

8-2020

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### Recommended Citation

Rose, Kate (2020) "Sexual Violence, Traumatic Memory, and Speculative Fiction as Action," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: 10.23860/dignity.2020.05.01.05

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### Abstract

Starhawk's speculative novel *City of Refuge* (2015) depicts rape trauma and its consequences in a dystopian society that is the logical conclusion of patriarchy. French psychiatrist Muriel Salmons's research on how traumatic memory contributes to inequality and how reconstructing narrative can heal survivors places her similarly at the intersection of story and activism. *City of Refuge* is a literary experiment focused on survivors of institutionalized sexual assault, while Salmons's work maps consequences of traumatic memory linked to childhood sexual violence. The basic tenet of narrative medicine that life experience affects mental and physical health coincides with Salmons's critique of how mental illnesses are often erroneously considered by psychiatrists as isolated genetic or congenital defects. They are seen as manifestations of individual pathology, devoid of a past or a context. This view may lead to sexual violence to continue to be unpunished. Starhawk explores trauma through sexually-enclaved characters and the problems they encounter even after freedom is gained. Conjugating Salmons's research and Starhawk's novel may help to spread awareness of traumatic memory's mechanisms, through illustrating dissociation, risk, emotional anesthesia, disjunction, and male versus female conditioned models of reliving trauma through inflicting it or having it inflicted. The gap between those suffering from traumatic memory and those who are not is wide, and often survivors are blamed for behaviors that are determined by patterns neurologically linked to trauma. Understanding survivors requires awareness of symptoms so that they can be treated effectively through reassembling and contextualizing narratives

### Keywords

traumatic memory, sexual violence, literature, feminism, speculative fiction, posttraumatic stress disorder, PTSD, Starhawk, Muriel Salmons

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## SEXUAL VIOLENCE, TRAUMATIC MEMORY, AND SPECULATIVE FICTION AS ACTION

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### ABSTRACT

Starhawk's speculative novel *City of Refuge* (2015) depicts rape trauma and its consequences in a dystopian society that is the logical conclusion of patriarchy. French psychiatrist Muriel Salmona's research on how traumatic memory contributes to inequality and how reconstructing narrative can heal survivors places her similarly at the intersection of story and activism. *City of Refuge* is a literary experiment focused on survivors of institutionalized sexual assault, while Salmona's work maps consequences of traumatic memory linked to childhood sexual violence. The basic tenet of narrative medicine that life experience affects mental and physical health coincides with Salmona's critique of how mental illnesses are often erroneously considered by psychiatrists as isolated genetic or congenital defects. They are seen as manifestations of individual pathology, devoid of a past or a context. This view may lead to sexual violence to continue to be unpunished. Starhawk explores trauma through sexually-enslaved characters and the problems they encounter even after freedom is gained. Conjugating Salmona's research and Starhawk's novel may help to spread awareness of traumatic memory's mechanisms, through illustrating dissociation, risk, emotional anesthesia, disjunction, and male versus female conditioned models of reliving trauma through inflicting it or having it inflicted. The gap between those suffering from traumatic memory and those who are not is wide, and often survivors are blamed for behaviors that are determined by patterns neurologically linked to trauma. Understanding survivors requires awareness of symptoms so that they can be treated effectively through reassembling and contextualizing narratives.

### KEYWORDS

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**T**HIS ARTICLE CONJUGATES RECENT RESEARCH of French psychiatrist Muriel Salmona and the speculative fiction of Starhawk, a feminist activist who became famous for her 1979 non-fiction book *The Spiral Dance: A Re-birth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. Its goal is to shed light on neglected yet prevalent aspects of trauma in order to promote more adequate detection, prevention, and healing from the devastating effects of sexual violence. After briefly introducing the work of Salmona and Starhawk, I elaborate on neurological mechanisms of trauma such as dissociation and how they influence individuals and society. Then, I examine how the novel *City of Refuge* illustrates these mechanisms, completing a picture that often goes unseen even by professionals, and that scientific discourse often does not (and perhaps cannot) adequately portray.

Lastly, the specifics of how traumatic memory ensures social control in the novel and, implicitly, in society, particularly through gender roles, is explored and possibilities are offered for social change.

Starhawk is a founder and leader of the Reclaiming Cooperative, whose actions are grounded in ecofeminist spirituality. She holds a master's degree in psychology specializing in feminist therapy, with experience healing survivors of sexual trauma. Muriel Salmona's organization *Mémoire Traumatique et Victimologie* has been highly influential in France, shifting laws and public awareness regarding sexual violence and its consequences, including through leading France to adopt the Nordic Model of criminalizing the "buyers" not the "sellers" of sex. Both women consider understanding and denouncing rape culture as part of survivors' healing process. They advocate for a world where sexuality is no longer based on domination, where survivors of trauma are understood and given adequate care, breaking cycles of violence and oppression. As activists and authors, they challenge rape culture from one of its central pillars, often hidden, yet crucial to upholding the structure: traumatic memory. If we understand this pillar, we can remove it, causing the institution of male violence to crumble. Both women have achieved public recognition and success, but not in proportion to their achievements, and key aspects of their work that could have great impact have been overlooked; among these are the subject of this article: traumatic memory.

