed scene points to the limits of a Western, universal, and traditional psychiatric model, and forces us to reconsider how we understand remembrance of trauma, and subsequently how we use this understanding to recover from it. It also conceptualizes a form of healing connected to African notions of

spirituality, ritual, and ceremony. What Balaev and Dixon teach us is that discussions of trauma should not be had irrespective of contextual factors, such as place and history, “society, nature, myth, and ritual”, and that doing so stretches the way we understand what it means to “read the wound.”

CONCLUSION

“The river’s for everybody.”
 “You sure, Jeremiah?”
 Everybody, Maggie.”
 (*Trouble the Water* 24)

“When you reach the rivah Jurdun
 You got tuh cross it by yo 'self”
 (Spiritual, *Trouble the Water* 180)

The purpose of this study, generally speaking, is to illustrate how various landscapes are useful referents in articulating the interplay of history, geography, and identity. More specifically, though, this study explores how landscapes in African American literature are ripe sites for exploring the nature of and potential recovery from traumatic experiences and loss, as these landscapes figure as sites on which the past and present invariably converge. As explored in the two chapters of this thesis, the river as a specific given space proves especially helpful in exploring these topics, considering its prevalence as a motif in literature and a myriad other African American expressive forms.

Undoubtedly, Melvin Dixon understood this inextricable relationship between African American identity and the southern landscapes by which the former was formed and is constantly being revised. Dixon’s *Ride Out the Wilderness* is an especially integral text in this discussion of southern landscapes and nature tropes, and how African American writers have always been concerned with teasing out the unique and often times complicated relationship African Americans have with landscapes that at once threatened to devastate black life and, as sacred, ancestral land, spiritually sustained black life. Perhaps no physical space is as contested in African American literature than the river. It seems fitting then that Dixon would choose the

river as the predominant motif in *Trouble the Water* by which to explore the relationship between geography and identity.

In *Water and African American Memory*, Anissa Janine Wardi contends that waterways and water crossings are “integral to black life”, citing a myriad symbolic and literal meanings and emphasizing that “water’s flow constantly links to life and death” (Wardi 4). She notes that in large part, bodies of water represent a link to human anatomy that is often articulated symbolically in literature, but, when considering human’s literal dependence on this element, is an often-slept on necessity. As this element is needed for the function of all organ systems, water is quite literally a life giving force without which we would die. However, bodies of water also hark to more sinister aspects of African American history, particularly the Middle Passage, as bodies of water were integral in carrying the bodies of enslaved Africans to the New World. Wardi notes: “The African American expressive tradition construes bodies of water as haunted by the bodies of those who lost their lives in their currents” (Wardi 4), calling water a “graveyard” as much as a repository of history and memory. This idea that rivers are haunted fits neatly with the preoccupation many black writers have with the spectral return of slavery, both in a literal and figurative sense, and how this painful history reaches into, hovers over, and ultimately has debilitating effects on the present. At the same time, bodies of water, as modes of travel, figure as sites that bear the potential for freedom and liberation, as they were sometimes used as escape routes for the enslaved. She contends, ultimately, that rivers, as “spatialized sites of memory” that contain and carry the collective memory of African derived people, are necessary in efforts to recover an ancestral past in hopes of better understanding our cultural history.

The river—fluid, malleable, ever flowing and multi-directional in its flow—allows us to better understand trauma and mediate the function of memory in representations of trauma in literature. As stated above, the river registers a multiplicity of meanings, many times ambivalent and contradictory, so much that it seems to defy complete representation. The river as a motif then is particularly useful in analyzing representations of trauma because of how it implicitly addresses and provides an alternative to the traditional model of literary trauma theory, which Michelle Balaev argues is reductive and narrow in its treatment of traumatic experience. The pluralistic model of trauma, on the other hand, refutes a homogenous interpretation of trauma in favor of one that “views trauma and the process of remembering within a framework that emphasizes the multiplicity of responses to an extreme experience and the importance of contextual factors in determining the significance of the event” (Balaev xi). She thus highlights the need for current trends in literary trauma theory to branch off into new territory, similar to how a river might branch off or merge and flow from or into a main channel.

Although it does not deal specifically with representations of trauma, I entitled chapter 1 “Many Rivers, One Source” in part because of what a river’s flow teaches us about diversity of lived experience, a diversity that the traditional literary trauma model does not factor well enough when considering how an individual remembers and extracts meaning(s) from a traumatic experience. The confluence of two rivers on their way toward a main source parallels the idea that there are a confluence of inextricable factors—social, cultural, historical, political, familial, etc.—to consider when examining how trauma is ascribed meaning by an individual, and additionally, how an individual responds to trauma. Also, Balaev’s insistence that memory is subject to revision over time, depending on the interplay of social and cultural factors, harks to the way the physical composition of a river transforms as it joins with other rivers, flowing along

the route toward its source. While writing on memory, she cites psychologist Frederic Bartlett, who writes, “Remembering is not re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction....It is thus hardly ever really exact...and it is not all important that it should be” (213). Water, too, is never exact—at least not exact as it began—as the composition of river water is literally changed as it meets other waterways and assimilates various rocks and sediments. This idea of a river’s shifting composition parallels Balaev and Bartlett’s characterizations of memory as active, imaginative, and constantly subject to amendment.

In “Rivers Remembering Their Source” Melvin Dixon examines the Negritude movement and how it enabled members of the African diaspora to connect with and reclaim a collective, cultural identity. He writes about the interconnectedness of writers and various artists of the “Harlem Renaissance in the United States, the *Revue Indigène* in Haiti, and the *La Revue du Monde Noir* in Paris” and how each movement ultimately comprised

a separate river remembering its source; each created a significant flow of theme and political passion ever circling the ancestral landscape, moving outward for independence and transformation of traditional oral forms of expression, and returning for renewal, regeneration, reunion with the past made present through language. (Dixon 31)

Trouble the Water, although written decades after these movements, constitutes one of these rivers, seeking to remember and reunite with its originary waters, yearning to reconnect with some semblance of a collective, ancestral past. Unsurprisingly, this too is what Jordan Henry’s story is about, reconnecting with the source that, paradoxically, is already within him, “a liquid coursing inside him, more nourishing than blood”, in fact. So, “How could Jordan forget the

river?" (149). By the novel's end, though, Jordan is no longer a character unmoored from his cultural past and present identity. Furthermore, he and his family achieve absolution and begin the spiritual healing work needed to move toward more hopeful futures. Yet, what Melvin Dixon teaches us in his novels through landscape imagery, and what Michelle Balaev teaches us in her pluralistic model of trauma theory is that there are many rivers still to cross.

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