Whereas Starhawk is primarily a writer with a background in psychology, Salmona is a psychiatrist with some background in literature, as her dissertation described the psychological condition of a fictional character from one of France's classic novels. She frequently alludes to literary works and uses an abundance of narratives to illustrate her theoretical points. Both *City of Refuge* and *Le Livre noir des violences sexuelles*<sup>1</sup> may be considered as forms of narrative medicine as they explore rape trauma in its social and individual consequences linked to inequality. In *City of Refuge*'s dystopian Southlands, pen-girls (female) and sojuhs (male) are bred and/or broken to be sexual or military slaves respectively, and as such have no real self (they cannot use personal pronouns), no name, no notion of ordinary life as we know it, nor of sex as anything other than a way to satisfy a primitive hunger in a man (through raping the sex slaves made available to sojuhs in the pens).

Through such horrors and the contrasting utopian Northlands, Starhawk explores the mechanisms of traumatic memory, oppression, and inequality. Salmona's research also explores these, but with a scientific focus, connecting the dots of neurological and sociological findings, while citing illustrative examples from real-life stories. The originality of Salmona's work is in shedding light on behaviors that are widely recognized but not understood in survivors. Some even claim that survivors are victimized because they already had certain characteristics, rather than identifying these as symptoms of traumatic memory (which include polyvictimization). Salmona describes the symptoms in great detail, including the neurological evidence and how it transfers into behavior, as well as how these behaviors are received and their consequences in survivors' lives. Through

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<sup>1</sup> Although edited by a major French publisher, this book has not yet appeared in English (here, translations are by the author). The website [www.memoiretraumatique.org](http://www.memoiretraumatique.org) does offer some articles by Salmona in English, including a useful recent summary of her main findings, "Traumatic Amnesia: a dissociative survival mechanism" (2018).

breaking down the usual disciplinary walls between neurology, psychology, sociology, and literature, this article argues for improved prevention and care for survivors and explains how these are linked to recognition and uprooting of inequalities that result from traumatic memory.

Trauma has been a popular lens of literary analysis since the 1980s, with writing viewed as a means of breaking through and transforming debilitating isolation. Through the unique perspective fiction allows, many writers have attempted to represent sexual violence and its consequences (Roussos, 2007). The desire to confront this widespread problem may explain the record-breaking success of the *Millennium* trilogy by Swedish crime writer Stieg Larsson (Rose, 2018), focusing on child sexual abuse survivor Lisbeth Salander's seemingly strange behavior, which illustrates symptoms of traumatic memory. Toni Morrison's last novel *God Help the Child* highlights the prevalence of child sexual abuse and the inadequacies of the judicial system in handling it effectively (real perpetrators go free, while the innocent are accused). Novels can increase awareness of a social problem whose deleterious effects pour over into all of our lives (lost productivity of a large part of the population, greater violence and insecurity, material and immaterial costs, and the overall persistence of inequality). Fiction can transform society, as it is accessible and attractive to people who might not otherwise want to confront painful realities.

### **The Ignored Tragedy of Traumatic Memory**

Salmona insists on the non-verbal quality of traumatic memory and how it estranges, alienates, and confuses survivors:

As long as it remains non-representable and non-verbalized, the 'ghost' memory of violence constantly haunts the psyche of the traumatized victim ... colonized by the terrorized victim she was at the moment of the trauma, by the violence, and by the aggressor, the victim has the impression of being double, even triple, oscillating continuously between the most bleak depression and the urge to move mountains (Salmona 2013, 169).

Since the 1990s, the groundbreaking Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study has shown that out of 17,337 adult HMO members (middle to upper-class Americans), 22% were sexually abused during childhood (17% males, 25% females). Charting medical histories alongside health problems over decades, researchers determined that childhood exposure to toxic stress was the main obstacle to health at age 55. The results of the ACE study quantify what many already suspected: physical and mental health problems are triggered and aggravated by life circumstances, and childhood sexual abuse has serious later consequences. Those who suffered adverse childhood experiences were found to be at a significantly higher risk for both physical and psychological disorders, substance abuse, and suicide; sexual risk behaviors are also much more prevalent, especially in women (Felitti and Anda 2010).

The ACE study opened the gates for inclusion of this knowledge in the mainstream medical community. However, there is still very little recognition and understanding of the intertwined neurological, behavioral, and social consequences of sexual violence and trauma. Psychologist Melissa Farley's international first-hand research with prostituted women highlights symptoms of Posttraumatic

Stress Disorder. She has classified the symptoms into three categories: re-experiencing of trauma (flashbacks and risk behaviors), avoidance and numbing, and manifestations of anxiety such as insomnia or irritability (Farley 2003, 36-37). These observations coincide with the research of Salmona. However, Salmona's findings expand on such categories through underpinning the neurology. She then constructs an approach to healing based on tracing symptoms back to original traumas, recognized in conjunction with social mechanisms of oppression. Interdisciplinary research such as that of Farley and Salmona (strikingly rare given the prevalence and impact of sexual violence) is crucial for justice, prevention, and treating the often misdiagnosed symptoms of survivors.

Salmona's work sheds light on these symptoms. The pivotal symptom is disjunction, whereby the brain produces its own "hard drugs" through renewing trauma, then shuts down emotions in order to survive:

When faced with the life-threatening cardiovascular and neurological risk, the brain disposes of an exceptional ruse: disjunction. Like an overcharged electrical circuit that shuts down to avoid blowing up everything plugged into it, the brain shuts down the emotional circuit through secreting emergency neurotransmitters (endorphins) and substances (blocking N-Methyl-D-Aspartate receptors) that are like hard drugs such as morphine and ketamine (Salmona 2013, 77).

The hippocampus, responsible for narrative, is cut off from the amygdala, or alarm system; therefore, the traumatic event cannot be translated into concrete memories that can be related and rationally understood (Shin et al. 2006; Bremner, Vythilingam and Vermetten 2003). Moreover, cut off from the part of the brain that should rationalize and narrate (making sense of an event and signaling that danger has passed), the brain's "alarm" will not be shut off.

Our brains have evolved to respond to dangers rapidly (fight, flight, or freeze), and then to understand them and calm down.<sup>2</sup> An alarm rings, sending out stress hormones to increase speed and strength; then once the danger has passed and been understood, it is remembered as a narrative and no longer induces terror. (Conversely, the reaction to threat might be to shut down immediately, directly engaging the step of dissociation described below.) Violence perceived as life-threatening and/because not evolutionarily understood by the brain, such as the sexual assault of a child (much different from a saber-tooth tiger attack), cannot be translated into narrative. The alarm cannot be shut off. The stress of the alarm constantly ringing must be mitigated by certain mechanisms such as disjunction (sudden shutting down), dissociation (prolonged state of being beyond oneself), and anaesthetization (numbing emotionally and physically). These are acquired

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<sup>2</sup> The research of Porges on polyvagal theory states that the reflex of immobilization is currently more prevalent in humans than fight or flight. Salmona's work includes this reflex (which she calls "sideration") and its influence on responses to attack such as rape, including explaining why victims do not appear to fight back. According to Salmona, sideration occurs after it becomes apparent that fight or flight will not work; whereas Porges states that it is the usual first response to danger. These views are not incompatible insofar as they similarly explain how victims "freeze up," and that we must understand this neurologically in order to correctly interpret events (in court, for example, but also in a therapeutic situation to help survivors understand themselves and be understood).

through risk behaviors. This little-known but well-documented normative neurological reaction to extreme trauma (an evolutionary survival mechanism) is crucial to understanding survivors.

The brain is modified by traumatic memory, and can repair itself through adequate care that includes recognition of traumatic events and their effects:

It is a matter of “repairing” the initial psychological break-in, the psychological petrification that stems from the irritability of violence ... This is done by ‘revisiting’ the experience of violence so that it can gradually become integrable ... by giving words to each situation, behavior, emotion, by accurately analyzing the context, the victim’s reactions, and the aggressor’s behavior (Salmona 2018, 12).

Salmona’s approach combines feminist social awareness of male violence as an accepted mainstream pattern. It elucidates how amnesia functions to make survivors strangers to themselves, thereby even less able to fight back.<sup>3</sup>

The goal to “encode the emotional traumatic memory into a conscious, manageable autobiographical memory” (Salmona 2018, 12) is a form of narrative medicine. Reconstructing a lost story, re-linking narrative (hippocampus) and raw emotional (amygdala) circuits of the brain leads to “decolonizing” the survivor, no longer prey to the nebulous, terrifying presence of the aggression (aggressor) and its “mysterious” symptoms. Moreover, to coherently relate the abuse can raise public awareness, contributing to more effective prevention strategies (the overwhelming majority of perpetrators are never brought to justice and thus continue in all impunity).

Often, instead of receiving adequate care, survivors are misdiagnosed and even blamed for their “strange” behaviors. They also may be permanently medicated for conditions considered incurable such as schizophrenia or depression, when actually their symptoms result from traumatic memory and are not incurable:

When the traumatic memory is treated, the traumatic events can be integrated into [her] autobiographical memory [and thus no longer colonize her life]. Unfortunately, professionals are not trained in psychotraumatology, and so the vast majority of childhood sexual abuse victims are abandoned to themselves ... unidentified, unprotected, and uncared for (Salmona 2018, 9).

Reading between the lines, through the lens of Salmona’s research, one sees evidence everywhere of unacknowledged cases of probable abuse, perhaps only remembered through symptoms and vague feelings (due to traumatic amnesia). An

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<sup>3</sup> Traumatic memory, traumatic amnesia, and resultant behaviors are not generally discussed in the United States with regards to sexual violence and/or child abuse prevention. For example, the National Center for Injury Prevention published “Stop SV: A Technical Package to Prevent Sexual Violence,” (retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv-prevention-technical-package.pdf>) which made no mention of it, nor did the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child’s “A Decade of Science Informing Policy” (retrieved from [developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/A-Decade-of-Science-Informing-Policy.pdf](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/A-Decade-of-Science-Informing-Policy.pdf)). This is a serious flaw, in light of the proven impact of traumatic memory and amnesia on individual behavior and on the way cases are mishandled, in both jurisprudence and medicine.

example is the recent *New York Times* obituary (Kurutz, 2020) of a woman who was formerly a “star of the [Yale] theater department,” and then spent the rest of her life as a panhandler (as mentioned in previously quoted material from Salmons: the fluctuation between “bleak depression and moving mountains”). “Mental illness and drug addiction” are cited as the reasons for her decline, although she “described her mental landscape this way: ‘I’m being raped. I’m being raped 24 hours a day, seven days a week.’”

This is an accurate depiction of traumatic memory’s colonizing effects. The likelihood that she had been raped and that this was responsible for her decline are not mentioned or probably considered by those around her; her clear declaration was instead thought to be a symptom of spontaneously occurring mental illness. The article does mention that she “became estranged from her family as an adult,” further suggesting she may have been abused as a child (Kurutz, 2020). Not listening to survivors includes not hearing the deeper messages of their symptoms. Novelists, unlike most of society (including professionals) tend to provide background story; in fiction, characters are less likely to be mentally ill “for no reason” than they are in real life. Similarly, ACE researchers reported that the vast majority of patients had never previously been asked by healthcare providers about antecedents of abuse, found to be the most prevalent causes of physical and mental illnesses.

This lack of understanding extends to professionals and researchers combating sexual violence, not trained to recognize and treat the specific manifestations of traumatic memory. Patients are often criticized for their inability to cope with ordinary existence, scapegoated in place of society’s confronting the hidden epidemic:

In spite of all their efforts to survive, they will be the ones held accountable and not their aggressors. They will be blamed for the survival strategies they put in place. Their avoidance strategy will be criticized, along with their ‘shyness,’ their lack of motivation ... As for their strategies of dissociation, these will be viewed very negatively when they concern consumption of alcohol or drugs, and risk behaviors will be bitterly reproached and issues of severe incomprehension (Salmons 2013, 304).

Sometimes out of malice, but largely out of ignorance, this blind-spot persists via stereotypes of men, women, and sexuality, the “inevitability” of violence and domination, and misogynistic views of women as “hysterics,” which linger in other guises today, medicalizing women for conditions that are not recognized as trauma-based.

ACE researchers Felitti and Anda (2010) link the higher rates of childhood exposure to toxic stress for girls to

...what in mainstream epidemiology appears as women’s natural proneness to ill-defined health problems ... we now see these as medical constructs, artifacts resulting from medical blindness to social realities and ignorance of the impact of gender (78).

This blindness is not only detrimental to survivors’ health, but also impairs justice, since symptoms of traumatic memory may be “mistaken for a delusion or an entry into a psychosis, and thus treated with heavy neuroleptics; when she files a



complaint, the victim will be considered as a psychiatric case, which puts the credibility of her account at significant risk, leading her complaint to be dismissed” (Salmona 2018, 13). There is a tremendous need for more accurate understanding, and both fiction and non-fiction can provide narratives as tools for this.

### **Dissociation, Traumatic Amnesia, and Other Life-Saving Obstacles to Healing**

Paradoxically, symptoms of traumatic memory that evolved to ensure survival may also be hazardous to survivors. These include forgetting and detaching from events, risk behaviors, and substance abuse. Dissociated survivors engage in avoidance strategies to not trigger the alarm of traumatic memory. When trauma is constant, there may be a full emotional shut-down (permanent dissociation), as they go about some of the motions of living while feeling dead inside. This shutting down is actually a survival strategy, as they could literally die from the emotional state of too much trauma, due to an excess of cortisol and adrenaline provoking a heart attack:

When avoidance behaviors no longer suffice or are not a possibility, the only solution left for the victim to control her traumatic memory is to use the dissociating behaviors whose efficiency she empirically discovered during the violence. To stop the intolerable state of suffering and distress or avoid at all cost that it recurs, the victim seeks out the emotional anesthesia that will protect and relieve her (2013, 116).

Misunderstanding this normative mechanism (the “freeze mechanism” described by Porges, called “sideration” by Salmona) leads to errors in judging rape cases, as not protesting may be misconstrued as a signal of consent.

Furthermore, detachment while telling of an event makes it seem like the survivor doesn’t really care, or that it wasn’t very serious, when in fact the detachment is signaling that it was severe enough to provoke disjunction. This may explain why the majority of rape cases are dismissed:

Dissociative disorders are [then] interpreted as elements that challenge the victim’s credibility, or, since the victim seems indifferent, as a proof that the alleged violence did not traumatize her (whereas it is the opposite) (Salmona 2013, 12).

In addition, the perpetrator may be a skilled manipulator who can succeed in winning empathy (from a jury, for example). The mirror reaction that typically triggers empathy does not function as it should, leaving the person faced with the dissociated survivor as cold and detached as the survivor *appears* to be (Salmona 2013, 99). Similarly, lacunae in memories may be used against a survivor, claiming that her story doesn’t hold up, or even that if it were really serious, she’d remember (again, the opposite is true). The detachment from one’s own body, from the here and now, plays against survivors as they seek justice.

Dissociative mechanisms may affect survivors’ sense of time, space, and reality. They are, however, evidence of very serious violence, indicating that narratives should be pieced together from what is known, rather than dismissed. Although it is recognized that amnesia accompanies severe trauma in around 60% of cases (Salmona, 2018), and dissociative traumatic amnesias are a defining component of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (DSM-5, 2015), this continues to be ignored in

practice. It is possible that society is not eager to confront the prevalence of a problem as disturbing as sexual violence committed against children in their own homes. This is especially difficult insofar as it cuts across socioeconomic categories (it is easier for social workers to target a “welfare mother” than a rich family, although they are equally prone to committing atrocities against their own children).

Disjunction typically occurs during an assault, when witnessing a traumatic occurrence, and anytime a traumatic memory is triggered. When listening to the pieces of a survivor's story, disjunction (and its lingering effects, referred to as dissociation) must be taken into account to reconstruct an accurate picture of events.

Tragically, since she first found relief through disjunction during the aggression, a survivor may seek out the same kind of violence in order to effectively detach again; this leaves her vulnerable to a lifetime of abuse. It also explains why the majority of women in prostitution were sexually abused as children (Farley et al. 2003, 35) and why abused women return to violent partners or “seek out” similar men (Graham 1994). This does not signify that these women want the violence; rather (like an electrical short-circuit) it is a desperate attempt to avoid death due to excessive amounts of the “hard drugs” the body produces that are linked to trauma. It involves the feeling of imminent death that only disassociating quickly (disjunction) may combat. Drugs and alcohol can assist the body's own “hard drugs” (adrenaline and cortisol), leading to a high rate of addiction in survivors; this makes their accounts of violence even easier for society to discredit and dismiss (Kendler et al. 2000).

Starhawk's speculative novel *City of Refuge* depicts the mechanism of “seeking out” similar violence (gaining dissociation) through the struggles of Zap and Zoom, boys rescued by protagonists Madrone and Bird.<sup>4</sup> Zoom, who was previously enslaved as a water-thief in the Southlands (where water is a scarce, hoarded commodity), was forced for many years to go under the ground and tap from pipes. In his new, free life, “He had a terrifying habit of disappearing into small holes” (253). When Madrone expresses surprise that a child forced underground would willingly go there when free, Bird (himself a survivor) explains this dissociative mechanism: “But you do go back ... You go back because the fear outside is easier to face than the residue it leaves inside you” (253). The “residue” is traumatic memory: the raw emotion of fear trapped in the terrorizing place beyond words (amygdala cut off from hippocampus). As Salmona explains, “when dissociation fades, which can happen when the victim is finally protected and secure ... then her traumatic memory can reconnect. More precisely, it flares up when activated by cues that recall violence: a place, an object, a smell ... The traumatic memory then invades the victim's psychic space, making her re-experience the violence as if a time machine went back and imposed abuse on her all over again” (Salmona 2018, 9). Facing real dangers again produces anaesthetizing chemicals allowing (paradoxically) temporary relief from the original trauma. Unfortunately, it is an addiction that must be renewed (the substances the body produces being first like speed, then like heroine), unless seen and treated for what it is, piecing a narrative together and understanding the mechanisms of violence.

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<sup>4</sup> Bird is previously featured in Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. He is made captive in the dystopian Southlands and suffers from this trauma.

Similarly, the characters in *City of Refuge's* utopian Northlands, many of whom have been sheltered from any traumas, do not understand why Rosa, previously kidnapped and raped in the Southlands, would want to join a dangerous mission. They do not want her to go, especially since she is still a child. However, those who are also survivors understand her need, summarized in the words of Sara: "That's the thing about trauma. When you've been through enough of it, your old life doesn't fit any more. Safety can feel more painful than risk" (269). One person who understands Rosa is Bird, her former music teacher, who was also captured and tortured in the Southlands and suffers from traumatic memory. His partner Madrone notices that Bird, too, feels most at home in the midst of danger. In the safety of the Northlands, he is no longer anaesthetized and must face the raw terror within, whereas risk behaviors provide the chemical fix that quiets traumatic memory and makes him temporarily himself again

...she couldn't help but remember how he had suffered at home, among the gardens and the running streams and the kind and laughing people. He had glowered and brooded and closed himself off. And here, among the ruins and the thirst and the unrelenting, grim work, he was like the old Bird, laughing, playful, as if some weight had been lifted (283).

Former sojourn River also feels this anxiety once he is free:

Walking eased the tension he felt creep up inside him. Not a pain, not exactly an itch, more like a sense of dislocation. Like he wasn't where he was supposed to be. Or who he was supposed to be. He'd changed. And that was good. All good. But not comfortable. Not familiar. Like a new and different uniform he wasn't used to wearing. Or a new pair of boots not broken in yet. Boots he didn't believe could last. (62).

Melissa Farley has observed an increase in symptoms after women have left prostitution. They are more likely to experience physical problems (numbness, irregular heartbeat, troubles with vision or balance) as well as anxiety attacks (Farley 2003). Samona's research explains this in terms of survivors no longer being anaesthetized through dissociation. The "hard drugs" the body produces decrease when a normal situation returns, effectively making normalcy more difficult to face than violence. This is a key element in understanding and assisting survivors.

Although Starhawk vividly acknowledges symptoms of traumatic memory, she allows her characters to treat trauma through risk and does not give them a venue to tell their stories to those around them. This may be because there is a war: if they don't focus on outsmarting the Southlands immediately, they will all be slaves. Starhawk illustrates an important point also emphasized by Salmona: Survivors must recognize the injustice of what happened to them, and fighting against this can be a powerful component to healing. This may involve risk and the thrill of disjunction, the natural chemical high available to those who are already traumatized (moving mountains). This is used by the Southlands to command the grunts, and also used by individuals from the Northlands, although it is controversial.

Risk behavior is a central symptom of traumatic memory. Understanding it can improve prevention and treatment outcomes and overall empathy for survivors. Madrone was never imprisoned, and so cannot fully relate to Bird; instead, his behaviors anger her, for example when she fixes up a room for them in the refuge they have created. He criticizes her for "nesting" in the midst of a war. In turn, she

admonishes him for not wanting to risk losing his “hard edge.” Bird’s reasoning culminates in the statement that “everything precious is a risk ... Something more to lose” (287). Engaging in durable plans and relationships is difficult in the midst of traumatic memory, since the envelope of self and life’s meaning has been torn. Any attempt at normal life may set off the flare of trauma, igniting the war zone within (“your old life doesn’t fit anymore”). The unbearable stress culminates in disjunction through risk. When in a situation of danger, anaesthetization is constant. When the danger ends and normal life returns, the stress is overwhelming. When not constantly at risk, survivors feel the full onslaught of non-narrative memory (the alarm that was never switched off). Disjunction can shut down the emotional system, and thus the alarm (though not without a price). Starhawk’s utopian Northlands residents are largely unfamiliar with the mechanisms of traumatic memory in spite of their social advancement, suggesting how much is unrecognized about it in real life, including by those who care and want to help. As an activist, Starhawk seems to be writing with a goal of exposing traumatic memory, finally bridging this crucial gap in understanding.

Starhawk depicts the dissociative mechanism through protagonist Smokee’s point of view, as readers encounter the horrors of the “breaking pens” wherein pre- and early adolescent girls are conditioned for a life of sexual slavery after being taken from their families to pay off the ubiquitous debts. The breaking pens are where all hope of escape and any sense of self are taken from the girls through prolonged gang-rapes as well as other forms of physical, sexual, and psychological torture. After this, Smokee is given over to her dual purpose of serving in the pens: satisfying the sexual needs of sojuhs (men bred to fight) and providing “breeds” (children) who will in turn be crafted into sexual or military slaves. In her state of drug-induced dissociation, Smokee feels no more pain:

Into [Smokee’s] euphoria came an awareness of something heavy on top of her, grunting and sweating and stinking of iron and blood. But she didn’t mind. She felt benevolent, floating somewhere high above the rutting of her body. And when it was over, and she began to feel the bruises and the pain, there was another sweetie to take away the edge (30).

Sweeties are drugged treats reminiscent of how addiction is used by pimps to keep women in prostitution. Farley has noted that it is often erroneously said that women turn to prostitution because they are addicts, when studies have shown the addiction to happen after entering prostitution as a way to survive the abuse and violation through dissociation (Farley, 2003).

The sojuhs enjoy torturing the pen-girls, competing to elicit the loudest noises of suffering. Through making someone else into no one, they, for a moment, can feel they have regained the self long ago stolen from them:

Grunting and heaving and endlessly pounding, pounding, driving home into the bowels of her castle the truth that she was nothing, no one, a rag to wipe up spill (34).

They are in the same gruesome play as when they were snatched from their mothers, but the roles are reversed and now they have the power, annihilating the victim’s self in an attempt to kill the victim they once were: “The traumatized perpetrator is fully addicted to violence” (Salmona 2013, 129). With the same need to

dissociate as other victims, to escape the unbearable onslaught of traumatic memory, they also relive trauma to get their chemical fix, but by making others suffer in their place:

It is as if, to advance safely in a terrifyingly dangerous minefield, perpetrators choose themselves some slaves to walk in front of them, stepping on landmines in their place, just like they had to for someone else in their past. The perpetrators know that what they are imposing on their victims is horrible and deeply unjust, all the more so since they have lived it, but 'it's someone else's turn now ... too bad for the weak' (Salmona 2013, 129).

They are anaesthetized emotionally, more and more as the dose of violence goes up; they do not feel empathy, but only the rush of power, annihilating the victim they were and the pain they felt.

River illustrates how traumatic memory makes some survivors inflict violence on others:

He had destroyed a lot in his time, and that was one way to feel power. To make another somebody cringe or cry out in pain, to shut a pair of eyes for good and wipe out that somebody – he had always enjoyed that, because by comparison he felt alive (Starhawk 2015, 57).

Moreover, they will make their victims suffer from guilt in their place, convincing them everything is their fault. River is colonized by trauma even when he becomes free and is on the path to healing:

...he wanted to punch her in the face and throw her down on the ground and nail her in the dirt, whether she wanted it or not. He still found the idea exciting, though he didn't want to (217).

His traumatic memory reignites, demanding familiar violence in order to dissociate and quiet the alarm. He describes this colonization, beginning with the cruelty inflicted on toddlers in the pens, torn from their mothers, lied to, the selfhood they had gained in their mothers' arms being replaced by the perversion of military officers:

The bigsticks have beaten this fury into him, and no matter what he learned in the Temple of Love, or how many times he chose not to act on it, it would always be part of the bedrock of who he was ... Somewhere deep in his memory a small boy cried for his mama. Mare threw this pup away, a gruff voice told him. He felt a blow to his stomach, but the words hurt more. Don't want this cub no more. But now the army gonna make chippet into a sojuh (219)

Traumatic memory lingers in him, a heaviness always there. He cannot just get on with life, and needs to piece together this deep memory and oppose the injustice of it in order to heal.

Understanding of trauma's lingering effects is often missing from the discourse of those who should be most concerned, including health care and judicial professionals. Salmona has written extensively about how trauma *colonizes* survivors, using an apt analogy and frequent references to the Stockholm Syndrome. Among

those who have voiced similar perspectives, Bessel van der Kolk's monumental book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2013) also focuses on the neurology of this "colonization" and its lingering effects on bodies and lives.

Stephen W. Porges's work on the neurology of response to threat suggests how to promote accurate understanding of rape survivors during trials, including why they might not have tried to fight or flee. Dee Graham's work explores the intertwined psychological and social consequences of male violence against women. Such books help to bring the evidence out of neurological papers (which few read) and make the findings available to a wider audience.

Salmona has shown how male victims are encouraged to treat their own trauma by abusing someone else rather than renewing their own suffering; the script remains the same, but the roles change:

Violence is an effective tool of domination and submission, since it brings about dissociation and emotional anesthesia which make victims into 'slaves,' and an emotional anesthesia in aggressors that turns them into 'brainless' machines of destruction" (Salmona 2013, 258).

In the ACE study, 94% of female survivors of sexual abuse and 60% of male survivors reported that the abuse was committed by males. Salmona adamantly opposes the idea that this is natural: abusers are not born monsters; they become them, evidenced by studies on empathy in newborns (Salmona 2013, 147). Typical of colonial paradigms, people in *City of Refuge* are a resource to be exploited, including for their sexual and reproductive capacities. Although the male "grunts" are also oppressed, they are given privileges over the female pen-girls, to use their bodies as "spill-rags," this serving to keep them happy, keep the pen-girls terrorized and oppressed, and also producing enslaved "spawn." In this system as in real life, most men are also victims (though they can scapegoat women, even more oppressed than they are).

Sexual violence is not inevitable or natural. Awareness of the mechanisms of traumatic memory can allow for effective strategies to eliminate it. Such awareness also allows survivors to escape from the aggressor's hold on them, analyzing how they are manipulated and controlled, playing out a script not of their choosing. This is like the Greek myth wherein Perseus holds a mirror in front of Medusa, so that he is not only protected from her petrifying face, but forces her to look at herself and through this be the one immobilized by her own monstrosity (Salmona 2013, 273).

### **Traumatic Memory and Social Control**

The nexus for control in the dystopian Southlands is debt, also a foundation of our current economic system. *City of Refuge's* graphic descriptions of sexual and military slavery evoke the realities of many prostituted women or young, vulnerable men, often minorities, lured into combat. The main difference with actual society today is in numbers: there is only a tiny and precarious middle class in the Southlands, the rest being the elite (few) and their slaves (most). This is a work of speculative fiction, set in the future; this suggests Starhawk is warning the reader of what is to come, if we continue down the road of a debt-based economy that allows the bottom line of profit to stand before human rights. Traumatic memory ensures the persistence of this system. Without the mechanisms of control being

internalized, such a small minority of elites could not control the masses; this is true in most situations of slavery, colonialism, and other extreme forms of domination.

The violation of Smokee's body is proportionate to her loss of hope:

When they'd decided she was sufficiently softened up, they let the grunts have her, one after another, hour after hour, and each thrust had pounded the hope out of her, until at last they hammered into her deepest, most intimate places the truth – that there was no escape, no refuge, no barrier they could not breach, no sanctum they could not despoil." (*City of Refuge*, 30).

The survivors are now captives not only in body, but also in mind and in spirit; they are colonized. For the majority of people, an extreme violation such as rape

...penetrates like a tidal wave into the psyche, sweeping away all mental representations, all certitudes, nothing being able to stand in its way. The cortical activity of the victim is paralyzed, and she is in a state of shock. The cortex under shock is incapable of analyzing the situation and reacting accordingly" (Salmona 2013, 75).

Moreover, traumatic memory confuses the survivor and

...makes her re-experience her own experience mixed with the aggressor's, in unintegrated, unanalyzable fragments of what she herself has seen, heard, done and felt, and what her aggressor did, his words, shouts, hatred, contempt, perverse excitement. This may give the victim the feeling of hearing voices ... she can even attack herself, insult herself, feel like a monster, be inhabited by a monster, be invaded by extreme violence, or be excited, while all of this comes from her traumatic memories, and from the abuser, what he has said, felt, and done" (Salmona 2018).

In keeping with the Stockholm syndrome, the victim might feel what the aggressor feels, including his perverse sexual fantasies; through her traumatic memory, she is colonized by him. The sexual excitement of the aggressor treating his own trauma through harming someone else, and "her excitement" at being harmed, coincide with the dominant thrusts of pornography, imposing violent paradigms with the pretense that the women are enjoying it, love to be raped, used, hurt. This fantasy afflicts the sexuality of both men and women, as in both cases it is anchored in traumatic memory; the difference, again, being in the choice (influenced by socio-sexual roles) to suffer or to make someone else suffer. What is portrayed in pornography is not men's sexuality imposed on women; rather it is traumatized sexuality imposed on both.

The pen-girls welcome the drugged sweets distributed by their torturers. This feeds into the Stockholm syndrome and recalls the frequency of addiction among prostituted women):

And then, when hope was utterly gone, they replaced it with her first sweetie – a bun of spongy cake wrapped around synthetic cream. After weeks of nothing but salty chips, her body greeted the sugar with joy. She

ate one and began to feel a delicious sense of release and relaxation, a warmth and languor running through her limbs (30).

The drug in the sweeties removes the pain, heightening the natural emotional and physical anesthesia that trauma provokes.

Melissa Farley's fieldwork with prostituted women has shown that one of the many factors that reduce their lifespan including murder, assault, overdose, AIDS and other diseases is that they do not realize when they are hurt, as their tolerance to pain has become dangerously high. In addition to brain modifications linked to traumatic memory, the majority also suffer brain injuries due to assault, the boundary between the two often being blurred (Farley et al. 2018). Pain is the norm of their lives and anaesthetizing is the survival mechanism to endure it. It is a survival mechanism whereby not only emotions shut down, but also a chemical response numbs physical pain. Smokee no longer feels the grunts and instead holds the calm image of herself on a beach.

Drug use is, paradoxically, a survival mechanism, although leading to long-term health problems; the "hard drugs" of disjunction produced by the body also ensure survival. When Smokee becomes pregnant, she finds the strength to resist the sweeties and must feel the full weight of the deepest possible negation of who she is. She learns, with great difficulty, to detach without the added chemicals, relying on her own ability to anaesthetize emotionally:

Without [the sweeties] the service sessions were almost unendurable – the stink, the heavy weight crushing her body, wringing out all her will and volition like dishwater from a sponge. Yet she endured. While the sojuhs used her body, she went to the sea, built castles of sand and watched them wash away. (30-31).

She is no longer present; this absence does not stop when the rapists are gone, instead they remain in the dark recesses of the brain, beyond words. Through dissociation, survivors are strangers to themselves.

After her baby is torn from her arms, Smokee attempts a hunger strike. Instead of force-feeding her, the authorities cage her in the middle of the common room to starve to death, as a warning to others who might decide to protest. They think that she will beg for food, but she does not. Instead, she is nearly dead of starvation when the pens are liberated, and she is anaesthetized emotionally:

When the Day of Liberation came, there was not much left of her. A low mound on a smooth beach that one last ripple could demolish. Dimly, she'd become aware of shouting and banging, of screams and yells and in the distance, shots. But she was far, far away on the receding tide, and it meant nothing to her" (34).

Some Holocaust survivors were in a similar state when the death camps were liberated.

Starhawk also depicts disjunction when Isis witnesses the murder of her lover, Sara, yet must continue to command her fleet:



Isis felt like some impostor with her face and voice continuing in quiet, efficient command while the real her huddled inside, unseen, arms over its head, silently screaming” (621).

Disjunction creates a split self through severing neurological connections, trapping terror in a place wherein it is not classified and tamed through narrative (unless the survivor can gain the help/ awareness to painstakingly puzzle the scattered pieces of meaning).

### Conclusion

As traumatic memory chemically and neurologically alters the body, it is not useful to tell survivors to forget the past and get on with life (Salmona 2013). Rather, they must learn to fully confront what happened to them, the inner and outer consequences, and explanations for their behaviors (often incomprehensible including to themselves). Symptoms are signposts for constructing a narrative in the place of amnesia, especially concerning the worst horrors endured. Salmona describes how traumatic memory colonizes survivors, always in the background haunting their lives. It is the absence of narrative that traps memories in this nebulous, terrorizing shape, beyond words, existing everywhere, unnamed. When words are invented to replace the words of the self (grunts, pen-girls/ spill rags, breaking pens, spawn), the system works with traumatic memory, reducing and redefining the survivor until there is nothing left of her.

Those benefiting from the system are a very small minority, the “Primes” in *City of Refuge*. They have enslaved, terrified, and manipulated everyone else, through a system of social control originating in debt, but persisting through traumatic memory. The “spawn” bred in the pens do not have names, only a number for the (male military slave) “grunts,” while (female sex slave) “pen-girls” are identified only by the location of their rooms. Those who were captured due to debt (rather than bred in the “pens”) have names left over from their pasts, which they gradually forget. Assigning numbers instead of names is reminiscent of the Holocaust, and serves, like the systematic rapes, to increase disorientation and dissociation in victims, removing the selfhood that might otherwise make them fight or resist until death.

“Sojuh” sounds like Black English for “soldier,” recalling racism in the military system, turning historically disempowered and impoverished communities to fighting for their oppressors and alluding to America’s history of slavery. The sojuhs change sides easily when they see the abundance of the Northlands and are offered “a seat at the table.” Forbidden to use personal pronouns throughout their enslavement, escapees continue once freed to refer to themselves as “this pen-girl” and “Fighter,” etc. (218-219); they have to learn the grammar of being a self. Once they realize they have been mistreated, and begin to see themselves as individuals, they begin to shed their conditioning.

An important step is gaining names. This is emphasized by a race organized for the pen-girls, at the end of which each proudly declares what she chooses to be called. Being a part of a caring community and investing in the work of rebuilding a city also helps River: “Each heavy load he carried seemed to strengthen the somebodiness inside him, as if it were a muscle that developed with exercise” (57). Nonetheless, there are many obstacles to healing from traumatic memory. When everything is going well, paradoxically greater stress is felt, because there is no

longer the possibility to detach. In addition, there is the disbelief that anything good can happen, conditioned by the depths of previous horrors. After his nightmarish life as a sojuz, River battles with this problem when integrating into the community of the utopian Northlands. Starhawk suggests that freed survivors cannot be simply relieved and happy, as the danger of traumatic memory remains in them. With relief comes the fear that it will not last, as the past hangs like a sword over their heads.

Starhawk and Salmona both depict how traumatic memory combines with social norms perpetuating male domination. Susan Brownmiller's influential book *Against our Will*, first published in 1975, is unfortunately still relevant to understanding the underpinnings of rape culture. One neglected factor continues to be the manifestations of traumatic memory. These have consistently contributed to fabricating, maintaining, and justifying rape culture. Men are encouraged to treat their trauma through using others, and women through being used. These norms are intertwined with the all-pervasive yet unacknowledged force of traumatic memory. Both procuring a fix of detachment through substances produced in the brain (treating traumatic memory), male domination and female suffering are eroticized (Salmona 2013, 280). *City of Refuge* illustrates this (for example, when the negation of another person makes the grunts feel more able to stand their own oppression). Thus, traumatic memory also functions for social control. When there is no self left, there is less likelihood of rebellion. Inflicting pain calms the oppressed sojuhs and pen-girls. Their chemical dependence on drugged foods offered, and on the substances of survival through detachment their own bodies produce, further limit the possibility that they would protest.

What would sexuality look like, beyond traumatic memory? Starhawk ventures to describe this through the Temple of Love of the Northlands. She has also explored this topic widely in her most influential work, *The Spiral Dance*. Here, she reconstructs masculinity and femininity in terms of desire and joy, honoring the living body. Whereas dominant religions focus on an afterlife, Goddess religion venerates life here and now on this planet; sex is celebration, not sin. Decolonizing sexuality, as well as social relations between the sexes from traumatic memory, leaves much to be understood and achieved in future interdisciplinary explorations.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

*Dignity* thanks Laura S. Brown, feminist psychologist, for her time and expertise in reviewing this article.

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#### **RECOMMENDED CITATION**

Rose, Kate. (2020). Sexual violence, traumatic memory, and speculative fiction as action, *Dignity: A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 5, Issue 1, Article 5.

<https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2020.05.01.05> Available at  
<http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol5/iss1/5> .

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